



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

and crew personnel attend to the first F-16 to be permanently based with the Air National Guard at Fresno.

F-16 whispers into Fresno

Air Guard's first Falcon welcomed

By CHARLES MCCARTHY
Bee staff writer

The first F-16 Fighting Falcon assigned permanently to Fresno slipped in almost unnoticed Monday morning amid the background noise of the louder F-4D Phantom jet engines at the Air National Guard base.

"They are quieter," said Mayor-elect Karen Humphrey as the F-16 touched down during a special welcome for the aircraft.

Without the F-16s, the city's plan to control noise around the Fresno Air Terminal might have fizzled in the screech and roar of F-4D Phantoms, she said. Now, she expects "a controllable noise level."

Humphrey and fellow City Council members two years ago lobbied the National Guard Bureau in Washington, D.C., to waste no time replacing Fresno's aging and belching Air Guard Phantoms.

"We really put a team effort together to get these [F-16] aircraft brought to Fresno, probably sooner than we'd been able to expect," Humphrey said.

Actually, the first F-16 of 20 as-

F-16 US Air Force fighter

Type: Air-combat fighter

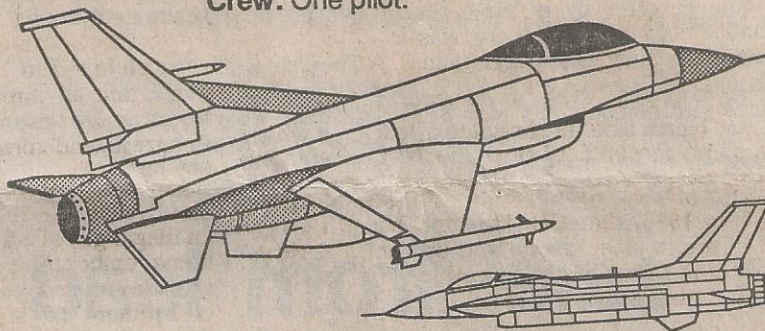
Armament: One 20mm cannon, up to 6 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles, or 11,000 lb. weapon load.

Speed: Twice the speed of sound.

Range: 2,000 miles.

Ceiling: Above 10 miles, straight up.

Crew: One pilot.



The F-16 pioneered "fly-by-wire" technology, where a computer monitors the pilot's movements and translates these into instructions which control the plane. Some 20 F-16s are expected to fly about 285 sorties a month from the Fresno Air Terminal.

Source: Modern Combat Aircraft, InfoGraphics

signed to Fresno arrived later than expected Monday. Preparing for takeoff from Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., pilot Lt. Col. Skip Osterman noticed the plane's liquid oxygen supply was a bit low.

After topping the tank, Osterman

still had to fly the Falcon slowly — not over 8 miles a minute — across the Sierra to Fresno. Air Guard officials frowned on sonic booms over the continental United States.

Two generals, a host of civic dignitaries and an array of Air Guard

and Army Guard colonels stood in the warm Fresno sunshine Monday morning, awaiting Osterman's arrival.

"He's 50 miles out," a colonel said as the plane approached.

Just then, two of the F-4Ds have been triggering noise complaints since their arrival in Fresno back in 1983 howled in frustration during morning practice intercept maneuvers.

Their exhaust smoke had been cleared from the runway when Osterman landed Fresno's first F-16.

Osterman is operations officer for the Air Force's 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, which have been handed over to the Air Guard after refitting the fighter-interceptors at Hill Air Force Base near Ogden, Utah.

By July, all the 1965- and 1966 vintage Phantoms will have been phased out of the Fresno Air Guard. A few will be sent to other units, but most will go to the Air Force, where they'll be turned into target drones. The Air Guard has chased down and blasted from the skies by U.S. and Canadian fighters F-15s, F-16s and F/A-18s.

The Air Force has earmarked \$1.5 billion to hand-me-down F-16s for replacement with the latest electronic intercept equipment. By the 1990s, F-16s will make up over half the Air Guard's fighter force. In turn, the Air Guard will have its civilian part-time and time state technician pilot program provide nearly 80 percent of

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Maj. Gen. Robert Thrasher, left, and Brig. Gen. William Bates greet Lt. Col. Skip Osterman.

Falcon

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defense over the continental United States.

Fresno's first F-16 actually isn't the first. Two others are parked inside the Air Guard's hangar. They're loaners from the South Carolina and Maryland Air Guard. They flew here early to allow Fresno maintenance people to become familiar with the craft.

Now they can go home. F-16 No. 611 has arrived.

It isn't Fresno's first 611, either. An F-4D in the Fresno inventory carries that tail number, too.

"That's a 1965 model," Lt. Col. Jerry Bird emphasized.

The early 1980s-model F-16s being sent to the Air Guard are being replaced by brand-new F-16s in regular Air Force units. More than 1,000 Falcons are now flying and 2,000 more are on order for the U.S. and allied air forces.

With their updated Falcons flying

at twice the speed of sound, the Air Guard pilots expect they'll be able to intercept anything that moves within the earth's atmosphere. This includes ballistic missiles and stealthy, slow-flying drug smugglers.

The Guard's F-16s have built-in spotlights to illuminate and identify drug smugglers.

"You're looking at 'Star Wars,'" said a colonel, showing Humphrey the F-16 cockpit.

"It looks very businesslike," the mayor-elect said.