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Cover: LT Royce Williams points to battle damage on his F9F Panther on board USS Oriskany (CVA 34) following his epic engagement with Soviet MiG-15 fighters on 18 November 1952.

Photo: USN



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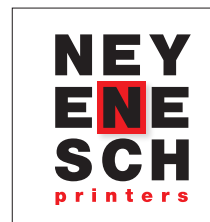
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Printing by Neyenesch Printers
San Diego, Calif.

Air Plan



VOLUME 54 NUMBER 1 Spring 2026
©2026, all rights reserved ISSN: 0736-9220

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Articles and news items are welcome. Submit material for *The Hook* to: Editorial Offices, *The Hook*, 9696 Businesspark Ave., San Diego, CA 92131-1643. (858) 689-9223 or (800) 322-HOOK, email: thookmagazine@gmail.com • website: <http://www.tailhook.net>
Advertising: Potomac Media LLC, 2125 Observatory Pl. N.W., Washington, D.C., 20007. (202) 363-3741, fax: (888) 325-9943, email: potompub@aol.com

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BRIEF

The world continues to be a dangerous place. As in decades past, when the president puts the signal in the air, carrier strike groups (CSGs) respond whether in the Middle East, Caribbean, Western Pacific or multiple other theaters around the world. Except, in an unprecedented way, there are more kinetic air-to-air and air-to-surface operations in these different theaters responding to the threat. And, as usual, tailhookers and maintenance crews rise to the challenge, innovating and flexing to respond accordingly.

From the Chairman

by RADM Mike "Nasty" Manazir, USN(Ret)

It is this spirit of innovation that has been the hallmark of Naval Aviation for more than a century. Whether preparing for war or responding tactically to the changing threat, tailhook aviators have been able to maintain supremacy in the battlespace. Long gone are the days of domination, but our CSGs have been able to create local supremacy to address the threat. The United States is still challenged to flip the cost curve when employing exquisite offensive weapons to respond to cheap and plentiful threats such as drones and low-quality ballistic missiles. So, we need more investment and innovation to create cheaper, plentiful protective weapon systems. This should be the focus of Naval Aviation innovation.

In my new adventures in the advanced manufacturing startup world, I am seeing a huge refocus on innovation in the defense industrial base backed by literally trillions of dollars in private investment. This is the real power of the United States — private investment fueling national security. One of the most foundational requirements is to rebuild the nation's manufacturing capacity.

For more than four decades, U.S. business has shifted manufacturing capability offshore, seduced by the business advantages of globalization. There has been little incentive to recapitalize aging manufacturing lines while the machinist workforce, with an average age of 62 and aging out,

USN



Ordnance arrayed in front of a VMFA-314 Black Knights F-35C Lightning II on board USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) while supporting Operation Epic Fury, 3 Mar '26.

takes tribal knowledge out with them. We must repair this trend to maintain preeminence against our peer competitors.

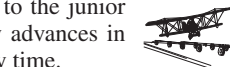
We woke up during the pandemic. Global supply chains fractured, illuminating the national security threat created when we could not control our sources of supply, especially when those sources were vulnerable to threat country intervention. The wake-up call has energized a visible and vibrant response, a literal explosion in innovation in the digital realm that fuels increased velocity in manufacturing and technology. The synergistic effect of administration executive orders, deregulation of business and incentives for private investment in the national security space has created a new playing field, one rife with opportunity to address our comparative disadvantages in warfighting capacity. I stress the word capacity because I still believe the U.S. warfighting capability and the training level of our warriors is unmatched around the globe, but we can no longer rest on those laurels.

The junior officers in our ready rooms and on board our aircraft carriers are yearning for senior officer sponsorship of innovative ideas. I have heard this clarion call. More active-duty admirals and generals need to listen to our innovators and remove the barriers to adopting new technology.

As we build the agenda for Hook '26, you will see more focus on innovation, hearing from junior officers who have cutting-edge ideas, backed by experience in the weapons engagement zones in multiple theaters. I want to ensure your Tailhook Association, which exists for the benefit of our members, with special attention to the junior officers in our midst, champions the necessary advances in technology to crush any threat, anywhere, at any time.



RADM Mike "Nasty" Manazir, USN(Ret)



If there is any doubt that we live in an ever-changing world and that tailhook aviation is a dynamic and versatile weapon, as we began work on this issue of the magazine, the big news was that USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN 78) was making an unexpected detour as she neared the scheduled end of her deployment. The Navy's newest flattop was soon operating off Venezuela, the "Pilots of the Caribbean," as the VFA-31 *Tomcatters* in Marshal author called himself and his fellow CVW-8 aircrew, supporting the capture of President Nicolás Maduro. As I write these words, *Ford* has reversed course to return to the Mediterranean Sea, joining USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) and CVW-9 as carrier aviation's contribution to *Operation Epic Fury*, the air campaign over Iran. We'll look forward to reports from the *Factory* and *Shogun* (tactical callsigns) squadrons.

From the Editor-in-Chief

Each issue of the *The Hook* includes the long-standing feature "From the Catwalk," which is one of the enduring elements from the publication's earliest days. CDR Robert "Boom" Powell, USN(Ret) is the current author/compiler of this array of eclectic stories from Naval Aviation's past, most (I emphasize most) of them true; it's not a good sea story if it doesn't leave you wondering a little bit. Boom has twin billing in this issue with an article telling the story of the brief, but impactful history of the US-3A, the *Viking* COD.

Warfighting Innovation Now is the theme of Hook '26 and two articles relate to events and operations where past generations of Naval Aviators demonstrated that spirit. Innovation is easier when you possess elements of the enemy's playbook and in a highly secretive location in the Nevada desert, a select group of Naval Aviators and their U.S. Air Force counterparts gleaned lessons flying an array of MiG fighters and exposing front-line aircrew to their capabilities. Contributing Editor Mike Crutch tells their story.

The sudden invasion of South Korea by North Korean forces in June 1950 took the world by surprise. With U.S. conventional forces having

been reduced dramatically following the end of World War II, there was a rush to get Naval Aviation firepower to the battlefield. Not only were aircraft carriers pulled from the Reserve fleet, but so-called Weekend Warriors of the Naval Air Reserve also received the call to arms. In 1951, in an innovative first, four squadrons whose members the year before were fully engaged in civilian pursuits, formed the nucleus of CVG-101, the first all-Reserve carrier air group in history. How they responded and their lessons learned are the subject of the article "Boxer's Reserve Punch."



Hill Goodspeed

Speaking of the Korean War, we pulled from the magazine archives an installment from a feature that ran for many years called "Where Are They Now?" The subject is CAPT Royce Williams, USN(Ret), who on 24 February 2026, became the Navy's most recent recipient of the Medal of Honor. At age 100, Royce is a regular attendee at the annual symposium, his presence alongside the junior officers who have followed him what makes the Tailhook Association so special. And this year, we celebrate the association's 70th anniversary. Beginning with this issue, "An Airplane Story" will look back at aircraft delivered to the fleet in 1956, some of them flown by that group of Naval Aviators who gathered that year for the first time at Rosarito Beach, Mexico.

Sadly, since the publication of the last issue of *The Hook*, Senior Editor Mark Aldrich passed away after a courageous battle with pancreatic cancer. Throughout, he demonstrated an amazing spirit that was inspirational to all of us on the association staff. Between chemotherapy treatments and hospital stays, he continued to work on the magazine as much as he could, telling me that it was rejuvenating to do something he loved to take his mind off the reality of what he faced. The final words of this issue inside the back cover are fittingly a tribute to him.

Bob Balsler



Mark Aldrich found this colorful photograph of a VC-35 AD-4N Skyraider taxiing on the flight deck of USS Valley Forge (CV 45) during the carrier's second Korean War combat cruise in 1951-'52.



In Fiscal Year 2025, the Naval Safety Command reported 18 Class A mishaps across Naval Aviation, 12 of them involving the Navy with two aircrew fatalities and six in the Marine Corps. These mishaps cover manned, flight-related and aviation ground mishaps. For the Navy, FY '25 was not our best, which reinforces the fact that we have committed ourselves to a dangerous profession, particularly when operating within an enemy weapons engagement zone.

From the Naval Safety Command

Here at the Naval Safety Command, our data analysts and subject matter experts dive deep into identifying causal and contributing factors behind all mishaps. By examining these and other factors, we move closer to achieving our goal to minimize preventable mishaps.

Our forecast modeling, presented in previous articles appearing in *The Hook*, and in-depth risk analysis continue to inform the aviation community on safety-related data with the ultimate goal of preventing the next mishap. Forecast analysis modeling is a tool that identifies potential risk factors within commands.

Safety professionals work diligently to keep the aviation community informed of the latest trends, lessons learned and best practices to help ensure our aviators and aircraft remain full mission capable.

Last year was humbling, but it provides the opportunity to renew our commitment to risk management, compliance with NATOPS/SOP, and

following the plan, brief, execute, debrief (PBED) process. By continuing to employ this process we ensure accountability and increase our operational effectiveness while incorporating a systematic approach to risk management and safety.

This past year reminds us that attention to detail is the permanent price of safety. To quote FADM Chester W. Nimitz, "Our armament must be adequate to the needs, but our faith is not primarily in these machines of defense, but in ourselves."

While our data analysts and safety experts continue to reveal insights and provide tools, the power to prevent the next mishap ultimately resides in the hangar, on the flight line and in the cockpit. Each of you plays a critical role in our risk picture.

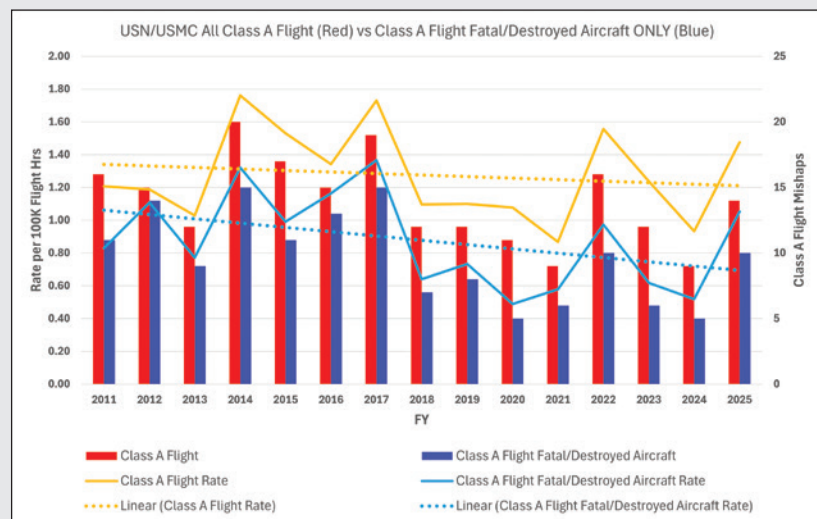
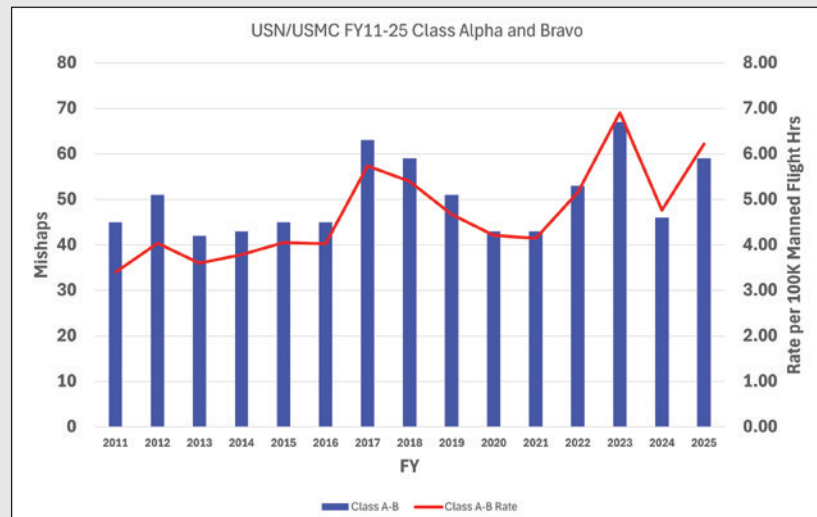
Let us look forward of the bow rather than toward the wake. Let's commit to a culture of disciplined adherence to procedures, honest and true communication and rigorous application of the PBED process on every single flight. By doing this, we can ensure this humbling year becomes a turning point, leading to a future where our aviators learn something from a single flight. Let's make the goal of zero preventable mishaps a shared reality.

Take off checks complete — Dino

The charts below provide additional information covering Class A and B mishaps.



RADM Dan Martin, USN



Hook '26

Preparations for Hook '26 have been underway for months with rooms and registrations setting a record pace. If you have not reserved your room at the Grand Sierra Resort (GSR), do so now as we will sell out. This year's theme, *Warfighting Innovation Now*, will focus on today's warfighters, a fitting theme given current operations in the Middle East, largely supported by carrier aviation. Our association president, CDR Travis "Sweet T" Amerine, has built a robust agenda of briefs and panel sessions that will captivate you all three days.

From the Executive Director

Highlights this year include Chief of Naval Operations ADM Daryl Caudle, who will be our guest speaker at the banquet. Former Secretary of the Navy Richard Danzig has accepted our invitation and will be recognized at the banquet. Additionally, the Navy's newest Medal of Honor recipient, CAPT Royce Williams, USN(Ret), plans to be with us just as he has each and every year. We will also be celebrating the 70th anniversary of *your* Tailhook Association, along with the 250th birthday of our great nation. If it has been a while since you have attended Hook, make this year the one to commit to.

The entire agenda can be found on our website, and you will see that it has something for everyone. The Bug Roach Mixer on Friday night will once again be a culminating event that truly captures what Tailhook is and what it means to be a member. Hook '26 commemorative Polo and T-Shirts are on order, and we expect them to be available in the Ship's Store by April. We will have limited quantities, so get yours when they become available. Life Members will receive a 50 percent discount on registration and a 10 percent discount at the Ship's Store during Hook. If

you are a junior officer Life member, we will have a complimentary cabana at the JO Pool Party. Stop by the cabana for complimentary beverages.

On a Personal Note

Please do me a favor and be sure to read Hill Goodspeed's tribute to Mark Aldrich in this issue. I could not have written it better. As you know, Mark was the senior editor of *The Hook*, and his loss is still being felt here at the association headquarters. There are only five of us here at the office and it's been tough not to have the presence of someone we have seen most every day for the past eight years. This issue of *The Hook* was the last issue he worked on, and you can honor him by keeping his memory in your heart each time you read *The Hook*.

Mark loved this magazine. In his final days, he reminded me not to mourn and to have a great Hook. I'm doing a poor job at the mourning piece. Mark was a prince of a man in every way and on a personal note, I lost a brother. However, according to his wishes the rest of the staff and I will endeavor to make it a great Hook. Come join us.

On behalf of the entire Tailhook staff, we are proud to serve you.

A. J. Kelly

CAPT Greg "Chaser" Keithley, USN(Ret)
Executive Director
The Tailhook Association



CAPT Greg Keithley, USN(Ret)



A Naval Aviator assigned to the VFA-37 Ragin' Bulls preflights an F/A-18E Super Hornet prior to launching on a mission from USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) in support of Operation Epic Fury on 2 Mar '26.

Yellowshirt Tribute

USN



A yellowshirt signals the pilot of an F/A-18E Super Hornet attached to the VFA-87 Golden Warriors on the flight deck of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) operating in the Mediterranean Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury, 2 Mar '26.

“Aboard ships like the USS *Ford* and *Abraham Lincoln* are a special group of Sailors I want to highlight today. These are the men and women, the Sailors up on the roof, running operations on the flight deck. With an average age of the early twenties, these are the unsung heroes of Naval Aviation.

“These young Sailors, known for wearing yellow shirts, are in charge of the catapults, taxiing jets around on the flight deck, shooting jets off the front end and recovering jets off the back end. They are literally involved with every single movement on the roof on an aircraft carrier. They are the last ones that a Naval Aviator sees before getting shot off the front end and the first one that a Naval Aviator sees after safely trapping on the back end.

“And just for a minute, imagine you’re standing on that aircraft carrier flight deck. There’s 30 knots of wind in your face. The deck is slippery, covered in grease. It’s noisy. There are propellers spinning. There’s jet blast everywhere. The helicopters are running. Your head is on a swivel and you’re trying to direct a multimillion-dollar fighter into a one-foot square box so that those Naval Aviators can be shot off into the black of night to go do America’s work.

“Those jets are fully loaded with missiles and bombs, and they are a world-class team combined with Naval Aviation and the aviators in those jets. This beautiful symphony of American spirit is the definition of perfectly organized chaos, and these crews do it every single time the carrier is at work, oh, by the way, in the middle of the night and oftentimes in the pouring rain.

“These are dedicated young people who take the road less traveled to serve their great nation doing the deeds that we need them to do. America’s enlisted force is the pride of every nation’s military, certainly ours, and the envy of every other one as well. Each and every one of them out there across the Joint Force are extraordinary. And in particular, today I want to highlight the yellowshirts.”

Remarks delivered by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Dan “Raizin” Caine, USAF, at a Pentagon press briefing on 10 Mar '26.



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Tailhooker is Navy's Newest Medal of Honor Recipient

by Hill Goodspeed and Barrett Tillman

LCpl Anamile Arce, USMC



Medal of Honor recipient CAPT Royce Williams, USN(Ret) waves to the crowd welcoming him upon his return to San Diego from Washington D.C. on 26 Feb '26, following the ceremony in which he received the nation's highest decoration for valor.

“I don’t go looking for honors,” CAPT Royce Williams, USN(Ret) said to the assembled audience at the Pentagon for his induction into the Hall of Heroes on Wednesday, 25 February 2026, the day after he received the Medal of Honor at the conclusion of President Donald J. Trump’s State of the Union address. However, many others from Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif. and the late RADM Don Shelton to fellow Naval Aviators and members of the American Legion did go looking in a yearslong campaign to recognize him for his heroic Korean War dogfight against a superior force of Soviet MiG-15s. Not since President Gerald R. Ford presented then-RADM James Stockdale with the nation’s highest military honor in 1976 has the distinctive five-pointed star medal with blue ribbon and white stars been draped around the neck of a Naval Aviator. And at age 100, Royce became the oldest living veteran to receive the Medal of Honor.

Barrett Tillman’s profile of the veteran aviator in *The Hook* in 2009 was the first open-source report of the event for which he was recognized with the nation’s highest decoration for valor. Following is what appeared:

“The trend in Korea was clear: air-to-air combat was practically nonexistent for tailhookers, so work ups stressed strafing, bombing and rockets. ‘We did little in the way of tactics and not much aerial gunnery,’ Royce recalls. Nevertheless, in 1952 LCDR Stan Holm took VF-781 aboard USS *Oriskany* (CVA 34) for a *Seventh Fleet* deployment with CVG-102.

“On 18 November, *Task Force 77* (TF-77) launched strikes against Hoeryong, North Korea, just across the Yalu-Tumen River from the huge Soviet base at Vladivostok. Thereafter, *Oriskany*’s Combat Information Center (CIC) reported multiple bandits inbound at 80 miles. The duty combat air patrol (CAP) flight was vectored out, but division leader LT Claire Elwood reported fuel pump problems and remained near the task force with his wingman. That left Royce and LTJG Dave Rowlands to make the intercept about 40 miles out.

“Climbing through a snowstorm at 12,000 feet, Royce called the tally-ho: numerous contrails high overhead. As the two F9F *Panthers* climbed, the bogeys descended out of the contrail altitude of 45,000 feet or so. There were seven MiGs, which split to corner the F9Fs. At 26,000 feet four of the bandits opened the action with an attack from 10 o’clock. The section turned into the threat, forcing an overshoot. When the MiGs pulled up, the trailing bandit lagged behind so Royce reversed onto his tail and hammered him. The MiG dropped into a smoking ‘graveyard spiral.’ Rowlands followed, shooting film to confirm the kill, but that left E. Royce Williams alone with six attentive Russian-born playmates.

“From there on it was a continuous cut-and-thrust dogfight. Royce two-blocked the throttle and left it at 100 percent as he swapped cannon fire with the nearest socialist aviators. Most of his shots were crossing or head-on. But at one point he hosed a MiG from astern and the Russian came unglued. Royce narrowly avoided a Fox-4 in a g-crunching pullup.

“The shootout continued in an arabesque of wrapped-up, mind-blurring turns as both sides scored hits. But the *Panther* whittled down the odds as one MiG after another was gunned or pitched out of the fight. Royce was turning hard when a better-than-average MiG driver got inside and pulled deflection. An explosive 37 mm shell cut the F9F’s rudder controls and destroyed the aileron boost. Out of ammo, Royce dived for a cloud deck 12,000 feet below, and by judicious jinking reached safety of the clag.

“Eventually Rowlands rejoined — that was the good news. The bad news — it was at the end of the tussle but in time to form behind a MiG on Royce’s tail as he dived for the clouds. Royce adds, ‘The other bad news — Rowland’s guns never fired!’

“After evading the surviving MiGs, Royce still had major problems. His shot-up *Panther* lacked full roll and yaw control, and lost control below 170 knots. He got some timely help from CAPT Courtney Shands, who put the ship slightly out of the wind to accommodate Royce’s fast, skewed approach

configuration. As if getting shot at by seven MiGs weren’t enough, the task force destroyers opened up on him due to ‘a breakdown in coordination between CIC and the gunnery liaison.’

“When he trapped, Williams’ *Panther* was a mess. Deck hands marveled at the condition of Bureau Number 125459, perforated some 260 times. No wonder Grumman was called the ‘Iron Works.’

“Williams walked into the ready room to find himself the focus of international attention. Aside from VADM Jocko Clark, CTF-77, Washington already knew about the incident. Meanwhile, a preliminary version of the mission was compiled that became official: Williams was credited with a kill and a probable/damaged while Dash-2, LTJG John Middleton, was credited with a single kill. Williams’ wingman, Dave Rowlands, was awarded a probable.

“Royce reported soonest to VADM Robert Briscoe, Commander Naval Forces, Far East, in Yokosuka, who passed the word from ‘No Such Agency.’ According to Briscoe, the electronic eavesdroppers said, ‘Tell the young man that he got at least three MiGs.’

“However, the story was considered far too hot for release to the public, though Russians had been flying against allied forces since 1950. The denouement occurred about 50 years later when Soviet information was released with the names of four MiG drivers who never returned to base. Whether confirmed or not, Royce Williams was the top tailhooking fighter pilot of ‘the forgotten war.’

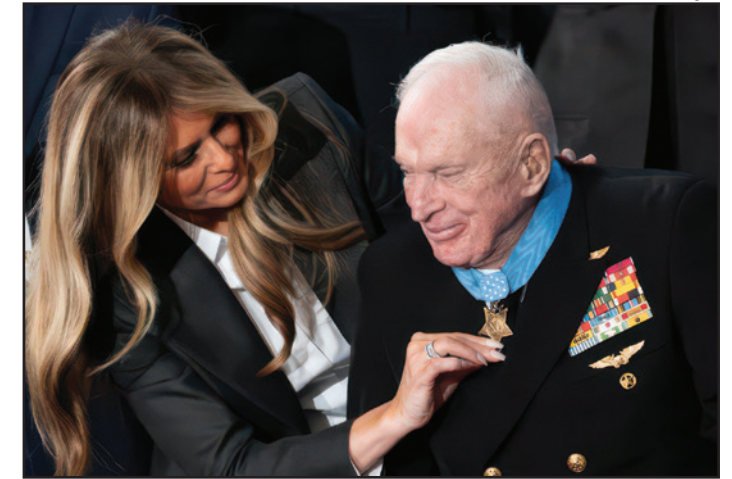
“A month later, in Seoul LT Williams found himself the JO by orders of magnitude, escorting President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower, GENs Omar Bradley and Mark Clark, and ADM Arthur Radford, among others. Knowing of the MiG encounter, Ike had asked to talk to someone who could speak knowledgeably about ‘our planes versus theirs.’ However, the soon-to-be commander in chief spent more time trying to convince the

obstinate aviator that scotch was superior to other adult beverages, with a notable lack of success.”

Continuing his remarks at the Pentagon, Royce spoke of his father, a World War I veteran, instilling in him recognition of what the country he was living in was giving him and that he “owed it something in return ... So just like any other Sailor and soldier, which I was once, I set out to be good at whatever I did for my country. As events revealed, I had this opportunity to do my best in battle.”



www.whitehouse.gov



CAPT Royce Williams, USN(Ret) pictured with First Lady Melania Trump after receiving the Medal of Honor during the State of the Union address on 24 Feb '26.

SSgt Madelyn Keech, USAF

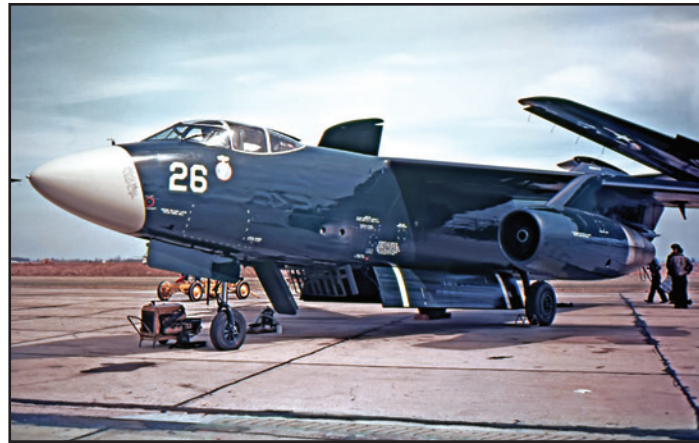


Left to right, Secretary of the Navy John Phelan, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, CAPT Royce Williams, USN(Ret) and Chief of Naval Operations ADM Daryl Caudle pictured during the ceremony inducting Williams into the Pentagon’s Hall of Heroes on 25 Feb '26.

AN AIRPLANE STORY

Skywarriors for the Smokin' Tigers

by Hill Goodspeed



The initial A3D-1s were among the last aircraft delivered in the Navy's overall glossy sea blue paint scheme, the sea service soon shifting to light gull gray over insignia white. These two images of BuNo 135426 include a close-up of VAH-1's Smokin' Tigers insignia.



“Ocean-to-ocean range at near sonic speeds with the U.S. Navy's most potent weapons,” read a 1955 Douglas Aircraft Company advertisement for the A3D (later redesignated A-3) Skywarrior. An accompanying illustration depicted the path one of the jets would take launching from one aircraft carrier, traveling long distance and then landing on another. Other artwork showed a bomb having just been released from an A3D over a port, no mention of it being a nuclear weapon that was the reason for the aircraft's creation.

While it was neither the first nor the last Navy aircraft to fly from the deck of an aircraft carrier with the primary role of delivering an atomic bomb, the Skywarrior was the longest-serving one, a versatile airplane adapted to other missions that included aerial refueling,

photoreconnaissance, electronic countermeasures and even transporting the Chief of Naval Operations. During a tour of USS *John F. Kennedy* (CVA 67) in 1972, a scientist remarked on what he took to be one of the Navy's more modern aircraft. The airplane's designer, Ed Heinemann, replied with a laugh. “That sir, is a Skywarrior. We started work on it in 1948.” The airplane had nearly two decades of service ahead of it at the time, operating until 1991.

Owing to its size — a wingspan of over 72 feet and gross operating weight of 70,000 pounds — the Skywarrior received the nickname the *Whale*. The lack of ejection seats and A3D designation also earned it the morbid moniker “All Three Dead.” The Navy accepted 282 examples of the aircraft, the final delivery in January 1961.



A3D-1, BuNo 135421, pictured in flight near NAS Jacksonville, the “FIP” visible beneath the cockpit indicating the airplane's assignment to the Flight Instruction Program training the first cadre of Skywarrior aircrew.

Befitting the *Whale*'s jet bomber's mission, the Navy created a new type of squadron, heavy attack (VAH), the nucleus of the first ones formed from existing composite and patrol squadrons. Among the latter was VAH-1, formed on 1 November 1955, from elements of the disestablishing VP-3. The first squadron skipper was CDR Paul F. Stevens, a World War II Navy Cross recipient who had previously commanded VC-5 flying the AJ-1 *Savage*, the Navy's first purpose-built atomic bomber. It joined the other VAHs in forming Heavy Attack Wing (HATWING) 1. VAH-1 personnel chose as the squadron nickname *Smokin' Tigers*, the insignia featuring one of the big cats with a cigar, its smoke plume a nuclear mushroom cloud. The squadron initially operated out of NAS Jacksonville, receiving



With a light gull gray tail section borrowed from another A3D-1, BuNo 135423 gets into position for launch from USS Shangri-La (CVA 38) in Aug/Sep 1956.



The Skywarrior's size put into perspective next to the island of USS Forrester (CVA 59) as two A3D-1s, BuNos 135443 and 135436, participate in VAH-1 carrier qualification on board the Navy's first supercarrier, Sep/Oct '56.

its first A3D-1s on 31 March 1956, with more following during the year as the squadron reached its full complement of 12 airplanes.

VAH-1 flew the *Whale* until early 1963, when the squadron completed transition to the A-5A *Vigilante*. The *Smokin' Tigers* completed another 18 months in the nuclear strike role before moving to the reconnaissance mission with RA-5Cs, which prompted redesignation as RVAH-1 on 1 September 1964.

The images of Smokin' Tigers Skywarriors are courtesy of Angelo Romano, author with Michael Grove of the book *Smokin' Tigers: A Pictorial History of Reconnaissance Attack Squadron One (RVAH-1)*.



A pair of VAH-1 Skywarriors, BuNos 135420 and 135443, pictured being craned aboard USS Shangri-La (CVA 38) at NAS Alameda for the squadron's initial carrier qualification, 31 Aug '56. Three days later, HATWING-1 Commander CAPT Tom Blackburn, flying with Steven as copilot and aircrewman R.G. McKee, launched from the carrier and overflew the National Air Show in Oklahoma City with an average speed of 606.557 mph. “We can start off the coast and hit a lot of targets,” said Chief of Naval Operations ADM Arleigh A. Burke, noting it proved the Navy could go anywhere in the world.



A3D-1, BuNo 135429, pictured in flight. Note the defensive tail armament that was part of the airplane's original specifications. VAH-1's “TB” tailcode honored CAPT Tom Blackburn, the HATWING-1 commander and World War II fighter ace while skipper of the famed VF-17 Jolly Rogers.



A3D-1, BuNo 135421, employs a drag chute while landing at NAS Sanford, Fla., a wartime training base expanded to serve as the home of HATWING-1.

