



ONBOARD. ON WATCH. MISSION READY.



Deployed on the world's most advanced aircraft carriers, the **Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS)** and **Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG)** deliver proven efficiency and performance to support decades of naval aviation operational readiness.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF U.S. NAVY

Cover: Shooter LT David Bailey gives the signal for launch to the pilot of a VFA-147 Argonauts F-35C Lightning II during flight operations on board USS George Washington (CVN 73) underway in the Pacific Ocean, 28 Oct '24.

Photo: MC3 August Clawson, USN



Page 17



Page 23



Page 28



Page 39

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Hill Goodspeed

SENIOR EDITOR
Mark Aldrich

DESIGN AND LAYOUT
ChampCohen Design Associates

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
LCDR Richard R. Burgess, USN(Ret)
Mike Crutch
CDR Jan C. Jacobs, USNR(Ret)
CDR Robert R. "Boom" Powell, USN(Ret)
CDR Doug Siegfried, USN(Ret)
Barrett Tillman
CDR Jack D. Woodul, USNR(Ret)



Printing by Neyenesch Printers
San Diego, Calif.

Air Plan



VOLUME 53 NUMBER 4 Winter 2025
©2025, all rights reserved ISSN: 0736-9220

4	BRIEF
4	From the President CDR Travis "Sweet T" Amerine, USN
5	From the Editor-in-Chief Hill Goodspeed
7	From the Naval Safety Command RADM Dan Martin, USN
8	From the Executive Director CAPT Greg "Chaser" Keithley, USN(Ret)
10	AN AIRPLANE STORY
12	MEMBERSHIP CORNER
14	TAILHOOK EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION
17	FROM THE CATWALK conducted by "Boom" Powell
23	LAUNCH
23	Hornet's Nest Off Hainan Island by Ryan W. Gilchrist
28	When Rivalries Cease by Matt Scales
34	Return from Rabaul by Hill Goodspeed
39	End of an Era: VX-31 Retires Harrier Fleet After Decades of Testing by Alan de Herrera
42	IN MARSHAL • Command Changes
43	Carrier, Carrier Air Wing and Squadron Reports
73	WAVEOFFS & BOLTERS
73	What is It?
74	RESPOT
75	THE HOOK INDEX 2025
76	ON DECK
76	There's Nothing New Under the Sun by LT Ryan "FUI" Shea, USN
IBC	PATCH PAGE
IBC	Birth of the Bones

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

TAILHOOK ASSOCIATION CORPORATE MEMBERS

The following corporations exhibit strong support of Naval Aviation through their membership in the Tailhook Association:

Airbus U.S.
Amentum
ATAC
BAE Systems
Bell Flight
The Boeing Company
Chemring Energetic Devices
Collins Aerospace
General Atomics
General Electric Aerospace
HII-Newport News Shipbuilding
Jacksonville Jet Port
L3Harris
Lockheed Martin Aeronautics
MBDA Missile Systems
McClellan Jet Services
Million Air
Navy Mutual Aid Association
Northrop Grumman Corporation
Omega Aerial Refueling Service, Inc.
Pratt & Whitney
Radiance Technologies
Raytheon Technologies
Rolls-Royce North America
The Skyhawk Association
Solairus Aviation
Tactical Air Support, Inc.
Talon Asset Management LLC
Textron
Trident Home Loans
Tripp Scott, P.A.
USAA
V2X
2Circle

In appreciation of our advertisers

The Hook relies on advertising to maintain its quality and financial well-being.

We appreciate the loyalty of our advertisers and encourage our readers to support the following advertisers:

AV8RSTUFF.com
A-4 Skyhawk Association
A-6 Intruder Association
A-7 Corsair Association
LCDR "Engine Eddie" Davidson
The Distinguished Flying Cross Society
Thad Dupper
F-14 Tomcat Association
Friends of Naval Aviation, Inc.
General Atomic Electromagnetics
General Electric
Idloom Events
JT4
KIHOMAC
Navy Mutual Aid Association
Newport News Shipbuilding
Neyenesch Printers
Omega Aerial Refueling Services, Inc.
Pratt & Whitney
Prowler Association
River Rats
Tactical Air Support, Inc.
Top Hook Realty
Trident Home Loans
VAW/VRC Foundation
V2X

THE TAILHOOK ASSOCIATION



9696 Businesspark Ave.
San Diego, CA 92131-1643
(858) 689-9223 • (800) 322-HOOK

PRESIDENT

CDR Travis "Sweet T" Amerine, USN

PRESIDENT EMERITUS

CAPT Lonny K. "Eagle" McClung, USN(Ret)

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

RADM Mike "Nasty" Manazir, USN(Ret)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

CAPT Gregory J. "Chaser" Keithley, USN(Ret)

OFFICERS

Vice President for Naval Aviation Reserve Matters

CAPT Beth A. Creighton, USN(RC)

Vice President for Marine Corps Affairs

Col Jerrold "Geri" Devore, USMC

Vice President for Civilian Affairs

Ms. Angie Knappenberger

Vice President for Outreach

CAPT Sterling "Sterls" Gilliam, USN(Ret)

Vice President for Strategic Communication

CAPT Rodger L. Welch, USN(Ret)

Vice Presidents for Strategy

CAPT Michael T. "Jockey" Lisa, USN(Ret)

CAPT D.A. "Roy" Rogers, USN(Ret)

Vice Presidents for Membership

CAPT Tracy Barkhimer, USN(Ret)

CAPT James S. "Goat Boy" Bates, USN

CDR Tim F. "T-Murf" Murphy, USN(Ret)

Vice Presidents for Business Development

CAPT James P. DiMatteo, USN(Ret)

CAPT Scott "Topper" Farr, USN(Ret)

CDR James D. "Max" Gross, USN(Ret)

CAPT Walter "Spanky" Stammer III, USN(Ret)

Vice President of Legislative Affairs

CAPT Kevin "Proton" McLaughlin, USN(Ret)

Vice President for Social Media

CAPT Mehdi Akacem, USN

Financial Advisor

Richard S. Carlquist, AIF®, CFP®

Chief Financial Officer/Treasurer

CDR Tom "Tex" Lawson, USN(Ret)

Secretary

CDR Neil G. "Cowboy" Zerbe, USN(Ret)

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

ADM Chris "Lung" Aquilino, USN(Ret)

LtCol Thomas "Loaf" Bolen, USMC

VADM Ted "Twig" Branch, USN(Ret)

CAPT Adan "Cherry" Covarrubias, USN(Ret)

CAPT J.J. "Yank" Cummings, USN(Ret)

CAPT Jim "Gigs" Gigliotti, USN(Ret)

LCDR Mark "Tugboat" Jbeily, USN

LCDR Nick "DT" Johnson, USN

RADM Mike "Nasty" Manazir, USN(Ret)

CDR Toni "Miggles" Miggins, USN

VADM Chip "Bullet" Miller, USN(Ret)

CDR Melodie "Mel" Palmer, USN(Ret)

CDR Carolyn "Sulu" Peterson, USN

CDR Corey "Humble" Pritchard, USN(Ret)

CAPT Bradley "Plug" Russell, USN(Ret)

LT Mary Cate "BC" Scully, USN

CAPT Walt "Sarge" Slaughter, USN(Ret)



Navy
★ **Mutual**®

Life insurance for our nation's protectors.

Navy Mutual offers life insurance to servicemembers and their families. Our dependable products feature no active duty service restrictions or aviation clauses so you can be sure your family is protected no matter where the future takes you.



Visit [NavyMutual.org/Navym](https://www.navy-mutual.org/Navym) to get a quote and apply online for our affordable term life insurance product. Prefer to speak with a person? Our friendly representatives are standing by to take your call at **800-628-6011**.

Active Duty / Reserve / Retirees / Veterans / Spouses and Children

Honorably discharged veterans must reside in Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Maryland, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, or Virginia.

The appearance of the U.S. Department of War (DOW) visual information does not imply or constitute DOW endorsement.



BRIEF

Greetings Tailhook Warriors,
I am so pumped to serve our amazing Tailhook family! I first want to thank CAPT Kristen “Dragon” Findlay for her multiple years of amazing leadership. Thank you for blessing us all and setting a phenomenal example!

From the President

Just like many of you, when I was a kid I dreamt of becoming a Naval Aviator. However, I never imagined reality would surpass even my wildest imagination. Most of you will agree that at some time in our individual cockpits, thousands of miles from home, we have all felt we could stretch out our hands and touch the very face of God.

Naval Aviation is and always will be the greatest adventure man has ever known. Operating aircraft on the high seas in an environment over which you have no control, hurling yourself and your warfighting craft, armed to the teeth with American ingenuity and firepower, off and back onto a floating airport day and night again and again in the service of our loved ones and the greatest nation on Earth is not only a life worth living, but one worth celebrating. What our eyes have seen and our hands have done can only truly be understood by the family with whom we share the experiences. Tailhook is that family.

Courtesy of VFA-105



The VFA-105 CAG bird in flight, the creative paint scheme highlighting the Old West legacy that inspired the squadron's Gunslingers nickname.

The Tailhook Association represents the best of our nation. I want it to feel like home to every one of you. Few are asked to do what we do and even fewer understand the sacrifices made. I have learned that life is better together. So if you are a nugget reading this sitting in a ready room, join the Tailhook family as a Life member. If you are a veteran debating attending Hook '26, book your room today! Every sortie is a gift, every drink shared together a memory and family is forever.

As we move into the future, we are thriving, growing and constantly evolving to better serve you and your families. Membership is the key to that growth. I humbly ask for your support to continue to expand our membership. Whether it is encouraging veterans to join or bringing a JO to Hook for the first time, it is up to us to promote our heritage and keep the traditions of Naval Aviation alive!

I am so excited for the journey ahead and humbled to serve all of you!

For those of you reading this while deployed or in a ready room at sea, our thoughts and prayers are with you and your families. Thank you for standing the watch!



CDR Travis “Sweet T” Amerine, USN



This past year marked milestone anniversaries for the naval services. Both the Navy and Marine Corps celebrated 250th anniversaries, their formation in 1775 by the Continental Congress predating the creation of the nation itself. This speaks to their importance to our maritime nation, whether in the age of sail in which they were born or the modern era where technology is reshaping the battlefield at a dizzying pace from hypersonic weapons to artificial intelligence. What has endured across the decades since the first Continental Marines gathered at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia and Sailors rigged the topsails of early frigates are those who have served, the characteristics they embody and the enduring challenges they face.

From the Editor-in-Chief

First-time magazine contributor Matt Scales highlights one of the most unique operations ever completed in aviation, one that began with the singular focus of Naval Aviators to rescue one of their own from the jungles of North Vietnam. What followed was an example of innovation and teamwork among comrades in arms that embodied the capabilities of the Joint force under the most trying of circumstances. Also appearing in *The Hook* for the first time is Ryan Gilchrist, who tells the story of an often-forgotten 1954 incident near Hainan Island that foreshadowed the tensions with China that grab headlines today. It represented Naval Aviation operating forward as only it can do, on the scene for those in distress and wielding American power as a deterrent toward aggression.

In the Fall 2025 issue we featured an article on the work of two Sailors who have documented naval operations visually across the years with a shared history of having USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) as a subject. The wide-ranging combat theaters of World War II provided a rich canvas for the creation of some of the most famous photographs ever taken. The article “Return from Rabaul” tells the story behind one of those images, which

shows badly wounded AOM2 Kenneth Bratton being pulled from a TBF *Avenger* on the flight deck of USS *Saratoga* (CV 3) after a strike against the Japanese stronghold of Rabaul.

And speaking of images, when it comes to painting a jet, the VMFA-112 *Cowboys* based at NAS JRB Fort Worth have taken the art to a new level with the adornment of an F/A-18D *Hornet* commemorating the Corps’ 250th anniversary. It is the subject of this issue’s “An Airplane Story.” Marine aviation is front and center in another article by Alan de Herrera documenting the final flight of the AV-8B *Harrier II* with the VX-31 *Dust Devils*. While the jump jet requires no tailhook, it has been a mainstay in sea-based aviation.

A member of the VFA-106 *Gladiators*, LT Ryan “FUI” Shea writes that the current generation of Naval Aviators must never let an opportunity pass to learn the lessons of history from their predecessors. What is over the horizon may just present similar challenges with solutions forged by experiences in an earlier time.

Another *Gladiator*, Commanding Officer CDR Travis “Sweet T” Amerine, also shares his first comments as our new president after taking the gavel from CAPT Kristen “Dragon” Findlay. It is a special time to be assuming that role as the new year marks 70 years since that small group of tailhookers gathered for the first time “south of the border” and officially founded the Tailhook Association.

Also, be sure to check inside the back cover for something a little different connected to one of Naval Aviation’s legendary squadrons.

As we bid farewell to 2025, Senior Editor Mark Aldrich and I speak for all our predecessors in wishing fair winds and following seas to Phyllis Carter, who has served as a proofreader of *The Hook* going back to the earliest days of the magazine. We thank her for her tremendous contributions to the magazine.



Hill Goodspeed

CDR Edward T. Steichen, USNR



LTJG John Clark waves a returning aircraft back aboard USS *Lexington* (CV 16) during operations off the Gilbert and Marshall Islands in 1943.



F-14 Tomcat Association

WWW.F-14ASSOCIATION.COM



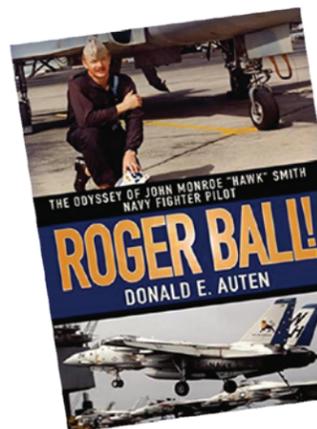
Start planning for Oceana, September 2026 Tomcat Sunset 20th Anniversary and Reunion

OUR MISSION: TO PRESERVE THE HISTORY OF THE GREATEST FIGHTER JET THE UNITED STATES NAVY HAS EVER FLOWN

Photo: LCDR Art Lagare, U.S. Navy - Unrestricted.

Selected photographs and articles are used under a license agreement with Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation.

Celebrate Tailhook's 69th Birthday With Three Great Books on Naval Aviation History



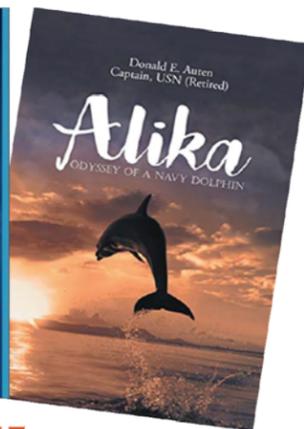
ROGER BALL! The Odyssey of John Monroe "Hawk" Smith Navy Fighter Pilot

Roger Ball paints a provocative history of Captain "Hawk" Smith, a pathfinder and innovator in the quest to overhaul Naval tactical aviation following the Vietnam War.



BLACK LION ONE TOPGUN Trailblazer Capt. John Monroe "Hawk" Smith In Command of VF-213

The most advanced and lethal fighter in the world, the right time in history, and the right bue kicking fighter pilot to help take Navy TACAIR to the pinnacle of air-to-air warfighting-Black Lion.



ALIKA Odyssey of a Navy Dolphin

Alika testifies to the unwavering bond of loyalty and trust dolphins share with their Navy handlers. A must read for those allured to the majestic mammals who live in the sea and befriend man.

AVAILABLE AT AMAZON AND ALL
MAJOR ONLINE BOOKSELLERS



Order today: info@donautenbooks.com

Three years ago, the Chief of Naval Operations debuted a revised safety and risk management program called the Safety Management System (SMS). The associated OPNAV Instruction (OPNAV-M 5100.23) called for significant changes and a shift toward a mindset that embraces critical self-assessment and self-correction by all personnel from the deck plate to senior leadership.

In 2025, we are continuing to amplify and build on the SMS foundation that is a bedrock of the CNO's "Get Real, Get Better" principles and guidelines. Naval operations are a dangerous business and the fact that mishaps do occur mandates a commitment to improve our day-to-day focus on risk identification and management.

From the Naval Safety Command

During our assessments and conversations with the fleet over the past several years, Naval Safety Command professionals have learned that unfamiliarity with the SMS remains. Think of it as a holistic view of conducting operations with a full understanding of limiting factors. As aviators, we do this through our PBED (plan, brief, execution and debrief) process. We utilize our standard operating procedures, NATOPS, crew resource management and "ready room confessions" so that others may learn from our mistakes. The SMS serves as an umbrella encompassing an array of existing systems centered on two primary areas of focus — risk management and assurance — which are key elements in naval instructions and briefings. The underlying premise behind the SMS is that it systematically seeks out potential hazards and creates and enforces controls to reduce risks to an acceptable level, ultimately enabling Naval Aviators to maintain their readiness and warfighting capability.

Sound risk management encompasses identifying, communicating and accounting for organizational risk. Are we fully aligned and communicating with our fellow crewmembers in the ready room? Are we maintaining a questioning mindset? Assurance relies on continuous self-assessment and effective oversight in day-to-day operations to ensure compliance.

As aviators, we implement risk management principles in our daily operations. The SMS risk management line of effort aligns codified processes with the following steps:

- Identifying risks and hazards through deliberate planning and assurance activities.
- Assessing risks and priorities using a risk assessment matrix.
- Weighing prioritized risks (i.e., during pre-flight briefings) against their opportunity value to inform leaders' judgement.
- Mitigating risk by developing and implementing control measures (strategies, TTPs and constraints) to mitigate risk, manage actions to minimize risk and remain alert to unexpected deviations.



RADM Dan Martin, USN

Most view members of Naval Safety Command as inspectors. We are not. We assess risk from Echelon II through Echelon VI levels and identify the accountable person with the authority to act on risk areas that oftentimes a lower echelon is forced to accept but should not have to. Monitoring risk is key to maintaining effectiveness and accountability. Identifying risks and constraints in your organization's "Risk Registry" assists in creating an aggregated command risk profile. Risk registries enable commanders to implement effective strategies for prioritizing, communicating and accounting for risk at the appropriate level.

Ultimately, the most important part of the SMS is the mindset of the organization. Adopting a healthy risk-aware culture cultivates continuous checks and feedback at all levels. Embracing the SMS and its principles allows for flexibility and minimizes stovepiping.

Safety is not simply a departmental or individual role. It is a direct result of the entire team's collective efforts and leadership's unwavering commitment to prioritize risk control, competence and procedural compliance across the Naval Aviation Enterprise.

The SMS is available at the following link: <https://www.secnv.navy.mil/doni/SECNAV%20Manuals1/5100.23%20CH-3.pdf>

MCSN Claire Bennett, USN

Aircrew from CVW-2 squadrons assemble with CAG CAPT Tommy Locke and USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) Skipper CAPT Scott Miller for a briefing in Ready Room Room Five on board the carrier while underway in the Andaman Sea on 22 Oct '21.





Greetings Tailhookers,
Thanks to all of you, 2025 closes out as another highly successful year for both the Tailhook Association (THA) and Tailhook Educational Foundation (TEF).

2025 in Review

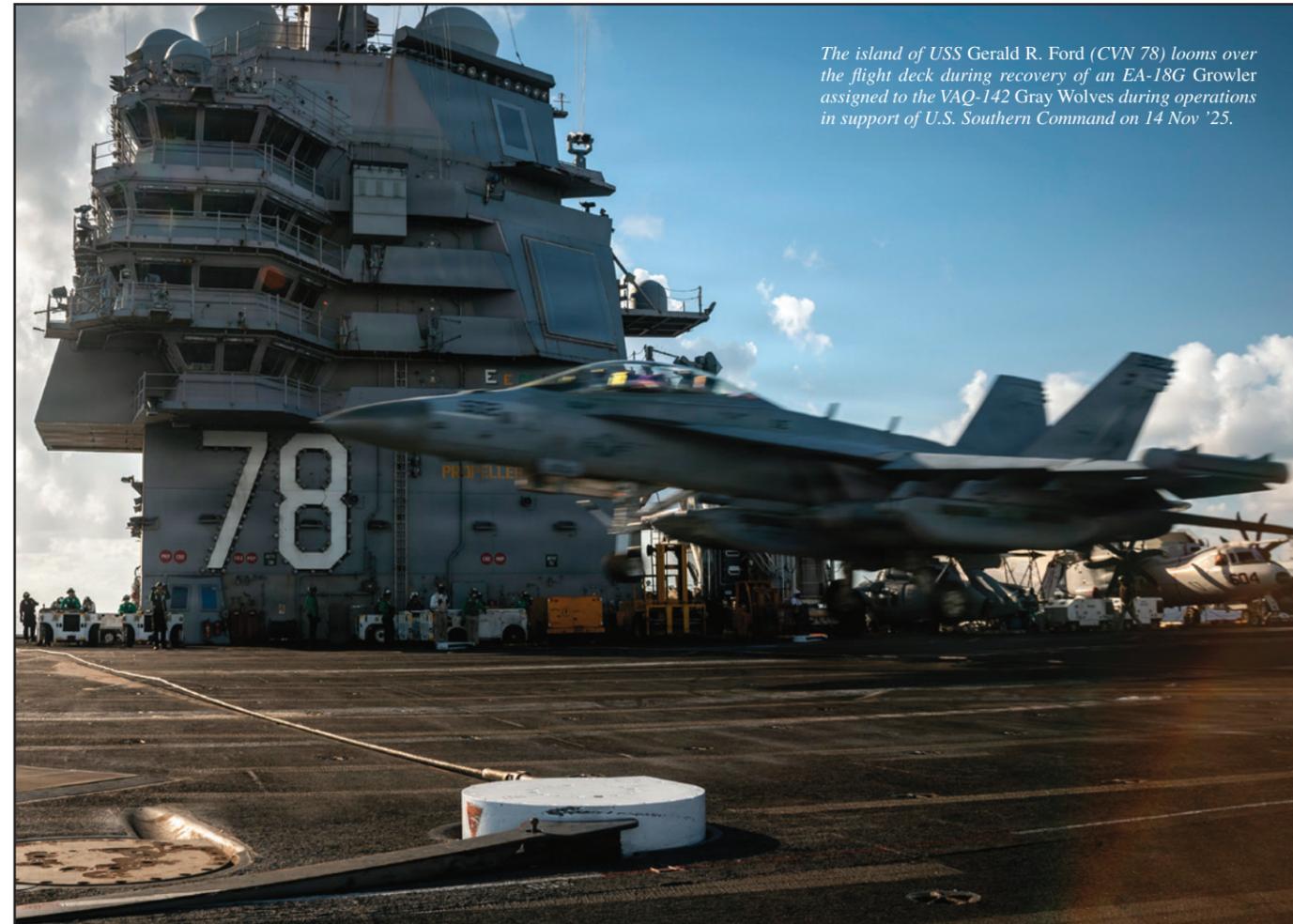
Our second year at the Grand Sierra Resort (GSR) for Hook '25 was exemplified by huge turnout, exceptional execution and tremendous hospitality on the part of the GSR staff. There was something for everyone who attended. Membership remains strong and Life membership continues to climb. Today, over 65 percent of Tailhookers are Life members. Financially, we have reached new milestones with over \$3,000,000 in investment funds and another \$300,000 in operating funds. Your association has never been stronger, and our fiscal discipline is what allows us to continue to keep membership costs at a minimum, despite inflation.

From the Executive Director

As you make your plans for Hook '26 scheduled for 20–22 August 2026, at the GSR in Reno, be sure to reserve your room now on our website. We were able to increase the number of available rooms for next year, but I still expect a sellout, so don't delay. Registration will open online soon after the New Year.

Our theme for 2026, *Warfighting Innovation Now*, will focus on today's warfighters and our ability to innovate to sustain a winning edge over any threat. Next year also marks Tailhook's 70th anniversary and our nation's 250th birthday. Join us at Hook '26 to not only celebrate our past but also discuss and find solutions to securing our future for generations to come.

USN



The island of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) looms over the flight deck during recovery of an EA-18G Growler assigned to the VAQ-142 Gray Wolves during operations in support of U.S. Southern Command on 14 Nov '25.

Give the Gift of Membership

Throughout the year, members approach me at various functions or events and ask how they can help THA. As I write these words, we are approaching the end of the year and are amid the holiday season. In this spirit, consider giving the gift of membership. There is sure to be someone who could benefit from a THA membership, whether it be a squadronmate, family member or friend. About every membership that lapses is due to forgetfulness. Ask those you know how their membership is doing. Maybe someone you know has an annual membership. Life membership would be a great gift this time of year.

As always, please notify us if you have changed your contact information. Wrong addresses cost us money when your magazine gets returned. Update your information via our website, give us a call or send an email.

From all of us here on the THA and TEF staffs, we wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! Be well and see you at Hook '26!



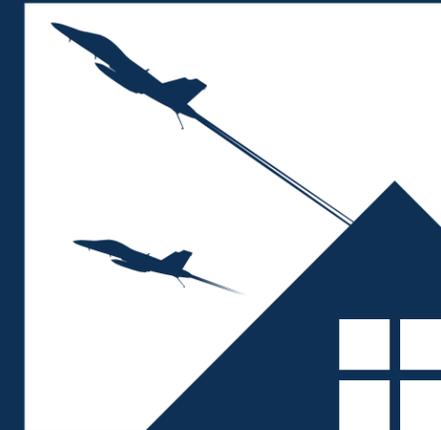
CAPT Greg Keithley, USN(Ret)

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

HOME

[hōm] *noun*

A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN REST YOUR HEAD AND HEART.



TOP HOOK

REALTY
Central California

WELCOME HOME!

WHEN MAKING ONE OF THE BIGGEST INVESTMENTS OF YOUR LIFE, EXPERIENCE MATTERS.
MILITARY RELOCATION PROFESSIONAL.

BRIANNE MCCALLISTER
BROKER/OWNER

CALL US AT 559.309.1178 OR VISIT TOPHOOKREALTY.COM

BRIANNE@TOPHOOKREALTY.COM | DRE # 01801687



AN AIRPLANE STORY

All photos by Dave Cibley

Hornet Commemorates Leatherneck Legacy

by Dave Cibley



The VMFA-112 anniversary jet is a reminder to LtCol Anthony "FABA" Heiser and all Cowboys, from aircrew to maintainers, of both what it means to be a Marine and the proud heritage of the Corps.

November 2025 marked the 250th anniversary of that day at the Tun Tavern in Philadelphia where a fledgling nation's Second Continental Congress commissioned innkeeper Samuel Nicholas to recruit the first Continental Marines. This year, few have been prouder to embrace the spirit of this historic moment than the Marines of VMFA-112 based at NAS JRB Fort Worth, Tex. The *Cowboys* painted one of their squadron jets in a remarkable heritage scheme honoring the history of the Marine Corps and the squadrons that flew the F/A-18 *Hornet*. The scheme also incorporates a special element honoring those heroic *Hornet* pilots who gave their all in the course of their duties.

One of four units still operating legacy *Hornets*, the *Cowboys* had recently taken delivery of several jets transferred from the VMFA(AW)-224 *Fighting Bengals* as that squadron transitioned to the F-35B *Lightning II*. Some of the airframes required repainting and rebranding, and a two-seat F/A-18D, Bureau Number (BuNo) 164874, was chosen for a visit to the paint shop. In August, after it returned from participation in *Exercise Atlantic Alliance* at Portsmouth/Pease in New Hampshire, the jet was flown to MCAS Beaufort, S.C., for repainting.

The remarkable new heritage scheme is full of nods to the history, traditions and symbols of the Corps, and to the men and women who flew and maintained the type.

The jet's nose and tail fin sport the number "250" to honor the Marines' 250th anniversary. While a departure from standard modex numbering, it is more than appropriate for the anniversary jet.

The words "TUN TAVERN" appear on the aircraft's port spine to remind us of that historic moment in 1775, while the Marine Corps motto "SEMPER FIDELIS," adopted in 1883 under Col Charles G. McCawley, appears on the starboard side.

The outboard vertical stabilizers carry silhouette images recalling the famous photograph of the Marines raising the American flag atop Mount

Suribachi during the battle of Iwo Jima. The artwork has been updated to include 50 stars on a flag that held only 48 during World War II.

The inboard tail surfaces feature the eagle, globe and anchor design from 1868, which became the official emblem of the Corps in 1955, as well as the earlier historic emblem of the eagle with a fouled anchor and thirteen stars. The two left and right rudders display the dates 1775 and 2025, respectively.



No commemoration of Marine Corps history would be complete without the iconic flag raising on Iwo Jima. The service's original emblem visible on the inboard vertical stab endures on the buttons of leatherneck uniforms.

BuNo 164874 always draws attention when it is in the pattern.



The underwing outboard of the fold on each side lists eleven Marine squadrons known to have operated the *Hornet*. All 22 are visible when the wings are folded.

Perhaps most poignant and moving are the 50 names listed prominently on side panels below the cockpit. No aircrew who flies this jet and no Marine who services it can do so without being reminded of the 50 Marine *Hornet* aircrew who died while in the service of their country. Most of those named lost their lives in tragic mishaps while flying the type, though a few died while on active duty or while serving in the Marine Corps Reserve by means not directly involving a flight mishap. Still, they are remembered.

The significant effort required to assemble the names is commendable as the information was not readily available and had never been compiled. The original F/A-18A predates modern computer systems; the VMFA-314 *Black Knights* at MCAS El Toro, Calif., was the first Marine unit to fly the *Hornet* in 1983, just two years after the introduction of the IBM personal computer. Therefore, much data was not readily accessible in modern databases. It took researchers tirelessly digging into boxes in storage to compile the list.

Once the plane was repainted, the *Cowboys* wasted no time getting it out there to join the 250th anniversary celebration. A four-ship flight led by the newly painted commemorative jet flew to Boston to participate in Marine

Week, which included numerous activities in Massachusetts. The Marines spent days visiting veterans and Gold Star families in the area, including stops at Marguerite House, an assisted living facility in Lawrence, and Bedford's Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans' Hospital. The unit also participated in wreath laying ceremonies at the veteran's memorial in Billerica, before saddling up the jets to perform two flyovers above the Boston Common in downtown Boston and Fort Sewall in Marblehead.

Veterans from all branches were thrilled to meet their active-duty brothers and sisters as emotions ran from laughs to tears. One of them, still sharp as a tack, had just celebrated his 100th birthday. The man had been a tank driver in LGEN George S. Patton's Third Army. As much as he enjoyed the Marines' visit, the leathernecks were even more humbled by his recollections of his service.

The new heritage jet joins the colorful blue commanding officer's (CO) bird as one of three specially painted aircraft in the *Cowboys*' stable. The third is a low-visibility remembrance of the jet's *Bengal* days. The CO's jet, BuNo 165405, displays its own special markings remembering the squadron's history and heritage, including silhouettes of aircraft types flown and a Texas flag on the speed brake.

A big toast to the men and women of VMFA-112 for their commitment and pride in their unit, their people, their country and their Corps!



In addition to the commemorative jet for the 250th anniversary of the Marine Corps, the squadron commanding officer's *Hornet* honors the legacy of VMFA-112, which was established in 1942 and flew combat missions as part of the famed "Cactus Air Force" on Guadalcanal.

MEMBERSHIP CORNER

Welcome New Tailhook Members and Life Members!

