

Right: Capt Gregory Ulrich, an 81st Fighter Squadron pilot from Fairfield, California, runs through a celebratory stream of water after the last A-10 tactical sortie at Spangdahlem on May 14. US Air Force/Airman 1st Class Gustavo Castillo
Below right: A-10C 82-0647, fitted with long-range ferry tanks, taxis out on May 17 as the final four Warthogs leave Spangdahlem for the last time. Joris van Boven





Warthogs

Extinct in Europe

Hans Drost and Dick Wels report from Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany as the last USAF A-10s leave Europe

AS IF mother nature herself was depressed, the last tactical sortie of Fairchild Republic A-10C Thunderbolt IIs of the 81st Fighter Squadron (FS) 'Panthers' on May 14 flew under a dark and threatening sky. It was farewell to both the Warthog, as the A-10 is affectionately known, and the Panthers almost 70 years after the unit's first deployment to Europe.

Panthers in Europe

Two years after activation in the United States, the 81st FS arrived in England during 1944 with brand-new Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighters. During the last year of the Second World War, the Panthers flew hundreds of fighter escort, close air support (CAS) and interdic- ▶

Spangdahlem – a future?

The official word on Spangdahlem's future is that the base is going to stay open. The F-16s of the 480th FS remain and the base is also home of the 606th Air Control Squadron – the 'Inspectors of the Skies' – which provides deployable theatre battle management.



tion missions from numerous forward landing bases in Europe while covering the Allied advance. In June 1945 the unit returned to the US before showing up again in Europe in 1953 with the North American F-86 Sabre at Hahn Air Base, Germany. Hahn was the home of the 81st until 1971, except for a three-year stay at Toul-Rosières Air Base, France, between 1956 and 1959, where the Panthers started flying the North American F-100 Super Sabre in 1958. At the end of 1966 the unit converted to the McDonnell Douglas F-4D Phantom II and in 1971 moved to Zweibrücken Air Base, Germany, before relocating two years later to Spangdahlem as part of the 52nd Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW).

Spangdahlem era

This air base, strategically built on the top of a hill in the Eifel region, would be home to the Panthers for the next 40 years. The squadron took on the electronic warfare role when it started flying the 'EF-4C' Phantom with the mission to suppress enemy defence systems. In 1979 the unit received the F-4G, far better equipped for this 'Wild Weasel' role. A new strategy led to the formation of 'hunter/killer' teams in which F-4Es and F-4Gs of Spangdahlem's 52nd TFW paired up to locate and destroy enemy radar-guided surface-to-air threats. In 1988 the General Dynamics F-16C replaced the F-4E in the 52nd, which became the only wing in the US Air Force to fly two different aircraft in the same combat element. The Panthers became an all-F-4G squadron at the end of 1990 and went to combat during the first Gulf War over Kuwait a



Above: A-10C 81-0988 is a European veteran, having served in the UK with the 510th TFS at RAF Bentwaters in the early 1980s.

Below: Squadron's last call: pilots and maintainers pose in front of one of the 81st FS's A-10s during the unit's last exercise, Real Thaw, at Monte Real in Portugal. US Air Force

Bottom: Squadron personnel gather by the taxiway as three of the last four A-10s make their way to the runway on May 17. Joris van Boven

Warthog in the Wild

The A-10A was designed to provide close air support (CAS) to ground troops. As such, the US Air Force expected to fly it in combat from forward operating locations, often with semi-prepared runways, so forward operating bases were established at Leipheim, Ahlhorn and Nörvenich Air Bases in West Germany during the Cold War. On such bases there was a high risk that low-slung engines would suffer foreign object damage, so the A-10 was designed with its engines on top of the fuselage. Its built-in 30mm cannon was designed to kill heavy armoured tanks and can fire up to 3,900 rounds of armour-piercing shells per minute.

Because the A-10 operates at low level, the chance of getting hit by small arms fire is high, so the cockpit and vital parts of the flight control system are protected with titanium armour – which is why the Warthog is also called the 'flying bathtub'. The aircraft can fly on one engine, with one tail missing and even half of one wing.



