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Cover: *ENS Frederick J. Joyce Jr., a can of pineapple juice in hand, prepares to climb into an SBD-5 Dauntless of VB-5 prior to launch from USS Yorktown (CV 10) in Oct '43.*

Photo: LT Charles Kerlee, USNR



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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)



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IBC USS *Hornet* (CV 12) World War II Squadrons

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BRIEF

Tailhookers, we have reached the unofficial end of summer — a sad day for us boaters — and that means another symposium is in the books! I think you will all agree with me that Hook '25 was a great event!

The convention floor was again sold out with a record number of our industry partners bringing the show. They propel our association into the future, ensuring our active-duty force has the right kit to take to the fight. I want to extend my congratulations to Ms. Kallie De Vries, Lockheed Martin Trade Show Coordinator, the winner of our Large Industry Leadership Award, as well as CDR Ward “Mooch” Carroll, USN(Ret) with his YouTube channel supporting Hook in fine fashion as the Small Business Leadership Award winner. By the way, you know that he cannot do his show without his wife, so thanks Carrie for allowing Mooch to come out and play!

From the Chairman

by RADM Mike “Nasty” Manazir, USN(Ret)

In addition to making Hook what it is today, your Tailhook Association (THA) staff works year-round, every day, to make it a premier organization that is truly second to none. We were honored to recognize two key staff members at Hook '25 as Mark Aldrich, Senior Editor of *The Hook*, received this year's Lifetime Achievement Award, and Janet Warren, who personally manages over 7,500 memberships, was named Honorary Tailhooker of the Year. Congratulations to you both and the entire THA and Tailhook Educational Foundation (TEF) staffs for all they do for the association.

Our Naval Aviation warriors continue to fight and win in the weapon engagement zone. Our air wings and aircraft carriers are utilizing the capabilities of the advanced aircraft catapulting from our flight decks in innovative ways, connecting with our other Naval Aviation capabilities and the Joint Force. This year, we heard again from those on the front lines and for the first time ever, added a new panel on innovation that featured a packed house as our active-duty JOs want to use the best tech

CJ Machado



Tailhook Association (THA) Board of Directors Chairman RADM Mike “Nasty” Manazir, USN(Ret) pictured with outgoing THA President CAPT Kristen “Dragon” Findlay at the banquet capping off Hook '25.

has to offer to take the fight to the bad guys. My personal thanks to LCDR Mark “Tugboat” Jbeilly for inventing, organizing and moderating the “Innovate to Dominate” panel. Tugboat is exactly the JO we want representing active-duty membership on our board. I also want to welcome CDR Carolyn “Sulu” Peterson, LT Mary Cate “BC” Scully and LCDR Nick “DT” Johnson to our board. With four active-duty board members, the ready room is well represented!

Please join me in also welcoming ADM Chris “Lung” Aquilino, USN(Ret) to the board and bid a fond thank you to VADM Jerry “Steamer” Beaman, USN(Ret) and CAPT Shawn “Shrek” Malone, USN(Ret) for their valuable board service.

Your THA president changed office this year as CAPT Kristen “Dragon” Findlay led her last a cappella national anthem and handed “the book” and the podium to CDR Travis “Sweet-T” Amerine, commanding officer of the VFA-106 *Gladiators*. Dragon is beginning her training track as prospective DCAG of CVW-9. We will all miss her panache and grace coupled with a great sense of humor as she leads *Team Shogun* warriors into the fight. But, if you know Sweet-T, you know the energy he brings will LIGHT THIS PLACE UP! As chairman, I cannot be more grateful for Dragon's service as president, and I look forward very much to matching Sweet-T's energy and love of Naval Aviation as we lean into Hook '26!

Finally, I would like to thank Mr. Alex “El Jefe” Meruelo and everyone at his Grand Sierra Resort (GSR) for the wonderful support provided to THA and TEF. Alex's daughter, Lisette, offered the Meruelo annual scholarship donation and the GSR staff once again welcomed every Tailhooker with open arms and a visible sense of partnership and service. We are excited to continue the relationship and look forward to Hook '26!



RADM Mike “Nasty” Manazir, USN(Ret)



As I write these words, another Tailhook symposium is in the books. While the forward-looking theme was “Dominate Tomorrow,” the legacy of Naval Aviation and what began with a gathering at Rosarito Beach, Mexico, was also present. RADM Lawrence Chambers, USN(Ret) attended the first gathering of the Tailhook Association in 1956 and he recounted for the audience on hand at the first panel at Hook '25 his experiences commanding USS *Midway* (CVA 41) during the evacuation of Saigon in 1975. On the shoulders of such giants stand the warfighters of today and tomorrow facing the challenges of Naval Aviation's second century.

From the Editor-in-Chief

Command of an aircraft carrier is one of the most demanding and rewarding jobs not only in the Navy, but in the world. For many a Naval Aviator, it represents the pinnacle of a career. Such was the case for CAPT (later ADM) Austin K. Doyle, who commanded USS *Hornet* (CV 12) in combat operations from August 1944 to June 1945. Drawing from letters home to his wife and official documents, we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II by recounting his momentous command tour, which included the Battle of Leyte Gulf, combating kamikazes and enduring a typhoon.

The second part of Contributing Editor Mike Crutch's history of USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) brings the story of the Navy's oldest carrier up to the present as she operates forward executing combat operations on her scheduled final deployment. As LCDR Colin “Safari” Howell writes in the CVW-17 contribution to In Marshal, “*Nimitz* may be the fleet's oldest flattop, but in *Fifth Fleet* this summer, she is no museum piece. She is a sword, a little weathered at the hilt, perhaps, but sharpened by decades of warfighting culture and carried by a crew that refuses to let time dull its edge.” One of those serving aboard the carrier is MC2 Hannah Kantner,

an article by Dirk Plantinga highlighting her photographs of current operations on board *Old Salt* alongside the work of PH1 Harold J. Gerwien, USN(Ret), who shot images at the carrier's commissioning in 1975. They represent the Navy photographers who have been the source of thousands of historic images and photos of current operations that have graced the magazine's pages.

This issue's “An Airplane Story” draws its inspiration from a photograph we received from CAPT Denny Sapp, USNR(Ret) showing a reunion of members of the 1975 *Blue Angels*. That year marked the Navy Flight Demonstration Squadron's second show season operating the A-4 *Skyhawk*. We decided to show some images of some of those *Scooters* in fleet service and when they were adorned with the famous blue and gold livery.

CDR Scott “Lips” Ruppert, USN(Ret) follows up a recent “On Deck” article about a winging ceremony at NAS Meridian with another one recalling his own journey to Wings of Gold. His inspiration came from a brief encounter with a young Naval Aviator on a cross-country and you will want to be sure and read the rest of the story. We hope you enjoy this issue of *The Hook*.

CJ Machado



RADM Lawrence Chambers, USN(Ret) attended the very first Tailhook Association gathering in 1956 and was a featured panelist at Hook '25.

"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.

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DOMINATING TODAY, TOMORROW AND BEYOND

From the business end of “America’s Favorite Strike Group” (*Carrier Strike Group One* on board USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70)) to the business of Naval Aviation in Washington, D.C., I am humbled to serve alongside you as Director, Air Warfare (OPNAV N98). Naval Aviation has been at the forefront of projecting American power, deterring aggression and protecting vital global interests for over a century. In its 250th year, the U.S. Navy, with Naval Aviation at its heart, remains where it matters, when it matters operating at sea and ashore to deliver peace through strength. This enduring presence is crucial to preserving the American way of life and ensuring freedom, security and prosperity. From the formidable presence of carrier strike groups (CSGs) to the cutting-edge capabilities of expeditionary aircraft, Naval Aviation is not merely dominant today but poised to extend that dominance far into the future. Naval Aviation is READY to deliver combat-ready naval air forces that win.

From the Director, Air Warfare

by RADM Michael S. Wosje, USN
Director, Air Warfare (OPNAV N98)

Dominating Today: Global Reach and Unmatched Readiness

Today, the power of Naval Aviation is felt across every corner of the globe. CSGs are continuously forward-deployed, centered on the unmatched capability of nuclear-powered *Nimitz* and *Ford*-class aircraft carriers with their embarked carrier air wings (CVWs). CSGs are agile, all-domain forces, key to the Navy’s integrated capability across the spectrum of operations. They are a visible reflection of the commitment of the American people to a free and open planet by sailing and flying alongside our allies and partners. I experienced this firsthand during *Pacific Steller 2025* operations with the French Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

USS *George Washington* (CVN 73) and CVW-5 operate as the *Seventh Fleet*’s forward-deployed team. USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68), in her 50th year of service thanks to nuclear power, and CVW-17 operate in the *Fifth Fleet* area of responsibility (AOR). USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN 78) and CVW-8 are underway in the *Sixth Fleet* AOR with our North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) and CVW-2 deployed in November 2024 and did not return to NAS North Island until August 2025 following a three-month extension to support *Operation Rough Rider* alongside USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75) and CVW-1, which deployed in September 2024 and returned to NavSta Norfolk in June 2025.

Naval Aviation is where it matters, with the combat power to tilt the scale and make a difference, demonstrating its readiness time and again in combat operations. And in doing so it is achieving firsts for the fleet. CVW-9 conducted the first employment of the Next-Generation Jammer Mid-Band (NGJ-MB) and CVW-9 and CVW-2 both employed the F-35C *Lightning II* in combat, conducting strikes against Iranian-backed Houthis. CVW-1 likely set the record for the largest single strike in naval history, dropping 124,000 pounds of ordnance in under two minutes.

Naval Aviation operates a formidable array of platforms as the centerpiece of our naval forces. Highlighting the enduring value of the world’s most survivable and indispensable airfields, as of this writing both our oldest and newest nuclear-powered aircraft carriers (CVN 68 and CVN 78) are deployed.

The F/A-18E/F *Super Hornet*, transitioning to Block III, is the backbone of the CVW with the most capable air-to-air missile in the world, the AIM-174B. The F-35C adds fifth-generation capability. Currently equipping five West Coast/Forward-Deployed Naval Forces carrier-based squadrons, it is elevating the lethality and survivability for the high-end fight with Block IV deliveries underway. The EA-18G *Growler* provides critical electromagnetic spectrum superiority for the entire Joint Force as it brings NGJ-MB online. The E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye* delivers unmatched airborne early warning and command and control, ensuring unparalleled situational awareness. MH-60R/S helicopters

provide distributed operations, anti-surface warfare, search and rescue and last tactical mile logistics. The CMV-22B *Osprey* modernizes carrier logistics, boasting the demonstrated ability to move F-35C power modules while greatly expanding forward logistics opportunities in support of distributed maritime operations.

In the expeditionary role, the P-8A *Poseidon* provides long-range, multi-mission, cue-to-kill anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, third party targeting, and armed ISR&T (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and targeting) missions. Naval Aviation is scaling remote autonomous systems (RAS). The MQ-4C *Triton* provides a persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability across three forward orbits, delivering worldwide 24/7 situational awareness.

