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A-10Cs assigned to the 23rd  
Fighter Group form up for a  
photo en route to Nellis AFB,  
Nevada, for an exercise.  
**US Air National Guard/TSgt John  
Winn**







# MOODY 'HAWGS'

Active-duty A-10C Thunderbolt II units are few and far between in the US Air Force. The 23rd Fighter Group at Moody AFB, Georgia, is a vital unit that underscores why the A-10 is back in favor and here to stay.

REPORT **Henk de Ridder**





“ In 2017, the 74th deployed again to Turkey for OIR. A total of 4,100 [IS] targets were struck and over 2,000 danger close employments were registered

**T**HE US AIR Force has confirmed that it intends to retain the A-10C Thunderbolt II into the 2040s, despite the recent announcement that the service would retire 44 aircraft in 2021, and 63 over a two-year period. USAF long-term plans include seven squadrons of A-10Cs that will support close air support (CAS) missions in permissive or lightly contested airspace, according to Lt Gen David Nahom, Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs.

The A-10C fleet will include three active-duty, three Air National Guard, and one Air Force Reserve Command squadron, which the air force says will be sufficient for operations, test, and training. The service plans to reinvest the funds saved through retirement in upgrades for the remaining Thunderbolt IIs. In addition to structural modifications, the savings would provide for avionics upgrades that would integrate the aircraft into the ‘digital battlefield of the future.’

Moody AFB, located near the city of Valdosta, Georgia, is home to two of the four front-line, active-duty A-10 squadrons. The resident 23rd Wing includes a pair of ‘Warthog’ units: the 74th Fighter Squadron (FS) ‘Flying Tigers’ and

75th FS ‘Tiger Sharks’. These squadrons are complemented by reservists assigned to the 76th FS ‘Vanguards’, which comes under the 442th Fighter Wing/476th Fighter Group at Whiteman AFB, Missouri.

Capt Rod Appleton is assigned to the ‘Flying Tigers’, and told *Combat Aircraft Journal*: ‘The 23rd Fighter Group is the USAF’s largest operational A-10C unit and has 49 aircraft in its inventory and over 80 A-10 pilots that are based here at Moody.’ Besides the two A-10 squadrons, Moody is also home to a single HC-130J Combat King II and one HH-60G squadron — both of which come under the 347th Rescue Group. Additionally, US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) for the Embraer/Sierra Nevada Corporation A-29 Super Tucano are underpinned here as part of the support package through pilot training with the 81st FS, which comes under the 14th Flying Training Wing.

The 23rd Operations Support Squadron (OSS) looks after both the airfield and the adjacent Grand Bay air-to-ground range, plus 250,000 square miles of surrounding military airspace. The proximity of the Grand Bay range is clearly a massive bonus for all the resident squadrons as it supports live fire and training events, and provides airdrop facilities and assault strip operations for the HC-130s.



**Top:** A Moody A-10C lets rip with the 30mm Gatling gun. **All photos** Henk de Ridder, Hans Drost and Dick Wels unless stated

**Above:** A-10 pilots now routinely wear the Scorpion helmet sight system.

The Avon Park Range is another massive resource for the local units, and it is the largest primary training facility on the US East Coast. Appleton said: ‘It’s a little far away, about 40 minutes’ flying, south of Orlando. But when we go there, it’s absolutely great training; a lot of space to work, a lot of tactical targets like airfields and villages — so it’s very, very valuable.’

## Thunder and attack!

The 74th FS has approximately 25 A-10 pilots on strength, plus 10 attached pilots who generally work at the group level.

There are also about eight pilots from Air Force Reserve Command (AFRC) who dip in and out of the operations. Appleton said: ‘We [in the 74th FS] introduce



ourselves with 'thunder', and those from the 75th respond with 'attack'."

