

**By January 1997, the F-111 will be history.
The EF-111 may soon follow it into retirement.**



Wings of Change





Photographs by Paul Kennedy and Guy Aceto, Art Director



The three very different aircraft that currently represent the 27th Fighter Wing join up for the camera over eastern New Mexico. The Block 30 F-16C and the EF-111 are led by an F-111F.



The swing-wing F-111 has been a part of operations at Cannon since the first "Aardvark" arrived in 1969. A few years ago, the Air Force consolidated the fleet at the New Mexico base [see "The Aardvarks Gather at Cannon," April 1993, p. 36]. More recently, budget considerations led to a decision to retire the aging but still potent system. In January, the 27th FW officially began its transition from the F-111 to the multirole F-16 Fighting Falcon, but it had laid the groundwork long before.

The 27th FW was determined to move smoothly from one aircraft type to another, and senior wing officials decided that the first order of business should be to take care of the people who had worked so hard over the years to create the unit's enviable reputation. The wing put together a special assignment division to work directly with the Air Force Personnel Center at Randolph AFB, Tex. Its mission was to find everyone assignments quickly so they would know whether they would be cross-training to the new aircraft or transferring to a new base. Lt. Col. Dale Hanner, 524th Fighter Squadron commander, said, "It was flow-charted out to the very last guy."



Photo by Paul Kennedy



Though they knew their aircraft were to be retired, F-111 crews still put in a great deal of time on temporary duty, participating in such exercises as Red Flag, Green Flag, and Gunsmoke 1995. Above, SSgt. Mark McConnell does a last-minute "tweak" of the jet under his care, while, at left, crew chiefs launch their jets for the day's missions. "Everybody has a critical part—a piece of the puzzle—to make a combat fighter wing work," said Col. Michael Koerner, 27th FW commander. "It requires a tremendous amount of support and effort by the entire team."



Cannon has been home to five versions of swing-wing aircraft—the F-111D/E/F/G and the EF-111A. The F model—with its Pave Tack infrared and laser-guided target designator system and the ability to deliver a wide range of smart munitions—and the sophisticated EF-111 Raven electronic countermeasures aircraft are survivors of the thinning of the wing's ranks that began in 1992. Above, the markings of the wing and the 27th Operations Group are shown on a newly arrived F-16C and an EF-111 being led past the flight line by an F-111F. At right, the much larger F-111 looms over its smaller cousin. Such disparity in size requires many changes. The dimensions of an aircraft affect how it is parked on the ramp and, consequently, taxiing and parking guides must be repainted.



Big changes may be taking place around them, but the EF-111s (bottom right) of the 429th Electronic Combat Squadron—the "World Famous Ravens"—are still assigned to deploy anywhere their electronic jamming expertise is needed. The World Famous Ravens will be the last F-111 squadron of any type in the Air Force. Current plans call for the EF-111 squadron to remain active at least until 1998.





A new type of aircraft on the flight line means significant adjustments all around. Just ask anyone in supply. While a certain amount of equipment remains the same, there is not much overlap. Almost twenty years of technological advances separate the F-111 from the F-16.

A lot of storage space is needed for F-111 equipment as the squadrons draw down. Aircraft are flown to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., but the equipment must stay at Cannon for now. An estimated ninety-three percent of F-16 parts are already on hand, along with about seventy-one percent of new support equipment.

At top, a full warehouse on base is the first stop for new equipment arriving from throughout the Air Force. About \$10 million will be spent on building or improving facilities at Cannon to accommodate its F-16 operations. Above right, cross-training takes place wherever space permits. Surrounded by a room full of F-16 pylons and equipment, (left to right) SSgt. Tim Hurst shows SrA. Jerry Shelton and former F-111 technician TSgt. James Lowe the finer points of an F-16 missile launcher.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

The wing began training classes in July 1995 for maintenance personnel who would be converting from the F-111 to the F-16. At right, MSgt. Bernie Manfre (right) reviews a ten-hour throttle inspection in an F-16 cockpit with his student, Amn. Errson Martin. Sergeant Manfre is a former F-111 hydraulics technician and crew chief who has already cross-trained to the F-16 and is in charge of crew chief training for the 522d Fighter Squadron, the first of the three units to begin the transition. More than a few of his students will be just like him, with most of their Air Force experience in the F-111. What he teaches—and learns—will be invaluable to the other two squadrons down the line when it is time for them to make the change.



Photos by Paul Kennedy



Sgt. Michael Reeves (far left) oversees the removal of an F-16 canopy by his students, Amn. Ryan Sellers (center) and SrA. Rich Fisher. Sergeant Reeves came to the 27th FW from Osan AB, South Korea, to be part of a cadre of experienced F-16 maintainers and trainers. His eight years of experience with the Advanced-Concept Escape System II (ACES II) ejection seat has put him in charge of designing a new egress shop. The capsule ejection system for the F-111 is unique in the Air Force and is very different from the more common individual ejection seat.