MEMBERSHIP CORNER

Welcome New Tailhook Members and Life Members!

November New Members

LCDR Patrick Wiegleb, USN(Ret)
LCDR Richard A. Kruse, USN(Ret)
ENS Dan Beckham, USN

November New Life Members

Mr. Kit G. Lavell, USN Veteran
Mr. Stephen W. Henninger
LCDR Richard C. Dannerth, USN(Ret)
CAPT Rob Weiss, USN(Ret)

December New Members

Mr. Robert David, USN Veteran
CAPT Gregory R. Collins, USN(Ret)
LT Anhhkhoa Lam, USN
CAPT Mike Haymon, USN
Mr. Joel Delman
Mr. Matthew J. Graybiel, USN Veteran
LT Kevin Moran, USN
Mr. John C. Corrigan, USN Veteran
LCDR Leo E. Hansen, USN Veteran
CDR Adam Bosma, USN
CDR Robert J. Bettendorf Jr., USN Veteran

December New Life Members

Mr. Thomas T. Johnstone, USN Veteran
LCDR Michael B. Farrell, USN Veteran
Capt Jack E. McLaughlin, USMC Veteran
CAPT Martin N. Fentress Jr., USN
CAPT Rob Weiss, USN(Ret)
CDR John Blanford, USN(Ret)
CAPT Scott D. Tingle, USN(Ret)
LCDR Michael J. Lane, USN(Ret)
LCDR Kenneth T. Sanger, USN Veteran
CDR Albert L. St. Clair, USN(Ret)
LCDR Robert D. Arthur, USN(Ret)
Ms. Marjorie Luke

LT Ryan Quintal, USN
LT William H. Wells, USN
Mr. Donald W. Link
LTJG Hunter P. Arndt, USN
LCDR Steven Slaugh, USN
LCDR Bryan Reed, USN

January New Members

CDR Vern Larson, USN(Ret)
CDR Ralph Braund, USN(Ret)
LT Joshua Taylor, USN(Ret)
LT John M. Givens, USN
CDR Matthew Peden, USN
Master Steven J. Denning
Mr. Blayne McCafferty
Mr. Alfred G. Chavous Jr.
CDR Thaddeus Rusinek, USN
Mr. Brian M. Queen
Mrs. Jan Horsefield
Dr. Andrew Beath
LT Scott Altorfer, USN Veteran
LCDR Timothy Byrne, USN Veteran
Mrs. Kea Matory
RDML Charles Saffell, USN(Ret)

January New Life Members

Capt Zachary Moore, USMC
LT Donald L. Wiedner, USN Veteran
CDR Cameron B. Place, USN(Ret)
CAPT Karl Volland, USN(Ret)
CDR Tom E. Sanders, USN(Ret)
Mr. Terry Carter
LT Stevens E. Woodburn, USN Veteran
AN Leroy Striegel, USN Veteran
Lt Col James M. Parsons, USAF(Ret)
CDR Charles Billy, USN(Ret)
LCDR Mike J. Bernard, USN(Ret)

February New Members

LCDR Timothy E. Fahey, USN(Ret)
LCDR John Laughlin, USN
Mr. William D. Allen, USA Veteran
Mr. Michael W. Wiscombe, USMC Veteran
LT Ryan Hebert, USCG(Ret)
CDR Frank Conway, USN(Ret)
LCDR Don Lyle, USN(Ret)
CDR Don Boothe, USN(Ret)
Mr. Jerry Mautner
Ms. Julie Greer
LT Robert P. Lind, USN
Maj Craig Platt, USMC Veteran

February New Life Members

CAPT Paul J. Valovich, USN(Ret)
LT Alan L. Cartwright, USNR(Ret)
LT James T. Gancos, USN Veteran
CAPT Eric Pagenkopf, USN(Ret)
LCDR Thor Stensrud, USN
CDR Roger L. Ryon, USN(Ret)
VADM Brent M. Bennett, USN(Ret)
CAPT Tommy Butts, USN
LCDR Joe Balsley, USN(Ret)
Mr. Matt Ottosen
LT Jared Hachmeister, USN
LT Bruce C. Miller, USN Veteran
CDR Dana D. Mullis, USN(Ret)
CDR R. Scott Ruppert, USN(Ret)
Mr. George C. Paulson
CDR Timothy P. Hurley, USN
LCDR William J. McDermond, USN Veteran
CDR Mark Guttenberger, USN(Ret)

Cutoff date — 28 February 2026.
All members after this date will be featured in the next issue.



Photos courtesy of CAPT Dave "Roy" Rogers, USN(Ret)



Mile High Tailhookers hit the slopes in kilts for their most recent membership drive.



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TAILHOOK EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

 Combined Federal Campaign No. 10251

Aloha Tailhookers,
Your Tailhook Educational Foundation (TEF) thanks you again for your remarkable, ever-growing generosity to our foundation and our tailhook legacy students. In 2025, your support again surpassed annual contribution totals for the previous year by \$30,000. Total 2024 contributions were \$1,650,000 and in 2025 your generosity totaled \$1,680,000. Your largess grows every year and as a result of the last two banner years, the total value of all TEF portfolios is now well over \$8,000,000.

In 2025, 150 TEF scholarship awardees earned over \$702,000 in scholarship grants. This represents 14 more awardees and \$168,000 more than TEF awarded in 2024, 22 more awardees and \$202,000 more than were earned in 2023, and 42 more scholarship awardees and \$422,000 more in grant funds earned in 2020. In the five years between 2020 and 2025, TEF's average grant value increased by \$1,500 from \$3,150 to \$4,650 per grant.

Please know the sole reason TEF is empowered to grow not only the number of scholarships our Naval Aviation legacy students can earn, but also the amount of scholarship funds available for them and the average grant value of each scholarship is your unwavering generosity.

Your kind, assiduous support continues to make an active, significant and inspiring impact on the lives of our talented TEF scholarship recipients. Not only do we thank you for supporting TEF, but we also pass on sincere appreciation from our students-awardees and our advanced gratitude for your charitable giving to come.

TEF's scholarship applications open in mid-December and close in mid-February each year. Once the applications close, TEF's staff prescreens all submitted applications for eligibility, completeness and application quality. This process finishes in early March and during the ensuing eight weeks, our scholarship committee fully screens, grades and ranks awardees from the applications remaining. We notify the awardees and those not selected by email in April.

The TEF staff then matches awardees to named scholarships, notifying them which scholarship they earned and its grant value in the middle of June. We also update our TEF donor and scholarship awardee web pages. The annual scholarship cycle ends when TEF mails the grant checks to the awardees through their college bursar offices by the end of July. If you have any questions about the TEF scholarship timeline or the application or awardee selection processes, please visit our website or call us at (858) 689-9223.

At TEF's fourth quarter board meeting each year, our board of directors votes on and selects the next year's scholarship name. We started collecting donations for our 2026 reunion scholarship in November 2025, and we will continue to raise funds for this year's scholarship through Hook '26.

This year's scholarship honors and pays well-earned tribute to CAPT Royce Williams USN(Ret). Royce is the Navy's most recent Medal of Honor recipient, having received the nation's highest decoration for valor at the State of the Union address on 24 February 2026. He is credited with downing four Russian MiG-15s while flying a combat air patrol off USS *Oriskany* (CVA 34) on 18 November 1952.

If you would like to contribute to our newest perennial scholarship honoring CAPT Williams, please indicate this on your donation form or the memo line of your check to TEF. Another quick way to donate is to use the QR code shown to the right that takes you directly to our GiveDirect webpage donation form. This form also allows you to tell TEF which scholarship you would like to support.

We also want to remind you that we are always looking for eligible high school senior and college Gold Star students, and current and former enlisted college students who may be unaware of TEF's scholarship programs supporting them.

Students are eligible to earn one of TEF's Gold Star scholarships if their qualified parent sponsor (or stepparent sponsor) passed away while serving on active duty. Our Gold Star and enlisted applicants also need

to be currently attending or planning to attend an accredited college or university. If you know or are aware of any of these students or their parents, please ask them to contact our TEF front office so we can point them to our TEF Gold Star or enlisted scholarship programs.

Additionally, TEF reminds our donors who are still working that many large and small companies and organizations match employee donations to qualified charities. TEF qualifies as one of those non-profit 501(c)(3) charities. A list of companies like Boeing, Delta Airlines, Microsoft, Raytheon and RTX, along with several hundred other companies that provide matching donations can be found on our Tailhook Google Drive at the following link:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w3LFL2ycF3XeqrBlc_uEq6trnAZIO-t/view?usp=sharing

In closing, TEF genuinely appreciates the resolute charitable generosity from our industry partners, our like-minded organizational sponsors and donors, and our unyielding individual Tailhook members and supporters. Your continued support remains the lifeblood of our annual fundraising efforts and our ability to fund TEF grants for these brilliant students each year.

We look forward to thanking all of you in person at Hook '26 on 20-22 August at the Grand Sierra Resort in Reno.



CAPT Rodger Welch, USN(Ret)

CAPT Rodger Welch, USN(Ret)
Executive Director
Tailhook Educational Foundation



TEF GiveDirect
Donation QR Code
TAX ID: 33-0487778

Office of Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D.



Medal of Honor recipient CAPT Royce Williams USN(Ret.) pictured with fellow South Dakotan Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., whose father also served as a Naval Aviator, splashing two enemy aircraft while flying F6F Hellcats off USS Intrepid (CV 11) during World War II.

SHIP'S



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Hook '26 Men's & Women's Polo
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FROM THE CATWALK

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MCSN Jarrod A. Schad, USN

AN Chase Sawyer, left, salutes while ABHAN Corbin Caccia lowers the American flag during evening colors on the flight deck of USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) in Norfolk, Va., on 11 Sep '19.



Question: What was the last aircraft carrier not built in Newport News, Va.?

FLAG DAY

It's a day to honor the red, white and blue and the country it flies over. It happens once a year, but for me, there's only one flag day and it happened years ago in one of the most remote places on Earth. It was a dawn launch from USS *Midway* (CV 41) smack dab in the middle of the Indian Ocean. We were sick of flying combat air patrol off the coast of Iran but today was different. Not only were we on our way home, but for the first time in months we would see land.

"The flight schedule called it a low-level training flight, but to us it was like a scenic drive in the country. Yeah, maybe we'd only see uninhabited tiny atolls, but they were land, and anything was more exciting than the blue water we'd been seeing the past few months. It was just 'Lizard' and me in one jet, 'Rawhide' and 'Jabba' in another — four good friends out for a joyride in two very expensive F-4 hot rods.

"Halfway through the flight, we spotted a small sailboat anchored near an atoll, which piqued our interest since we were far from any shipping lanes and hadn't seen a civilian boat in months. Nobody was up on deck, but that was to be expected at that early hour. Curiosity got the best of us, and we had to have a closer look, so we circled around to do a low fly-by, rationalizing that if our noise woke them up, at least they'd get a show.

"We were outclassed [and] outgunned. The show they gave us far exceeded our feeble attempt. Two people came up on deck and started proudly and emphatically waving a big American flag, and we were close enough to see the smiles on their faces. I can't speak for my buddies, but for me that sight caught me off guard and put a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball as our flag means so much more to me than just a symbol

of our country. We were almost exactly on the opposite side of the planet from our country, about as far away as you can get, and yet here in the middle of nowhere we were seeing these folks proudly displaying our flag and showing they were glad to see us as they did so."

Ed Note: The squadron was on board USS Midway (CV 41) on Gonzo Station from 5 July to 24 August 1985 in what would prove to be the final full deployment of the F-4 on board a U.S. Navy carrier.

—LT Wes Koons (VF-161, 1985-'87) quoted in the San Diego Union-Tribune



LT Dana Potts, USN



A pair of F-4S Phantom IIs assigned to the VF-161 Chargers pictured in flight off USS Midway (CV 41), circa 1984.

ROUND 'N ROUND

USS *Bennington* (CVS 20) claimed a new world record for orbits when she completed 308 left circles within a 2000-ft. area. For 40 straight hours the anti-submarine warfare carrier steamed in circles while taking part in antenna radiation tests conducted by the Long Beach Naval Shipyard off Seal Beach, Calif. The ship had to remain within a one-mile circle so that the radiation pattern could be calibrated.

There was a persistent port list when the ship finally steadied on straight course after completion of the tests. The result was that 100 percent of *Bennington's* crewmembers experienced vertigo, some of them for the first time.

—Adapted from Naval Aviation News, June 1960

HOW DID THEY KNOW?

VF-871 was established at NAS Oakland, Calif., in December 1949. Composed entirely of Naval Air Reserve personnel, the squadron departed for its annual two-week training in July 1950. Amid that period, the call came on 2 August to report to NAS San Diego for active duty. Greeting them was a tremendous banner draped over the hangar spaces that read, "WELCOME WEEKEND WARRIORS." Prophetically, the middle word had been crossed out. By May 1951, the squadron was on board USS *Princeton* (CV 37) heading for combat over Korea.

CAPE HORN

Her construction stopped with the end of World War II, USS *Oriskany* (CV 34) was placed in commission on 25 September 1950, and subsequently sent to the Mediterranean. She returned to NAS Quonset Point, R.I., in October 1951, for a month and then steamed to Gravesend Bay, N.Y., to offload ammunition. She had her masts removed, allowing passage under the bridges spanning the East River to enter the New York Naval Shipyard for her first major overhaul. Since her new home port was San Diego, *Oriskany* went on a South American tour with official visits to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Valparaiso, Chile; and Lima, Peru after leaving the shipyard. On 29 June, she became the first American aircraft carrier to sail around Cape Horn. According to the ship's cruise book, after turning north along the coast of Chile, the carrier steamed through seas so rough that the crew had to sit on the mess decks to eat.

- John Masefield: "Off Cape Horn there are but two kinds of weather, neither one of them a pleasant kind."
- Traditional Maritime Adage: "Below 40 degrees latitude, there is no law. Below 50 degrees, there is no God."
- Traditional Lore: Rounding the Horn earns a Sailor the privilege of wearing a gold earring.

Below: TBF-1C Avengers and FM-2 Wildcats spotted for launch on the flight deck of USS *Anzio* (CVE 57) on 21 Apr '45, supporting operations against Japanese forces on Okinawa.

Naval History and Heritage Command



NONREGULATION FOOTWEAR

"[Larry] Duthie was fond of wearing fluffy, pink bunny slippers on the ship. At first it was just in 'Alice's Restaurant,' our JO bunkroom. But as the cruise went on, he became less self-conscious about them and was often seen wearing them with his flight suit or his uniform in the ready room or the wardroom. Once he even forgot to switch into flight boots for a launch and was called out by the Air Boss over the IMC as he was parading across the flight deck all geared up to fly but with fluffy pink slippers. He was known as 'Fluffy' from then on."

—VA-164 squadronmate

USN



A banner on a hangar at NAS San Diego welcomes Naval Air Reserve squadrons recalled for active duty in the Korean War.

National Naval Aviation Museum



Members of ship's company in ranks amid aircraft on the flight deck of USS *Oriskany* (CV 34) underway in the Atlantic Ocean shortly after her commissioning at the New York Naval Shipyard on 25 Sep '50.



Sailors and Marines stand at attention on the pier alongside USS *Nassau* (ACV 16) following her commissioning ceremony at the Puget Sound Navy Yard on 20 Aug '42. Note the bow art to inspire shipyard workers.

NAMES MATTER

Although rare, there are precedents for renaming a ship while in commission. By nautical lore, this is considered bad luck. USS *Midway* (CVE 63) was renamed *St. Lo* in October 1944 so that the name of the famous battle could be used for the lead ship of a new class of large-deck carrier. Two weeks later, a kamikaze attack sent *St. Lo* to the bottom during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. USS *Anzio* (CVE-57) formerly *Coral Sea*, fared much better.

HAS YOUR HOMETOWN BUILT AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER?

Newport News, Va., of course, holds the distinction of having been the birthplace of the most aircraft carriers, beginning with USS *Yorktown* (CV 5) in 1936. Across the river in Portsmouth, the Norfolk Navy Yard built one. The confusingly named New York Shipbuilding Corporation — it was in Camden, N.J. — built USS *Saratoga* (CV 3) in 1925, USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA 63) in 1960 and all 11 light aircraft carriers (CVL). Bethlehem Steel's Fore River Shipyard in Quincy, Mass., gets credit for seven flattops built. The New York Naval Shipyard in Brooklyn launched six. If you need more places, most escort carriers were constructed assembly line-style by Kaiser Shipyards in Vancouver, Wash., and Seattle-Tacoma Shipbuilding. One or two were farmed out to Kearny, N.J., Chester, Penn., San Francisco, Calif. and Pascagoula, Miss.

PASSION

"Damn I LOVED working on that jet! It was such a challenge! But the rewards could bring tears of pride to my eyes. I've been shocked, stabbed, cut, bruised, pinched, burnt, smashed fingers, stood on my head for three hours in the cockpit to pull a headrest, heck I've even fallen off one once. I've said every cuss word known to man and even made up a few and directed it to the jet, but the second somebody other than a *Tomcat* Sailor said something bad about MY jet, I would rip into them."

—Brian Hegrat quoted in Half Century, Baby



PH3 Justion Bane, USN



Maintainers at work on an F-14 Tomcat in the hangar bay on board USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75) underway in the Atlantic Ocean in Nov '00.

BOUNCES

- Peace is that brief glorious moment in history when everybody stands around reloading.
- During WW II, the complex wood structure of the SNJ-5 *Texan* was built by H.J. Heinz, Co. Yes, the pickle people!
- The objective is to hit the target and not the target to hit you.
- It is a tacit, yet profound admission of the preeminence of flying in the hierarchy of the human spirit that those who seek to control aviators via threats always threaten to take one's wings and not one's life.
- I never worry about action, but only about inaction.

—Winston Churchill

SPEEDSTERS

An Air Force F-105 *Thud* driver recalled a Joint Navy/Air Force mission to Hanoi in 1965. "I was doing 810 knots on the deck (that's right, buddy, 810 knots) and I slowly overtook a Navy F-8 *Crusader* as if passing a car on the freeway. We exchanged gentle, pathetic waves as if to say, 'Oh, Hi there. Don't know you but hope you're having a nice day.' I swear it was the most surreal moment of my life."

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR'S PRAYER

My student is a headache that I do not want,
 He maketh me to lie down at night very weary.
 He leadeth me beside high-tension wires,
 Yea, though he knoweth better, my hair turneth gray.
 And though I fly on the clearest of days,
 I fear much evil, for he is with me.

SBD DOINGS

LtCol Earl B. "Slim" Sumerlin Jr., USMC, told tales of flying the SBD *Dauntless*. When he was with the VMSB-235 *Death Angels* on Green Island, one of the pilots was a notorious tobacco chewer. The aerial gunners hated flying with him as he had the habit of spitting into the

National Naval Aviation Museum



SBD Dauntless dive bombers assigned to the Marine Corps Bombardier and Air Gunners School at MCAS El Centro, Calif., pictured on a gunnery training flight, circa 1943.

Naval History and Heritage Command



A flight instructor and student receive information from their plane captain prior to a training hop in an N3N Yellow Peril during World War II.

slipstream and as the rear canopies were usually open, they ended up smeared with the smelly slop.

SBDs flew as gunnery trainers at NAAS Cecil Field during WW II. One *Dauntless* suffered an engine failure at the 180 and the pilot and Sailor trainee on his first flight both bailed out. A week later the same student went up to refly his familiarization hop. After landing, the ground crew on the ramp asked the pilot where his gunner was. It turned out that when the pilot chopped the power for landing, the kid had jumped out again.

HAIRCUT HAZARDS

John "Frog" Allen was sitting in the barber's chair when general quarters sounded. The barber was on the whaleboat crew and dashed off, leaving Allen with half a haircut.

A memory Charles "Chaz" Fatur has of his time serving aboard USS *Midway* (CV 41) during 1985-'87 was a contest held among his fellow ship's barbers to see who could cut the most hair in a 12-hour shift. Chaz was the winner with 50 haircuts. The second-place finisher did 40 haircuts.

CORSAIR GETS ONE

On 4 September 1950, ENS Edward Laney of VF-53 off USS *Valley Forge* (CV 45) was on his second mission of the day, a combat air patrol that he was afraid would be a long dull afternoon. However, radar detected an incoming bogey, and his flight was directed to descend and identify the intruder. In close, they saw it was a twin-engine bomber. As the flight lead, LTJG Richard Downs got within range first and the gunner on the bomber fired at him. He immediately climbed.



Ordnancemen wheel carts of rockets past a VF-53 F4U-4B Corsair on the flight deck of USS Valley Forge (CV 45) in preparation for strikes against North Korean targets in Jul '50.

In response to their report, the task force commander on board flagship USS *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) directed the flight make the aircraft turn away and, if fired upon again, shoot it down.

Chasing the inbound bomber, Laney recognized the faint red stars as Soviet markings and thought it was an Ilyushin Il-4. When the two F4U-4B *Corsairs* closed the gap, the gunner fired again at the lead. LTJG Downs fired a burst of 20 mm at the bomber ... and missed. Close behind his leader, Laney opened fire. He hit the starboard engine, which fell off followed by the entire wing.

Upon returning to *Valley Forge*, the two pilots helicoptered to the flagship for debrief. The gun camera film proved that the bomber's gunner had fired on both *Corsairs*. However, since it was a Russian aircraft, the event received no publicity, and no specifics appear in Laney's citation for the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Many years after the Korean War, Russian historians published the story of the incident. What Laney thought was an Il-4 was an American-built Douglas A-20G *Havoc* supplied to the Soviet Union under Lend-Lease during WW II.

Laney saw service in WW II, Korea and Vietnam and was commanding officer of NAS Patuxent River before his retirement. He lived to the age of 97.

Answer: USS Constellation (CV 64) was commissioned in 1961 after her construction at the New York Naval Shipyard in Brooklyn. The same year, USS Kitty Hawk (CVA 63) was commissioned after being built by the New York Shipbuilding Corporation in Camden, N.J.

Chock 'em, chain 'em, and non-secrets to the Catwalk.

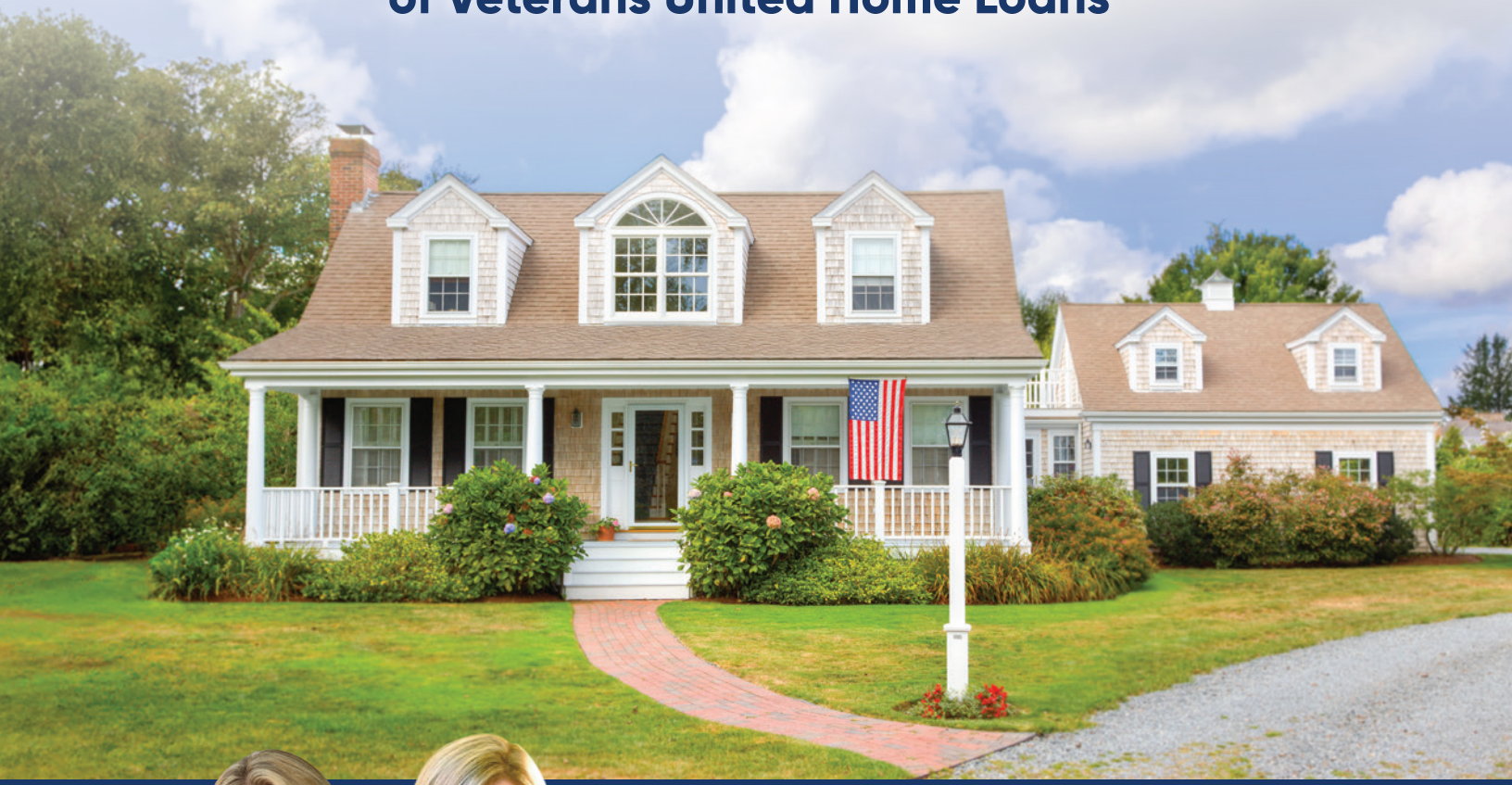


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LAUNCH

USAF

Red Eagles, Gold Wings: Naval Aviation and America's Secret MiG Programs

by Mike Crutch



A former Iraqi Air Force MiG-21F-13 wore full U.S. national markings and a spurious USAF serial number in 1968 during its highly secret trials codenamed Have Doughnut.

A limited declassification of records during the past 20 years partially lifted a veil on the fleet of Eastern Bloc aircraft operated from secret sites in the Nevada desert since the late 1960s. Most information in the public domain tends to focus on the U.S. Air Force aspects of operating these aircraft, but there was significant involvement by those wearing Wings of Gold.

In August 1966, an Iraqi Air Force pilot flew a Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-21F-13 fighter (NATO codename *Fishbed-E*) to Israel. The U.S. military was keen to examine and test the aircraft due to the prevailing MiG-21 threat to its aircraft over North Vietnam. This led the Foreign Technology Division of the Air Force Systems Command (AFSC), which acted on behalf of various military organizations, including the Naval Weapons Center, to negotiate a lease for the jet. Secrecy was paramount, with the MiG loaded into the hold of an Air Force C-133 *Cargomaster* for delivery to the highly classified Groom Lake test facility in the Nevada desert, arriving on 23 January 1968. Serving at the time with the NAS Point Mugu-based VX-4 *Evaluators*, CDR (later RADM) Tom Cassidy

was the Navy's lead pilot for the Joint service exploitation project of the MiG, codenamed *Have Doughnut*.

Cassidy flew chase in one of his squadron's F-8E *Crusaders* when the MiG-21 took to American skies for the first time on 8 February 1968, piloted by his USAF counterpart in the project, Lt Col Joe Jordan. A limited engagement between Cassidy in the MiG-21 and an F-4J *Phantom II* took place 10 days later. This was the first of an eventual 25 Navy-only flights. They included fighter vs. fighter comparisons, infrared/radar missile detection tests and evaluating defensive maneuvers against the MiG-21 by aircraft like the A-4F *Skyhawk*, A-6A *Intruder* and A-7A *Corsair II*. LT Dennis Sullivan joined Cassidy in flying the MiG and the intelligence gathered was a gold mine for both the test community and in developing tactics for front-line squadrons to defeat the MiG-21 in aerial combat. After its 102nd and final sortie on 30 March, personnel disassembled the former Iraqi MiG-21, which departed for Israel 75 days after its arrival. It would not be long before additional MiGs arrived at Groom Lake.

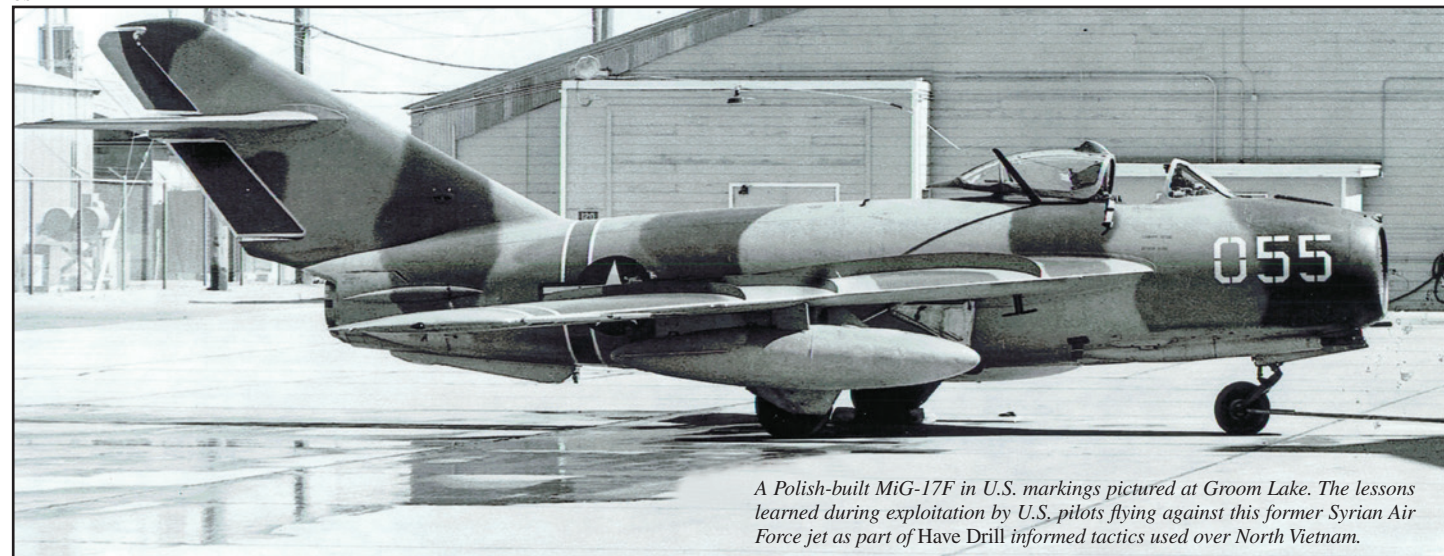
Online resource



RADM Tom Cassidy, who as a lieutenant commander in the VX-4 Evaluators was the first Naval Aviator to fly the MiG-21 as part of Have Doughnut.