Tomorrow and Beyond: The Edge of Innovation

The future of Naval Aviation is not simply an evolution of current capabilities, but a revolutionary leap forward, driven by continuous innovation and strategic investment. The Navy looks forward to advancing the sixth-generation fighter program intended to replace the F/A-18E/F and EA-18G with superior range, speed and sensor capabilities, integrating manned and unmanned RAS. The MQ-25 *Stingray*, the first carrier-based unmanned aircraft, is designed to extend the range and endurance of CVWs by providing aerial refueling, returning strike capacity to air wing *Super Hornets*. The first production MQ-25’s maiden flight is planned late this year with the goal of rapidly scaling to a CVW near you. Payloads matter, too. The CVW constantly enhances lethality with new weapons like the AIM-260, Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (LRASM) C-3, and Advanced Anti-Radiation Guided Missile-Extended Range (AARGM-ER). There are plans to field a rapid prototype hypersonic weapon.

Fifteen years from now, the CSG of 2040 will have radically transformed into a mix of manned and unmanned platforms. The threefold increased power generation, heightened sortie generation rate and expanded launch and recovery envelopes of the *Ford* class will ensure nuclear-powered aircraft carriers remain the most flexible, survivable and adaptable airfields in the Joint Force. Harnessing rapid advancements in technology, collaborative combat aircraft (CCA) with advanced autonomous warfighting capability will complement manned platforms, enhancing operational flexibility and real-time decision-making for the CSG commander. Manned sixth-generation fighters with CCAs will pave the way for fifth-generation Block IV+ F-35Cs supported by Next Generation Jammer-equipped EA-18Gs, all networked with the E-2D. Meanwhile, persistent unmanned systems performing ISR will help sense and make sense of the battlespace. The CSG will seamlessly integrate this together into Joint all-domain operations, leveraging real-time collaboration with space-based assets, cyber forces and allied networks.

Part of this revolution includes artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML) in our tactical decision-making, but also AI/ML-enabled aviation sustainment and readiness. This includes predictive maintenance, optimizing resource allocation and enhancing repair operations. Specifically, AI/ML algorithms are core to advanced Condition-Based Maintenance (CBM+) systems, analyzing real-time data to identify subtle anomalies which indicate impending failures, allowing for proactive interventions before costly breakdowns occur. Our world-class Sailors are our greatest strategic asset. AI/ML can guide our technicians through complex procedures with augmented reality, and intelligently manage spare parts inventory, leading to faster turnaround times and reduced costs. This aligns with the current state of AI capabilities, as these tasks typically require powerful data analysis and pattern recognition.

Foundation: Training Our Sailors

Beyond hardware, the human element remains paramount. The Chief of Naval Air Training is committed to training, mentoring and delivering the highest quality Naval Aviators. In 2024, the Naval Air Training Command flew 25.5 percent of the combined Navy and Marine Corps flight hours, winging 1,167 Naval Aviators and seven Air Vehicle Pilots.



RADM Michael S. Wosje,
USN

Transitions from the TH-57 *Sea Ranger* to the TH-73 *Thrasher* and the T-44 *Pegasus* to the T-54 *Marlin II* are in full swing. The T-45 *Goshawk* is undertaking a Service Life Extension Program (SLEP) to ensure operability throughout the next decade as we get ready for the next-generation Undergraduate Jet Training System (UJTS) competition for the T-45 replacement. The Navy is investing in and modernizing warfighting competency through Live, Virtual and Constructive (LVC) training environments, which combine live exercises with virtual simulations and computer-generated forces. This allows for complex, multi-domain training without extensive live resources. In the fleet, simulators (i.e. sims at sea) on board aircraft carriers provide Naval Aviators with more opportunities to train and rehearse in realistic environments while deployed.

Conclusion: The Enduring Value

The importance of Naval Aviation extends far beyond direct combat operations. It is a critical component of national security and prosperity, safeguarding global commerce, and upholding the principle of freedom of navigation. The Navy’s ability to operate from “seabed to space” underpins global stability, which in turn fosters economic growth and protects the American way of life. That stability is being challenged today. When Naval Aviators patrol the skies, they are not just protecting our ships. They are protecting trade routes, deterring aggression and ensuring that nations can conduct business freely and securely. Naval Aviation stands as a beacon of American strength and ingenuity. From its current global dominance, exemplified by active CSG operations in the hottest spots around the globe, to its relentless pursuit of technological and human advancement, Naval Aviation is poised to “fight and win” alongside our allies and partners for generations to come. Naval Aviation will remain an indispensable asset in preserving peace, deterring aggression and protecting the freedom and prosperity that define the American way of life. Naval Aviation — dominating today, tomorrow, and beyond!

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Aircraft from CVW-2 off USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) overfly an international assemblage of U.S. Navy, French Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force ships underway in the Philippine Sea during Pacific Steller 2025 earlier this year.



“You will be governed by the principle of calculated risk,” then-ADM Chester W. Nimitz wrote in a message to his forces before the Battle of Midway, “which you shall interpret to mean the avoidance of exposure of your force to attack by superior enemy forces without good prospect of inflicting ... greater damage on the enemy.” This principle is employed daily by those in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Pacific Fleet and U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific. ADM Nimitz’s interpretation and promulgation of calculated risk-taking to his commanders in the fleet ultimately led to success during World War II. At its core, this involves a focused assessment of all available options and potential outcomes weighed against expected gains and losses. Questions aimed clearly at identifying the problem are extremely useful in analyzing the situation and evaluating the odds of success and failure.

From the Naval Safety Command

Today, more than eight decades later, calculated risk assessment remains relevant. Every day, aviators employ a compass, better known as risk vs. reward. The tools we have at our disposal to do so include training, lessons learned, standard operating procedures and NATOPS. As threats and operational environments evolve across our areas of responsibility, it is critical that we keep risk awareness at the forefront, both in the ready room and in the air.

Flying, in and of itself, is a calculated risk and involves some degree of danger, whether environmental, mechanical or human. As aviators, we operate in an environment where the stakes are high, and the price of failure is deadly. Be informed and risk aware. Decision-making should be based on facts and analysis, not on emotions or unfounded assumptions.

We reduce the calculated risk through planning, briefing, executing and debriefing (PBED). Naval Aviation does this better than any other community across the Navy and Marine Corps.

Commanding officers, you are accountable for ensuring those under your charge remain risk-aware, resilient and adaptive to sustain our north star, readiness and combat lethality. Every decision you make must align to that mission’s ultimate objective while incorporating crew resource management and maintaining constant communication and situational awareness.

Determining calculated risks at the operational level requires a clear understanding of the commander’s intent and guidance. These two factors establish the parameters of the mission and overarching objectives while also allowing for adaptability as needed for emerging threats. Knowing the intent and guidance from the onset, in the ready room, is crucial when calculating risk that aligns with these principles.

ADM Nimitz believed in completely understanding the scenario before him. As the operational environment grows more complex and threats continue to rise, the logic of calculated risk remains relevant. Our forces, trained Sailors and Marines, and our full mission capable equipment are vital to win. We cannot lose them due to poor decision-making. The Battle of Midway proved that.

Tally-ho,
Dino

Naval History and Heritage Command



ADM Chester W. Nimitz pictured during a visit to the Navy Department in Washington D.C. during World War II.

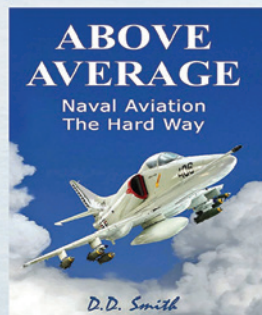


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It is a cleverly written and refreshingly honest story of the author’s life and times as he fights his way from rural Minnesota to the blazing skies over North Vietnam. Commander Smith flew 138 combat missions and made more than 800 carrier arrested 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.

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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.



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www.intruderassociation.org



F-14 Tomcat Association

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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

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Hook Turnover Complete

When I took over the Tailhook Association (THA) executive director role in late 2016, the reunion coordinator position was vacant, but considered a part-time job. As a result, I added executing Hook onto my plate and told the board that we would figure something out later. I must be slow, because it took me eight years to realize that running the annual symposium is no part-time gig, especially since we transitioned to the Grand Sierra Resort (GSR). After discussions with Chairman of the Board RADM Mike Manazir, USN(Ret), it was agreed that I would stay on as executive director to run the day-to-day business and bring on someone to manage Hook. Enter CAPT Dave “Roy” Rogers, USN(Ret), the right pick at the right time. We began the turnover this time last year and just finished the post-Hook administration this week. So with Hook ’25 finally put to bed, Roy is officially the Hook coordinator. Congrats, Roy! You did an excellent job this year incorporating lessons learned from Hook ’24, our first year at the GSR. By far, Hook ’25 was the best executed Hook I have seen thanks to Roy.

From the Executive Director

More Turnover

After three years as our THA president, CAPT Kristen “Dragon” Findlay announced her relief, CDR Travis “Sweet-T” Amerine, at the Hook ’25 banquet. “SH” job Dragon! You crushed it and took Tailhook to the next level. We are grateful for your tireless dedication and no matter how busy things got, you made it fun. I know you will continue to serve and support the association, but you will also be busy as you gear up for your next leadership role. Congrats on your selection as prospective DCAG of CVW-9. Welcome aboard Sweet-T! The energy you exuded at Hook ’25 is a great sign of things to come and like Dragon, we are fortunate to have warfighters leading the way on the flight line.

Special Thanks

Hook is what it is today thanks to so many who showcase their talent and dedication in both the preparation and execution of the symposium. Special thanks go to Chairman Manazir, President Findlay, Tailhook Educational Foundation Executive Director CAPT Rodger Welch, USN(Ret), and staff members Roy Rogers, Janet Warren, Beth Rollins, Jean Roberts, Chris “Fender” Biggin, Hill Goodspeed and Mark Aldrich. Thank you as well to key volunteers including THA Public Affairs Officer LT Grace “GLITTERS” Kording, CDR Mel Palmer, USN(Ret), Denise Haines, Tracy Barkhimer, LCDR Howie Warren, USN(Ret), Greg “GT” and JoAnne Todd, CAPT Steve “Sonic” Hejmanowski, USN(Ret) and a

CJ Machado

host of other Tailhook board members and officers.

This year, two of our staff members were recognized at the “Jig Dog” and Ginger Ramage Awards Brunch, with Janet Warren named 2025 Honorary Tailhooker of the Year and Mark Aldrich presented with the 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award. Thanks Janet and Mark for all you have done and continue to do for Tailhook. Well deserved! Final thanks go to VADM Jerry “Steamer” Beaman, USN(Ret) and CAPT Shawn “Shrek” Malone, USN(Ret) for their nine years of service (term limited) as directors on the Tailhook board. I know both of you will continue to serve the association in the years that follow, but thanks for the added value you provided as directors. Finally, welcome aboard to our newest board members ADM Chris “Lung” Aquilino, USN(Ret), CDR Carolyn “Sulu” Peterson, LCDR Nick “DT” Johnson and LT Mary Cate “BC” Scully.



CAPT Greg Keithley, USN(Ret)

Hook ’26

Planning for Hook ’26 is already underway, so circle your calendar now for **20–22 August 2026**, at the GSR. Room reservations will be available by the end of this year, so please don’t delay. We will send a newsletter when room reservations open. For those who do not have an email address on file with us, keep checking the website. Registration will open online the first week of January.

