

480th Tactical Fighter Squadron, a Brief History

The 480th Tactical Fighter Squadron (Warhawks) was assigned to the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) from 31 March 1970 to 17 November 1971 at Phu Cat Air Base (AB), South Vietnam, flying the F-4D Phantom II (HK tail letters). While at Phu Cat, 480th aircrews flew close air support, air interdiction, and Ranch Hand escort missions over South Vietnam, close air support, air interdiction, gunship escort and combat air patrol (B-52 BARCAP) missions over Laos, close air support and air interdiction missions over Cambodia, and a limited number of strike/air interdiction missions over North Vietnam (Route Pack One). Here follows is the rest of the history of the 480 TFS from inception to its recently reactivated status at Spangdahlem AB, Germany.

The unit was first constituted as the 480th Fighter Bomber Squadron, assigned to the 366 Fighter Bomber Wing, flying F-100 Super Sabres on 25 September 1957 at England Air Force Base, LA. The Wing and the 480th were redesignated as Tactical Fighter units 1 July 1958. The squadron was deactivated 1 April 1959 due to budgetary reductions, but was reactivated 8 May 1962 flying F-84F Thunderstreaks at Phalsbourg-Bourscheid AB, France. The squadron rejoined the 366 TFW at Holloman AFB, NM on 16 July 1963 and began re-equipping with the F-4C in 1965. The 480 TFS deployed to Da Nang AB, South Vietnam on 1 February 1966 and was first attached to the 6252 TFW, then assigned to the 35 TFW and re-assigned to the 366 TFW. Flying out of Da Nang, the 480 TFS conducted combat operations over South Vietnam, Laos, and North Vietnam. Sometime during its time at Da Nang, the 480 TFS transitioned to the F-4D.

On 5 November 1966, a 480 TFS crew, Maj R E Tuck and 1/Lt JJ Rabeni, Jr. shot down the first MiG-21 of the Vietnam War. While at Da Nang, 480th aircrews scored nine MiG kills. In November 1967, a member of the 480 TFS, Capt. Lance Sijan, ejected from his disabled aircraft over North Vietnam and was badly injured. Despite his injuries he evaded enemy forces for more than 40 days and then, when captured, managed to escape briefly. Captain Sijan later died in a prisoner of war camp and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

When the 366 TFW at Da Nang was re-equipped with F-4Es, the 480 TFS and its F-4Ds were transferred to Phu Cat on 15 April 1969. At Phu Cat, the 480th was first assigned to the 37 TFW which flew F-100s. The 480 TFS was joined by the 389 TFS, also from Da Nang, on 25 June 1969 as the drawdown of F-100 squadrons at Phu Cat continued. Both squadrons were assigned to the 12 TFW on 31 March 1970 when the 12 TFW was moved from Cam Ranh Bay to Phu Cat without personnel or equipment. When the 12 TFW began transferring Phu Cat AB to the South Vietnamese AF in late 1971, the 480 TFS was inactivated on 17 November 1971 and its aircraft transferred to other fighter units in Southeast Asia.

The 480 TFS was reactivated on 15 November 1976 under the 52 TFW at Spangdahlem AB, Germany. To perform its Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) mission, the 480th flew F-4G Wild Weasels and F-4Es employed in hunter/killer roles. F-4Es were replaced by F-16C Fighting Falcons in 1987 in a unique employment of two different aircraft types in the same fighter squadron. The 480 TFS was deployed to the Middle East in support of Operation Desert Shield in the fall of 1990 and flew SEAD combat missions in support of Operation Desert Storm (Gulf War I) from 17 January 1991 to 11 April 1991.

The 480 TFS was redesignated the 480th Fighter Squadron on 1 October 1991 when the Air Force eliminated the tactical/strategic distinction of combat units. Name change notwithstanding, the unit was inactivated 1 October 1994 when their F-4Gs began retiring from service as a part of the post Cold War force reduction.

The 480th FS was reactivated on 13 August 2010 under the 52 Fighter Wing at Spangdahlem AB, Germany and is now equipped with the F-16CJ variant for its mission to provide lethal defense suppression in support of NATO and U.S. forces.

Thanks to the Air Force Historical Research Agency, 52FW/PA, and Norm Malayney for input. William H. Cathey, 480TFS Sep 70-Sep71.



Current squadron patch for the 480th Fighter Squadron (Warhawks) flying F-16CJs, assigned to the 52nd Fighter Wing, Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany.