

Out From

The F-16s of the 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano AB, Italy, are key to NATO's southern tier defenses and US forward deployed airpower.



Italy

Photography by Jim Haseltine
Text by Otto Kreisher, Senior Correspondent



Aviano Air Base sits at the foot of the Dolomite mountains on the southern edge of the snow-capped Alps in northern Italy. But the F-16s of the Aviano-based 31st Fighter Wing frequently have been in much less scenic and serene locations, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, South Korea, and recently, Libya. As the only Air Force fighter wing south of the Alps, the 31st FW is a critical part of NATO's combat capabilities in the alliance's southern region. The location also gives the wing's two F-16 units, the 510th Fighter Squadron and the 555th Fighter Squadron, a head start on deployments to US operational and combat missions far removed from Aviano. Here, three F-16C Block 40s from the 555th FS, the "Triple Nickel," maneuver over the Dolomites on a training mission.



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/1/ The 31st FW's flagship (foreground) leads a four-ship formation of F-16s from the 510th FS and the 555th FS in flight over the Dolomites, north of their home at Aviano Air Base. /2/ A1C Nathaniel Lott (left) and SSgt. Kristoffer Jambaro conduct postflight maintenance on an F-16 at Aviano. /3/ A1C Nicholas Crouse (left) and A1C David Hamilton check a tool box and laptop in preparation for weapons maintenance on an F-16. /4/ In Nevada, two F-16s from the 510th FS climb steeply over the test and training range complex near Nellis Air Force Base in preparation for the July 2014 Red Flag exercise there.



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5 /1/ Lt. Col. Scott Poteet from the 31st Operations Group flies a training mission over Italy wearing the Joint Helmet-Mounted Cueing System. It helps pilots maintain situational awareness even without looking at the cockpit instruments. The system displays aircraft performance, navigation, and tracking symbology on the helmet's visor. /2/ TSgt. Fritzgerald Ruiz (foreground) and Crouse load a GBU-54 laser and GPS guided 500-pound bomb on the 31st FW flagship during weapons loading training. /3/ An F-16 loaded with AIM-9 Sidewinder and AIM-120 AMRAAM munitions, external fuel tanks, a Sniper targeting pod, and an ALQ-131 jamming pod pulls Gs in an overhead break for landing at Aviano. /4/ An F-16 flies over the snow-covered Italian Alps in May. /5/ Capt. Joe Gagnon (left) and Capt. Brian Beears, F-16 pilots from the 555th FS, walk back to the squadron for debriefing after a training mission.



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/1/ Armed with M16s, SSgt. Maurice James (left) and A1C James Oshel, security forces airmen, stand next to a Humvee with a roof-mounted weapons station while providing security for an F-16 at Aviano. /2/ Capt. Matt Robbins, a 510th FS pilot, checks an AIM-9 Sidewinder missile as part of his preflight check. /3/ A four ship from the 31st FW flies over Venice, Italy, on a training flight southwest of their base. /4/ SrA. Enrique Melgarejo performs an end-of-runway preflight check on an AIM-120 AMRAAM as an F-16 prepares for a flight.



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/1/ Capt. Cory Jerch, a pilot with the 510th FS, checks the AIM-120 missile as part of his preflight inspection of an F-16. /2/ Maintenance personnel from the 555th tow an F-16 to a hardened aircraft shelter on Aviano. /3/ The 31st FW flagship flies through a mountain valley in northern Italy during a training flight. /4/ Aviano transit alert personnel refuel a Greek air force airborne early warning aircraft on the air base flight line.



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/1/ Three F-16s from the 31st FW fly over the Italian city of Sacile during a mission. The wing flagship has the lead, with an F-16 from the 510th off its left and one from the Triple Nickel on its right. /2/ A 510th FS F-16, with afterburner flaring, takes off from Aviano for a training mission. /3/ In front of the 510th FS facilities at Aviano, an F-16 model stands as a proud historical symbol of the "Viper." The squadron nickname, displayed on the pedestal, has evolved over the years. The unit and its airmen have been called the "Bien Hoa Buzzards," "Bosnia Buzzards," and the "Fightin' Buzzards."



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/1/ Pilots in four Vipers complete their preflight checks before taxiing out for a training sortie from Aviano. /2/ A 510th FS pilot climbs into his F-16 in preparation for another mission. /3/ An F-16 is framed by the front of a hardened aircraft shelter at Aviano. /4/ SSgt. Johnathan Sills and SrA. Mathew Monk from the 555th Maintenance Squadron install an AIM-9 Sidewinder on an F-16 showing a Triple Nickel fin flash. Thanks to the base's proximity to Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, for the airmen and F-16s at Aviano, optempo doesn't look to slow down any time soon. ■