After World War Two, the emergent US Air Force was disinterested in CAS, with it remaining 'an army thing'. The Douglas A-1 Skyraider was the USAF's only dedicated CAS asset in Vietnam and a 1966 report by a US subcommittee was critical of the USAF not being suitably supportive of the mission, saying that it should develop a simple, inexpensive, specialized CAS aircraft. This led to the A-X (Attack Experimental) program, which was geared to the development of an aircraft with low-speed maneuverability, massive cannon firepower, extreme survivability, and the ability for extended loiter time in a target area.

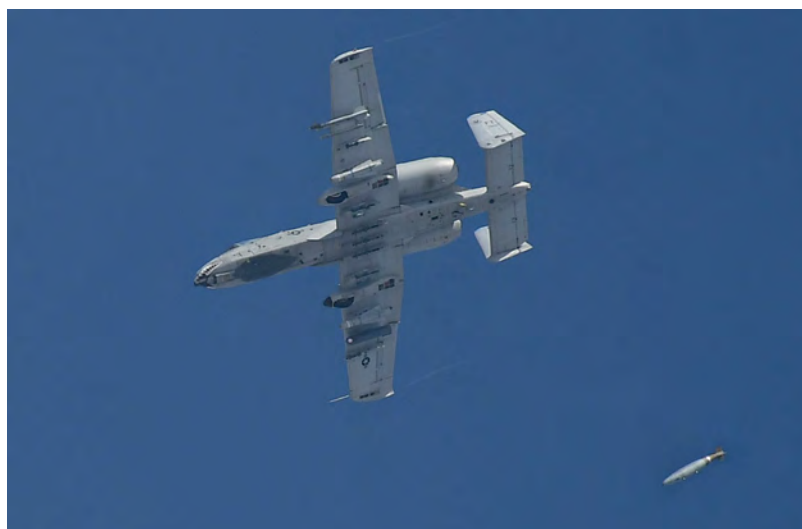
The Fairchild Republic A-10 Thunderbolt II was the result — designed around the fearsome General Electric GAU-8/A seven-barrel Gatling cannon. To 'feed' the ammunition drum, a special vehicle was built by Syn-Tech — the GFU-8/E Ammunition Loading Assembly cart — known as 'The Dragon'.

## Always under fire

Ironically, for an aircraft designed to withstand heavy punishment over the battlefield, the A-10 has endured a pummeling from those who have tried to

**Right:**  
A 2,000lb Mk84 bomb is dropped over the Grand Bay range.

**Below:**  
Striking shark mouth markings adorn the 23rd Fighter Group A-10s.



## 23RD FIGHTER GROUP

The 23rd FG dates back to the American Volunteer Group (AVG) that was established in 1941 when the US government organized volunteer air units to help the nationalist government of China. The same three squadrons within the group today mark their

heritage with the distinctive shark mouth markings similar to those that adorned the P-40 Warhawks of World War Two. Capt Rod Appleton said: 'The 'Flying Tigers' served with distinction during World War Two. It flew 24,000 combat sorties and 53,000 flying hours. The pilots shot down 621 enemy aircraft in air combat and they destroyed 320 on the ground.'

The 23rd FG, part of Moody AFB's 23rd Wing, re-united the original squadrons through A-10 operations and, since 2007, they have worn the famous 'Flying Tigers' teeth.







kill it off on successive occasions. It's been argued that other multi-role types can better fill the CAS mission, without the need for the single-role A-10. Even after the A-10 proved so effective in 1991's Operation 'Desert Storm', the calls for its retirement grew.

Yet the 'Warthog' endured as lawmakers effectively banned the USAF's plans to retire the type. Through the A-10C upgrade with smart weapons and new avionics, to a re-winging project that provides an additional 10,000 flight hours — the A-10 will be around into the 2040s. In 2015, all work on the type had stopped as the A-10 community feared that time had been called on the aircraft. Today, the USAF is well into planning for a raft of new upgrades.