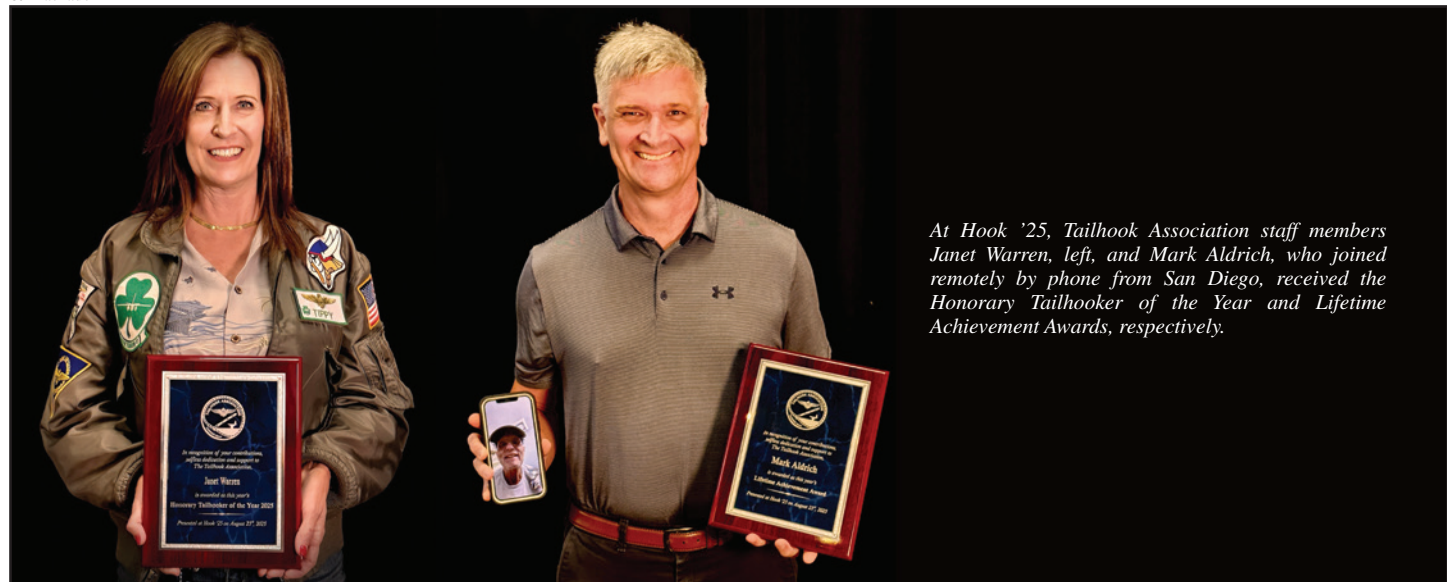
A Note From the Ship’s Store

As you may have noticed when viewing merchandise online, most of our apparel depicts either pilot or NFO wings. That does not mean you can’t get an item that features Naval Flight Surgeon and Aircrew wings, or a host of other designators. We are not a department store, and it is simply too costly to have standing inventory for every item with every designator. If there is something you want with your desired designator on it, please call Jean at our office (858-689-9223) and she can assist you with placing a special order.

On behalf of the entire staff, we are proud to serve and support all things Tailhook. We hope to see you at Hook ’26 next year.

A.O. Kelly

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



At Hook ’25, Tailhook Association staff members Janet Warren, left, and Mark Aldrich, who joined remotely by phone from San Diego, received the Honorary Tailhooker of the Year and Lifetime Achievement Awards, respectively.

SHIP’S



STORE



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



Port Authority Jacket Embroidered with Pilot/NFO Wings & Hook



Stone Coaster Pilot or NFO Wings & Hook



Ogio Heather Polo w/ Pilot or NFO Wings & Hook in Black, Navy, or Grey



Carrier Gray Sherpa Blanket with NFO Wings & Hook



Stainless Steel Wine Cup with NFO or Pilot Wings & Hook Etched



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



AN AIRPLANE STORY

Bruce Trombecky



Recently, members of the 1975 *Blue Angels* gathered for a golden anniversary reunion. Their service 50 years ago came on the heels of a momentous change. It was the second year following the Navy Flight Demonstration Team's redesignation as a full-fledged squadron, with CDR Tony Less holding the position of commanding officer vice the officer in charge title of his predecessors. The new squadron also boasted a new aircraft. "*Blue Angels* to rip skies with smaller, slower jets" read a newspaper headline in 1973 announcing the shift from the F-4 *Phantom IIs* flown since 1969, which had been involved in a series of deadly mishaps while flying with the team, to the smaller A-4 *Skyhawk* that was much more inexpensive to operate. Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare) VADM William D. Houser cited the accidents and the need for F-4s in the fleet, saying it was important to have the *Blue Angels* flying during a challenging period for recruiting.

USN



Then and now — members of the 1975 Blue Angels pictured in front of the flight leader's A-4F Skyhawk and at a recent reunion.

As such, the Navy selected a group of A-4Fs and a TA-4J, many scheduled to be retired from service, for their new role thrilling air show audiences around the country. "The A-4F has really proven to be top drawer in the air show environment and even all the F-4 drivers on the team like the airplane," Less wrote at the beginning of the 1975 season. "Its biggest drawback is its instability in turbulent air and minimum amounts of available pull." But he stated, "we've added a little spice and to date the feedback has been positive." The *Blue Angels* flew the *Scooter* until 1986, at which time the team transitioned to the F/A-18 *Hornet*. The remaining *Skyhawks* were scrapped or ended up in museums, including those soaring high in the *Blue Angel Atrium* at the National Naval Aviation Museum. This selection of images highlights some of these airplanes in fleet service and on the air show circuit.

CAPT Denny Sapp, USNR(Ret)



Frank MacSorley



A-4F, BuNo 154983, pictured at NAF Washington during its assignment to the VA-212 Rampant Raiders on 17 Dec '68, just months after the squadron returned from its fourth Vietnam War cruise.

Angelo Romano Collection



A-4F, BuNo 154984, pictured in 1967-'68 during its service in the VA-113 Stingers.

Clay Jansson



A-4F, BuNo 154177, pictured in the foreground with other Blue Angels aircraft prior to an air show at NAS Miramar on 5 Oct '74.

Frank MacSorley



BuNo 154984, pictured at NAF Washington on 3 Jun '74. While the Skyhawk has the name of Flight Leader CDR Tony Less on the canopy rail, it interestingly does not have No. 1 on the tail.

Jim Sullivan



Blue Angel No. 3, BuNo 155029, pictured at MCAS Cherry Point, N.C., on 29 Apr '76.

Frank MacSorley



A-4F, BuNo 154177, on the flight line at NAF Washington while assigned to the VX-5 Vampires, circa 1968.

National Naval Aviation Museum



Skyhawks assigned to the VMA-223 Bulldogs taking off in 1971. The jet in the foreground, BuNo 155029, was later assigned to the Blue Angels.

MEMBERSHIP CORNER

Welcome New Tailhook Members and Life Members!

June New Members
LCDR Kenneth Weddington, USN Veteran
Mr. Christopher Junek
LT Ashley Wright, USN
CDR Gerry E. Armstrong, USN
Col Fred Izadseta, USAF(Ret)
Lt Col Jerry E. Irwin, USAF(Ret)
LT Nathan B. Melin, USN
CAPT Kaitlin McLeod, USN
CDR Joel Knippel, USN
LTJG Courtney Hays, USN
LTJG John C. Schulz, USN
Mr. Alex Brough, USMC Veteran
Mr. Mark A. Audette
CDR Harry Bolich, USN(Ret)
LT Michael Kron, USN
Mr. Paul Thomas, USN Veteran
CAPT Douglas R. Volkman, USN(Ret)

June New Life Members
LTJG Thomas J. Burton, USN
LT Brian L. Mazzone, USN
LT Brian Pounds, USN
LT Jake Arai, USN
LT Anthony R. Polo, USN
CDR William E. Dann, USN
LT Aaron K. Clayton, USN
LT Ian Arbuckle, USN
CDR Donald K. Bright, USN(Ret)
Mr. William M. Brown
LtCol Matt Haefner, USMC(Ret)
CDR James T. Noland Jr., USN(Ret)
CDR Doug Gray, USN(Ret)
LT Mark A. Hahn, USN Veteran
Mr. Carl Staub
Ms. Lauren Kell-Hill, USMC Veteran
LT Christopher Gray, USN
LCDR Matteson S. Crary, USN(Ret)
CAPT Richard A. Clark, USN(Ret)
Maj William M. Gershen, USAF Veteran
Mr. Walter C. Fink, USN Veteran

July New Members
LtCol Edward Barbour, USMC(Ret)
Mr. John Morrison
Ms. Kellie Currie
LTJG Reece Walker, USN
LTJG Ahnou M. Boulom, USN
CDR Duke Dietz, USN(Ret)
LT Kenneth L. Harris, USN
CTR1 Joseph L. Holloway, USN(Ret)
LCDR Geoffrey M. Murphy, USN Veteran
Mr. Michael B. Stansel Jr.
Mr. Todd Cheney, Veteran
Capt Chuck C. Kent, USMC
LT Hayden A. Espericueta, USN
LT Benjamin W. Hogin, USN
LCDR Kevin Pitcock, USN
CAPT Mark R. Sivers, USN(Ret)
LT Connor Simon, USN

LT Taylor M. Quinn, USN
LTJG Fiona Lobon, USN
ENS Dylan Dilger, USN
CDR Brendan C. Stickles, USN(Ret)
LT Jared Adams, USN
LT Keith S. Henzer, USN
LtGen Kevin Iams, USMC(Ret)
ENS Richard A. Suvari, USN
LT Carissa B. Meinster, USN
LTJG Ajiteshwar Singh, USN
LTJG Zoey Osterloh, USN
LTJG Gregory A. Thomas, USN
LTJG Catherine Medeiros, USN
LT Alastair P. Wilkins, RN
LTJG Phillip Ugarte, USN
LTJG Ryan M. Henderson, USN
LTJG John Menges, USN
LT Oliver M. Taylor, USN
LT Nicholas A. Rudnik, USN
LTJG Angel Rosario, USN
LT John P. Winkler, USN
LTJG Andrew D. Gould, USN
LT Tiffany Johnstone, USN
LT Reed Orren, USN
LTJG Collin Anderson, USN
Capt Mihir Gite, USMC
Mr. Bennett E. Taber, USCG Veteran
LTJG Nolan Sadler, USN
Capt Donald D. Wolfe, ANG Veteran
Mr. Kevin Donohue, USMC Veteran
CDR Brian Crosby, USN
LTJG Sean P. Garrett, USN
LT Andrew Adcox, USN
LTJG Austin Hanly, USN
LT Tanner Strawbridge, USN
CDR Patrick J. Quinn, USN(Ret)
LTJG Jack Brisseno, USN
LT Jacob Granick, USN

July New Life Members
CDR Patrick A. Salmon, USN(Ret)
CDR Justin Letwinsky, USN(Ret)
LCDR Richard L. Collier, USN(Ret)
LCDR Bradley T. Mitchell, USN
LtCol Christopher E. Georgi, USMC(Ret)
CAPT Chauncey L. Mitchell, USN(Ret)
LT Joseph Catterall, RN
CDR Kyle D. Lindsey, USN(Ret)
CDR Arthur B. Cyphers, USN(Ret)
CAPT Roger A. Richardson, USN(Ret)
Mr. David M. Smither
Mr. Brett G. Odom, USN Veteran
CAPT Robert E. Houser, USN(Ret)
LT Marty Sattler, USN Veteran
LCDR William C. Johnson, USN(Ret)
CAPT Dudley A. Gillaspay, USN(Ret)