A pair of 81st FS Warthogs formate on a 100th Air Refueling Wing Boeing KC-135R Stratotanker during a training mission over northern Europe. Terry Lee



year later. During its stay in the desert the unit flew more than 12,000 missions, making 113 radar kills.

Eifel Warthogs

In February 1994 the 81st became an A/OA-10A squadron, taking its aircraft from the recently-deactivated 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron which had transferred across from the 81st TFW at RAF Bentwaters in Suffolk to the 52nd TFW almost a year earlier.

Today the A-10 is used operationally for forward air control (FAC), guiding other aircraft against ground targets, and combat search and rescue (CSAR). 'Hog drivers' are proud of their mission as Captain Josh Jones, an 81st FS pilot, explained: "We're dedicated to support the ground forces. We take a lot of pride in calling ourselves 'support', which is a little bit unusual. We want to support the guys on the ground and hope they go safely home after the fighting."

The Panthers were involved in many combat operations in several 'hotspots' throughout the world. During Operation Deny Flight between 1993 and 1995 the squadron was deployed to Aviano Air Base, Italy, enforcing the no-fly zone over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In 1997 the unit took part in Operation Southern Watch, enforcing a no-fly zone in Southern Iraq and Aviano Air Base was again the Panthers' temporary home when the unit deployed in 1998 to support NATO's air presence during the crisis in Kosovo. In 1999 another deployment took the 81st to the Balkans in support of Operation Allied Force, a NATO military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War. From 2003 the squadron deployed to Afghanistan several times to provide CAS to coalition ground forces during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Charlie arrives

In 2009 the unit received the C-version of the A-10. Under the Precision Engagement Program, A/O-10As were upgraded to the A-10C. "The C-model allows more precision," said Capt Jones. "Instead of dumb bombs we can use GPS-guided bombs and we have exchanged our paper maps for digital ones. The upgrade increased the effectiveness of the 'Hog' even more."

The Panthers deployed to Afghanistan with their A-10Cs for the first time in May 2010. Capt Jones said the biggest challenge for a Hog driver during ▶

Exercising in Europe

Besides deployments, there were also exercises to train for combat readiness. Most interesting was training with air forces that used to be behind the 'Iron Curtain' and 'on the red map' – exercises like Croatian Phibilex in 2000 or, more recently, Dacian Thunder in Romania last year. During these the A-10 pilots had a perfect opportunity to train for the main mission, CAS, but also FAC and CSAR. The last multinational training opportunity for the squadron was in Portugal for Exercise Real Thaw during February 11 to 22 at Monte Real Air Base, Portugal. Capt Jones commented: "That was an awesome trip. There were 4,000 ground personnel participating – people everywhere. They were doing air-drops, inserting people by HALO [high altitude, low opening]. We had some guys doing FAC for the HALO drops and some practising CSAR with C-130s from the Portuguese Air Force. It was an excellent example of practising multiple missions." The A-10 crews were also tasked to fly off the coast to attack naval vessels. "The A-10 is a special asset that we don't have the everyday opportunity to work with," said the Portuguese Air Force's Lt Col Carlos Lourenco, the director of Real Thaw. "The Portuguese Air Force flies the F-16 Fighting Falcon as its primary fighter aircraft, but doesn't have a close air support aircraft like the A-10. Having the ability to conduct operations like search and rescue with the 81st is beneficial for training. This is especially important for the helicopter squadrons and working together increases both parties' understanding of operating in a joint environment."

"The last place you want to figure out how to work together is on the battlefield"

Lt Col Clint Eichelberger, the 81st FS commander, explained: "Our opportunity to be here and train on a wide variety of missions is invaluable for us – we haven't been able to do this in months. We very rarely go anywhere and not have to work with other forces. We're always going to integrate, whether they be air forces, ground forces or maritime. The last place you want to figure out how to work together is on the battlefield. That's why coming to these exercises is so important."