A VX-4 F-8E Crusader flies alongside the Have Doughnut MiG-21. A range of U.S. combat aircraft evaluated their capabilities against the Eastern Bloc fighter.

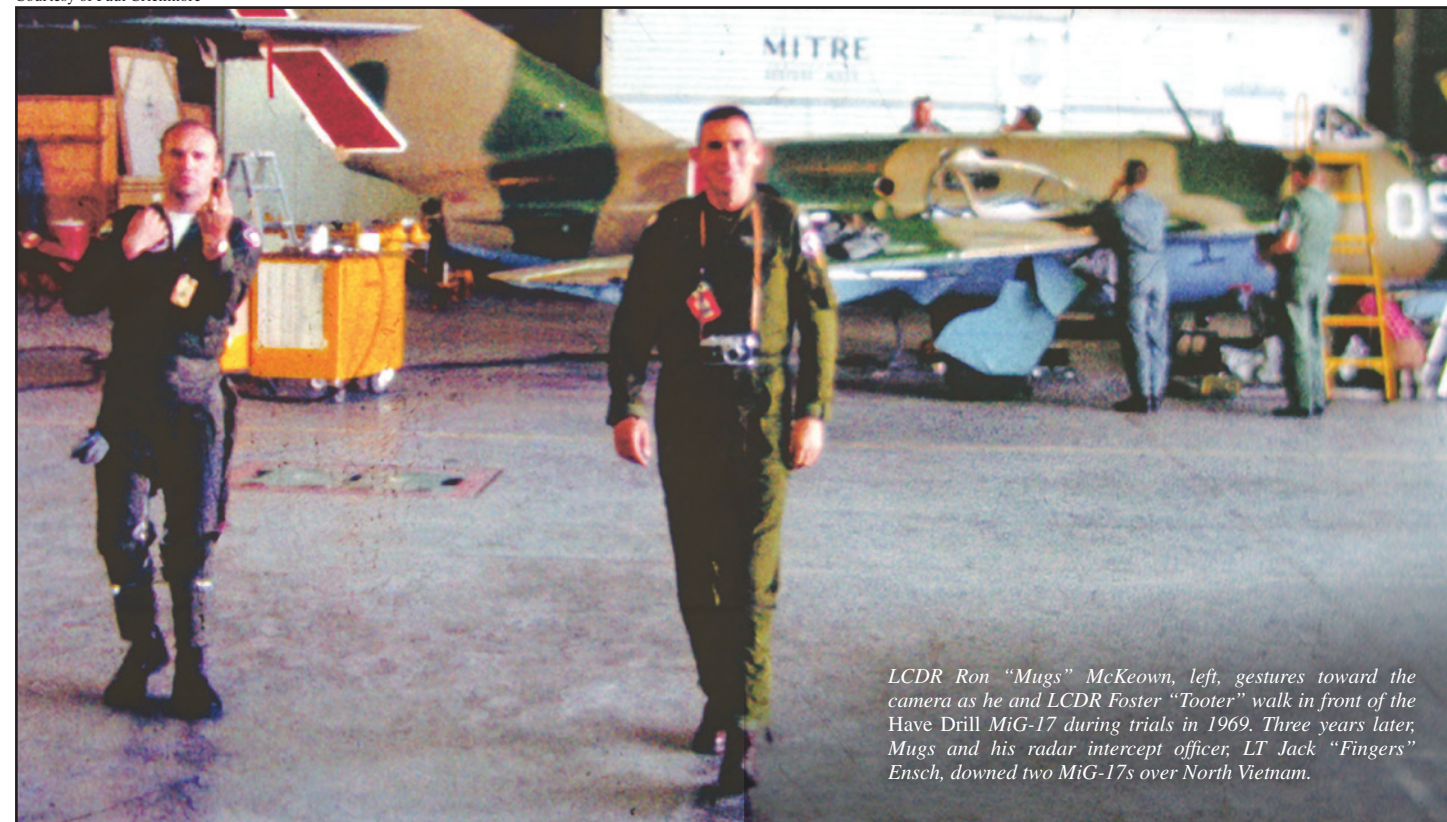


A Polish-built MiG-17F in U.S. markings pictured at Groom Lake. The lessons learned during exploitation by U.S. pilots flying against this former Syrian Air Force jet as part of Have Drill informed tactics used over North Vietnam.

On 27 January 1969, a USAF transport delivered a MiG-17F *Fresco-C* to the Nevada desert for exploitation under *Project Have Drill*. Initial evaluation by engineers revealed it to be a Polish-built Lim-5M example. A second, Russian-built MiG-17F arrived on 12 March. Codenamed *Have Ferry*, this aircraft functioned as backup and was also used for 2-v-x sorties with its hangar mate. These aircraft, both former Syrian Air Force machines, had landed in Israel due to a navigation error the previous year, and were offered to the U.S. after exploitation by the Israeli Defense Forces. Assuming custody of the jets was the Special Projects Branch of the USAF's 6512th Test Squadron, usually based at Edwards AFB as part of the Air Force Flight Test Center.

As with the MiG-21, the Navy also had a vested interest in evaluating the MiG-17. It was proving a thorn in American sides over Vietnam and would eventually down 28 U.S. aircraft during the war. VX-4 pilots LCDRs Foster "Tooter" Teague and Ron "Mugs" McKeown were embedded into the 6512th to develop the test plan to exploit the MiG-17s in the air-to-air environment. Flights began on 17 February 1969, with the Navy mounting 47 sorties against a mix of F-4B/J and F-8H/J fighters, plus

Courtesy of Paul Crickmore



LCDR Ron "Mugs" McKeown, left, gestures toward the camera as he and LCDR Foster "Tooter" walk in front of the Have Drill MiG-17 during trials in 1969. Three years later, Mugs and his radar intercept officer, LT Jack "Fingers" Ensich, downed two MiG-17s over North Vietnam.



F-4J Phantom II, Bureau Number 155832, assigned to the VF-213 Blacklions pictured at Nellis AFB for a Have Idea det in Feb '75. Front-line squadrons ostensibly sent detachments to fly against USAF aggressors to mask operations against the Groom Lake MiGs.

By the time of the 209th and final program sortie on 14 May, the MiG-17s had proven to be formidable dogfighting platforms coupled with having a small visual signature. As was the case with *Have Doughnut's* findings, the USAF and Navy updated their tactical manuals with this firsthand information and outlined counter-tactics. The *Have Drill* airframe returned to Israel, while the *Have Ferry* example remained at Groom Lake for follow-on testing.

The USAF continued a series of Foreign Materiel Exploitation (FME) programs under the umbrella codename *Have Glib*. Included was the continued use of the lone MiG-17, which both USAF and Navy pilots flew in a variety of tests, the sea service also continuing to expose the jet to TOPGUN IPs. High-ranking officials also visited Groom Lake for briefings on the projects, those with a test pilot qualification allowed to fly the asset. In 1971, combat veteran VADM Thomas F. Connolly, then Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare), logged his final Navy flight hour in the MiG-17, while Marine Corps ace MGen Marion E. Carl flew the jet twice while serving as Inspector General of the Marine Corps, his last active-duty assignment.

By late May 1973, following the addition of another MiG-17 (a search and ranging radar-equipped PF model, NATO codename *Fresco-D*) and the return of the original *Have Doughnut* MiG-21F-13 from Israel, *Project Have Idea* became the codename for all aircraft-based FME programs. *Have Glib* remained as the blanket Joint activity to obtain access and exploit Soviet-built assets.



The biggest acquisition to date was four MiG-21F-13 airframes from Indonesia after that nation deposed its communist regime in 1970, thanks to covert U.S. backing. Using three of the jets as sources for spare parts, a single "new" MiG-21 took to the Nevada skies in August 1973. It was around this time that the 6512th adopted the nickname *Red Hats*, with a squadron patch featuring a bear wearing a red hat, surrounded by six red stars and the motto "More With Less," recognition of the logistics involved in operating and maintaining the Soviet-built fighters.

The second Marine to fly one of the MiGs was test pilot Capt Pete Field. He had flown the MiG-17 in 1971 before checking out on the MiG-21 two years later. Alongside him was VX-4 pilot LCDR Jack Ready, with both flying MiGs in a series of trials lasting into 1974 that culminated in radar tests against VX-4 F-4s. That test event was also the first occasion that fleet squadron aircrews flew against the MiGs, with F-4Js from the VF-96 *Fighting Falcons* selected to augment VX-4 during January 1974.

During the mid-1970s, contrasting with the Air Force's guarded approach of qualifying more of their aggressor pilots to fly the assets, the small Navy cadre drove a comprehensive adversary/aggressor operation that could be accessed by both USAF and Navy weapons schools for training, as well as front-line units. In 1975, four fleet F-4J squadrons sent small detachments (dets) to Nellis AFB to fly "up north" and engage the *Have*

Idea MiGs. These included the NAS Miramar-based VF-114 *Aardvarks* and VF-213 *Blacklions*. Both units were then assigned to CVW-11, and it is no coincidence that CAG-11 was the now-CDR Tooter Teague. The VF-21 *Freelancers* sent four F-4Js to Nellis, officially to fight the USAF's 64th Fighter Weapons Squadron aggressors, but this was just a cover story. F-4Js of the NAS Oceana-based VF-31 *Tomcatters* became the first Atlantic Fleet jets exposed to *Have Idea* assets, having quietly detached to Nellis from CVW-3 weapons training at MCAS Yuma.

In February 1976, recent Empire Test Pilots School graduate LCDR Tom Morgenfeld joined VX-4 and soon replaced LCDR Bill Hayden working alongside colleagues in the 6512th. "In early June 1976 ... I flew up to the test site with [LT] Perry Clausen, one of our existing *Have Idea* pilots. After a brief ground school from the USAF pilots, the next day I flew four familiarization sorties in the

Courtesy of CAPT Tom Morgenfeld, USN(Ret)



LCDR Tom Morgenfeld unaware of the water about to rain down on him after his first flights in the MiG-21 at Groom Lake in 1976. His career included significant involvement in the exploitation program, including serving as the first Naval Aviator to evaluate the MiG-23 and Su-22.

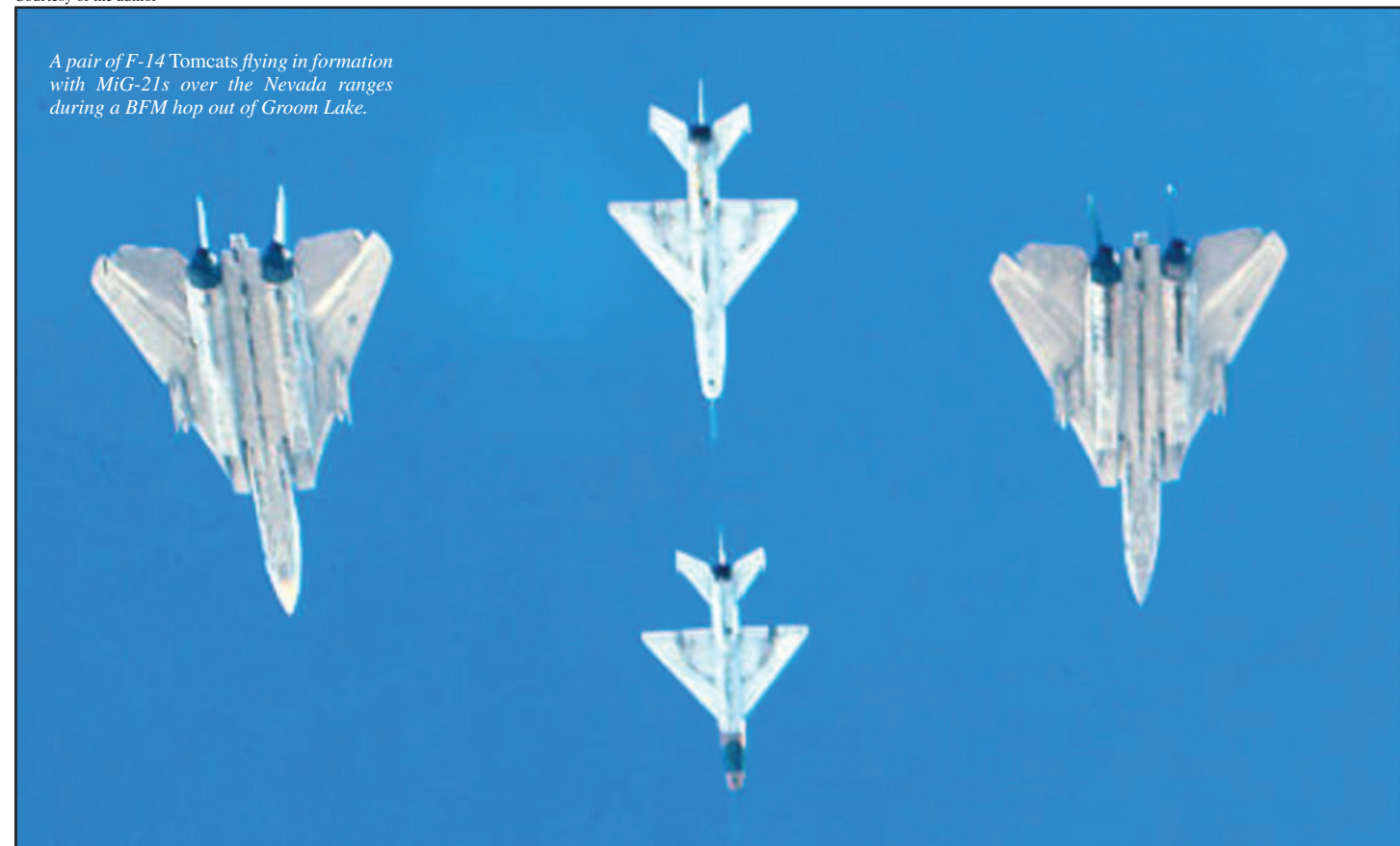
MiG-21. Needless to say, I was quite pumped up! My introduction to that extremely small but most highly qualified outfit was almost complete and I was spoiled forever. I say almost complete because they needed to complete one more task before I was accepted. Catching us vain fighter pilots at the crest of a huge ego trip, the maintenance troops had a great way of bringing us right back down to earth ... They tell you that they need to add your picture to their album of pilots. Of course who can turn them down! They ask you to pose in front of the squadron sign, g-suit and all, for the picture. What the poor, unsuspecting but chuffed pilot doesn't know is that there is a gent hiding behind that sign who will dump a bucket of ice water on you precisely as the picture is taken ... It's a wonderful tradition!"

Morgenfeld was one of three VX-4 pilots maintaining proficiency on the MiG-17/21 fleet. Thanks to the squadron's test status, AFSC provided less resistance to Morgenfeld's team than to its USAF counterparts in Tactical Air Command (TAC) when it came to using the MiGs for training. "I tried very hard to expose as many Naval Aviators as possible to the threat airplanes," he recalled. "To that end, every time I filled out a request to use the assets, I couched our need in the form of some sort of test." His best work along these lines was what he termed the "TOPGUN Tactics Test," the justification being that as the school was the Navy's center of excellence on counter-threat tactics, its students needed to evaluate against actual Soviet jets. This was the backdoor method to getting most TOPGUN classes from late 1976 exposed to the MiGs as a pre-graduation event.

The Navy soon added a fourth pilot to the *Have Idea* pool, a spot filled by a current TOPGUN IP. The first was Marine Capt Larry Richard, who had downed a MiG-21 over North Vietnam in August 1972 while flying a F-4E *Phantom II* as an Air Force exchange pilot. Richard, followed by another Marine TOPGUN IP (Capt Lew Hoyt), worked with Morgenfeld and others to pave the way for the school's MiG Exposure Program, which eventually lasted 12 years.

After qualifying on the MiG, the TOPGUN IP assigned to the program went to Groom Lake to fly a series of class sorties. Students flew to Nellis AFB and refueled before heading north into the test range airspace (F-14s usually had enough fuel to fly direct from Miramar) and into an area set aside for the MiG exposures. It was close to "The Box," the restricted piece of sky under which Groom Lake sat. The MiG pilot formed up on the student's jet, inviting him to take the lead and get a good look

Courtesy of the author

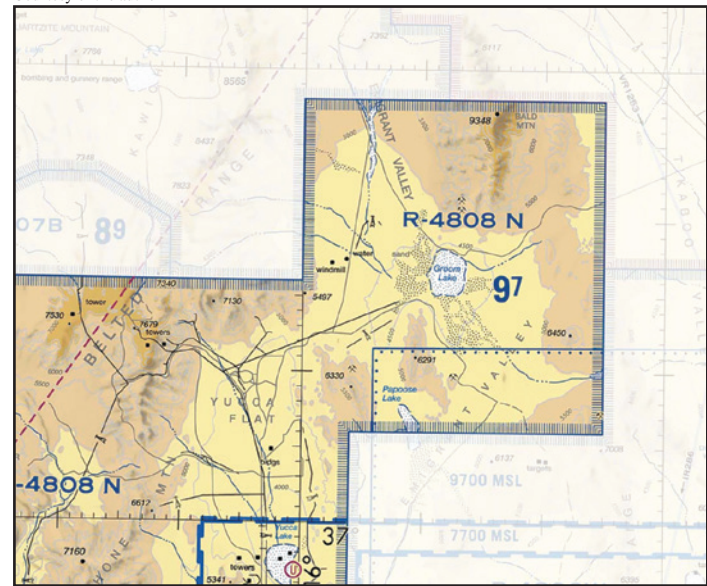


A pair of F-14 Tomcats flying in formation with MiG-21s over the Nevada ranges during a BFM hop out of Groom Lake.

around the "enemy." MiG and student would go into combat spread before calling. "Fight's on!" The 1-v-1 usually included two to three engagements before the MiG needed to return to base for fuel.

From a TOPGUN student's perspective, LT (later RADM) Jim "Rookie" Robb found secrecy was maintained right up to his first airborne engagement, when he and RIO LT Mark Johnson, both from the VF-14 *Tophatters*, were one of the first F-14 *Tomcat* crews to attend TOPGUN from 8 November to 10 December 1976. As he related in Brad Elward's book, *TOPGUN — The Legacy*, "They prepared us for the mission and framed it as if we were performing against standard enemy aircraft (*Ed. Note: A-4s, F-5s or T-38s*). We didn't know what the aircraft would be ... when we encountered the MiG-17; it was one of those 'oh shit, it's a MiG' moments."

Courtesy of the author



A Federal Aviation Administration sectional chart from 1982 showing "The Box" around Groom Lake in Nevada. Note there is no airfield shown at the location.



This was exactly what TOPGUN and soon TAC's Nellis-based type weapons schools wanted in terms of getting through the "buck fever" that crews experienced when first confronting a MiG in the air. This first view, followed by "watch me/follow me" performance profiles and some basic fighter maneuvering in a training environment, helped remove the myth of the Soviet pilot and his machine. In a reversal of roles, Robb would later become a TOPGUN IP as well as a Navy MiG pilot.

The *Red Hats* were designated the 6513th TS at Groom Lake on 1 December 1977. Earlier that year, following more than 18 months of successful exposures to selected front-line fighter aircrew, the aggressor/adversary element had detached from the test community when the USAF formed the 4477th Test & Evaluation Flight (TEF) on 1 April 1977. Although officially part of the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing based at Nellis, this new unit continued to operate at Groom Lake due to the classified nature of its aircraft. Some of its initial pilots still came from

an operational test background, including Morgenfeld, who became the seventh member — and first Navy pilot — assigned to the new unit, receiving the callsign *Bandit 7*.

With an initial fleet of two MiG-17s and six MiG-21s, the unclassified project codename became *Constant Peg*, a combination of the callsign of the approving USAF general at TAC headquarters and the name of the wife of the 4477th's first CO. Although TAC had operational control, an interservice agreement resulted in 70 percent of the project funding coming from the USAF and the Navy covering the remaining 30 percent, formalizing Navy and Marine Corps use of the assets.

Another Naval Aviator who flew with *Have Idea* and then *Constant Peg* from Groom Lake was LT Charles "Heater" Heatley III. He had first been exposed to the MiGs as a TOPGUN IP before being seconded to the 4477th as TOPGUN's pilot in residence, becoming *Bandit 8* in May 1977. Alongside his fleet F-4 (and later F-14) background, Heatley was well known for his photographic and design skills. This led him to name the 4477th the *Red Eagles* and design the squadron patch.

The Air Force required that Navy IPs like Heatley undertake formal USAF aggressor training prior to joining the 4477th. He recalled that the 20 or so syllabus training sorties he was slated to perform with the Nellis-based 64th Fighter Weapons Squadron (FWS) was quickly truncated to

Above: Pilots and maintainers assigned to the 4477th Test and Evaluation Squadron pose in front of a F-5E Tiger II, circa 1980. LCDRs Keith Shean and Charles "Heater" Heatley are at bottom right.

just two, "It was crazy ... I had more hours dogfighting in F-5s than the aggressor instructors." Some future Navy pilots for the 4477th also experienced tailored training before qualification as USAF aggressor IPs. Heatley also remarked that the transition for him, as a former TOPGUN IP, was much smoother than those Navy colleagues coming from a test background with VX-4. In all cases, Navy and USAF *Constant Peg* pilots were officially assigned to either the 64th or 65th FWSs, performing limited duties with those aggressor units in addition to their jobs at Groom Lake to maintain a cover for their presence at Nellis.

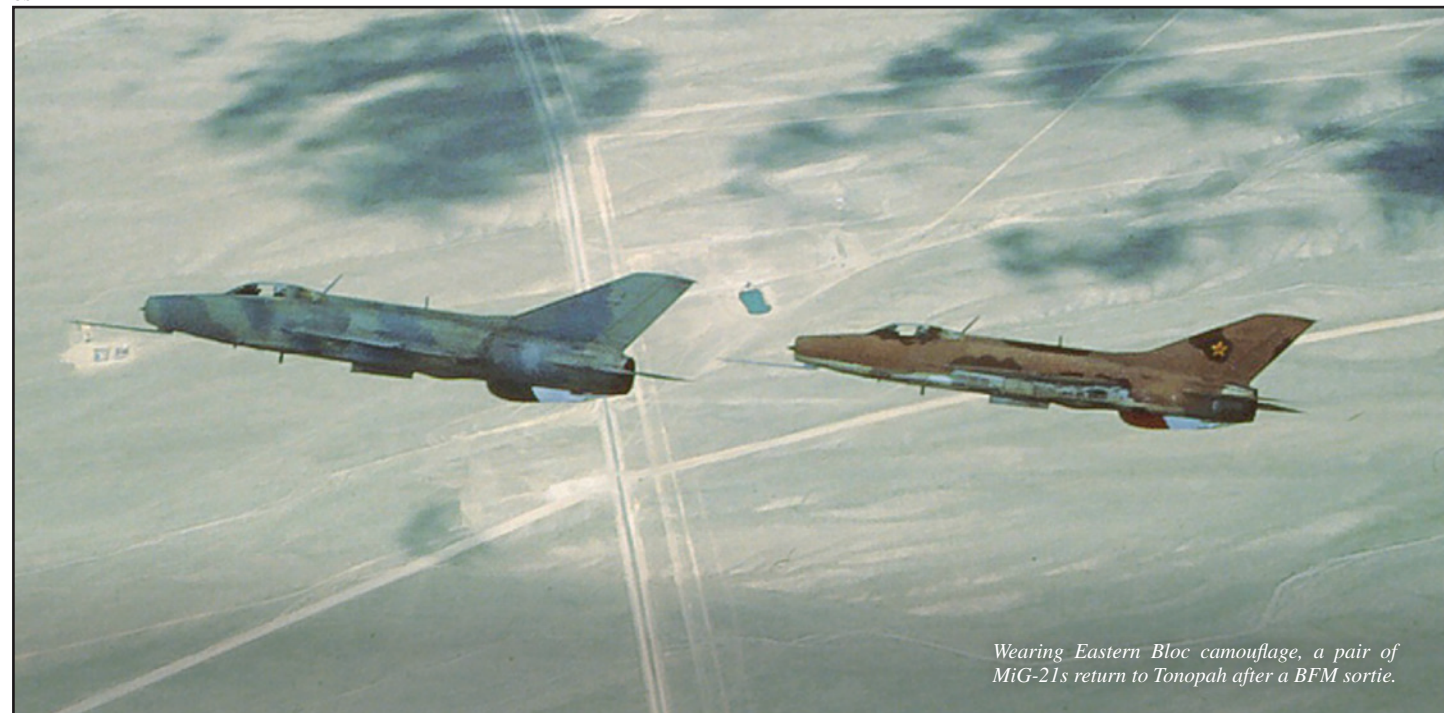
The 1978 expansion of *Constant Peg* operations demonstrated a requirement for a new base, prompting a relocation from the severe security restrictions at Groom Lake to the slightly reduced ones found at Tonopah Air Force Station. The airfield, located in the extreme northwest of the Nevada test ranges, had originally been built by the Department of Energy to support nuclear testing. Tonopah's position under test range airspace was ideal, not only for security reasons but also for allowing the 4477th to still operate their MiGs near invited guest Blue Air jets that usually operated from Nellis.

Following various upgrades, including extending the 6,600-ft. runway to 10,000 feet, 4477th Commanding Officer Lt Col Gaillard Peck departed Groom Lake in a MiG-21 on 17 July 1979, to lead his unit to Tonopah for the first time. Additional improvements to the base continued during the next few years, dovetailing into preparatory work for the arrival of *Project Senior Trend*, Lockheed's F-117A *Nighthawk*. In fact, much of the work at Tonopah, supposedly for the classified MiG unit, hid activities for the even more secret stealth fighter-bomber.

After joining the 4477th, Heater Heatley soon observed, "The Air Force did things differently [than] the Navy ... Their operations and maintenance were disconnected at the operational level. That meant their scheduling was by (aircraft) tail number and up to two weeks ahead. If a jet was down for whatever reason, that was the sortie cancelled despite a ramp full of other 'up' jets." Thus, it was common for USAF fighters operating out of Nellis to cancel MiG engagements whereas the serviceability rates in the 4477th were quite high despite the unsupported Soviet technology of their jets. Therefore, pilots at Miramar and MCAS El Toro sometimes received no-notice phone calls inviting them to the desert to fly against the MiGs.

A third Soviet aircraft type soon arrived for 4477th use. Acquired from Egypt and airlifted to the U.S. in September





Wearing Eastern Bloc camouflage, a pair of MiG-21s return to Tonopah after a BFM sortie.

1977, a single MiG-23MS (NATO codename *Flogger-E*) began evaluation at Groom Lake under *Project Have Pad*. Tom Morgenfeld became the first Navy pilot to fly it in March 1978. *Have Pad* proved previous intelligence assessments wrong in that the *Flogger*, although optimized for high speed “dash” capability, proved to be poor in the slow speed dogfight regime. It also featured some handling characteristics that made its American pilots quite wary. With additional Egyptian *Flogger* airframes transferred to U.S. custody, moves were made to place them in service with the *Constant Peg* team.

A mix of MiG-23MS *Flogger-E* and MiG-23BN *Flogger-F* jets slowly found their way to the 4477th beginning in November 1979. Earlier that year, on 23 August, one of the MiG-17s (the original *Have Ferry* jet) was lost in a fatal crash involving VX-4 pilot LT M. Hugh Brown (*Bandit 12*). With great personal strain, Heatley was directly involved in the post-crash recovery and not until November 2007, following *Constant Peg* declassification, could he tell Hugh’s widow Linda and their two sons about his secret work. Two non-fatal MiG-17 mishaps occurred with USAF-piloted jets in 1981 and 1982, ending the type’s American military career and leaving the MiG-21s and MiG-23s to soldier on with the program.

The 4477th upgraded its status to a test & evaluation squadron (TES) status on 1 May 1980. By the end of that year, over 1,000 sorties had been flown, equating to nearly 400 exposures to front-line crews. 4477th pilots were organized into three flights, the third called “C” Flight (a play on the word sea) because it consisted exclusively of Navy and Marine Corps pilots, usually four at any one time. LCDR Keith Shean, who joined the 4477th as *Bandit 17* in January 1980, observed, “The initial cadre of Naval Aviators made lots of embarrassing mistakes because some [USAF] procedures were so different ... everything from hand signals differences, to the invisible 10-foot wall simulated by a red line on the tarmac, to the different radio voice calls [all] bit us in the ass. It got so bad that we started a logbook for all new incoming gold wing guys [with] all the gaffs we had made and to avoid making the same. We filled up a lot of that book.”

More Navy and Marine Corps fighter squadrons, including the last remaining carrier-deployable F-4 *Phantom II* units, continued fighting against the MiGs, usually as part of weeklong dets to Nellis euphemistically titled “overland air combat maneuvering.” Heatley remembered they were long days, but he was not a stranger to such a tempo thanks to his TOPGUN IP background. Having given a mass briefing to a squadron at the start of its *Constant Peg* week, the daily routine typically started with Heater flying a Cessna 404 commuter or F-5T-38 from Nellis to Tonopah around 0600 and launching for his first flight of the day in a MiG-17 at 0800. Back on the ground 20 minutes later, he jumped from his fuel-depleted jet to a fresh MiG-21 for the

next engagement. Of the former aircraft, Heatley said, “Fighting in the MiG-17 versus a modern fighter was the equivalent of using a frying pan against a professional tennis player with a hi-tech racket, so it was very eye-opening for the visiting aircrews and an important learning point.”

With the eventual consolidation of all CVW weapons/integration training at NAS Fallon, it became the norm to include *Constant Peg* exposure sorties as part of those events. That included the two VF-41 *Black Aces* crews, part of CVW-8 assigned to USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68), who went on to successfully engage two Libyan Su-22 *Fitter* fighter-bombers over the Mediterranean on 19 August 1981. With the advent of the F/A-18 *Hornet* in the Navy and Marine Corps, the new jet also mixed it up with MiGs

The first Marine pilot assigned to the 4477th TES was Maj Lenny Bucko (*Bandit 22*), who had been approached to join *Constant Peg* while serving as a TOPGUN IP in 1980. Thanks to his previous experience, and the standing order that all 4477th pilots had to undergo USAF aggressor training, Bucko became the first pilot to hold adversary/aggressor ratings for the Navy, USMC and USAF.