## Moody ops

Those new pilots destined for the A-10 cockpit train with the 357th Fighter Squadron at Davis Monthan AFB in Arizona, on its B-course. This squadron is the Formal Training Unit (FTU) for the A-10. Capt Appleton said: 'When you arrive at Moody you must complete LAO — local area orientation — which takes eight rides. Then you fly as a wingman, a number two or four for about a year; just learning the ropes and making the mistakes that we all made. Then you will do the two-ship flight lead and after that the four-ship flight lead. We also carry the FAC-A [Forward Air Controller — Airborne] mission. We still carry that role in case we need to do that in Afghanistan or Iraq. So, we train for this mission in the squadron.' Appleton explained that the relationship with the resident special operations HC-130s and HH-60s means the Moody A-10s fly a lot of combat search and rescue (CSAR) — typically on the Avon Park range.

Little is reported of the A-10 flight simulators, but Moody has four on site, with former pilots running these facilities and they create realistic scenarios, especially for emergency procedures, with pilots spending up to six hours a month here on average.

## Keeping it relevant

Reflecting on the latest kit in the A-10, Appleton underscored how far the 'Warthog' has come in the past decade: 'We now use precision-guided munitions and have a tactical awareness display that intergrades with the SADL [Situational Awareness Data Link], plus a moving map and variable message format [VMF]. The





**Left top to bottom:**  
A pristine 'Flying Tigers' A-10C ready to depart Moody AFB.

Pre-flight checks, include the AIM-9 Sidewinder, which is carried for self-defense.

The machine – known as 'The Dragon' – is used to load 30mm rounds into the A-10.

**Above:**  
A-10s of the 23rd FG have been regularly deployed to the Middle East in recent years.  
**USAF/MSgt William Greer**

**Right:**  
The Grand Bay range is pummeled by 30mm rounds from an A-10.

reason we use SADL is due to integration with army troops. Our helmets can be fitted with the Scorpion Helmet Mounted Integrated Targeting [HMIT] system, which projects information [onto a monocular] so we have full situational awareness, and it allows us to cue our weapon systems in the direction of where we are looking. A planned update is the implementation of HOBIT [the Hybrid Optical-based Inertial Tracker], which will give us even more precision motion tracking.'

The A-10C has four radios. Appleton said: 'It can get a little bit busy for one guy to work four radios. LARS v12 is used to communicate with the JTACs [Joint Terminal Attack Controllers] during CAS missions. It's a great update and it is very useful during CSAR missions as we can also talk with the downed pilot. It's not

just a radio, we can also use it to send messages on a phone.'

The ongoing Operation 'Inherent Resolve' (OIR) battling so-called Islamic State (IS), coupled with a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, has meant the A-10 community has been in high demand. Appleton said: 'In 2016, the 74th deployed for Operation 'Inherent Resolve'. During the deployment, 10,700 combat hours were flown with 55 deliberate strikes against [IS] troops in Iraq and Syria. During Operation 'Atlantic Resolve' we flew 1,200 missions from remote locations in Eastern Europe.

'In 2017, the 74th deployed again to Turkey for OIR. A total of 4,100 [IS] targets were struck and over 2,000 danger close employments were registered.' This means the A-10s were employing ordnance in close

proximity to friendly ground forces. 'The squadron was awarded the Gallant Unit Citation, the first USAF unit to win this award at squadron level. In 2018, the 75th deployed to Afghanistan for Operation 'Freedom's Sentinel'. During 2,000 missions, around 10,000 combat hours were flown, and 1,300 weapons destroyed 148 targets.'

It underscores why the USAF has finally decided that the A-10 must be retained. Opting for a smaller fleet will enable some saved money to flow into new improvements for the 'Warthog'.

The sheer range of munitions carried by the A-10 is reason enough to keep these aircraft as a very handy tool in the overall kit. The A-10C is able to use the Advanced Precision Kill Weapons System (APKWS) — which are laser-guided rockets — not to mention a range of Joint Direct Attack Munitions, laser-guided bombs, AGM-65 Maverick missiles (with electro-optical, laser, and imaging infra-red guidance systems), and of course its lethal gun.

The combination of great training, readiness, upgrades and that CAS mentality, means the 'Flying Tigers' are primed and ready for the future, whatever that may bring. 🐾

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