

F-84G Thunderjet Story

As we all know, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) has taken delivery of the new JAS 39C/D Gripen fighter aircraft and they have been assigned to 701 Squadron of Wing 7 at Surat Thani. The reception ceremony will be held in July 2011. This is a step up from the 4th Generation jet fighter family of the F-16 to a 4.5 Generation aircraft. Although it is only a half generation development, it is likely to be the last development before Thailand moves to a true 5th Generation aircraft in the future. It might be 15 years or less before the RTAF purchases a 5th Generation jet fighter like the F-35, which will be a necessity by that time.

An important aspect for the psychology of those involved with the Gripen, regardless of whether they are pilots, ground support staff, or anyone else in the RTAF is that if we look back a mere 50 years in the history of the RTAF, we would see the transition from propeller-driven fighter aircraft to the first generation of the jet fighter. We received the first of our jet fighter/bombers (the F-84G) from the USA at the end of 1956.

In 1955 the RTAF received its first jet trainer aircraft and photo-reconnaissance aircraft – the T-33 and RT-33. These were the very first jet aircraft to be used by the RTAF. However neither was a jet combat aircraft in that their primary role was not to do combat with adversaries in the air. In providing jet trainers, the US was preparing Thais with foundation skills for pilots and officials to develop knowledge and experience in operating jet aircraft prior to them working with the jet fighter aircraft which would be shortly delivered. So at the end of November 1956, US pilots delivered the first group of four F-84G Thunderjet fighter/bombers, from a total of six aircraft. These were parked at Wing 1 at Don Muang. The delivery of a second group of seven aircraft occurred 13 days later. After delivery checks were completed all 13 aircraft were given the Thai designation Fighter Aircraft Type 16, or BK 16, and they were allocated to Number 12 Fighter/bomber Squadron of Wing 1 at Don Muang. They replaced the BK 15 (F8F-1/1B) Bearcat aircraft which were passed to Wing 2 where they continued to serve. During the delivery flight, the aircraft carried USAF insignia but it is not known from which country they arrived – whether it was Japan or South Korea – as the departure point for the delivery flight was not recorded. However it is interesting to note that in the first two groups there were several aircraft which had previously been in NATO air forces: Italy, Belgium, and France following service in the USAF.

The USA provided additional F-84G aircraft to the RTAF; in July 1957 a third group of nine aircraft and in August 1957 a final group of nine aircraft. It is not known if these aircraft were delivered by air or sea. All the F-84G aircraft were issued to four flights within 12 Squadron. Each flight had seven aircraft. You might notice that three aircraft were kept as spares. However this might not be the actual case as they were not allocated squadron identities as they were attrition replacements for aircraft losses from the first two deliveries. These aircraft were written off in accidents (which I will detail later).

Although the Type 16 Fighter aircraft were used, they were considered to be new aircraft in the RTAF. This engendered great pride with those people chosen to be involved with these aircraft. The aircraft had built a great reputation through its work as a fighter/bomber in the Korean War. It was also the first jet fighter and most modern aircraft in the RTAF. Therefore the morale and esprit-de-corps of the pilots in the squadron was very high. The pilots for the F-84G aircraft were selected from the best Bearcat pilots regardless of whether they were commissioned or non-commissioned officers. The majority were non-commissioned officers because at that time the RTAF operated a large number of Bearcat aircraft and needed a large

number of pilots, which could not be met by relying on the supply of commissioned officers. So most pilots in Bearcat squadrons were non-commissioned officers, with the commissioned officers being in a minority. This was especially so for squadrons based in Takhli and Khok Kratiem. However in 12 Squadron in the later period, there was an increased number of commissioned pilots especially after the graduation of Class 1 of the Air Officers School and who did not have experience flying Bearcats but had been selected to fly the F-84G aircraft. They could be selected if they had flying hours and flying experience especially if they were from Bearcat squadrons and passed strict flight testing by a committee first. From there, if they passed, they would undertake transition training with the Type 11 jet trainer (T-33) in 10 Squadron (or 11 Squadron in later times). Each graduating class provided a very few officers.



The first four F-84G aircraft were delivered by USAF pilots in November 1956.

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The Reception Ceremony for the BK16 aircraft which arrived in 1957 was conducted on the tarmac in front of RTAF Headquarters with Field Marshal Phibul Songkhram, Prime Minister acting as the representative of the Royal Thai Government.

Pilots selected to fly the BK16 had to try to learn and practise flying at the same time as other changes were occurring. They had to practise aerial combat tactics apart from intercept missions – individual aerial attack using the primary weapons of the F-84G, six M3 .50 inch calibre machine guns which were fitted in the nose and wings. Ammunition carried was 300 rounds per gun. For ground attack missions, two bombs (ranging from 250 pounds to 1000 pounds each) could be carried under the wings.

However sometimes this position could be used to instead carry incendiary bombs or “skip bombs” as they were called at the time. Later these were called ‘napalm’. When longer range missions were conducted, jettisonable 230 gallon reserve fuel tanks could be carried. In addition, on the outer ends of the wings, two to four 5-inch high velocity aircraft rockets (HVAR) could be carried. These rockets each had a weight of about 45 pounds and a range in excess of three miles. They were another weapon used to destroy ground targets.