September New Members

AD2 Thomas Prince, USN Veteran
Mr. Christian Roy
Sgt Peter Meyer, USMC Veteran

September New Life Members

Mr. John Walsh
CDR Daniel Tantillo, USN
CAPT John T. Distad, USN(Ret)
LT Dave W. Cable, USN Veteran
LCDR William W. Craig, USN Veteran
ATN2(AC) Dan R. Williams, USN Veteran
CAPT Ralph E. Griffiths, USN(Ret)
CDR Daniel Ruffin, USN
CDR William Moyer, USN(Ret)
MCPO William L. Striegel, USN(Ret)
CAPT Mark N. Clemente, USN(Ret)
LCDR Bruce F. Borland, USN Veteran

October New Members

LTJG Sawyer Masuoka, USN
CDR Gary Smilowitz, USN(Ret)
Col Benjamin K. Hutchins, USMC(Ret)

Mr. David E. Dunkin, USN Veteran
CDR Daniel M. Lien, USN(Ret)

October New Life Members

Capt Robert J. George, USMC(Ret)
Mr. Michael D. Reed
CWO3 Richard E. Goldsberry, USN(Ret)
Capt James J. Dunn, USMC(Ret)
LtCol Edward Sypniewski, USMC(Ret)
Mr. Robert A. Grossman
LCDR William Bethea, MD, USN Veteran
CAPT Tad Chamberlain, USN(Ret)
CAPT Clarke Craine, USN(Ret)
LT Cody Hyland, USN
Mr. Tommy H. Thomason
LCDR William H. LaBarge, USN(Ret)
Mr. David Drakeford, USN Veteran
CDR Chris D. Saufley, USN
CAPT John A. Conkey, USNR(Ret)
CAPT Frank Buerger, USN(Ret)
LCDR Andy Caputi, USN Veteran
CAPT Wayne L. Ward, USNR(Ret)

November New Members

SSgt Martin S. Kaufman, USA Veteran
MIDN Jack Craycroft, USN
Mr. James Donohue
Mr. Patrick Donohue

November New Life Members

LCDR C. Dan Pentecost, USN(Ret)
CDR James J. McDevitt, USN(Ret)
CDR Charles R. Gilbert, USN(Ret)
LCDR Joel Kramar, USN(Ret)
LTJG Clarence E. Wenzel, USN Veteran
Mr. Bob Penkhus
LCDR James Charnesky, USN(Ret)
CDR John E. Mawhinney, USN(Ret)

Cutoff date — 24 November 2025.

All members after this date will be featured in the next issue.



Courtesy of Martin S. Kaufman

The flight jacket of former Tailhook Association member CDR Jim Williams features two vintage 1950s patches, the VA-65 Fist of the Fleet (before its redesignation as VA-25) and one for the VF-21 Mach Busters. Note the Hook '64 and Hook '65 patches on the sleeve.



Owned and Operated by U.S. Navy Veterans

WE WORK HAND IN HAND WITH YOU,
PAYING CLOSE "ATTENTION TO DETAIL" THROUGH ALL PHASES.

CRUISE DET SHOULDER CHEST TAILS
ANNIVERSARY FRIDAY RED AIRS HERITAGE

VERY LOW PRICES, FREE ART WORK, SATISFACTION GUARANTEE
QUALITY STANDARD EMBROIDERED AND SUBLIMATED PATCHES
HIGHEST GRADE THREADS & EMBROIDERING TECHNIQUES

All images shown are scans of actual patches that we made for squadrons.

WHITEYINGA@AV8RSTUFF.COM
CELL: (478)997-1011
WE BUY PATCH COLLECTIONS

CMO's, PAO's & SNACKO's
WE BUY YOUR OLD INVENTORY

INTRUDER ASSOCIATION

SHOWCASING A LEGEND

LET US HEAR YOUR STORIES

JOIN NOW

The mission of the Intruder Association is to preserve and promote the legacy of the US Navy and Marine Corps A-6 Intruder Community, to keep others informed of the A-6 aircraft mission and accomplishments and to provide for continued camaraderie among all those who flew and supported the aircraft and its squadrons, thus "Preserving the Legend of the Intruder."

You are welcomed to join the over 1,200 active members of the Intruder Association. Our membership is made up of former Pilots, Bombardier/Navigators, Maintainers, and Technical Representatives. Others may join as Associate Members. Your membership package will include welcome letter, patch, decal, and the biannual Windscreen magazine.

Our aircraft may no longer be flying, but the memories of missions flown and liberty lived will live on.

Direct Access to Membership Registration Online Form:
(QR CODE)

All Weather Attack
www.intruderassociation.org



TAILHOOK EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

 Combined Federal Campaign No. 10251

Season's greetings and glad tidings Tailhookers. Our Tailhook Educational Foundation (TEF) team and extended Tailhook family of supporters, and the 150 Naval Aviation legacy students who worked hard to earn TEF scholarships this year, are all genuinely grateful for your generous support in 2025.

Of those 150 awardees, four Gold Star students earned \$10,000 each this year. This is an increase of \$7,000 per Gold Star grant from previous years due to a generous endowment to TEF's Gold Star scholarship program from ADM Bill McRaven USN (Ret), one of the managers for the Jeff Bezos Courage and Civility Award. Also, four of the 150 awardees were former Navy and Marine Corps enlisted personnel who served on aircraft carriers or who had a Naval Aviator sponsor. All told, during our 2025 scholarship season your contributions provided \$702,500 in grant funds to TEF awardees, an increase of \$168,000 from 2024. The average grant value also increased \$500 from \$4,150 per grant in 2024 to \$4,650 this year.

Courtesy of San Diego Padres



For many years the scholarship sponsored by the San Diego Padres was named in honor of former pitcher Randy Jones, who received the Cy Young Award in 1976. Jones passed away at the age of 75 as this issue was going to press.

The generosity of Tailhookers at Hook '25 was also incredible. The total raised was \$110,000, with \$60,000 of these donations topping off the new perennial scholarship paying tribute to all our past and current editors of *The Hook*. This new and significant perennial scholarship portfolio started awarding a \$5,000 annual grant in 2025 and will continue to do so in perpetuity. The other \$50,000 was the second of four pledged donations from Mr. Alex Meruelo, owner of the Grand Sierra Resort, to build a \$200,000 perennial portfolio that will yield a \$10,000 annual grant in perpetuity once completed.



VADM Ted "Twig" Branch, USN(Ret)

As we wrap the flight deck for 2025, we humbly ask you to support TEF a final time this year with a contribution to our End of Year (EOY) fundraiser. This will help us grow our scholarship funds for next year's awardees. You should have received our EOY letter and blue donation return envelope in the mail around Thanksgiving. If you have not made your final 2025 contribution to TEF, we kindly ask you to do so by mailing the blue envelope or by calling our office at (858) 689-9223 and donating over the phone. Your EOY support not only determines the number of students who will earn TEF scholarships, just as importantly, it determines the value of those grants.

Along with the Courage and Civility Award donation, many of your contributions this and every year are used to finance our essential Gold Star scholarships. Since many of our Gold Star-eligible students are unaware of this program, we ask you to help us find eligible young people and their families and connect them with TEF.

We are also seeking external sponsors for our TEF enlisted grants. If you would like your EOY contribution to help fund our enlisted scholarships, please let us know when you call to donate, indicate this on the memo line of your check or note your intention in the online donation form.

TEF was founded 30 years ago as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with the vital and privileged mission of awarding annual scholarships to Naval Aviation legacy students. Your gracious contributions each year are used solely to fund and grow these scholarships. If you have questions about any of the ways to donate to TEF, or if you have any thoughts you would like to pass on to us, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you again for your resolute EOY support and thank you in advance for the generosity we are certain you will continue to provide TEF as we catapult into 2026.

As I write this letter on Veterans Day, it is not lost on me that I am primarily addressing it to veterans. Thank you and thanks to your families for your service and commitment to our great nation. Please know your charitable generosity continues to have a valuable and inspiring impact on the goals and successes of TEF's scholarship awardees each year. These talented, motivated, hard-charging young people are our nation's future leaders, and due to your continued support, our future remains in very good hands.

All of us at TEF wish you peaceful holidays full of seasonal blessings.

VADM Ted "Twig" Branch, USN(Ret)
Chairman of the Board
Tailhook Educational Foundation

SHIP'S



STORE



Port Authority Jacket Embroidered with Pilot/NFO Wings & Hook



Hat Khaki, Navy, & Light Colada with Pilot Wings & Hook



Port Authority Black Vest Pilot/NFO Wings & Hook



Carrier Gray Sherpa Blanket with NFO Wings & Hook



Stone Coaster Pilot or NFO Wings & Hook



Fleece blanket Embroidered with Hook & Ship Logo on the bottom right corner. Size 50" X 60"



Crew Neck Navy Blue Super Soft Sweatshirt Screen-printed Tailhook Text & Hook or Embroidered with Pilot/NFO Wings & Hook





MACH 2 HOMIES

FOR YOUR REAL *estate* NEEDS!



WHAT SETS US APART

Individualized service that exceeds the standard and delivers results.

Tailored support, never one-size-fits-all.

Dedicated care, during the move and long after you're settled.

Custom strategies, not generic checklists.

Strategic guidance, executed with precision and purpose.



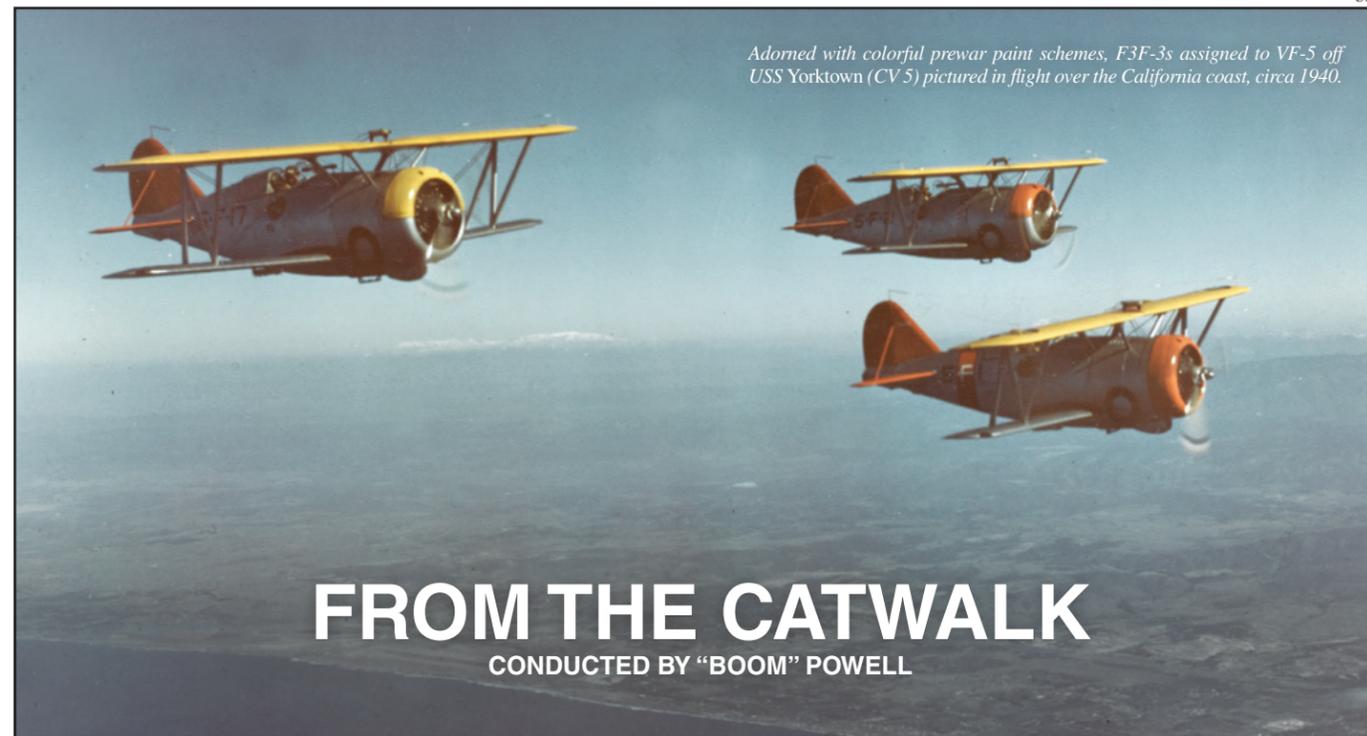
Lila Olson
REALTOR
757-339-2411



Powered by LPY Realty LLC



WE KNOW THE DRILL- HOME BUYING / SELLING MILITARY STYLE



Adorned with colorful prewar paint schemes, F3F-3s assigned to VF-5 off USS Yorktown (CV 5) pictured in flight over the California coast, circa 1940.

FROM THE CATWALK

CONDUCTED BY "BOOM" POWELL

Challenge: Grumman fighters had consistent designations under the pre-1962 system. Most are well known, but can you fill in the gaps? First was the FF-1, nicknamed "Fifi." F2F? F3F? F4F Wildcat. F5F? F6F Hellcat. F7F Tigercat. F8F Bearcat. F9F Panther/Cougar. F10F? F11F Tiger. F12F? (answers at end of Catwalk)

DEAD STICKS

On 2 August 1958, during the opening run-in for the air show at Clarence, N.Y., *Blue Angel* solo pilot LT John R. Dewenter had the engine of his F11F *Tiger* run rough and lose power. As he attempted to reach NAS Niagara Falls, the engine seized and flamed out. Rather than eject over the heavily populated Buffalo suburbs, Dewenter made a straight-in, dead-stick landing on a short runway at Buffalo Municipal Airport. Although the almost fully fueled F11F touched down on the approach end, its speed took it across Gennessy St., a timely red light clearing a path through traffic for the Navy fighter. It came to rest at a gas station, just yards from the fuel pumps. The only damage was to the aircraft!

A message from CNO ADM Arleigh A. Burke stated, "YOUR MAGNIFICENT ACTION THIS AFTERNOON IN LANDING YOUR AIRCRAFT RATHER THAN HAZARDING THE LIVES OF THE CIVILIAN POPULACE REFLECTS THE HIGHEST CREDIT ON YOURSELF THE BLUE ANGELS AND THE NAVY X WELL DONE."

Online resource



LT John Dewenter's F11F Tiger pictured where it came to a stop at a gas station in suburban Buffalo, N.Y., after experiencing an engine failure during a 1958 air show.

Dewenter had practice. In January 1951, while assigned to the VF-781 *Pacemakers*, a Naval Air Reserve squadron whose members volunteered 100 percent to serve in the Korean War, he dead stuck a F9F *Panther* at NAS Miramar. In January 1956, now assigned to the VF-93 *Blue Blazers*, he made the first successful ditching of a sweptwing aircraft, putting a F9F-8 *Cougar* into San Francisco Bay. His luck held. As CAG-17 he survived the fire on board USS *Forrestal* (CVA 59). Dewenter retired as a captain after 33 years of service and 4,284 hours of flight time.

UNSEEN WATER HAZARD

I loved the I Bar at NAS North Island. I've had drinks there with some famous folks and knew better than to touch the aircraft hanging from the overhead. In 1985, we (VAQ-139 *Cougars*) stayed at the BOQ there overnight prior to flying aboard USS *Constellation* (CV 64). The morning of the flyon my "driver," LCDR Greg Elcock, took a quick swim and jumped into the deep end right after the pool people had added chlorine. He opened his eyes underwater and immediately felt a lot of pain. Greg got out of the water and flushed his eyes, but he knew he wasn't going to drive a *Prowler* that day. We had to helo one of our guys off the ship back to North Island, where he took our bird aboard. Greg sat next to me in the back seat and was understandably nervous about not being at the controls.

—LCDR Rick Morgan, USN(Ret)



National Naval Aviation Museum



A VAQ-139 *Cougars* EA-6B *Prowler* pictured during flight operations on board USS *Constellation* (CV 64) while the carrier operated off Southern California on 18 May '84.



LCDRs J.J. "Yank" Cummings and Shannon "Flash" Coulter's farewell messages to the "Big Fighter" on the nose of the F-14 Tomcat they flight delivered to Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., 17 Mar '05.

BONEYARD BOUNTY

"The Boneyard," once known as the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center (AMARC) and since May 2007 as the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group, is at Davis-Monthan AFB where thousands of U.S. military aircraft go to retire or "regenerate" (i.e., go to scrap). *Ed. Note: Many return to service as evidenced by F-16s pulled for service at the Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center and thousands of former fighters turned into target drones for the Air Force.*

Back in the day, the Boneyard sequence went something like this. Haul ass into the break supersonic. Plant both feet on the instrument panel ... and pull 12-plus g's. Wake up, land [and] shut down. Start "harvesting" epic memorabilia for the I LOVE ME room — stick grip, throttle quadrants, g meter, 10-day clock, mirrors, piddle packs, etc. Tour the Boneyard, liberty in Tucson and fly airlines back home.

Those were in the good ole days because the work went out. "We have a radar gun in the tower so if you exceed 250 knots in the break, you will be flight violated." They also started full cockpit inspections and if something was missing, you would be held accountable.

We dropped off some of the last full-up F-14 Tomcats on 17 March 2005. That was my last flight in the "Big Fighter." As I shut down, with the USAF cockpit integrity police surrounding us, I frantically looked for something to take with me, so I snagged a small night-vision device-capable light and dropped it inside my flight suit. I also kept my leg restraints. They did not go where the light went.

—CAPT J.J. "Yank" Cummings, USN(Ret)

GEOGRAPHY 101

A favorite bit of geographical trivia is the Panama Canal from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean runs southeast. The U.S. East Coast from Maine to Jacksonville, Fla., is almost southwest (215 degrees).

A nugget on his very first flight in a F-8 Crusader did not have an instructor pilot tucked alongside. It was a beautiful day but there was a lot of haze and visibility was only a couple of miles. He went out over the ocean to W-291 southwest of NAS Miramar. After trying out his new mount, he realized he could not find his way back. He came up on the squadron's base radio and got help ... sort of. Someone told him to fly east, and he would hit land and be able to see the Salton Sea. He did and soon reported that he could see water past the coast and there were some islands in it. Everyone yelled that he was too far south and to turn north because there were no islands in the Salton Sea. He ended up ejecting and his aircraft landed in the water at the north end of the Gulf of Mexico (*sic*). The Mexicans gave him back to us at the border a bit later. The tail of the F-8 was sticking out of the water for a bit. I do not remember that we salvaged anything from it.

—F-8 Crusader Association website

PICK A DECK

Imagine that part of your mission brief was which of three decks you would use to launch. After the turbulence it created necessitated the

removal of her superstructure from amidships, the former battlecruiser HMS *Furious* (47) had an unobstructed flyon/flyoff deck and upper and lower hangar/flyoff decks. Wind tunnel testing produced a solution of retractable bridges and conning stations. The small, circular structures

Online resource



HMS *Furious* (47) underway following her recommissioning in 1925, an extended period in the shipyard having fully transformed the ship from a cruiser to a full-fledged aircraft carrier.

mounted on either side of the forward edge of the flight deck served as the ship's bridge during combat situations. They provided an enclosed location for the crew to navigate the carrier with a view forward. The starboard structure was the primary one used for navigation. These pseudo bridges were cramped, and visibility was described as "barely decent." When not conducting flight operations, there was a chart house/bridge that raised up, providing a somewhat higher vantage point. When aircraft were flying, the chart house retracted with its roof flush with the flight deck.

When *Furious* was eventually fitted with an island, it was for Flying Control (FlyCo), not navigation. Consequently, the ship's handling during flight operations "could be a bit unnerving for the assigned plane guard destroyer."

As first built, *Furious*, *Courageous* and *Glorious* were lead ships of one-time First Sea Lord and Admiral of the Fleet John "Jackie" Fisher's odd "large light cruisers." Detractors nicknamed them "Curious," "Spurious" and "Outrageous," and later, as the "Hush" ships after the last syllable of their names. All three were converted to carriers in the 1920s, *Courageous* and *Glorious* equipped with conventional starboard islands. Three decks were not the only novel element of *Furious*. The wardroom for midshipmen was circular as it was built in the old barbette for the 18-in. aft gun turret.

BOUNCES

- Old-timers referred to their wooden propellers as "sticks." Hence, when the engine quit, you had a "dead stick."
- During night field carrier landing practice before going to sea, a F/A-18 *Hornet* ingested one of those large fruit bats as it was just joining the runway centerline. A huge flame trail shot out of the exhaust, prompting the call, "302, you'll be a full stop on this one."
- When legendary RADM John "Jack" Christiansen closed out his logbooks after 34 years of service, he had about 6,000 hours and between 500 and 600 arrested landings. "I quit counting traps," he said. "I never saw much purpose in it. After all, how often have you parked your car?"
- During long transits like those from the Western Pacific to NavSta Norfolk, the standing joke was about the pilot who complained to the flight surgeon that he had no trouble sleeping at night and his morning sleep was OK, but he just tossed and turned all afternoon.

SKIP CRASH SPLASH

On the morning of 16 December 1983, ENS Larry Coy ejected from a TA-4J *Skyhawk* when the nose gear ripped off during a catapult launch off USS *Lexington* (AVT 16). Due to the angle of the ejection, he hit the water before the chute deployed. The plane guard helicopter picked him up astern the carrier.

"After two hours in medical and finding no major issues, the Doc told me the skipper of the *Lex* wanted to see me. Upon entering the bridge, I was greeted by an 'Admiral Halsey-looking' captain who said, 'Ensign Coy, sorry about running over you, but you were in the way!' After the briefest of pauses, he then added, 'Stay out the way next time!' Not knowing quite how to respond, I stood in silence as he then asked, 'Do you have any idea how lucky you are?' With grateful eyes I answered, 'Yessir, I know exactly how lucky I am!'

"The captain then decreed, 'Henceforth you shall always be known as Skip!'

"I quickly informed this career Naval Aviator and deep draft boat driver, 'Sir, I never skipped.'

"With no hesitation he declared, 'In that case, henceforth and forever you shall be known as Splash.'"



Naval History and Heritage Command



Workers at the American Propeller and Manufacturing Company in Baltimore, Md., at work assembling what aviators of the era called "sticks," 1918.

National Archives



Aircrew in a TA-4J *Skyhawk* await their turn on the catapult during carrier qualification on board USS *Lexington* (AVT 16) in 1989.

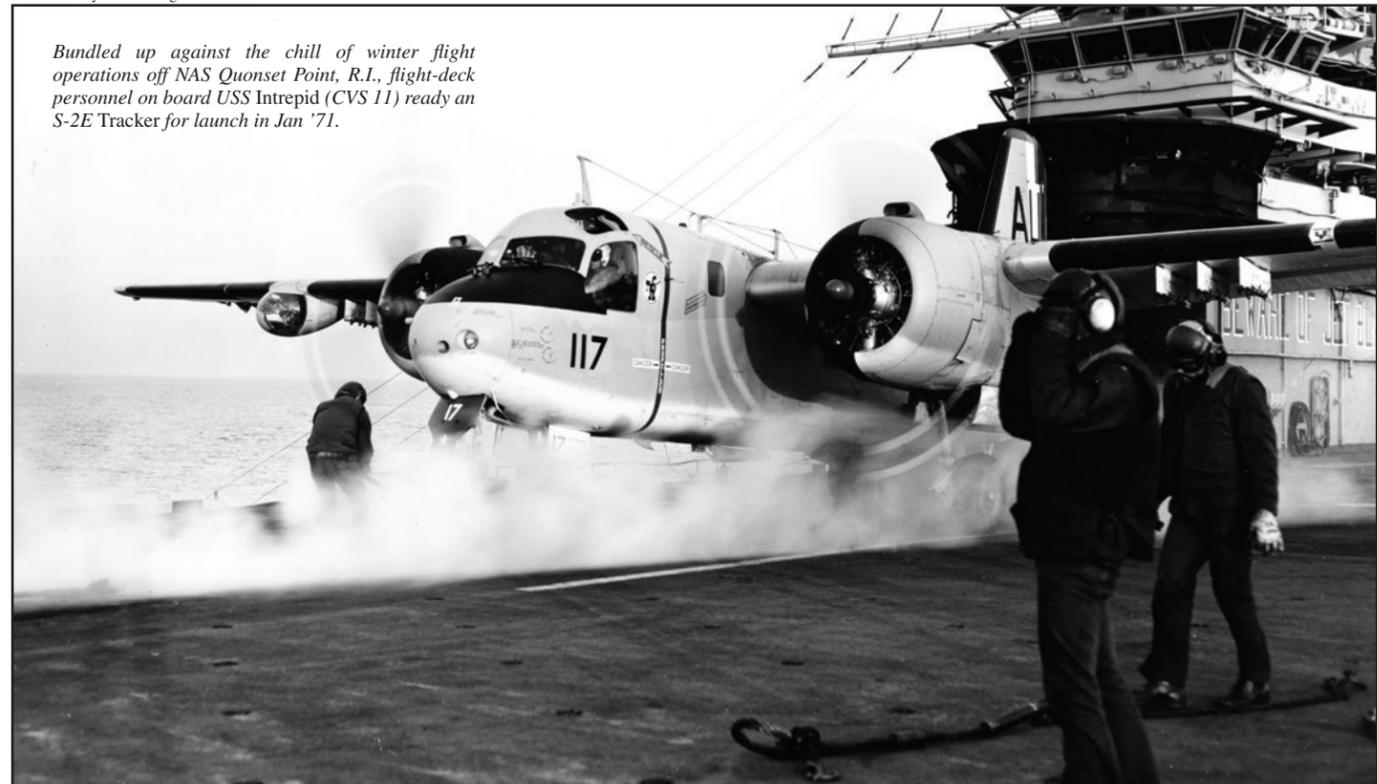


A VMCJ-1 EF-10B Skyknight, adorned with a Snoopy cartoon and electronic reconnaissance mission markings from Vietnam War service, pictured at MCAS El Toro, Calif.

PASS IN REVIEW

The EF-10B *Skyknight* had a combination aileron/spoiler control system. After incidents involving an activated, or “popped,” spoiler, and simultaneous attempt to fold the wings resulting in crunched spoilers, maintainers installed a fix — a simple weight on wheels squat switch. With weight on the main gear and a spoiler open, the wing on the side of the popped spoiler would not fold. It did not take long for clever members of the VMCJ-3 *Lieutenants’ Protective Association* (LPA) at MCAS El Toro to realize that on the ground, if you pushed the stick to the left and folded the wings, the left wing wouldn’t fold because of the fix, but the right wing would. The result was a fair representation of a salute. “While I was at VMCJ-3, members of the LPA, when at Air Force bases, would push the stick to the left and fold the wings as we taxied near the tower,” recalled a former squadron JO. “Then, as the ‘saluting’ *Skyknight* passed the tower, we would come up on the ground control frequency and broadcast in our best parade ground voice, ‘Paaass in review!’”

Naval History and Heritage Command



Bundled up against the chill of winter flight operations off NAS Quonset Point, R.I., flight-deck personnel on board USS Intrepid (CVS 11) ready an S-2E Tracker for launch in Jan '71.

DEFINE EARLY

In 1972, CVSG-56 claimed a record by making the earliest (midnight plus several minutes) and the latest (midnight minus several minutes) visual flight rules, day carrier landings. USS *Intrepid* (CVS 11) was on an anti-submarine training cruise in the North Atlantic in the land of the midnight sun beyond the Arctic Circle. Any claimants for a tie (we don’t know exactly how many minutes from midnight) in the 53 years since then?

YOUTHLY PURESOME MEETS SAC

For those unfamiliar with retired CDR Jack Woodul’s quasi-autobiographical series that appeared in *The Hook* between 1991 and 2011, here’s a sample. “I was cross-country back to NAS Dallas from Cecil [NAS Cecil Field] in my *Crusader*. When I turned the corner into Fort Worth Center airspace, they advised me that there was a 30-minute ATC [air traffic control] hold into their airspace due to WX [weather]. Um. No hab gas. Change my flight plan to ... um, Barksdale

in Shreesport (Grits pronunciation), and how about one of them vectors? All right, when I got there, I got put on a real long downwind. Seems that I arrived during a B-52 scramble-ex RTB [return to base] and I was fitted in amongst the *Buff*s. When I landed and exited the runway, I was met by a truck full of airmen with rifles pointed at me! Oy! I popped my canopy, they demanded, and I furnished my DD-175. They reluctantly figured I wasn’t a commie, but, even worse, still might be a secret Squid ORI inspector! They escorted me to the base of the tower, which was serving as a transient line for “suspicious creatures.” They finally allowed me to shut down and deplane. Eventually, things calmed down enough to tell me to git out and don’t come back. Worked for me.”

NO NIGHT, NO HOW

I knew a couple of CVLG(N)-41 (USS *Independence* (CVL 22)) aviators, including CDR William E. Henry, the senior night fighter officer and one of the few night aces, and CAG CDR Turner F. Caldwell. Caldwell wrote a *Saturday Evening Post* article titled, “We Put the Carriers on the Night Shift.” I’ve cited him a couple of times, as he quoted a steward’s mate. “Man wasn’t meant to fly no how. And if he was meant to fly, he wasn’t meant to fly off no boat. And if he was meant to fly off a boat, he dang sure wasn’t meant to fly off no boat at night!”

—Barrett Tillman

DAD SAVE

D.D. Smith tells this tale — now that the statute of limitations has run out — about his A-4 *Skyhawk* squadron’s return to NAS Cecil Field after a detachment to NavSta Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. “As I pulled my plane into the line, I could see Roberta and the kids at the rope. I had stuffed a couple of bottles of terrific Puerto Rican rum into the cockpit beside me. It would never have been a problem in the past, but looking to my right, I saw, to my horror, customs officials and dogs working their way toward me from cockpit to cockpit. Holy crap. I pointed excitedly to my

six-year-old [son] and frantically motioned for him to come up the ladder to my cockpit. After some bewildered hesitation, he scrambled up the ladder, and I thrust two bottles into his hands. He barely made it to the safety of the crowd before the feds approached my plane.”

Obscure Grumman: The F2F and F3F were look-alike single-seat, retractable gear biplanes. The F5F was a twin-engine interceptor, while the F10F Jaguar featured swing wings with an erratic flying tail. The F12F was the designation for an advanced F11F Tiger with upgraded engines.

Chock ’em, chain ’em and any contraband into the Catwalk.

Mark Aldrich collection



The XF10F-1 Jaguar pictured during flight testing at Edwards AFB, Calif., in 1952, the feline that inspired its nickname prominently painted on the fuselage.

National Naval Aviation Museum



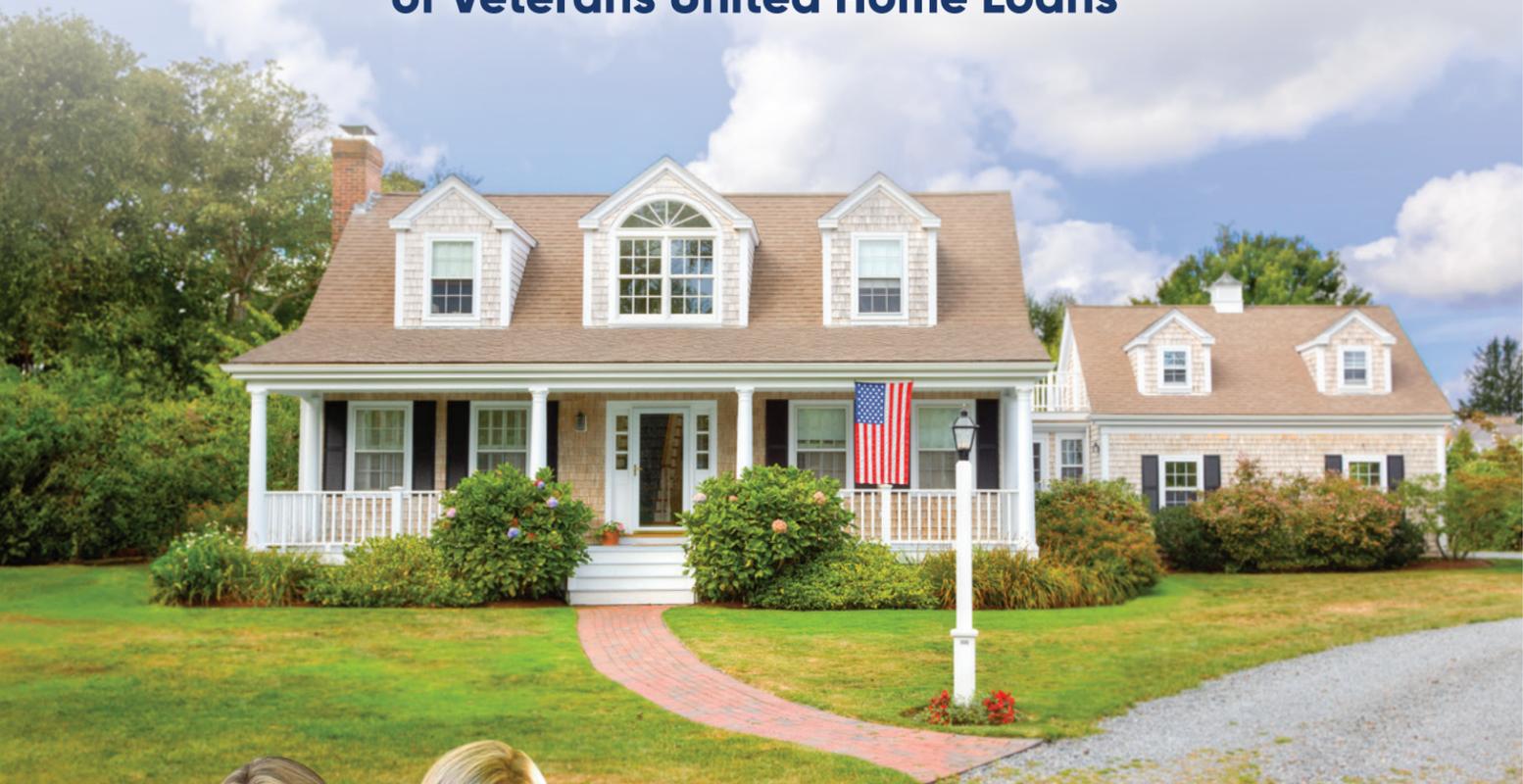
An F6F-5N Hellcat, distinguishable with its underwing radome, assigned to VF(N)-41 readies for launch from USS Independence (CVL 22), 10 Oct '44.