America’s then-friendly relationship with the People’s Republic of China in the mid-1980s saw the purchase of twelve brand-new Chengdu J-7B fighters (NATO reporting name *Fishcan*), which were license-built MiG-21F-13s. This boosted airframe availability (reaching a peak for *Constant Peg* MiG-21 family airframes of 17 in 1985), however concerns over the ejection seats fitted to the former Indonesian examples soon forced them into retirement. The MiG-23s remained a maintainer’s nightmare, with typically less than half of the 10 on hand by 1985 available to fly at any one time.

During its last full calendar year of operations, the 4477th executed 2,793 sorties, which provided exposures to 905 front-line aircrew; this was more than double the figures achieved at the start of the decade. Despite this, the USAF terminated *Constant Peg* in early 1988. No clear reason for this decision has ever come to light.

As a result, the squadron planned a last hurrah in the form of a mass launch on Saturday, 5 March 1988, with 13 MiG-21s (of the 14 on strength) and four MiG-23s (of the 10 assigned) launching just after noon as part of an *Exercise Green Flag* (the electronic warfare-focused version of *Red Flag*) event. All four of the remaining Naval Aviator *Red Eagles* flew that day — LCDR Cary “Dollar” Silvers (*Bandit 61*) and Maj Marty Macy (*Bandit 49*) in MiG-23s, LCDR Bob “Sundance” Davis (*Bandit 64*) in a MiG-21 and LT Stan ‘Swish’ O’Connor (*Bandit 69*), who was the squadron’s junior pilot and drew a T-38 trainer as no more MiGs were available.

The 4477th disbanded on paper on 15 July 1990, but following the final flying day in March 1988, some pilots and maintainers transferred



Having done its duty preparing U.S. pilots to fly against potential enemies, one of the MiG-23MS jets operated by the 4477th Test and Evaluation Squadron pictured after delivery to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in 2017.

to the 6513th TS at Groom Lake and continued to operate the MiGs for currency purposes. The reason for the absorption of those aggressor/adversary-qualified pilots into the test and exploitation unit was to provide a level of operational input into any future projects.

Operating under the new umbrella codeword of *Have Phoenix*, the 6513th continued as a FME unit with ex-Soviet Bloc aircraft, their efforts boosted by the end of the Cold War in 1989, which provided unprecedented access to newer examples of such equipment. A reunified Germany, rich with former East German tactical aircraft, was one example, and as Coalition forces engaged Iraqi to liberate Kuwait in January 1991, *Project Have Loan* saw a MiG-29 *Fulcrum-A* borrowed for testing in Nevada skies. Eventually, additional MiG-23s and Su-22s were acquired on permanent transfer, while Russian aerospace companies with the blessing of then-President Boris Yeltsin sold new aircraft to the U.S., including examples of the cutting-edge Sukhoi Su-27 *Flanker* fighter.



As part of USAF organizational changes in October 1992, the 6513th redesignated as the 413th Flight Test Squadron, and further changes in the late 1990s saw the *Red Hats* become an undesignated unit working under Groom Lake-based Det 3 of the AFFTC. As a modern day, much smaller equivalent to the defunct 4477th TES, Air Combat Command, which had replaced TAC in 1991, and Navy interests were housed under Det 3 of the 53rd Test & Evaluation Group. Both units shared spaces and aircraft at America’s most classified military facility.

From the 1990s and into the first decades of this century, secrecy has again descended over operation of Russian-built tactical aircraft. Slight glimpses under the veil have occurred, with hardy aviation enthusiasts hiking to the closest public land near Groom Lake to capture on camera both MiG-29s and Su-27s performing dogfights, confirming the shadowy world to exploit foreign technology and prepare warfighters in the modern era continues in the same Nevada skies in which it began.

The author thanks CAPT Tom Morgenfeld USN(Ret), CAPT Charles Heatley III USN(Ret), as well as assistance from authors Paul Crickmore and Steve Davies, in preparing this article.

Navy and Marine Corps MiG Test/Adversary Pilots, 1968–1988

- LT Melvin H. “Hugh” Brown
- LT Guy A. Brubaker
- LCDR David R. Bryant
- Maj Leonard J. “Lenny” Bucko, USMC
- LT Ross Burgess
- CDR Thomas J. Cassidy Jr.
- LCDR Evan M. “Marty” Chanik Jr.
- LCDR Charles P. “Perry” Clausen
- LCDR Robert E. Davis
- LT Daniel N. Dixon
- Capt Peter B. Field, USMC
- CDR Paul T. Gillerist
- LCDR William B. Hayden
- LCDR Charles J. Heatley III
- LT Craig G. Honour
- LCDR Jerry B. Houston
- Capt Lewis E. Hoyt, USMC
- LT Fred D. Knox Jr.
- LCDR Selwyn S. “Sel” Laughter
- Maj Martin S. Macy, USMC
- LCDR John F. Manning Jr.
- LCDR Daniel R. McCort
- LCDR Donald L. McCrory
- LCDR Ronald E. McKeown
- LCDR Thomas A. Morgenfeld
- CDR John M. Nash
- LCDR John B. Nathman
- LT Stanley R. O’Connor Jr.
- LCDR Philip C. Pirozzi
- LCDR John K. “Jack” Ready
- Maj Lawrence G. Richard, USMC
- LCDR James A. Robb
- LCDR Jerry D. Sawatzky
- LCDR Keith E. Shean
- LCDR Cary A. Silvers
- LT Dennis A. Sullivan
- LCDR Dane C. Swanson
- LT Russell M. “Bud” Taylor
- LCDR Foster S. Teague
- LCDR Robert L. Temme Jr.
- Capt George C. Tullos, USMC
- LCDR Kenneth M. Wallace Jr.
- LT John M. “Mike” Welch
- LCDR H. Dennis Wisely

Ranks given are for when those aviators were conducting *Have* sorties and/or *Constant Peg*. On the 4477th Test and Evaluation Flight/Test and Evaluation Squadron maintenance team, which worked miracles to get unsupported foreign aircraft safe for flight each day, Navy personnel were heavily outnumbered by the USAF. The following Sailors are known to be involved with *Constant Peg*: Richard Caramico, Robert Hensley and Mark Mills.



Boxer's Reserve Punch

by Hill Goodspeed

USN



F9F-2B Panthers of the VF-721 Starbusters lead other aircraft of the all-Naval Air Reserve CVG-101 as they prepare to launch from USS Boxer (CV 21) for a strike against targets in North Korea in 1951.

The parade wended its way through the streets of Kansas City, Mo., under cloudless skies with a slight autumn chill, perfect flying weather for the aviators in the Navy airplanes from NAS Olathe, Kan., which flew in formation overhead. Amid the marching color guards and high school JROTC units that Saturday, 10 November 1951, was a procession of open cars carrying members of VF-884, an Olathe-based Naval Air Reserve squadron, and their wives. A float featured a replica of USS *Boxer* (CV 21). In one car, Mrs. Jean Carmichael and Mrs. Enid Garrison rode with Chief of Naval Air Training VADM John Dale Price, their husbands having been declared killed in action and missing in action respectively while flying with the squadron in Korea. Later, Price would remark at a luncheon, "Kansas City is the first city to honor a naval squadron with a parade ... and it is the first city in history to provide the same group of young men to defend their country in two wars in a single decade."

On 20 July 1950, the month after North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea, the members of VF-884 received news of their recall to active duty. This was a necessary expediency, the sudden invasion coming with the U.S. military having drawn down its conventional forces. The more than 49,000 aviators on active duty in 1945 had by 1950 shrunk to less than 10,000, necessitating a heavy reliance on the Naval Air Reserve, its ranks including many experienced pilots from World War II.

Other squadrons receiving notices of activation on the same day as VF-884 were the NAS Glenview, Ill.-based VF-721, VF-791 out of NAS Memphis, Tenn., and VA-702 based at NAS Dallas, Tex. "Orders were dispatched on a Thursday afternoon [20 July] directing members of the called squadrons to be on deck at their home air stations at 8 the following morning," a newspaper report noted of the frenzied recall. "Friday, at 8 a.m., 98 percent of them were on hand — the other two percent were hurrying back from vacations, business trips, and the numerous other places where American civilians going about their normal pursuits would be. They had just as much right to the proud title 'Minute Men' (sic) as did their forebears of 175 years before."

While these "Weekend Warriors" prepared for active duty, *Boxer* was at sea making best speed toward the Western Pacific. She had returned to her home port of San Diego on 16 June having spent the first half of 1950 operating with U.S. *Seventh Fleet*. On 14 July, loaded with 170 Air Force and Navy aircraft, 1,012 passengers and 2,000 tons of additional cargo to bolster United Nations forces defending South Korea, she departed NAS Alameda bound for Yokosuka, Japan. The carrier broke all existing records for a Pacific crossing in 8 days, 16 hours and made the return voyage in less than eight days, quickly making ready to embark CVG-2 and return to *Seventh Fleet*. Between August and November 1950,

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Wearing leis around their necks after a port call in Hawaii, VF-884 pilots are all smiles in the ready room on board *Boxer* en route to the waters off Korea. There, the Bitter Birds suffered more combat losses than any other CVG-101 squadron.

she launched strikes against North Korean forces and supported the invasion of Inchon. The carrier returned to the States for overhaul and made ready to return to the waters off Korea, at which point *Boxer* and the four recalled squadrons would converge as the nucleus for an historic event in Naval Aviation — the first all-Reserve CVG deployment of the Korean War.

Eight days after recall, VF-884 under the command of LCDR Glenn Carmichael, who during WW II flew F6F *Hellcats* with VF-80 off USS *Ticonderoga* (CV 14), arrived at NAS San Diego. The squadron included a set of three brothers — Bill, Robert and James Marr — and many students from Kansas State. Ironically, the squadron would eventually adopt an insignia featuring a Jayhawk, the mascot of Kansas University, and call themselves the *Bitter Birds*. The squadron reported to the West Coast with no assigned aircraft, pilots having trained on the weekends flying F8F-1 *Bearcats* belonging to NAS Olathe. Within days of arrival they received F4U-4 *Corsairs* they eventually took into combat.

Naval History and Heritage Command



The pilot of an F4U-4 Corsair assigned to the VF-791 Hammering Hosses peers out of the cockpit as he prepares to roll in for a rocket attack against a railway bridge in North Korea in Sep '51.

VF-791, under the command of LCDR James B. Kisner, who had received the Distinguished Flying Cross flying with VF-19 off USS *Lexington* (CV 16) during WW II, also arrived in San Diego slated to fly the "Bent-Wing Bird." The squadron maintenance officer recalled in a Summer 1990 article for *The Hook*, "Mostly we received high-time F4Us that would be on a third tour. While in storage, the rubber seals had dried, so we ended up having to replace them all. That took a considerable amount of time. We spent many hours to insure flightworthiness. We also did not receive our planes very quickly, so for a while, there wasn't much flying going on in F4Us."

Fiction mirrored truth for VF-721 under the command of LCDR William E. Woodman, which was destined to be one of CVG-101's two jet squadrons with delivery of F9F-2B *Panthers* on 28 September 1950. One squadron pilot, LT Thomas Chuhak, had returned from WW II service as a Naval Aviator and attended law school at Northwestern. He had just begun practicing as an attorney in Chicago when the recall notice came for his squadron, prompting him to leave behind his wife and three daughters. This mirrored the main character, LT Harry Brubaker, in James Michener's epic Korean War novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*. The squadron eventually adopted the nickname *Starbusters*.

VA-702, which adopted the nickname *Rustlers*, the insignia representing the squadron's Texas roots with ordnance hanging from a longhorn steer, received AD-2/4Q *Skyraiders* shortly after arriving in San Diego. Skipper LCDR Sidney C. Seagraves had been a pilot in VT-94 off *Lexington*. He received the Navy Cross for his heroism attacking Japanese shipping in Kure Harbor on 28 July 1945, scoring a direct hit on a heavy cruiser and then leading his division safely back to the carrier over a distance of more than 200 miles amidst unfavorable weather conditions.

Along with dets from VC-3 flying F4U-5NL *Corsairs*, VC-11 flying AD-4W *Skyraiders*, VC-35 equipped with AD-4N *Skyraiders*, VC-61 in F9F-2P *Panthers* and the



USN



A long way from their Texas homes, pilots of VA-702 assemble for a squadron photograph with their venerable Spads on board *Boxer*.



Flight-deck personnel muscle a bomb-laden AD Skyraider assigned to the VA-702 Rustlers across the flight deck of Boxer during the carrier's 1951 Western Pacific combat cruise.

HO3S-1-equipped HU-1, the Naval Air Reserve squadrons formed CVG-101, which was established on 1 August 1950. The squadrons conducted intensive training, which included weapons detts to NAAS El Centro, Calif., field carrier landing practice, carrier qualification and an Operational Readiness Inspection on board USS *Leyte* (CV 32). Concurrently, work continued on *Boxer* at Hunters Point Naval Shipyard.

Meanwhile, the Korean War showed no signs of ending. *Seventh Fleet* carriers spent the first stage of the war focusing on close air support (CAS) for two amphibious landings, the advance up the Korean peninsula and subsequent withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir. By early 1951, the lines had become more static, and carrier-based aircraft increased the number of interdiction missions against such targets as bridges and the North Korean railroad network. It was toward this tactical environment that CVG-101 headed as *Boxer* departed the West Coast on 2 March 1951.

Joining *Task Force 77* in the Sea of Japan on 26 March 1951, *Boxer* launched her first combat missions the following day as the carrier steamed within sight of the coast near the 38th parallel. CVG-19 aircraft off USS *Princeton* (CV 37) led the 16 CVG-101 airplanes, the tally for that first day reported as damage to nine houses and one factory-type building. CAS runs resulted in the destruction of five pillboxes and an estimated 40 enemy troops killed.

The North Koreans exacted their revenge, revealing the dangerous operational environment in which the Naval Air Reserve fliers operated. Hit by small arms fire, a VA-702 AD-2 made a belly landing behind enemy lines, an Army helicopter swooping down for a quick rescue after its pilot witnessed the forced landing. Two other squadron *Skyraiders* diverted to airfields with battle damage.

The following day LT W.C. Windsor of VA-702 bailed out of his burning *Spad* after being hit on a strike that focused on railroad-related and industrial targets. When his parachute blossomed, the wind caused him to drift toward the battery that shot him down. By slipping the parachute, he maneuvered away from it, landing in a clearing on a hillside. An HU-1 helicopter off *Princeton* pulled him to safety — Windsor recalled being “snapped through the air just like a pea” at the end of the rescue hoist line — and had him back aboard *Boxer* within 40 minutes of the time

he was scheduled to return from the strike. On another mission, VA-702 Skipper LCDR Seagraves led a mixed strike of *Skyraiders* and *Corsairs*, the latter normally going in first as flak suppressors. On this occasion, not wanting smoke from the F4U attacks to obscure the target, Seagraves called out “*Tiger One* going in first.” Retired CDR William L. “Peaches” Lamb, who was on the strike, recalled, “He immediately is met by a wall of flak which seemed to stop his *Skyraider* dead in midair! The flak was just solid all around him. He calls out, ‘*Chicken Shit One* pulling out. Get those *Corsairs* down there.’”

VF-791 pilot LT Walter W. “Gus” King had an eventful conclusion to his flight while spotting naval gunfire on 6 April. His *Corsair* took a hit that “blew a hole the size of a basketball” in his port wing. One result of

Naval History and Heritage Command



A Naval Reserve photographer's mate recalled to active duty for service on board *Boxer*, Herbert Hahn dabbled in pencil sketches in addition to taking photographs. Among them was this depiction of a pair of VA-702 *Skyraiders* unleashing ordnance during a strike against Hamhung in Apr '51.



Plane captain Felix A. Norris assists LTJG John W. White as he straps into the cockpit of a VF-791 F4U-4 Corsair prior to launching on a combat mission from *Boxer* in 1951. The bombs painted on the fuselage show that it is not the aircraft's first time over the beach.

the hit was that it ruptured the hydraulics systems. *Vulture's Row* was packed awaiting his return to *Boxer*, fully expecting to witness a belly landing on the flight deck. “However, I blew the gear down without trouble and landed aboard safely,” King recalled. “As I trapped, one rocket came off its rail and hit the prop, igniting and burning on the deck. So the gallery got some entertainment.”

On 7 April, the air group lost its first pilot. LTJG Harold T. Walker of VF-884 radioed that his F4U-4 had been hit and was losing power and oil pressure. Heading toward the coast of North Korea, he entered a cloud bank at an altitude of about 1,000 feet and was never seen again. LT Alfred W.C. Thomas of VF-884 was killed in action 11 days later when his *Corsair* exploded in midair after hitting high-tension wires near Hamhung, North Korea.

Boxer replenished on 19 April and set course for Yokosuka, Japan, arriving on 21 April. CVG-101's baptism of fire encompassed 1,076 combat missions flown with 10 aircraft lost or damaged beyond repair, including operational accidents. Reflecting the emphasis on interdiction, these missions primarily focused on buildings and the rail network, to include bridges, tunnels, yards and cars. However, enemy troops did not escape pilots' attention. One of the early newspaper articles appearing on the home front after CVG-101 entered combat recounted a mission against communist forces atop a ridge. One *Boxer*-based aircraft dropped napalm on them as they took cover in a wooded area and when they fled across the ridge another wall of fire met them courtesy of another CVG-101 airplane. “The Reserve pilots of ... *Boxer's* air group are quickly becoming familiar with modern warfare 1951 style since recently joining *Task Force 77*,” read the article, one of the aviators involved being LT Paul Boyer, who had flown *Corsairs* off USS *Intrepid* (CV 11) during WW II.

There were challenges. Materially, with jet aircraft operations from carriers still in their infancy, *Boxer's* jet blast deflectors proved problematic. Expanding when heated by CVG-101 *Panthers*, they remained stuck in the up position until sufficiently cooled enough to be lowered. Tactically, CAG CDR W.W. Brehm noted the need for more training in coordinated strikes, low-altitude napalm delivery and low-level armed reconnaissance by the air group's jets.



USN



Armed with 5-in. high-velocity aircraft rockets, a pair of VF-721 F9F-2B *Panthers* off *Boxer* overfly Wonsan, the harbor a frequent ditching site for battle-damaged aircraft. The jets proved less vulnerable to enemy fire than propeller-driven aircraft in armed reconnaissance missions over North Korea.



An F9F-2B Panther of VF-721 on the flight deck of Boxer in 1951. Operating early jets on board carriers not originally designed to handle them required a degree of trial and error by aviators and flight-deck personnel alike.

A return to combat brought a noticeable intensification of enemy anti-aircraft fire during a line period that lasted from 2 May to 2 June. In the age before precision-guided munitions, pressing attacks at low altitude increased the chances of delivering bombs on target, the trade-off increased exposure to enemy air defenses. On 63 occasions aircraft returned to *Boxer* with some degree of battle damage, keeping squadron maintainers busy in the hangar bay between missions.

The air group lost four aircraft, including one of its most experienced pilots in LCDR Carmichael. Hit by enemy fire while providing CAS on 24 May, the VF-884 skipper managed to bail out of his *Corsair*, his parachute landing amid Republic of Korea ground forces. The first helicopter dispatched to the scene got lost en route and it was an hour before a Marine Corps chopper arrived on the scene. By that time Carmichael was near death, his chest crushed, presumably by hitting the aircraft's tail assembly when he jumped from the cockpit. He was the third VF-884 pilot lost during the line period.

Another was LT Charles "Snapper" Garrison, who led what was known as the "One Eye" division within the squadron, the nickname deriving from his tendency to push his lip microphone up over his eye, giving it the appearance of a patch. Division pilots wore helmets painted bright yellow with an eye painted on the front.

On 18 May the One Eyes were executing an attack against an enemy convoy when Garrison's F4U took a hit and caught fire. With his wingman, ENS Marion "Drag" Dragastin, yelling over the radio to him to bail out, Snapper jumped from his airplane, only to have his shroud lines become entangled on the tail. Managing to break free, he hit the ground injured in enemy territory. With North Korean forces making efforts to reach the downed pilot, Drag descended to treetop level, making repeated runs in the face of intense fire to keep soldiers attempting to reach his division leader away. While engaged in one of these attack runs, observers saw his head slump on his chest before his airplane crashed into the ground. He received the Navy Cross posthumously. Despite his heroic efforts and those of other rescue combat air patrol aircraft, Garrison was not recovered. A repatriated prisoner of war stated that he had been held

alongside the aviator at a hospital near Wonsan for a time, saying he could not have survived long given his condition. The leader of the One Eye division remains unaccounted for to this day.

The next line period in June and July 1951 saw *Boxer* launch 1,992 combat sorties, the CVG-101 action report noting that pilots continued to utilize the successful tactics acquired during previous line periods. "It is definitely noticeable that squadrons are using more coordinated attacks on all strikes regardless of the anti-aircraft fire expected in the specified area." The report noted that the F9F Panthers of VF-721 were increasingly proving their value in the armed reconnaissance missions that were so much a part of the air war over Korea. The high-speed jets could attack a target quickly, making them less vulnerable to enemy fire than the slower propeller-driven aircraft. In many instances, CAG reported, they "can come in and actually deliver the attack before being discovered." The greater threat to the jets was operating from the ship, but in this area there was improvement as pilots continued to reduce the operational accident rate.

The third line period brought participation in *Operation Strangle*, in which *Task Force 77* aircraft, the *First Marine Aircraft Wing* and U.S. Air Force units each focused on one of North Korea's main north-south traffic arteries to "keep their assigned routes so bomb cratered, de-bridged, mined and patrolled as to keep enemy traffic off them." This led to CVG-101 aircraft executing a new tactic for the deployment — road seeding. Focusing on passages through mountainous areas, air group planes cratered roadways with general purpose bombs and then covered the areas with "butterflies," the term used for cluster bombs.

CVG-101 lost two pilots during the line period, LT David Arrivee of VC-35 and LTJG Paul Schaefer, the latter the sixth member of VF-884 to fall to enemy fire. One *Bitter Bird* had his second lucky break. During the previous line period, LTJG Oliver Droege's F4U *Corsair* crashed into the sea just ahead of *Boxer*. Photographs of the event appeared in the *Kansas City Star*, giving his wife Cora the first news of her husband's narrow escape. Ironically, that same day a letter arrived at their home in which he described what happened. "About halfway down the deck the

plane hit turbulence," he told her. He managed to get the airplane level and the landing gear up before the propeller "started to clip the surface. Then the left wing dug into the water, and I was in for keeps. The plane spun to the left and the cockpit went under." Droege unbuckled himself quickly and swam away as fast as he could from his sinking *Corsair* as the carrier maneuvered to starboard to avoid him.

On 28 June, North Korean gunners knocked Droege out of the sky, his plane catching fire. Burned about the face, hands and legs, he bailed out in an area above the Hurvehon Reservoir. Making his way to the top of a hill, he hugged the ground while Marine Maj Douglas Norton, flying a light observation aircraft, kept him in sight, coordinating rescue combat air patrol and directing a helicopter to his location. Overcoming problems with the rescue hoist, its crew managed to pull Droege to safety. He returned stateside for treatment at the Oakland Naval Hospital where Norton was also soon a patient after being shot down himself, enabling the Navy pilot to meet up with the fellow aviator who had maintained a watch over him 10 miles behind enemy lines.

Numerous bad weather days hampered *Boxer* and CVG-101 efforts in July and August 1951, prompting the diversion of some strikes and in one instance a departure from the operating area to outrun a typhoon. However, pilots worked around the weather in conducting the standard array of missions that were a hallmark of Korean War air operations — CAS, armed reconnaissance, bridge busting, photoreconnaissance, interdiction and spotting naval gunfire for U.S. Navy ships in Wonsan Harbor.

That body of water had become a safe haven for damaged aircraft. On 7 August 1951, VA-702's LT Robert T. Walker ditched his AD-2 *Skyraider* in the harbor waters after being hit by small arms fire. A rescue helicopter from USS *Toledo* (CA 133) pulled him to safety. It was the same helicopter from the same ship that had rescued him when he bailed out the previous month after taking a direct hit from a 20 mm round 15 miles northwest of Wonsan.

On 17 August 1951, during a break in flight operations, CAPT Dennis J. Sullivan relieved CAPT Cameron Briggs as commanding officer of *Boxer*. During WW II, the new skipper had commanded USS *White Plains* (CVE 66) against the onslaught of Japanese surface forces off

Samar in the Philippines during the Battle of Leyte Gulf., receiving the Navy Cross.

The CVG-101 action report noted that after five months of operations, air group airplanes had dropped more than 3,363 tons of bombs, expended 245,760 gallons of napalm and fired 11,324 rockets. As *Boxer* departed for Yokosuka on 24 August, one line period remained in the historic cruise for the ship and air group's Modern Minutemen.

Months of intense combat bred camaraderie and esprit de corps in the ready rooms on board *Boxer*. Its Memphis roots prompted newspapers back home to refer to VF-791 as the *Fighting Rebels*, but among themselves they preferred the *Hammering Hosses*, the term "hoss" uttered by southerners as a greeting to strangers. One division within the squadron dyed their flight suits dark blue and painted their flight helmets black, prompting the bestowing of the nickname *Black Knights* by their squadronmates. During one period of the deployment they adopted the nickname *Kisner's Kattle Killers* after their squadron skipper and the targeting of the North Korean transportation system, notably railroad cattle cars.

Boxer launched the first strikes of her final line period of the cruise on 6 September. The variety of missions that day encapsulated CVG-101's experiences over Korea. F9F Panthers chased an enemy train into a tunnel and then fired rockets into the opening. Air group aircraft knocked out four railroad bridges and three highway bridges and provided CAS for U.S. and Republic of Korea infantry divisions. Day after day, a similar pattern of targets greeted pilots in their ready room briefings, and by the conclusion of the line period they had destroyed 16 locomotives and 201 railroad cars, inflicting damage on scores more. Some 140 highway and railroad bridges were considered destroyed with at least one complete break.

The air group lost one pilot during the line period when the F4U flown by LTJG Harold Podorson of VF-884 crashed during a bridge strike south of Wonsan. A pair of VA-702 *Skyraiders* also fell to enemy fire, with one pilot picked up by helicopter and the other pulled from the water by the destroyer HMAS *Anzac* (D59) after floating in his life raft for nearly two hours off Kilchu. The enemy

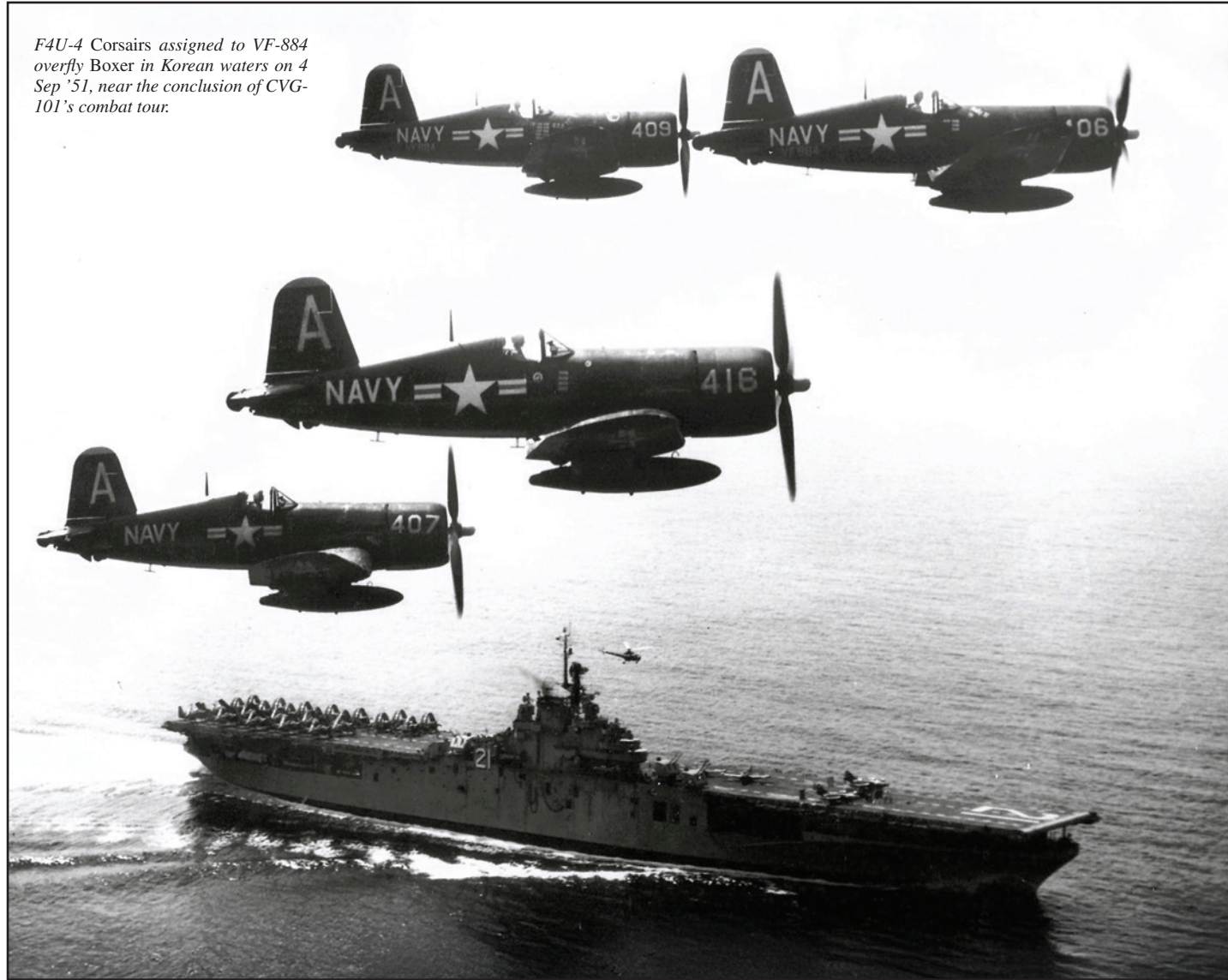


National Naval Aviation Museum



Flight helmet worn by LTJG Dennis Earles while flying F4U-4 Corsairs with the NAS Memphis-based VF-791 during combat operations in Korea in 1951.

F4U-4 Corsairs assigned to VF-884 overfly Boxer in Korean waters on 4 Sep '51, near the conclusion of CVG-101's combat tour.



exacted a toll until the very end. On 3 October, the final day of combat, a *Hammering Hosses Corsair* sustained a hit that eventually caused a loss of power. LCDR Archibald Y. Sturdivant Jr., VF-791's executive officer, ditched in Wonsan Harbor, a crash boat from Yodo Island plucking him from the water.