August New Members
LT Matthew Miller, USN
LT Andrew Marko, USN

LTJG Daniel J. Cooke, USN
LT Deirdre K. Beaudoin, USN
LT Emily M. Larabee, USN
LCDR Rajiv Stone, USN
LT Brian Lee, USN
LTJG Jack C. Golden, USN
LTJG Ethan Mayers, USN
LTJG Christopher Sims, USN
Maj Daniel Lengyel, USMC
Mr. Joseph M. Pruzzo
Mr. Peter Hooper, USN Veteran
LT Emily Beres, USN
CDR Cameron Bouton, USN
Mr. Aaron Hudacky, USN Veteran
LTJG Joseph E. Garcia, USN
ENS Tanner Gregory, USN
LT Jacob R. Bloomstein, USN
LTJG Garet Lipinski, USN
LCDR Jesse C. Arnold, USN
LT Nolan Murray, USN
LT Michael Zurlo, USN
LTJG Elizabeth K. Linsdell, USN
LTJG Brian A. Burton, USN
LTJG Raymond A. Rossman, USN
PO1 Eddie Lai, USN(Ret)
LT Kelly Williamson, USN
1stLt William F. White, USMC
Capt Richard Macke, USAF
LTJG Trent Pitrowski, USN
LT Seth G. Anderson, USN
LT Christopher G. Ventrano, USN
LT Ryan Gower, USN
Capt Brooke Bogdanovich, USMC
LCDR Bryan Weisberg, USN
LTJG James Rockhill, USN
LCDR Christopher S. Greil, USN
LCDR Tom J. Royals, USN
LT Adrienne J. Vitelli, USN
LTJG Brandon Duncan, USN
1stLt Dylan DeVries, USMC
LCDR Casey Smith, USN
LtCol Michael Golike, USMC
LT Tyler C. Fleig, USN
ENS Connor C. Pierson, USN
ENS Yezid G. Gracia, USN
LtCol Michael Jones, USMC
Lt Col Ken Lee, USAF(Ret)
LTJG Jake Grabarek, USN
LT Gavin O'Donnell, USN
LCDR Maxwell Maguire, USN
Mr. Brett Rosenberg, USMC Veteran
Mr. Lewis Perdue
Capt Gabe Thrower, USMC
LTJG Casey J. Scholl, USN
LCDR Patrick Sheldon, USN
CAPT David Bergesen, USN
CDR Erin Kurz, USN(Ret)
COL Matt D. Matter, USA(Ret)
Mr. Christopher Roby, USN(Ret)
LT Hal Valeche, USN(Ret)

August New Life Members
Mr. Greg A. Kuntz
LCDR William K. Dennis, USN Veteran
LT Russell O. Berry, USN Veteran
CDR Ted G. Stier, USN(Ret)
LCDR Neal Dunne, USN
CDR Nicholas E. Lowe, USN
ADR1 Rodger O. Evans, USN(Ret)
LCDR George R. Bartlett, USN
LCDR Paul L. Moffett, USN
LCDR Chris Dooley, USN
LT Kevin Loughmiller, USN Veteran
CDR David M. Fravor, USN(Ret)
LCDR Frederick Slyfield II, USN Veteran
Ms. Megan Buriak
Ms. Deborah Stoneman
LCDR Brendan S. McGinnis, USN
LCDR J. Taylor Burton, USN
LT Jeff A. Jernigan, USN
LCDR Tara A. Palmer, USN
CAPT James K. Dettbarn, USN
CDR William G. Wells, USN(Ret)
CDR Raymond E. Fitzgerald, USN(Ret)
Capt Bob C. Carlson, USMC Veteran
CAPT Leslie Mintz, USN
LT David Rose, USN Veteran
BGen Kevin J. Killea, USMC(Ret)
LT Cassandra J. Garfola, USN
LCDR Colin McLean, USN(Ret)
CAPT John R. Wood, USN(Ret)
LT Benjamin F. Carbone, USN
CAPT Anthony Desmet, USN(Ret)
CAPT Shannon P. Adams, USN
CDR Nigel Sutton, USN(Ret)
Maj Erik Hopkins, USMC

CDR Casey Liggett, USN
CAPT Paul A. Crump, USN(Ret)
CDR Matthew J. Halliwell, USN
Mr. James V. Watterson
LT Jamie R. Foy, USN
CDR Scott H. Hulett, USN(Ret)
CAPT Martin E. Church, USN(Ret)
CDR Eric I. Brown, USN(Ret)
CDR Timothy M. Clesen, USN(Ret)
LT Caleb Smith, USN
LCDR Casey Smith, USN
LT Timothy F. Walsh, USN
CDR James H. Haigler, USN
LT Travis M. Dill, USN
Capt Kennyn Sandy IV, USMC
CDR Adam N. Horn, USN
LT Nicholas M. Kartvedt, USN
CAPT William Dooris, USN(Ret)
LCDR Emily J. Garcia, USN
Mr. Michael De Cou, USN Veteran
LCDR John A. French, USN(Ret)
Mr. Rick A. Bruder
Mrs. Kathleen Lewis
LCDR Kaid Weideman, USN
LCDR Kyle Mui, USN
LT Robert Bailey, USN
LT Tommy Bunts, USN
LCDR Steven L. Spicer, USN Veteran
LT Robert P. LiVolsi, USN
LT Gilbert A. Wright, USN
LT Sam Pershall, USN
LT Kevin Kans, USN
LCDR Brian J. Serbent, USN
CDR Sam Rykaczewski, USN
CDR John G. Kurtz, USN(Ret)

CDR Michael J. Petronis, USN
CDR Brian M. Kocher, USN(Ret)
CAPT David S. Baird, USN(Ret)
CDR Matthew Orner, USN
Mr. Mark Sears
CDR Donald J. Breen, USN(Ret)
LtCol Micah Myers, USMC(Ret)
Ms. Johana Smith
LCDR Joel T. Foster, USMC/USN Veteran
LT Paul Snow, USN
CDR Ryan A. Dorn, USN
LT Charles P. Markert, USN
LTJG Benjamin Markert, USN
LCDR Matthew C. Huffman, USN
LT Eric P. Lampela, USN Veteran
LT William M. Brady, USN Veteran
Mr. Jeff A. Shafer
CDR Sean M. Stuart, USN
LT Ross H. Davis, USN
CAPT Christopher H. Flood, USN(Ret)
LCDR Alan J. Hytonen, USN(Ret)
Capt Craig W. Pope, USAF/ANG Veteran
LCDR Diana Guglielmo, USN(Ret)
LT Travis W. Smith, USN
Mr. William W. Heiter, USN Vetern
Mr. Rick A. Bruder
CDR Greg S. Marshall, USN(Ret)
Mr. Carl L. Kaminski, USN Veteran
Mr. John Walsh, Veteran

Cutoff date — 31 August 2025.
All members after this date will be featured in the next issue.




CDR Donald J. Breen, USN(Ret) rings the bell as a new Life member at Hook '25.



Tailhook Association board member LCDR Mark “Tugboat” Jbeily welcomes guests to the poolside cabana reserved for Life members at Hook '25.



TAILHOOK EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

 **Combined Federal Campaign No. 10251**

Aloha Tailhookers,,
Thank you to all involved in accomplishing a blockbuster Hook '25. In our second year at the Grand Sierra Resort (GSR), we filled the house again with seasoned and nugget Tailhookers. Congratulations to retired CAPTs Dave "Roy" Rogers, our reunion coordinator, and Greg "Chaser" Keithley, Tailhook Association (THA) executive director, as well as the rest of the staff and THA President CAPT Kristen "Dragon" Findlay for planning and executing another remarkably successful symposium. We also thank the GSR leadership, and their staff hosts this year. We look forward to continuing our partnership.

Hook '25 showed that our symposium gets better every year. Below are some of the highlights.

- Over 3,300 total attendees
- More than 30 active-duty flag/ general officers
- More than 15 retired three and four-star flag/ general officers
- 123 exhibitors

As for the Tailhook Educational Foundation (TEF), it was another monumental symposium.

- \$125,000 raised since Hook '25 registrations opened
- \$106,000 raised at Hook
- *The Hook* Magazine Editors perennial scholarship topped off at \$100,000
- 85 raffle prizes drawn, a record high

TEF fundraising at Hook '25 succeeded not only due to our industry and organizational partners and membership support, but also due to Mr. Alex Meruelo and the Meruelo family providing the second of four \$50,000 annual contributions to build the *Grand Sierra Resort Perennial Scholarship*.

Speaking of scholarships, 150 out of 400 applying Naval Aviation Legacy students (38 percent selection rate) collected \$702,500 in grant funds in 2025. This is \$168,000 more than last year, \$202,000 more than 2023 and \$341,000 more than 2020. In short, your support of our 2025

CJ Machado



Tailhook Educational Foundation Executive Director CAPT Rodger Welch, USN(Ret) pictured with Mrs. Dolly Brown, who along with CAPT Taylor Beattie and his wife Amy funded a perennial memorial scholarship honoring Dolly's late husband, CAPT John E. "Lobo" Brown, USN.

scholarship program more than doubled the amount of TEF grant funds provided to college students five years ago. Also, our 2025 grants averaged \$4,650, up \$500 from last year and \$1,500 per grant since 2020.

In 2024, 55 of the 143 grants were awarded at \$3,500 or more (38 percent), 28 at \$5,000 or more (19 percent) and eight at \$10,000 or more (6 percent). This year, 106 of the 159 grants were awarded at \$3,500 or more (67 percent), 57 were awarded at \$5,000 or more (36 percent) and 17 were awarded at \$10,000 or more (11 percent).

TEF also matched the San Diego Padres Foundation's \$10,000 annual grant, so our highest value scholarship this year was again \$20,000. And, for the twelfth year in a row, our loyal STAR anonymous donor contributed \$100,000, funding two \$15,000, four \$10,000 and six \$5,000 STAR scholarships in 2025.

The most remarkable scholarship-growth success this year was the profusion of sponsors, who either built new \$200,000 perennials or increased their existing portfolios to \$200,000 or more.

In 2024 and prior, TEF had zero \$200,000 perennial scholarship portfolios. We only awarded five \$10,000 grants, four sponsored by our STAR donor and one co-sponsored by RADM Denny Wiseley, USN(Ret) and Mr. Jon "Nordo" Winthrop. This all changed after VADM Kevin "Kid" Donegan USN(Ret) set a \$200,000 fundraising goal for the ADM Leighton W. "Snuffy" Smith perennial scholarship at Hook '24 and reached that goal. Remember, a \$200,000 portfolio yields a \$10,000 annual grant in perpetuity. In 2025, TEF's \$200,000 perennial portfolios now include:

1. The \$200,000 ADM Leighton W. "Snuffy" Smith Memorial Scholarship sponsored by the Smith family, friends and Hook '24 participants (\$10,000 grant).
2. The \$250,000 *Intruder* Association Scholarship (\$12,500 grant).
3. The \$225,000 LT Pat Buckley Memorial Scholarship sponsored by Mr. Russ Buckley and family, and the San Diego Tailhook Ready Room (\$11,500 grant).
4. The \$210,000 CAPT Ray Alcorn Memorial Scholarship sponsored by Ray and Karen Alcorn at \$210,000 (\$11,000 grant).
5. The \$200,000 CAPT John (Ed) "Lobo" Brown Memorial Scholarship sponsored by Mrs. Dolly Bown and CAPT Taylor and Amy Beattie (\$10,000 grant).

Until 2024, all TEF Gold Star (GS) grants were funded by undesignated donations. These GS scholarships were financed with other TEF-sponsored annual grants at \$3,000 each. In 2024, Collins Aerospace stepped up as the first organization to externally fund and name two GS grants at \$3,000 each, the Eugene Ely and the CAPT Willie McCool Gold Star Scholarships.