Discover Why Veterans Choose the

VA LOAN Goals

of Veterans United Home Loans



Proudly serving VA, NC, MD, CA, NV & OR

Looking to Buy, Sell or Refi? Connect today!



Wendy Edde | (757) 572-0279

Senior Loan Officer, NMLS #1200036

Ali Schellenberg | (757) 892-4295

Senior Loan Officer, NMLS #759461

(530) 492-8343, 670 Auburn Folsom Rd., Ste. 107, Auburn, CA 95603. VUAuburn.com. A VA approved lender; Not endorsed or sponsored by the Dept. of Veterans Affairs or any gov't agency. NMLS #1907 (www.nmlsconsumeraccess.org). Equal Housing Opportunity. Licensed by the Dept. of Financial Protection and Innovation under the CA Residential Mortgage Lending Act, License #41DB0-95680.

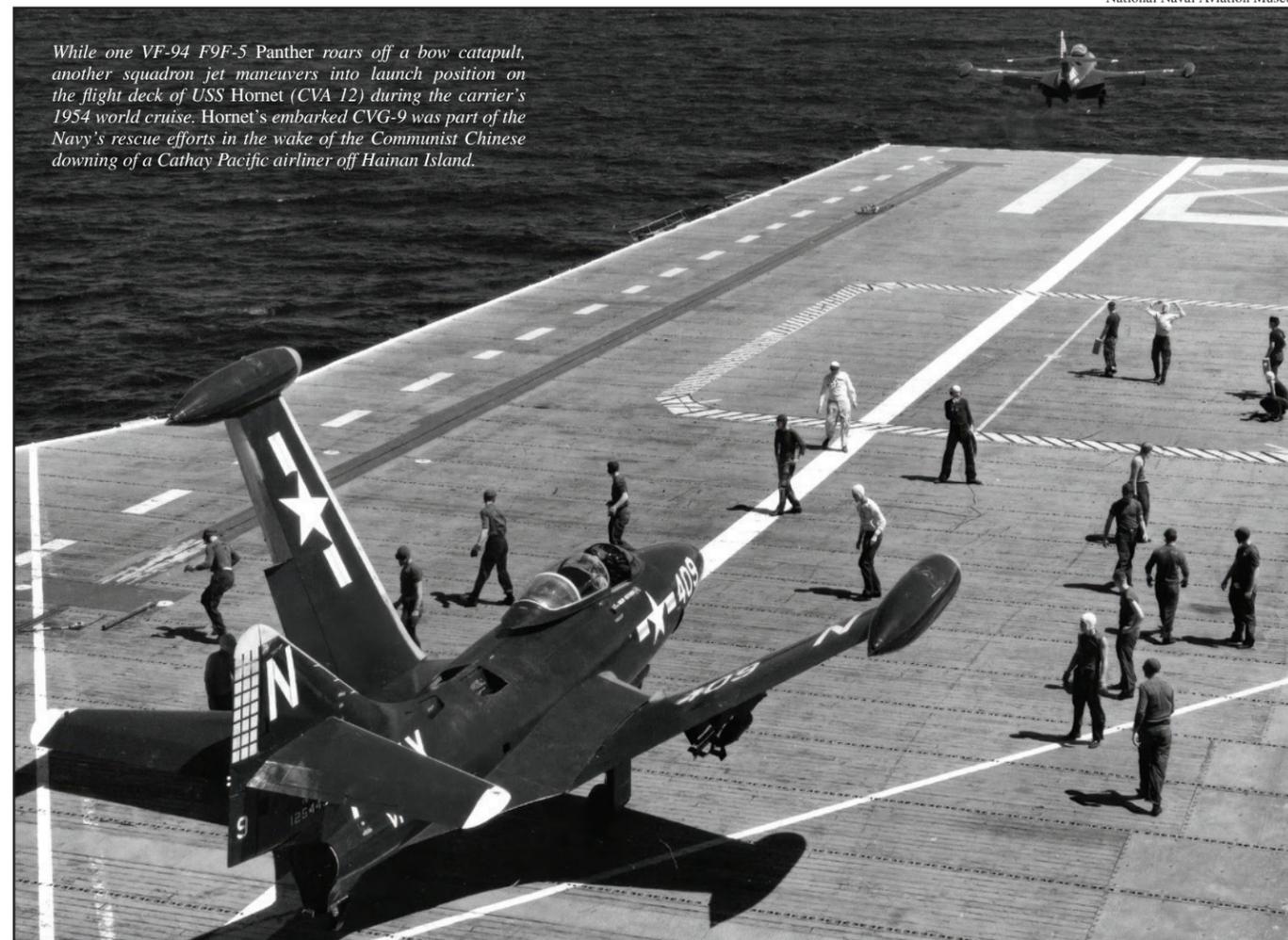


LAUNCH

Hornet's Nest Off Hainan Island

by Ryan W. Gilchrist

National Naval Aviation Museum



While one VF-94 F9F-5 Panther roars off a bow catapult, another squadron jet maneuvers into launch position on the flight deck of USS Hornet (CVA 12) during the carrier's 1954 world cruise. Hornet's embarked CVG-9 was part of the Navy's rescue efforts in the wake of the Communist Chinese downing of a Cathay Pacific airliner off Hainan Island.

Naval History and Heritage Command

Chinese-held Hainan Island in the South China Sea has consistently been the location for aerial incidents involving the U.S. Navy and the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). Examples include the Navy's first publicized air-to-air engagement of the Vietnam War on 9 April 1965, during which an F-4 Phantom II from the VF-96 Fighting Falcons off USS Ranger (CVA 61) and its crew was lost during a disorganized dogfight with Chinese MiG-17s. More recently on 1 April 2001, an aggressive intercept by a Chinese J-8 Finback resulted in a mid-air collision with a VQ-1 World Watchers EP-3E ARIES II intelligence-gathering aircraft. The intelligence and reconnaissance airplane made a forced landing on Hainan Island, where its crew was detained for 10 days. It took longer for the airplane and its sensitive equipment to be returned to U.S. custody. While both incidents received much attention at the time and to this day, another aerial engagement off Hainan Island seems to have faded into distant history.

Following the cessation of hostilities on the Korean peninsula in July 1953, Navy carriers deploying to the region were still on alert as tensions remained high. In March 1954, this nearly brought the U.S. into direct combat with China over French Indochina. As the pivotal battle of Dien Bien Phu raged, besieged French



French officers greet Commander, U.S. Pacific Command ADM Felix B. Stump at Tan Son Nhut Airport on 16 Nov '53. The following year brought the siege of Dien Bien Phu, a pivotal event that led to France's withdrawal from French Indochina.

troops could only be resupplied via air drops. The Chinese moved several squadrons of MiG-15s to the border with French Indochina, poised to intercept the transports.

Seventh Fleet carriers off the coast subsequently readied their aircraft for combat against the threatening fighters, maintaining numerous combat air patrols (CAPs) and alerts for a period of about three weeks, ready to defend the transports. If the situation warranted, conventional strikes by carrier-based aircraft were not out of the question. Fortunately, the situation never escalated, but it was much closer than people realized, prompting one F2H *Banshee* pilot assigned to the VF-172 *Blue Bolts* on board USS *Wasp* (CVA 18) to later say, "We were ready to go. I have never been more excited in my preparation for an assignment ... If the MiGs came south, we went after them. The orders were in place."

However, even with the temporary cooling of the situation in French Indochina, the region remained hot. Hainan Island, situated adjacent to the Gulf of Tonkin in the South China Sea, was quickly becoming a hub for communist air power. Utilized by the Japanese during World War II, the island was the target of air strikes late in the war as Allied forces advanced toward the Home Islands. Now, nine years later, Chinese aircraft dotted the island's landscape, from more conventional propeller-driven fighters to advanced MiG-15s. In the summer of 1954, one of the jets intercepted and buzzed a Qantas Airways Lockheed *Constellation*, the identity of the enemy plane confirmed by a Korean War veteran Naval Aviator who happened to be on board as a passenger. This raised alarms, prompting the issuing of instructions for civilian airliners to give Hainan Island a wide berth. However, the stage was set for disaster.

On 23 July 1954, a Cathay Pacific Douglas C-54 *Skymaster* on a flight from Bangkok to Hong Kong was flying 15-20 miles off the southeastern coast of Hainan Island, well beyond the 12-mile territorial airspace buffer zone. It should have been safe, but co-pilot Captain Cedric Carlton saw a low-wing aircraft with Chinese markings making a run from above the airliner. Pilot Captain Philip Blown then spotted a second aircraft making a diving firing run of its own. They were a pair of La-11 *Fangs* from the PLAAF's 85th Fighter Regiment.

The defenseless civilian airliner took multiple hits in the No. 1 and No. 4 engines as well as the wings and fuselage, killing several of the 19 souls on board. Attempts to throw off the attackers were in vain, as they bracketed the Cathay Pacific plane and continued to shoot. "I heard something noisy and could not identify it at first," said survivor Mrs. P.M. Thorburn. "Then I realized it was bullets and yelled at everyone to

Online resource



View of a La-11 Fang, the Soviet-built fighter flown by People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) pilots in shooting down the Cathay Pacific airliner and engaging CVG-5 aircraft in Jul '54.

get down, that we were being shot at." Through heroic effort as gunfire went off around him, Captain Blown managed to ditch the damaged airplane in the South China Sea. "I began evasive action, zig-zagging all the way from 9,000 ft. (sic) where the attack began to 5,000 ft. [where] I noticed my rudder controls were shot away," Blown recalled. "All the way down the attack continued. At 2,000 ft. my right aileron was shot away." The pilot's watch stopped when the airplane went into the water at 1147, three minutes after the attack began.

Fold3



Army Air Forces B-24 Liberators pictured during a World War II bombing run over Hainan Island before it became a Cold War flashpoint.



Hornet underway off NavSta Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, on 10 Jan '54, prior to embarking on a world cruise that would take her to the Western Pacific.

U.S. Information Agency

Thankfully, the multiple distress calls radioed during this hectic time were received and several friendly aircraft headed to the scene. Among them were a pair of SA-16 *Albatross* flying boats from the USAF's 31st Air Rescue Squadron at Clark AB in the Philippines. Meanwhile, USS *Hornet* (CVA 12) with CVG-9 embarked and USS *Philippine Sea* (CVA 47) carrying CVG-5 were underway off French Indochina. Commander, *First Fleet* VADM William K. Phillips was on board the former carrier and received a dispatch from NavSta Sangley Point asking for assistance after receiving distress calls from the Cathay Pacific flight. He ordered Commander, *Carrier Division Three* on board *Philippine Sea*, RADM Harry Don Felt, to launch aircraft immediately. While they were on their search legs, aircrew picked up radio communications that pinpointed the location of the survivors. With this information, *Hornet* launched her own aircraft, and both air groups assumed positions over the survivors.

Air Force Capt Jack T. Woodyard recalled that the seas were running between 10 and 12 feet, necessitating that he land his *Albatross* in more protected waters near a small island and taxi to the location of the survivors. With the flight engineer throwing a line from the bow and two crewmen casting another from the rear of the airplane, the raft holding the survivors was pulled through rough seas toward the seaplane. "[The] survivors were dazed. They just didn't say anything as they were being helped aboard," Woodyard stated. "They were in a state of shock. They appeared unable to comprehend what was happening."

With only nine of 19 passengers from the Cathay Pacific flight accounted for, the air groups resumed searching on 25 July. Areas of interest included small islands and junks off Hainan Island where people were possibly being held captive. USS *Rowe* (DD 564) and USS *Hunt* (DD 674) set up station 18 miles east of Tachao Tao on standby for possible rescues, and F9F-6 *Cougars* established a rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) station east of Tai Chow Island. However, the searches that day turned up nothing, and the two carriers moved farther out to sea for the night.



Air Force Capt Jack T. Woodyard carries six-year-old Valerie Parrish, one of the survivors of the Cathay Pacific DC-4 *Skymaster* that he and his crew pulled from the water near Hainan Island.

On the morning of 26 July, both carriers began launching their aircraft at 0900 to resume the search. CAG-5 CDR George C. Duncan, an ace in WW II flying F6F Hellcats and a veteran of Korean War combat, led the aircraft off *Phil Sea*. The main search party consisted of three divisions of AD-4/4B Skyraiders from the VF-54 Hell's Angels along with one section of F4U-5N Corsairs from VC-3, Detachment (Det) B logging the Navy's last Western Pacific (WESTPAC) deployment of the aircraft.

En route to the search area, the gaggle assumed different altitudes, fanning out their search. CAG Duncan's division was at 5,000 feet, with the others ranging from 3,000 feet down to 500 feet. These were led by two senior VF-54 pilots, XO LCDR Paul J. Wahlstrom, who received the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism flying F6Fs in WW II and Operations Officer LCDR William H. Alexander, an experienced Skyraider pilot. Finally, flying top cover at 10,000 feet were the two VC-3 Corsairs led by LCDR Edgar B. Salsig, the det's officer in charge, with wingman ENS Doyle L. Sutherland.

At 1010, not too long after establishing their search pattern, pilots spotted enemy aircraft approaching from the direction of Hainan Island. They were two La-11 Fangs, the same type of aircraft from the same unit that had shot down the Cathay Pacific flight. "The Reds were flying at about 6,000 feet," Duncan recalled. "They turned into us to make a regular run. We evaded them. They apparently didn't have any sense at all. They made three runs, but they couldn't fire on one run."

The division of ADs weaved with the Chinese plane to get in position for a shot. LT Roy M. Tatham had an opening but did not take it due to the close proximity of Duncan's Skyraider as they fought the geometry of the engagement. Continuing the weave, the able LT Tatham made two more runs, scoring on both opportunities. ENS Richard R. Crooks was also able to track the wounded bandit in a starboard turn, attaining more hits. The efforts of the two Skyraider pilots combined to send the La-11 spinning uncontrollably out of the fight and into the water.

The second La-11 appears to have gone after LCDR Alexander and his wingman, ENS John J. Zardius. The rest of the VF-54 pilots all swarmed the remaining bandit, and the full sequence of events is unclear to a degree. In Navy records, four Skyraider pilots shared credit in its destruction —

USN

LCDR Wahlstrom, LTJGs John L. Damian, Richard S. Ribble and John M. Rochford. However, this La-11, even after taking punishment from multiple U.S. aircraft, began a 20-degree dive for the shoreline, evidence that at least some of their hits were fleeting at best. Up above and eager to get in on the action, the VC-3 section raced in with the altitude advantage and plenty of speed. Their Pratt & Whitney R-2800 supercharged engines roaring, the Corsairs served one last enemy combatant with the meaning of "Whistling Death," the nickname of the airplane born over Pacific islands during WW II. In the lead, LCDR Salsig saddled in on the enemy fighter and fired his 20 mm cannons, scoring the killing blow that finally sent the La-11 crashing into the sea.

With the Navy planes now closer to the coast off Hainan Island, they were again fired upon, this time by a Chinese gunboat patrolling below, but they were not cleared to engage and risk expanding the incident further.

The adrenaline-filled Navy flyers returned to *Philippine Sea* and later appeared on board *Hornet* for a press conference, much of which appeared in local newspapers back home. From his headquarters in Hawaii, ADM Felix Stump, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, stated, "If any U.S. plane is attacked or approached with obvious hostile intent, it will fire back. In other words, you don't have to wait until you get your head blown off to shoot back." On Capitol Hill, Sen. Lyndon Johnson, D-Tex., voiced support for the action, his words ironic given the Tonkin Gulf incident that occurred a decade later during his presidency. "Regardless of the details, the fact still remains that the Chinese Communists are shooting at our men."

In some releases, the only pilots initially credited with aerial victories were Tatham and Crooks sharing the first La-11 and Salsig with the second. It is unclear how the exact details of the second engagement resulted in a kill shared by five aviators. Tatham and Crooks downed their La-11 together at roughly the same time; thus the kill credit was shared. Salsig's killing blow to the second La-11 came after the other Skyraiders had engaged it and it was still flying. In a similar instance over North Vietnam in 1972, the Navy awarded the crew whose missile killed an already slightly damaged MiG with sole credit for the kill.



VF-54 Hell's Angels AD Skyraiders pictured in formation prior to the squadron's 1954 deployment on board USS Philippine Sea (CVA 47). While known for their air-to-ground capabilities, the Spads proved their mettle in the air-to-air arena against Chinese fighters off Hainan Island in Jul '54.



VC-3, Det B pilots gather around a map in their ready room on board Philippine Sea. LCDR Edgar B. Salsig is second from left and ENS Doyle L. Sutherland is fourth from the left. The insignia featuring the nearsighted cartoon character Mr. Magoo chosen for the cruise is visible on their flight suits.

The July 1954 engagement off Hainan Island was the last instance to date during which U.S. Navy aircraft scored confirmed, unclassified air-to-air kills against Chinese aircraft. In an interesting side note, two very credible sources spoke of supposed engagements near Hainan Island immediately following *Operation Pierce Arrow*, the retaliatory air strikes launched against North Vietnam, claiming a handful of kills for Navy pilots. While no official documentation relating to such engagements can be found, news clippings from the beginning of August 1964 tell of Chinese MiGs flying all the way to the Vietnamese coast and confronting Navy jets, confirming they were highly active and harassing at this time. With the current political climate with China, it is doubtful any information will be released for the foreseeable future.

It is also notable that the air group that participated in the July 1954 engagements was CVG-5. Now designated CVW-5, it is the Navy's only forward-deployed carrier air wing, a position it assumed in 1973. With growing concern of conflict with China in the coming years, CVW-5 would certainly be in the vanguard of such an action, likely from the initial stages.

While times and technology have changed drastically, the lessons learned from the 1954 Hainan Island incident are clear — be vigilant and ready at a moment's notice. It did not take much for a relatively peaceful 1954 WESTPAC cruise in an unstable political environment to turn into combat. It is in this mission that Naval Aviation consistently proves its unique value, which must be maintained in the important years ahead with a renewed focus on the People's Republic of China.



A page from Philippine Sea's cruise book from 1954 featuring a map that highlights the action off Hainan Island with "Splash 2!"

When Rivalries Cease

by Matt Scales



A VAH-4 Fore Runners KA-3B Skywarrior returns to an unidentified carrier following a mission during the Vietnam War. The payload capability of what was once the Navy's primary carrier-based nuclear weapons delivery platform made the Whale adaptable to the aerial fueling mission.

Since the inception of the U.S. military, rivalries have existed among the different services. From jokes and the belief that one service is superior to the other, to serious disagreements between service leaders over missions and budgets, competition between the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps has always been a part of the landscape of the armed forces. While services may have their differences from time to time, when a fellow American is in trouble, service affiliations disappear, and the welfare of a fellow countryman becomes a unifying force. One of the greatest examples of this attitude was demonstrated by Navy and Air Force personnel on one day during one of America's longest wars.

Wednesday, 31 May 1967, dawned as a typical day in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Throughout the region, aircraft from across the U.S. military prepared for a variety of missions against North Vietnam. At Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) in northern Thailand, two F-104 *Starfighters* from the 435th Tactical Fighter Squadron, callsigns *Falstaff 21* and *Falstaff 22*, prepared to take off on their mission to provide top cover to an RC-130 *Commando Lance* flying over the Tonkin Gulf.

Meanwhile, at U-Tapao RTAFB, maintenance personnel were busy installing a Boom Drogue Adapter (BDA) on a KC-135 *Stratotanker's* refueling boom. The adapter was a necessary modification to the aircraft for its mission that day of refueling the F-104s as the *Starfighters* were one of the few Air Force fighters whose design used the same refueling system as Navy aircraft. As the maintainers installed the unusual piece of equipment, no one could have foreseen the historic and lifesaving effect the 10-ft. hose and basket would have later that day.

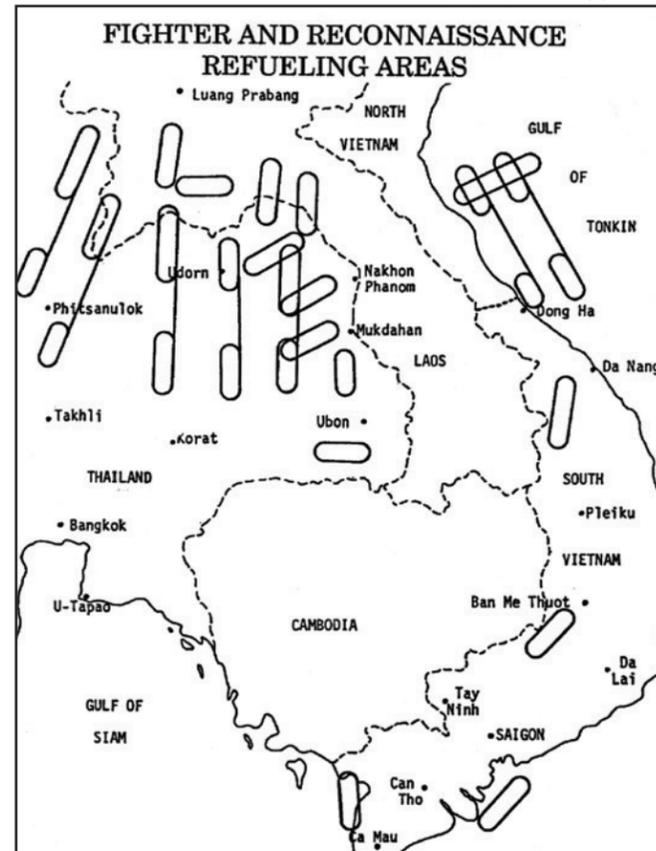
While maintenance personnel completed their work, Maj John Casteel along with copilot Capt Dick Trail, navigator Capt Dean Hoar and boom operator MSgt Nathan Campbell prepared for their unusually long flight. While typical tanker missions from U-Tapao involved flying over South Vietnam or on refueling tracks over the Tonkin Gulf before returning to Thailand, on this day the crew of the KC-135 was preparing to return to the United States. Their flight would take them from U-Tapao to a

refueling track off the southeast coast of North Vietnam where they would rendezvous with the F-104s before turning east and flying to Kadena AB, Okinawa. From there, they would begin their trip across the Pacific back to their home base of Clinton-Sherman AFB, Okla. The unusual flight also meant the KC-135 would be carrying 14 passengers, including two additional four-man KC-135 crews. The tanker's long flight necessitated

Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University



A B-52 Stratofortress lands at U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base with a KC-135 Stratotanker visible on the tarmac preparing to take off on an aerial refueling mission.



Map showing the racetrack patterns flown by U.S. Air Force tankers in support of combat strikes in the Vietnam War, during which they delivered 1.4 billion gallons of fuel.



USS Bon Homme Richard (CVA 31) pictured during one of the ship's six combat cruises as part of the "Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club" off North Vietnam.

adding a larger fuel load to the aircraft than that normally required for a short refueling mission over South Vietnam, yet another factor that would prove invaluable later in the day. The passengers and fuel loaded, the large tanker, callsign *Brown Anchor 21*, lifted into the sky at 0615.

As Air Force personnel prepared for their missions, some 600 miles away in the Tonkin Gulf, aircraft from CVW-21 on board USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA 31) prepared for an alfa strike against North Vietnam's Kep Airfield. It was considered a "harassment strike" by Commander, *Carrier Division Seven* RADM Vincent P. de Poix, a large-scale attack against the airfield earlier in the month having put it out of service. Six A-4C *Skyhawks* from the VA-76 *Spirits* were slated to lead the attack on the airfield located 37 miles northeast of Hanoi. Joining them were two *Skyhawks* from VA-212 flying anti-radar suppression and four more *Rampant Raiders* A-4Es providing flak suppression for the strike package. Among the latter was



Tailhook



A-4E Skyhawks assigned to the VA-212 Rampant Raiders pictured readying for launch from Bonnie Dick for a combat mission over North Vietnam, May '67.

National Naval Aviation Museum



LCDR Arv Chauncey of VA-212 off Bon Homme Richard, whose shootdown prompted the large-scale rescue effort on 31 May '67.

LCDR Arv Chauncey with ENS Steve Gray flying as his wingman. The Skyhawks, along with F-8E Crusaders from the VF-24 Red Checkertails and VF-211 Checkmates, A-1H Skyraiders from the VA-215 Barn Owls and all three KA-3B Skywarrior tankers from Detachment L of the VAH-4 Four Runners began launching from Bonnie Dick at 0849.

As the carrier launched her aircraft, the crew of Brown Anchor 21 winged their way over South Vietnam. As the tanker passed near Da Nang AB, Maj Casteel and Capt Trail casually remarked to each other that both runways there were operational that day, an unusual event since

SSgt Andy Sarakon, USAF



View of Da Nang AB in South Vietnam in Sep '70. Maj John Casteel landed Brown Anchor 21 at the sprawling air base following the wide-ranging tanking mission.

it had begun to experience more frequent enemy attacks but one that would prove helpful later in the day. Casteel then turned his aircraft north and set up in his racetrack pattern as MSgt Campbell prepared to refuel the two F-104s. Having already tanked on the KC-135 being relieved by Casteel's crew, the fighters were scheduled to receive three offloads from Brown Anchor 21 before returning to Thailand.

Over the Tonkin Gulf, CVW-21 aircraft rendezvoused and began their flight toward Kep. To avoid more heavily defended areas, the formation flew north of the airfield, paralleling the North Vietnam/China border before turning southwest toward their target. As the formation approached the airfield, they came under intense anti-aircraft fire. Among the first hit was LCDR Chauncey whose A-4 took rounds that destroyed his engine. Gliding as far as he could, he was finally forced to eject from his crippled Skyhawk. Observing a good chute and making radio contact with his wingman, ENS Gray immediately began coordinating a rescue for Chauncey. Quickly joining the effort, fellow Rampant Raiders CDR Marvin Quaid and LTJG Mark Daniels joined up and functioned as a radio relay for Gray, who was flying low over the mountains to keep Chauncey in sight. Quickly running low on fuel, Gray and Quaid turned command of the rescue over to VA-215 aircraft and return to Bonnie Dick. The attempt to extract a fellow American from enemy territory was only beginning.

While Gray had immediately called for a rescue helicopter before his squadronmate even hit the ground, the response was not immediate. Inaccurate intelligence of North Vietnamese MiG activity in the area provided to RADM de Poix caused him to delay. To counter this reported threat, as well as to replace aircraft too damaged during the attack to continue supporting the effort, Bon Homme Richard launched a four-ship rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) of F-8s from VF-24. While Chauncey had been the only member of CVW-21 shot down during the attack on Kep, many aircraft in the strike suffered battle damage that caused their aircraft to rapidly lose fuel. Having refueled the strike package prior to the attack and then provided fuel for the multiple damaged aircraft, the Skywarriors led by CDR John Wunsch from VAH-4 quickly realized that they also needed refueling support.



A VAH-4, Det L Skywarrior refuels a VF-24 Red Checkertails F-8E Crusader as other thirsty jets await their turn in the basket on 31 May '67.

USAF

Southwest of the Navy tankers, MSgt Campbell had just provided the first refueling for Falstaff flight when Maj Casteel and Capt Trail heard two near simultaneous radio calls from Water Boy, a radar site at Dong Ha, as well as CDR Wunsch on Guard (aircraft emergency frequency), both requesting emergency refueling support for two Navy tankers flying just south of Haiphong Harbor. Understanding the urgency of the situation, Casteel immediately headed north and prepared to help in any way he could. As they flew, they had to figure out how to do something none of them had ever done — refuel Navy aircraft.

The two services' unfamiliarity with each other showed immediately. As the two pilots started coordinating their rendezvous, Casteel told Wunsch he was at 28,000 feet. Wunsch replied that his KA-3Bs' fuel states were so low, they would be unable to climb to that altitude. Making an emergency descent, Casteel brought his KC-135 to 5,000 feet and attempted to locate the Navy tankers.

One of the first challenges faced by the crew was how the aircraft would find each other. "We were too low to receive help from our radar sites," Casteel later joked, "and I doubt if the North Vietnamese were interested in offering assistance." Tuning to a tactical air navigation (TACAN) frequency provided by a Navy destroyer operating as a radar picket ship with the callsign Red Crown, the KC-135 flew to the ship and began circling the destroyer. When the Whales arrived, they were unable to locate the Air Force tanker so Wunsch told Casteel to roll out of his turn onto a heading that would put him flying toward Haiphong Harbor. When Casteel informed the Navy pilot he had to turn, Wunsch replied, "If you turn now, I'll run out of gas before I can get to you." Agreeing to roll out, Casteel pointed the Air Force tanker toward the coast of North Vietnam. He remembered telling Capt Hoard (the navigator) "when he could stand it no longer, he should tell me, and we would turn. As the nose of my aircraft began to cover the mouth of Haiphong Harbor, the Navy tanker said 'turn' about the same time Dean said turn."

Finally making the rendezvous, the lessons continued. With a more critical fuel state, Wunsch approached the boom first. As the KC-135 copilot, Capt Trail operated the airplane's refueling system and turned on two of the tanker's four pumps, the setting used by the Air Force's version of the Skywarrior, the B-66 Destroyer. He quickly learned the pressure was too great when it pushed



A pilot's-eye view of the hose and drogue attachment on a KC-135 Stratotanker that allowed Brown Anchor 21 to conduct aerial refueling for VAH-4, Det L KA-3Bs.



The only photograph taken of the dual tanking as Brown Anchor 21 refuels LCDR Don Alberg's KA-3B, which in turn passes gas to a VF-24 F-8 whose tail is just visible behind the Whale.

Wunsch out of the KC-135's refueling basket. The pressure lowered to one pump, Wunsch again made contact and took a quick 2,300 pounds of fuel before moving to the tanker's right wing to allow his wingman, LCDR Don Alberg, to plug in. As the fuel flowed into his nearly empty tanks, the four F-8s from VF-24 called in saying they too were critically low on fuel. One was so low that he would embody the saying "desperate times call for desperate measures."

Approaching the KA-3Bs in formation with the Air Force tanker, the four-ship RESCAP from VF-24 needed gas urgently. Hearing their desperate situation, LCDR Alberg told his bombardier navigator to deploy their aircraft's refueling hose because, as he would remark later, "I knew we could take fuel from the KC-135 faster than we could give it to a receiver." Behind the unusual formation, LT Chip Harris, so low on fuel he was concerned with having to eject from his F-8, saw the refueling hose deploy from the *Skywarrior* and immediately plugged his *Crusader's* refueling probe into the tanker's basket. Grateful to be receiving fuel, Harris did not think about the fact that he had just completed the first known "trilevel" refueling. Concerned with the confusing radio traffic he was hearing, Maj Casteel asked, "What's going on back there?" The answer came from one of the F-104 pilots who had stayed with the big tanker as it headed north. Observing the KA-3B plugged into the KC-135's basket with an F-8 plugged into the *Skywarrior*, the Air Force pilot replied, "You've got a daisy chain going on."

Having received enough fuel to return to the carrier, LT Harris immediately turned his F-8 back over the Tonkin Gulf before being recalled by the flight lead, CDR Red Isaacks. The rest of the RESCAP (LCDR John Bartocci and LCDR Chuck Blaker) then refueled from the A-3s before returning to *Bon Homme Richard*. Now too low on fuel to make it to Kadena, the KC-135 crew headed south with their F-104 escort, now grateful that they had previously heard that both runways at Da Nang were open.