In exercises or aerial weapon competitions (for the F-84G), the usual location was Wing 2 at Khok Kratiem. Prior to this time such activities were conducted at Wing 5 at Prajuap Khirikhan. The somewhat long distance caused subsequent fuel shortage issues and long flight times. Another aspect was the use of live air-to-ground ordnance in proximity to the Wing which was itself close to Prajuap Khirikhan municipality. This increased the risk of accidents with live ordnance during the activity. There was an incident in 1956 when a bomb carried by a Bearcat accidentally fell and landed in the township. This caused numerous deaths and injuries and led to the exercises and competitions being moved to Wing 2 in 1957.

These live fire activities used the area to the north of the airfield. The field impact area for the aerial weapons was in Chai Badan district, which was also called Muang Khom and had been surveyed since 1957. It was developed and modified and came into service in 1960. The F-84G had not yet been given the opportunity to engage in the aerial weapons competition because the squadron was building its pilots towards combat readiness status. In 1958 the squadron pilots had their first chance to compete in what was then known as the Gunnery Meeting. Apart from the F-84G aircraft from 12 Squadron, other aircraft included F8F1/1B Bearcats from 22, 23, 43 Squadron and T-6 Texan aircraft from 53 and 71 Squadron. Each squadron was represented by a team of four pilots. In this way, both individual and team combined score competitions were held.

The different categories were HAB (High Angle Bombing); LAB (Low Angle Bombing); HAS (High Angle Strafing); Low (Low Angle Strafing); and LAR (Low Angle Rocket) attack. HAR (High Angle Rocket) attack was only conducted for Bearcat aircraft. The team from 12 Squadron consisted of SQNLDR Samran Yaem-sribua, SQNLDR Narong Kritiyachot, PLTOFFR Swai Yensuang and FSGT1Suthep Khamkhun.

In 1959, the RTAF received an invitation from the US 13th Air Force in the Pacific to send a group of fighter aircraft to participate in an aerial weapons capability demonstration of Allied nations ("Flying Brothers") at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, which was hosted by 405 Fighter Squadron of the USAF. The RTAF considered sending five F-84G aircraft to participate. This was the first time that the RTAF had ever sent aircraft to a foreign country to participate in an exercise or competition. The competition included gunnery, rocketry, bombing and formation flying. Although the RTAF team had the lowest capability, their scores were very close to the other nations which were using F-100 or F-86F aircraft. Later, in 1960, the RTAF team again attended "Flying Brothers 1960" with F-84G aircraft and performed to great acclaim as their superb skills gave results which were not bested by the more capable aircraft of other nations. The leader of the team this time was SQNLDR Samran Yaem-sribua; however, by this time he was a Wing Commander.

Apart from the Aerial Weapons Competitions there was also formation flying. This developed from small-scale tactical formations into nine-ship formation flying with the objective of performing displays when engaged in joint exercises with allied nations under the SEATO banner, for important RTAF events, for visiting foreign personnel or for the Thai community. This demonstrated the ability and skill of the Thai pilots. The first of the formation flying displays occurred a little over a year after the F-84G was delivered, and when each pilot only had an average of just over 100 hours flying the aircraft. The first recorded nine-ship formation display (as far as we can ascertain) occurred on 27 March 1958 to commemorate Armed Forces Day. As for the person who had the duty of being leader of this first nine-ship display, who else could it be but Squadron Leader Samran Yaem-sribua!

In the nine-ship formation flying team, the leadership role went to Squadron Leader Samran Yaem-sribua. At this time he was very well-known in the world of military formation flying, and his nickname was "Sam" and "Honey Sam" started to appear on the forward fuselage of his assigned aircraft. We are not sure if this was in accordance with regulations or whether anyone got into trouble, but it was seen to be in existence for a long time, and on a number of airframes. There are photos of both times the Thais competed in the aerial weapons competitions in the Philippines (aircraft 1215 and 1241). He began his training with four-ship formation flying; then after attaining success the formation was increased to seven aircraft. Later still, they started using a nine-ship formation. The names of the other eight pilots:

- #2 FLGOFFR Phayin Sawatdeebutr
 - #3 PLTOFFR Sway Yensuang
 - #4 FSGT1 Suthep Khamkhun
 - #5 FSGT1 Samart Piamsri
 - #6 FSGT1 Thammanun Benjakul
 - #7 WGCDR Pathom Kertsangsri
 - #8 FSGT1 Chaiyan Phimthon
 - #9 FSGT1 Thanom Phuangdech
- (All ranks are as they were at that particular time)

In these displays, the formation would fly in Diamond and Arrowhead formations and perform loops, barrel rolls, chandelle, Cuban 8, cloverleaf and finish with a bomb-burst. Apart from these shows, they flew many times and there were plans for a 12-ship formation.



US personnel loading 500 pound bombs onto a Type 16 aircraft. US personnel acted as advisors to the squadron and gave advice.

