

Red Flag for a World



Coalition

The February Red Flag in Nevada featured Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, British, and Australian forces, with more than 130 aircraft and 2,500 troops taking part.

Photography by Richard VanderMeulen



Over the Nevada desert, an F-15E waits off the wing of a KC-135 tanker for its turn to take on fuel.

The Air Force's premier realistic training exercise, Red Flag, played out in an unusual way in the skies over Nellis Air Force Base and the Nevada Test and Training Range this winter. For the first time, dedicated "aggressor" F-15s took part. Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and foreign forces honed their skills for upcoming deployments.

Red Flag's hallmark is realistic combat in a controlled environment, featuring battles against skilled opponents. The opportunity to engage dissimilar aircraft using enemy tactics is also important and is often a change for units that typically fly against others from the same unit.

Taking off at right is an F-15E of the 90th Fighter Squadron, Elmendorf AFB, Alaska.



Afterburners lit, this F-111 of the Royal Australian Air Force takes off and has not yet closed its landing gear door. The RAAF is the last air force still flying the F-111. Nations such as Australia come to Red Flag for the opportunity to fly with the US and to take advantage of the vast Nellis range.

At right, an F-16C from Cannon AFB, N.M., takes off with an assortment of air-to-air missiles hung on its wings.

Experience in Vietnam showed that young combat pilots—lieutenants competent in their aircraft but without flying experience in a composite strike force—were most likely to be shot down during their first 10 missions. A Red Flag priority is giving inexperienced pilots the equivalent of their first 10 combat missions in a dynamic and stressful—but controlled—environment.





At left is one of the new 65th Aggressor Squadron F-15s in its distinctive markings.

Below, an Australian F-111 tucks under a KC-135R from the Washington Air National Guard's 141st Air Refueling Wing. CMSgt. Don Roberson looks on through the boom operator's window during his final sortie prior to retirement.



Above, an E-3 AWACS based at Tinker AFB, Okla., helps control and guide the numerous and diverse Blue force aircraft.



Above, an A-10 with a 2,000-pound laser guided bomb under its fuselage heads off to the section of the Nellis range devoted to live-fire training.

Three Nellis-based HH-60 helicopters (left) helped perform the twice-daily combat search and rescue operations that are part of Red Flag.



Red Flag gives airmen an opportunity to train with rarely seen aircraft, a fact which participants say is one of the key benefits of the exercise. (See "Red Flag With a Difference," August 2005, p. 38.) As younger airmen quickly learn, the missions get progressively difficult.

At right, a pair of B-2 stealth bombers taxi at Nellis after a mission.



Once completely nocturnal, the F-117 stealth fighter at left prepares to take off in broad daylight. The Nighthawks from Holloman AFB, N.M., flew both day and night sorties at this Red Flag. Visible in the background are several Marine Corps F/A-18 Hornets.

The B-2 Spirit of Kitty Hawk (below) departs Nellis on a rare daytime mission. The stealth bombers, based at Whiteman AFB, Mo., flew one- and two-ship missions in Red Flag.



Above, F-22 Raptors of the base's 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron.





Above, an aggressor F-16 soars above the Nevada desert. Top right, Lt. Col. Patty Morales of the Washington Air National Guard adjusts the power of her KC-135 as Blue Force "friendly" aircraft call for the tanker.

Right, a B-2 Spirit is silhouetted against the sky as it departs for a night mission. Below, an Alaska-based F-15 heads out on full afterburner.



At left, Maj. Greg Nolting (l) lowers the landing gear and Capt. Mike Harris manages the KC-135's power settings during final approach to Nellis.

The need for realistic combat makes quality aggressors important. The F-15 was added as an adversary aircraft this year to better replicate advanced foreign aircraft and to give USAF pilots a wider range of "enemies" to contend with.

Right, an F-15 aggressor in a desert camouflage paint scheme takes off in front of a flight line full of F-15E Strike Eagles.



At left, an F-16 sports the distinctive green and brown aggressor's "lizard" paint scheme. This Viper is armed with AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles on its wingtip and carries a data link pod.

Below, a Royal Air Force Tornado GR4 launches on a mission. The British and Australian participants were allowed the rare opportunity to participate in a Red Flag exercise featuring stealthy aircraft.



During this Red Flag, one of the tankers had to return to base for a mechanical problem. Above, Maj. Bill Nixon relays the new plan to the boom operator.





Capt. David Michaud, above, bends to his task in his Red Flag Aggressor F-16. The 64th Aggressor Squadron fields 12 F-16s. The newly reconstituted 65th Aggressor Squadron flies F-15s.

Top right, an RAF Tornado employs thrust reversers. Middle right, an F-15C makes its final approach with its landing gear and speed brakes extended.

A B-2 Spirit (right) touches down at Nellis. The base is surrounded by vast mountain ranges and largely uninhabited deserts.



At left, an F-16 takes off against a spectacular backdrop. Nellis helps keep the Air Force's combat skills sharp through its host organizations of Red Flag and permanent test and tactics development missions. ■