The tanker's interaction with the Navy was not over, however. Having also launched in support of the rescue effort of LCDR Chauncey (and later LTJG Mark Daniels, who was rescued), two F-4B *Phantom IIs* from the VF-143 *Pukin' Dogs* called up also needing gas to get back to their ship, USS *Constellation* (CVA 64). Still glad to help and with fuel to give, the tanker gave each F-4 3,000 pounds, saving the aircraft flown by LCDR Pat Thompson with radar intercept officer (RIO) LTJG Ed Barczak along with wingman ENS Barry Miller with RIO ENS Davy Jones. With no other aircraft in need of fuel, the KC-135 landed at Da Nang, quickly refueled, and proceeded to Kadena for the crew to face the music for what they had done.

Stories conflict as to the potential consequences they faced for their actions that day. Capt Trail remembered continuing their flight to Guam, where they debriefed with Maj Gen William Crumm, who was responsible for all Strategic Air Command (SAC) assets in the Pacific (B-52 *Stratofortresses* and KC-135s). Trail recalled Crumm asking them for details about the refueling before telling them a story of a young Maj Crumm who had broken a rule as a B-29 *Superfortress* pilot to ensure a particular bombing mission to Japan was successful. Casteel, as the aircraft commander, remembered the uncertainty of his fate lasting well into the crew's return to Oklahoma. It even appeared to be heading toward a court-martial. The crew of the KC-135 had broken several rules. Not only had the tanker flown much farther north than allowed, the refueling took place a mere 20 miles off the coast. Additionally, Casteel had flown his aircraft that far north to refuel Navy aircraft at a time when, according to Trail and Casteel, SAC regulations forbid Air Force tankers from refueling Navy aircraft without permission.

To top it all off, after the event the crew landed their large aircraft in South Vietnam, a move that though all but forbidden, ultimately may have helped save the careers of the crew. While maintenance personnel at the base refueled the KC-135 and Maj Casteel reported to Air Force officials



Chief of Naval Operations ADM David L. McDonald was so appreciative of the efforts of the crew of Brown Anchor 21 that he purportedly contacted Air Force Chief of Staff Gen John P. McConnell threatening to award each of them the Navy Cross if they were disciplined for their actions.

the fact that they had diverted, a passenger on board the tanker and a KC-135 pilot himself, 1st Lt Gary Leuders, mentioned to a Marine pilot why the tanker had landed at the base. According to Leuders, the Marine then got word to RADM de Poix about the fact that the Air Force tanker had saved many Navy aircraft. Months later, Casteel remembered discussions over his actions abruptly stopped after Gen John P. McConnell, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, reportedly received a phone call from Chief of Naval Operations ADM David L. McDonald. A Naval Aviator, he apparently told McConnell, "If you court-martial those guys, I'll pin the Navy Cross on their chest in the courtroom."

In the end, all four crew members of *Brown Anchor 21* received the Distinguished Flying Cross. They were awarded the 1967 Mackay Trophy for the most meritorious flight of the year. Despite a valiant effort from aviators off both *Bon Homme Richard* and *Constellation*, LCDR Arv Chauncey was captured and endured 2,105 days of captivity before his release on 4 March 1973. When asked about that day, individuals involved in the unique event responded in different ways. Steve Gray, who later documented his experiences in his book *Rampant Raider*, described 31 May 1967, as "the worst day of my life." In a speech to the 1968 graduating class of Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, Calif., John Casteel said of the day, "I've heard a lot of distress calls from other pilots. It's a pretty useless feeling because there isn't anything you can do to help. This time it was different." Similarly, Don Alberg knew Chip Harris needed fuel and simply deployed his refueling hose to help a fellow Naval Aviator. Harris joked that he didn't do anything special and if anything, was foolish to allow his *Crusader* to get so low on fuel. In a war filled with stories of loss and frustration and on a day that included those emotions for a number of Naval Aviators, other individuals wearing silver wings were willing to bend rules and try things that had never been done before and in doing so, proved no matter what color a person's uniform is, when a brother-in-arms is in trouble, rivalries cease.

The opinions and assertions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense.



Below: Maj John Casteel, USAF(Ret), left, and Lt Col Dick Trail, USAF(Ret) share memories in the cockpit of the KC-135 Stratotanker they flew as Brown Anchor 21, on the occasion of the airplane's transfer to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force on 30 Apr '22.

Return from Rabaul

by Hill Goodspeed



PH1 Paul Barnett's photograph showing Japanese ships under attack in Rabaul's Simpson Harbor on 5 Nov '43.

The U.S. military placed a heavy emphasis on documenting combat actions during World War II. Famous Hollywood producers like John Ford and William Wyler served in uniform, the talents that drew theatergoers to the silver screen in peacetime capturing Americans in combat from the Battle of Midway to bombers unleashing ordnance high above Germany. Civilian war correspondents and military photographers alike produced some of the most famous images in history. When it came to Naval Aviation, a team of photographers under the command of CAPT Edward Steichen fanned out across the Pacific and European Theaters. Their cameras captured carrier operations, not only in the technology of ships and aircraft, but also the inherent human emotion and sacrifice of serving in combat. Such was the case on board USS *Saratoga* (CV 3) on 5 November 1943.

According to an official Marine Corps history of WW II, the "very name — Rabaul — haunted the thinking of Allied leaders in the South and Southwest Pacific." Called the "Gibraltar of the Pacific," the Japanese base on the island of New Britain featured a natural harbor ringed by airfields. It posed a threat to the lines of communication between the U.S. and Australia and could be used as a base of operations for Japanese forces to counter Allied offensives in New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Following the seizure of Guadalcanal, the Allies commenced *Operation Cartwheel*, which included parallel offensives by forces under the command of GEN Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea and those led by ADM William F. Halsey Jr. advancing up the Solomon Islands chain to establish airfields from which air strikes could exert constant pressure on Rabaul. As part of the latter effort, forces went ashore at New Georgia in June 1943 followed by an assault against Vella Lavella in August.

Naval History and Heritage Command



Commander, South Pacific Force ADM William F. Halsey Jr., seated center, at a planning session behind the front line on Bougainville with Marine Corps Maj Gens Allan H. Turnage, left, and Roy S. Geiger, Nov '43.

On 1 November 1943, U.S. Marines landed on Bougainville, which upon the completion of airfields on the island would place Allied air power just over 200 miles from Rabaul. To counter this threat, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) dispatched a powerful surface force from the Central Pacific base at Truk Atoll to disrupt the landings. A U.S. Army Air Forces B-24 *Liberator* spotted the force on 4 November as it headed toward Rabaul to refuel and replenish before sailing for Bougainville.

Seeing an opportunity to catch the enemy force at anchor before it could descend on the ships of the U.S. amphibious forces supporting the Marines ashore on Bougainville, Halsey ordered *Saratoga* and USS *Princeton* (CVL 23) into action. The former carrier commander understood the risks facing the aircrew on board the flattops attacking such a heavily defended target, later writing that he "sincerely expected both air groups to be cut to pieces and both carriers stricken, if not lost."

While the ships, designated *Task Force 38*, made their approach, pilots and aircrewmembers readied for what they knew would be a most difficult mission. Among them was AOM2 Kenneth Bratton of Oxford, Miss. He had joined the Navy less than two weeks after the Japanese attack

on Pearl Harbor and reported to VT-12 on 28 February 1943, just days before personnel of the recently established squadron boarded ships in California bound for Hawaii. There the squadron operated with other elements of CVG-12 at NAS Puenene on Maui. Departing for Noumea, New Caledonia, in late June, the air group embarked *Saratoga* for the first time on 1 August.

Bratton had eight combat missions under his belt and was slated to fly the mission against Rabaul on board the TBF *Avenger* of CAG CDR Henry H. Caldwell along with another aircrewman, ACRM R.W. Morey. PH1 Paul Barnett would ride as a passenger to document the mission against Rabaul, one of the typical roles of the CAG at the time to conduct bomb damage assessment of the attack. Also on board *Sara* was LT Wayne Miller, whose duties did not include flying an airplane or commanding Sailors as part of one of the shipboard divisions. Assigned to Steichen's Naval Aviation Photographic Unit, he wielded a camera with the task of visually documenting the forthcoming strike.

Beginning just before 0900 the first of 97 aircraft launched from *Saratoga* and *Princeton*. The cloud cover that concealed



LT Wayne Miller, USNR



A crowd of Sailors assembled on "Vulture's Row" and the flight deck as a plane director signals the pilot of an F6F-3 Hellcat on board USS *Saratoga* (CV 3), Nov '43.



CDR Henry H. Caldwell pictured during his command of CVG-12 on board Saratoga. "It is hard to find a finer fellow than Howard," his Naval Academy classmates wrote of Caldwell, who was a star athlete at Annapolis and graduated from Sparks High School, near where Tailhookers gather each year.

the approach of the ships also hid the strike aircraft for a period en route to Rabaul, where clear skies revealed a harbor packed with ships. "As our planes approached," the squadron history for VF-23 off Princeton recorded, "the harbor was protected by an umbrella of anti-aircraft fire, the likes of which our boys had never experienced before and hope never to see again. Japanese fighter planes swarmed the sky ... everything the enemy could get airborne."

The attackers gave as good as they got. Of the seven heavy cruisers whose sighting triggered the raid, only one emerged unscathed with four suffering significant damage. In addition to preventing IJN surface ships from impacting the landings on Bougainville, wrote Saratoga Commanding Officer CAPT John H. Cassidy, "It is further believed that the Japanese conception of Rabaul as an attack-proof fleet base was shattered and that it is probable that the danger of further naval air attacks may force the abandonment of Rabaul by the Japanese as a major base." Indeed, the subsequent air campaign against the base would render it unnecessary to seize it by amphibious assault.

As some of the last airplanes of the strike group to retire from the target area, the TBFs of VT-12 were subjected to intense attacks by enemy aircraft, with seven planes suffering battle damage. "The ruggedness of the TBF is attested to by the return of one with 109 bullet holes, another with 87 holes and still another shot up so completely that sufficient control was not available for a carrier landing, but a normal water landing was effected," read the squadron history. All told, CVG-12 lost three airplanes and 30 suffered some degree of battle damage. Five aircraft failed to return to Princeton, one made a forced landing near the ship and 10 recovered aboard with battle damage.

Caldwell's TBF and escorting F6F Hellcats flown by ENS Carlton Roberts and LTJG H.M. Crockett drew the attention of eight Zero fighters. In a running aerial battle that lasted some 25 minutes, the air group commander employed his forward-firing machine gun to drive the enemy off the tails of the escort pilots. However, Roberts' airplane suffered such damage that he had to break off from the engagement. Crockett, although bleeding from wounds in the face and arm, stayed in the fight. He managed to land his Hellcat, which was riddled by 200 bullet holes, on board Princeton.

Caldwell managed to shoot down one of the enemy fighters. Bratton, manning the gun in the Avenger's ball turret, splashed another one. "He was coming almost head on at 300 miles per hour, and only a few hundred feet away," the gunner remembered. "He went down in a plume



Left to right, ENS Charles W. Miller and LTJGs Henry H. Dearing and Bus Alber head toward their F6F Hellcats on board Saratoga prior to launching for the attack on Rabaul, 5 Nov '43.

of black smoke." Moments later, the Japanese exacted their revenge. Bullets tore into the turret, knocking the machine gun out of commission. Three rounds struck Bratton in his leg, and another shattered his knee.

Barnett, who had already captured a panoramic photograph of Japanese ships smoking in Rabaul's Simpson Harbor, kept peering through the lens of his camera. A bullet slammed into his head, killing him instantly just after he snapped his last image of a Zero coming in for a kill.

With one dead and one wounded, Caldwell eventually managed to find concealment in a cloud bank, a newspaper article of the time describing his airplane as a "flying wreck. Its rear turret had been shot away, its radio blasted out of commission, one landing wheel was gone, its wing flaps were useless, and its ailerons and tail had been chewed by more than 100 bullets." The pilot knew the seriousness of Bratton's wounds, the gunner crediting him with a determination to get the crippled airplane back aboard ship because Bratton would have been unable to climb into a life raft if the Avenger landed in the water.

The LSO gave the CAG a waveoff on his first approach. "As we went around for another try the engine conked [out]," Bratton recalled. "I thought the jig was up then, but the 'old man' gave the engine a shot with the fuel pump, and it caught." Despite the battle damage and with only one wheel down, Caldwell skillfully recovered on the flight deck of Saratoga. Amidst the scramble of personnel surrounding the CAG's airplane to render assistance was LT Miller.

That morning he looked across the flight deck and captured the silhouetted figures of personnel against the dawn as the carrier approached Rabaul. When three Naval Aviators headed prior to their airplanes prior to launch, he was there to photograph their purposeful strides. His camera then took in the scenes of the returning strike aircraft. An SBD Dauntless of VB-12 arrived with a wounded gunner. Miller snapped images of ARM1 Alva Parker being helped out of the airplane and lying in a litter on the flight deck with blood splatters on his Mae West life vest.

When Caldwell's battered TBF recovered, Miller positioned himself first on the starboard side as personnel opened a fuselage hatch, seeing Barnett's body. The image shows the air group commander rising out of the cockpit and looking back down the port side of the airplane. Litter bearers move toward the camera. Miller followed them to the other side of the airplane, arriving just in time to witness Bratton's removal from the ball turret of the Avenger. His facial expression reflects the pain from his wounds as one man lifts him out of the airplane while positioned on the wing, which is lower than normal because of the collapsed main



ARM1 Alva Parker, wounded in the neck and shoulders while flying as a gunner in an SDB Dauntless over Rabaul, awaits transport to sick bay on board Saratoga on 5 Nov '43.

mount. Two other Sailors reach up to assist while standing on the flight deck. In an instant, Miller produced one of the most famous photographs of the war.

The severity of Bratton's wounds prompted his evacuation to the United States, where he was hospitalized on the West Coast for initial treatment and then allowed to fly home in mid-December 1943 to visit his family, spending time with his sisters in Memphis, Tenn., before traveling to nearby Oxford to see his parents. A newspaper article noted at the time that he had two brothers serving in uniform, one on board a subchaser in the South Pacific and another an Army sergeant at Camp Forrest, Tenn.

Meanwhile, Miller's photograph appeared in newspapers and magazines around the country, prompting the Navy to send Bratton to visit war workers in factories that collectively formed the "Arsenal of Democracy." "Battle-scarred and with more than 100 pieces of shrapnel still in his body" was how a reporter described him while covering a visit to the Rumsey Manufacturing Corporation in Seneca, N.Y., where Bratton stressed the importance of "keeping on the job." In Rochester, a visit to the Samson-United Corporation was especially poignant since the company manufactured turrets for the Avenger. He was able to sit in one for the first time since the Rabaul strike. In Pittsburgh, a stop at the plant that made bulletproof glass prompted him to recount how it saved his life. "A rain of bullets splattered the turret beside my head, but the glass served its purpose, and I was not hurt. Then my gun controls went out and a stream of slugs coming through the fuselage caught me in the legs and hips."



Flight-deck personnel surround the heavily damaged TBF Avenger flown by CAG-12 CDR Henry H. Caldwell after its return from Rabaul on 5 Nov '43.

A tour of the Tarrytown, N.Y., plant of the Eastern Aircraft Division of General Motors, which built TBM *Avengers*, included Bratton receiving the Air Medal from RADM Clark H. Woodward and seeing the airplane in which he returned to *Saratoga* on that fateful day. The battered torpedo bomber had been sent back to the States so war workers could see the importance of their efforts on the home front. At Eastern's Linden, N.J., plant, he joined Broadway actress Mary Martin commemorating the production of the 2,500th FM *Wildcat*. These visits proved to be his final service in uniform before he received a medical discharge on 1 December 1944.

CDR Henry Caldwell received the Navy Cross for the mission over Rabaul. It would not be his last brush with danger. As commanding officer of USS *Pine Island* (AV 12) during *Operation Highjump* in the Antarctic during 1946-47, he was an observer on board a PBM *Mariner* that crashed into a mountain on Thurston Island. Three personnel on board were killed, the remaining six, which included Caldwell, surviving in the harsh polar environment for 13 days until their rescue. He eventually retired as a rear admiral and passed away in 1985.

LT Wayne Miller lived to the age of 94, an obituary that appeared in 2013 relating that he had been scheduled to fly in Caldwell's aircraft over Rabaul on 5 November but gave up his place to Barnett. His wartime service, he once said, gave him the opportunity to "photograph mankind and explain man to man." His time in the Navy took him to the Philippines and the invasion of southern France, and he was among the first to photograph Hiroshima after the dropping of the atomic bomb. In the postwar years he captured life on Chicago's South Side and joined Steichen again, contributing to an exhibition called the "Family of Man" at the Museum of Modern Art with photographs of his wife giving birth and caring for their son. The image of Kenneth Bratton remained one of his most famous photographs.

Following his discharge, Bratton married Mary Louise Brister in 1947. The couple raised four children, and he worked for many years as a salesman for the Hill-Behan Lumber Company, living in Mississippi and Louisiana. At times in the postwar years, the famous photograph of him resurfaced, including in a 1954 *Saturday Evening Post* article written by National Naval Aviation Museum

Charles Lindbergh. However, most knew little of his wartime exploits and an obituary published at the time of his death in New Orleans in 1982 made no mention of his naval service during WW II when a moment in time came to symbolize the resolve and sacrifices of those on the front lines.



LT Wayne Miller, USNR



LT Wayne Miller arrived just in time to photograph Sailors removing AOM2 Kenneth Bratton, the pain of his wounds etched on his face, from his TBF Avenger after surviving a running air battle with Japanese fighters over Rabaul.

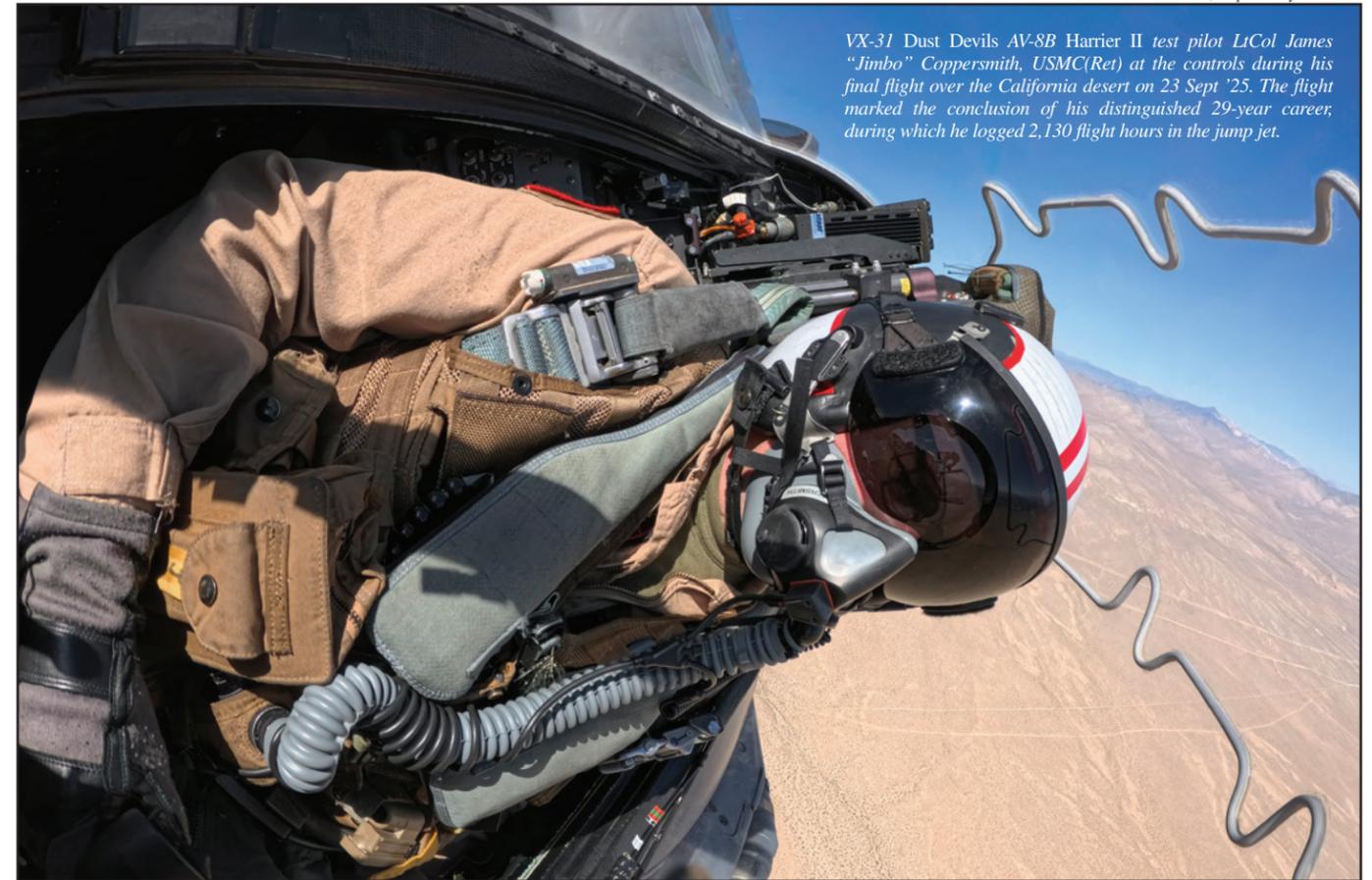


Bratton receives the Air Medal from RADM Clark H. Woodward during a visit to the Eastern Aircraft Division of General Motors plant in Tarrytown, N.Y., in 1944. Visible in the foreground is the TBF Avenger airplane in which he was wounded during the raid on Rabaul.

End of an Era: VX-31 Retires Harrier Fleet After Decades of Testing

by Alan de Herrera

Unless otherwise noted, all photos by the author



VX-31 Dust Devils AV-8B Harrier II test pilot LtCol James "Jimbo" Coppersmith, USMC(Ret) at the controls during his final flight over the California desert on 23 Sept '25. The flight marked the conclusion of his distinguished 29-year career, during which he logged 2,130 flight hours in the jump jet.

The warm desert wind blew softly from the southwest as VX-31 *Dust Devils* pilot LtCol James "Jimbo" Coppersmith, USMC(Ret), the squadron's civilian technical director, climbed into the cockpit of his AV-8B *Harrier II* for one last sortie, closing the final chapter on the squadron's four decades of development history with the vertical/short takeoff and landing (VSTOL) aircraft. This was more than just a final flight; this was the end of an era, woven into the *Harrier's* iconic 54-year legacy. For Coppersmith, it was also the end of a 29-year career, accumulating 2,130 hours at the controls of the notorious jump jet, a machine as unforgiving as it is iconic.

The Rolls-Royce *Pegasus* engine screamed behind his canopy like a howling beast as he ran up the RPMs on *Coso 88*, squatting low and menacing at the edge of NAWS China Lake's 7,700-ft. runway. He scanned the gauges that had guided him through countless flights, each instrument a map of battles fought and lessons learned. His right hand gripped the control stick, muscle memory guiding every move. His eyes traced every dial and readout. Through the large bubble canopy, the Mojave shimmered in the morning light. Inside, Coppersmith felt the old, unspoken bond between himself and the machine he nicknamed "Christine." This wasn't just another hop into the blue. This was the last ride, the last nibble on the razor's edge.

The radio crackled, "*Coso 88* cleared for takeoff." He slammed the throttle forward to full thrust. Off the brakes, a loud burst of dirty thunder ripped across the desert. The engine wailed like a banshee, knocking him back into his seat. A deafening roar filled the cockpit as the *Harrier* blasted down the runway, the jet wash searing the desert scrub. The ground rumbled, shaking the cockpit and rattling his helmet, drowning out memory, fear and reason, everything but the mission ahead. Every control input — rudder, stick, throttle — was a negotiation with chaos.

At 850 feet, he yanked the nozzle lever and felt the 23,000 pounds of vectored thrust quickly lift him off the ground as the *Harrier* clawed its way into the California sky.

Stocky, short-winged and single seat with a single turbofan engine, the AV-8 *Harrier* is a light attack brawler with a storied reputation of being dangerous both to fly and, with its bombs slung low and a 25 mm cannon in its belly, to adversaries. The airplane was a crazy idea that broke conventions, an audacious challenge hurled at the laws of physics and the staid minds of aviation orthodoxy.



Coso 88 departs NAWS China Lake for its final flight over the California desert. VX-31 retired the aircraft on 23 Sep '25, ending four decades of *Harrier* flight testing and evaluation.



An AV-8B Harrier II assigned to the VMM-163 (Reinforced) Evil Eyes recovers on the flight deck of USS Makin Island (LHD 8) during Amphibious Squadron/Marine Expeditionary Unit Integration Training (PMINT) off San Diego on 16 May '14.

Originally engineered by the United Kingdom in the 1960s, the *Harrier* was all straightforward, mechanical controls. Without computers or fly-by-wire, it was a pilot's airplane with linkages, chains and cables — Pure stick-and-rudder flying. It was the kind of machine that did not forgive mistakes. It punished them. "It's a really hard jet to master," said Col Ben "Lawman" Hancock, USMC(Ret). "You had to have a very smart left hand because that hand controlled the throttle, the power and the nozzles."

"The *Harrier* was the genesis of Marine Corps TACAIR," former pilot Maj Frank "Chomps" Zastoupil. "You were able to take off vertically [and] land on short runways, even in the tree lines and grass fields."

"[It] is the ultimate example of flexible basing," former AV-8 pilot Derek "Loob" Mills told me. "Boats, grass, dirt, parking lots, soccer stadiums ... they all looked like viable options to a jump jet pilot."

The Marines took the original British oddball, hacked and hardened it, then launched it from forward operating bases near the front lines and the stubby decks of amphibious assault ships near the shore, making the *Harrier* a cornerstone of Marine Corps aviation's most sacred mission — close air support (CAS). "There's one word that describes the CAS mission — righteous," according to Jack "Blaster" Brown, who flew the airplane in the 1970s. "You went lower, released lower. You exposed yourself because you were consciously connected to those guys on the ground."

Zastoupil continued, "To have been that good at close air support, to have been that talented at that mission set — supporting the ground forces — that was the key to the *Harrier* ethos."

Operation Desert Storm and the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria were battlefields where the CAS mission was not just a tactic. It was a lifeline. When the world went to hell and the enemy closed in, the forward air controller's voice crackled over the radio. "Where are the *Harriers*?"

The airplane didn't own the sky. It owned the dirt, the grit and the fight. It wasn't love for the attack pilots who wrangled this beast and made the impossible look routine. It was respect, hard and raw, every time a "Devil Dog" strapped into a *Harrier*. "You were taming the dragon," Zastoupil said. "It took extremely talented pilots to fly it."

VX-31 has served as the operational test bed for the AV-8B *Harrier II*'s evolution, driving innovation, developing new capabilities and supporting the fleet and allied forces with advanced weapons, sensors, pods and procedures. By teaming test pilots with software developers, systems engineers and weapons experts, VX-31 evaluated everything from flight control logic to laser targeting pods and night vision capability. The *Dust Devils* evaluated Link 16 integration for the modern battlefield, precision weapons, survivability systems and even biofuel. They broke what needed breaking, fixed what needed fixing and rebuilt everything better. In doing so, they transformed a notoriously challenging jump jet into a safer, more lethal and more reliable combat asset, pushing the *Harrier* to the edge, then pushing it further.

"Over the years, we've continued to add more things, more capabilities," Flight Test Engineer Tom Crouse observed. "It's been a nonstop churn of upgrading the *Harrier*'s systems. It's one of the last true low-level CAS mission aircraft." Flight Test Director Harvey Pierce noted, "The biggest evolution for us was going from analog to digital with the OSCARS (Open Systems Core Avionics Requirements/Standards) program. We upgraded the system to integrate newer weapons. We just kept putting



Maj Alec "Cosmo" Rackish conducts a preflight inspection of his AV-8B Harrier II before the squadron's final weapons test mission at NAWS China Lake on 3 Jun '25. He was the last active-duty Marine Corps test pilot to fly Harriers in VX-31.

more stuff into the airplane." VX-31's hands-on, code-to-cockpit approach kept the AV-8B *Harrier II* relevant long after its 1985 debut, embodying disciplined experimentation and inventive engineering.

The airplane's V/STOL capability enabled launch and recovery from amphibious assault ships in support of littoral operations, turning their decks into flexible, mobile airfields that could push air power right up to the shoreline. Nothing about it was routine, though; more like a precision ritual skimming the boundary between control and chaos. Combat-loaded, pilots blasted off from the swaying flight deck in just 800 feet, using only the airplane's own power. They made a thrust-vectoring vertical landing back on a patch of steel barely wider than its wings. There were no catapults and no arresting cables to catch a tailhook. Add night operations in rough seas while low on fuel, and you had the makings of a real nightmare.

Coppersmith told me about his time flying off a "gator boat." "The flight deck on the LHD (landing helicopter dock large amphibious assault ship) a hazardous place. You were sharing the environment with all the other tilt-rotor aircraft in the composite squadron." Former pilot Col Trevor Felter recalled, "The *Harrier* was built to be on the boat." He explained that the AV-8 is only capable of vertical landings when it has a low fuel load and enough water to cool the engine. Achieving a vertical landing requires a thrust-to-weight ratio of at least one-to-one. "You can only hover with under a thousand pounds of fuel," he said. "You typically get a primary approach, and sometimes a secondary attempt. But if you make a serious mistake out there, it's usually catastrophic."

Coppersmith's last flight in the *Harrier* was a visceral lap around the high desert he knew so well, a love letter to the *Harrier* community written in high-speed, low-level runs over familiar terrain and simulated bombing runs across landmarks outside the China Lake boundaries, saluting old friends along the way.

An hour later, he returned for the final act with a slow hover, landing gear down, nozzles rotated, the heat shimmering like a mirage as he hung in defiance of gravity itself. The final flight drew veterans, Sailors, Marines, government civilians, industry partners and family members to the squadron's flight line.

Aligning with the spectators in front of the squadron hangar, Coppersmith slowly decelerated to a steady hover, then lifted the nozzles up and over the hover stop. He dipped the *Harrier*'s nose 12 degrees, then back in a brief bow, a last farewell for the believers.

As he taxied back to the VX-31 hangar, two fire engines parked nose-to-nose sent up a proper water salute as he slowly rolled through the arch of mist. Then, as the *Pegasus* engine spooled down for the last time, silence. Coppersmith climbed out of the cockpit, took a deep breath and smiled into a wall of cheers and salutes.

Inside the *Dust Devils*' Hangar 6, a massive American flag hung behind the podium. The squadron's previously retired AV-8B *Harrier II* sat silent in the corner on display, like a retired gladiator. The speeches tried to make sense of it all. Addressing the audience at the podium, LtCol Timothy "Little Buddy" Burchett, VX-31 commanding officer, commended the China Lake team for safely guiding the program to its conclusion. "We did not coast into the finish line. It was a triumphant finish for the team partnership," Burchett told the crowd. "The *Harrier*

team was (*sic*) true innovators in what we called integrated test, helping get capabilities into the front-line warfighters' hands faster."

"Today we completed AV-8B RDT&E flight operations," said Coppersmith. "The *Harrier*'s testing life has come to an end, but its contributions to Marine air power live on in every aircraft and pilot that follows." Underscoring the jet's enduring significance to the Marine attack mission, Coppersmith stated, "It was the most successful attack aircraft in Marine Corps history, no doubt about it. Then, pausing for a moment, he looked at the audience with grave resolve and said, "We lost a lot of great Marines along the way ... and we honored each of them with every procedure and material solution that improved the safety and reliability of this aircraft."

Naval Test Wing Pacific Commodore CAPT David Halpern summarized it best. "The jump jet proved that 'runways optional' wasn't a punch line. It was a revolution. The U.S. Marine Corps took that revolution and made it a doctrine. It was a promise to the rifleman. Close air support would be there, even when infrastructure wasn't. And here at China Lake, the *Dust Devils* wrote vital pages of that story. That was not routine work; that was heritage."



