

AARDVARKS OVER THE JUNGLE

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE GENERAL DYNAMICS F-111 INTO COMBAT WAS FRAUGHT WITH PROBLEMS THAT WERE DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME - BY HARRY A. MANN, LT. COL. USAF (RET.)

My odyssey with the General Dynamics F-111 began during August 1967 when I reported to my new boss — Lt. Col. Edwin David “Lucky” Palmgren, Chief of Operations, in the newly-formed 428th Tactical Fighter Squadron — the F-111A outfit at Nellis AFB just outside Las Vegas. He gave me a friendly southern greeting, but I was impressed with his no-nonsense professionalism. He had been a member of the USAF Thunderbirds display team time, the second time as commander (flying the difficult Republic F-105 Thunderchief during its brief service with the team), and it was obvious why he had been chosen for this demanding job.

Colonel “P”, as we all later called him, cautioned me that this was a very high visibility, high priority assignment because the world’s first swing-wing fighter was strongly supported by then-Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. He said the SecDef was convinced that a single plane

performing many missions would be more cost-effective than having several different types of aircraft.

He explained that budget projection called for General Dynamics to build 1700 F-111s in various configurations because the plane was expected to replace the aging Boeing B-52 as a strategic bomber and the McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II as a multi-mission fighter. The mission of Detachment 1 (Det. 1) of the 428th TFS at Nellis was to prove that a single aircraft could successfully penetrate a heavily-defended target at night at very low altitudes and make a successful pinpoint bombing run entirely by radar.

“This is where you come in,” Col. P added, “your job is to teach the copilots how to read their ten-inch radar screen well enough to be able to locate their targets even at very low altitudes.”

When I asked him why there were no other navigators assigned to Det. 1 like those used in the B-52 and F-4, he said Gen. Sweeney, then Tactical Air Command (TAC) Commander, insisted that two pilots fly the F-111 in combat to insure it did not fall into the hands of the North Vietnamese. Colonel Palmgren promised he would try to get me a few rides in the F-111 so I could learn the radar system better, but not to get my hopes up because there were only six months left until our scheduled



Harvest Reaper flight suit insignia.

The hard work and sacrifices of Detachment 1 paved the way for later, successful F-111 operations in Southeast Asia. Curiously, the F-111 never had an official name. Because the name *Combat Lancer* had been chosen for the first F-111As deployed to SEA, the 428th TFS submitted the name “Lancer” as an official name but his was not accepted by the USAF. That name would go to the B-1 bomber. Late in its life, the USAF decided that the plane’s nickname of “Aardvark” would become official and, finally, the F-111 had a name.



Flight suit patch for *Combat Lancer* crews.



deployment to Takhli, Thailand.

HARVEST REAPER

The codename *Harvest Reaper* was given to the first phase of our operation at Nellis AFB. The purpose of this six-month program was to train the 24 assigned pilots (all were Korean War or Vietnam War combat veterans) to fly at tree-top altitudes using the aircraft’s remarkable terrain-following radar (TFR), which allowed the pilots to select any desired altitude between 1000 feet and 200 feet and the F-111 would automatically maintain that altitude. All the pilots had to do was monitor the instruments and throttles — and pray that the advanced systems worked.

Detachment 1 had ten left-seat first pilots and ten right-seat copilots, plus four senior pilots who were allowed to fly in either position. They all would be flying six specially configured F-111As that were built by General Dynamics at a cost of about \$25 million each. This was about twice the cost of a “normal” production F-111 because they all had dual controls for both crewmen, a General Electric M61 20mm Gatling gun cannon, and an AIM-9 Sidewinder missile in the forward bomb bay. (EDITOR’S NOTE: One pilot stated no two of these early aircraft were the same — they were developmental airframes rushed into a combat situation.) The Detachment 1 aircraft consisted of F-111As 66-0016, -0017, -0018, -0019, -0021, and -0022 (as a point of interest,

surviving *Harvest Reaper* aircraft would be converted to EF-111A Ravens). At first, the copilots resented being taught to be bombardiers, but they eventually developed a reluctant appreciation for the capability of the



Patch for the 428th Tactical Fighter Squadron.