



# Republic F-105 Thunderchief (Air Vanguard)

*Peter Davies*

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The Republic F-105 was the fastest and most successful Cold War strike fighter. Designed to deliver nuclear weapons at low altitude and then fight its way back to base it was the primary weapon in the USAF's world-wide tactical strike arsenal in the early 1960s. Thunderchief pilots in Europe, the Far East and the USA stood on short-notice alert, ready to take on formidable defences in their supersonic attacks on pre-planned Communist bloc targets. However, the F-105 achieved legendary status in a very different conflict.

When direct American involvement in Vietnam began in 1964 F-105s were deployed to the area, initially as a deterrent but increasingly as conventional attack fighters against insurgency in Laos and Vietnam. As the pace of war increased and bombing of North Vietnam began in 1965 the Thunderchief was the most important weapon in attacks against the most heavily defended territory in modern history. Two wings of F-105s, manned by pilots whose experience often included combat in WWII and Korea, performed truly heroic deeds in an environment where the political and tactical odds were usually stacked against them. Flying long distances from their bases in Thailand the fighters maintained daily attacks on military, transport and industrial targets, braving deadly Soviet anti-aircraft missiles and flak 'thick enough to walk on' (in the words of one pilot). Additionally, they shot down at least 27 North Vietnamese MiG fighters in eighteen months, more than half the total scored by the official F-4 Phantom II anti-MiG escorts in that period. However, the cost was unacceptably high: 330 out of a total production of 753 F-105Ds and two-seat F-105Fs were lost in combat, curtailing the type's front-line service. The two-seat F-105F, initially produced as a trainer, became a vital pioneer in the field of electronic warfare. Specially-equipped examples used new technology to detect and defeat Soviet radar guided missiles and anti-aircraft guns introducing revolutionary tactics in SEAD (suppression of enemy air defences) which are still in use today. They provided essential support to the Linebacker operations that ended the war in 1972 and continued in service after the surviving single-seat F-105s had been relegated to reserve duties.

Historically and technically the F-105 epitomises the 'faster and higher' design philosophy of 1950s aircraft technology. Its designer, Alexander Kartveli, was responsible for the WW II P-47 Thunderbolt and a series of F-84 fighter designs that gave the USAF its first credible jet striker for the Korean War and the basis of its tactical nuclear strike capability in the 1950s. The F-105 marked the climax of this design process, creating a fighter which could out-run any MiG at low altitude and project US air power at long range in ways that defeated the most sophisticated air defences.

Visually, the F-105 was an impressively large and dramatic-looking fighter. In combat service it acquired a wide range of colour schemes (including that of the Thunderbirds aerobatic team) and wartime artwork that lead to attractive illustrative material. Despite its undoubted importance, popularity and its legendary combat record the type has attracted comparatively slight attention from publishers and nothing (at least, since the 1960s Profile Publications) that presents its full story in the compact but thorough form that an Air Vanguard could offer to a wide range of enthusiasts and students.

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