Even with a busy schedule of training new pilots, qualifying the crews that will stay to fly the F-16, and disposing of a flight line of aircraft, F-111 crews take advantage of every opportunity to fly. In the past year, the Aardvark has been a regular on the ramp at Nellis AFB, Nev., for Red Flag, Green Flag, and Gunsmoke. They stand ready for any real-world commitments and expect to take part in several exercises this year. The 524th FS—"The Hounds of Heaven"—plans to attend this year's Maple Flag exercise at CFB Cold Lake, Canada. It will mark the last deployment of the bomber. At right, a crew from the 524th prepares for yet another sortie.

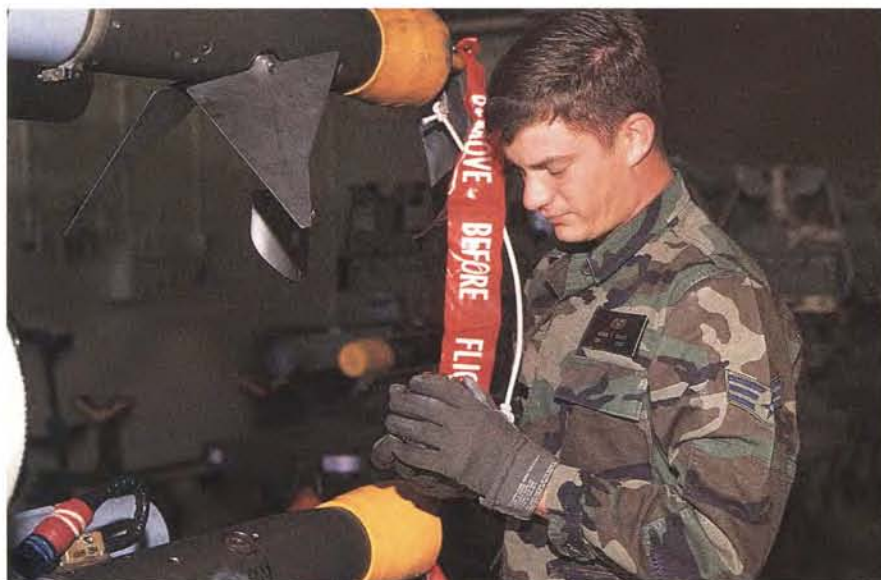


Staff photo by Guy Acero

Some of the biggest changes stem from new weapons the 27th FW is adding to its inventory. The addition of AIM-120 AMRAAM and AGM-65 Maverick missiles means that weapons storage facilities need improvement and modification as crews test, assemble, and deliver the new missiles. A new maintenance building is planned for 1998. At right, munitions maintenance personnel move Mk. 84 training bombs to make a little extra room for the additional weapons.



Photos by Paul Kennedy



While the air-to-ground side of the mission is sure to change—with less time spent at medium altitude and on night, low-level missions—the air-to-air role is also new to the wing. At left, SrA. Michael L. Youngs checks part of an AIM-9M Sidewinder during a twenty-flight missile inspection. The advanced AIM-9, along with the AIM-120 AMRAAM, is at the heart of the F-16's air-to-air punch. The multimission capability of the "Viper" and its significantly lower operations and logistics costs made it an attractive choice to succeed the F-111.

The 522d FS, nicknamed the "Fireballs," was the first to begin the transition. (The 523d and 524th Fighter Squadrons will follow in order. The 524th will convert to Block 40 aircraft.) Most of the Block 30 F-16s for the 522d FS arrived from the 35th Fighter Wing at Misawa AB, Japan. Some come complete with pilots who have received regular assignments to Cannon. The Fireballs are the first stop for new F-16 pilots reporting to the wing, and a lot of desk sharing will go on until they move to the next squadron. About five percent of F-111 pilots and crews are expected to stay on to transition to the new system, said Lt. Col. Stephen Mueller, 522d FS commander.





Staff photo by Guy Aceto

Though the F-111 faces retirement, dedicated crews maintain a sense of style. The transition plan calls for three squadrons to be back to combat status by January 1997.

The first F-16 sorties began in September 1995, said Lt. Col. Carl Armstrong, deputy chief of the transition team, and through the fall, the wing flew six to eight sorties a week. The wing looks ahead to other developments, too. It expects to field a "new" 522d FS at a Red Flag exercise in July. Also, the 429th ECS will continue to operate its advanced jamming platform at least until 1998. Crews who have been to war in and have been brought back safely by the F-111 might feel nostalgic walking out to the aircraft one last time.

They nevertheless bring the highest standards of professionalism to their new aircraft and eagerly face the challenge of achieving new goals in it. By the beginning of 1997, the 27th FW will be represented by the EF-111 and the F-16C, shown above in formation over the New Mexico countryside. ■



Photo by Paul Kennedy



Staff photo by Guy Aceto