In October 2024, Mrs. Barbara Torrey-Smith and her son, Bill Smith, started a \$100,000 perennial scholarship to honor Barbara's father, CDR Philip H. Torrey Jr. CAG Torrey was shot down in World War II near Tokyo and his remains were not recovered until the early 1980s by Barbara's brother, Col Phil Torrey III, USMC, while stationed at Camp Fuji, Japan. For more information about Navy Cross recipient CDR Philip Torrey Jr., and the scholarship honoring him, please visit our 2025 scholarship awardee webpages.

Barbara told us she wanted the scholarship honoring her father awarded to a Gold Star student each year. This \$100,000 portfolio yields a \$5,000 annual grant. This meant, starting in 2025, TEF would need to award *all* our GS grants at \$5,000. We asked Collins Aerospace if they would increase their two GS grants to \$5,000 each and they stepped up again and did so this year.



CAPT Rodger Welch, USN(Ret)

In May 2025, we received word that TEF was the recipient of a \$250,000 donation from ADM Bill McRaven, USN(Ret), in his role as financial advisor for some of the Jeff Bezos Courage and Civility Award funds. This generous grant from ADM McRaven, intended specifically for the children of fallen Naval Aviators, more than covered our ability to award all TEF 2025 GS grants at \$5,000 this year. In addition, \$200,000 of this donation built two new \$100,000 perennial GS portfolios and \$20,000 was added to this year's \$5,000 GS grants, bringing them from \$3,000 in previous years to \$10,000 this year. This exceptionally generous contribution from ADM McRaven empowered TEF to provide meaningful grants for our GS students, breaking all previous GS grant records as well as ensuring five GS scholarships are now externally sponsored, with three of them perennials. Our sincere thanks to ADM McRaven!

To top off our record-breaking year, four prior-enlisted applicants earned \$14,000 in grant funds. This is more enlisted grants and funding than TEF has ever awarded in the past.

TEF also greatly appreciates our 2025 committed donors. Your support enabled these 150 Naval Aviation legacy awardees to earn TEF grants this year. To see the list of 2025 donors, please visit <https://www.tailhook.net/2025-donors>.

In addition to providing grant funds to college students and sending nearly 1,000 copies of *The Hook* magazine to educational institutions all over the world and our grant awardees, TEF's mission statement highlights our role "... to *Educate the Public in Past, Current and Future United States Navy Aircraft Carrier and Carrier-Based Naval Air Operations and Missions*." When you have some spare time, we encourage you to visit the TEF scholarship awardee pages and read the write-ups. Those pages are full of stories about Naval Aviation legends, famous battles and ships, aircraft types, astronauts, Medal of Honor recipients and all kinds of "Past, Current and Future ... Carrier-Based Naval Air Operations" tales.

Tailhookers, we have thanked you extensively for your 2025 donations and support to date. However, we also need to thank you *in advance* for continuing your support for the rest of the year. Your support *throughout* the year is the only way TEF can continue to grow our awardee funding streams and help our grant recipients keep pace with ever-increasing college costs.

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Landing or taking off in DC?

Contact Jason "Jazz" Leaver

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Scan for contact:



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

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

Your two wingmen, TEF and THA, remain in combat spread, working to keep both of your Tailhook organizations on centerline and glideslope as we serve you. Thank you all again for your long-standing assistance, conviction and inspiring support for our Tailhook team. We look forward to seeing everyone on 20–22 August 2026, at the GSR for Hook '26!

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



**TEF GiveDirect
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Jonathan Martin



CDR Charles "Chuck" Sweeney, USN(Ret) reflected in a plaque from the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) Society at the I-Bar on board NAS North Island. Sadly, he made his last cut on 10 Jun '25, and TEF changed its scholarship honoring him to a memorial one.

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MLS

PH3 Terry Simmons, USN

FROM THE CATWALK

CONDUCTED BY “BOOM” POWELL

USS Seattle (AOE 3) steams ahead of USS Saratoga (CV 60) following completion of underway replenishment in the Red Sea during Operation Desert Storm, 1 Feb '91.



DUEL

In the early days of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), pilots from several nations were having a celebration at the officers club after completing a Joint exercise. A tall Texan fighter pilot wondered aloud why the French fighters were not aggressive. Insulted, a Frenchman drew himself up to his full five-and-a-half-foot height and challenged the lieutenant (junior grade) to a duel. The surrounding banter and laughter stopped with the earnestness of the Frenchman's accusation.

“Ah accept,” drawled the Texan, “and because you challenged me, ah have the choice of weapons, right?”

“*Mais oui*, anything you weesh,” declared the Frenchman.

The Navy pilot looked down at his challenger, paused and said, “We’ll settle this affair with twenty-pound sledgehammers in five feet of water!”

When pounds and feet were translated into meters and kilograms there was an outburst of laughter and drinks ordered all around. Honor was satisfied and a new nickname of “Sledge” awarded.

LT Tom Pickett, USN



LT William Ipock of the VFA-113 Stingers flies an F/A-18 Hornet in formation with two French Mirage 2000s while waiting his turn to tank from a French C-135FR Stratotanker during Operation Southern Watch on 23 Apr '94.

GHOST RIDER GHOST

Billy Walker and Larry Duthie were fraternity brothers at Arizona State University, and both went to Navy flight training. As is so often the case, after Duthie deployed as a member of the VA-164 *Ghost Riders* they lost touch. Months later, Walker heard the sad news that his friend “Duth” had been shot down over North Vietnam and killed.

Summer 1967 brought grim days for the *Ghost Riders*. On 18 July, during a strike against the Co Trai railroad yards, anti-aircraft artillery hit LCDR Dick Hartman's A-4E *Skyhawk*, forcing him to eject. While attempting to set up a rescue effort, LTJG Duthie's *Skyhawk* also took a hit. He flew his burning airplane toward the coast using only trim as all the other controls were not responding. When trim control quit and the airplane rolled, he ejected some 45 miles southeast of Hanoi. Going 500 knots at the time he punched out, his leg was so badly injured that he was hobbled on the ground.

An HS-2 *Golden Falcons* SH-3A *Sea King* made a 105-mile overland flight over enemy territory, with pilot LT John Bender hovering over the rugged terrain searching for Duthie. “Thereupon intense ground fire from three sides laced the area with tracers at such close range that the sound of automatic weapons and small arms firing was audible above the engine and rotor noise,” read his subsequent citation for the Silver Star. Bender continually exposed himself to enemy fire looking out the cockpit window to locate Duthie in the dense jungle growth and rugged karst cliffs below. He maintained his hover for 12 minutes, departing only after a bullet passed through his window and mortally wounded one of his gunners. He departed to seek medical attention for his crewman, turning the rescue effort over to an Air Force HH-3E *Jolly Green Giant* piloted by Maj Glen York. He and his crew braved the intense ground fire to rescue Duthie after he had been on the ground for more than four hours. York received the Air Force Cross.

The next morning, *Ghost Rider* LTJG Barry Wood was on a flak suppression mission in support of the effort to rescue Hartman when his *Skyhawk* took a hit and began losing fuel. Wood jettisoned his ordnance and made it eight miles out over the Tonkin Gulf before ejecting. A boat from a destroyer picked him up.





An HS-2 Golden Falcons SH-3A Sea King assigned to combat search and rescue pictured on board USS Long Beach (CGN 9) in 1967.

Billy Walker maintains a blog about all things aviation and a few years ago received an email about the heroics of 18 July 1967. “York’s story was fascinating, but it was the photos at the bottom that were astounding! There were a couple of pictures of my buddy Larry Duthie sitting in York’s helicopter [with] all smiles after his rescue.

“Duth wasn’t dead after all! I set to work trying to locate him. There was Larry Duthie, a publisher in Walla Walla, Wash. I called. He answered. I asked, ‘Are you the Larry Duthie who went to Arizona State University?’ He admitted this and asked who I was. I said, ‘Billy Walker, and you’re not dead!’”

BOSS OF THE WAVES

CAPT Joy Bright Hancock is well known for serving as director of the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) when they gained status as part of the Regular Navy following World War II. Less well known are her close ties to Naval Aviation. After service in World War I as a Yeoman (F) at NAS Wildwood, N.J., she married LT Charles Little, who subsequently lost his life in the crash of the airship ZR-2 in England in August 1921. A year later, she obtained employment with the Bureau of Aeronautics (BuAer), where her duties included editing its newsletter, which later evolved into the magazine *Naval Aviation News*. In 1924, she left BuAer to marry LCDR Lewis Hancock, who the following year was one of 14 crewmembers killed when the rigid airship USS *Shenandoah* (ZR 1) crashed after encountering a storm over Ohio.

Hancock returned to BuAer after attending foreign service school and obtaining a private pilot’s license, serving from 1932 until fall 1942 in the Editorial and Research Section and as a special assistant to the bureau chief. On 15 October 1942, she received a commission as a lieutenant in the newly formed Women’s Reserve, commonly known as the WAVES, initially serving as its representative in BuAer and later in a similar position for the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Air). By the end of the war she had attained the rank of commander. From a family of eight siblings, she was one of four of them to serve in the armed forces; one of her brothers was an officer on board USS *Yorktown* (CV 10) throughout the war.

After promotion to captain and service as WAVES director and Assistant Chief of Naval Personnel for Women, she retired from active duty in June 1953. A year later she married VADM Ralph A. Ofstie and accompanied him during his 1955–’56 tour as Commander, *Sixth Fleet*. She passed away in 1986 at the age of 88 and is interred in Arlington National Cemetery.

GRINCH SAFETY OFFICER

In December 1990, USS *Saratoga* (CV 60) and CVW-17 were on deployment in the Red Sea for *Operation Desert Shield*. Just prior to Christmas, we did an underway replenishment, which included cross-decking some 500 Christmas trees donated to the carrier. A call came out that trees were on the hangar deck and people could grab them and



A happy LTJG Larry Duthie, second from right, pictured with the USAF Jolly Green Giant crew that pulled him to safety from the jungles of North Vietnam on 18 Jul ’67.

put them in shops, ready rooms, etc. We had one in our ready room and decorated it accordingly. Most shops had trees in their spaces. After about a week, the safety officer must have come back from temporary duty because the call came to return all trees to the hangar deck. Apparently, they were a massive fire hazard. So all the trees except two were returned to the hangar deck and then summarily deposited in the Red Sea. We would see them floating around for days afterward. Merry Christmas!



Left to right, LCDR Joy Bright Hancock, RADM Alfred M. Pride, LCDR Jean Palmer and CAPT Erl C.B. Gould pictured at NAS Barbers Point during an inspection of Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) activities in Hawaii, 25 Oct ’44.

MARTIN BACKBREAKER

The first live ejection using a Martin-Baker seat occurred in 1946 from a *Meteor F.3* at altitude. Following this, LTJG Adolph “Chubby” Furtek became the first U.S. Navy officer to eject from an aircraft when he rode a Martin-Baker seat out of a Douglas JD-1 *Invader* assigned to the Naval Air and Material Command at NAS Lakehurst.

The Navy was incurring a 94-percent fatality rate in ejections below 1,000 feet using various types of American-built seats. Joseph H. “Hap” Dressel, director of the Bureau of Aeronautics’ Airborne Equipment Division, had witnessed a live, ground-level ejection at an air show at Farnborough, England, and sent a team to evaluate the latest Martin-Baker ejection seats. Medical Corps officer LCDR Roland A. “Doc” Bosee was on the team and expressed misgivings about back injuries due to the larger propellant charge necessary to achieve ground-level ejections.