On 5 October, as *Boxer* headed toward Japan, she launched 13 F9F-2B *Panthers* and 20 F4U-4 *Corsairs* bound for NAS Atsugi for placement in an aircraft pool to support other squadrons bound for combat off Korea. Among the most notable warbirds in the air group was one assigned to VF-884 nicknamed "Sweet Sue." Joining the squadron on 11 September 1950, the airplane logged its 101st and 102nd combat missions on its one-year anniversary with the *Bitter Birds*. Hit by enemy fire on eight separate occasions over Korea, she brought her pilot back each time. The trusty *Corsair* finished its combat tour with 121 missions.

Before the carrier departed for home on 8 October, CVG-101 pilots took the opportunity to brief aircrew of CVG-15 off USS *Antietam* (CV 36), which consisted of four recalled Naval Air Reserve squadrons. The lessons imparted appeared in CVG-101's summary of operations in CAG Brehm's final action report.

Armed reconnaissance flights had exposed the vulnerability of low-flying propeller-driven aircraft — no F9Fs were shot down as compared to 18 F4Us and ADs — and Brehm recommended the use "two-plane groups of jet aircraft" for these missions. When it came to CAS, the propeller-driven aircraft proved highly successful, hitting enemy troops in some instances just 50 yards in front of friendly forces with an array of ordnance from 20 mm rounds to napalm. Another successful endeavor was bridge busting, with Brehm noting that in some instances eight targets were destroyed in a single day. He did note that the North

Koreans began fortifying the bridges with anti-aircraft batteries, which necessitated the use of flak suppression in advance of strike aircraft. Two-plane night hecklers also yielded results, with pilots spotting the movements of trucks and trains and relaying the information to aircrew in the first day strikes, who aided in their destruction.

Brehm noted a dramatic increase in the volume of anti-aircraft fire during CVG-101's line periods, writing that by the end of the cruise 40 mm and 20 mm bursts could be seen on every flight with anti-aircraft fire encountered as high as 12,000 feet.

In conclusion, CAG drew four lessons from CVG-101's experience that would benefit follow-on air groups entering combat over Korea. The first was to respect the weather. Secondly, it was important to not stay on a set course, execute slight turns and remain in spread formation to avoid anti-aircraft fire and not attack heavily defended targets unless enough planes were present to "divide the ground fire and suppress it." His third point was to avoid low pullouts from bombing runs, while his final recommendation spoke to the patience required to gain experience in the demanding combat environment. Noting that it took at least a month to get proficient in the mission sets, Brehm concluded, "Too often the new pilots read the strike flash reports of the experienced groups and determine to equal the results of their elders. This in turn results in the pilots taking unnecessary chances and incurring unnecessary losses which serve to destroy confidence when it is needed most."

As the men of CVG-101 headed home, they left behind nine pilots killed or missing in action and one lost in an operational accident. The air group lost 30 airplanes in combat or operational mishaps and on 238 occasions aircraft returned to *Boxer* having been hit by anti-aircraft fire or suffered damage from operational causes, including the dangerous

business of landing on the carrier. Pilots logged 23,672.4 flight hours and recorded 8,567 arrested landings. In combat missions over Korea, they expended 5,087.6 tons of ordnance, 12,923 rockets and over 3.6 million .50-cal. and 20 mm rounds. The range of targets spoke to the nature of the interdiction missions that defined the air war over Korea — railroad bridges, trucks, beasts of burden, supply dumps, pillboxes, factories and lumber piles.

Some 2,000 family members, among them the loved ones of CVG-101 personnel, were pierside in San Diego when *Boxer* arrived home, the carrier having been away for 237 days, 79 percent of them spent at sea. In addition to the parade in Kansas City, there were other hometown celebrations of CVG-101's return.

F8F *Bearcats* from NAS Glenview escorted the transport planes carrying the personnel of VF-721 from San Diego to a landing at the air station. A parade through downtown Chicago and a celebratory dinner at the Blackstone Hotel followed. Members of VA-702 flew into Dallas' Love Field, where the squadron's commanding officer was greeted by his wife and three daughters, the youngest born while he was away. Rain washed out a scheduled parade, but to the men of VF-791 the highlight was landing at NAS Memphis. "[In] a matter of minutes a huge hangar was a bedlam of reunion as officers and enlisted men who 14 months ago left that very airfield for Korean duty found sweet sanctuary in the arms of those who had waited out their return."

For some members of CVG-101, release from active duty was immediate, while others moved on to another tour of duty. For the squadrons in which they had served, the Korean War tour marked an opening chapter in storied legacies. VF-721 made another combat cruise on board USS *Kearsarge* (CVA 33) and redesignated as VF-141 in 1953. A decade later it received

the new designation VF-53. Along the way the squadron adopted the nickname *Iron Angels*, which it carried until disestablishment in 1971 following Vietnam War combat in the F-8 *Crusader*.

VA-702 also made another combat cruise on board *Kearsarge* eventually redesignating as VA-145, the *Rustler* nickname (it became their callsign in later years) changing to *Swordsmen* in 1954. The squadron remained in service until its disestablishment in 1993 having logged combat missions during Vietnam and *Operation Desert Storm*.

VF-791 became VF-142 in 1953 and redesignated as VF-96 in 1962. Adopting the nickname *Fighting Falcons*, it was among the most storied fighter squadrons of the Vietnam War, flying F-4 *Phantom IIs* and scoring eight MiG kills, including five by LT Randall H. Cunningham and LTJG William P. Driscoll, making them the only Navy aces of the war.

VF-884 spent another Korean War combat tour on board *Kearsarge*. Redesignating as VF-144 in 1953, it became VA-52 in 1959. It had shed the *Bitter Birds* nickname in 1953, and the new designation brought adoption of the nickname *Knightriders*. The squadron logged combat missions in Vietnam flying both the A-1 *Skyraider* and A-6 *Intruder*, disestablishing in 1995.

A page from the cruise book the members of the *Bitter Birds* created following their return from Korea provides perhaps the most fitting epitaph to CVG-101's Modern Minutemen. "War plays no favorites; it reserves no judgement," it read. "It exacts its toll of lives with unconcern. The victor maintains his right to the beliefs, creeds [and] customs for which he fought. War came to the men of this squadron because our beliefs and the beliefs of other free countries were endangered by an aggressor ... We fought with loyalty and courage, bravery and faith in what we knew was right."



USN

"Sweet Sue," an F4U-4 Corsair assigned to the Bitter Birds, shows off its combat record at the conclusion of VF-884's combat tour.



Viking Executive Jet

by CDR Robert "Boom" Powell, USN(Ret)

Unless noted, all photographs courtesy of the author.



Painted all white, US-3A Viking, BuNo 157998, assigned to the VRC-50 Foo Dogs prepares for launch from USS Coral Sea (CV 43) in Nov '81. Note the dented blivet, a sign of heavy wear.

“VIP aircraft, 400-mph cruise, 3,800-mile range, seats six, and can land on aircraft carriers!” So an advertisement for Lockheed’s US-3A Viking might have read in the *Wall Street Journal* if the airplane had not been in the U.S. Navy.

Executing the carrier onboard delivery (COD) mission has relied on modification or variants of combat types since the TBM Avenger had its bomb bay, gun turret and radio/radar operator’s station removed to make way for cargo and a helter-skelter seat arrangement for seven passengers. The S2F (S-2) Tracker anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft came next with a slight redesign that resulted in the TF-1 (C-1) Trader, followed by the E-2 Hawkeye airborne early warning platform getting a new bulbous fuselage that did not match the nickname bestowed on the C-2.

While the Greyhound has decent passenger/cargo payload, range and speed, the Navy’s increased operations in the Indian Ocean during the late 1970s revealed the need for something to supplement the turboprop C-2 in the COD role. It may have been a Lockheed executive who, for business reasons, proposed modifying the S-3 Viking for the role. The Navy said give it a try and the company developed a prototype from a pre-production aircraft.

The Douglas Escapac ejection seats obviously had to go; if the passengers can’t eject, why should the pilots? Six military-style seats replaced the two ejection seats and equipment in the rear compartment formerly manned by ASW operators. The seat for the loadmaster was collapsible as it was positioned over the entry hatch. The pilots sat in ejection seats with firing cartridges removed and optional padding to make the seat pan a bit more comfortable. The frangible overhead panels which allowed for ejection became conventional hatches for emergency exits.

The interior was divided into 10 compartments varying from four to 54 cubic feet with some pressurized. The only obvious external difference between the US-3A and its submarine-hunting sibling was a small, slit

window on both sides just forward of the aft crew windows. The wing stations became useful for carrying either 300-gallon fuel tanks or a specially developed, large pod for cargo. (*Ed. Note: Colloquially known as “blivets,” these pods were useful for giving tactical jets something in which to store luggage and equipment. They were locally produced from old fuel tanks or, in some instances, napalm canisters. The term goes back to World War II slang for something overfilled, i.e., five pounds of s*** in a four-pound sack.*) The US-3A blivet may be the only one ever factory built. A loading diagram for the combinations of passengers, cargo, tanks and blivets to determine the desired range, load, speed or some combination of those factors presented a maze of choices.

To bring the cabin up to airline standards, it included a passenger advisory panel, emergency oxygen masks, life preservers and overhead reading lights. However, the type of oxygen mask, military seatbelts and



A fully packed blivet with cargo restraining nets pictured on the port wing of a US-3A. The blivet measured 18 feet, 8 inches and weighed 460 pounds before being packed with cargo.

need to wear a cranial helmet said to passengers that they weren’t flying Pan Am! Pilots used an intercom to relay instructions to the loadmaster, who then yelled them to the passengers.

The one-of-a-kind Viking was designated US-3A and first flew as such on 2 July 1976; it was assigned to the VS-33 Screwbirds, operating with CVW-11 on board USS Kitty Hawk (CV 63). In 1979–1980, the carrier embarked CVW-15, which included the VS-21 Fighting Redtails operating the US-3A. Kitty Hawk’s Western Pacific deployment during that time extended two and a half months to support contingency operations in the northern Arabian Sea during the Iran hostage crisis. The “Muppet Show” was popular on television at the time and Sailors nicknamed the location of the carriers “Gonzo Station,” reminiscent of Yankee Station and Dixie Station during the Vietnam War. Flying from shore bases, especially NSF Diego Garcia, the US-3A COD fliers called themselves “Gonzo Airlines.” It followed that their very special, one-of-a-kind aircraft was named after the very special, one-of-a-kind star of the show — Miss Piggy.

More Speedy CODs

With the proven utility of the Viking COD, five more of the pre-production S-3s were converted to US-3A standards in 1981. While the first US-3A, Bureau Number (BuNo) 157998, had received the *nom-de-charme* “Miss Piggy,” the follow-ons were usually referred to by the less charming “Pig.” With the exception of BuNo 158868, which had been held for environmental tests, the numbers were sequential, BuNos 157994–157998. All the Viking CODs were assigned to the VRC-50 Foo Dogs based in Japan and the Philippines and painted all white to match other Navy transport aircraft.

Simon Boocock was in the last class of Fiscal Year 1981 out of VT-21 at NAS Kingsville flying TA-4J Skyhawks. “I was notified of my selection by my CO the day before I received my wings,” he recalled. “It was a complete surprise as I had been told something completely different earlier in the week. Two other JOs in front of me, Rob Flynn and Bob Gulley, were the first nuggets to go to the US-3A.”

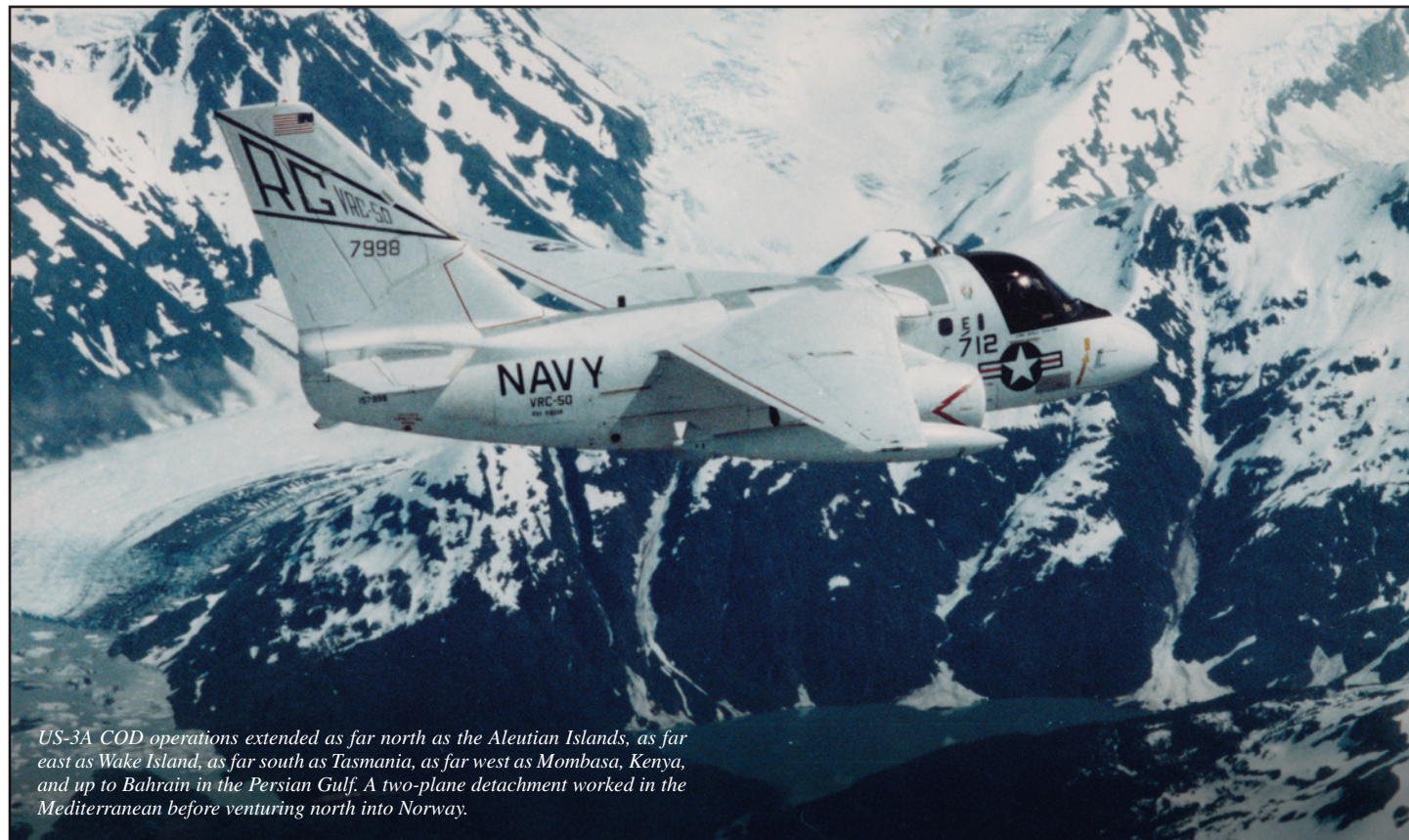
Sid Wegert also was surprised. “I was a nugget in the A-7 RAG [Replacement Air Group, the old term still in use despite such units being Fleet Replacement Squadrons] and after some snags in training I thought I was going back to the Training



A US-3A refuels from a KA-6D Intruder assigned to the VA-196 Main Battery as an F/A-18A Hornet of the VFA-25 Fist of the Fleet awaits its turn during flight operations off USS Constellation (CV 64) in the Arabian Sea, Nov '85. Aerial refueling was not permitted when passengers were on board the Viking COD.



Four of the six US-3As lined up during their heyday. The original “Miss Piggy,” BuNo 157998, is at far right.



US-3A COD operations extended as far north as the Aleutian Islands, as far east as Wake Island, as far south as Tasmania, as far west as Mombasa, Kenya, and up to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. A two-plane detachment worked in the Mediterranean before venturing north into Norway.

Command to be a SERGRAD [selectively retained graduate] instructor. When the orders arrived, it was to VRC-50 to fly the US-3! I went through the VS-41 RAG at North Island, less the anti-submarine stuff, and carqualed in a standard S-3 on USS *Enterprise* (CVN 65) before going to NAS Cubi Point to join the VRC-50 det there.”

Keep Your Bags Packed

Beginning with Miss Piggy during the Iranian hostage crisis, Diego Garcia became a periodic base of operations for detachments (dets) of US-3As. With a pair of 12,000-ft. runways and 20 deepwater anchorages, the island base was an important transshipment point for ships and heavy Air Force cargo aircraft. It also had all the amenities of a major installation. The popular officers club was labeled “The Footprint of Freedom.” Flights to the carriers, however, could be as long as four hours.

During *Operation Desert Storm*, Mark Hoffhines was part of a det at Fujairah International Airport in the United Arab Emirates. “We had three or four US-3s and about the same number of C-2s to support the four carriers in the Persian Gulf. Add pilots and ground crews and it was a fairly large group. We were housed on a military installation nearby, with vans for transport. The guard shack at the entrance to the compound had a machine gun nest atop [it]. Upon return, the machine gunner would train his gun on us until we were cleared to enter. Our meals primarily consisted of MREs. Living conditions were very poor for the enlisted men. We usually worked 12-hour shifts with no days off, unless the fleet was standing down. On those days we would hold a safety standdown and provide recreation and a barbecue for the troops. Keeping busy made the time go by faster.”

With a half dozen US-3s more extensive operations became possible. When a carrier departed the West Coast headed for the Indian Ocean, *Viking* CODs flew out of NAS Cubi Point and set up dets to the north in Japan or the Aleutians, or to the east, usually on Guam, and started delivering mail and cargo as soon as the ships were within range. As the carrier came closer to the Philippines, the dets shifted back to Cubi Point. The support would continue until the ships entered the Indian Ocean, at which time the Diego Garcia US-3s would assume the mission. When the carriers headed home, the VRC-50 *Vikings* reversed the pattern.

“Our bread-and-butter carrier was the *Midway* (Ed. Note: *Navy’s forward-deployed carrier in Japan between 1973 and 1991*),” one pilot commented. “You could always count on her being around and often the

air boss would let us run the deck to get a few extra traps.” While there was little chance of 100 landings on any one ship to become a Centurion, the *Viking* COD pilots made up for it by landing on many ships. A couple claimed to have trapped aboard every active aircraft carrier at the time.

Travel Travails

Carrier operations presented challenges. “Remember that there were many oil rigs afire at that time, creating smoke that covered the Persian Gulf. Visibility was usually very poor,” recalled one US-3A pilot. “On days when the fleet was in an EMCON [emissions control] condition, transmitters were turned off so the only way of knowing which carrier was yours was visual. This is another case where experience paid off. On one mission, I had to approach each carrier, getting close enough to determine if the flight deck was configured for landing. If it was, I would fly over the carrier at altitude and read the number on the [flight deck] to see if it was my carrier. If not, I would depart and search for another carrier until I was successful.”



A VRC-50 US-3A in the lighter paint scheme worn by *Viking* CODs spotted next to a drab VS-24 Scouts S-3B on the flight deck of USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) during *Operation Desert Storm*.

The US-3A had an impact on other elements of a carrier’s embarked air wing, placing a burden on the antisubmarine squadron and its *Vikings*. “Typically, they would land, and the jet would immediately be down for a bunch of gripes that our maintenance had to deal with, effectively robbing the fleet jets of parts that they couldn’t get,” recalled a VS pilot. “It got so bad that during one of my cruises, the CO convinced our CAG that instead of having the Pigs bring mail to us when we were out of C-2 COD range, we should fly to Diego and get it ourselves. So we did. Great way to get off the ship for a night and have a few beers at the club during the middle of a line period.”

“During our nineteen eighty IO [Indian Ocean] deployment, we always had a sortie pushed well south to pick up Miss Piggy if they had a nav failure,” recalled a VAW-121 E-2 *Hawkeye* pilot from USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69). “And yes there was that one time when they did and would have missed *Ike* by several hundred miles.” Yet, one thing about the COD *Viking* caught the attention of one carrier group staffer. “I was always impressed that the US-3 could trap/launch with us swinging on the anchor in the north Arabian Sea.”

Finale

For a time, the Navy looked for a larger COD, with proposals to put tailhooks and folding wings on the Douglas DC-9, Boeing 737 and Fokker F28 commercial jetliners (Ed. Note: *Navy pilots flew simulated carrier approaches in the Fokker during trials in Europe*). Lockheed proposed a “*Super Viking*” with new engines and a fuselage large enough to accommodate seats for 30 passengers. None of the proposals were accepted.

In 1994, the Navy withdrew the US-3 from service, the last deployment supported by VRC-50 being that of USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) the previous year. Several served in the S-3 RAG before placement in storage. The special blivet continued to be used by ASW *Vikings*. As for aircrew, the Navy did not consider flying the US-3 a “warfare specialty.” Therefore, if a pilot was career-minded and wanted to continue flying in the Navy, he had to transition to an aircraft that had a warfare specialty. As with other communities that were disestablished, timing and luck decided your fate.

To the Norse people of long ago, a viking crossed the seas in search of adventure. The crews of the *Viking* COD did just that.



A close-up of “Miss Piggy” surrounded by mail representing the most valued service of the *Viking* COD. The artwork was positioned between the normal crew window and the added slit window, which was the only external difference between the S-3 and US-3.



Flight-deck personnel handle cargo and mail on board USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) in 1993. Note the open blivet on the starboard wing and a 300-gal. drop tank on the jet’s port wing.



IN MARSHAL

Command Changes



COMMANDER, NAVAL AIR FORCES
VADM Doug Verissimo relieved
VADM Dan Cheever
2 February 2026
NAS North Island



VAQ-142
CDR Drew Schnabel relieved
CDR Matthew Galamison
20 January 2026
USS Gerald R. Ford



VFA-113
CDR Christopher Montague relieved
CDR Billy Mohr
4 December 2025
NAS Lemoore



CVW-8
CAPT Jacob Rose relieved
CAPT David Dartez
19 January 2026
USS Gerald R. Ford



VAW-124
CDR Andrew Gillis relieved
CDR Robert Spann
19 February 2026
USS Gerald R. Ford



VT-86
CDR Joe V. Seida relieved
CDR Adam Cowan
12 February 2026
NAS Pensacola



HSC-8
CDR Adam Shields relieved
CDR Ian Gill
23 February 2026
NAS North Island



VFA-41
CDR Taylor Rives relieved
CDR Mike McBryar
31 December 2025
USS Abraham Lincoln



VUQ-10
CDR Craig Nesgood relieved
CDR Emily Mooren
18 September 2025
NAS Patuxent River



UX-24
LtCol Jason Noll, USMC relieved
CDR Tyler Hurst
29 January 2026
NAS Patuxent River



VFA-94
CDR Gordon Robertson relieved
CDR Andrew Jaeger
17 November 2025
USS Nimitz



ATTENTION SQUADRON COs and PAOs

The editors of *The Hook* encourage you to share and celebrate your squadron activities, accomplishments and milestones by contributing In Marshal articles quarterly. In addition to written accounts, we are looking for outstanding, unpublished and recent high-resolution photos of squadron activities, personnel and aircraft. The better the quality of photo and article, the better you look. If you want a shot at the coveted cover photo, the image you send must be very high resolution and portrait (vertical) format. Please do not embed images in your article.

For Changes of Command, please submit the names of the new and relieved COs, a high-resolution command photo of the new CO, the date, location and full name of command.

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In Marshal Deadlines:

- Spring _____ 1 February
- Summer _____ 1 May
- Fall _____ 1 August
- Winter _____ 1 November

If you have any questions or need advice on content, send the editors an email. We want to help your command look good and are ready to assist.



VADM Mark "MRT" Fox, USN(Ret) and his wife Priscilla join the VFA-81 Sunliners for a Dining Out that honored the squadron's service in Operation Desert Storm.



USS Harry S. Truman
CAPT Daniel Prochazka



CVW-1
CAPT Leslie Mintz

VFA-81 SUNLINERS

by LT Caleb "Narrow Banana" Brown, USN

The Sunliners have stepped it up as always during the fall and winter months. From preparing for our Aviation Maintenance Inspection to crushing the strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) syllabus, the squadron is doing it all. An exciting event on the horizon is Red Flag Alaska, where the Liners will plan, organize and execute large-force exercises with numerous Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force counterparts. We will train new SFWT Level IV and IV+ pilots in the art of being a Team Lead, while the up-and-comers get some chances at leading in the bigger fight.

Unfortunately, the squadron must say goodbye to several of its members as they head off to bigger and better things. A hearty congratulations to LT Tim "Blma" Shelby on heading to NAS Key West to bask in the sun with the VFC-111 Sundowners and to LCDR Andrew "Mr. Tumnus" Weatherholt on traveling west to NBVC Point Mugu, Calif. And of course fair winds and following seas to "Big Perm," who is transitioning to the civilian test world. Last, but certainly not least, the Liners bid farewell to our "ole British mate," Lieutenant Jake "Van No-Gogh" Robertson, who is set to fly the F-35 "Battle Penguin" back in his home country. We'll miss you all!

In November, the Sunliners welcomed VADM Mark "MRT" Fox, USN(Ret) to our Dining Out. It was a fantastic evening, providing Liners past and present a time to reminisce and tell sea stories about the bravery and valor shown in Operation Desert Storm. The night culminated in a

toast to the loss of their friend and fellow Liner, CAPT Scott Speicher. These brave warfighters demonstrated the squadron standard, and it is our honor to strive to maintain it. We stand on the shoulders of giants.

The Sunliners, regardless of the phase we are in or the task at hand, remain prepared to serve our great nation, fly with distinction and proudly show up each and every day to be the best there is. So, here's to another year filled with excitement, training and best of all, basic fighter maneuvering ... Who said?

VAQ-144 MAIN BATTERY

by LT Nathan Arntz, USN

VAQ-144 has been powering through maintenance phase and completed the Growler Capability Modification (GCM), receiving crucial depot-level upgrades on five EA-18Gs.



LCDR Tyler "Buffer" Fisher and LCDR(sel) Luke Edlin pictured on the flight line at NAS Whidbey Island after returning from their final flight as members of the VAQ-144 Main Battery.

In addition to hardware replacement during GCM, all *Main Battery Growlers* received the latest software configuration set, enabling VAQ-144 to employ the ALQ-249 Next Generation Jammer Mid-Band pod. This upgrade ensures the squadron is equipped with the most advanced tools available to “own the spectrum” in any potential conflict and will bring enhanced capabilities to the fight, increasing *Team Tarbox’s* (tactical callsign) lethality.

While aircraft capability is crucial, it is the skill and knowledge of the aircrew that ultimately determines success in the complex world of electronic warfare. The operational pause of maintenance phase provides a vital window for VAQ-144’s pilots and weapons system officers to absorb and master new tactics, techniques and procedures. Despite limited aircraft availability, five VAQ-144 aircrew have achieved major milestones in the *Growler Weapons and Tactics Program (GWTP)* syllabus. LTs Greg “Kanchu” Bielke, Jonathan “Enigma” Ledet, Nick “Deep Purple” Oravetz and Landon “Butt Monkey” Starnes all completed their GWTP Level II syllabus, qualifying them as Tactical Wingmen. LT Adam “Gutter Rat” Keating completed his GWTP Level III syllabus, making him a qualified Mission Commander. LT Keating wants to impart this nugget of wisdom to all future GWTP Level III hopefuls. “It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

The ready room said goodbye to two more officers this quarter as LCDR Tyler “Buffer” Fisher and LCDR(sel) Luke Edlin bid farewell to NAS Whidbey Island. Buffer came to the *Main Battery* during work ups for last year’s deployment on board USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75). Having just completed an instructor tour with the VAQ-129 *Vikings*, he brought valuable experience to the ready room and an important perspective for the JOs slated to join VAQ-144 in the months to follow. On deployment, he earned the title of “PET Shot King” amongst the ready room, having employed six AGM-88E Advanced Anti-radiation Guided Missiles in support of several named operations. LCDR(sel) Edlin, a *Main Battery* plankowner, set VAQ-144’s maintenance department on track to achieve excellence from inception. The multitude of roles he filled during his time in the squadron were crucial to its success during last year’s deployment. We know he will continue this tradition of excellence while contributing to the Naval Aviation Enterprise at NAWS China Lake, Calif., and we wish him the best.

Looking ahead, the *Main Battery* has some exciting training opportunities to come. This spring, VAQ-144 JOs will join other squadrons for detachments (dets) and training opportunities to include professional development at China Lake, VAQ-129 carrier qualification in San Diego and multiple air wing exercises. But not all the training opportunities will be away from Whidbey. VAQs across the flight line have continued collaborating in local large-force exercises, leveraging tethered Link-16. This enables a realistic threat replication to test and refine new tactics in a Live, Virtual, Constructive environment, providing training opportunities that would otherwise not be available without sending maintainers and aircrew on det. As the collaboration continues, *Main Battery* Sailors will keep working hard and pushing the boundaries of tactical excellence.

VAW-126 SEAHAWKS

by LTJG Olivia de Olazarra, USN

The VAW-126 *Seahawks*, flying the E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye*, rounded out 2025 successfully and jumped into 2026 with our usual fire and fortitude. With many events on the horizon, the squadron looks forward to continuing its support throughout the fleet.

This past fall, VAW-126 sent a crew to support the Naval Weapons System Evaluation Program (NWSEP) at Tyndall AFB. LCDRs Kevin “TARS” Zwerneman, Julie “Gruchess” Stapleton, LTs Carly “RASINS” Courtney and Car “Imp” Yaeger expressed the tremendous value in continuing our development and integration with Air Force assets. They provided critical command and control to various USAF platforms during the det. “It was a great experience in which we helped develop leading-edge tactics, technique and procedures to improve our integration with the F-22,” said RASINS.

Following NWSEP, VAW-126 proudly supported the U.S. Air Force Weapon School Integration (WSINT) course, providing two aircraft, along with dedicated aircrew and maintainers, to ensure the successful execution of the event. WSINT is the culminating event for our *Hawkeye Weapons and Tactics Instructor (HEWTI)* course, and most often is also the graduation strike for those completing the strike fighter tactics

instructor course (TOPGUN). LT Tyler “Durden” Bozeman, named the Airborne Command, Control and Logistics Wing Pilot of the Year at last year’s *Hawkeye Ball*, proudly represented VAW-126 at WSINT for the duration of the monthlong event. He worked alongside the E-2 community’s best, the staff from the Carrier Airborne Early Warning Weapons School (CAEWWS), in implementing the newest techniques and updates to our tactics.