Lt Col Clinton Eichelberger, the 81st Fighter Squadron's commander, gets into his flying suit before departing Spangdahlem on May 17. He was the lead pilot for the 'final four' A-10 flight to leave Europe. US Air Force/Airman 1st Class Gustavo Castillo

missions over Afghanistan is that they can last up to four hours: "There, things happen very quickly. Our specialisation is working together with the guys on the ground, so we have to be very careful and very sure where we are going to employ the gun. When things happen very quickly, you have to be ready for that. A flight can be very calm and boring, but those five minutes when you're shooting and dropping bombs can be very intense. The transition from calm to chaotic is very quick, and in order to support the guys on the ground correctly you have to make sure you are on top of it before it happens.

"We are talking Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) on the ground. They are specifically trained air force personnel embedded with the army or marines. They're a kind of translator; they talk both army and air force [language]. They're the ones calling the air strikes with us."

Troops that have been supported by the A-10s are grateful to the pilots and express that in many ways, as can be seen in the squadron's heritage room. On the walls are all kinds of 'thank you's', such as the painting of a group of British soldiers in need of help from the air. In the painting is an A-10 in the background getting ready to move in. Capt Jones explained: "During this particular mission the A-10 pilot lost contact with the group. The radio calls of the team suddenly went dead and the pilot thought that maybe he'd killed the group by his fire support. Later it turned out that the guy with the radio walked through a stream and his radio got under water. It went silent! Fortunately the unit got out of the situation safely."

The last sortie

On May 14, the day of the last tactical A-10 sortie by the Panthers, there were only eleven pilots left with the squadron – normally there would have been between 30 and 40, but because most of the A-10s had already left, the squadron pilots had gone with them. Three of the four aircraft left at Spangdahlem took part in that last sortie. Capt Jones: "They're going to go practise some CAS first and then they're going to say goodbye to the local area. In the last weeks we've tried to say goodbye to all former forward operating locations where we were stationed. Today we're going to fly east



Its final mission complete, A-10C 81-0992 taxis beneath an arch of water created by the base's fire engines.

and come back from the north over Fulda." This village in central Germany was known for its strategic location during the Cold War – the 'Fulda Gap' was a route for potential tank movements from Eastern Europe into central Germany. In an attack, the A-10s could be deployed for CAS to ground troops trying to stop the enemy tanks.

Lt Col Clinton Eichelberger, who took command of the Panthers last August, said: "Personally it's a sad day that we are leaving, and also as an organisation it's a sad day. But it's just another chapter in the life of a fighter squadron. And just like we have done before, I believe we will come back. This isn't the end of the 81st!" Eichelberger is proud of what the squadron achieved after it became clear it was to be deactivated. "It was my job to make sure that we close this chapter the right

way, and that meant that everybody was taken care of to be sure their careers are progressing, putting them in the right spot – not only the people in the squadron building, but also the people on the maintenance side. That was very important to me."

When asked about the future of the A-10 in US Air Force service, Eichelberger explained that he has no crystal ball, but in any combat situation that has a ground war there will be a need for combat air support, "and today the A-10 is the best solution for that".

Development of the A-10 and its systems is continuing. One of the latest modifications is the new Raytheon Scorpion helmet technology, which transmits data on a single monocle attached to an existing helmet to the pilot's right eye. If the pilot looks outside the cockpit, he can distinguish friend from foe. When he spots an enemy target, a sensor attached to his helmet passes the information to his weapons, enabling him to fire right away without turning his aircraft.



Above: Raytheon's Scorpion helmet technology transmits data via a monocle attached to an existing helmet to the pilot's right eye. Images by the authors unless stated otherwise

The very end...

After a two-hour mission the three Warthogs overflew Spangdahlem for the last time and touched down on the runway. Two trucks from the fire department were on both sides of the taxiway to salute the A-10s with a curtain of water. On the platform beneath the control tower personnel from the 81st FS and their families stood by with fire extinguishers and champagne to hose down the pilots as soon as they dismounted their aircraft, to complete a memorable occasion. On Friday May 17 the last four A-10s left Spangdahlem – the final Warthogs to roam Europe.



The last 81st FS A-10 mission about to launch on May 14.