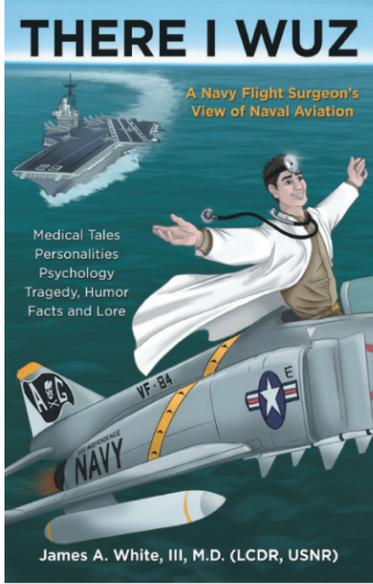
Coso 88 receives the water salute traditionally bestowed on an aircraft after its last flight as it slowly taxis back to the VX-31 *Dust Devils* hangar on 23 Sep '25.



The Hook, Winter 2025

THERE I WUZ

A Navy Flight Surgeon's View of Naval Aviation



Medical Tales
Personalities
Psychology
Tragedy, Humor
Facts and Lore

James A. White, III, M.D. (LCDR, USNR)



"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.

HOW TO ORDER

512 Pages, \$28.50...free shipping CONUS

For direct orders from the author, James White, 2920 Jackson Street, Alexandria, LA 71301 [Email: WUZBOOKS@gmail.com]

Send your name, address, phone, email, # of copies & check.

Or, Order Online at Archwaypublishing.com/en/bookstore, or from Amazon, BarnesandNoble, your local bookstore.

Below: AV-8B Harrier IIs assigned to the Thunder Chickens of VMM-263 (Reinforced) spotted on the flight deck of USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7) operating in the Atlantic Ocean, 26 Aug '25.

MCSN Andrew Eggert, USN

Page 40

The Hook, Winter 2025

Page 41



IN MARSHAL

Command Changes



U.S. SEVENTH FLEET
 VADM Patrick Hannifin
 relieved
 VADM Fred Kacher
 13 November 2025
 Commander, Fleet Activities
 Yokosuka



HSM-73
 CDR Dane Mutschler
 relieved
 CDR Matthew Henrich
 25 November 2025
 USS Nimitz



VFC-13
 CDR Traver Fordham
 relieved
 CDR Rob Blackwood
 11 July 2025
 NAS Fallon



USS NIMITZ
 CAPT Joseph Furco
 relieved
 CAPT Douglas Graber
 21 September 2025
 USS Nimitz



VFA-2
 CDR Bryan Orlowski
 relieved
 CDR Nick Zerler
 25 November 2025
 NAS Lemoore



VT-2
 CDR Jason Hathaway, USCG
 relieved
 CDR Jonathan Lushenko
 10 December 2025
 NAS Whiting Field



USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT
 CAPT Will Mathis
 relieved
 CAPT Brian Schrum
 23 October 2025
 USS Theodore Roosevelt



VFA-27
 CDR Matthew Warshaw
 relieved
 CDR James McMillan
 2 October 2025
 USS George Washington



VT-9 SAU
 CDR Rob Lowery
 relieved
 CDR AJ Clay
 6 November 2025
 NAS Meridian



STRIKE FIGHTER WING ATLANTIC
 CAPT Eric McQueen
 relieved
 CAPT Chris Dentzer
 21 November 2025
 NAS Oceana



VFA-31
 CDR Robert Gordon
 relieved
 CDR Wes Mize
 10 August 2025
 USS Gerald R. Ford



STRIKE FIGHTER WEAPONS SCHOOL ATLANTIC
 CDR Bill Adams
 relieved
 CDR Jason Bauman
 5 December 2025
 NAS Oceana



VFA-87
 CDR Brandon Rodgers
 relieved
 CDR John Schnepfer
 4 November 2025
 USS Gerald R. Ford



HSC-4
 CDR Gene Pontes
 relieved
 CDR James Thomas
 11 December 2025
 NAS North Island



VFA-195
 CDR Joseph Burns
 relieved
 CDR Justin Reddick
 4 September 2025
 MCAS Iwakuni



MC2 Isiah B. Goessl, USN
 LT Matthew Snyder assigned to the VRM-30 Titans pictured in the cockpit of a CMV-22B Osprey on 12 Feb '25, during Pacific Steller 2025.



VFA-11 Red Rippers aircrew demonstrate the capabilities of the F/A-18F Super Hornet during the NAS Oceana Air Show on 21 Sep '25.

CVW-1 CVN 75



USS Harry S. Truman
 CAPT Daniel Prochazka



CVW-1
 CAPT Leslie Mintz

VFA-11 RED RIPPERS
 by LT Taylor "Gator" Quinn, USN

The shorter days have coincided with yet another turning of the wheel for the illustrious *Red Rippers*. Following a successful combat deployment, CDR David "BO" Manges passed the baton to CDR Mitch "TACO" Parmentier, who is the 86th commanding officer of this venerable fighter squadron! Accompanying TACO at the helm is *Ripper* alum CDR Patrick "Fonda" Bouchoux, returning to the promised land to serve as executive officer. Entering this new season, the squadron finds itself at an exciting juncture. While chasing the ever-elusive "chill" maintenance phase, we continue to drive strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) progression and operational readiness while also becoming the first East Coast FA-18E/F squadron to completely transition to the Block III *Super Hornet*.

Leading from the front yet again, the *Rippers* took charge of this year's NAS Oceana Air Show, where Super JO turned department dead, LCDR Marty "Grouse" Wilson, orchestrated and led the fleet air power flight demonstration in front of more than 300,000 spectators. The squadron then kicked off football season with a flyover of Virginia Tech, the alma mater of one of our own, LCDR Jesse "PEON" Arnold. Squadron

outreach continued across the country, from inspiring the next generation of Naval Aviators in Pensacola to soaring over the Rocky Mountains for Colorado's Tribute to Aviation in Montrose. The squadron also led a division for multiple flyovers at this year's Ryder Cup in Bethpage, N.Y., and to support several other high-profile football games and community events nationwide as the season progressed. Most notably, the *Rippers* supported the Navy's 250th celebration, executing flawless demonstration flights and static displays that showcased the Navy's formidable firepower and flexibility, truly fitting for one of the service's oldest continuously active fighter squadrons.

Even amid a busy season of air shows, flyovers and community outreach, the *Ripper* training team makes sure JOPA never loses sight of the main goal of creating that sweet SFWT sausage. The squadron would like to congratulate LTs Kieran "Costanza" McCarthy, Alex "Mr. Skin" Miskimon and Dan "Dangle" Fisk on the completion of their SFWT Level IV qualifications, and LTs Nick "Rizzler" Williams, Chris "Backshot" Ventrano and Hayden "SP" Esperciceta on their SFWT Level III qualifications.

Lastly, the *Rippers* bid farewell to LCDRs Matt "Magic Mut" Buss and Chris "PONZI" Rochon and LT Tyler "Dickenbass" Armentrout as they transition to the next chapters of their lives, VFA-11 is proud of all they have achieved! Here's to Us!

VFA-81 SUNLINERS
 by LT Caleb R. Brown, USN

The summer months proved especially busy and exciting for the VFA-81 *Sunliners*, taking part in air shows, training events and flyovers while preparing for upcoming detachments (dets). Recently, the squadron transferred and accepted multiple jets to facilitate operations of other squadrons, enabling the *Sunliners* to still support the fleet while in a maintenance phase. The squadron could not function without the professionalism and hard work of the maintenance team, which day after day provides the very best that the Navy





An F/A-18E Super Hornet assigned to the VFA-81 Sunliners pictured on the flight deck of USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) during preparations for the Titans of the Sea Presidential Review, 4 Oct '25.

has to offer. VFA-81 is incredibly proud of the Sailors that support the mission through maintenance and logistics. The squadron recently pinned two new chief petty officers — congratulations to Chiefs Daniels and Cuello — meritoriously advanced several Sailors and enjoyed taking the “Sailors of the Year” up for backseat rides to show them what the jet can do!

Along with training, the *Sunliners* have had the honor to support the community by participating in the Ryder Cup flyover, the Navy and Marine Corps 250th commemorative sea power demonstration and the missing man flyover for astronaut CAPT Jim Lovell.

Additionally, unit-level training continued at an astonishing pace. With three new SFWT Level III and two new Level II pilots, the squadron is becoming more tactical than ever. From giving good deal basic fighter maneuvering flights for JOs to planning dets in Alaska, the esteemed (and newly promoted) LCDR Charles “Cupcake” Peck never throttles back.

As the squadron has now had a few months at home since returning from deployment, the work has not stopped. The VFA-81 *Sunliners* proudly stand ready to ensure we get the correct effects on target, on time, first try!

VAQ-144 MAIN BATTERY

by LT Nathan Arntz, USN

Following the inaugural deployment for VAQ-144 on board USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75), we have been hard at work in maintenance phase. While our jets have been sent out for upgrades, our aircrew are striving to advance in their training syllabi. In July, six JOs augmented the VAQ-135 *Black Ravens* at Nellis AFB for *Red Flag 25-3*. During this two-week evolution, *Main Battery* aircrew worked tirelessly and ensured maximum *Growler* participation and effects in the events. For many of the JOs, this was their first time experiencing the chaos of a large-force exercise. When they sought advice from senior JOPA, LT Kevin “Ken Doll” Cuellar had this to say. “Just don’t say anything during the mass debrief and you’ll be fine!”

Into August and September, the *Main Battery* bid farewell to many of our combat-hardened aviators and ground officers. These included Gunner CWO3 Eliazar Bermea, CWO3 Chris Worsham, LTs Connor “Beyblade” Pitney, Ken Doll Cuellar, LCDR Mike “Mittens” Adams, and the squadron’s third skipper, CDR Brant “Probie” Schmall. CWO3 Bermea is taking his operational expertise to the sunny beaches of NAS Key West while CWO3 Worsham, LTs Cuellar and Pitney will be heading next door to train new Fleet Replacement Squadron students at VAQ-129. Super JO LCDR Adams and CDR Schmall both bid the

Courtesy of VAQ-144



Outgoing Commanding Officer CDR Brant “Probie” Schmall has his Life Preserver Unit inflated by VAQ-144 Main Battery aircrew to celebrate his final flight in the U.S. Navy.

Navy farewell, our former skipper retiring after 25 years of service which began with his enlistment in 2000.

It has not been all goodbyes, however. CDR Richard “Lampshade” Delk relieved CDR Schmall at a combination change-of-command/retirement ceremony on board NAS Whidbey Island. New XO CDR Matthew “Dee Dee” Jones has also joined the team after completing his shore tour on the staff of Commander, Naval Air Force Atlantic (CNAL). Additionally, we welcomed new Maintenance Officer ENS Claude Joseph and Gunner CWO3 Fox to the *Main Battery*. We are looking forward to them carrying on our established tradition of excellence.

Speaking of excellence, VAQ-144 dominated at the awards portion of this year’s *Growler* Ball. The squadron earned the Tactical Excellence Electronic Attack Squadron of the Year Award for accomplishments on the recent *Carrier Strike Group Eight* combat deployment on board *Truman*. Furthermore, CWO3 Worsham received the CWO4 Lester B. Tucker Ground Maintenance Officer of the Year Award and CDR Schmall received the CDR Robert “Detox” Eastman III Award. These honors represent important milestones as we continue to write *Main Battery* history. As the new year approaches, VAQ-144 personnel continue to work hard and strive for success and tactical prowess to dominate the ever-changing world of electronic warfare.

VAW-126 SEAHAWKS

by LTJG Olivia de Olazarra, USN

The VAW-126 *Seahawks* began a scheduled maintenance phase following an eventful eight-month combat deployment. The squadron hit the ground running following the completion of post-deployment leave, supporting U.S. Fleet Forces Command and CNAL in seven events since our return.

VAW-126 supported *Northern Strike*, the largest annual National Guard exercise in North America, providing air intercept control (AIC) and maritime air control for Joint assets. The *Seahawks* served as the airborne tactical command and control asset for the exercise, providing indispensable targeting for Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Air Force assets. The squadron was integral to all realms of the fight, supporting precision targeting into simulated air, sea and land threats.

Upon our return, the *Seahawks* supported the annual NAS Oceana Air Show by participating in the fleet air power demonstration. After weeks of practice, LTs Tyler “Durden” Bozeman, Charlie “Pottles” Kiernan and Bradley “Dadley” Davidson proudly represented the squadron in the three-day show with tens of thousands of spectators in attendance.

In October, VAW-126 took part in the sea power demonstration at NavSta Norfolk in celebration of the U.S. Navy’s 250th birthday. Aircrew manned an E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye* static display on board USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77), while two crews supported airborne flight operations for the event. LCDR Kevin “TARS” Zwerneman, LTs Carly “RASINS” Courtney and Kyle “Yukon Cornelius” Melvin led the flyover. Commanding Officer CDR Benjamin “Silverback” Sanders, LTs Stephen “DB” Reilly, Matthew “SLOP” Othus and Todd “JAC SKATT, PHD” Kim maintained the overall datalink picture and were responsible for airborne communications and tanking coordination.

LT Sean “DIMM” Gorman described participating in the 250th as “easily the coolest and most rewarding thing I’ve done in uniform.” LT Melvin shared a similar opinion, saying “it was such an honor to integrate with the air wing and demonstrate our capabilities and proficiency on such a large scale. I was in awe of our sheer amount of firepower.” Reportedly, the president and first lady took quite an interest in the E-2D.

Meanwhile, the *Seahawks* have been diligently pursuing tactical training and aircrew syllabus progression. LT Noah “Laika” Vodisek departed for the MAWTS-1 course in August. LT Emily “BONIT” Beres headed to NAS Fallon, in October to begin the TOPGUN AIC course. We look forward to welcoming Laika and BONIT home in the coming months and learning the latest tactics, techniques and procedures from them. At home, we’ve been working closely with our air wing partners to facilitate the completion of several Air Combat Training Continuum Level III and IV check rides. These events ensure the continued development and maintenance of a tactically proficient fleet.

Most recently, the *Seahawks* are preparing for the significant Maintenance Program Inspection and Aviation Maintenance Inspection. Our Sailors are working tirelessly to ensure they have a work product reflective of the pride they bring to the workplace each day. Senior maintainers are taking our largely junior maintenance department Sailors under their wing to ensure the numerous learning experiences from this past deployment are carried forward and built upon. As always, “America’s Squadron” is committed to pursuing the highest levels of safety, capability and combat readiness.

Despite our productive few months back ashore, the *Seahawks* are always looking ahead for additional opportunities. In the coming months, VAW-126 will support the Naval Weapons System Evaluation Program at Tyndall AFB and provide an E-2D for a USAF Weapons School Integration det. America’s Squadron is always hard at work!



MC2 Mitchell Mason, USN



A VAW-126 Seahawks E-2D Advanced Hawkeye leads the way for a flyover demonstrating naval air power as part of the Titans of the Sea Presidential Review celebrating the U.S. Navy’s 250th anniversary, 5 Oct '25.



The colorful tail of the Stingers' CAG bird stands out amid those of other VFA-113 jets and F-35C Lightning IIs of the VFA-97 Warhawks on the flight deck of USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) during a port call in Pearl Harbor on 8 Aug '25.



USS Carl Vinson
CAPT Joshua Wenker



CVW-2
CAPT Eric Bell

VFA-113 STINGERS

by LT Cole "House Call" Green, USN

After two straight years of back-to-back work ups and deployments, the VFA-113 *Stingers* finally returned home to NAS Lemoore, kicking off a well-earned maintenance phase and marking our first holiday season at home since 2022. The downtime hasn't kept the squadron idle, both on and off the flight line, as the *Stingers* have stayed sharp and committed to the mission. LCDR "Perm" Wales has continued pushing the strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) train full steam ahead as LT Morgan "Mater" Whetstone earned his SFWT Level III Section Lead qualification. Meanwhile, our pilots have supported high-end events around the fleet, including *Gray Flag 2025* with the VX-9 *Vampires* and the Marine Corps' 250th celebration at MCB Camp Pendleton alongside fellow CVW-2 squadrons.

This season also saw the turnover of some of our most seasoned *Stingers*. We bid farewell to LCDR Tyler "StoVal" Trombetta, who left to pursue continued "Time-Fuel-Distance Problems" at Naval Test Wing Pacific. LCDR Samuel "Gutter" Howell traded Lemoore dust for East Coast humidity, joining the VFC-12 *Fighting Omars*, and is reportedly preparing for a life of plaid shirts and mountain solitude. LT Calvin "Wet Suit" Hoople headed to NAS Fallon for TOPGUN and Strike staff, hopefully with the skills to finally keep his phone charged.

Where there's turnover, there's fresh talent. We welcomed LCDR Greg "Sassy" D'Alessandro from the VFA-27 *Royal Macs* and broke in a pair of brand-new FNGs from the Fleet Replacement Squadron — LTs Alex "FISH" Knoop and Hayden "Michaels" Cowdrey — who are still "looking for a way to contribute."

As 2026 fast approaches, the *Stingers* are focused on spending the holidays with family and friends, but with one eye on the horizon. We will stay lethal as we charge into the next work-up cycle this spring. First and Finest!

VAQ-136 GAUNTLETS

by LT Dominic Pauzuolis, USN

Following a nine-month deployment on board USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) to the *Seventh Fleet* and *Fifth Fleet* areas of responsibility (AOR), VAQ-136 returned to NAS Whidbey Island in August 2025. Seven *Ironclaw* (tactical callsign) crews were welcomed home by families and friends on 12 August, with the Naval Air Logistics Office flight arriving two days later. Since that time, the squadron has worked vigorously on restoring and maintaining aircraft health with Skipper CDR William "Bag-O" Bogdanowicz's focus on maintenance and Sailor well-being.

MC2 Marissa Johnson, USN



Sailors move a VAQ-136 Gauntlets EA-18G Growler across the flight deck of Vinson underway in the Pacific Ocean on 9 Aug '25.

Two *Gauntlet* jets recently participated in a show-of-force demonstration to commemorate the 250th anniversaries of the Navy and Marine Corps. On 18 October 2025, CVW-2 assets supported an amphibious demonstration exercise at Del Mar Beach, displaying the capabilities and strength of the Navy-Marine Corps team. The exercise included parachute jumpers, amphibious landings, Marine artillery fires, and fixed/rotary-wing flyovers. *Team Broadsword* (tactical callsign) F-35C *Lightning II*, F/A-18E/F *Super Hornet* and EA-18G *Growler* aircraft conducted tactical formation flyovers followed by a large formation flyover.

Additionally, the *Gauntlet* team has made great use of our time at home, focusing on *Growler* Weapons and Tactics Program progression and celebrating the accomplishments of two new Level IV and one new Level III-qualified aircrew.

VAW-113 BLACK EAGLES

by LTJG Jacob Glassman, USN

Following a demanding nine-month combat deployment, the VAW-113 *Black Eagles* have maintained our trademark drive for excellence while transitioning ashore. The squadron's post-deployment efforts have focused on sustainment and maintenance, emphasizing aircraft upkeep and readiness. The maintenance department has continued to set the standard by successfully executing the Material Condition Inspection and Maintenance Program Assist. These critical evaluations ensure aircraft safety, reliability and combat readiness. Additionally, the *Black Eagles* are preparing for the Aviation Maintenance Inspection and NATOPS unit assist later this fall.

Since returning to home port, VAW-113 has sustained operational readiness, while focusing maintenance efforts on transitioning from Delta System Software Configuration (DSSC) 3.1 to DSSC 4 and continuing to prepare for DSSC 5.1. These upgrades will enhance the E-2D's ability to provide situational awareness and tactical management in a multi-domain environment while expanding mission effectiveness within Naval Aviation.



The VAW-113 Black Eagles gather for a command photograph on the flight deck of USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) during the squadron's 2024-'25 deployment.

THE WARRIOR'S BURDEN
by LtCdr "ENGINE EDDIE" Davidson

33rd Fighter Pilot to survive
more than 200 Vietnam Combat Missions
in the mighty/smoky F-4 Phantom II
366 pages -- 60 color photos -- \$29.95
DiscountDiversBandB.com/CombatCorner.html
and /Memoirs.html or CaptEcoEd@aol.com

The *Black Eagles* were proud to be recognized with the 2024 Battle Efficiency Award (Battle "E") and the RADM Frank Akers Award at Hook '25 with Commanding Officer CDR Ryan P. Jauregui accepting for the squadron. These awards acknowledge VAW-113's outstanding operational performance, maintenance excellence and mission readiness throughout the deployment cycle. The achievements reflect the professionalism and dedication of every *Black Eagle* from the flight deck to the maintenance line.

Several members of the squadron also received Airborne Command & Control and Logistics Wing awards at the annual West Coast *Hawkeye* Ball. LT Ross Davis was recognized as the Pilot of the Year, LT David Filbert was honored as Maintainer of the Year and LTJG Kiera Mulroy was awarded Intelligence Officer of the Year. Additionally, AT1 Colton Hawn received the Junior Maintenance Leadership Award, and IS1 Kyle Paquin received the Intelligence Specialist Award. Their accomplishments highlight the individual excellence and teamwork that define the squadron's culture.

Further enhancing our training initiatives while ashore, the squadron has strengthened its tactical proficiency by integrating with the Carrier Airborne Early Warning Weapons School and MAWTS-1 for live flight events. These advanced training evolutions consisted of providing air intercept control and maritime employment support that enhanced interoperability and sharpened the aircrews' combat readiness, ensuring seamless coordination in a Joint operations environment.

The *Black Eagles* have also continued to play a pivotal role in Joint and fleet-level exercises by participating in the White House-directed America's Marines 250: From Sea to Shore — A Review of Amphibious Strength in San Diego where aircrew showcased their skills and contributions to Naval Aviation by providing command and control and tanker coordination. Additionally, the squadron participated in various exercises this fall to include *Resolute Hunter*, *Steel Knight* and *Desert Bone*.

MCSA Pablo Chavez, USN



An MH-60S Seahawk assigned to the HSC-4 Black Knights hovers over the flight deck of Vinson during vertical replenishment in the Pacific Ocean on 13 Aug '25.

As the squadron gears up for the new calendar year, efforts will shift toward DSSC 5.1 software transitions and *Exercise Global Lightning*. These efforts will further refine the squadron's readiness posture and reinforce its leadership role in airborne command and control. The *Black Eagles* continue to soar forward, embodying excellence, teamwork and commitment to mission success. With a proud heritage and a clear focus on the future, VAW-113 stands ready for every challenge that lies ahead.

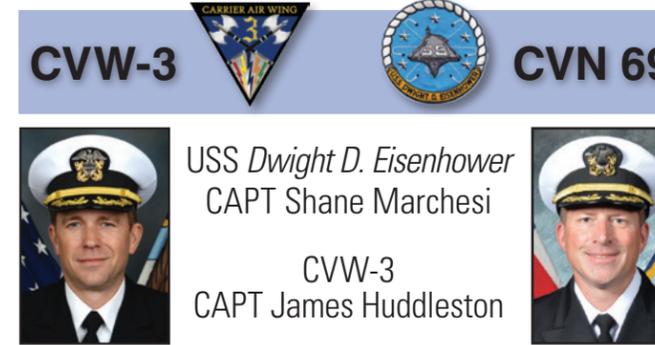
HSC-4 BLACK KNIGHTS

by LT Alex Smith, USN

The legendary *Black Knights* of HSC-4 returned home in mid-August after a successful nine-month deployment on board *Carl Vinson*. Working alongside the rest of CVW-2, HSC-4 provided critical support to *Carrier Strike Group One* during a demanding period in both *Fifth* and *Seventh Fleets*. The squadron executed 947 sorties, encompassing more than 2,390 flight hours over nine months at sea, while delivering continuous armed surveillance and reconnaissance, personnel recovery and vital logistics support to the strike group. In the process, members of the command earned the Combat Action Ribbon, Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal and Strike/Flight Air Medals.

Since returning home and taking well-deserved leave, HSC-4 seamlessly transitioned back to stateside operations, focusing on building readiness through rigorous live hoist training, standardization and evaluation flight events, as well as completing elements of the Air Combat Training Continuum syllabus. In addition to training, the squadron also successfully executed an ordnance transfer evolution underway followed by a Maintenance Program Assist, while also preparing for an upcoming search-and-rescue evaluation and Aviation Maintenance Inspection.

The *Black Knights* remain focused and engaged after a legendary deployment, constantly training to ensure we are always ready to rescue, protect and deliver.



USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower*
CAPT Shane Marchesi

CVW-3
CAPT James Huddleston

BLUE BLASTERS HONOR SQUADRON LEGACY

As autumn fell upon Virginia, the greatest squadron at NAS Oceana welcomed the cooler temperatures with plenty of action. At the annual air show, former VA-34 *Blue Blasters* held a reunion, recounting experiences and days of glory and passing on valuable knowledge (such as the origin of the squadron's motto) to current *Blasters* to keep alive. Separately, a group of former *Intruder* aircrew received a tour of the squadron spaces, sharing their stories while walking down memory lane. Several were with our squadron for its final A-6 *Intruder* deployment on board USS *George Washington* (CVN 73) in 1996. The current *Blasters* were honored to host them and thank them for their time and tales.

Also earning the title of "Former *Blaster* Pilot," LT Brad "Stickers" Beahan bid farewell to VFA-34, moving on to instruct the next generation of fighter pilots at NAS Kingsville, Tex. See you in Season 2 of "Top Guns: The Next Generation." With the losses of our cadre piling up, the squadron picked up some replacements, adding LTs Livia "(FUNGUS)" Conlon and Spenser "HWANG" Neel to the family. We finally regained LCDR Chris "Meat" Honeycutt from his temporary duty on board USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN 78), restoring strength to their ranks.

Maintenance phase continues for the *Blasters*, which means flyovers and Red Air. The squadron participated in Navy and Marine Corps 250th birthday celebrations with ceremonies, games, operations, and displays galore, flying up and down the East Coast. VFA-34 also participated in a sinking exercise as part of *Unitas 2025*, targeting the former-USS *Simpson* during a live-fire evolution, and sent a detachment to NAS Fallon to support CVW-7's Air Wing Fallon. Maintaining our signature hardworking attitude and smiles, the *Blue Blasters* continue to prove our motto true — "Have Gun ... Will Travel!"

Courtesy of VFA-34



Then and now — Blue Blasters aircrew from the squadron's A-6 Intruder days pictured on board USS *George Washington* (CVN 73) and during a recent visit to the squadron at NAS Oceana. Squadron veterans pictured are "Trigger" Lennard, "Moose" Mousseau, "Sleepy" Pierce, "Noise" Phillips, "Space" Pacer and "Bart" Barthelmes.

MC2 Mitchell Mason, USN



In a farewell to CVW-1 as the VFA-143 Pukin' Dogs shift to CVW-3, squadron F/A-18E Super Hornets unleashed ordnance near USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77), displaying the firepower of the carrier strike group during the *Titans of the Sea* Presidential Review on 5 Oct '25.

VFA-143 PUKIN' DOGS

The *World-Famous Pukin' Dogs* of VFA-143 have been working hard for the past couple of months. LCDR Chris "Nacho Girl" Fowler and LT John "Body Cam" Roakes both performed in the NAS Oceana Air Show. CDR Rob "LEAWICK" Patrick, LCDR Jeff "CHAPS" Giesler, LTs Roakes and Julian "Lego Head" Torres participated in the Navy-Marine Corps 250th anniversary sea power demonstration on board USS *George H. W. Bush* (CVN 77). The show was truly one for the books with live ordnance and multiple demonstrations showcasing the lethality a carrier strike group brings to the fight! We also had our esteemed Paddles, LTs Jeff "AEDS" Burton, Cassy "SLUG" Zachares and Dave "SHIF" Wiseman, represent the *Dogs* on the platform on board *Bush*, waving everyone involved in this historic event.

Change has been no stranger to the squadron lately. In September, the *Pukin' Dogs* said farewell to the squadrons of CVW-1 and joined the fighting force of CVW-3. We're excited to work with *Team Battle Axe* (tactical callsign) for the foreseeable future! On 10 September, the squadron held a Change of Command during which Skipper CDR Tyrel "LAR" Younts relinquished command to CDR Jason "Pigans" Geddes. The squadron gave CDR Robert "Leawick" Patrick a warm "welcome back" as he returns to VFA-143 for the third time, this time as XO!

As we roll into the fall, the *Dogs* are joining CVW-3 at NAS Fallon as Red Air in support of air wings currently in work ups for deployment. Once home from this detachment, it's full steam ahead as we begin our own training for deployment. Here's to the *Dogs*!



Courtesy of VFA-34



VAW-123 SCREWTOPS

by LT Grace "Bodhi" Zagaja, USN

As the VAW-123 *Screwtops* continue to evolve and adapt, this quarter has brought significant milestones and exciting challenges. From transitioning to the cutting-edge E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye* and participating in high-stakes exercises to sending personnel to support fellow squadrons, the *Screwtops* have consistently demonstrated unwavering commitment and skill. Alongside these operational achievements, we also celebrated a pivotal Change of Command and proudly represented the squadron at Airshow London in Canada. These events highlight our dedication to advancing mission readiness, fostering leadership and strengthening connections within the aviation community as we move forward.

The change-of-command ceremony this summer marked an important leadership transition. We bid farewell to CDR Alexander "Tardy" Glass, whose leadership and dedication have been invaluable to the squadron. Executive Officer CDR Michael "PuNR" Ptacek flied up to commanding officer, stepping up to lead the *Screwtops* into the squadron's next chapter. Taking on the role of XO is CDR Cody "Judy" Hastings, who brings a wealth of experience and enthusiasm to the team. This seamless transition ensures the squadron remains on a steady course as we continue to advance our mission and capabilities.

Over the past several deployments, we have proudly supported our fellow squadrons by sending many of our experienced aircrew and Sailors to the VAW-113 *Black Eagles*, VAW-126 *Seahawks*, VAW-121 *Bluetails*, and VAW-124 *Bear Aces*. By embedding our personnel within these squadrons during their deployments, we bolstered their operational capabilities during critical missions and provided invaluable opportunities for our team members to gain essential qualifications

Courtesy of VAW-123

and firsthand experience in diverse operational environments. This collaboration underscores our commitment to mission readiness and the professional growth of our aircrew and Sailors.

In August, we participated in *Coastal Warden* and *Fly Swatter* alongside the HMLA-269 *Gunrunners*, Project Manager *Apache* (South Carolina Army National Guard), and the VMUT-2 *Night Owls* to conduct counter-unmanned aerial systems (UASs) training in the W-122 airspace off North Carolina. Using the MQM-170C *Outlaw* remotely piloted vehicle target to simulate hostile drones, we focused on refining cost-effective, kinetic solutions to the growing UAS threat. Marine attack helicopters demonstrated their unique ability to detect, engage and neutralize these threats with persistence and precision. Over the course of the exercise, we successfully directed six drone kills using AGM-114Q *Hellfire* and AGR-19A/AGR-20F missiles, enhancing our readiness to protect maritime operations and maintain freedom of navigation.

The squadron also sent a crew to Airshow London at London International Airport in Ontario, Canada. The event brought together aviation enthusiasts and professionals for impressive aerial demonstrations and aircraft displays. Members of our team enjoyed connecting with the community, showcasing their skills and representing the *Screwtops*. It was an incredible opportunity to celebrate the spirit of flight and strengthen ties within the aviation world.

Looking ahead, the *Screwtops* remain focused on rigorous training and continuous improvement as we prepare for the challenges of tomorrow. With new technologies, evolving threats and dynamic missions on the horizon, our squadron is ready and eager to face what is next. We are committed to maintaining our high standards of excellence and operational readiness as we continue to serve with pride and precision. Ready on arrival, lethal on station!

Members of the VAW-123 Screwtops got a little help hosing down LCDR Ian "Smeagol" Wightman after he made his final flight in the squadron..



A VFA-27 Royal Maces F/A-18E catches a wire on board USS George Washington (CVN 73) during flight operations in the Philippine Sea on 14 Aug '25.



USS *George Washington*
CAPT Timothy L. Waits



CVW-5
CAPT Brian Kesselring

"NOTHING COMES EASY"
by LT Nate "allstate" Bermel, USN

When we left you last, your *Royal Maces* were on the eve of an exciting port call in Singapore at the end of the first half of summer cruise. After an overnight transit, we awoke to quite the puzzling sight. Approaching us on the horizon was a land mass that contained exactly zero skyscrapers and looked suspiciously like Guam. Surely, the ship's navigator had simply mixed up his east and west and would correct course momentarily.