The *Seahawks* continued seeking out training and participation at the most prestigious levels of the fleet. We excitedly welcomed back two critical members of our wardroom — LTs Emily “BONIT” Beres from the TOPGUN air intercept controller (AIC) course and Noah “Laika” Vodisek from the Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics (MAWTS) course. BONIT, sharing her insights on her time at TOPGUN, stated “while the work was very demanding, it was incredible to have the staff and some of the most knowledgeable people in the fleet at our disposal. I am beyond excited to bring that knowledge back to the *Seahawks* and make people even more excited about the future of the *Hawkeye*.” We are fortunate to have resources like her to aid in our application of the most recent tactical developments.

We are also eager to announce other members of the squadron recently selected to attend graduate-level tactics courses. LT Kyle “Yukon Cornelius” Melvin departed for the TOPGUN AIC course in February, followed by LT Car Yaeger for the MAWTS course in March. LT Melvin shared that he was “excited to get to the course and increase [my] tactical proficiency,” adding that he is “looking to continue the high standards set by generations of stellar VAW-126 JOs who attended TOPGUN before him, such as LTs Cole ‘Burble Bill’ Watson, Nick ‘SPAM’ Soriano and Lulu ‘Sour Patch’ Acosta.”

Additionally, we received news of exciting career opportunities for some of our most senior JOs. LT Brianna “Daffy Duck” Warren was accepted into the HEWTI course and will then remain on the illustrious CAEWWS staff at NAS Fallon. She is “eager and prepared to work hard at the HEWTI course” and is “most excited to learn about her future area of subject matter expertise and how to make E-2D aircrew even more effective in combat.” Additionally, LT Bradley “Dadley Bravidson” Davidson will soon depart for his next set of orders at NAS Patuxent River to attend the prestigious U.S. Naval Test Pilot School. He shared that he “is thrilled for the opportunity to be working on the leading edge, developing the future of the *Hawkeye* community.” Finally, LT Tyler “Durden” Bozeman was recently accepted into the fall 2026 HEWTI course where he will undoubtedly continue a proud tradition of *Seahawk* WTIs.

Looking forward, VAW-126 will participate in a wide range of training events, continuing to pursue peak combat readiness and proficiency. Aircrew are diligently preparing for a NATOPS unit evaluation later this winter, while also supporting Joint *Exercise Checkered Flag* at Tyndall AFB in the spring and *Exercise Resolute Strike* with the Royal Navy this summer. Additionally, the *Seahawks* look forward to supporting the celebration of America’s 250th this year in New York City, all while we continue bolstering our legacy as “America’s Squadron!”

Courtesy of VAW-126



VAW-126 *Seahawks* junior officers pictured next to one of the squadron’s E-2D *Advanced Hawkeyes* at *NavSta Norfolk* in Jan ‘26.



A VFA-113 *Stingers* F/A-18E joined aircraft from other CVW-2 squadrons, the U.S. Air Force and California ANG in conducting the pregame flyover at Super Bowl LX at Levi Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif., on 8 Feb ‘26.



USS *Carl Vinson*
CAPT Joshua Wenker



CVW-2
CAPT Eric Bell

VFA-113 STINGERS

by LT Haden “Michaels” Cowdrey, USN

After spending 21 out of 24 months deployed or on detachment, *Stingtown* is finally home. While we welcome the brief chance to refit and execute maintenance, we are diligently preparing for the upcoming Optimized-Fleet Response Plan.

In our off time, we are keeping the NAS Lemoore Officers Club and Hop Forged alive and well, bailing two of our finest JOs in January. LT Connor “Service Cat” Mannix, the Navy’s only Standoff Land Attack Missile-Expanded Response “SME,” is departing for the VT-21 *Redhawks* at NAS Kingsville, Tex. Rest assured, the future of Naval Aviation is in good hands. We have no doubt that he will be an excellent instructor in

the mighty T-45 *Goshawk*, given his unique ability to imitate *Sidewinder* tones. We also bid adieu to *Stingtown’s* least eligible bachelor, LT Michael “2GOM” Verdile, who we look forward to heckling at Strike in Fallon during our next air wing event.

We also bid farewell to our trusted skipper, CDR Billy “Twitch” Mohr, who departed for Charleston, S.C., after selecting for the nuclear power pipeline in December. “Being Skipper of *Stingtown* was the greatest honor of [my] life,” he said before his departure, and we can attest that the honor was ours. Twitch leaves us not only as skipper, but as a close friend and mentor. Taking the helm is long-time cardio SME, CDR Christopher “U-Turn” Montague, who will dearly miss chirping 2GOM every day at “rats” or in Ops.

Following a period of well-deserved holiday leave (the first stateside in three years), we have welcomed two new pilots into our midst — new Executive Officer CDR Alex “Spider Monkey” Tidei and with the first-round pick of the 2026 Hinge Draft, LCDR Wes “Trash Blast’er” Perkins hailing from the *Blue Angels*. With work ups fast approaching, the *Stingers* sent LT Ryan “Sheldon” McMullin to fly over Super Bowl LX with CVW-2 and USAF aircraft, representing the squadron on our nation’s biggest stage. It just goes to show, everyone wants to be a *Stinger*!



An F/A-18F Super Hornet assigned to the VFA-32 Fighting Swordsmen flies over the Navy Dare County Bombing Range during a combat search-and-rescue exercise on 8 Sep '25.



AT2 Huy Ho, left, and AD3 Samuel Hernandez direct an F/A-18E Super Hornet assigned to the VFA-34 Blue Blasters on the flight line at NAS Oceana on 27 Jan '26.

One could be led to believe that the *Blasters* were all work and no play. However, throwing our annual holiday party, we recognized the herculean efforts of the entire command, with multiple snow and ice days requiring game plan flexes and hard work from every Sailor. Looking forward to 2026, the *Blue Blasters* stand ready to tackle the challenges thrown at us by work ups and eagerly look forward to the tantalizing reward of deployment on board USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69). Stand by to see firsthand that no matter what the call, *Blue Blasters* Do!

VAQ-130 ZAPPERS
by LT Tyler Kennedy, USN

The *Zappers* have been keeping busy over the past year, enjoying the time at home since returning from our last deployment toward the end of 2024. Even though we have been in maintenance phase, the squadron has continued to maintain proficiency and tactical excellence both at home and on several detachments, showcasing the high standards expected of fleet squadrons.

At the beginning of 2025, the *Zappers* traveled to Nellis AFB to support *Gray Flag*, a large-force exercise that provides critical training to CVWs. After returning to NAS Whidbey Island, the squadron conducted several inspections, passing all of them with high marks, a credit to the work ethic and attention to detail of our Sailors.

In September, the *Zappers* participated in *Growler Week*, where our performance across all events was nothing short of exemplary. VAQ-130 took home first place in both the field carrier landing practice tournament and the “Dogfight Derby,” and placed second in the foosball tournament. To end the week, the squadron had a fun and memory-filled night at the Swinomish Casino, which hosted the annual *Growler Ball*.

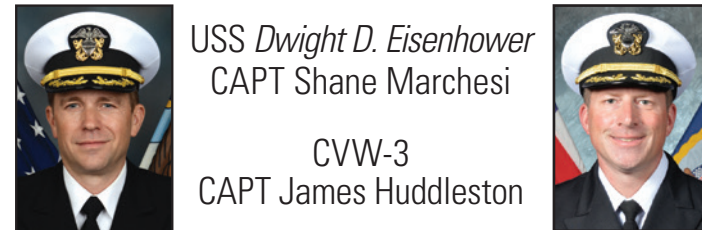
On 1 October, the *Zappers* held a memorial service at the *Prowler Memorial* at Whidbey Island, unveiling a plaque for the two aircrew who lost their lives in a mishap one year earlier. The service for LCDR Lyndsay “Miley” Evans and LT Serena “Dug” Wileman was attended by their families, friends, squadronmates and aviators across many squadrons. They will forever hold a place in Naval Aviation, the *Growler* community and VAQ-130.

At the end of October, the *Zappers* headed down to Nevada to support CVW-7 at Air Wing Fallon. Although this was not an air wing meant for the *Zappers*, it enabled the squadrons



Michael Grove

A VAQ-130 Zappers EA-18G Growler returns from a flight in support of CVW-7's Air Wing Fallon in Oct '25.



USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower*
CAPT Shane Marchesi

CVW-3
CAPT James Huddleston

A BUSY STRETCH FOR THE GYPSIES
by LTJG Keylan “Respects” Herman, USN

It was a busy and fun-filled fall and winter for the *Gypsies* (tactical callsign), with no shortage of flyovers, holiday parties and quality time spent together. Between the chaos of the schedule and the good times away from work, the squadron stayed active and connected, making the most of everything the past few months have had to offer.

As we’ve inched closer to the start of work ups, VFA-32 has been deep in the strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) grind. Long days, plenty of reps, studying and simulator time have been the norm. At the same time, we have been steadily growing the *Gypsy* family, welcoming new pilots and weapons system officers straight out of the Fleet Replacement Squadron and getting them spun up. Watching these fresh faces jump in, learn fast and contribute right away has been a huge boost to the squadron.

The *Gypsies* are fired up to announce our newest Level IV SFWT aircrew — LTs Carlee “Midge” Conway, Brandon “Kronk” Hensley, Brittany “Hot Wheels” Kramer and Nick “Slider” Rudnik. These officers put in the work and earned it the hard way, showing grit, solid decision-making and a whole lot of commitment throughout the syllabus. Congratulations to all of them on reaching this milestone.

We’re also stoked to recognize our new Level III aircrew — LTs Pete “Cowgirl” Caggiano, Sheridynn “Smitty” Scheppers, Brandon “BLU?” Bristow, Stu “Slap” Bayliss and Eugene “Judy Hopps” Kim. These aircrew have taken a big step forward and continue to prove they are ready to shoulder more responsibility. We’re looking forward to seeing what they do next as they keep pushing forward.

Of course, along with new faces and new qualifications comes saying goodbye. The *Gypsies* are sad to see Choco Taco and Slider move on to their next chapters. Both have been huge parts of the squadron, and their impact will not be forgotten. While we’ll miss flying and working alongside them, we know they are going to crush it wherever the Navy sends them next.

With work ups right around the corner, the *Gypsies* are locked in and ready to keep pushing. The last few months have set the tone, and the squadron is in a great spot heading into what’s ahead. Proud of the team, proud of the progress and excited for what’s next. *Gypsy* Roll!

VFA-34 BLUE BLASTERS

by LT Amadeus “FUNGUS” Skoczek, USN

With the cold months of winter rolling in, the *Blue Blasters* took a break from our usual travels, spending time at home on an equally cold mission —targeting the SFWT syllabus and the TOPGUN school itself. Dispatching one of our best, the *Blasters* bid farewell to LCDR Orion “Sid” Kelly, relinquishing him of his arduous duties as operations officer and sending him to shape the future of TOPGUN as its new executive officer. Refining their aim to the TOPGUN cadre, the *Blasters* then qualified LT Brent “Pooh Bear” Guthrie at SFWT Level IV+ before sending him to the course. We wish them both all the best and are standing by for feedback on how the *Blasters* truly are the “Pride of the East, Best in the West.”

Taking additional shots in-house, the *Blasters* also qualified several of our own pilots in the SFWT syllabus, with LCDR Matt “PWOP” van Dine and LT Mitchell “Zohan” Pendleton obtaining their Level IV qualifications, with an additional two JOs, LTs Jacob “Spock” Granick and Amadeus “FUNGUS” Skoczek, completing the Level II syllabus.

of CVW-7 to receive high-level training that will greatly assist them in their future deployment. This opportunity also allowed VAQ-130 aircrew to complete numerous *Growler* Weapons and Tactics Program Level II, III and IV events, and provided the remaining qualifications to create one Mission Commander and one Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses Lead.

Upon return from Fallon, the squadron held a change-of-command ceremony on 13 November. CDR Matthew "Trouble T" Turner relieved CDR Timothy "Puddy" Warburton as commanding officer. CDR Adam "ManBearPig" Reddick assumed the duties of executive officer. It also served as a retirement ceremony for CDR Warburton. He leaves the Navy after serving across many commands in numerous roles honorably and faithfully.

In January 2026, CMDM Frank Wilson turned over the role to CMDM Conrad Lampasona, who will provide wisdom and mentorship to all Sailors in the squadron as the newest member of the command triad.

The *Zappers* continue to work diligently during the remainder of maintenance phase and look ahead to our upcoming work-up schedule. Zap Zap — Dominate!

VAW-123 SCREWTOPS

by LTJG Jessica Chin, USN

VAW-123 is adapting well as an E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye* squadron, consistently demonstrating operational excellence through disciplined training, refined tactics and sustained flight hours. The squadron remains focused on maintaining proficiency across all mission sets, ensuring aircrew and maintainers are fully prepared to execute complex command and control operations in dynamic environments. By emphasizing continuous improvement, effective crew coordination and integration with Joint and Coalition partners, VAW-123 preserves a high state of readiness and reinforces its ability to deliver reliable airborne early warning and battle management in support of fleet and Joint Force objectives.

In late September, the *Screwtops* played a critical role supporting *Exercise UNITAS* in conducting a sinking exercise (SINKEX), providing

Michael Grove



airborne range clearance and maritime air control. The *Screwtops* ensured real-time coordination between surface and air assets, enabling precise execution of fires and safe deconfliction across the battlespace. VAW-123 worked with multiple entities to include the VFA-32 *Swordsmen*, HSC-26 *Chargers*, HSM-50 *Valkyries*, VFA-34 *Blue Blasters*, VP-16 *War Eagles*, VP-26 *Tridents*, VX-20 and USS *Arlington* (LPD 24).

Following the SINKEX, VAW-123 provided two E-2D aircraft to support CVW-7 during its Air Wing Fallon advanced phase, delivering continuous airborne early warning, command and control plus battlespace management throughout the evolutions. The *Screwtops* participated in multiple advanced tactics phase events that required E-2D capabilities in an air wing that has the last fleet E-2C aircraft. The squadron provided effective coordination between strike fighter and support assets while maintaining real-time situational awareness for the air wing.

Additionally, in November VAW-123 worked closely with VFA-32 and the HSC-7 *Dusty Dogs* to execute a complex combat search-and-rescue (CSAR) scenario. The squadron coordinated the air picture, managed communications and integrated assets as HSC-7 conducted recovery operations and VFA-32 provided escort and tactical support. As part of the Joint environment, VAW-123 also controlled and integrated with participating U.S. Air Force F-22 *Raptors*, ensuring seamless coordination, deconfliction and situational awareness across all platforms to successfully accomplish the CSAR training mission objectives.

Looking ahead, VAW-123 is ready and excited to begin work ups in March. Having already completed field carrier landing practice and carrier qualifications, the *Screwtops* will carry that momentum forward with Flight-Deck Certification this spring. Through disciplined training, meticulous maintenance and a strong culture of professionalism, the squadron maintains a high state of readiness and reliability across all mission areas. The *World-Famous Screwtops* are eager to refine tactical proficiency and operational cohesion over the next year as we begin the predeployment work-up cycle.

Below: A VAW-123 *Screwtops* E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye* photographed while operating from NAS Fallon in Oct '25.



Team Badman aircraft lead a formation that includes Marine Corps and allied aircraft during recent Joint training in the Indo-Pacific.



USS *George Washington*
CAPT Timothy L. Waits



CVW-5
CAPT Brian Kesselring

VFA-27 ROYAL MACES
by LT Nate "allstate" Bermel, USN

After the surprise visit from the President of the United States and a Busan, South Korea, port visit, the finish line of the 2025 cruise remained firmly in sight. However, "the world gets a vote," or so they say, and the *Maces* were thrown a couple of more curveballs for good measure. First, a surprise extension sent us back to the South China Sea for a few more weeks of patrolling the world's most important coral reef. Next, the Navy's premier ammunition offload ship in our corner of the Pacific suffered a fire, derailing our return to home port indefinitely. Christmas was saved by Guam (of all places), when the "G-Dub" pulled up for a pier-side ammo offload and extra port call. By this time, the last of this crop of "Probies" had picked up callsigns, though LT Bo "Psyduck" Peng is still confused about his. Newly named LT Matt "Chūgi" Royce shredded guitar at Porky's open-mic night with LCDR Ryan "Mayhem" Mahon. If the *Maces* learned anything this cruise, it's that all roads do, in fact, lead to Porky's.

Upon return to home port, the *Mace* JOPA put on an "Amazing Race" for all CAG Bizz walk-off players as they traveled from Yokosuka to MCAS Iwakuni, complete with pop-up challenges (such as drinking

with locals or acquiring a co-ed's number), Precise Participant Location and Identification tracking via Find My Friends, and video feeds from contestants sabotaging each other on the bullet train. The competition was all live streamed at the MCAS Iwakuni Officers Club, which, of course, was the finish line. Congratulations to the *Outlaws* (VAQ-141's tactical callsign) on winning the inaugural contest — and temporary custody of "The Wheel" — with honorable mentions to the *Argo* and *Mace* teams.

And just like that, we were back to winter in Japan and the familiar comforts of ramen, gyoza and lemon sours. With a flight line of completely slicked-off jets, cold weather and sea temperatures just warm enough to avoid dry suits, basic fighter maneuvering (BFM) derby season was officially on. The *Maces* relished that real fighter feeling, and there's no doubt that the fellas are *Rhino*-pilled.

Holiday post overseas movement leave sent the *Maces* all over. Some went international, while others took the opportunity to ski Japan's legendary powder (all collarbones left intact this year). LTs John "Bath Salt" Brooks and Forrest "PLUMP" Cullings made the sacred pilgrimage to NAS Oceana's Thunderdome for LSO School. LT Nate "allstate" Bermel's highly classified proposal/kidnapping plan, which he kept secret from absolutely nobody and successfully achieved mission objectives by keeping the ring locked in the Special Access Program Facility during cruise, just miiiiight've been overkill.

The new year also brought the departures of a trio of beloved *Maces*. LT Stephen "ROYZ" O'Donnell was our HDFP night check representative, a true silent professional, and a one-man morale factory. His infectious laugh and indefatigable liver were surefire guarantees that a good time would be had by all. ROZY is heading back to Virginia Beach ("the greatest city on God's green earth") to instruct with the VFA-106 *Gladiators* (oh the stories the Cat Is are gonna hear) and while the *Maces* will miss him terribly, we know exactly where on Shore Drive we can find him. We wish him the best, and we all look forward to the late-night FaceTimes to hear about all the shyte he's been up to lately.



LT Samuel "Squatch" Schultz, surely the oldest head JOPA the tailhook community has ever seen, leaves behind quite a legacy here in Japan. Squatch became Japan's favorite karaoke gaijin, skied down Mount Fuji (and every other mountain in the country) and founded the Keepers of the Local Iwakuni Trails to support important conservation efforts. The hairy man in the big white van is actually quite the sweetheart, and if there was something mischievous going on in the ready room, you can be sure he was at the heart of it. Squatch is off to the VAQ-129 Vikings (yes, the Growler Fleet Replacement Squadron) to return to his roots in the Pacific Northwest and become student electronic warfare officers' worst nightmare.

Last, but not least, we have LCDR Ryan "Mayhem" Mahon. The "Easy With It" frontman brought the party with him wherever he went. Mayhem provided the *Maces* with meats and vino as head grill master, and he also supplied some of the most unforgettable conversation starters you've ever heard before 0800 on a workday. Mayhem departs after the driest Dry January you've ever seen; he's heading to his next tour in D.C. to do what exactly we do not know. Well the plan will probably change again by the time he lands at Dulles. Mahalo brother!

The *Maces* sent off JOZY, Squatch and Mayhem at our Dining Out in Tokyo, which saw the return of Wheelchair Mayhem, live band karaoke and an unforgettable weekend all-around.

What's next for the *Maces*? We'll tackle the Strike Fighter Advanced Readiness Program, Air Wing Guam, Iwo To and cruise with new pods and missiles, but the same *Mace* spirit. Until next time ... Cheers and MIYF!

COLD SHOWERS AND NEW JETS

by The Chippy Chronicles Team

Post-credits scene for Winter 2025: Just when we thought we were finally done painting, packing and preparing to reset the squadron, the Navy hit us with the classic "one more thing," and we found ourselves enjoying an all-expenses-paid encore in the South China Sea, capped off

Courtesy of VFA-27



The VFA-27 Royal Maces gather for a Dining Out in Tokyo to celebrate completion of a successful 2025 deployment cycle.

with an unplanned port call in Guam. It was the perfect final act to a season where "the plan" was more of a suggestion.

After finally returning home, with late winter still very much doing winter things, our junior officers were welcomed with six months of cold showers and no heat. Apparently, the required parts are still on a slow boat from a country that may or may not exist. Morale held steady, mostly because hypothermia is temporary, and our hope died weeks ago. That mindset carried us straight into the February transpacific jet swap. The original plan involved Air Force tanker support heroically meeting us halfway across the Pacific, an idea that evaporated under the combined weight of tanker math and crew rest. Faced with reality, the Navy did what it always does. We adjusted expectations, upgraded to United Polaris and abided, ultimately adopting the new plan.

That plan became the "Great American Super Hornet Swap." We flew out to pick up the new jets first, then turned around to return the old ones, a perfectly logical sequence that briefly left the squadron with 22 jets on the books and on the ramp in Iwakuni. While the operations department was thrilled, the maintenance department developed a thousand-yard stare. Lessons remain scarce and details will be lost, but a great story should emerge in the summer edition.

We once again attempted to kick LT Richard "Yardsale!" DeMann out of the nest, but the transpacific jet swap required one more qualified body. Despite repeated efforts, Yardsale proved impossible to dislodge and earned himself a short extension. He remained aboard for one final lap, bags packed, officially classified as "still here," and helped shepherd jets across the Pacific.

Somewhere between cold showers, commercial flights and jet math, the squadron briefly pivoted from survival mode to elegance with a Dining Out full of glamour, tradition and selective memory. LT Jake "Richie Rich" Lindow expertly executed the event, his reserves of Hilton Honors points and Friendship Day profits ensuring the evening felt far classier than anyone expected — or deserved.

Meanwhile, the JOs collected qualifications like they were on clearance. LTs Jake "Richie Rich" Lindow and Tony "Air Bud" Janssen earned strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) Level IV, LT Alex "Glaze Master" Oshirak picked up SFWT Level III, and LTs Ryan "Caesar" Harrington, Mike "Bilbo" Hoang and Will "Konbini" Hammond grabbed their Level IIs. The reward was an immediate trip to Savannah, Ga., for Raytheon Warfighter School, which we are assured was strictly training. LCDR Akheel "Slumdog" Patel also headed west to NAS Fallon to join CVW-11 during Air Wing Fallon.

With jets swapped and confidence restored, the *Dambusters* returned to Iwo To for field carrier landing practice, a time-honored tradition of convincing ourselves we're ready. The pattern and ball flying were declared top notch, which clearly meant the squadron was prepared for the 2026 patrol cycle.

As a final sacrifice to the Naval Aviation gods, the *Dambusters* bid farewell to LT Tom "Zombie" Haller. The rest of us are stocking up on caffeine, nicotine and patience.

New jets, same circus. CHIPPY HO!

VAQ-141: NEW YEAR, NEW ME (KINDA)

by LT Joshua "FNG" Krogman, USN

When VAQ-141 last left you, we were steaming our way around the vast Pacific Ocean, steadily deterring all those who opposed us. During the last few months, the *Shadowhawks* finished our 2025 cruise (including a spicy extension), returned home, and enjoyed the holidays in a multitude of ways. Currently, we and our CAG Bizz brethren are enjoying our time at home on board MCAS Iwakuni while continuing to remain tactically and "die-namically" proficient.

Following our working port call and visit from distinguished visitors, a freshly painted *GW* and her hardy crew and air wing returned to sea. Our sea legs only lasted a short time, as four days into our venture we made a quick pit stop in Busan, South Korea, to enjoy time with our counterparts there. Sailors were on record good behavior, which in no way was related to having been in port only four days prior. Busan provided invigorating times for all, including soju and beer cocktails, eating wriggling octopus tentacles and, of course, gorging ourselves on Korean fried chicken. As a bonus, following our port call we were able to fly alongside our South

Korean allies and managed to avoid overflying Liancourt Rocks, though LT Tanner "FNG" Russ was itching to get himself in the news.

Following our work in the Northern Pacific, CVN 73 was given the news we all knew was coming — extension. Cheers sprang up from every corner of the ship and elation was at an all-time high as we recognized we would get another month at sea with our best friends in the whole world. More time to work on maritime tactics and flying the ball is all any aviator truly desires in this world.

As we awaited relief from USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72), *Team Badman* (tactical callsign) continued to develop and test new air wing and ship tactics and procedures and push the limits of what we can do as a combat team with the entire carrier strike group. At the same time, LTs Matthew "Thicci Bobbi" Zachary and Alex "FNG" Kania tested the limits of both spirit and body by undertaking the famous *Outlaw* "One Percent Corn Dog Challenge," where you must eat one percent of your total body weight in corn dogs. We encourage all those who are brave enough to face this gauntlet to reach out to us for direction. Corn Dog Challenge standardization checks must be observed by an already-patched aviator. Travel and temporary additional duty budget will be set up by the squadron who desires an observer.

After all the heavy training of the 25-1, 25-2, 25-3 and 25-4 patrols and a hard-fought battle to claim a spot at 3,000 feet in the stack, the *Shadowhawks* returned home, but not before stuffing everything we could fit into the staterooms of our CO and XO to avoid taking things off the ship (sorry gents!). Our squadron had a wonderful welcome home set up for us by the VAQ-141 spouses' group, who ensured we could get our tolerance back up to standards with a gifted bottle of wine for each officer.

The *Shadowhawks* JOPA also wants to recognize a special effort by one of our own. The VFA-27 *Royal Maces* laid down a challenge for CVW-5's return to Japan — the Return to Home Port Amazing Race. Upon disembarkation, walk-off members of each squadron would compete in a race from Yokosuka to the doors of the MCAS Iwakuni Officers Club. Contestants had the chance to complete challenges along the way to reduce their overall time, with the lowest time for the journey winning the grand prize, an infamous and historic landmark in the world of Naval Aviation. LT Logan "FNG" Hughes



Courtesy of VFA-195



Chippy Ho! The VFA-195 Dambusters pictured during a recent squadron Dining Out as they look ahead to whatever 2026 holds for Forward-Deployed Naval Forces.

put it all on the line for VAQ-141, completing multiple challenges along his storied journey home. Some of his greatest feats included standing watch on the quarterdeck of USS *Ralph Johnson* (DDG 114), earning a SWO pin in process, having a Japanese stranger waterfall a beer into his mouth, and winning a 1-v-many against the *Maces* on the Shinkansen. Logan's dedication to his team and steadfast resolve are prime examples of the leadership and perseverance that VAQ-141 instills in its members, and the JOPA is proud to recognize him. His efforts proved fruitful, and the trophy of a lifetime now resides in the *Shadowhawks'* JOPA lounge as a proud reminder of the immense efforts of one of our own.

Grateful to be home with family, half of our squadron set off on holiday leave that would encompass both Christmas and New Year's. Those that remained behind held the proverbial fort down by rehacking our BFM currency and establishing ourselves once again as the "most formidable BFM force in CAG Bizz." During this time the remaining officers also enjoyed a Christmas holiday party, which was filled with laughs, holiday mirth and White Elephant gift exchanges. Some left with gifts they will never forget and some left with memories they will never remember.

As the New Year rolled around, the *Outlaws* said a few hefty goodbyes to several of our esteemed JOPA. Departing for the Electronic Attack Weapon School is LT Jack "DaBaby" Downey, who leaves behind a stellar legacy of doing all the tasks that other JOPA members don't know how to do. We also said farewell to our "Admin Department Head on a JO Pay Grade," LTJG Jordan "OG" Ogburn, who graciously ran the admin shack like no other. Lastly, we send off LT Courtney "Ronda" Dale, our resident comedian and fashionista, who will go on to join the instructor cadre at VAQ-129. We wish all of them the best of luck at their next commands!

Following the New Year, the other half of our squadron set out on their holiday tours around the globe. During this time, VAQ-141 minted our newest *Growler* Weapons and Tactics Program Level III Mission Commander, LT Nate "DWEEB" Fox. Additionally, VAQ-141 took on the introduction of the Next Generation Jammer into our inventory. Upon the return of all aircrew from their post-cruise travels, we began the training necessary to become proficient on our new equipment. We are excited to have this new hardware and start to field it in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility on a regular basis. The new capabilities this will bring to our squadron will give us major advantages in the future and greatly enhance our primary mission of deterrence. The *Growler* will continue to be a vital asset, and with this new technology, push the boundaries of electronic attack on our home turf and abroad like never before.

MC2 Tyler Crowley, USN

The *Shadowhawks* made the most of our post-cruise time off and holiday season, but we are excited to get back on the horse as we prepare for the upcoming 2026 cruise. A lot is going to happen between now and then, but one thing is certain — no matter the task, the tactic or the die table, the *Shadowhawks* remain ready to crush all others, any time, any place. As always, DPTBO!

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by LtCdr "ENGINE EDDIE" Davidson

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CVW-7 CVN 77

USS *George H.W. Bush*
CAPT Robert Bibeau

CVW-7
CAPT Martin N. Fentress Jr.

ON THE BOAT AGAIN
by LT Roy "Exotic" Billodeau, USN

The last few months have seen CVW-7 hard at work. The work-up cycle has been in full swing, and the air wing has spent much of its time underway, vigorously preparing for our upcoming deployment. *Team Jackpot* — USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77) and CVW-7 — has officially reunited and is back in full form! Group Sail (GRUSAIL) and our Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX) have required the air wing's best performance yet, and the team could not have performed better!

After leaving the Silver State Officers Club at NAS Fallon dry of booze and its coffers significantly fuller, the air wing took to the seas for GRUSAIL in December 2025. As aircraft and personnel embarked *Bush* and USS *Mason* (DDG 87), *Carrier Strike Group Four's* (CSG-4) syllabus came into play, challenging our skills learned during Air Wing Fallon (AWF). The underway period also included carrier qualifications (CQ), deck landing qualifications (DLQ) and normal cyclic operations. In true Navy fashion, all of this occurred right before Christmas. However, the air wing rose to the challenge, helping integrate the strike group into a lethal fighting force.

After disembarking, CVW-7 took the holidays to recharge its batteries, ensuring it was ready to hit the ground running again at the end of January for COMPTUEX. However, Mother Nature had a say! A massive winter storm decided that it would head to the Hampton Roads area, along with much of Virginia and North Carolina. The snow that came with it gave the air wing an extra day at home with family and friends, something that brought no argument from any JO. Sadly, Mother Nature had another say. The snow soon melted and CVW-7 once again embarked *Bush* and *Mason*.

