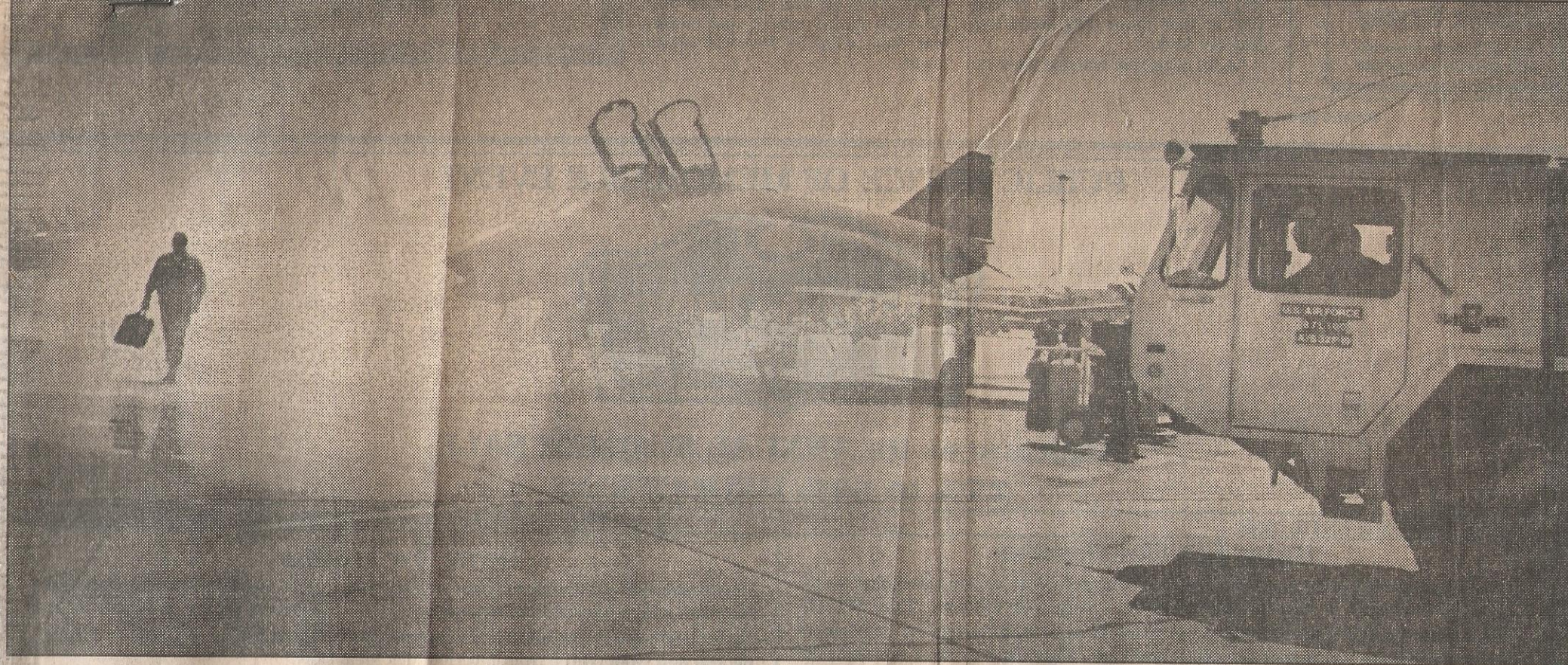




Fresno Bee/Ralph Throneberry

A fire engine douses Air Guard pilots at Fresno Air Terminal after the final flights of F-4D Phantom jets over the Fresno area. They will be replaced by F-14s.

Phantom jets buzz adieu to Fresno

By **CHARLES MCCARTHY**
Bee staff writer

Four Fresno-based Air Guard Phantom jets howled over the city for the last time shortly after 11 a.m. Friday, making a low pass from Sanger to Woodward Park.

Their Fresno swan song took the Vietnam-era F-4Ds less than four minutes at about 5 miles per minute — about 320 knots an hour.

It was a champagne flight.

After the F-4Ds completed their 180-degree circles and thumped onto the Fresno Air Ter-

minal runway, Air Guard firefighters turned hoses on the air crews. Then the fliers got champagne.

Today, the 144th Fighter-Interceptor Wing's 29 rear-seat weapons systems officers are surplus. Computers have replaced them in the Air Guard's single-seat 1980s model F-16 fighter jets.

A few of the younger "whizzos" are retraining as F-16 pilots. Some will transfer to the Reno-based F-4C Nevada Air Guard group. The older ones — like F-4Ds — will take other Air Guard or civilian jobs.

Quieter, faster-climbing F-16s will begin

training flights next week from the Fresno Air Terminal.

But Fresno won't be totally rid of the noisy, smoke-belching Phantoms, yet.

Until October, when the Fresno-based F-16s go on-line for air defense, Phantoms from the Minnesota Air National Guard will fill at Fresno on five-minute armed alert. They'll scramble to intercept drug smugglers or any other intruders in West Coast airspace.

Fresno's 1966-model Phantoms, the first of which arrived Oct. 2, 1983, still must fly to their new homes.

For most, this will be the Air Force bone-

yard outside Tucson, Ariz. A few will go to units still using Phantoms.

A couple will be refitted as pilotless drones to be blasted from the skies by American and Canadian interceptor pilots — Top Guns with real targets.

Friday's 90-minute training flight off the Central California coast was the aircrew finale for "whizzo" Maj. Greg Frazer. He'll remain in uniform as Fresno's regular Air Force adviser until he retires next year.

Frazer and pilot Maj. Dennis Mast led

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Friday's four-Phantom finale. Before takeoff, Frazer briefed the

Two Castle-based F-15 Eagle jets would be the defenders. They'd "try and save the palace."

A Fresno-based electronic "stealth" Lear jet would be a "wild-card," jamming anyone's radar it chose. A Castle-based KC-135 aerial refueler would be a flying gas station for the fighter jets.

"If you get killed, go to the tanker and wait," Frazer said, sounding like the script from the movie, "Top Gun."

"Call only your kills. If you go below 5,000 feet, you've hit ground."

The dogfight-weary Phantoms would be flown in a pincer tactic, flight leader Mast said as he continued the briefing. This was the tactic the Navy used successfully against Libyan MiG jets. The Air Guard veterans might just make it work against the younger, regular Air Force F-15 pilots.

"Against F-15s, you've got to be as stealthy and as tricky as you can," Mast cautioned.

F-15s are front-line Air Force fighter-interceptors. But they're not as new as Fresno's F-16s.

The F-16s, Mast mused, have a "dogfight" switch on their control handles. One flick and the combat computer kicks in.

Then, Mast coordinated the after-mission flyover, once past the Fresno Air Terminal, a right turn over Woodward Park, around Clovis and home for the last time.

"Don't depart the airplane [lose control] on the break," Mast joked.

Despite one fatal crash and several hair-raising incidents, Fresno Air Guard officials emphasized that their six years in F-4Ds were safe ones. The unit is one of the nation's top 10 in Air Guard safety.