Although we regretted the navigational error, the *Maces* took full advantage of the stop in Guam, engaging in a wide range of activities such as visiting Porky's, scuba diving and visiting Porky's. It was also time to bid farewell to LCDR Greg "Sassy" D'Alessandro. Sassy was the finest of *Maces* and a beloved figure in the air wing. His sass, friendship and supply of Red Bulls will be missed for quite some time, and the *Maces* made sure to send him off right with a lively tiki bar bail at sunset, followed by some nighttime aquatic Olympics in Tumon Bay. Sassy will continue flying Block III *Rhinos* on the West Coast with the VFA-113 *Stingers*, where he is somehow already their senior department head.

Following Guam, the *Maces* returned home to Japan for "halftime," having successfully defended our spot at 2K in the Case I stack while also nabbing some Top Ten patches and the Top Hook award in the process. While at MCAS Iwakuni, the strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) pain train got rolling again, and despite weeks of bad weather, the *Maces* minted two fresh Level IV Division Leads — LTs Riley "SPORT" Turk and John "Bath Salt" Brooks. Well done, gents!

This working port call was so productive, in fact, that each and every pilot in CAG Bizz fell right out of 30-day carrier trap currency. The air wing's "Re-CQ" detachment in Iwo To was all set — until Mother Nature herself intervened. Only one week before we were supposed to arrive, offshore volcanic eruptions near Iwo To threatened to close the field carrier landing practice (FCLP) pattern. The end of halftime was thrown into doubt and CAG Bizz thrown into a pickle, as it had been standing policy to avoid FCLPs in Iwakuni due to understandable local sensitivities regarding jet noise and underlined fly through downs at the ramp. The *Mace* JOPA, solution-oriented as ever, mission planned alternate courses of action, including daisy-chaining tankers from Iwakuni to Iwo To and back for a 5.0 total flight time FCLP hop.

Fortunately, our plans did not make it past the brainstorm phase, as our host city graciously enabled CAG Bizz to conduct FCLPs in Iwakuni (with provisions for a no-fly day on Japan's Day of Respect for the Elderly). For some of our pilots still getting used to driving on the left side of the road (as the number of JOPA traffic tickets this year indicates, allegedly), flying right-hand approach turns from 1,000 feet was just another part of the Japan experience. For one of our fellow Forward-Deployed Naval Forces squadrons, however, Japan's aforementioned holiday was the perfect time to beat up the (empty) pattern; unfortunately, there did not appear to be much local sympathy for the last manual ball flyers in the Bizz. High-level discussions successfully smoothed the situation over, and although your humble *Mace* correspondent was unable to obtain an on-the-record report, sources suggest that all parties reaffirmed their respect for blue-collar ball flying as well as



the importance of coordinating power additions with a healthy amount of right rudder.

At the start of Tac 2, the *Maces* executed an airborne Change of Command, with CDR James “IBM” McMillan departing following an epic flyby. We remain deeply grateful for IBM’s years of leadership in the squadron. He had the *Maces* in top form, imbued with fighter spirit and always looking good. His exodus has left the squadron with several vacant collateral duties, including Custom Ink T-shirt Liaison, Expedited Recovery SME — oh, and *The Hook* article ghostwriter. While he will no doubt be missed, the JOPA is grateful they can finally stop pretending to enjoy LaCroix just because it was the skipper’s favorite. IBM is heading back to his home in Virginia Beach, joining *Carrier Strike Group Two’s* staff for what will surely be a fruitful tour. Farewell and following seas, sir!

Assuming command is CDR Matthew “CROMO” Warshaw, with CDR Justin “WANG” Wiley stepping in as our new executive officer. They both bring tactical credentials and years of CAG Bizz experience, ensuring the *Maces* remain a “gun squadron” for years to come.

The *Maces* roll on. LCDR Ryan “Mayhem” Mahon is back in action, providing a real-time stress test of the Navy’s condiment supply chain in the Western Pacific. LCDR Samuel “Shy Ronnie” Magilke is bashful as ever. LCDR Bobby “Juice” Ward has been the *Maces’* ambassador for international relations, personally furthering them at every stop. LCDR Matthew “GASH” Schulteis, inspired by ready room nature documentaries, has begun incorporating the tactics of the animal kingdom into the SFWT syllabus. Our senior JOPA, LT Samuel “Squatch” Schultz, has been the air wing’s MVP in the air and on the ground, single-handedly stopping bogey overflights of Mom while ensuring that no NATOPS jacket gets overlooked.

Just as we were going to press, we were hit with another curveball — the “G-Dub” would be hosting a “VVIP” for a high-visibility event. The visit had been shrouded in secrecy ... who could it be? Rumors were swirling. Word was that it was Dua Lipa (though some insisted it was Sydney Sweeney). For such an important visitor, the G-Dub postponed weeks of training, steaming straight for home port in Yokosuka and a repainting of the entire boat (surely part of its scheduled maintenance) to make sure we “made the best impression.” The boys were also keen on making an impression; for their part, the JOPA furiously watched Dua Lipa music videos while memorizing the lyrics to “Levitating.”

All told, it has been a wild ride. As our wisest JO, LT Riley “SPORT” Turk, put it — “Nothing Comes Easy.” SPORT’s sage words have become the *Maces’* mantra, and they will no doubt carry us through the (eventual) end of patrol, upcoming participation in Annual Exercise (ANNUALEX) — which occurs every other year — and more. Stay tuned!

Until next time ... cheers and MIYF!

Cpl Chloe Johnson, USMC



VF-147 Argonauts F-35C Lightning IIs await their turn to tank from a Marine Corps KC-130J Super Hercules over Australia during *Talisman Sabre*, 15 Jul '25.

VFA-147 ARGONAUTS

by LT Bret “Yam Rat” Silvestri, USN

Following an unusually busy winter at Iwakuni, the VFA-147 *Argonauts* have continued to strike a strong balance between mission execution and morale.

During Patrol 25-1 the squadron made significant contributions to both air wing integration and maritime security operations. Key objectives included strengthening partnerships through participation in *Talisman Sabre* and an integrated warfare readiness exercise while executing long-range strike missions that demonstrated the reach and precision of the F-35C *Lightning II*. The deployment also provided invaluable opportunities for cultural engagement, with port calls in Guam and Manila giving squadron personnel firsthand exposure to the diverse cultures of the Western Pacific.

After three months on board USS *George Washington* (CVN 73), the squadron returned to Iwakuni for a brief but productive shore period. Pilots maximized flying opportunities and *Lightning* Tactics and Weapons Syllabus (LTWS) progression while also enjoying Japan’s finest cuisine, from chu-his to sushi and ramen, making the most of limited downtime.

Beginning in June, the *Argonauts* refocused on regaining carrier proficiency through an intense period of unit-level training and large-force exercises. These efforts culminated in *Talisman Sabre*, a multinational exercise involving nearly 100 aircraft from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and United States.

The exercise featured complex air-to-air engagements, Joint refueling missions and advanced strike coordination, allowing the *Argonauts* to fully leverage the Joint Strike Fighter’s sensor fusion and interoperability capabilities. Partner participation included Australian F/A-18F *Super Hornets*, EA-18G *Growlers* and F-35As; UK F-35Bs and tankers; VMFA-242 *Bats* F-35Bs; and F-22 *Raptors* from the Air National Guard’s 154th Fighter Wing. The exercise showcased true allied integration and reaffirmed the squadron’s leading role in high-end operations.

The embarked flight operations allowed several ready room members to work through LTWS progression. This hard work culminated in Level II qualifications for LTs Nicholas “Panic!” Ruiz and Spencer “THuDS” Bridgeforth as well as Level III qualification for LT Ari “CLARA” Feustel.

The squadron’s port visits provided well-deserved respite and cultural exchange. In Manila, junior Sailors and officers alike experienced the energy and sensory overload of the capital of the Philippines, a highlight for many new to the region. In Guam, familiar beaches, clear waters and diverse food options reminded everyone why it remains a squadron favorite. Whether enjoying dinner at Texas Roadhouse, Pizza Kaya or Tsubaki Tower, the *Argonauts* made the most of every liberty opportunity.



President Donald J. Trump delivers remarks on “Peace Through Strength” on board *George Washington* on 28 Oct '25, in front of an immaculately maintained Chippy 407.

After a balanced and busy inter-patrol period focused on both unit-level training and LTWS progression, the *Argonauts* have re-embarked *GW* for Patrol 25-2. This at-sea period will emphasize continued integration with regional partners and participation in a carrier strike group exercise, advancing Coalition interoperability in air defense, long-range strike and electronic warfare.

Regardless of what the schedule brings, whether a high-tempo exercise or an unexpected presidential visit to Yokosuka, the *Argonauts* remain ready, resilient and relentlessly professional.

SHORT CRUISES, LONG STORIES (NOW FEATURING VVIP TYPHOONS)

by *The Chippy Chronicles Team*

If anyone thought halftime meant downtime, the VFA-195 *Dambusters* proved otherwise. Between a volcanic eruption, a typhoon that turned into a VIP visit and yet another pair of short patrols, the squadron stayed busier on “break” than most people do at work.

After the first half of deployment season wrapped up, the squadron finally took a breath in Iwakuni. We reunited with families, maintenance caught up on the usual “just one more” gripes, and for about five minutes, things were calm. Then Iwo To erupted. The timing couldn’t have been better ... just as we were getting ready for FCLP. The eruption forced us to skip Iwo altogether and switch to right-handed pattern FCLPs with a tailwind, which for the uninitiated, is basically doing everything backward on purpose. It was a good reminder that the only thing predictable about carrier aviation is that it never goes according to plan.

With Iwo still smoking and everyone barely unpacked, the *Dambusters* kicked off 25-2 with the usual optimism and the illusion of a normal schedule. That illusion didn’t last long. A typhoon rolled in and sent *George Washington* sprinting in a completely unplanned direction. Flight operations turned into a weather chase, and just when the sea finally calmed, word came down that a VVIP event was happening, and the ship and air wing were headed for Yokosuka. Admirals, SECDEF,

POTUS! Oh my! Nothing like going from storm evasion to guest preparation overnight.

As soon as lines were tied, the hangar bay became an art studio. Paint rollers, brushes and a suspicious amount of masking tape appeared. Every squadron suddenly rediscovered their inner decorator as the ship and jets got fresh paint jobs in record time. The event went off cleanly. The brass was happy, the decks gleamed and the smell of fresh paint lingered longer than the speeches. Both 25-2 and 25-3 patrols ended up short and technically unplanned. The original schedule blew up somewhere between the typhoon and two weeks spent at the pier painting everything that didn’t move.

After the Yokosuka VVIP whirlwind, 25-3 felt like déjà vu — another short patrol, another sprint to keep pace with the schedule. The Busan port call gave everyone a chance to reset, hop on a train to Seoul and enjoy the world-class therapy known as Korean BBQ. It was the perfect ending to a string of unpredictable evolutions. The *Dambusters* then went back to sea one last time to close out the 2025 patrol season, knocking out sorties, qualifications and maintenance inspections before finally calling it a wrap.

Back in Iwakuni, the focus shifted to reset and refit. The squadron prepared the last of CVW-5’s aircraft to fly to CONUS and got ready to accept a new lot of *Super Hornets*. This season also marked the departure of LT Richard “Yardsale!” DeMann, heading to the VFA-106 *Gladiators* to serve as an instructor pilot, and LCDR Dylan “Spatch” Aaker, who is off to NAS Fallon to work with Dauntless, shaping the way a carrier strike group employs its capabilities. Both leave behind big shoes to fill, and we wish them fair winds and following seas as they continue shaping the next generation of Naval Aviators.

From volcanoes to typhoons to last-minute paint jobs, 2025 reminded us that the only constant in this business is change. But through it all, the *Dambusters* kept flying, fixing and finding humor in the chaos. New jets, new faces, same *Chippy* spirit. **CHIPPY HO!**



VAQ-141 SHADOWHAWKS

by LT Joshua "FNG" Krogman, USN

During the last few months, VAQ-141 has executed large-force exercises, enjoyed a halftime port call back in Japan, set out for the second half of our deployment, and continued to push the boundaries of carrier tactics in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility. During this time CVW-5 returned home for a brief period to celebrate the Navy's 250th birthday with some distinguished visitors. As of this writing, the *Shadowhawks* are on board the Navy's only forward-deployed aircraft carrier, the mighty *George Washington*, steaming our way around the vast Pacific region.

Following our time in the South Pacific working alongside our Australian brethren, CVN 73 moved back north, participating in exercises with HMS *Prince of Wales* (R09) and USS *America* (LHA 6). The *Shadowhawks* provided airborne electronic attack effects, evaluated new tactics with our allies and strengthened the bond between our great nations. Sailors from both sides were able to enjoy visiting each other's ships while also exchanging camaraderie, and of course, patches.

Following these exercises, CVN 73 pulled into Guam, where our Sailors and aviators enjoyed a much-needed rest and relaxation period. Over the years, the members of the air wing have become intimately familiar with the paradise that is Tumon Bay. For our new guys, this was a great chance to explore a new place and learn that not all hotels in Guam are created equally. For our senior aviators, it was a chance to revisit old hangout spots and discover new ones. For all aviators, it was the perfect time to get tan, go fishing, enjoy good food and as always, perfect the artform that is beer die.

Finishing out the 25-1 deployment leg, VAQ-141 participated in another large-force exercise alongside South Korea-based U.S. Air Force squadrons and Marine Corps aviation assets from Japan. Our aviators were able to go head-to-head with our fellow *Growlers*, pitting themselves against the VAQ-209 *Star Warriors*. It is yet to be determined who had the better *Growler* radio tactics, but from our side, going to the merge while listening to Dua Lipa is pretty hard to beat.

After all the heavy training of 25-1, *GW* pulled back into her home port of Yokosuka and *Team Badman* (tactical callsign) returned home to

MCSN Nicolas Quezada, USN

Iwakuni for a brief time. The halftime port call provided a much-needed opportunity to refit and rearm both the air wing and ship. VAQ-141 was able to complete extensive maintenance on our aircraft, accomplish large amounts of unit training and set ourselves up for success for the looming 25-2 deployment. During this time, we also said goodbye to a few *Shadowhawks* moving on to their next assignments, including CWO4 Cris Reyes, LTJG Panu Beckley and LT Markus "GOMO" Cotton. Fair winds and following seas!

As the end of September arrived, VAQ-141 once again went aboard *GW*, our home away from home, and headed back out to sea. We immediately began the deployment with the continued testing of tactics not performed by any other air wing in the world. VAQ-141 is proud to have played a part in the development of this new tactic and hopes that all our brethren out there continue to refine this new way of warfare.

In October, members of CAG Bizz participated in ANNUALEX, a large-force exercise involving South Korea, Japan and the United States. All kinds of platforms from each nation came together to improve shared tactics and strengthen our ties with each of our fellow allies. During this time, CVN 73 and her embarked air wing pulled back into Yokosuka for a surprise visit from several distinguished guests, including Commander, U.S. *Seventh Fleet*; Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and President Donald J. Trump. Over 4,000 Sailors gathered on board *George Washington* to hear the Commander in Chief speak. Our leaders spread messages of congratulations on 250 years of the U.S. Navy, and provided guidance moving forward on warfighting, naval posture and relationship building with our allies. Sailors even had the privilege of listening to the new prime minister of Japan speak in her first public interaction with U.S. military members. We are proud to be hosted by the incredible nation of Japan, and hope that our bonds of strength and friendship will only grow.

Immediately following this, CVN 73 and her loyal crew set out to the sea once again. Our mission remains the same — deter all who oppose the United States and her interests, protect the freedom of the seas both at home and abroad, and continually challenge the front lines of the airborne electronic attack world. Happy 250th birthday to all our Navy brethren out there, and here's to 250 more!



A plane director signals the pilot of a VAQ-141 Shadowhawk EA-18G Growler on the flight deck of George Washington underway in the Indian Ocean on 24 Jul '25.



AO3 Zachary Shoehorn of the HSM-46 Grandmasters inspects a GAU-21 machine gun on one of the squadron's MH-60R Seahawk helicopters during Tailored Ship's Training Availability on board USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77), 18 Jun '25.



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



CVW-7
CAPT Martin N. Fentress Jr.

THE SILVER STATE STAY

by LT Roy "Exotic" Billodeau, USN

Over the past several months, *Team Freedom* (tactical callsign) has hit the airways executing the Optimized-Fleet Response Plan (OFRP). From sailing the Atlantic Ocean on board USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77) during Tailored Ship's Training Availability (TSTA) to fighting over the high desert of Nevada, CVW-7 squadrons gathered to sharpen their skills as part of an integrated carrier strike group (CSG). With the support of non-organic assets in robust training environments, *Team Freedom* made another successful step forward to deploying as a combat-effective air wing.

The summer vacation months kicked off the integrated phase of the OFRP. With sunscreen in hand and Paddles donning sunglasses on the platform, CVW-7 led the charge in large-force exercises and reunited *Team Jackpot* with CVN 77. An integrated CSG was born again! While the summer cruise wasn't close to Carnival's amenities, some might say that *Team Jackpot* hit triple sevens when folks made it home for the Fourth of July. Although it was a short pleasure cruise, TSTA set the stage for future operations, establishing a solid foundation for safe and lethal flight operations from the sea.

After a couple of changes to the summer schedule, *Team Freedom* executed one of its largest movements of the OFRP cycle. Squadrons fled their respective coasts to rally in the "Oasis of Nevada" (according to the Fallon, Nev., welcome sign just before the Comstock Casino on S. Taylor Street). Thirsting for some robust training, members of *Team Freedom* bypassed the Middlegate burger challenge to quench their thirst at the Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center (NAWDC). Some might call it the watering hole of Naval Aviation excellence.

NAWDC provided an all-inclusive stay for six weeks that incorporated a syllabus of over 30 separate missions, including but not limited to strike, combat search-and-rescue (CSAR), suppression of enemy air defenses, defensive counter air, offensive counter air, maritime strike and anti-submarine warfare (ASW). That was the "Bronze Package." For some of the few hand-selected "Silver Package" members, the Strike staff facilitated CVW-7 Mission Commander candidates planning and executing missions under instruction. Although the Silver State O'Club didn't provide an open bar and only the occasional token, Strike staff ushered in a non-organic intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platform to include a P-8A *Poseidon* for Air Wing Fallon (AWF) to make for up it.

If the precision of beer die KPs (ker-plunks) and drinking the o'club WINCHESTER of beer is reflective of the air wing's capabilities, then *Team Freedom* imbues a warfighter's esprit de corps and tactical excellence. The learning objectives were met and every aircrew gained another nugget of knowledge. With numerous hours logged in mission planning, the aircraft and debriefs, hopefully every member of *Team Freedom* earned enough points on their player's card to get a few more chips for the o'club next time.

For the "Gold Package," the HSM-46 *Grandmasters* and HSC-5 *Nightdippers* left the comfort of their rooms at the Navy Gateway Inn & Suites and the cold beers at the o'club behind to go camping! Utilizing a detachment (det) of CMV-22 *Ospreys* and Navy C-130s, CVW-7's helicopter squadrons moved their personnel, equipment and aircraft to sunny California to conduct expeditionary advanced base operations based out of MCB Camp Pendleton and NAS North Island. HSM-46 executed ASW training flights and supported maritime strike missions off San Clemente Island, and HSC-5 conducted CSAR and combat logistics. They accomplished all of this while eating only MREs! These operations, based out of austere locations, proved that the air wing remains flexible and ready to meet the challenges and requirements of tomorrow.

Looking to the future leads CVW-7 back to reintegrating with CVN 77 and the reforming of *Team Jackpot*. Group Sail and the Composite Training Unit Exercise are just around the corner, and deployment is on the horizon in 2026. The work that CVW-7 is putting in now honing its skills in combat operations all but guarantees its future successes!





A VFA-103 Jolly Rogers F/A-18F roars off the flight deck of Bush during TSTA in the Atlantic Ocean on 14 Jun '25.

BACK AT THE BEACH AND ON THE ROAD

by LT Brian “Sniffy” Mazzone, USN

The VFA-103 *Jolly Rogers* have been back at the beach and on the move, balancing a full slate of flying, training and travel as we roll into the busy season. True to form, the *Bones* continue to do it all with equal parts professionalism and personality, keeping the jets sharp, the morale high and the skull flying proudly wherever we go.

We’ve welcomed several fresh faces to the ready room, all bringing their own unique energy to the squadron. LT Ben “FNG” Scholz joins us as a new pilot, and if you saw him walking across the flight line, you’d swear he was an extra from “The Sopranos.” LT Katie “SIS” Waller, a former weapons system officer (WSO) turned pilot, stays true to form as she’s still trying to figure out how to fly the airplane. She joins the ranks of “Bullet Det East,” an odd group who are slowly learning to become productive members of society. LTJG Sean Piehel, our intelligence officer, is best known for his fondness for swing dancing and his tendency to say “cheers” at the end of every conversation, a quirk the ready room still hasn’t quite decided how to handle. LTJG Nathan “FNG” Schrand also joined the *Bones*, a man of mystery for now, but if nothing more, he adds mass to the squadron, and we wish him well in his future feats of strength. LCDR Chase “Banana” Hammack recently joined the *Bones*, bringing a face of gold and a heart of black, paired with a tactical prowess only a mother could love. LCDR Eric “K-Cup” Kemble has wasted no time making sure the JOs know that he is one of us, even if the gold oak leaf says otherwise.

While the squadron welcomed new energy, we also said goodbye to several longstanding *Vics* whose leadership and personalities helped shape the ready room into what it is today. LT Eric “MAVICS” Brovarone leaves behind a tenure that predates most, remembered for his sometimes-helpful wisdom and his truly unmatched squadron duty officer cooking skills. LT Justin “Hamster Hands” Hiller departs to chase wings of a different kind, making the rare jump from WSO to pilot. Small in stature but large in presence, Hammy was known for his constant jokes, contagious energy and uncanny ability to “rage-bait” at will. LCDR Nick “Mimbo” Adams also moves on, following in the line of O-4 greets who remember when the Navy was better with flying manuals by day and smoking in the ready room by night. One final farewell goes to LCDR CL “Spanky” Keedy, a man known for his football analogies despite his small stature. He will be missed as we once again enter halftime — or the fourth quarter — or wherever we’re at in the game. We’ve lost track.

The *Bones* have since traded the beach for the high desert of Fallon, where the squadron continues honing its edge, executing the tactics of tomorrow with the technology of yesterday, and perfecting the fine art of surviving 12-hour days on bad coffee and good company. Between long flights, longer debriefs and a few nights at the o’club, the team has managed to keep morale high and the humor alive. A few weekend getaways and some lighthearted mischief have helped balance out the grind, proving once again that even on the road, *Victory* (tactical callsign) continues to be mission ready — for Victory in Combat. Until next time, Here’s to Victory, Here’s to the *Bones*!

VFA-83 RAMPAGERS

by LT Koty “The Ghoul” Krull, USN

Following our return from TSTA, the *Rams* have remained hard at work maintaining operational readiness. The maintenance department diligently focused on bringing all 11 of our aircraft to full mission capable status in preparation for Air Wing Fallon (AWF). On the aircrew side, we continue to refine our tactical proficiency across both air-to-air and air-to-surface mission sets. A notable contributor to our increased combat readiness is LT Cole “Pickle” Carey, who recently completed strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) Level III. Additionally, congratulations are in order for our Senior JO, LT Jagan “TOTO” Ravichandran, on successfully completing SFWT Level IV. TOTO’s dedication and leadership continue to have a significant impact on the squadron.

As we prepare for upcoming deployment, the *Ram* ready room continues to take shape. We are proud to welcome LCDR James “Trash Panda” Mackovjak as one of our new department heads. Additionally, we extend a warm welcome to our newest junior officer, LTJG Evan “(Bucky)” Dixon, who joins us from the VFA-122 *Flying Eagles*. At the same time, we bid a heartfelt farewell to LT Charity “Mistyc” Somma. Your dedication, sacrifice and extensive expertise have made a lasting impact on the squadron. Your presence will be greatly missed in the ready room, and we wish you continued success in your next assignment. We look forward to seeing all you will accomplish in the future.

Overall, the *Rams* are continuing to solidify as a team, with members embracing their individual roles in support of the squadron’s mission. As we enter our next phase of training, we will begin to rigorously execute and refine our responsibilities, ensuring we are fully prepared to operate as a lethal, integrated fighting force. A special thank you goes out to our maintainers and support personnel for your tireless work and

commitment as we press forward through AWF and COMPTUEX. These critical training milestones are shaping the *Rams* into the combat-ready squadron our air wing expects and deserves. *Ram On!*

VFA-131 WILDCATS

by LT Kyle “McNewGuy” Wagner, USN

The VFA-131 *Wildcats*, AIRLANT’s First and Finest, have been getting after it again during this final quarter of 2025. The squadron executed a weeklong det to NAS Key West to further refine skills in basic fighter maneuvering and have been hard at work preparing for and executing AWF alongside our fellow CVW-7 squadrons. Finally, the squadron welcomed a handful of new faces and said goodbye to some older ones who we will surely miss.

After our one-week det to Key West, the *Wildcats* continued preparations for AWF. Many consider it the crucible within work ups that is not only a test of a pilot’s ability to execute complex events. It also evaluates the numerous hardworking personnel who make flying these aircraft possible and their ability to meet the demands of high tempo, extended duration flight operations. During week one, the *Wildcats* expended 500-lb. BLU-111 general purpose bombs, inert GBU-12/16 *Paveway II* laser-guided bombs, inert GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM), inert GBU-54 laser JDAMs and numerous rounds of 20 mm.

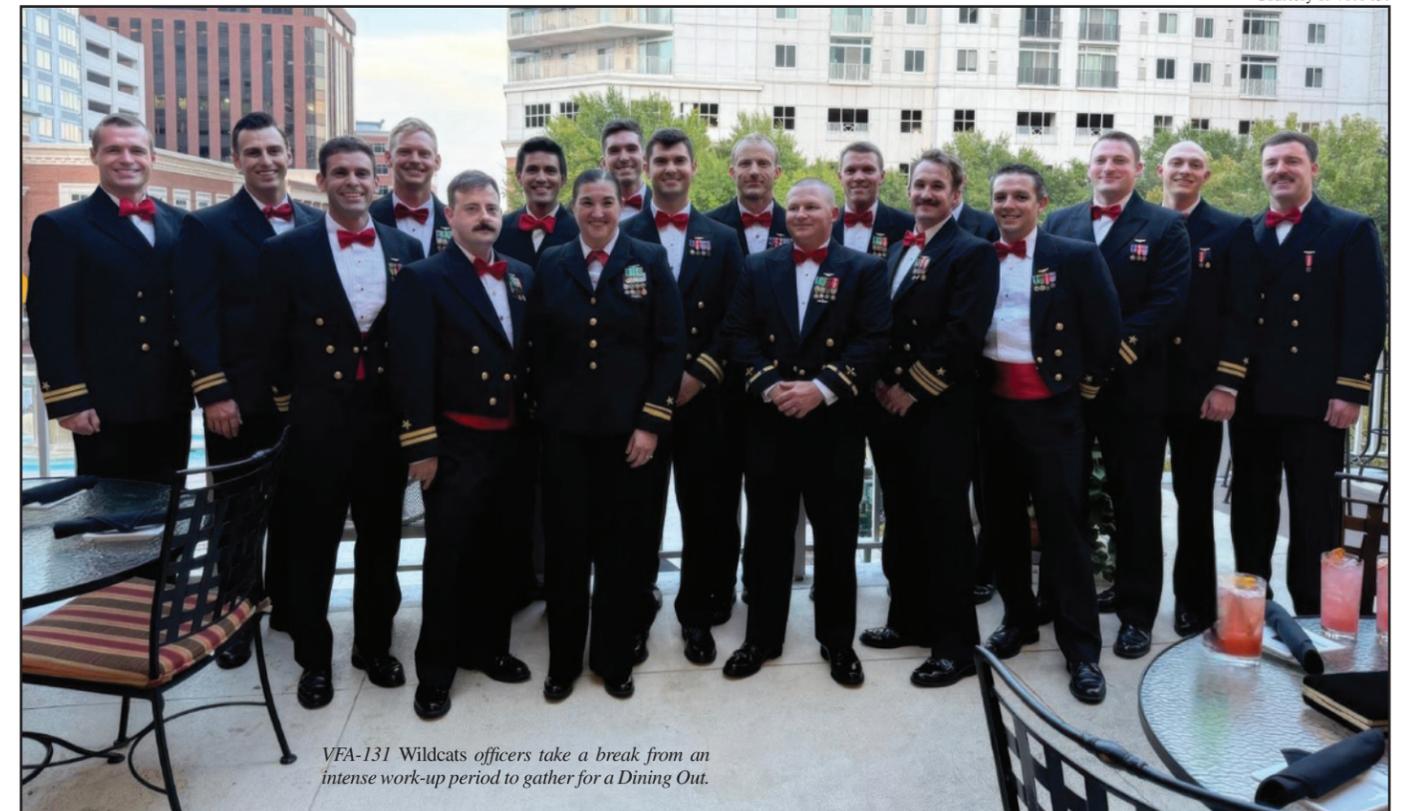
Following the first week of unit-level training, the *Wildcats* joined the rest of CVW-7 in lectures, mission planning and execution of complex large-force exercises. Each of them required hundreds of man-hours for mission planning and thousands of maintenance hours to prepare the more than 40 aircraft taking part in each event. The specific mission sets executed by *Team Freedom* on each exercise varied, but ultimately they all shared the overarching objective of developing CVW-7 into a true team, capable of overcoming any challenge presented, and *Team Freedom* excelled.

Finally, it is with a heavy heart that we had to say goodbye to some of our fellow *Wildcats* who, throughout this quarter, received orders to depart our command. “Shih Tzu,” “PoLR,” “Clifford,” and “JP,” you were all exceptional members of VFA-131 who were crucial in continuing to uphold the *Wildcat* standards and the squadron will miss you in the years to come. ONE TEAM, ONE FIGHT, SINGLE SEAT FOREVER! Meow!



ADAN Dominic Aragon assigned to the VFA-83 Rampagers, part of the team on the ground that keeps the jets in the air, carries tie down chains on the flight deck of Bush during a break in TSTA flight operations on 20 Jun '25.

Courtesy of VFA-131



VFA-131 Wildcats officers take a break from an intense work-up period to gather for a Dining Out.

VFA-105 GUNSLINGERS

by LT Anthony "Grease" Polo, USN

After several months of a demanding operational tempo, the *Gunslingers* were eager to embrace an extended period of home station time in August. The squadron capitalized on this opportunity by conducting two highly productive mini basic fighter maneuvering dets to NAS Key West, where aircrew refined their tactical skills in the skies above the Florida Keys. These focused sessions allowed pilots and WSOs to enhance their tactical abilities and build confidence in dynamic air combat maneuvering. Additionally, a select group of six aircrew participated in impromptu training on acute maritime survival. The opportunity to train together in a more relaxed setting re-energized the ready room, strengthening the bonds between aircrew as we prepare for the challenges ahead.

In September, VFA-105 ramped up its efforts to integrate pilots and WSOs, with a particular focus on mastering the LITENING Pod (LPOD). Working alongside the VFA-131 *Wildcats*, VFA-105 led the charge in refining and standardizing fleet-wide LPOD employment, ensuring that we maintain our tactical superiority in targeting and reconnaissance operations.

Several aircrew also achieved significant tactical qualifications this month, including LTs James "Puck" Davis and Caleb "Scarebear" Hiller, both of whom qualified as Combat Section Leads. The month also marked a significant milestone as we welcomed new members to the *Gunslinger* family, including LCDR Zac "Midrat" Zatorski and LT Tamara "Nikki" Hayles, along with our first WSO department head, LCDR Evan "Tommy Boy" Bokhart, and our first WSO training officer, LCDR Adam "Snackatowa" Davensizer. At the same time, we bid farewell to seasoned professionals LCDR Alexander "Navin" Beasley, LTs Christopher "TINA" Ballas, Tyler "Chicken" Schmidt and CWO5(sel) Rick Mason, whose contributions leave an enduring impact on the squadron.