Although we tried to delay the inevitable, COMPTUEX began, once again starting with CQ and DLQ for CVW-7 squadrons. Even the CMV-22Bs of the VRM-40 *Mighty Bison* got in on the fun with their own night DLQs! However, before COMPTUEX even began, CVW-7 mission commanders were hard at work, planning for dozens of missions of different varieties, sharpening the spear of the numerous warfare areas within the strike group. CSG-4 once again had prepared a training regime, but this time it required much more focus and dedication from *Team Freedom* (tactical callsign). The air wing integrated with inorganic tankers, maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft and foreign partners from two different navies, expanding their breadth of knowledge and experience. In all the challenges CSG-4 presented, the air wing rose to the occasion, demonstrating CVW-7 and *Team Jackpot's* ability to decisively win in combat at sea.

As of this writing, CVW-7 is putting the finishing touches on preparing for deployment. The air wing has been at it for the better part of the last year, and we could not be more ready. Our aircraft are groomed, our affairs at home are settled, our families are prepared and, most importantly, the men and women of the squadrons of CVW-7 are ready to project power across the seas wherever *Team Freedom* is called to serve.

VFA-83 RAMPAGERS
by LT Grant "Trench Foot" Birindelli, USN

The VFA-83 *Rampagers* recently wrapped up a busy and character-building stretch of operations that took us from the high desert of Nevada to the statistically dangerous casinos of Lake Tahoe, and back to the warm, steel embrace of *George H. W. Bush*. Along the way, we managed to sharpen our warfighting skills, integrate as an air wing and confirm that we are still very good at flying airplanes.

The *Rampagers* headed west to NAS Fallon for AWF, where we participated in multiple large-force exercises designed to stress aircrew, jets and egos alike. The syllabus was demanding, the debriefs were long and the lessons learned were plentiful, most of them centered around timing, communications and excessive use of the phrase "just to put a bow on that."

Fallon did what Fallon always does, separating fact from fiction, humbling the confident and never failing to remind us that no matter how good you think you are, there is always a debrief slide waiting to prove otherwise. By the end, the *Rampagers* walked away sharper, faster and marginally more caffeinated.

In a bold and courageous move for squadron readiness, the *Rampagers* conducted a squadron admin off-site in Lake





A VFA-83 Rampagers F/A-18E Super Hornet strains against an arresting wire after trapping aboard Bush during Group Sail in the Atlantic Ocean, 12 Dec '25.

Tahoe. While this event was intended to foster cohesion, it quickly became apparent that the junior officers had uncovered what they believed to be a flawless economic strategy — printing money at the craps table. For a brief, shining moment, several JOs were convinced they had beaten the system, a belief that was unceremoniously corrected later that evening. Lessons learned included the house always wins and “letting it ride” is not a retirement plan. Morale, however, significantly improved.

Fresh off AWF, the *Rampagers* returned to sea for GRUSAIL on board CVN 77. This provided valuable time to hone our skills on the boat and further integrate with the rest of the strike group, proving once again that landing a jet on a moving postage stamp in the middle of the ocean is, in fact, a perishable skill. Operations were smooth, sorties were productive and the squadron continued to demonstrate that VFA-83 is ready to answer the call.

During GRUSAIL, all department heads and the skipper temporarily departed the ship to participate in what some (“Fat Goose”) are now calling the greatest flyover of all time at the 2025 Army-Navy game. Left behind were the JOs and our XO, alone, unsupervised and flying the schedule. Despite expectations, the squadron continued to operate at a high level, executing sorties safely and professionally, proving once and for all that the future of Naval Aviation is in good hands.

This cycle also brought major milestones for two of our own. LT Jagan “TOTO” Ravichandran completed strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) Level IV and will be taking his talents to Fallon as part of the next TOPGUN class. The squadron congratulates TOTO and looks forward to hearing him say “actually...” during future briefs. LT Cole “Pickle” Carey completed SFWT Level III, another huge achievement and a testament to his dedication, skill and ability to survive debriefs intact. Well done to both — drinks will be accepted.

The *Rampagers* also welcomed several new members to the team with the arrival of LCDRs Alexander “Banana Hands” Carlson, Ben “Crunch” Vanderberry, LTs Evan “ROOKIE” Dixon and John “Jim” Winkler. We are excited to have them on board and look forward to seeing them carry on the squadron’s traditions.

As always, and most importantly, thank you to the Sailors of VFA-83. None of this happens without your relentless efforts. Every shop has been

working to generate safe and reliable aircraft, often under tight timelines and in less-than-ideal conditions. You are the reason the squadron continues to seamlessly operate at the highest level.

The *Rampagers* remain ready, trained, tested and occasionally lucky. The mission continues, the bar remains high and gravity is still just a suggestion.

RAM ON!

VFA-105 GUNSLINGERS

by LT Matthew Gillcrist, USN

Following an intensive AWF, the VFA-105 *Gunslingers* returned to NAS Oceana in early November and hit the ground running. While three aircrew remained at Fallon to participate in *Carrier Strike Group Ten’s* (CSG-10) Integrated Air Defense Course, the rest of the squadron prepared for GRUSAIL in early December.

As the *Gunslinger* ranks continued to grow with the arrival of LT Connor King, we balanced well-deserved Thanksgiving leave with high-end tactical development. The squadron successfully integrated with Naval Special Warfare for close-air-support training while concurrently conducting field carrier landing practice in preparation for its return to the aircraft carrier. During this time, the ready room’s tactical depth grew, with LCDR Evan “Tommy Boy” Bokhart re-hacking his SFWT Level IV qualification and LT James “Puck” Davis earning his initial Level IV qualification.

December saw the *Gunslingers* embark *Bush* for CSG-10’s GRUSAIL. New arrivals LT Marcus Figueroa and LTJG Perry Choo joined the squadron just in time for a baptism by fire into cyclic operation, night carrier traps and live ordnance expenditures. This short underway provided foundational experience for the squadron’s junior aircrew, instilling the essence of Naval Aviation with safe and proficient flying around the carrier. Beyond increasing technical proficiency, GRUSAIL served its primary purpose of forging the interpersonal bonds between the air wing and strike group that will be the backbone of the upcoming deployment.

After two weeks at sea, the squadron returned home, eager to embrace holiday leave but refusing to coast, using the three-day window before

Christmas leave to earn LT Caleb “Scarebear” Hiller his SFWT Level IV qualification. Over the holidays, the *Gunslinger* family took a necessary exhale after a rigorous yearlong work-up cycle to celebrate time with loved ones. However, VFA-105 remained lethal, incorporating dissimilar aircraft combat training with Air Force F-22 *Raptors*, underscoring the squadron’s commitment to integration and mission to cultivate well-rounded, lethal warfighters.

We ushered in the New Year with a mix of excitement and bittersweet emotions, welcoming LT Henry Kesting to the ranks while bidding farewell to beloved squadronmates LCDR Jeffrey “Marv” Davis, LT Matthew “Pool Boy” Baugh and CWO3 Antonio “Gus” Moore. We celebrated the contributions of these departing members in true *Gunslinger* fashion with a successful ruse to greenlight CDR Joel “FAIDS” Nogle’s house for a night of camaraderie and sea stories. Thank you, Skipper and your family, for putting up with the squadron’s antics! The legacy left by these members will continue to shape VFA-105 into the formidable fighting squadron they helped build.

January continued with preparations for COMPTUEX, the Navy’s intensive, multi-week certification exercise for the entire strike group. The *Gunslingers* also persisted in our focus on executing SFWT syllabus events, reinforcing the sound fighter execution that is the foundational element of Naval Aviation lethality. The squadron is relentless in its pursuit of excellence across all facets of warfighting and is ready to answer the nation’s call once again. Tonight ... We Ride!



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The VAW VRC VUQ Foundation hosted a Community Admin and a Community Brunch at Tailhook 2025. The Foundation also hosted a community symposium in conjunction with the East Coast Ball and the Community Ball on the West Coast. All events were successful with positive feedback from the Active Duty Community, our Corporate Members and Individual Members despite the Government Shutdown. The Foundation is working with the Active Duty Community to help plan C2 Sundown events, Tailhook 2026 and the Balls on both Coasts. For more information on the Foundation please go to the Foundation Website at VAW VRC VUQ Foundation.

Courtesy of VFA-105



VFA-105 assembles to celebrate LT Matthew “Pool Boy” Baugh’s final flight with the Gunslingers.



A VFA-213 Fighting Blacklions F/A-18F Super Hornet taxis on the flight deck of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) underway in the Caribbean Sea while supporting U.S. Southern Command tasking, 4 Feb '26.

CVW-8



CVN 78



USS Gerald R. Ford
CAPT David Skarosi



CVW-8
CAPT Jacob Rose

VFA-213 WORLD-FAMOUS FIGHTING BLACKLIONS

by LT Andrew "Magnum G.I." Pellistri, USN

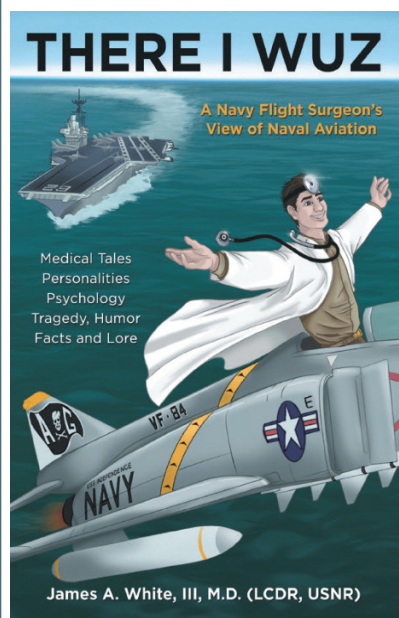
The World-Famous Fighting Blacklions have had a very eventful deployment on board USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78). The JOPA curated electric vibes across the globe from the European port calls of France, Norway, Spain and Croatia to the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea in St. Thomas, V.I. However, the Blacklions have always kept our tactical execution at the forefront. Dry suits abounded, we executed dissimilar air combat training with Norwegian F-35A Lightning IIs, close air support with Norwegian Joint terminal attack controllers and conducted strategic deterrence operations in the High North.

In late October, we received orders to head west to U.S. Fourth Fleet for enhanced counternarcotics operations. When the call to execute came, the Blacklions were once again at the tip of the spear, serving in multiple team lead roles throughout Operation Absolute Resolve and now Operation Epic Fury. This accomplishment was only possible through the relentless efforts of the maintenance department that worked day and night to ensure all aircraft were full mission capable.

VFA-31 TOMCATTERS

by LT Tommy "FOFO" Brophy, USN

The pilots of VFA-31, better known recently as the "Pilots of the Caribbean," have been busy since our last update, visiting Caribbean islands, pirating ships, stealing dictators and changing regimes before heading back across the Atlantic for Operation Epic Fury.



"Great read, unusual in that Navy Flight Surgeons seldom comment on life on the carriers. Superbly written...another perspective of Navy Life at sea and a doctor's wonderful memoirs!"

- Warm Regards, Captain Dan A. Pedersen (USN, Retired), Founder of the "TOPGUN" Navy Fighter Weapons School in 1969 and Skipper of USS Ranger (CV-61) in 1982.

Also, an excellent overview for family and friends of Naval Aviators: life on a carrier, the culture of naval aviation, challenges and rewards, physical risks and emotional stresses, deployment, etc... giving non-aviator readers a feeling of being there.

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The rumors of a Fourth Fleet cruise finally became a reality as Team Felix (tactical callsign) and Ford transited from our home away from home in the Mediterranean to the Caribbean. On one of our many no-fly days during the transatlantic voyage, we earned Top Hook for the second line period after putting up a blistering 3.93 GPA and an astonishing 97 percent boarding rate. Not only are Felix pilots tactical savants, but we also fly "rails" passes — Paddles' words, not mine. The target wire shivers when Felix rolls out in the groove. The one exception is when XO "Lemur" is behind the boat, in which case the 1-wire starts to quiver in fear (Ford is a 3-wire boat for all you 4-wire Nimitz-class flyers).

After entering the Caribbean, we immediately started flying daily defensive counter air combat air patrols and precision-guided munition flights. Morale was high. Even the Air Force and Marines could not kill our vibes. We were on East Coast time, chatting with our families on blazing fast Wi-Fi (thanks Starlink) and catching every NFL game we cared to watch. What more could we want? Fast forward two months and the JOs hadn't touched a strike fighter weapons and tactics event in recent memory, the department heads had flown enough tanker hours to get their airline qualifications and morale was dangerously low after our second 24-hour, Alert 15 in a week. How did we fix this problem you ask? Insert a Caribbean port call and rumors of a big, secret operation.

We started with a lovely St. Thomas port call in the sunny, 75-degree December weather while our families back home froze. Turns out, a fruity drink on a beach can cure most anything. Again, hold your sympathy.

Upon our return, we immediately started throwing ourselves into Absolute Resolve. After weeks of planning and waiting, uploading ordnance only to download it and spooling up to spool down, the day finally arrived. CVW-8 crushed it. Watching the plan come together was awe-inspiring to say the least. We can't thank our maintenance team enough for keeping all our jets in tip top shape, "Team Red" for moving

thousands of pounds of ordnance daily for weeks, and our three-person squadron duty officer rotation for each spool up. We showed the world how lethal an aircraft carrier can be. That should have been enough to validate sortie generation rate and get Ford to come home on time, right? RIGHT?? Well, news of our extension hit the ready room, and everyone was upset except for Skipper "STORC," who believes that "the absence of hope is a good thing." Thanks, sir.

In the meantime, the carrier stole (or repurposed) every single Venezuelan oil tanker that even sniffed the Caribbean. We had to give the helo bubbas some love, I guess. Our second St. Thomas port call was so nice we got to do it twice. While we were there we received "Integrity at the Helm," the coded message announcing our extension, a true stroke of social media genius.

It hasn't been all fun and games, as we've had to say goodbye to some of our beloved Felix family. LCDR Graham "Bones" Stapleton, after extending to help keep us the most tactical squadron in the air wing, much to his wife's chagrin, will be heading to a Joint job in Germany. Have a stein or 12 for us. LT Christopher "Supperman" Wright, after being recognized as the best JO in CVW-8, will be heading to NAS Fallon. Also, LT Ruben "Slappy" Hays will be leaving us to go nerd out with the VX-9 Vampires. Godspeed. Lastly, our beloved and famed Gunner Rooney will be leaving us for a well-earned shore tour at NAS Sigonella, Italy. We have refilled our ranks with one LT Ben "Ken Belly" Kelly and are excited to see what he can bring to the squadron. For all our sakes, I hope he brings some Zyn for Skipper STORC.

Hopefully, weary Felix pilots will be allowed to come home in the coming months to be met by not only our families, but a well-deserved maintenance phase. Until then we will keep flying whatever comes our way, and every JO pilot will be playing the "who gets a fly-off spot" game. As always, Felix Rules!



MC2 Tajh Payne, USN



Felix seems to peek over the wingtip as a VFA-31 Tomcatters F/A-18E recovers aboard Gerald R. Ford underway in the Caribbean Sea on 17 Jan '26.

LT Alex "Michael JackZyn" Petroy pictured in a VFA-151 Super Hornet overhead Wake Atoll on 7 Dec '25, the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The day after that momentous event that drew the United States into World War II, Japanese aircraft attacked Wake, the first blow of the battle for the remote Pacific outpost.



CVW-9



CVN 72



USS Abraham Lincoln
CAPT Daniel J. Keeler



CVW-9
CAPT William Frank

VFA-151 VIGILANTES

by LT Alex "Michael JackZyn" Petroy, USN

The Vigilantes are at sea! When last we left off, the officers and Sailors of VFA-151 were completing final preparations for our 2025-'26 deployment. We are now hard at work on board USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72), staying unpredictable in the U.S. Fifth Fleet area of responsibility.

Getting underway proved more challenging than expected as the carrier worked to get its reactors in fighting shape. After a pleasant weekend in San Diego, the Vigis were ready to tackle carrier qualification (CQ), which went off without a hitch. Upon arriving aboard, we were treated to a Lincoln welcome of refreshingly cold showers.

With CQ complete, we were ready to hit the ground running with flight operations. Unfortunately, the vagaries of logistics and schedule precluded us from maintaining the level of proficiency we desired. A handful of fly days around Hawaii helped break up the monotony, but before we knew it, we were settling in for another stretch of no-fly days as we steamed west.

Following a near interminable transit, its high points including flights around Wake Atoll Island on the anniversary of the Japanese attack on

Pearl Harbor, Lincoln and CVW-9 arrived in Guam for our first "port call" of deployment. We were constrained to a tight timeline, but fortunately LT Greg "Splash Bang" Sheryll was already on the scene to prepare for our arrival, a silver lining of his delayed departure from NAS Lemoore. After an all too brief stop, we were underway again, headed for the South China Sea.

Our time on station there was busy. From standing alerts to some strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) training, the Vigilantes were not idle. LCDR Justin "Count Chocula" Lamascus was instrumental in protecting the strike group, launching on two separate alerts to intercept marauding People's Liberation Army Air Force aircraft. Splash Bang was put to work following his late arrival, steadily progressing through SFWT Level III training.

Spending the holidays underway is always tough but ours were made better by the concerted efforts of the spouses, who provided decorations and snacks that brought holiday cheer to the ready room. Thank you, Vigi spouses! Welcoming in the New Year was quite exciting. The ship hosted a party in the hangar bay that turned into a raucous affair that could be heard all the way up on the 03 level.

Other highlights of deployment include the Sailors of VFA-151 progressing through their training and qualifications. We are proud of their efforts and enjoy celebrating their accomplishments. The Enlisted Leader Development graduations have been particularly rewarding. Bravo Zulu to all the Vigilante Sailors for their hard work so far.

We would be remiss if we didn't also give a shout out to one member of Lincoln's crew for his tireless efforts to raise morale. CAPT Fathom, the resident service dog, stopped by the ready room for a visit and instantly improved the mood of all present. His job is one of the toughest on board and we are grateful for his service.

Now we are all looking forward to our first real port call in Manila. Until then, you can find the Vigilantes standing the watch in the skies over the South China Sea, ready for anything that comes our way ... Well, plans changed. See you at Hook (we hope).
Fight Ugly!

AWF1 Christopher Martinez conducts a safety check on board a VRM-50 Sunhawks CMV-22B Osprey on the flight deck of USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) underway in the Pacific Ocean, 26 Jan '26.



CVW-11



CVN 71



USS Theodore Roosevelt
CAPT Will Mathis



CVW-11
CAPT Chad Heirigs

TEAM BARBWIRE

by LCDR Charlie "Booby" May, USN

Team Barbwire (tactical callsign) returned from the holidays and hit the ground running. In January, the CVW-11 team converged on Nevada for Air Wing Fallon (AWF), honing our skills in advanced tactics to better distribute lethality if called upon. The desert was a great opportunity for the warriors of CVW-11 to hone their tactical warfighting prowess as well as their skills on the beer die table. Following four weeks of intense training, CVW-11 elements spent one more week at NAS Fallon learning fleet air defense tactics at the Integrated Air Defense Course.

February saw CVW-11 wish fair winds and following seas to CDR Jason "Droid" Harrel of the VFA-154 Black Knights and CDR Ian "Turd" Gill of the HSC-8 Eightballers as they completed their command tours and turned over their squadrons to CDRs John "Zima" Puckett and Adam "Shaggy" Shields, respectively.

In March, Team Barbwire readied for our Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX). Squadrons spent time flying field carrier

landing practice in preparation for returning to the carrier environment. COMPTUEX is the last step in CVW-11's work-up cycle in preparation for the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise and deployment later this year.

Team Barbwire will spend one month at sea combining all the training and lessons learned over the past year, doing our part to earn the USS Theodore Roosevelt Strike Group its Blue Water Certification in order to fight with speed and violence anywhere on Earth.

VFA-154 BLACK KNIGHTS

by LT Felipe "ICEE" Molina, USN

In August 2025, the VFA-154 Black Knights took to the skies over NAS Lemoore to begin the air-to-air Strike Fighter Advanced Readiness Program. Aircrew came prepared with the latest tactics to fight any threat as we look to secure the skies throughout the world. Not only did the Black Knights show professionalism, but we also acted with confidence and clarity in executing the tactics. At the same time, multiple aircrew earned their SFWT Level III and IV qualifications, showcasing an increased level of preparation, execution and commitment to the legacy of Naval Aviation.

After completing some work ups in Lemoore, the squadron took the jets north over the Sierra Nevada and found ourselves in Fallon for two weeks. This provided the squadron with a unique training environment, giving our aviators the opportunity to fight against some of the fleet's most experienced instructors and Red Air. This allowed aircrew to gain proficiency in suppression of enemy air defenses, close air support and maritime employments under Strike Fighter Weapons School Pacific instruction. Aircrew eagerly took to the skies with HARM (High-speed Anti-Radiation Missile) and AARGM (Advanced Anti-radiation Guided Missile) captive air training missiles strapped to their jets, effectively suppressing and destroying notional surface-to-air missile threats across Fallon's vast ranges.





A VFA-154 Black Knights F/A-18F roars through the rugged terrain of the "Sidewinder" low-level training route in Nov '25.

Closer to the desert floor, the *Black Knights* honed our trigger fingers, employing over 4,000 rounds of 20 mm during numerous gun strafes, and pockmarking the B-20 range with multiple live Mk 81/82 and laser-guided bombs (LGBs) and laser-guided training rounds (LGTRs).

Fast forwarding to October 2025, the squadron set its sights on Tailored Ship's Training Availability (TSTA) and Group Sail. Four weeks on board *Theodore Roosevelt* were highlighted by flight operations in the Pacific Ocean. Once more, the *Black Knights* showed expertise by executing flight operations with all types of sorties during all-weather operations, large-force exercises and even emergency scenarios. Aircrew expended over 3,000 rounds of 20 mm, and employed general-purpose bombs, Joint Direct Attack Munitions, LGBs and LGTRs. All the hard work paid off, and the *Black Knights* seized the opportunity to spend a port call together in San Diego, a much-needed break after tough weeks at sea. Accommodations were secured and we proved to CVW-11 once again that we work hard and party hard.

During January and February 2026, AWF provided us with the opportunity to strengthen our partnership with other squadrons in CVW-11. Integration allowed us to see the full potential and the latest

MC3 Aaron Haro Gonzalez, USN



Steam wafts across the deck of Theodore Roosevelt as a VFA-86 Sidewinders F-35C Lightning II launches from a waist catapult during Tailored Ship's Training Availability in the Pacific on 13 Nov '25.

capabilities of our fellow warfighters, enhancing our strength projection on the battlefield. This gave us the chance to use the latest software updates on the F/A-18F, and most importantly, mark our place on the modern battlefield as we fly alongside fifth-generation fighters. In addition to flights focused on integration, we emphasized our readiness as a squadron, taking to the ranges in Fallon once again to expend a variety of ordnance and munitions.

Even though it is fun to take the F/A-18F to its maximum capabilities, we wanted to take our fighting spirit to Lake Tahoe. From a lake house full of *Black Knights*, Otis and the court, we provided CDR Jason S. Harrell with a proper farewell. CDR Harrell has devoted the best years of his life to the *Black Knights*, nearing the end of his career at the squadron where he first arrived as a JO. His naval service includes graduating from both TOPGUN and the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School. CDR Harrell is not leaving a squadron behind, but a family he helped forge. We also congratulate LCDRs "Pedro!" Montoya and "C-Rob" Andon as they leave the squadron in great shape. During their time with the *Black Knights*, they have ensured all aircrew exceeded the highest standards both in the jet and at the pony races. We wish all of them the best in their future endeavors.

The squadron continues to work on its readiness in preparation for embarking *TR* with the rest of CVW-11 for COMPTUEX and RIMPAC during the spring and summer, followed by deployment toward the end of the year. Whatever challenges lie ahead, regardless of what our adversaries plan, VFA-154 stands ready and committed for battle readiness. The squadron looks forward to bringing reassurance and deterrence to the high seas. BKR!

VFA-86 SIDEWINDERS

by LT Anthony "BIG DOOG the Impaled" Alberico, USN

The VFA-86 *Sidewinders* have maintained a demanding operational tempo, successfully completing four major detachments (dets) since October 2025 to finalize preparations for our upcoming deployment with CVW-11 on board USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71).

In September, the squadron executed a short-notice det to NAS Fallon for the Integrated Advanced Readiness Program with CVW-11. The entire squadron mobilized and achieved a flawless 100 percent sortie completion rate, providing invaluable training for both pilots and maintainers.

Demonstrating our agility once more, the *Winders* quickly responded to another immediate tasking by sending five F-35Cs and 83 personnel to NAS Oceana for the Navy and Marine Corps 250th Birthday celebration on board USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77). This event provided a prominent stage to demonstrate the Joint Strike Fighter's impressive performance capabilities as part of a massive display of naval air and sea power.

Following these two shore dets, the squadron shifted its focus to safe and effective operations in the carrier environment. The *Sidewinders* embarked *TR* at NAS North Island for TSTA. From October through November, we operated at sea with the full complement of CVW-11, honing critical skills in air wing integration, complex mission planning and demanding carrier operations followed by a brief San Diego port call after an arduous period at sea. After the successful completion of TSTA, the squadron returned home for a well-deserved period of rest over the holidays.

The *Sidewinders* began the new year by welcoming a new department head, LCDR Trent "Dangi" Fridono, before immediately launching into preparations for AWF, a crucial evolution to prepare for the high-end fight and sharpen the edge of fifth-generation strike fighter tactics. While in the desert, the squadron bid a fond farewell to a legend of the F-35 community, LCDR Zach "Jerry" Williams, and welcomed LT Ryan "Mr. Hong" Turner.

With AWF complete, the squadron sent two LSOs to Initial Formal Ground Training and began final preparations for COMPUTEX. The *Sidewinders* are poised and ready for the challenges ahead as we enter the final phase of our work-up cycle and prepare for deployment — 86 'EM!

YEAR OF THE FIST PLUS ONE

by LT Joseph "Mango Fingers" Merkel, USN

Goodbye Year of the *Fist*. We had fun, but even the good times eventually end. Just memories of crawling out of maintenance phase,

cold starting the work-up cycle, beating up the flight deck of *Theodore Roosevelt*, employing live ordnance and championing BFM Derby '25 remain for the most significant 12 months of the century.

Over the last year, our 15-pilot squadron saw 11 pilots cycle out in exchange for nine new ones. Since our last article, we finished TSTA and fielded jets with a distinguished sortie rate before heading home for the holidays. We dropped dozens of live and inert ordnance, shot 1,600 rounds of 20 mm and released hundreds of chaff and flares.

But now we are into the Year of the *Fist Plus One*! Spinning back up after the break was a good, albeit not a long, time to recage for AWF. To shake up the roster again, the JO Jungle subtracted one from its ranks, LT Sean "The Goomah" Garrahan, to support the VFA-195 *Dambusters* in Japan. To maintain equilibrium, the department heads sent LCDR Rajiv "Strokes" Stone to Hawaii. After adjusting weight, the *Fists* touched down in Fallon, greeted by 15-degree temperatures and the sound of fighter aircraft echoing from the Fallon Range Training Complex.

It's difficult to look much further beyond AWF with how busy the training is here, but then again, the rest of the Year of the *Fist Plus One* will be equally busy. A couple of months after wrapping up AWF we will return to *TR* for COMPTUEX, then soon head back out for RIMPAC. At last, with our sea legs warmed up, the *Fist of the Fleet* will be primed and ready for cruise. *Fist 'em!*



Below: The VFA-25 skipper's assigned F/A-18E Super Hornet pictured during a recent flight, the tail noting the Fist of the Fleet's history dating to 1943 when the squadron was established as VT-17 flying TBF Avenger torpedo bombers.

Courtesy of VFA-25





CAG-17 CAPT Brent "Bob" Jaquith, second from left, celebrates his 1,000th trap after recovering aboard USS Nimitz (CVN 68) in a VFA-22 Fighting Redcocks F/A-18F, 22 Sep '25.

CVW-17   **CVN 68**

 **USS Nimitz**
CAPT Joseph Furco

 CVW-17
CAPT Brent Jaquith

THE LAST LAUGH: CAG'S THOUSANDTH TRAP AND NIMITZ'S FINAL FULL AIR WING FO'C'SLE FOLLY

by LCDR Colin "Safari" Howell, USN

After four extensions and nine demanding months at sea, *Team Quicksand* (tactical callsign) concluded a historic 2025 deployment spanning two major theaters, ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific region and conducting combat operations in *Fifth Fleet*. The deployment was defined by operational excellence, flexibility under pressure and a relentless commitment to mission, the hallmarks of CVW-17. In early December, the air wing flew off, and by mid-December USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) pulled into Bremerton, Wash., closing the log on a deployment that was as challenging as it was deeply meaningful for all hands.

While underway, *Nimitz* celebrated her 50th anniversary, a milestone few warships ever reach. For half a century, *Old Salt* (tactical callsign) has projected power, deterred adversaries and served as home to generations of Sailors and aviators. CVW-17 was honored to be on board for that golden anniversary, adding its own chapter to the ship's storied legacy.

On 22 September 2025, CAG CAPT Brent "Bob" Jaquith completed his 1,000th arrested landing in the VFA-22 *Fighting Redcocks'* CAG bird. Though he admitted it is a minor miracle he's still able to get in and out of the jet at his age, he asserted that more impressive is the effort and dedication of countless Sailors he has served with over the years who ensured he got airborne and recovered safely every time.

Among the many memorable moments of the deployment, the final full air wing Fo'c'sle Follies served as a capstone to the cruise. Long a tradition of Naval Aviation, it served as a rare moment for *Team Quicksand* and *Old Salt* to come together with humor, creativity and camaraderie to celebrate accomplishments and blow off steam after months of hard work. This deployment's Follies were especially significant as it was the last time an entire air wing would gather for the tradition on board *Nimitz*.

As *Team Quicksand* filled the fo'c'sle, laughter bounced off bulkheads that had seen it all. With over 350,000 arrested landings and 50 years witnessed by the steel around air wing personnel, it was impossible not to feel the weight of history. The space itself felt like a living archive marked by generations who endured the same demands of the sea and found the same relief in shared humor, year after year. *Team Quicksand* did not disappoint.

The final full air wing Follies captured everything that defines Naval Aviation culture — sharp wit, self-deprecation, irreverence and pride. It was a reminder that even during a difficult and extended deployment, the air wing never lost its sense of humor or its connection to each other. The show served not only as entertainment, but a celebration of what the team accomplished together. The VFA-146 *Blue Diamonds* had the distinction of being the final squadron awarded Top Hook honors and CDR Tony "Dirty" Kopp, skipper of the VFA-137 *Kestrels*, took home the final individual Top Hook.

