

The skies over Laughlin AFB, Texas, are quickly filling up with the next crop of USAF pilots.

The Next Class



Students in front, instructors in back, three sleek T-38s of the 87th Flying Training Squadron at Laughlin AFB, Texas, slice through the skies over the Rio Grande River on a mission to learn precision formation flying. The need for new USAF pilots is soaring, and the pace of activity at this south Texas training base is climbing rapidly.



Photography by Guy Aceto, Art Director, and Susan Kennedy



Air Education and Training Command is stepping up pilot training to compensate for a USAF pilot shortage expected to persist for a decade. Training cuts in the early 1990s resulted in a shortage of nearly 700 pilots in 1998, and the figure could grow to 2,000 within three years. Through Laughlin's 47th Flying Training Wing, around 30 officers earn their wings about every three weeks.

Nearly 400 blue-and-white aircraft dot the Laughlin flight line. All students must master the T-37 in primary flight training, but after that, it's the T-38 for fighter-bound students and the T-1A for those headed to bombers, tankers, or transports. Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training was instituted both to manage shrinking inventories of trainers and to provide more relevant training to students.

The T-37 became USAF's primary jet trainer in 1957, so long ago that all of today's four-star generals with pilot wings trained in it. Tens of thousands of pilots around the world have begun their military flying careers in this venerable twin jet, known for its solid handling and high-pitched whine, which earned it the nickname "Tweet." Overdue for retirement, the T-37 will be relieved, beginning in 2002, by the Raytheon T-6A Texan II, winner of the Joint Primary Aircraft Training System competition. The T-6 is a departure because it is not only a single-engine turboprop but a tandem-seat airplane, as well. Its performance bests the T-37 in most respects, and it offers glass-cockpit displays and avionics. The training syllabus will still focus on primary flight instruction.



Many roads lead to Laughlin. New lieutenants come from ROTC, Officer Training School, and the Air Force Academy, and a few captains cross-train from other career fields, as well. Flying experience varies; some may already have a civilian pilot's license, others may have been through a flight screening program, and for some, it's entirely new. The goal is the same for all, though: the silver wings of an Air Force pilot.

The T-37's cockpit will be familiar to students long before they actually sit in one. Weeks of academics and hours of "switchology" time in part-task trainers, like this one, mean no surprises when it's time to really fly. There are classes in life support, egress training, aircraft systems, and aerodynamics so that students like 2d Lt. Chad Erikson (left) utilize every minute of flying time to maximum benefit.



Last year, the 47th FTW added a second T-37 unit to help keep up with the heavier flow of students. The flying pace is fast—320 sorties a day—and many instructors make “triple turns”—flying with three students in a single day, with the necessary pre- and postflight briefs for each. Above and at right, 2d Lt. Allen Selkey (left) observes as his student, 2d Lt. Charles Hamby, checks the maintenance log of the Tweet they’re about to take out. After signing off, the two will do a preflight walkaround.



Every class is known by its graduation year and class number and builds esprit de corps by designing and wearing its own patch. Class 99-13 lets it be known it harbors no superstitions, with its motto “Luck Don’t Fly.”



At left, the T-37’s distinctive paint scheme makes it a standout in the Texas skies.



Nothing is left to chance when students mix with jet airplanes, and safety gets sharp focus in the classroom as well as the cockpit. In a preflight brief, 2d Lt. Ryan Sparkman goes over the drill. A First Assignment Instructor Pilot, Sparkman's flight training is still a fresh memory, and he knows how students think. Below, instructors and students hurry up and wait for the crew bus.



After learning the basics in the T-37, students are selected to split off onto two tracks. Those bound for fighter units go on to train in the T-38. Faster, larger, and more nimble than the T-37, the T-38 is much more challenging. Reaching the T-38 is a major milestone in a process many students began with their high school applications to the Air Force Academy or perhaps even their first air show. At right, the student up front watches for ground crew signals as a sortie begins. The instructor, in the second seat, literally backs up the student.



When the T-38 Talon was introduced in 1961, it was the world's first supersonic trainer and led to the F-5E Tiger II fighter still serving with many air forces around the world. In the SUPT program, the T-38 also hones skills in formation flying, night and instrument flying, and cross-country navigation. The 38-year-old Talon has been getting a much-needed update in the form of the Pacer Classic modification. The cockpit is being completely redone, with multifunction and head-up displays and integrated Global Positioning System-Inertial Navigation System, and there are structural enhancements. AETC expects this new T-38C, slated to start entering service this year, to keep taking students supersonic through 2020.