In October, the squadron headed to Nevada for AWF, the culminating event of the 2025 OFRP work-up cycle. The *Gunslingers* were poised to leverage the insights gained during this event as a tactical advantage in future operations. The ready room also became a focal point for reinforcing squadron cohesion in preparation for the upcoming deployment. VFA-105's young WSOs experienced firsthand the importance of crew integrity, which extends far beyond the cockpit and into every facet of squadron life, including the o' club. Amid intense, high-fidelity air battles, camaraderie thrived, highlighted by a memorable callsign review board in Lake Tahoe, where LT Dylan "Steamy Nix" Hinckley, LTJGs Dean "Darf" Waite, Jake "Worm" Bloomstein and Margot "Spa" Behrens

Courtesy of VFA-105



Members of VFA-105 assemble to celebrate LT Tyler "Chicken" Schmidt's final flight as a Gunslinger.

earned their new callsigns. Our newest pilots, LTs Matthew Gillcrist and Samuel Paparo III, witnessed the camaraderie firsthand as they joined the fleet just in time for the Tahoe admin and AWF large-force exercises. Prepared for the future, VFA-105 is ready to answer the call of duty, standing resolute and united. Tonight ... We Ride!

MISSION READY: PATRIOTS FINALIZING WORK UPS FOR DEPLOYMENT

As fall settles in, the VAQ-140 *Patriots* continue progressing through the advanced stages of our work-up cycle. We achieved a significant milestone with the completion of TSTA in June. During this phase, the squadron integrated fully with CVW-7 and *George H. W. Bush*, establishing a seamless operational relationship with the carrier and its flight-deck crew to ensure mission readiness under any challenge.

The squadron also proudly supported the Navy's recruiting efforts, showcasing Naval Aviation's capabilities at air shows in cities like Yuma, Ariz., and Deadwood, S.D., highlighting our operational excellence and the importance of naval air power.

In July, we bid farewell to CDR Shane "BP" Salvatore, our outgoing commanding officer. We are deeply grateful for his leadership and wish him fair winds and following seas as he embarks on new adventures. The squadron is now under the command of CDR Omar "Odd Job" Sanusi, whose wealth of experience, energy and vision continue to guide us through the final stages of the work-up cycle as we prepare for deployment.

September brought *Growler* Week, a series of team-building events that strengthened camaraderie and esprit de corps, featuring friendly competitions like foosball, dodgeball, mountain biking and the annual *Growler* Golf Tournament, where the *Patriots* team won the "Closest to the Pin" trophy. The week wrapped up with the *Growler* Ball, celebrating the VAQ community's achievements and traditions. Additionally, we celebrated the annual community awards, where four VAQ-140 Sailors received individual excellence honors, recognizing their outstanding performance and dedication.

A successful AWF in October sharpened our tactical skills through realistic training scenarios, improving our ability to operate in complex environments. During this det, four *Patriot* aircrew earned *Growler* Weapons and Tactics Program qualification upgrades, further enhancing our operational capacity. We also took a well-deserved break for an admin in Tahoe, allowing the team to recharge before returning to the next phase of training. The lessons learned during AWF, along with the progress made in readiness and qualifications, will be vital as we prepare for deployment.



A rain-slicked flight line and dawn's early light make for a colorful reflection of VAQ-140 Patriots EA-18G Growlers ready to taxi for a training flight.

Looking ahead, we shift focus back to afloat operations as we prepare to embark CVN 77 and reconstitute *Team Jackpot*. With sharpened tactics, seamless integration and strong leadership, the *Patriots* are ready to meet the challenges of deployment. VAQ-140 remains committed to excellence — professional, proficient and tenacious — prepared to answer the call wherever the fleet requires us. Until next time — RCSH!

A YEAR OF EXCELLENCE AND PROGRESS: SUN KINGS SOAR TO NEW HEIGHTS

Throughout the summer and fall of 2025, the VAW-116 *Sun Kings* demonstrated unwavering dedication and exceptional skill, propelling ourselves through a period of remarkable growth and achievement. In early June, the squadron embarked on a pivotal milestone, relocating all its aircraft and personnel to NavSta Norfolk to join CVN 77 for an intensive TSTA. During the underway the squadron was able to integrate more cohesively with the rest of the air wing and conduct training operations from several different operating areas.

In October, the *Sun Kings* made their mark once again at AWF, solidifying our role as the backbone of situational awareness for the air wing. Over the course of five weeks the squadron provided airborne command and control during some of the most challenging and complicated training events the staff at NAWDC have developed. Despite the many environmental and material challenges encountered during the det, the *Sun King* maintenance department showcased its resolve and dedication, resulting in an impressive 96 percent sortie rate. CVW-7 has grown increasingly cohesive, honing its skills with each passing day in preparation for the upcoming deployment.

The squadron's continued success is a testament to the hard work and dedication of its members. This year, many individuals reached significant career milestones. Among them, two of the squadron's most senior first class petty officers were selected for promotion to chief petty officer. Congratulations to Chief Tittle and Chief Frazier! Additionally, LT Brady "BTR" Watson swiftly completed his syllabus and earned the title of Aircraft Commander, while LT Sarah "Band Camp" Ulmer has achieved her first major career goal by earning a coveted spot in the TOPGUN Air Intercept Control course at NAS Fallon.

While the *Sun Kings* have experienced unparalleled success, we also bid farewell to several respected officers. We extend our deepest gratitude to LTs Bridgette "Myrtle" Hickey, Bailey "Fico" Bliss, LCDR Corey "Mike Honcho" McMurtrie, LT Thomas "Milkman" Frankenberger, LCDR Thomas "2 Ribs" Lee, ENS Gabriel Large and CWO2 Roberto Salas Jr, whose contributions will continue to impact the fleet as they move to new assignments. However, with change comes opportunity, and we are proud to welcome two new officers to the squadron, ready to bring fresh perspectives and experience to the growing JOPA.

As we continue to build on our successes, the *Sun Kings* remain committed to excellence, teamwork and readiness, poised to tackle whatever challenges lie ahead as we prepare for the future.



MC3 Jayden Brown, USN



The cockpit glass reflects AN Isobel Acevedo and the flight deck of *Bush* as she cleans an E-2C Hawkeye assigned to the VAW-116 *Sun Kings* during operations in the Atlantic Ocean on 18 Jun '25.



With Mutha front and center, the VFA-213 Blacklions assemble in front of the island of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) during an eventful cruise that has taken the squadron from the Mediterranean to the High North to the Caribbean Sea.



USS Gerald R. Ford
CAPT David Skarosi



CVW-8
CAPT David J. Dartez

VFA-213 FIGHTING BLACKLIONS

Since our last magazine update, the VFA-213 *World-Famous Fighting Blacklions* have been at work in the air, at sea and (frequently) in port. With ports of call in Marseilles, Oslo and Palma de Mallorca (and another on the horizon as of this writing), some squadron FNGs are left wondering if they stepped onto a Carnival Cruise Line ship in Norfolk by mistake. Luckily, we've got plenty of hinges around to remind us of the COVID days.

Since our last update, the *Blacklions* have earned multiple crew upgrades. LTs Abdallah "LIL RAsCL" Brittain and Guy-yinn "GLITTIR" Tchwantu both earned strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) Level III qualifications. Additionally, LCDR Andrew "MoBi" Delany, LTs Stephen "FNG" O'Keefe and Seth "Weenie Hut Jr." completed SFWT Level II. During line period zero, LT Shane "Bop-It" Platt earned CVW-8 Top Ten Nugget and in line period one he received Top Ten Hook. LT Cody "Spot 7" Hyland became USS *Gerald R. Ford's* (CVN 78) first-ever "Nocturian" after achieving his 100th night trap! Last (but certainly not least), our intelligence officer, LTJG Kaley "Mind Freak" Henyon, earned her Information Dominance Warfare Officer pin.

Breaking news straight from Ready Room Seven's ice machine (which is usually out of ice) — CDR Robert "STORC" Gordon has assumed command of Fighting 31! And get this, he's managed to keep his job for THREE WHOLE MONTHS! Bravo Zulu, sir. We also want to shout out to CDR Wes "Wooly Willy" Mize for his time as skipper and wish him the best in his future endeavors. Finally, hold on to your kitten mittens because we have a shiny new executive officer! CDR William "Lemur" Revell is fresh off his shore tour ... or rather, straight from the "Bureau" itself! He's been sent, via his own written orders, to Fighting 31 on a divine mission to personally fix retention issues. Good luck Lemur! The JOs are walking disaster zones fueled by caffeine, nicotine and questionable decisions. *Skipper note: None of my JOs use nicotine. I thought the Bureau sent me a new guy who was a user, but he just has a big bottom lip.*

This cruise has been less "relaxing vacation" and more endless montage of fighter jets flexing for distinguished visitors such as Livy Dunne and Paul Skenes. We've been pummeling SFWT sorties like they owe us money, squeezing in some unit-level training between all the multinational Joint exercises. Speaking of international relations, our beloved exchange pilot from the land of tea and crumpets, Royal Navy LCDR Lewis "Speedbird" Phillips, completed the SFWT Level III syllabus and immediately left the JOPA after being spot promoted by the First Sea Lord in an underwhelming ceremony in the ready room. Also, our phantom JO, LT Matthew "JAAWOL" Coulter, despite owing the Navy approximately six months of leave, somehow managed to duck through Level II. Now, a somber moment. Pour one out for our fallen *Felix* brethren, LTs Duke "HoTCAP" Kenner and Jake "TRASH" Yoon, who have moved on to their shore tours. Don't worry, we have replenished our ranks with two former T-45 "Top Guns" during our time underway — LTs Tommy "The Butcher" Brophy and Andrew "Mary Todd Lincoln" Walsh. Welcome to the fleet new guys!

Ford decided to treat us to a scenic tour and pushed to the High North for some flying with our North Atlantic Treaty Organization partners. While dodging polar bears and icebergs, we participated in *Exercise Neptune Strike 1, 2* and gasp ... a 3rd! *Felix* also participated in *Operation Overture*, better known as *Operation Norwegian Princess*. We intercepted Russians, saw the Northern Lights and enjoyed breathtaking sunsets that would make Bob Ross jealous. We also worked with our Norwegian allies and JTACs, shooting bullets and dropping ordnance, including what was presumably the most explosive laser-guided training round ever seen (WHAMMY!).

Let's be clear, all of this could not have been accomplished without the tireless efforts of the *Felix* maintenance department. In the Arctic, nuggets were "lucky" enough to build character by manning up every day and spending hours in a stale dry suit. This resulted in unparalleled creativity by our own LCDR "POM POM" Dulaney as he struggled to fill his normal three piddle packs per flight. On the bright side, we braved the cold and Jack Frost himself and earned our Blue Noses and Top Hook for the first line period!

Ah, the sweet, sweet Mediterranean! After our little Arctic adventure, we returned to what we can only describe as "flying paradise." Picture it — crystal clear waters, balmy breezes ... and crippling credit card debt. In the Med, *Ford's* "joy cruise" was in full swing, boasting a staggering three port calls in six weeks! The *Felix* bank accounts were officially hemorrhaging money at a rate that had us considering selling our flight boots to pay for the next round of overpriced, warm tequila. Oh well, as they say, "It's a wazy. It's a woozie. It's fugazi." Loosely translated, this means, "we're broke but having fun ... maybe."

Team Factory (tactical callsign) has spent the last month prepping to "manufacture pain" for *Fifth Fleet*. We are ready to hit the Red Sea! Huh? What's that? We're NOT going there anymore? Interesting.



Members of Team Felix proudly display their status as "Blue Noses" after Ford ventured across the Arctic Circle.

VAW VRC FOUNDATION

"Honoring the men and women of the VAW and VRC communities"

**JOIN US
BECOME A MEMBER TODAY!**

* VAW VRC Reunions

* VAW VRC interactive web site

* VAW VRC Ready Room aboard USS Midway

* VAW VRC newsletters

The VAWVRCVUQ 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 Foundation.

Page 61

Scratch that! Strike it from the record! *Team Felix* arrived in *Fourth Fleet*, practically bursting with excitement about whatever awaited us there. Maybe we'll get one of those infamous Bahamian port calls and the even more elusive green ink! As always, *Felix Rules!*

THESE HAIRS HAVE ANSWERED OUR PRAYERS!

by LT Harrison "FNG" Jones, USN

Impressive mustaches have been in fashion in the strike fighter community since the inception of the tailhook. For a community known for audaciousness, it comes as little surprise that many pilots grow facial hair to a length that is commensurate with their passion for tactical excellence. Accordingly, the *Golden Warriors* of VFA-87 have fully embraced pogonotrophy during this 2025 deployment (pogonotrophy refers to the act of growing and grooming facial hair; the more you know).

Known as the *War Party* (tactical callsign) or to one two-tailed executive officer as "those clowns," we sport our mustaches with pride. This esprit de corps was expressed perfectly by our esteemed commanding officer, who perceptively noted, "If you have a long mustache, your hair needs to be tight. If your hair is long, you have to be jacked." Truer words have never been spoken. If barbatus icons such as Sam Elliot, Tom Selleck, Charlie Chaplin and Admiral of the Navy George Dewey have taught us anything, it is that facial hair is not just a fashion statement, but a state of mind. The *War Party* proved over this deployment that the "stache does not maketh the man," but rather proves one's dedication to Fighter Spirit. Sometimes, however, the ultimate proof of dedication is sacrifice.

From the Mediterranean to the High North, from the admin of Côte d'Azur, France to the spas of Oslo, our nose neighbors were the glue that held the air wing together. In Norway, many a local would pass us by, inquiring, "What is this? The mustache convention?" Our response was, "No, ma'am, this is a fighter squadron." This rebuttal would usually

MCSN Brianna Barnett, USN

be reciprocated by the purchase of a horn of mead, cementing our international renown with the help of our curtain of virility, swagger and witty banter. This made it all the more shocking when, to the horror of the air wing, the squadron shaved our beloved mustaches at Foc'sle Follies, marking a sacrificial offering for continued good luck throughout deployment.

Previously unseen bare faces were suddenly and mercilessly exposed, and in an instant, the squadron was unrecognizable. How could such handsome pilots so crudely shave such beautiful mustaches? Would the warfighters of old look down from the heavens with pride or despair, and why didn't our training officer partake? Is it because the squadron channels its BFM prowess through the push-broom of this former 1-v-1 subject matter expert? This selfless act provided more questions than answers. Even a few *Growler* upper lips were culled in the confusion. Fellow aviators and Sailors spent the next few days relearning our callsigns and faces. However, it was a necessary sacrifice few had to make for the sake of air wing morale, Fighter Spirit and a continued epic deployment.

What happened in the 45 days following our selfless sacrifice? Grace and prosperity rained down on the *Warriors* with 30 days frequenting the friendly skies of "Hack City" and the other 15 spent in Oslo, Palma and Split, where our merry band was surely mustered in their hotel by 0200. Certainly, it was the sacrifice of our mustaches that accelerated the never-ending train of "good deals." How long will the luck continue? None can say. As the tasking for *Carrier Strike Group Twelve* changes with new orders to the *Fourth Fleet* area of responsibility, we can only hope for las playas del Caribe and a wayward Su-30 or two. However, with our mustaches growing back fuller and more luscious than ever, VFA-87 will remain ready to once again make the sacrifice for the sake of CVW-8's good fortune.



An F/A-18E flown by a once mustachioed VFA-87 Golden Warriors pilot on approach for recovery on board Ford in the Sixth Fleet area of responsibility, 31 Oct '25.



A F-35C Lightning II assigned to the VMFA-314 Black Knights prepares to launch from USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) during Exercise Northern Edge 2025 in the North Pacific, 23 Aug '25.



USS Abraham Lincoln
CAPT Daniel J. Keeler



CVW-9
CAPT William Frank

TEAM SHOGUN

by LCDR Cory "Juicy" Couture, USN

Team *Shogun* (tactical callsign) of CVW-9 is charging toward deployment at max afterburner. Since our last update in *The Hook*, the air wing executed a successful *Northern Edge* exercise, dominated the high-end Integrated Air Defense Course (IADC) and sliced through the depths of sustainment phase with precision and focus. Rather than rest on their sizable laurels, *Shogun* squadrons continued to fly, fight and lead up and down the West Coast. They fought aggressively, trained relentlessly and recovered at standard operating procedure minimum fuel. Every event has been squeezed for the maximum return on warfighting readiness and seamless integration across our platforms. Ready for prime time, *Shogun* now turns its full focus to the upcoming deployment on board USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72).

While Naval Aviation enjoyed the warm welcome of Reno and the annual Tailhook symposium, CVW-9 aircrew bundled up in their dry suits and made the trek to *Northern Edge 2025*. For two weeks, the team executed Joint operations across the challenging conditions of the Alaskan ranges while braving the elements and executing with precision despite the Arctic environment. *Team Shogun* delivered long-range maritime strikes, suppressed simulated air defenses and maneuvered through complex threat environments. The air wing operated alongside Joint and Coalition partners, building real-world warfighting trust and delivering combat power across vast distances. Spanning from the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex to the Gulf of Alaska to the remote reaches of the Aleutian Islands, *Northern Edge* brought together more

than 6,500 servicemembers, approximately 125 aircraft and seven naval vessels from the U.S. and Canada. It proved more than a spreadsheet full of green boxes. *Team Shogun* is built to fight and ready to win in combat.

Immediately after this arctic adventure, CVW-9 blasted into NAS Fallon for the IADC with a bag of knots and an attitude to match. This high-end training event placed aviators and surface warfare teammates from across the carrier strike group (CSG) inside the most advanced Joint simulation environment available in the fleet. Together, the team fought through complex, multi-domain scenarios, executing kill chains under pressure, countering dynamic threats and integrating seamlessly with every warfare commander in the CSG. *Shogun* aircrew refined their tactics, pushed their mental and physical limits (respect to the Fallon O'Club), and returned to their squadrons with hard-earned experience.

Now, with deployment looming on an uncertain horizon, *Team Shogun* is keeping the pressure on. Squadrons continue flying sorties, running integrated training and preparing for a port call in Thailand with vision and purpose. Leadership drives a clear standard — Agile, Disciplined, Lethal. Our katana remains sharp and ready, standing by to answer our nation's call!

Break break, three quarters of a mile, call the ball!

Arguably the most critical update for CVW-9 staff this cycle, aside from combat readiness, is winning the prestigious 2025 Strike Fighter Ball Sports Championship. Despite having significantly less personnel than our competitor squadrons across the NAS Lemoore flight line, *Shogun* staff gave a dominant performance and backed up our words with action by being agile, disciplined and lethal in the air, on the ground, on the court and on the beer die table. Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard, but the CVW-9 staff works hard and has more God-given talent than Boobie Miles.

Chaps would have said a prayer for us, but he knew we already had it in the bag. We call him "Gunner" because he rips dodgeballs like Joint Direct Attack Munitions. "Big Time" came up Big Time with his Big-Time drives. CAGMO has the frame of a five-star center, and his jumper is almost as beautiful as his ability to deliver full mission capable aircraft. The CAG air intelligence officer had all the details on the competition, and his scouting reports proved correct. CAG's reputation on the beer die table has transitioned to legend. He has more hours on the table than the JOPA has in the Navy. Want to know what our Pentagon-approved physical training program is? Sorry, it's classified, but it results in Ws. *Shogun*, out.



A pair of VFA-41 Black Aces F/A-18F Super Hornets carrying AIM-174B missiles in formation over the North Pacific during a Northern Edge mission off Lincoln, 24 Aug '25.



“THE IN-BETWEEN TIMES”

by LT Olivia “Tina” Denbesten, USN

Greetings Tailhook community! The *Black Aces* currently find ourselves in that familiar limbo between major exercises and deployments, the “in-between times” when everyone likes to pretend its calm, but the flight schedule says otherwise.

Sustainment Exercise (SUSTEX) II was no quick detachment. The *Aces* were underway for a five-week marathon of flying, trucking up to Alaska for *Northern Edge* and perfecting the art of showering without hot water. Despite the rustic conditions, the squadron racked up major wins, a mountain of qualifications and lots of flight time in a dry suit.

Leading the charge, LTs Mackenzie “Glinda” Kirschner, Trent “Scut” Rudd, Robert “S.A.L.S.A.” Fitzpatrick and Jack “ALeC” Gasper earned their strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) Level IV qualifications. Closely behind, LTs Jack “Shartin Baker II” Gibbons, Cory “KBaE” Provence and Leor “Lowside” Golan checked the box for Level III. And rounding out the sweep, LTs Mitch “Dicky T” Weller, Olivia “Tina” Denbesten, David “Micro” Mock and Hunter “Sunshine” Holstad earned their Level II qualifications.

As if that weren’t enough, Glinda and Scut added forward air controller (airborne) qualifications to their resumes, while Glinda, Scut, LCDRs Matthew “HUGs” Phillips and Matthew “Chicken” Faulkner earned distinction as Rescue Mission Commanders. If SUSTEX stands for “sustain everything,” the *Black Aces* took that to heart, from flight hours to qualifications and morale (mostly).

Back home, we entered our nomadic era, migrating across Reeves Boulevard while our ready room undergoes “construction ... to make it better.” Rumor has it that the project will be finished before we return, though construction itself has yet to begin and is already three months behind schedule. Through it all, the squadron’s most vital piece of equipment, the coffee maker, survived the move unscathed. Priorities intact.

In the meantime, we bid farewell to six of our best — LCDR Jennifer “Bogis” Sandifer, LTs Greyson “Squidward” Thompson, Garrett “Nickel Rick” Booth, JP Perez, LTJG Steve James and CWO3 Nic Mathis. In their stead, we welcomed six new *Aces*, all about to experience the traditional baptism by fire that only deployment can bring — LTs Kyle “FNG” Cahners, Silas “FNG” LaGroue, Jennifer “FNG” Weigold, Lucas “FNG” Mills, Matt “FNG” Modelo and ENS Louis “Louie” Lopez.

Meanwhile, HUGs and Chicken both earned the pinnacle qualification of Command Duty Officer Underway, meaning they can now drive the carrier if all else fails. Two department heads at the helm — what could possibly go wrong?

As we count down to another deployment, operational tempo remains high and spirits stay steady, powered by equal parts espresso and Celcius. With the holidays on the horizon, the squadron stands ready to deck the carrier’s halls. After all, nothing says Christmas like tinsel, flight ops and the faint smell of JP-5. First to Fight, First to Strike!

VFA-151 VIGILANTES

by LT Alex “Michael JackZyn” Petroy, USN

At the time of our last magazine submission, the VFA-151 *Vigilantes* were preparing to get underway with the rest of CVW-9 on board *Lincoln* to participate in SUSTEX II and *Northern Edge*. The ensuing month found us hard at work honing our warfighting skills and preparing for our upcoming deployment. Over the course of SUSTEX, we requalified for shipboard operations and practiced our integration with the CSG through participation in multiple large-force exercises. Following a very brief port call at NAS North Island, *Lincoln* headed north to the Gulf of Alaska for *Northern Edge*. While in the northern latitudes, the *Vigilantes* became experts at donning and doffing dry suits and shivering through showers. We also had several excellent opportunities to both work with the Air Force and test our mettle against them.

MCSN Daniel Kimmelman, USN



Jet fumes blur the launch of a VFA-151 Vigilantes F/A-18E from Lincoln during Northern Edge 2025, 23 Aug '25.

Our time on board the ship resulted in *Vigilantes* earning several highly regarded qualifications. LTJG Nick “SittREP” Zerby passed his board with flying colors, earning his Intelligence Warfare Officer qualification. Additionally, LCDR Justin “COUNT CHOCULA” Lamascus completed his Mission Commander Strike Lead qualification, one of the pinnacle tactical achievements of the VFA community.

Upon our return from the Great North, the squadron continued with its frenetic pace. LT Jack “_DR_amic” Murphy finished his Level III SFWT training, earning him the right to lead a section of F/A-18s into combat as well as begin instructing more junior members of the squadron. His success is due to his dedication and perseverance as well as the outstanding efforts of his instructors. Shortly afterward, LT Jake “NAMPON” Benavidez achieved his Level IV SFWT qualification, despite the best efforts of the local airspace to stop him. This achievement earns him the right to lead a full division of F/A-18s into combat and is one of the final steps of his SFWT progression. Bravo Zulu to these *Vigilantes*!

Throughout the summer, the *Vigilante* family grew as well. We are excited to welcome four new arrivals to bolster our ranks for the upcoming deployment. LCDR Parker “CONDOR” Phelps arrived from the VFA-105 *Gunslingers* by way of the School of Aviation Safety. LT Chris “TINA” Ballas is also joining us from the *Gunslingers* as one of the first sea-to-sea junior officers. We look forward to their leadership and experience strengthening the squadron.

Our other new arrivals are LT Ethan “Zynderella” Hardt, who completed his CAT I instruction in VFA-122 and is eager to continue sharpening his skills. ENS Alex Ball will be replacing LTJG Zerby as our intelligence officer. We send him off with gratitude for all his excellent work.

With the pilots and Sailors of VFA-151 enjoying their hard-earned preparation for overseas movement (POM) leave, the work continued as a contingent of *Vigilantes* attended the IADC at NAS Fallon, working together with personnel from the air wing and strike group to improve our ability to defend the ship.

As the POM period winds down, the *Vigilantes* are prepped and ready for our November deployment where we will uphold our high standards and demonstrate our warfighting ability throughout *Seventh Fleet*, ready as always to FIGHT UGLY!

WIZARDS READY TO EXECUTE

by LT Thomas “FNG” Beaudoin, USN

The VAQ-133 *Wizards* held our change-of-command ceremony on 2 October 2025, at NAS Whidbey Island. CDR Erik “mOObs” Dente transferred command to CDR Ian “FARKUS” Chamberlin, while CDR Bradford “#” Brodersen took on the role of executive officer.

As we conclude our yearlong sustainment period, the *Wizards* have continued our trend of excellence. After a brief rest following return from SUSTEX I, the squadron successfully executed another deck sustainment exercise (SUSTEX II) and participated in *Northern Edge* on board *Abraham Lincoln*, accumulating 210 flight hours and 133 arrested landings. Shortly thereafter, during the annual VAQ community celebration known as the *Growler Ball*, VAQ-133 was honored with the 2025 ADM Arthur W. Radford Award, marking the second year out of the previous three that the *Wizards* have been recognized for tactical excellence in airborne electronic attack.

Additionally, we have rigorously trained our aircrew through *Growler* Weapons and Tactics Program (GWTP) events. LTs Jerry “The Tizzler” Kigerl, Tommy “StUFS” Wickum and Abby “Mansplain” Savidge achieved their Level III *Growler* Mission Commander qualifications. LTs Zachery “Mad Libs” Miller and Cody “SHIA” Horst earned their Level IV qualifications as Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses Element Leads. These new qualifications significantly enhance the tactical readiness of both individual aircrew and the entire squadron.

As VAQ-133 prepares for its second deployment in two years, the *Wizards* have welcomed several new junior officers and department heads, while bidding farewell to others. New aircrew include LTs Marshal “FNG4” Hess, Matthew “FNG5” Underwood, Tiffany “FNG6” Johnstone and LCDR Sean “Stanky J” Hadley. We wish a warm farewell to LT Kevin “Mr. Weeboto” Vicencio as he departs for the forward-deployed VAQ-141 *Shadowhawks* in Japan and LCDR Christopher “PIG” Miller leaving for the Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center as NAS Fallon.

The *Wizards* are READY TO EXECUTE on deployment. Whether at sea or ashore, we remain ready to face all challenges head-on. PUSH IT UP!



MCSN Daniel Kimmelman, USN

Under gray skies over the North Pacific, an EA-18G Growler assigned to the VAQ-133 Wizards returns to Lincoln following a flight in support of Northern Edge 2025, 21 Aug '25.





Flight-deck personnel positioned next to a VAW-115 Liberty Bells E-2D Advanced Hawkeye as it prepares to launch from USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) underway in the Pacific on 25 Jul '25.

CVW-11   **CVN 71**

 **USS Theodore Roosevelt**
CAPT Will Mathis

 **CVW-11**
CAPT Chad Heirigs

Looking ahead, CVW-11 is preparing to participate in Air Wing Fallon and COMPTUEX in 2026. These high-intensity exercises will serve as the final proving grounds for our aircrews, integrating lessons learned from previous training evolutions and sharpening our ability to operate in a fully integrated strike group environment.

In addition to our work ups and predeployment exercises, CVW-11 is excited to announce our participation in RIMPAC. The world's largest maritime warfare exercise, it brings together naval forces from across the globe to train in multinational, multi-threat environments. CVW-11's participation will be an invaluable opportunity to engage in complex, integrated operations with our allies and partners, further strengthening our interoperability with international forces.

RIMPAC is a significant milestone for CVW-11 as it allows our aircrews to demonstrate their capabilities on a global stage, honing their ability to operate seamlessly with diverse military forces in varied and challenging operational scenarios and showcase our combat readiness and flexibility in a multinational training environment.

As we look toward 2026, CVW-11 is confident in our readiness and excited for the challenges that lie ahead. Each training event, from SFARP and IARP to TSTA, Air Wing Fallon, COMPTUEX and RIMPAC, is designed to ensure that we are ready for anything. The men and women of CVW-11 remain committed to maintaining the highest standards of readiness, and we are prepared to deploy at a moment's notice.

The preparation we have undertaken over the past year has set the stage for a successful deployment in 2026. We are ready to answer the call, wherever it may come, and we remain steadfast in our mission to protect and defend our nation and our allies. The air wing's legacy of excellence continues, and we are honored to be a part of this proud tradition.

"GET IN LOSERS, WE'RE BOUNCING"

by LT Joseph "Mango Fingers" Merkel, USN

BFM DERBY CHAMPIONS. Before we touch on anything else, we just had to put that out there. With that out of the way, let's recap the last few months.



An F/A-18E Super Hornet assigned to the VFA-25 Fist of the Fleet pictured during flight operations on board TR on 1 Nov '25, as the ship and CVW-11 squadrons prepare for their upcoming deployment.

Since our last update, the VFA-25 *Fist of the Fleet* cleaned up Flight-Deck Certification, enjoyed a weekend in Reno for Hook '25, greeted new faces in the squadron, continued the work-up cycle, celebrated Strike Fighter Ball, employed an AGM-154 Joint Standoff Weapon, flew over the world-famous Walker Cup at Pebble Beach, "green lighted" Fallon to wrap up air-to-air SFARP and IARP, added Aerial Refueling System to our mission sets, proved above average maintenance practices during the pre-Aviation Maintenance Inspection, and went hook down on USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) for TSTA.

Amidst the chaos we added experienced (and inexperienced) pilots to the roster. From just down the street and under the bridge, past the food truck, on the right (take the spot that says "CO"), we received our longtime neighbor LCDR Clay "Mimsy" Elward from the VFA-154 *Black Knights* to bolster the department head forces. Not to worry, though, as the JOs were reinforced by the *Fists*' No. 1 donor, the VFA-146 *Blue Diamonds*. LT Mike "Lord Helmet" Kwasknik is here to flex his super JO superpowers, and LT Jordan "Mr. Mistoffelees" Wilson brings us two deployments worth of experience from the *Diamonds*. And, of course, we must mention our newest FNG, LT Travis Jackson, who comes ready to know the discussion items and execute the maneuvers within course training standard.

As mentioned earlier, VFA-25 is the reigning champion for the 2025 BFM Derby, proving our mettle in air-to-air combat. Our mustaches are keeping pace with our egos as we beat up the field carrier landing practice pattern at home, ready to throw absolute darts behind the boat for the next month. TSTA dropped us off into Thanksgiving for a much-needed reprieve, with a few weeks at home before closing out the "Year of the *Fist*." Hopefully, the holidays will stuff our stockings with SFWT progression and abundant flight hours as we get ready for Air Wing Fallon, and the "Year of the *Fist* Plus 1" beyond. *Fist* 'em!



**Intruder Reunion
Dallas, Texas
22-26 April 2026**

The A-6 Intruder Association is excited to be conducting their 2026 Intruder Association Reunion at the Hyatt Regency Dallas. Co-located with the iconic downtown Dallas Reunion Tower, this central US location offers a site with multiple travel options into the DFW and Dallas Love airfields. For most Intruders, it can be a simple single flight leg from anywhere in the United States.

Room reservations, and information about planned activities can be found at the following link:

<https://dfwtailhookers.org/2026-ia-reunion>

FIGHTING CHECKMATES: UPDATES AND UPGRADES
by LT Benjamin Hogin, USN

The VFA-211 *Fighting Checkmates* are reporting back with a flurry of activity since our last update in *The Hook*. We have been busy honing our skills, supporting important events and welcoming new members to the team.