The team was picked up before breakfast and taken to the demonstration by James Baker himself. After a hair-raising 40-minute ride through country hedgerows, the group arrived at what looked like a World War I airfield consisting of one small strip and a tin hangar. Inside the hangar was the company’s *Meteor F.3* with RAF Squadron Leader John “Fifi” Fifield strapped into the rear cockpit of the airplane. Baker pointed out that the seat had the more powerful charge.

“The *Meteor* was pushed out, started and taxied to the end of the short runway. Full power down the runway and right in front of us out shot Fifi. Bam! Bam! Full deployment of the main chute, one swing and he touched down.

“Without a word Jimmy [Baker] got in his car as Fifi gathered his chute and walked to us. Fifi got in Jimmy’s car and we followed, driving a short distance to a local pub. Inside, Jimmy and Fifi were at the bar, and we were all handed a mug of ale. Then Jimmy turned to Doc, pointed to Fifi downing his ale, and said, ‘Doctor, does that look like a man with a broken back?’”

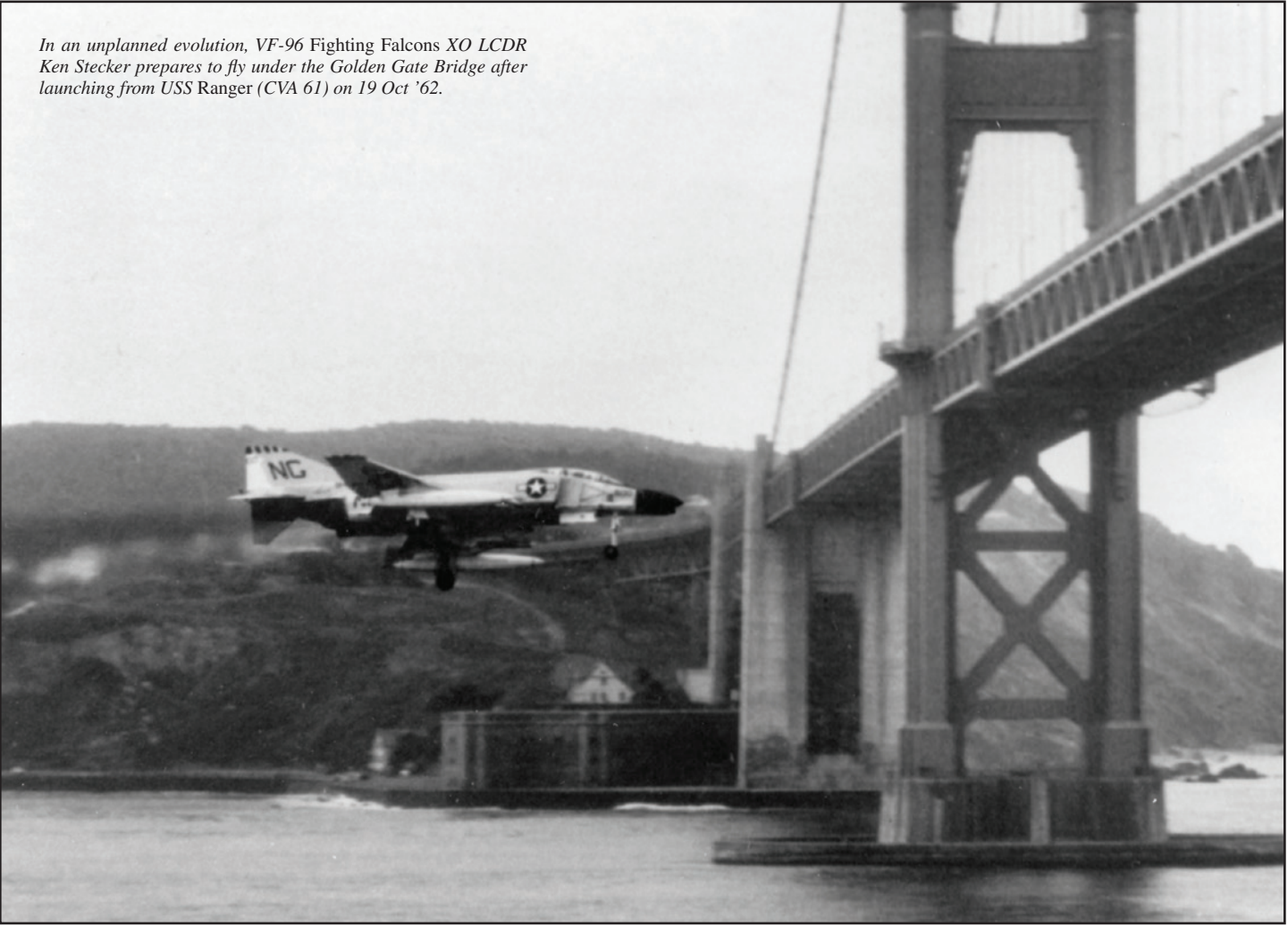
—CAPT William H. Hoover, USN(Ret)

GOT AWAY WITH IT

On the 19 October 1962, USS *Ranger* (CVA 61) was supporting the filming of a documentary about carrier pilots. As the ship entered San Francisco Bay, flight deck personnel readied two VF-96 F-4 *Phantom IIs* were for launch. The “money shots” were supposed to capture a *Phantom* roaring off the deck, then climbing away over the Golden Gate Bridge. However, “something” occurred that delayed the launch enough that when the *Phantom* left the carrier, the pilot saw a whole lot of Golden Gate in front of him and had no choice but fly under the bridge.



RAF Squadron Leader John “Fifi” Fifield pictured strapped into a Martin-Baker ejection seat prior to a flight test of the lifesaving equipment.



In an unplanned evolution, VF-96 Fighting Falcons XO LCDR Ken Stecker prepares to fly under the Golden Gate Bridge after launching from USS Ranger (CVA 61) on 19 Oct ’62.



TF-1 Traders off USS Essex (CVA 9) pictured with Royal Navy aircraft on board HMS Victorious (R38) during operations in the Mediterranean Sea, circa 1958.

SLEEPY BYE

“It was a Sunday somewhere in the Indian Ocean and our carrier, HMS *Victorious* (R38), was doing a 24-hour speed trial. It started at midnight on the previous night, and during the hours of darkness we had worked up to our maximum speed, which the stokers (*Ed. Note: Royal Navy term for Sailors serving in the engineering department*) claimed to be over 40 knots.

“At first light we found most of the officers, wandering aimlessly around the flight deck looking rather lost after forsaking their quarters in the stern because of the horrendous vibration down aft. [This was] much to the great amusement of the stokers who were responsible for the shaking.”

—Unknown Royal Navy stoker

- BOUNCES**
- A Korean War F4U *Corsair* pilot talking about battle damage he received — “To this day I have never figured out how they counted the holes. Is an entry and exit one hole or two? And what does a groove count? Anyway, it sure took a lot of patches to fix that old bird up.”
 - A pilot was called “Moth” because he always drifted right to left on landing, seemingly attracted by the light on the mirror.
 - During the 1960s, HMS *Hermes* (R12) signaled a passing U.S. Navy ship in the Mediterranean. “Good morning to the second biggest navy in the world.” Quick as a flash came the reply. “Good morning to the second best.”
 - Mid-watch on Pier 12 in Norfolk in February between two carriers is a sub-zero wind tunnel! EVERYONE walks backward with their hands in their pockets. They don’t call it Breezy Point for nothing.

HUSH HUSH

While I was with the Skunk Works in “Beautiful Downtown Burbank,” I parked a toy “stealth fighter” (Testors F-19 plastic kit) on my desk. Within 90 minutes one of my coworkers told my boss, Dick, who summoned me and ordered it removed it from the property *immediately*. I mentioned everyone pretty much knew we were building something weird in the building. He responded, “You don’t know that, and you can’t have any toy or model which infers there is such a program.” So, I removed it.

A few weeks later, Dick summoned me again. He told me I’d been cleared into a specific program, and I was to go with one of my other coworkers, Bill. We left the office, took a rather confusing, meandering route to another part of the building, went through two secure doors ... and there was the F-117A production line. My immediate, professional, response: “HOLY S***!” Bill laughed, “Yeah, I had exactly the same response the first time I saw them.”

I subsequently worked on the short-lived F-117X / Tailhook Stealth program and some other projects. The day after the Air Force “grayed” the F-117A following its successful employment against the vaunted Panamanian air defense network, Lockheed posted a banner over the entrance to our building: "CONGRATULATIONS! YOU’VE DONE IT AGAIN! YOU STILL CAN’T TALK ABOUT IT!"

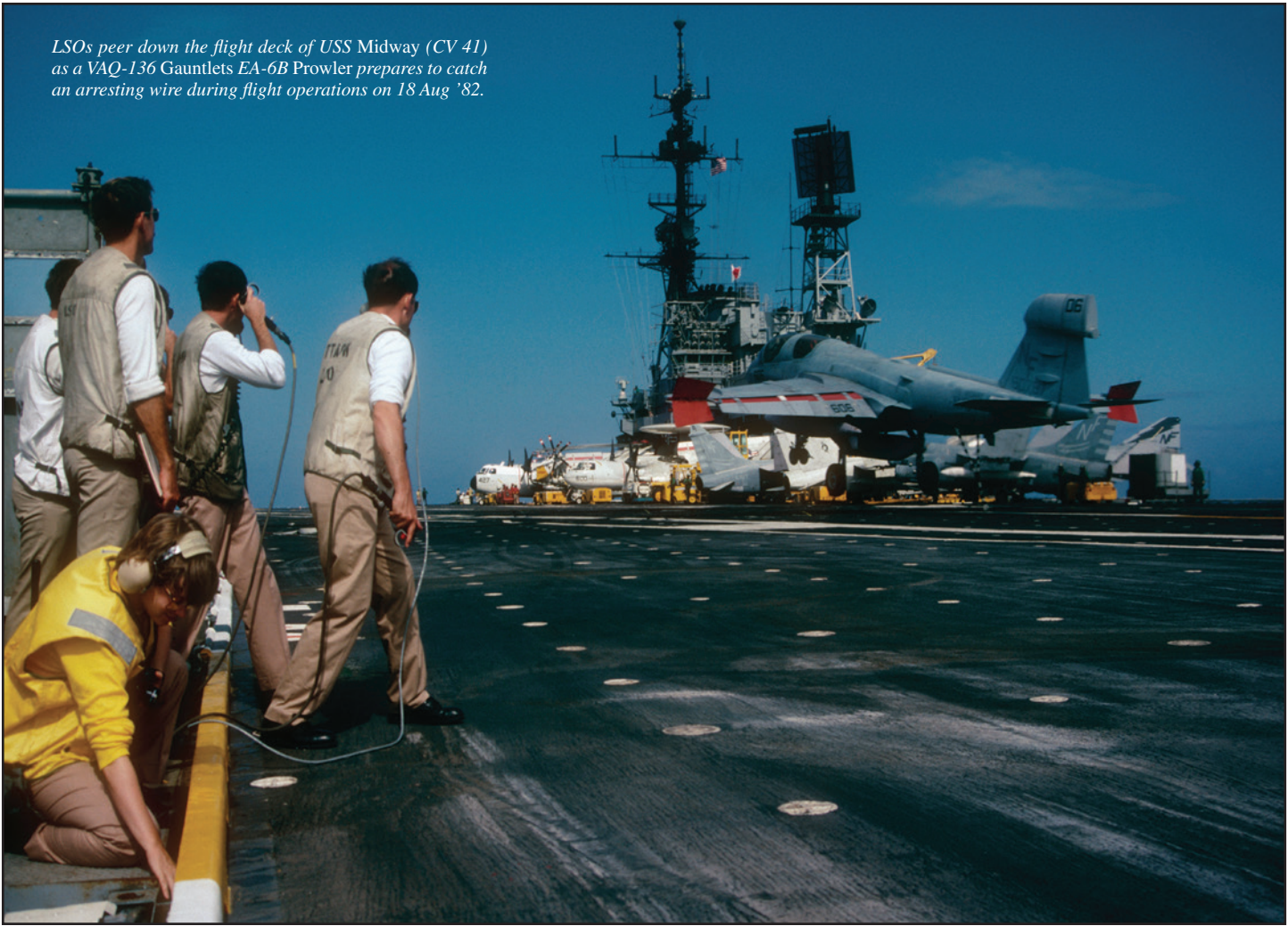
In 1991, while working as a historian at Vicksburg National Military Park, I finally received the letter from Lockheed. “Now you can talk about it, now you can mention the program in your resume ... but you still can’t talk about all of the other stuff you worked on.”

