

Recce Phantom

The Nebraska Air National Guard reclaims an RF-4C, preserving its own history

For many of the men in the Nebraska Air National Guard who flew the McDonnell Douglas RF-4C, the Phantom remains the source of lasting memories. The Cornhusker pilots and ground support personnel were members of the 173rd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, which operated the “recce” Phantom from 1972 to 1993. Although the unit transitioned to a fleet of Boeing KC-135R Stratotankers, becoming the 155th Air Refueling Wing based at Lincoln Municipal Airport, its members never forgot their dream of bringing an RF-4C back to their state to preserve it for future generations.

The story of how Phantom 65-0903 returned to Nebraska began some years back at the squadron’s 60th reunion party, when Colonel Jim Ryan, the 173rd’s retired vice commander, suggested that they try to secure an RF-4C from storage at the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG) at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. “I put the idea to the group, and the vote was 100 percent to go for it,” Ryan recalled. But his idea had to be shelved when it turned out to be too expensive.

In August 2006, Ryan learned that one of the Nebraska Air Guard’s RF-4Cs was at Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base, near Columbus, Ohio. Rickenbacker officials soon agreed to make their recce Phantom available, but squadron members would have to come up with the funds to disassemble it and truck it to Nebraska. The 173rd’s former members quickly reactivated the nonprofit NEANG Phantom Corporation, formed earlier when they had tried to get a jet from AMARG. Within 100 days its fundraising efforts netted \$51,500, more than enough to defray the cost of disassembling the RF-4C and taking it from Columbus to the Strategic Air and Space Museum in Ashland, Neb.

The McDonnell Douglas RF-4C was a modification of the U.S. Air Force’s very suc-



Above: The Strategic Air and Space Museum’s un-restored RF-4C, 65-0903, displays a subdued gray paint scheme dating from the early 1990s, when it served in the Nebraska Air National Guard. **Below:** Restoration complete, the Phantom is decked out in a wrap-around “Europe One” scheme that it wore in the 1980s, a paint job designed to help Phantoms blend in with European terrain during low-level reconnaissance missions.



cessful F-4C and D model Phantom IIs, which served as the backbone of Air Force combat operations during the Vietnam War. The unarmed reconnaissance version was equipped with multiple cameras along with optical and infrared sensors tucked away in its elongated nose compartments. The optical cameras—still in place in 65-0903’s nose—were used primarily for low-altitude photography, but were also capable of producing quality high-altitude images. As with the Phantom’s fighter-bomber version, the crew sat in a tandem cockpit. The majority of photographic and sensor tasks were handled by the rear-seat pilot, but unlike the Navy’s RF-4Bs, the Air Force’s RF-4Cs had dual flight controls, so either crewman could fly the aircraft. A total of 503 RF-4Cs were produced over a 10-year period. USAF recce Phantoms flew their last missions in 1991, during Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield.

Powered by a pair of afterburning General Electric J79-GE-15 engines, the Phantom could achieve a maximum speed of more than 1,300 mph, with a cruising speed of 575 mph. The Nebraska airmen said flying it was like “redlining a Corvette” on one of the state’s open highways.

In 1972 the RF-4Cs arrived at the Air Guard base located just west of Nebraska’s capital city. Prior to that the squadron had flown the Republic RF-84F Thunderflash, North American F-86D and L Saber Dog, Lockheed F-80C Shooting Star and North American P-51D Mustang. The 173rd’s photo Phantoms flew training and active duty missions in the U.S. for more than two decades. In the 1980s they completed three temporary duty assignments in Turkey. In 1993, when the unit converted to tankers, its aging RF-4s were retired.

Transported from Columbus by Worldwide Aircraft Recovery, Phantom 65-0903 arrived at the Strategic Air and Space Museum’s restoration hangar on February 8, 2007. Colonel Ryan recalled that a number of 173rd veterans showed up on a cold winter’s day to welcome the jet to its new home. “It was in pretty good shape considering it had been outdoors for some time,” said museum restoration manager Mark Hamilton. The Worldwide crew, along with Hamilton, went to work and within a short time the reassembled aircraft was once again standing on its landing gear.

“All in all,” Hamilton noted, “this aircraft was in fantastic shape considering what we’ve

had to work with in the past.” He said the airframe was first sprayed down with a degreaser fluid, then thoroughly rinsed with high-pressure sprayers. “That got everything cleaned up to the point to where we could give it a once-over and see what was going to be needed to repair.” A subsequent inspection revealed a few “dings and bruises,” said Hamilton, “but they were nothing we couldn’t handle.”

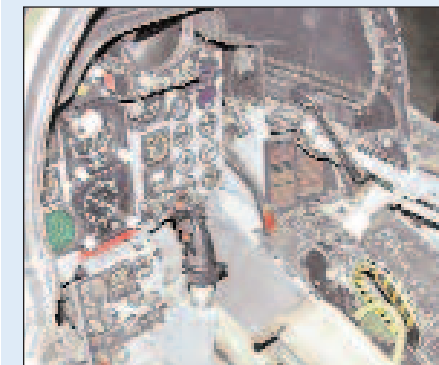
The cockpits, which had been kept closed, just needed to have accumulated dust and dirt removed. All the instruments were intact; the only items missing were the grips on the top of the control sticks. The Martin Baker ejection seats were in good condition, but Hamilton took the additional precaution of having the seats inspected by two technicians from the Nebraska ANG to make sure they were inactive.

The only alteration that presented a problem was that the two J79 engines had been removed. This meant supports had to be fabricated on which to hang the burner cans.

A group of former 173rd members joined the museum’s restoration team to help sand and prepare the airframe for painting. Once all the cosmetic repairs were complete, the team decided to paint the Phantom in the Air Force’s “Europe One” wrap-around camouflage pattern of two shades of green and charcoal gray.

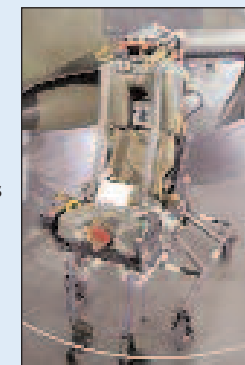
All that remained was to add finishing touches such as the star-and-bar insignia on the aft fuselage sides and the top and bottom of the wings. Next came the tail numbers, “Nebraska” on the top of the fin, the star at the base of the rudder with the word “Lincoln,” identifying the aircraft’s home base, and the squadron’s distinctive flaming arrow insignia on the starboard intake. Working from photographs, Hamilton spent several days researching the markings before he masked and carefully painted them all by hand. The aircraft was then rolled out onto the museum’s floor to take its place alongside *The Pulaski Hustler*, Strategic Air Command’s record-breaking Convair B-58A.

On November 1, 2008, the newly restored Phantom was the centerpiece of a dedication ceremony and banquet at the museum. Colonel Ryan summed up the feelings of everyone who had worked so hard to reclaim this vital piece of the 173rd’s history, saying, “When I take my grandsons down to see that aircraft and put them in the cockpit, it brings a tear to an old pilot’s eyes.” ✈



A view of the pilot’s compartment shows the impressive array of analog instruments and gauges needed to fly a Phantom.

One of the RF-4C’s Martin Baker MKH7 ejection seats, state of the art for its day, awaits inspection before being reinstalled in the cockpit.



The anhedral horizontal stabilizer is one of the Phantom’s most distinctive features.



A glass port in the nose provides a spot for this oblique-mounted KS-87 camera.