Photo : RTAF

หมู่บินผาดแผลง 9 เครื่อง ของฝูง.12 ขณะเตรียมวิ่งขึ้นเพื่อทำการบินแสดงเหนือสนามบินดอนเมือง เนื่องในงาน
วันกองทัพอากาศ (27 มี.ค.2501) บ.เครื่องบินล่าสุดในภาพเป็นเครื่องของ น.ต.สำราญ แยมศรีบัว หัวหน้าหมู่บิน



The nine-ship formation team from 12 Squadron while practising for a display above Don Muang airfield on the occasion of Armed Forces Day 27 March 1958. The lead aircraft is that of Squadron Leader Samran Yaem-sribua, the Team Leader.

In 1961, the F-84F Sabre jet fighter, which had a great reputation since the Korean War and which the RTAF had needed for a number of years was finally delivered. At the start of 1961, the first 20 aircraft of a planned 40 were delivered. They were first allocated to 13 Fighter Squadron of Wing 1. They were given the designation of Type 17 Fighter aircraft or BK17. The remaining aircraft were delivered later with the RTAF planning to deploy them in 12 Fighter Squadron in October 1961. Therefore, the F-84G aircraft which remained in 12 Squadron would be transferred to 43 Fighter Bomber Squadron of Wing 4 at Takhli to replace their T-6 or BF8 type aircraft. Since 1959, this aircraft had been the primary combat aircraft of 43 Fighter Bomber Squadron. It is thought that at that time there were no more than 20 F-84G aircraft remaining. (It is believed that the actual number was 19.)

The presentation ceremony to Wing 4 occurred on 2 October 1961, and on that day all the aircraft flew to their new home at Takhli. On arrival at Takhli the squadron had to concentrate on air intercept or aerial raids which was a mission used in the Korean War. Defence against air threats by air intercept was an uncommon task (for 43 squadron) as there were new F-86F aircraft at 12 and 13 Fighter Squadrons which had this role. The pilots of 43 Squadron were mostly old hands on the T-6 and Bearcat. When they had completed conversion training on the T-33 jet trainer, it was not a hard task to fly the F-84G. Furthermore, when the majority of pilots in the squadron had high levels of expertise and experience in mass formation flying, including having the most hours of any squadron, 43 Squadron chose the pilots to form a nine-ship formation team. The objective was to perform at various events, including showing that the pilots of Takhli were no less skilful than the pilots of Don Muang. This team was known as "King Cobra" after the Wing 4 and 43 Squadron emblem.

However the service life of the F-84G at Takhli was to be very short because only two years after entering 43 Squadron service, it departed. This was because 12 Squadron received the F-86L or BK17A aircraft which was an all-weather interceptor. This replaced the F-86F aircraft in 12 Squadron and these aircraft were passed to 43 Squadron to continue their service. It therefore became imperative to take the F-84G aircraft out of service. At that time there were 17 aircraft remaining and most were in airworthy condition. The grounding order came in February 1963 and was the final chapter in the RTAF's use of the F-84G. This story was only six years long – from the start of 1956 to the start of 1963.

Now let us look back to the matter of flying accidents experienced by the F-84G fleet. As we said earlier, these accidents began only a few months after the delivery of the second batch. The first accident occurred during training on 7 March 1957 in the area of Hua Maak and another aircraft crashed in Wang Noi district of Ayutthaya province on 6 December 1957. In both circumstances, the pilots were able to eject and were uninjured. In another incident, an aircraft was damaged beyond repair by a fire while parked on the apron on 26 May 1957. There were many other aircraft accidents which occurred during flying training such as bird strike, running off the runway during take-off or landing, or from other causes. The damage was such that the aircraft could be returned to airworthy status. However in some cases, 12 Squadron pilots were killed in F-84G accidents. Mostly this occurred in weapons training. From information available, three aircraft were lost while at Wing 2 and one whilst at the Chai Badan Weapons Range, along with three or four pilots killed.

When we reach back to December 1958, when the BK16 had been in service for two years, 12 Squadron had 26 aircraft. So in the first two years the Squadron had lost five aircraft. From the records which we have been able to examine, it is credible that the number of aircraft written-off due to various causes while at 12 Squadron was in the range of 11-12 aircraft. Another two were lost while in service with 43 Squadron. So from a total number of 31 airframes received, by the time the aircraft was taken out of service in 1963, only 17 aircraft remained.

This is probably only part of the story as it happened a long time ago – over half a century. The BK16 or F-84G Thunderjet was the first jet fighter aircraft of the Royal Thai Air Force. So although it was not the first jet aircraft to take the Royal Thai Air Force into the jet age, it was the first genuine jet combat aircraft and Thailand's 1st generation jet fighter aircraft.

Photo : RTAF



ภายในลานจอด บ.ของฝูง.43 บน.4 ตาคสิ ในช่วงปลายปี 2504 ภายหลังจากที่เพิ่งได้รับ บ.ข.16 มาจากฝูง.12

On the tarmac area of 43 Squadron, Takhli at the end of 1961. The Squadron had just received the BK16 fighter aircraft from 12 Squadron.

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