



Fresno Bee/Ralph V. Thronebery

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## Air Guard's old 'T-Bird' is Mexico-bound

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The T-33 jet, nose-heavy and a little underpowered, showed its age parked next to the sleek, twin-engined F-4 fighter at Fresno's Air National Guard base last week.

The 35-year-old trainer, looking drab with the U.S. Air Force lettering removed from its fuselage, has been sold to the Mexican Air Force and will depart on its last flight from Fresno Wednesday, ending an aviation era at the Fresno base. A crew of eight Mexican Air Force officers, including two mechanics, will arrive in Fresno today to check out the jet both on the ground and in the air. One of the visiting officers will pilot the plane when it leaves.

Mexico has purchased several other T-33s from the United States. The others will be picked up at Davis Monthan Field near Tucson, Ariz.

Mexico will arm the trainers, equip them

to carry bombs and use them as front-line aircraft.

It could be a happy ending for the old jet trainer that came to the Fresno Guard unit about a quarter-century ago. With proper maintenance, it could serve Mexico well for at least 15 years.

At one time, five of the cigar-shaped jets were assigned to the local Guard. They were affectionately referred to as "T-Birds" by Guard personnel.

Lockheed built 5,691 of them from 1948 to 1959. They served as the Air Force's primary pilot-training aircraft until 1967.

In Fresno it was used as a trainer, transport and more recently as a target aircraft — acting as an approaching enemy.

One of its characteristics, due mainly to its shape and lack of flat surfaces, was that it was difficult to track on radar.

It made many friends among Guard personnel during its stay in Fresno, gaining a solid reputation as a plane with great maneuverability because of its straight wings. The newer jets have swept wings.

"It was a little bit underpowered, but it was a fun airplane," said Guard pilot Maj. Randy L. Bushore of Clovis.

Bushore, who enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1971, has been a member of the Fresno Guard since 1981.

He had his first flight in a T-33 more than 15 years ago and has developed a special affection for the trainer.

"It's reliable," he said. "You always felt safe flying it. It's very predictable."

Comparing it to driving a car, Bushore said it would be like driving a vehicle that corners well and is "very comfortable" to drive.

Bushore said he had a couple of eye-openers while flying a T-33, but nothing that could be classified as a close call.

One of those experiences was during a formation takeoff at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida, when the revolutions-per-minute gauge on his plane began winding down to zero.

However, the trouble was with the gauge

and not the engine, and Bushore was able to land the plane safely.

The other incident was during a thunderstorm when his T-33 was caught in a down draft while he was landing, and the plane plummeted almost 1,000 feet toward earth before he was able to bring it under control.

Bushore said it takes about 100 hours of piloting the T-33 before you start to feel comfortable with the aircraft.

Guard Col. Jim Benton said it's not always easy finding parts for the old trainers — a situation similar to owning an antique car that needs repairs.

He said Mexico has been able to buy parts and will be able to retool its machinery and make whatever is necessary.

"I'll miss flying her," said Bushore. "You feel like it's an old friend."

"Each plane develops its own personality."