Students flirt with the Mexican border, which abuts the base's airspace, as they shift positions during formation practice.

Formations get tighter, echelon turns (right) get smoother, and confidence rises as training progresses. The three types of trainers at Laughlin each have their own designated airspace, to avoid confusion in the skies. As the pilot production rate has ticked up, Laughlin's leadership expects that its students and instructors could log over 100,000 hours of air time this year.



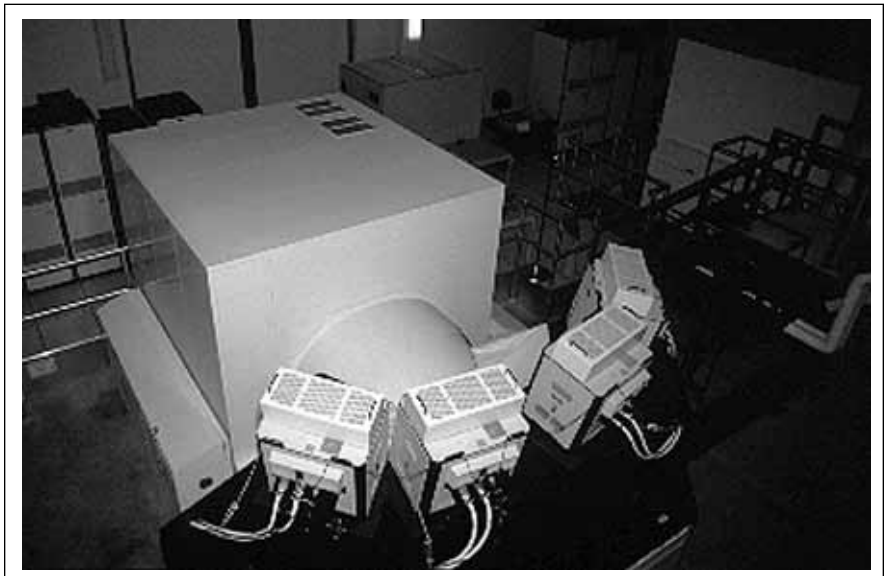
There is a certain joy to be found in this kind of flying. Though heavily scripted, the missions leave room for unplanned, but educational, aerobatics. Instructors find great satisfaction in seeing the progress their students make with each sortie.



Pilot training is a serious business, requiring intelligence, concentration, and stamina both on and off the ground, but a pilot's first solo is worthy of some lighthearted celebration. At left, 2d Lt. Jefferey Cashion is about to splash down in the "Pogo Pool," so named because the call sign for a student on first solo is "Pogo." Classmates and instructors from E (Elvis) Flight are only too happy to help commemorate this landmark moment in a fellow pilot's career.

As simulators have become more realistic, their low cost and training value have taken on more importance. While students will receive 200 hours of flying time during SUPT, they will get 500 hours in "the box," as a simulator is known. There are usually long lines waiting for time in devices like this T-1 full-motion sim. All three aircraft types at the base have simulated counterparts in the windowless blockhouse down the street from the flight line.

Laughlin boasts an instructor crew that includes FAIPs, pilots with frontline time, and older civilians with years of experience under their belts, providing for an exceedingly well-rounded flying education. It competes with other SUPT bases to provide USAF with the very best pilots.



Still the new kid on the flight line is the T-1A Jayhawk, introduced in 1992 to teach future "heavy" pilots their craft. The 86th FTS operates the T-1, which, when delivered, was the first new trainer procured in over 30 years. The Jayhawk has proved quite popular with crews, and it gets regular updates, such as the addition of GPS. At left, a crew works the checklist prior to a sortie.

The Air Force switched bomber-bound students to the Jayhawk track last year to lighten the load on the heavily used T-38, but students still fly 18 sorties in the older jet to top off their training. With the T-1 and the T-38, the service believes bomber-bound pilots now have the best of both worlds.



The T-1 syllabus has a natural emphasis on longer missions and crew coordination, but the training is just as intense as in other squadrons. Students fly more frequently and are eager to advance to the next level of training. Above, a Jayhawk spools up for a sortie. At right, Capt. David M. Quigley looks on as his student, 2d Lt. John Kruczynski, performs the preflight check.



Photos by Susan Kennedy

Staff photo by Guy Aceto



Another T-1 mission launches down the long Laughlin runway. The torrential rains and floods of 1998 stopped flying operations last summer, but sorties are back up to record levels.



Students and instructors are well aware that pilot retention is down. Enthusiasm remains high, however, especially since greater numbers of graduates coming out of Laughlin mean more pilots to shoulder the burdens of the 21st century Air Force. ■