—Mark Morgan

PRESCIENCE

Every LSO looks forward to the last recovery of the night or the “Final Final.” Because there isn’t a launch before the event, it is usually quiet and peaceful waiting for the recovery. It was just such a beautiful night on the platform of USS *Midway* (CV 41) with incoming aircraft lights visible all the way up to the marshal stack.

The first aircraft down was an EA-6B *Prowler* flown by my XO and I was the controlling LSO. The LSO writer that night was a *Hornet* pilot named “Yank.” As the *Prowler* reached three miles, I said, “Yank, write this down. Too much power on start. Over control high in the middle. Fly through down in close. Low flat at the ramp underlined. No Grade one wire.” Yank just looked at me. I said, “Just write it down.” Shaking his head, he wrote “605 - TMPX OCHIM -IC LOBAR_ 1.”



LSOs peer down the flight deck of USS Midway (CV 41) as a VAQ-136 Gauntlets EA-6B Prowler prepares to catch an arresting wire during flight operations on 18 Aug ’82.

A few moments go by and 605 calls the ball. “Roger Ball.” The *Prowler* proceeds to fly the exact pass Yank just wrote down. After the trap, I didn’t say a word. I just smiled at Yank. Yank’s mouth was wide as he stammered, “How did you do that?” I continued waving.

When we got to my ready room, I approached my XO to debrief his pass. Before I could begin, Yank yells out, “XO! XO! You are not going to believe this! Horse called your pass from three miles out!” So here I am standing in front of my XO, about to give him a No Grade, but now my XO knows I gave him the No Grade before he even called the ball. Needless to say, things went frosty for a while.

—CAPT Mike “Horse” Horsefield, USN(Ret)

Chock ’em, chain ’em, and Paddle’s comments to the Catwalk.



USAF



An F-117 Nighthawk pictured in flight over the Nevada desert on 21 Oct ’03.

USN

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LAUNCH

From the Bridge: A Carrier Captain's View of the Pacific War

by Hill Goodspeed

National Naval Aviation Museum

At 0958 on Wednesday, 2 August 1944, VADM Richmond Kelly Turner's barge pulled alongside USS *Hornet* (CV 12). Seas were rough as the carrier lay at anchor off Saipan, but the lone figure in khaki managed to be hoisted aboard the flattop that had put into port less than 24 hours earlier to replenish its bombs. CAPT Austin K. "Artie" Doyle, who one officer described as "chunky, full of life, very outgoing, acting on things at once," had spent the previous night on board Turner's flagship awaiting the arrival of the ship he would soon command. Known as "Terrible Turner," the commander of the Pacific Fleet's amphibious forces did not have the reputation for being cordial, but Doyle held a trump card. In 1927,



CAPTs William D. Sample, left, and Austin K. Doyle pictured on board USS *Hornet* (CV 12) in Aug '44, just before the latter assumed command of the carrier.

when then-CDR Turner underwent flight training at NAS Pensacola, then-LT Doyle had been one of his instructors. True to his personality, Turner was prone to argue with him in the air about errors made during training flights. "I landed the plane and told him in no uncertain terms that he had better do what I said, or he wouldn't get by," Doyle recalled of the moment he took matters into his own hands. "From then on he was amenable to all suggestions."

There to greet Doyle on board *Hornet* was another officer from his past. Skipper CAPT William D. Sample had been a groomsman at Doyle's wedding and the longtime friends spent the next few days preparing for the turnover, including time at sea.



National Archives



Hornet at anchor in Majuro Atoll on 29 Mar '44. Doyle took in a similar scene a few months later when he arrived to take command of the carrier.

“Have been having the time of my life and at last have heard shots fired in anger,” Doyle wrote his wife Jamie, whose nickname was “Jimps.” “Bill [Sample] has been swell, of course, and though things have been tough once or twice, he has kept full and skillful control. It is nice to know that we are as good as our publicity makes out.” Though Doyle had commanded USS *Nassau* (ACV 16) during the invasion of Attu in the Aleutians in 1943, no enemy aircraft had approached the ship.

In just a few days on board *Hornet*, the ship took evasive maneuvers at the report of an incoming bogey while operating off Chichi Jima and unleashed her anti-aircraft guns against a Japanese aircraft at a range of 6,000 yards. “Bill is gone so I am on my own now,” Doyle wrote on 11 August, his friend having departed to eventually assume command of an escort carrier division. Tragically, he died shortly after the Japanese surrender when the plane in which he was flying crashed near Wakayama, Japan, on 2 October 1945.

In port in Eniwetok for several days, the new skipper had an opportunity to learn more about the carrier and her crew. “They do a beautiful thing aboard this ship,” he wrote his wife. “Five minutes before Taps every night there is a one-minute prayer broadcast over the loudspeaker system. Everybody stops what he is doing and listens to it ... There are so many more angles to this big ship with 3,000 men and officers on board that it takes a long time to catch on.” He also wrote of a USO show, with the expected reactions from Sailors who had been at sea for months on end. “They [the performers] were all nice looking ... and said they couldn’t wait to get back home and tell their friends how easy the Navy is,” he commented, which was maybe not a surprising impression given the fact that their previous appearances had been at rustic Army camps ashore.

Hornet soon put to sea for a brief training cruise, the first with Doyle in command on the bridge. “The air group [CVG-2] is tired — they’ve been out too long, but I’ve been working on them, and they are responding like the great gang they are,” he confided in a letter home. “We didn’t have a single casualty, not even a blown tire, last week. We’ll have plenty of tough assignments ahead, but we can take them. And you should see the ship’s guns shoot!! We made the cruisers look sick.”

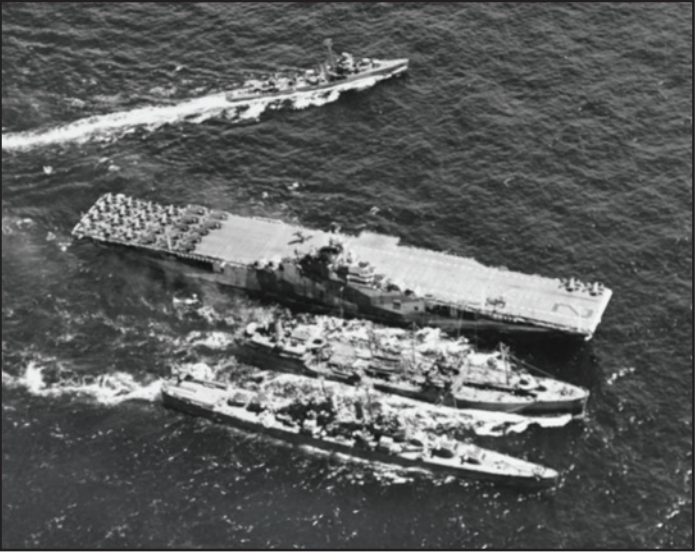
VADM John S. McCain had arrived to take command of *Task Group 38.1* (TG-38.1), which was an element of *Task Force 38* (TF-38), and consisted of four carriers, including *Hornet*, and their escorts, for the forthcoming combat operations, learning the ropes in preparation for relieving VADM Marc A. Mitscher. This would coincide with ADM William F. Halsey relieving ADM Raymond Spruance, who was Commander, *Fifth Fleet*, as part of a regular rotation. Though the ships remained the same, the designations changed to *Third Fleet* and

Naval History and Heritage Command



Left to right, Doyle, VADM Marc A. Mitscher and RADM Joseph J. “Jocko” Clark on board *Hornet* for presentation of awards on 26 Aug ’44. Walking behind them is CAPT Arleigh Burke, Mitscher’s chief of staff and a future Chief of Naval Operations. Both flag officers would play a significant role in the carrier’s operations during Doyle’s time in command.

National Archives



Hornet and a light cruiser refuel from an oiler on 3 Aug ’44, the day before Task Force 38 launched air strikes against Chichi Jima.

TF-38 respectively, under Halsey and McCain. In addition to McCain visiting *Hornet*, Mitscher came aboard on 26 August to present awards to members of the crew, receiving three cheers as he had once served as commanding officer of the first carrier named *Hornet*. “He is a fine man, and everybody thinks the world of him,” Doyle wrote. “Would follow him anywhere.”

Doyle had more difficulty with RADM Joseph J. “Jocko” Clark, who historian Samuel Eliot Morrison called “Part Cherokee Indian and part Southern Methodist, but all fighter ... He used rough and explosive language but knew his business thoroughly and had more than a fair share of energy and dogged determination.” Having commanded USS *Yorktown* (CV 10), one of the first *Essex*-class carriers to enter combat in 1943, he did not shy away from expressing his opinions as a carrier task group commander. His biographer noted that while Sample was more mild-mannered, Doyle had the personality to “handle” Jocko. Clark departed shortly after Doyle assumed command but would return as task group commander a few months later, with *Hornet* serving as his flagship.

“This life is intensely interesting all the time,” Doyle wrote on 30 August 1944, also informing his wife of his plans to send money home to her for war bonds or anything else required for the family of five children, the youngest of whom had been born just weeks before he departed for the Pacific. “There isn’t a dull moment day or night.” That was certainly the case on 7 September as TF-38 began a series of strikes against the Palau Islands and targets in the Philippines to neutralize Japanese air power and defenses in advance of forthcoming invasions.

Amidst flight operations and regular reports of bogeys, Doyle found time to initiate a practice on most days of having his steward bring a big pitcher of tea to air plot, where anyone from department heads to pilots could stop in and share what was on their mind with him over a cup. He kept a .22-cal. rifle on the bridge and occasionally took shots at things floating on the water to pass the time during many hours at sea. One of his executive officers recalled him routinely setting his sights on flying fish, taking a shot just as he sensed one was going to dive into the water and proclaiming, “Got him!” He fooled many a green Sailor with his “marksmanship.” Realizing he had a veteran crew, he limited time spent at general quarters, instead setting Condition One Easy. “We got as much rest as you could under the circumstances,” an officer remembered.

“I must be built peculiarly, for I’m actually thriving on the life,” Doyle admitted to his wife on 24 September 1944. “[I] get mad at things often enough to make it interesting ... We’ve been under attack, but (keep this to yourself) I didn’t know it as I was trying to stay in position on a guide that was maneuvering radically.”