First, we ventured to NAS Fallon for IARP training. It was a valuable opportunity to reintegrate with our fellow CVW-11 squadrons, refining our combat proficiency in a challenging environment. We especially appreciated the chance to connect with new faces within the air wing and strengthen the bonds that are crucial for effective teamwork.

Upon our return, VFA-211 proudly joined the VFA-86 *Sidewinders* in supporting the commemoration of the U.S. Navy's 250th anniversary with an air power demonstration on board USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77). The event demanded seamless execution with the president, secretary of the navy and secretary of war in attendance. We are pleased to say it went off without a hitch! A significant thank you goes out to our maintenance department, which was able to provide five aircraft that employed 24 Mk 83 bombs and 600 rounds of 20 mm throughout the course of the event. Your dedication, expertise and unwavering commitment ensured our aircraft were mission ready, exceeding all expectations.

The *Checkmates* are excited to welcome LTs Jack LeRette and Dylan Farley to the squadron. Conversely, LCDR Casey "EDGYR" Murdock and LT Chris "Chunder" Armstrong will be leaving us shortly. EDGYR is transitioning to U.S. Africa Command in Germany and Chunder is headed to TOPGUN, preparing to become a VFA-122 strike fighter tactics instructor.

Currently, VFA-211 is off the coast of San Diego, completing TSTA and Group Sail. This intensive training is essential for maintaining our combat readiness and preparing us for future deployments. During our time on the West Coast, we took the opportunity to reconnect with CAPT Dick Evert, USN(Ret), commanding officer of the *Checkmates* from 1983 through 1985, and repatriate the RADM Joseph C. Clifton Trophy, which is "...is in memory of Rear Admiral Clifton, who distinguished himself as a fighter pilot during World War II. His heroism and extraordinary achievements in flight paralleled the aggressive attitude and drive and inspiring leadership he displayed throughout his life. This award recognizes meritorious achievement by a fighter squadron."

We are thankful to have the award back where it belongs, amongst *Checkmates*! We thank CAPT Evert for his insightful and motivational words at the World-Famous I Bar before we left the pier. It was an honor to spend quality time with a former *Checkmate*.

Courtesy of VFA-211



Former squadron Commanding Officer CAPT Dick Evert, USN(Ret) and current Checkmates gather around the RADM Joseph C. Clifton Trophy at NAS North Island.

The *Fighting Checkmates* continue to embrace challenges, refine our skills and uphold the proud traditions of our squadron. We look forward to sharing more updates with the Tailhook community soon. **NIKEL UP!** "*Fighting Checkmates* — Move in Silence Until You Say *Checkmate!*"

#1 Best Seller in Amazon Biographies of the Vietnam War
Enjoyed by more than 7,000 readers in 12 countries around the world. 1500+ reviews. This is a revised and updated version!

"D. D. Smith's personal memoir of his years in naval aviation captures the myriad of challenges that was Naval Aviation before the Vietnam War. ...highly recommended." **STEPHEN COONTS, NY Times best-selling author of Flight of the Intruder**

ABOVE AVERAGE
Naval Aviation
The Hard Way
D.D. Smith

"CDR Smith delivers. I regard him as a friend, whom I have followed from Minnesota farm to (Navy Chief Test Pilot). In between, he's confided in me progression, advancement, cold sweats, mistakes, defeats, disappointments, and, in the end, victories. I followed it all ... a thoroughly entertaining read." **BLEUSHARQUE** (review)

But the book is much more...

It is a cleverly written and refreshingly honest story of the author's life and times as he fights his way from rural Minnesota to the blazing skies over North Vietnam. Commander Smith flew 138 combat missions and made more than 800 carrier arrested landings. As the Navy's first Chief Test Pilot, his tests in the F-14 led to the first EVER flat spin in a Tomcat — and it nearly killed him. No swaggering bravado here; this is a fresh, insightful look at life, luck and guts — in Vietnam and beyond.

Available at **amazon** in print, Kindle and audio versions



Sailors on the flight deck of USS Nimitz (CVN 68) load ordnance onto a VFA-94 Mighty Shrikes F/A-18E Super Hornet in preparation for conducting missions in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility on 20 Aug '25

CVW-17   **CVN 68**

USS Nimitz
CAPT Joseph Furco

CVW-17
CAPT Brent Jaquith




**REESTABLISHING PRESENCE:
NIMITZ RETURNS TO PERSIAN GULF**

by LCDR Colin "Safari" Howell, USN

In the wake of the 12-Day War and rising regional tensions, USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) marked a pivotal milestone in restoring U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf. As the first U.S. aircraft carrier to operate there since USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) in 2023, *Nimitz* led a deliberate return to a strategically vital and increasingly contested maritime theater.

Guided by *Team Quicksand* (tactical callsign), the deployment carefully reestablished carrier operations while simultaneously renewing and strengthening diplomatic and military partnerships throughout the region. Two landmark port visits — to Bahrain, the first since 2020, and Dubai, the first since 2018 — provided invaluable opportunities to engage with regional leaders and demonstrate sustained U.S. commitment to security and cooperation. It also afforded *Nimitz Strike Group* Sailors a well-deserved opportunity to relax and experience different cultures.

Operational activities supported multiple diplomatic efforts. *Nimitz* conducted several Strait of Hormuz transits, reaffirming freedom of navigation in one of the world's most critical sea lanes of communication. The strike group also supported *Operation Inherent Resolve*, contributing to broader regional stability. Utilizing Oman's Masirah Range, CVW-17 aircrew conducted close-air-support training, enhancing readiness in austere environments and paving the way for future training opportunities with regional partners for future carrier strike groups.

The air wing also supported U.S. Africa Command operations by conducting strikes against ISIS targets in Somalia. These precision strikes resulted in the degradation of its capabilities, underscoring the CVN/CVW team's ability to project power across multiple combatant commands and respond to emerging threats beyond the immediate area of operations. These operations were complemented by a robust program of Joint exercises and distinguished visitor engagements designed to build trust and interoperability. The air wing flew Dissimilar Air Combat Training with Omani, Bahraini and French forces, fostering tactical integration and Coalition readiness. *Nimitz* hosted distinguished visitors from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, allowing for strategic dialogue and the alignment of shared security objectives.

This phase of deployment was more than a demonstration of military might; it was a carefully calibrated effort to rebuild presence, renew alliances and sustain a stable security environment in a region critical to global commerce and geopolitics. Thanks to the planning and execution led by *Team Quicksand*, the *Nimitz Strike Group's* return reasserted the U.S. Navy's enduring role as a reliable partner and stabilizing force amid evolving challenges.

In October, the *Nimitz/Quicksand* team departed the *Fifth Fleet* area of responsibility to return to home port. En route, emergent tasking during our transit resulted in extended presence operations in the *Seventh Fleet* AOR. *Quicksand* continued to stand the watch and respond to our nation's call as one of the starkest symbols of our nation's strategic commitment to our allies, partners and potential adversaries.

VFA-137 KESTRELS

by LT Patrick "Strobes" Hesse, USN

The *Kestrels* checking in from *Nimitz* once again! Finally, we see the light at the end of the tunnel as we prepare for our journey home! Our four months of operations in *Fifth Fleet* brought plenty of fun, but nearly zero Case I as the haze embarrassed even the strongest IPA. The *Kestrels* also experienced a beer day where we learned how far you can stretch two lukewarm beers. Fortunately, the 80-day streak at sea ended when *Old Salt* (tactical callsign) docked in Bahrain, allowing VFA-137 to take care of some important business. The *Kestrels* nominated two new Paddles, LTs Tyler "Doug" Blake and Patrick "Strobes" Hesse, and executed one callsign review board for "Strobes," formerly known as "Thunderpig."



LT Christian "Snake-Eye" Reed of the VFA-137 Kestrels prepares to launch from Nimitz in support of U.S. Africa Command tasking, 23 Aug '25.

One month later, we pulled into Dubai for a few days prior to finishing off our operations in the Persian Gulf. For our final bit of fun prior to putting the throttle in the corner for NAS Lemoore, King Neptune paid *Nimitz* a visit and minted some *Kestrels* as trusty shellbacks!

Fifth Fleet offered the squadron pilots many unique opportunities. While operating in the Gulf of Aden, the *Kestrels* supported two Bab al-Mandeb transits and conducted strikes in support of contingency operations within the AOR. After transiting the Strait of Hormuz and normalizing U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf, the *Kestrels* supported *Operation Inherent Resolve* and conducted multinational training exercises with the French and Qatari Air Forces. When this article goes to print, the *Kestrels* should be home with our family and friends after a stint in the South China Sea doing our best Forward-Deployed



CAPT Doug Graber, former commanding officer of Nimitz, makes his final flight from the ship in a VAQ-139 Cougars EA-18G Growler on 7 Aug '25.

Naval Forces impression. We've missed them and thank them for their unwavering support!

THE COUGARS PRESS ON

by LT Ryan "TCUP" Mostofi, USN

Trading the heat and high tempo of the *Fifth Fleet* for the blue expanse of the *Seventh Fleet*, the *Cougars* charged forward across the Pacific home to the misty mountains and evergreens of the Pacific Northwest. During deployment, the mission called and, true to form, the *Cougars* answered without hesitation.

During months of dominating the electromagnetic spectrum abroad, the team remained sharp, motivated and as unified as ever, finding strength in shared purpose and *Cougar* camaraderie. As the deployment rolled on, the

squadron proudly welcomed LT Tyler Nemeth to the ready room. Eager to fly, learn and embrace what it means to be a *Cougar*, he quickly showed the drive and enthusiasm that define our "work hard, play hard" ethos. He joins a team groomed through months of operations across two numbered fleet AORs, where the *Cougars* consistently brought airborne electronic attack excellence wherever tasked, no matter the mission or conditions.

The squadron also bid farewell to two dedicated junior officers, LTs Andrew "Skinny Leonard" Wisegarver and Todd "Fruit Skin" Beman, as they head to HAVOC, the Airborne Electronic Attack Weapons School, to hone their skills and bring increased lethality to the *Growler* community. The ready room will surely feel their absence, but we are excited to see what they accomplish in this next chapter. Fair winds and following seas!

Throughout deployment, the *Cougars* remained in high demand, providing unmatched airborne electronic attack support across multiple regions and ensuring control of the electromagnetic spectrum wherever tasked. Whether launching from the flight deck to execute Air Combat Training Continuum (ACTC) sorties, or supporting Joint partners in *Inherent Resolve*, the squadron continued to demonstrate flexibility, professionalism and a dash of *Cougar* humor that keep spirits high and morale strong.

Throughout our time at seam, thoughts of family and friends fueled our drive. The *Cougars* arrived home proud of our work, refueled by purpose, recharged by accomplishment and ready for whatever comes next.

VAW-121 BLUETAILS

by LT Alexander "FNG" Peralta, USN

The world's best and brightest airborne command & control squadron, the VAW-121 *Bluetails* worked in earnest while on board *Nimitz* for the venerable carrier's planned final deployment. The squadron had to endure challenging conditions while originally operating in *Seventh Fleet*, and then quickly repositioned to the *Fifth Fleet* AOR to answer the nation's call. Heightened regional tensions, Case III desert haze and pitching deck proved to be no match for the resiliency of the *Bluetails*.

During VAW-121's time in *Fifth Fleet*, *Nimitz* operated in the Persian Gulf, one of the busiest corridors in the world, and pulled into port in both Bahrain and Dubai for much-needed time ashore. After leaving the Arabian Sea, King Neptune boarded CVN 68 to transform the squadron's 40-plus pollywogs into pristine shellbacks, participating in one of the Navy's oldest traditions, a Crossing-the-Line ceremony.

On board *Nimitz*, awards and accolades continued as the *Bluetails* marked numerous achievements and aircrew upgrades. Three Sailors pinned on chief. Foc'sle Follies recognized VAW-121 aircrew with seven Centurions, two "Nocturnions," four Top Five pilots and a Top Hook awardee, combining for over 500 carrier arrestments throughout deployment.

Operationally, the squadron personnel worked equally as hard in the airplane as they did on the flight deck, hangar bay and ready room. Aircrew used Ready Room Six to upgrade eight air battle managers (ABMs) to ACTC Level II, four ABMs to Mission Commander and two pilots to Carrier Aircraft Plane Commander. *Bluetail* maintenance personnel performed over 9,450 maintenance actions, 650 corrosion prevention work orders, 510 fix phase discrepancies and 65 major inspections supporting over 1,700 flight hours and 500 sorties throughout deployment. Their actions directly attributed to keeping aircrews where they belong, in the sky focused on mission success.

Looking ahead, VAW-121 will have a busy winter upon the squadron's return to NavSta Norfolk. With *Nimitz* ending her tenure as the Navy's oldest aircraft carrier, VAW-121 will embark on her last cruise as she sails around South America to a home port change to Norfolk. In just under three months, the squadron will go through a leave period, and conduct field carrier landing practice, instrument check rides, NATOPS evaluations and other currency requirements. The squadron will also plan simulator events, ground training and a cross-country flight. Despite all these challenges, the popcorn oil is ordered, and movies are downloaded as VAW-121 is looking forward to getting back aboard CVN 68 one last time and seeing Paddles on the ball!



A VAW-121 *Bluetails* E-2D Advanced Hawkeye overflies USS Lenah Sutcliffe Higbee (DDG 123) underway in the South China Sea on 7 Jun '25.



In advance of receiving the squadron's first F-35C Lightning IIs, VFA-115 pilots completed carrier qualification on board USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) in Oct '25.

AROUND THE FLEET

THE END OF DIASPORA

by LT Matt "Spyder FALCONE" Webber, USN

Here weeks away from receiving our first shipment of F-35C Lightning IIs, the *Talons* (tactical callsign) of VFA-115 quake in anticipation, excited for the new car smell of those Lot 17s. As avid readers already know, maintainers and pilots alike have worked diligently over the last 12 months in preparation for the long-awaited return to in-house operations. Despite an unexpected delay in the delivery of our aircraft, we remain on track for Safe-for-Flight Certification in February with a little help from our friends across the street at VFA-125.

Talons, still spread across several commands, are poised to come back home to Hangar 6. Skipper CDR William "Milkman" Gifford and the bulk of the transitioning pilots completed their carrier qualification on board USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) in October, marking one of the final notches in the belt of Fleet Replacement Squadron syllabus completion. LT Ahad "Nighthawk" Asim has moved from one sister command to another, now getting some real fleet experience with CVW-5. As he patrols the waters of the Far East with the VFA-147 *Argonauts*, he is learning the true meaning of "not better, just different." We're all excited to have him back before the holidays. Meanwhile another *Panther* purebred has joined the JOPA ranks as LT Travis "Viper" Dill patched to VFA-115 in October.

As NAS Lemoore's favorite "shore command" (as we were lovingly referred to), VFA-115 enjoyed the annual display of fighter spirit at this year's Strike Fighter Ball, despite a discouraging last place finish in Strike Fighter Golf. *Talons* came dressed to impress, opting for a slightly stealthier take on the mess dress uniform. Although he did not want to leave his cozy new home, *Mini Marshal* dressed to match and accompanied the *Talons* to ball, where he was justly awarded back to the VFA-94 *Mighty Shrikes*. Hopefully, he doesn't make his way back to Hangar 6 for another year ... watch this space! Until next time, EFR.

Courtesy of VFA-115



The *Talons* display their new take on mess dress uniforms during the Strike Fighter Ball.



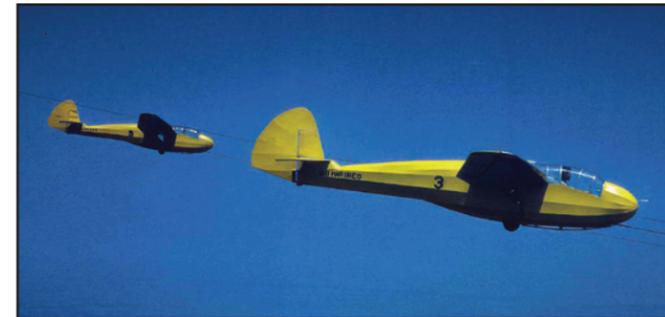
WAVEOFFS & BOLTERS

What is It?

by Mark Aldrich

The Fall 2025 issue's mystery aircraft represented a short-lived chapter in Naval Aviation, one that drew its inspiration from the German capture of Fort Eben-Emael in Belgium on 10 May 1940. Such was the quickness with which the Germans struck that after Nazi propaganda hinted at a "secret weapon," U.S. newspapers speculated that it was anything from a new type of gun to "paralyzing nerve gas." As was eventually revealed, it was an assault from the air, the first glider-borne attack in history, in which less than 80 airborne troops subdued over 600 defenders in just 20 minutes.

National Archives



Marine Corps LNS-1s assigned to Glider Group 71 under tow during operations from Page Field at Parris Island, S.C., in May '42.

The U.S. military quickly seized on the employment of airborne forces, whether as paratroopers or using gliders, the efficacy of such attacks from the air reinforced with the successful German capture of the island of Crete in May 1941. Among the companies contracted for the procurement of gliders to train aircrew was Schweizer Aircraft Company, owned and operated by three brothers and incorporated in New York in 1939.

The company's SGS 2-8, a two-seater with a fabric-covered welded steel fuselage, drew favorable attention from both the Army Air Forces and Marine Corps. Weighing 450 pounds and with a wingspan of 52 feet, it had a tow speed of 70 mph and a sink rate of 165 feet per minute. A total of 13 examples of the glider, which received the designation LNS-1, were delivered to Glider Group 71 at Parris Island, S.C., in 1942. "U.S. Readies 'Silent Commandos of the Skies' to Carry Fight to Foes," read a May 1942 newspaper headline that highlighted the training under Marine LtCol Vernon M. Guymon, a recipient of the Navy Cross for combat flights in Nicaragua between 1927 and 1929.



What is It?

The leatherneck glider program relocated to newly constructed MCAS Eagle Mountain Lake, Tex., in November 1942, but Commandant of the Marine Corps LtGen Thomas Holcomb canceled glider operations effective 24 June 1943. The lack of available airfields amid the vast distances of the Pacific Theater, coupled with the impracticality of their use against Japanese-held islands, led to the abandonment of Marine Corps glider operations.

We had three correct entries, with Gianni Fiamma of Italy our winner this time.

A family resemblance may be a clue to the Winter 2025 mystery airplane. Be sure to include the manufacturer and correct designation of the aircraft at the time the photo was taken. Extra points will be awarded to those who identify the year.

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

- LT Miles J. Barnes, USN(Ret) Life
- Col Donald A. Bartlett, USMC(Ret), Life
- Maj David C. Baird, USMC(Ret), Life
- CDR Jay Beltz, USN(Ret)
- CAPT Robert C. Cowen, USN(Ret), Life
- RADM Richard Dunleavy, USN(Ret), Life
- CAPT Forrest D. Goetschius, USN(Ret), Life
- RADM Leland S. Kollmorgen, USN(Ret), Life
- LT Eugene F. Loveland, USN Veteran, Life
- Mr. Robert W. MacLean, USA Veteran, Life
- CAPT Benjamin G. Newman, MC, USN(Ret), Life
- Mr. James M. Palmer, Life
- Mr. Peter A Quinn
- LCDR Christopher L. Reilly, USN(Ret)
- CAPT Frederick Rudell, USNR(Ret), Life
- LTJG Gary Williams, USN Veteran, Life

ADVERTISERS, The Hook Winter 2025

CAPT Donald Auten, USN(Ret) (author).....	6
AV8RSTUFF.com.....	13
LCDR "Engine Eddie" Davidson (author).....	47
F-14 Tomcat Association.....	6
General Atomic Electromagnetics.....	Inside Front Cover
Intruder Association Membership.....	13
Intruder Reunion.....	67
CAPT Jason Leaver, USN(Ret).....	74
Mach2Homes.....	16
Marine Patches.....	74
Navy Mutual Aid Association.....	3
Neyenesch Printers.....	74
CDR D.D. Smith, USN(Ret) (author).....	68
The Tailhook Association.....	15
Top Hook Realty.....	9
USS Midway Museum.....	Outside Back Cover
VAW/VRC Foundation.....	61
Veterans United Home Loans.....	22
LCDR James A. White III, MD USNR(Ret) (author).....	41



RESPOT

Letter to the Editor

We received a few letters regarding the photograph of the F-4 Phantom II flying under the Golden Gate Bridge that appeared in the Fall 2025 issue's "From the Catwalk." Mike Farmer wrote, "The accompanying article states that USS *Ranger* (CVA 61) was entering San Francisco Bay while launching an F-4 for a documentary film. This photo shows an F-4 headed west out of the bay. *Ranger* could not have launched the F-4 while entering the bay. Having sailed under that bridge several times and driven on it hundreds of times, I'm very familiar with the area. Fort Point, which is on the south side of the Golden Gate, is clearly off the F-4's port wing. Did *Ranger* actually conduct a launch while headed out of the bay?"

Mike and other members have sharp eyes. According to the carrier's log for 19 October 1963, *Ranger* stood out of San Francisco Bay for the "Twelfth Naval District Operating Area" that morning. En route, she commenced air operations at 0907, passed under the Golden Gate Bridge at 0912 and suspended air operations at 0914.



Your wingman for real estate in the DC area!

SAMSON PROPERTIES

#1 Total Homes Sold in DC, MD, & VA

Landing or taking off in DC?

Contact Jason "Jazz" Leaver

Over 20 Years of Local Expertise. Serving Those Who Serve. Tailhook Lifetime Member.

Scan for contact:



Jason Leaver, CAPT, USN (Ret)
Realtor®, Military Relocation Professional

The Hook Index 2025

Aircraft

Mystery Aircraft (Aldrich)	
Goodyear B-8 Airship	Sp:75
Briggs F19	Su:87
Ling-Temco-Vought V-530	Fa:75
Schweizer LNS-1	Wi:73

Articles

An Airplane Story: <i>Phantom of the Midway</i> (Ensch)	Sp:10
Birth of the Bombcat (Holmes)	Sp:23
The Forgotten S-3 Squadron (Nenna)	Sp:36
Photo Essay — Manning the Spare (Ramos)	Sp:72
Year in Review (Burgess)	Sp:74
On Deck: The Winging Ceremony: Generations Later Still Good for the Soul (Ruppert)	Sp:76
An Airplane Story: The Factory Floor (Staff)	Su:14
The <i>National Geographic</i> of Aviation Magazines (Staff)	Su:27
<i>Old Salt</i> Turns 50: Part I (Crutch)	Su:34
<i>Intruder</i> Legacy (Goodspeed)	Su:42
The Origins of Callsigns (Goodspeed)	Su:46
On Deck: Heroes Abounded (Booth)	Su:88
An Airplane Story: Angel Wings (Staff)	Fa:12
From the Bridge: A Carrier Captain's View of the Pacific War (Goodspeed)	Fa:25
<i>Old Salt</i> Turns 50: Part II (Crutch)	Fa:33
Through the Lens (Plantinga)	Fa:41
Hook '25 Recap (Kording)	Fa:72
On Deck: Be "That Guy": Pass It On (Ruppert)	Wi:76
An Airplane Story: <i>Hornet</i> Commemorates Leatherneck Legacy (Cibley)	Wi:10
<i>Hornet's</i> Nest Off Hainan Island (Gilchrist)	Wi:23
Return from Rabaul (Goodspeed)	Wi:34
End of an Era: VX-31 Retires <i>Harrier</i> Fleet after Decades of Testing (de Herrera)	Wi:39
On Deck: There's Nothing New Under the Sun (Shea)	Wi:76

Authors and Contributors

Aldrich, Mark	Sp:75, Su:87, Fa:75, Wi:73
Amerine, CDR Travis "Sweet T," USN	Wi:4
Booth, RADM Peter B., USN(Ret)	Su:88
Branch, VADM Ted "Twig," USN(Ret)	Sp:14, Wi:14
Burgess, LCDR Richard R., USN(Ret)	Sp:74
Cheever, VADM Dan, USN	Su:8
Crutch, Mike	Su:34, Fa:33
de Herrera, Alan	Wi:39
Donnelly, RADM Michael, USN	Sp:6
Ensch, CAPT John "Fingers," USN(Ret)	Sp:10
Findlay, CAPT Kristen "Dragon," USN	Su:4
Gilchrist, Ryan	Wi:23
Goodspeed, Hill	Sp:30, Su:42, Su:46, Fa:21, Wi:34
Holmes, Tony	Sp:23
Keithley, CAPT Gregory J. "Chaser," USN(Ret)	Sp:8, Su:12, Fa:10, Wi:8
Kording, LT Grace "Glitters," USN	Fa:72
Manazir, RADM Mike "Nasty," USN(Ret)	Sp:4, Fa:4
Martin, RADM Dan, USN	Sp:7, Su:10, Fa:8, Wi:7
Nenna, Dave	Sp:36
Plantinga, Dirk	Fa:41
Powell, CDR Robert R. "Boom," USN(Ret)	Sp:17, Su:21, Fa:19, Wi:17
Ramos, José "Fuji"	Sp:72
Ruppert, CDR Scott "Lips," USN(Ret)	Sp:76, Fa:76
Scales, Matt	Wi:28
Warren, Janet	Sp:13, Su:16, Fa:14, Wi:12
Welch, CAPT Rodger, USN(Ret)	Su:18, Fa:16
Wosje, RADM Michael S., USN	Fa:9

Briefs

From the Air Boss (Cheever)	Su:8
From the Director, Air Warfare (Donnelly and Wosje)	Sp:6, Fa:6
From the Naval Safety Command (Martin)	
	Sp:7, Su:10, Fa:8, Wi:7

From the Chairman (Manazir)	Sp:4, Fa:4
From the President (Findlay and Amerine)	Su:4, Wi:4
From the Editor-in-Chief (Goodspeed)	Sp:5, Su:5, Fa:5, Wi:5
From the Executive Director (Keithley)	Sp:8, Su:12, Fa:10, Wi:8
Membership Corner	Sp:13, Su:16, Fa:14, Wi:12
Tailhook Educational Foundation (Branch, Welch)	Sp:14, Su:18, Fa:16, Wi:14

Insignia

Naval Aircraft Patches	Sp:IBC
USS <i>Nimitz</i> (CVN 68) First Deployment	Su:IBC
USS <i>Hornet</i> (CV 12) World War II Squadrons	Fa:IBC
Birth of the Bones	Wi:IBC

Squadrons • Air Wings • Air Stations

In Marshal	Sp:39, Su:49, Fa:44, Wi:42
------------	----------------------------

Other Topics

Book Review	Su:85
Command Changes	Sp:39, Su:49, Fa:44, Wi:42
From the Catwalk (Powell)	Sp:17, Su:21, Fa:19, Wi:17
Letters to the Editor	Sp:74
Notes for PAOs	Sp:39, Su:85, Fa:45, Wi:75
On Deck	Sp:76, Su:88, Fa:76, Wi:76
The Last Cut	Sp:75, Su:87, Fa:75, Wi:73
What is It? (Aldrich)	Sp:75, Su:87, Fa:75, Wi:73
<i>The Hook</i> Index, 2025	Wi:75



MARINEPATCHES.COM

FOR ALL YOUR SQUADRON SWAG



The Ready Room
5197 Stewart St
Milton, FL 32570
(850) 317-2243

Marine Patches
401 Anchor St
Corpus Christi, TX
78418
(636) 299-0603



Email your new designs to info@marinepatches.com

OFFICIALLY LICENSED BY THE USMC AND US NAVY TRADEMARK OFFICES

The Hook Magazine

Photos:

- Attach photos to your correspondence, minimum size 500k, 1mb preferred. DO NOT EMBED PHOTOS WITHIN A TEXT MESSAGE OR EMAIL.
- Identify all people shown with rank, first and last names, plus call signs including enlisted personnel.
- We prefer formations, unusual evolutions, external weapons.

Text:

- Submit double-spaced with upper- and lower-case letters (not all caps).
- Do not embed photos in email text or word processing document.

Deadlines:

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

Send Material To:

- thookmagazine@gmail.com,
Subj: Hook Submission by (squadron)
- **If by mail:**
Editor, *The Hook*,
9696 Businesspark Ave.,
San Diego, CA 92131-1643
Phone Contact: (858) 689-9227 or (800) 322-HOOK;
Fax (858) 578-8839



ON DECK

Courtesy of LCDR Patrick "Joey" Sheldon, USN

There's Nothing New Under the Sun

by LT Ryan "FUI" Shea, USN



The VFA-2 Bounty Hunters pictured in front of Bullet 104 on the flight deck of USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) underway in the Gulf of Aden conducting combat operations against Houthi rebels, May '25.

“Anyone who tells you ‘We’ll never do that again,’ is wrong,” CAPT J.J. “Yank” Cummings, USN(Ret) mused as he sipped his drink at the NAS Oceana Officers Club. He had just finished presenting at a “Warrior Debrief” event jointly hosted by the VFA-106 *Gladiators*, the East Coast F/A-18 Fleet Replacement Squadron, and the Tailhook Association’s Hampton Roads Ready Room. In his speech, he related to new aviators his experiences deploying to Afghanistan immediately after the coordinated terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

At that time, Yank was flying the F-14 *Tomcat* in close-air-support missions. He highlighted the fact that when they entered the theater, the U.S. had not planned or prepared for extensive combat operations in Afghanistan. As a result, many of the cutting-edge tactics were difficult to apply because the required support network just did not exist. This wasn’t a fight with robust air defense pictures and complex friendly ground schemes of maneuver, and coordination was difficult because of how dispersed and dynamic the ground situation was. In short, the fight they had trained for was vastly different than the one they showed up to.

One can see how this dilemma might apply to future conflicts as well. An unanticipated non-state actor might instigate conflict in a region we don’t expect, or an anticipated adversary might begin armed hostilities at an inopportune time. How do we adapt to that?

How do we find the right solution to a question we didn’t know we needed to ask ourselves?

I think we can have a great deal of confidence in the notion that when we get there, we’ll be in good company. From the Pacific Theater of World War II to the Houthi insurgency in the Red Sea, every conflict the U.S. military participates in involves some degree of expectation-to-reality mismatch. In each conflict, warfighters find the solution with a little ingenuity and, perhaps more importantly, a lot of collective memory.

The particular techniques we learn from veterans of prior conflicts may seem simplistic to us now, and they may be in comparison to current “high-end” tactics, techniques and procedures, but the entire reason we get to hear about them is because they worked for someone else who was in a similarly unfamiliar situation to the one we might encounter. To be as prepared as possible for future conflicts, we need to hear a broad range of sea stories with the lesson, “I did it this way and lived to tell the tale.” This will inform both our knowledge of possible solutions to a problem someone else encountered in the past, as well as our wisdom to know when we might need to make it up as we go.

So don’t be shy when you have the opportunity to talk to retired servicemembers or veterans of recent conflicts. Ask questions about what they faced, how they faced it, and “the way it used to be,” which might just become “the way it is” once again.



Birth of the Bones

We thought we would try something a little different for the inside back cover. It’s not ENS Jack Ernie’s bones, but it certainly is a rare memento from the birth of the squadron known throughout Naval Aviation as the *Jolly Rogers*.

VF-17 established on 1 January 1943, and was the second Navy squadron equipped with the F4U *Corsair*. Under the command of LCDR Tom Blackburn, the squadron put the fighter through its paces and headed to the Pacific on board USS *Bunker Hill* (CV 17) later that year. Yet, the squadron was destined to achieve its fame not flying from a carrier deck, but from the jungle airfields of New Georgia and Bougainville, producing 11 aces and racking up 152 kills.

Needing a nickname, personnel settled on *Jolly Rogers*, a fitting choice given their aircraft’s nickname was a synonym for pirate. A VF-17 Sailor with an artistic bent created the original insignia stencil pictured here and submitted it to Executive Officer LCDR (later RADM) Roger Hedrick, who was one of the squadron’s aces. He preserved it for more than 50 years and after his passing it passed to the National Naval Aviation Museum.



The original Jolly Rogers insignia, left, and LCDR Roger Hedrick during his service as executive officer of VF-17.



Coming 2028:

*At the footsteps of the mighty USS Midway
will be the largest park honoring veterans and celebrating
freedom on the West Coast*



FREEDOM — PARK — AT BURNHAM NAVY PIER



Scan the QR code
and join us in
building this
iconic landmark!

WWW.MIDWAY.ORG