As CVW-17 prepares to go aboard one last time, the focus now turns to the ship's final journey. After a brief in-port period and some well-deserved time at home, *Nimitz's* final sail will take her around Cape Horn



Team Quicksand assembled for the final full air wing Fo'c'sle Follies in Nimitz's half century of service.

en route to Norfolk, perhaps the last operational chapter for the longest-serving aircraft carrier in the fleet. *Team Quicksand* is proud to be a part of that.

From combat operations to historic anniversaries, from relentless flight operations to one last night of laughter on the fo'c'sle, CVW-17 and *Nimitz* stood the watch together. As the ship heads out for her final voyage, one thing is certain. The legacy of *Nimitz* lives on in the Sailors and aviators who called her home. *Team Quicksand* and *Old Salt* are ready for the last sail.

VFA-137 KESTRELS

by LT Patrick "POPTART" Hesse, USN

Kestrels reporting from NAS Lemoore! We flew off *Nimitz* on 5 December 2025, and plugged the burners to return to our families! After a quick week of post overseas movement (POM) leave, the squadron went back to work to prepare for our spring cruise around the horn to bring *Old Salt* to Norfolk.

The end of this deployment brought a few changes to the *Kestrel* ready room. LTs Christian "Snake-Eye" Reed, Anthony "Pastatute" Mastroluca, Dallas "Disco Biff" Burke and CWO3 Leon "Red" Shields have begun new chapters in their naval careers. Snake-Eye left shortly before the end of deployment to check into Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic, and more importantly to meet his newborn son. Pasta will arrive at U.S. Naval Test Pilot School before this article publishes,

and Disco will continue his journey when he checks in at TOPGUN. Red has taken the short walk across the street to NAS Lemoore Search and Rescue (SAR). A huge thank you to our recently departed *Kestrels* for the leadership and morale boost you consistently brought to the squadron! We will miss you and look forward to seeing you again at Hook '26 in the fall! The squadron welcomed two new officers to the ready room, one brave fledgling from the VFA-122 *Flying Eagles*, LT Nate "Fiona" Titus, and our newest ground pounder, LT Jacob Grzech, coming to us from NAS Lemoore SAR.

We are excited to go aboard *Nimitz* once again, but until then the *Kestrels* will enjoy flying feet dry!

ROARING INTO THE NEW YEAR

by LT Tyler "FNG" Nemeth, USN

Trading the relentless heat of the Middle East for the welcome chill of the Pacific Northwest, the VAQ-139 *Cougars* have returned home. After a demanding deployment, the squadron touched down at NAS Whidbey Island on 7 December 2025, just in time for the holidays. The well-deserved break allowed the *Cougars* to reconnect with family and friends, strengthening the home front support that is vital to operational readiness.

The squadron is excited to welcome its newest aircrew, LCDR Brianna "POPS" Bilunas and LT Alex "Jekyll" Anicetti. POPS joined the team mid-deployment, flying out to meet us in the middle of the Pacific and bringing fresh enthusiasm to the ready room.

MC2 Jaron Wills, USN



A VFA-137 Kestrels F/A-18E Super Hornet recovers aboard Nimitz as she operates in the South China Sea on her final deployment, 20 Oct '25.



Flanked by squadron EA-18Gs, the VAQ-139 Cougars gather for a group photograph in front of the island of Old Salt.

She brings years of Joint electronic attack experience to the squadron, having integrated with Air Force and Coalition assets in her previous tours. Jekyll, the squadron's new training officer, will provide high-level training and fleet standardization to the *Cougars*.

The ready room bids a hearty farewell to LCDR Kyle "CLAM" Crowder, whose tireless dedication to *Cougar* excellence will be a great asset in his next assignment as the Director of Training at the Electronic Attack Weapons School.

The recent deployment tested the squadron's mettle and the Sailors of VAQ-139 rose to every challenge. They worked through long days and hot weather to ensure the mission was accomplished with professionalism and unmatched skill. Their ability to adapt and overcome kept spirits high and ensured mission success, no matter the obstacle. The team now shifts its focus to the next major tasking, supporting *Nimitz* on her final operational deployment around South America.

This upcoming voyage is not just another deployment, but a significant closing chapter in Naval Aviation history, and the *Cougars* are proud to be a part of it. The integration with *Nimitz* and *Carrier Strike Group Eleven* (CSG-11) will see the squadron once again proving its ability to operate in challenging environments and austere conditions.

As VAQ-139 prepares to answer the call, the squadron stands ready for this unique mission. The ability to transition rapidly from a demanding deployment to this historic repositioning is a clear reflection of our spirit and professionalism. We are eager to support *Old Salt* on her final journey, continuing our legacy of excellence on the world stage.

VAW-121 BLUETAILED

by LT Alexander "FNG" Peralta, USN

The nation's finest airborne command & control squadron, the VAW-121 *Bluetails*, launched off *Nimitz* in early December to begin our nearly 3,000 nautical mile journey home following deployment. The aircrews made stops at NAF El Centro, Roswell, N.M. and St. Louis before landing at NavSta Norfolk. A cross-country of this magnitude is no easy feat for one E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye*, let alone a squadron's worth. Senior JOs LTs Alex "Mojo Jojo" Beyer and Andrew "Pwe Miss" Holt led the way on planning fuel stops, ground support equipment, food and lodging for our return to home port. The families welcomed everyone with open arms, teary eyes and plenty of love after a long deployment.

Since returning home, the squadron executed two POM leave periods and reintegrated back into ashore lifestyle with many of our members taking trips to places like Miami, Connecticut, Lake Tahoe, Las Vegas and other locales around the country. Two of our aircrew even spent most of their deployment savings on purchasing Suzuki Jimnys!

However, our time ashore hasn't just been all POM and traveling. The squadron recently sent one E-2D for a software upgrade and several

aircrew are working their "bluetails" off. LT Alex "Mojo Jojo" Beyer successfully passed his Air Combat Training Continuum Level IV check ride, fully qualifying as an E-2D Element Lead for various tactical mission sets. He will be attending the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School at NAS Patuxent River. LT Dalton "BRITTNI" Demartini will be heading to TOPGUN to go through the rigorous Air Intercept Controller course. LT Keegan "Festus" Driscoll was recently accepted into the Marine Aviation Weapons & Tactics Squadron course. LTs Mitchell "Whangman" Felt and Dan "LibRA" Kohlman will both attend the LSO School in January. In addition to celebrating the accomplishments of these *Bluetail* aircrew, the squadron recently welcomed LTJG Lee "Munk" Smith and LT Salvador "K-Chainz" Ciolino at recent callsign review boards.

In January, the *Bluetails* began extensive training in preparation for cruising the southern seas on board *Nimitz*. Aircrew conducted aerial refueling training with an Omega Air KC-707 aircraft, trained comprehensively in E-2D simulators, provided air intercept control for the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Marine Corps as part of *Atlantic Lightning* and conducted field carrier landing practice at NALF Fentress and NASA's Wallops Flight Facility. The *Bluetails* are excited to be back aboard *Nimitz* exploring a new area of operations and the many port calls that will bring!

MC2 Caylen McCutcheon, USN



An E-2D Advanced Hawkeye assigned to the VAW-121 *Bluetails* launches off a waist catapult on board *Nimitz* during the CVW-17 flyoff as the carrier returned home from her final deployment, 5 Dec '25.

HSC-6 INDIANS DELIVER DURING NIMITZ'S FINAL DEPLOYMENT

by LT Eric "HICCUP" Rosdahl, USN

In 2025, the HSC-6 *Indians* embarked *Nimitz* for the carrier's final operational deployment. What unfolded over nearly nine months at sea was far more than a routine Western Pacific (WESTPAC) deployment. It was a dynamic, threat-responsive underway spanning most of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) areas of responsibility and underscoring the expanding role of rotary-wing integration in modern maritime operations.

HSC-6 supported CSG-11 and CVW-17 across the full spectrum of helicopter sea combat missions. From March to December, the squadron flew over 2,000 hours, transported more than 2 million pounds of cargo, conducted medical evacuations, search and rescue (SAR), logistics, vertical replenishment (VERTREP), aerial surveillance and reconnaissance (ASR), rotary-wing defensive counter air, combat search and rescue (CSAR), and a first of its kind organic maritime interdiction operation (MIO).

From the outset, the *Indians* served as the logistical backbone of the strike group. In the expanse of USINDOPACOM through persistent logistics and VERTREP operations, the squadron moved critical parts, ordnance, mail and personnel between the carrier and its escorts, ensuring combat capability never slowed.

In May, HSC-6 expanded its expeditionary profile during *Balikatan 2025* in the Philippines, conducting casualty evacuation and live close-air-support training alongside U.S. Marine Corps Joint terminal attack controllers and Philippine Air Force 710th Special Operations Wing combat air controllers. The squadron became the first carrier air wing rotary-wing unit to participate in this iteration of the exercise, highlighting the increasing integration of HSC platforms into Joint operations ashore.

After two and a half months in *U.S. Seventh Fleet*, CSG-11 received new orders and rapidly repositioned to *Fifth Fleet*. The shift from stability operations in WESTPAC to armed high tempo contingency operations in the Middle East marked an immediate change in CVW-17's posture.

Alert launches became routine. Low, slow flyer intercepts increased and HSC-6 crews frequently launched to intercept unidentified aircraft and escort unmanned aerial systems, preventing unescorted overflight of the carrier. As one of the most responsive airborne assets in the air wing, the *Indians* were often the first off deck, providing immediate security for the strike group. During *Fifth Fleet* operations, HSC-6 logged nearly

500 hours of ASR, delivering 24-hour surveillance, escort and deterrence alongside its HSM counterparts.

Operating in some of the world's most strategic waterways, the squadron supported multiple Surface Action Group (SAG) transits through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and multiple CSG-11 transits through the Strait of Hormuz, the first such strike group movements through the strait in over a year and amid heightened regional tensions. Each transit required layered domain awareness and rapid response capability.

CSAR added another layer of complexity. By staging aircraft forward of the strike group with guided-missile destroyers, HSC-6 extended CSAR coverage deeper into contested waters while maintaining carrier-based commitments. Two squadron pilots deployed forward to the CENTCOM Combined Air Operations Center, ensuring CVW capabilities were fully integrated into theater-level planning, execution and Joint personnel recovery coordination.

Operations in the North Arabian Gulf tested both aircraft and Sailors. Extreme heat affected performance and maintenance cycles, demanding sustained effort across every department. Despite limited port calls, Bahrain and Dubai offered rare moments of rest, and the squadron maintained high readiness throughout a deployment defined by persistent alert status. It offered Sailors unique port visits not seen by a carrier in over five years.

In the closing months of deployment, the *Indians* and our MH-60 brethren, the HSM-73 *Battlecats*, executed helicopter visit, board, search and seizure during a MIO in support of major contingency operations. This Joint operation demonstrated the expanding operational reach of the HSC community, and it was the first time this mission set was executed with assets 100 percent organic to the air wing and with almost every service component in theater.

Across two fleets and multiple mission sets, HSC-6 demonstrated the continually evolving capabilities of the HSC community. The *Indians* sustained the strike group, integrated seamlessly with Joint and allied partners, adapted rapidly to a shifting operational environment, and delivered persistent maritime security.

As *Nimitz* completed her final operational deployment, HSC-6 ensured this chapter of her service reflected the very best of Naval Aviation with flexibility, responsiveness and unwavering readiness.

From WESTPAC to the Arabian Gulf, the "Tribe" answered every call and became known as the workhorses of the air wing, living under the mantra of "Rescue, Protect, Deliver."



MC2 Jaron Wills, USN



Members of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 11 fast rope out of an HSC-6 *Indians* MH-60S Seahawk during a training evolution on the flight deck of *Nimitz* operating in the U.S. Seventh Fleet area of responsibility, 13 Apr '25.

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AROUND THE FLEET

Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic personnel assembled in front of the tools of their trade on board NAS Oceana.

STRIKE FIGHTER WING ATLANTIC: MAN, TRAIN AND EQUIP

by LT Chandalar "CHAD" Pensley, USN

Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic (SFWL) is the behind-the-scenes organization that gives East Coast strike fighter squadrons the tools they need to be ready to fight. While squadrons execute the mission on the flight line and at sea, SFWL provides the administrative, maintenance and material support that makes sustained combat readiness possible. The wing synchronizes resources across the flight line to ensure squadrons have what they need when they need it. SFWL facilitates the decidedly unglamorous but essential work of scheduling airspace and airfields, developing and installing simulator training capabilities, all while acting as a liaison for additional taskings. The maintenance team oversees the health and material readiness of more than 240 F/A-18E/F Super Hornets assigned to 15 strike fighter squadrons across four CVWs.

This past year, SFWL bid farewell to CAPT Chris "Meat" Dentzer and welcomed CAPT Eric "Drag" McQueen to lead the wing through its diverse missions. SFWL supported numerous high-visibility flyovers, from America's Navy 250 celebration to the Ryder Cup, all in the interest of keeping morale high and golf scores low. Beyond flyovers, the wing inspired the next generation of aviators by running an annual summer training program. This enabled more than 700 midshipmen to fly, and only occasionally puke, in the T-34C Turbo Mentor, fondly known as the "Dawg."

In addition to supporting robust live flight operations, SFWL enhanced virtual capabilities by developing and implementing advanced simulator builds. To support increased training realism and augment live training opportunities, the wing brought Link Inject-to-Live expeditionary capabilities to air wings at sea.

To keep the physical jets in fighting condition, the maintenance team coordinated and executed more than a dozen planned maintenance intervals, managed thousands of in-service repairs and led the integration of well over 100 depot-level modifications and technical directives. These efforts directly resulted in 137 mission capable aircraft and 94 full mission capable aircraft that flew more than 16,000 safe flight hours in support of training and operational commitments.

As squadron requirements shifted throughout the work-up cycle, SFWL orchestrated 45 aircraft transfers in the past year to ensure deploying units remained fully equipped and combat ready. The wing conducted multiple pre- and post-deployment Material Condition Inspections to ensure aircraft met the highest standards no matter the conditions to which they were exposed. At the same time, Naval Aviation Maintenance Center of Excellence (NAMCE) Oceana supported long-term fleet viability by

completing numerous Pre-Service Life Modifications. NAMCE delivered 16 jets to depot-level facilities to undergo the process to extend Super Hornet service life to 10,000 flight hours and deliver enhanced Block III capability to the fleet.

SFWL is truly in the business of customer service, supporting squadrons to operate at the highest possible level. Give us a ring if you need anything!

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35 for 35: VA-35 Veterans Gather to Commemorate Operation Desert Storm

by Eric Smallwood



VA-35 Black Panthers aircrew on the flight deck of USS Saratoga (CV 60), 1991.

This past January, the men of the VA-35 *Black Panthers* and their families gathered in Pensacola to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the beginning of *Operation Desert Storm*.

On 17 January 1991, the squadron was part of CVW-17 on board USS *Saratoga* (CV 60) in the Red Sea, the ship having been underway since 7 August 1990, when she departed NavSta Mayport at the beginning of *Operation Desert Shield*. The squadron's A-6E *Intruders* launched from the carrier at 0110 and headed to key targets near Baghdad. Over the next 43 days and nights, the *Rayguns* (tactical callsign) flew more than 400 combat sorties, carrying over 1.7 million pounds of ordnance, leading to the liberation of Kuwait.

The festivities kicked off with a Friday night flight jacket reception at the Mustin Beach Club on board NAS Pensacola. The base commanding officer, CAPT Chandra "MamaSan" Newman, started the evening off with a welcome message during this 200th anniversary of the base. The night's keynote speaker was CDR Mike "Gunnar" Menth, USN(Ret), the VA-35 executive officer in 1990-'91, who recounted the early days of *Desert Shield*, the Coalition build-up in Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea, and the successful *Desert Storm* missions to free Kuwait.

The second night, the squadron gathered in the *Blue Angel* Atrium at the National Naval Aviation Museum. The *Rayguns* dined under the suspended A-4 *Skyhawks* flown by the Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron, surrounded by historic airplanes from Naval Aviation history. The evening included an invocational memorial to those VA-35 family members who have been lost over the past few years, and a POW/MIA tribute led by former POWs Robert Wetzel and Jeff Zaun. Prior to dinner a "Parade the Beef" ceremony took place accompanied by a bagpiper. Keynote speakers were former CVW-17 DCAG, CAPT Dave "Hoser"

Park, USN(Ret), and the squadron's former CO, CAPT James "Jim Andy" Anderson, USN(Ret). The evening continued with various sea stories and memories from the Gulf War deployment. The weekend concluded with old friendships renewed and looking to the future, maintaining camaraderie that has endured since 1990.

Eric Smallwood



Operation Desert Storm veterans of VA-35 and their families at the Mustin Beach Club on board NAS Pensacola, 16 Jan '26.



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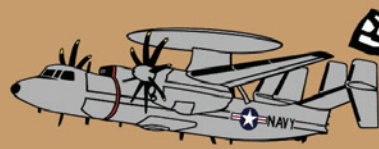
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IN REVIEW

F-14 "Bombcat" - The US Navy's Ultimate Precision Bomber; Tony Holmes; Key Publishing, UK, 2025; hardcover, 384 pages, illustrated. \$62.00



Author Tony Holmes is synonymous with in depth, high-quality writings on U.S. Naval Aviation, some of which has graced the pages of *The Hook* during the last 30 years. His latest effort is a welcome development of a work initially published as a 'bookazine' in 2015. However, this new coffee table book is so much more than a re-issue in a different format.

The book documents Grumman's efforts to turn the "Big Fighter" into a multimission strike aircraft — nicknamed the "Bombcat" — that defined its success during the final 15 years of its U.S. Navy service. Across 12 chapters, the author charts the history of the initial iron bomb days of the early 1990s before describing in exquisite detail the pairing of the Low-Altitude Navigational and Targeting-Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) targeting pod with the F-14. The second half of the book includes comprehensive accounts of the aircraft's combat operations over Iraq and Afghanistan through to retirement in 2006. The book is well illustrated throughout, using a mix of both personal and official imagery.

Tony's writing style makes this publication stand out as a piece of modern military aviation art. His efforts interviewing and featuring the people who developed, maintained and flew the Bombcat, plus those who commanded squadrons in combat, make this book the finest tribute to all of them. With *F-14 "Bombcat"* dedicated to the memory of five of those key people, I hope that those others still with us get to enjoy a great read.

— Mike Crutch

Point Mugu Test Centers: A Pictorial History — Part Two (1975-2002); Angelo Romano; RN Publishing, Novara, Italy, 2025; softcover, 248 pages, illustrated. \$80.00



With the end of World War II, NAAS Ventura County near Oxnard, Calif., was disestablished in February 1946, the Navy moving 10 miles south to establish NAS Point Mugu in October of that year for the purpose of testing guided missiles and air-dropped munitions. In the 80 years since then,

the Pacific Missile Test Center (PMTCC) has evolved through numerous incarnations to become the U.S. Navy's foremost test and development facility and range for a bewildering array of guided missiles, bombs, aerial weapons and electronic warfare systems.

Angelo Romano's *Point Mugu Test Centers: A Pictorial History — Part Two (1975-2002)* is a follow-up to his first volume covering the history of the station during the period 1945-1974. Like that work, Part Two is a comprehensive chronological narrative history of Point Mugu's role in the development and testing of nearly every weapon system evaluated or employed in the post-Vietnam War era of Naval Aviation. The author's year by year description of the aircraft, weapon systems, missiles, target drones and range facilities used during the Center's evolution includes not only the PMTCC, but also Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division (NAWC WD), Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS) Point Mugu, Pacific Missile Range Facility (PMRF) Barking Sands, Kauai, Hawaii, Weapons Test Squadron (WTS) and Naval Weapons Test Squadron (NWTSS) Point Mugu. The volume also covers the plethora of Navy fleet, Reserve and other tenant organizations stationed at various times at Point Mugu, but not necessarily related to PMTCC activities. These include VXE-6, HAL/HCS-5, VP-65, VA/VFA-305, VX-4 and Point Mugu's search and rescue helicopter unit. This includes brief squadron histories as well.

Relying on an army of photographers and utilizing images from many institutions, including the Naval History and Heritage Command, the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, the National Archives, National Naval Aviation Museum and others, Romano has also drawn from his own considerable personal collection to create an impressive, illustrated volume of spectacular color. Coupled with highly informative illustrations of test mission profiles and complete descriptions and photos of every aircraft used at Point Mugu during this period, the volume is a treasure trove of imagery for the historian or scale modeler. As one who lived at PMRF Barking Sands as a teenage Navy dependent between 1968 and 1972 and who witnessed many of the activities on its range during the Vietnam War years, I am gratified to finally see a comprehensive history of it and the larger organization of which it was an integral part.

Angelo Romano's *Point Mugu Test Centers: A Pictorial History — Part Two (1975-2002)* is an indispensable resource for the Naval Aviation historian and enthusiast alike.

— LCDR Kim Sheldon, USN(Ret)



CVW-9 aircraft spotted on the flight deck of USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) while supporting Operation Epic Fury, 28 Feb '26.



RESPOT

Calendar 2025 Year In Review

Compiled by LCDR Richard R. Burgess, USN(Ret), and Tom Kaminski

The following information reflects the official effective or actual dates of action reported. Ceremonial dates may differ from the official dates.

Aviation Units Established

- Mobile Support Unit One (MSU-1), 1 October 2025
- VUP-11, NAS Whidbey Island, Wash., Ceremony 13 November 2025 (Official date 1 October 2024)

- HM-12, NavSta Norfolk, Va., 31 March 2025 (Ceremony 21 March 2025)
- VQ-1, NAS Whidbey Island, 31 March 2025 (Ceremony 28 March 2025)

Aviation Units Reactivated

- VMM-264, MCAS New River, N.C., 11 December 2025

Aviation Units Redesignated

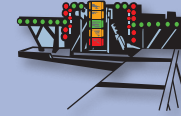
- VMFA(AW)-224, MCAS Beaufort, S.C., redesignated VMFA-224, 26 June 2025

Aviation Units Deactivated

- Detachment II of HM-15, NSA Bahrain, 31 August 2025
- VMA-231, MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., 30 September 2025 (Will be reactivated in Fiscal Year 2026 as VMFA-231)

Aviation Units Relocated

- USS *America* (LHA 6) from Sasebo, Japan, to San Diego, Calif., 25 September 2025
- USS *Tripoli* (LHA 7) from San Diego to Sasebo, 23 June 2025



WAVEOFFS & BOLTERS

What is It?

by Hill Goodspeed

We had many correct entries for this latest installment, one noting that it was a “Christmas present” given the ease of identifying Bell Aircraft Corporation’s XFL-1. The Navy procured a single example of the airplane, assigning it Bureau Number 1588, which fell within 200 numbers of the XF4U-1 *Corsair*. Chance Vought’s submission alongside the XFL-1 and Grumman’s XF5F-1 in response to the Navy’s January 1938 proposal for a new lightweight fighter.

National Naval Aviation Museum



Development of the XFL-1 never got off the ground, the lone example pitted against the prototype of the legendary F4U Corsair.

Assigned the nickname *Airabonita*, which had a nautical flair befitting an airplane for naval purposes, the XFL-1 was a derivative of Bell’s XP-39 *Airacobra* under development for the Army Air Corps. It differed from its cousin in many ways, notably in three-point instead of tricycle landing gear configuration, a shorter fuselage and expanded wingspan and tail surfaces. It did feature the same cockpit doors more akin to a sedan than a combat aircraft! “The XFL-1 had only a single-stage turbocharger and there were difficulties due to the placement of the engine mid fuselage because of balance issues,” CDR Jerry Wells, USN(Ret) wrote in his submission. “Also, problems with the engine required Allison to make changes to the engine mounts and bearings which caused issues with the engine oil distribution ... All three aircraft in testing had development issues during the testing phase so the issues with the XFL-1 were not significant.”

In the end, while the *Airacobra* saw combat in multiple theaters of war and significant service in the hands of Soviet pilots on the Eastern Front, the *Airabonita* never made it out of the design competition. The *Corsair* was simply too good, as pilots would demonstrate in hostile skies during both World War II and the Korean War.



What is It?

The Navy used the sole XFL-1 for armament tests at NAS Norfolk beginning in February 1942. Two years later it was sent to NAS Patuxent River where it was stricken from the Navy’s inventory on 26 April 1944. It was placed in a landfill and could be seen there into the mid-1970s before it was bulldozed over to make room for a runway extension.

John Ball is the winner this time through a drawing from the proverbial hat. The next airplane, pictured flying a desk, will hopefully be more of a challenge for the observer crops.

Please keep your informative cards, letters and emails coming (Tailhook Association, 9696 Business Park Ave., San Diego, CA 92131-1643; thookmagazine@gmail.com). Please, no phone calls.



THE LAST CUT

- CDR Joe L. Akagi, USN(Ret), Life
- Mr. Mark Aldrich, Life
- LCDR Daniel J. Beveridge, USN
- CAPT Allen C. Brady, USN(Ret), Life
- RADM Richard K. Chambers, USN(Ret), Life
- CDR Mark E. Davis, USN(Ret)
- RADM James H. Flatley III, USN(Ret), Life
- Mr. Robert E. Fritts, USN Veteran, Life
- CDR Thomas Himstreet, USN(Ret), Life
- CDR Andrew R. Hutchens, USNR(Ret)
- RDML Grady Jackson, USN(Ret), Life
- CDR Richard W. Johnson, USN(Ret)
- RADM Glen W. Lenox, USN(Ret), Life
- CAPT Claude C. Levinge, USN(Ret), Life
- Mr. Peter C. McMahan, Life
- PC1 Harvey Pitcher, USN(Ret) Life
- CDR Mike A. Ruth, USN(Ret)
- CAPT Robert E. Sandmann, USN(Ret), Life
- CAPT Lowell P. Stone, USN(Ret) Life
- CAPT Ralph Suarez, USN(Ret), Life
- CAPT Denis J. Taft, USN(Ret) Life
- ABM2 Richmond J. Tripp, USN(Ret), Life
- LCDR Nicholas J. Vagianos, USN(Ret), Life
- LT George F. Wil, USN(Ret), Life
- Ms. Barbara Woodbury, Life
- RADM Jay Yakeley, USN(Ret), Life

Courtesy of LCDR VonHayes “L3NnIE” Switzer, USN



Missing man flyover of F-35C Lightning IIs in honor of LCDR Daniel J. “Big Tasty” Beveridge.

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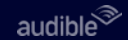
reveals the cultural blueprint behind the Blue Angels. Drawing from Navy experience, it shows how trust—built daily, never assumed—fuels elite performance. A powerful guide to purpose, accountability, relationships, and leading teams that perform at their best in business, combat, and beyond.



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George Dom
Captain USN (Ret.)

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ON DECK

A Sad Goodbye

by Hill Goodspeed

If you attended a Tailhook symposium during the past decade, you may have met Mark Aldrich. He was sure to have greeted you with a smile and a warm welcome. That was the nature of the man, the outward friendliness and ability to make every interaction a positive one coming natural to him. It was also the perfect fit for a professional career that before he joined the staff of the Tailhook Association spanned more than four decades as one of the founding employees of Trader Joe's. Such was his longevity with the company that Mark recalled that one of his customers during his early days working in Los Angeles was Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Namath, who was playing the final year of his career with the Rams in 1977. So proud was Mark of his connection with Trader Joe's that you would be hard-pressed to not find him wearing the signature Hawaiian shirt of a store captain.

Though as a youth he lived for a time in Europe, where his father's job took the family, Mark spent most of his life in California, where he and his wife Sue raised three children. He worked a busy schedule, but two lifelong passions converged (although they could not compete with his and Sue's love of all things Disney) to lead him to the Tailhook Association — a natural love of history and photography. He majored in the former subject in college and a relative who flew seaplanes with the Coast Guard inspired an interest in aviation history.

At the same time, Mark joined a group of aviation photographers, which included Bob Lawson, former editor of *The Hook*, who met regularly, went on photo shoots to air stations, airports and air shows, and exchanged images. He also began collecting photographs of historic aircraft, amassing an amazing collection that he was still building until the very end. "Here I am with pancreatic cancer, and I am still looking for photos on eBay," he told me on the phone just weeks before his passing. He then proceeded to tell me the nuances of a particular aircraft in the image that made it such a rare find at a bargain price.

To fuel his passion, Mark was a member of the American Aviation Historical Society, contributing to its noted journal, and volunteered at the San Diego Air and Space Museum. In the archives of the latter, he was like a kid in a candy store, spending hours processing and digitizing photograph collections. This resulted in serving as coauthor of a book with museum staff member Katrina Pescador titled *San Diego's North Island, 1911-1941* published in 2007.

When it came for him to retire, Trader Joe's loss was the Tailhook Association's gain as Mark began a second career, assuming the duties of archivist and associate editor of the magazine from the retiring CDR Doug

Siegfried, USN(Ret) in 2016. He became senior editor the following year when I assumed the duties as editor-in-chief.

Words cannot adequately express what Mark brought to the magazine with a sharp editorial eye and excellent story ideas. But his greatest impact was, not surprisingly, the photographs that make each issue of *The Hook* come alive. Mining the association's files, his own vast collection and his network of contacts, he had a way of always finding the perfect shot to capture the essence of each article. Even as his health deteriorated, he was always asking if there were any photos he could find, those featured in this issue's article "*Boxer's Reserve Punch*" the last ones he sent to me.

To say Mark will be missed is an understatement. He had a hearty laugh that could fill a room and was a great conversationalist who could discuss a range of topics. The saying "he never met a stranger" certainly applied to him. In short, he was the nicest person you would ever want to meet, and I and many others are indeed fortunate to have had that privilege. Fair winds and following seas, my friend.

Courtesy of Greg Todd



USS *Boxer* (CV 21) and CVG-101 Korean War Deployment 2 March-24 October 1951



USS *Boxer* (CV 21)



VF-721 *Starbusters*
F9F-2B *Panther*



VF-791 *Hammering Hoses*
F4U-4 *Corsair*



VF-884 *Bitter Birds*
F4U-4 *Corsair*



VA-702 *Rustlers*
AD-2/4Q *Skyraider*



VC-3, Det F *Blue Nemesis*
F4U-5NL *Corsair*



VC-11, Det F *Early Elevens*
AD-4W *Skyraider*



VC-35, Det F *Night Hecklers*
AD-4N *Skyraider*



VC-61, Det F
F9F-2P *Panther*



HU-1 Det *Fleet Angels*
HO3S-1



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