Two days earlier, bogeys began appearing on *Hornet*’s radar screens before dawn and at 0650 two bombs, later determined to have been dropped through the clouds by Japanese airplanes, exploded 2,700 yards off the port bow.

As attacks intensified on ships of TG-38.1 VADM McCain signaled for an increase in speed and emergency turn. As *Hornet* executed this order, her guns opened up on a Japanese A6M *Zero* fighter at an approximate altitude of 4,500 feet. Just a minute later, another Japanese fighter streaked just over the flight deck with its guns blazing, putting bullet holes in 10 aircraft, killing two Sailors and wounding five others. While pilots had failed to return from missions, these were the first members of the ship’s company killed in action during Doyle’s time in command.

Meanwhile, TF-38 aircraft hit the enemy hard, with *Hornet*’s action report noting, “Targets [in Manila] were so numerous that it was difficult to plot or keep tally of the damage inflicted.” George Jones, a correspondent who spent time aboard the carrier, put it more colorfully. “These waters where Admiral Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet 46 years ago are now littered with gutted hulks of Japanese ships and smoke still drifts over the blackened waterfront.”

In October *Hornet* was at sea en route to Okinawa having replenished at Manus Island and welcomed a new air group, CVG-11. “We’ve had some very foul weather lately, the worst I’ve seen since I was up in the Aleutians,” Doyle wrote. Have never seen a big CV so lively, but some gusts of wind are really terrific ... I haven’t had my clothes off for a couple of days.” A welcome diversion as the weather moderated was listening to the broadcast of the World Series in his sea cabin, which was of particular interest to the old Naval Academy baseball player. A week later on 16 October 1944, a letter written to his wife in the predawn hours told of “an exciting four days during which I got just a few hours of sleep. During daylight we’d work fast attacking the enemy and at sunset he’d send in all he had against us.” What censorship rules prevented him from saying were two close calls off Formosa. A Japanese torpedo plane, although in flames from hits by anti-aircraft fire from



National Archives



F6F-5 Hellcats lead a pack of CVG-11 aircraft, including TBM Avengers and SB2C Helldivers, as pilots start engines and ready for launch off *Hornet* for a strike on Nansei Shoto, 10 Oct ’44.

Hornet's screening destroyers, penetrated to a point just 150 yards of the carrier's port side before crashing into the sea. The following night an enemy dive bomber missed the ship by only 100 feet with its ordnance.

In those days, the embarked air group was a direct report to the carrier captain and Doyle expressed concern over the level of experience of replacement pilots reporting to CVG-11 after a month of intense combat operations. "On one occasion," he wrote in his action report for October 1944, "when all else had failed, it was necessary for the Landing Signal Officer to wave a spare hook in the air, then run up the deck to engage it on a wire before a replacement pilot could be persuaded to lower his hook. While this provided entertainment for the crew, it indicates poor indoctrination of pilots."

That action report covered *Hornet's* participation in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the most famous engagement of that wide-ranging battle being the heroic actions of a group of escort carriers and their screening vessels that turned back powerful Japanese surface force in the waters off Samar in the Philippines. *TG-38.1* was en route to Ulithi for replenishment and received orders to reverse course and make best speed to provide air support, the other carriers of *TF-38* having been drawn northward by a decoy force of Japanese large-deck carriers virtually devoid of aircraft. "We were there in the pinch when it was very grim and were able to push our boys off on time again and again when other ships were delayed by deck crashes," Doyle wrote in a letter to his wife after the headline-making battle, during which *Hornet* aircraft flew at extended range to strike the Japanese surface force as it retired.

He harbored concerns about his air group after the battle, writing McCain of the effects of the loss of CAG CDR Frederick Schrader over Formosa on 13 October and his intention to relieve the VB-11 skipper of command. "Although the Group has been formed for a year, it has had too many different leaders in that time, and its training is deficient in many respects. These defects did not become apparent until a few of the experienced leaders were killed ... in the Formosa engagement."

The new CAG, former VB-20 skipper CDR Robert E. Riera, proved an excellent choice to succeed Schrader, as evidenced by comments Doyle made following strikes against Manila in early November. "My new group has really come into their own the past two days, and everyone

National Naval Aviation Museum



on board is as pleased and as proud of them as of a new baby. They go around grinning from ear to ear for they've had a tough time and are hardworking boys. They were as green as grass, and it was a great strain taking care of them. What a pleasure it is now. They are better than the old group."

Amidst the press of combat operations, those on board became increasingly accustomed to their new skipper. "All the crew relaxed tonight ... when I retired to my sea cabin and put on my pajamas," he wrote on 6 November. "They knew we weren't going to be attacked tonight."

The following day, his 46th birthday, he received a cake and the ship's band serenaded him from the hangar deck, his accomplishing a "fast landing alongside the tanker in very heavy seas" adding to his celebratory mood, especially since it avoided the ire of new *TG-38.1* commander RADM Alfred E. Montgomery.

Spending time with his aviators left an impression. "You'd be horrified at the appearance of the pilots," he relayed to his wife on 20 November. "They look like babies. One young killer told me about his experiences on a grueling night flight last week — he couldn't have been over 19. And I, horrible creature that I am, sent him below to get a couple of snorts from the doctor. They are wonderful though, and full of pep ... They give everything all that they have and are rapidly building up a reputation for themselves."

A return to port brought an unexpected honor when Doyle received the Navy Cross with other carrier and cruiser captains with Halsey presenting him the award during a ceremony on board his flagship. He spent his wedding anniversary, 15 December, on the bridge observing flight operations as *Hornet* aircraft struck Bataan and just days later the carrier took a beating during a typhoon. It devastated the fleet, with three destroyers lost at sea, seven ships reporting heavy damage and the carriers losing 190 aircraft washed overboard or damaged beyond repair. A subsequent Court of Inquiry placed the blame squarely on Halsey's shoulders, citing "errors of judgement committed under stress of war operations."

Preparing for Christmas prompted a moment of reflection in a 23 December letter to his wife. "It will help keep the men from feeling too gloomy over being away from home for so long," he wrote of the gifts presented to each member of the crew. "Despite all I tell them,



Doyle pictured on the flight deck of *Hornet* with his Marine orderlies during a break in operations. He was popular with the leathernecks, one of whom was always in proximity to him on board ship.

they continually believe rumors that we'll be home for such and such a date. It's never as soon as one thinks unless you have bad luck and get damaged, which I hope won't happen to us. You know how much I'd like to be with you now, Kid, but with all the years in the Navy ahead of us, it would be awful if I couldn't spend some of the war in a spot where my education can be used. I suppose I should be worn to a frazzle from the strain of operating so constantly at sea, 'unprecedented' is the word the big shots use, but actually I'm thriving on it."

Dropping anchor on Christmas Eve, the crew celebrated the holiday with festivities on the hangar deck, complete with gag gifts for the ship's senior officers. Doyle received a hearty cheer from the crew and, when he purchased a pair of shoes on board the ship, he was informed his Marine orderlies had paid for them as a Christmas present. The skipper was popular with the leathernecks who never left his side and guarded the entrance to his cabin. One of them recalled that the carrier happened to be in port for the Army-Navy game and since Doyle was heading to another ship to listen to the game, he invited the orderly into his cabin to listen to the radio broadcast. "I thought that was the greatest ever, sitting in an overstuffed chair listening to the ... game at midnight because of the time change."

The new year brought renewed strikes against the Philippines, Hong Kong, Formosa and French Indochina, the latter destined to be a battleground for a subsequent generation of aviators and carrier crews. LTJG H. Blake "Rabbit" Moranville of VF-11 ditched his F6F-5 *Hellicat* in a rice paddy during a fighter sweep over Saigon on 12 January 1945. "We hear [he] is now safe and en route home by devious paths," Doyle wrote his wife a week later. The young pilot, because he was the son of a veterinarian, was the custodian of the *Sundowners'* mascot, a Boston bull terrier named Gunner. "The dog has been disconsolate ever since and can't understand where Moranville is. We can't tell him that his master is safe. It is really pathetic."

With many Naval Academy classmates and contemporaries commanding other carriers, the competitive spirit thrived in *TF-38*. "I have a standing bet of fifty bucks with any other carrier skipper that we can give them ten minutes and beat them in landing and rearming," his wife read in one letter from the Pacific. To a fellow officer back in the states, Doyle likened service with the fast carriers to the national pastime. "No one who has witnessed them steaming at high speed getting ready to turn into the wind ... will ever be able to get a pre-game thrill that approaches that involved in the competition of getting your own air group in the air before [other carriers] and as you swing into the wind again to recover the last strike of the day ... you start the race to get yours aboard before the other ships do — that's the BIG LEAGUES."

Six months into his command tour, Doyle had come to some conclusions about carrier operations that he shared with his former executive



LTJG H. Blake "Rabbit" Moranville of the VF-11 Sundowners asleep in the ready room with the squadron mascot "Gunner."

officer, CAPT Clifford H. "Dutch" Duerfeldt, now on the staff of Commander, Air Forces, Pacific Fleet. The effectiveness of fighter bombers against ships was questionable, there were still problems with the accuracy of dropping napalm from altitude, fighters need more firepower and, in the opinions of the pilots, the TBM *Avenger* was obsolete and in need of replacement. He also cited the "tendency to blame meager results against targets like Hong Kong" on factors like the weather and flak rather than "putting too few planes on too many targets."



National Naval Aviation Museum



Doyle, left, confers with another officer just outside the bridge on board *Hornet*, a place from which he led the ship through one of the most intense periods of combat in U.S. Navy history.

He also worried about the material condition of his ship and crew, stating “420 odd days since drydock entails heavy load on upkeep personnel over and above what is normally expected. Little or no paint, gradual weakening of hull structure due to pounding of lighters alongside in our exposed anchorage, irregular and uncertain upkeep periods all play their part ... Casualties to our radars are becoming more frequent.”

February brought the arrival of CVG-17 as *Hornet's* new embarked air group, one Doyle wrote was “full of pep. I’m simply delighted with them as they are almost half old-timers with combat experience.” In the same letter, he asked his wife if she had seen his photograph in a recent issue of *LIFE* magazine that featured a cover story on RADM Clark. “I am not as fat as I look in the picture.” Before heading out to sea again, this time as the flagship of Jocko’s *Task Group 58.1*, *Hornet* hosted a viewing of “The Fighting Lady,” a documentary shot primarily on board Clark’s old ship, *Yorktown*. Doyle spent the evening talking with famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle, telling his wife he was “a nice little man, very humble and complains about his health all the time.” He also wrote that John Roosevelt, son of the president, was on Jocko’s staff as a supply officer.

The new air group was put to the test almost immediately. Doyle underlined the date in his 17 February 1945, letter home, writing, “You can imagine how tremendously thrilled we are tonight. We always knew the Big Leagues could walk right up to Tokio (*sic*) Bay.” For the first time since the first carrier *Hornet* launched the Doolittle Raid in April 1942, carrier-based aircraft struck the Japanese Home Islands. Despite terrible weather that forced the cancellation of some strikes, *Task Force 58 (TF-58)* aircraft claimed the destruction of some 300 Japanese aircraft and hit enemy shipping and targets ashore. CVG-17’s performance was not up to Clark’s standards. In a postwar letter to a fellow officer, Doyle recalled “a terrific fight with Jocko, who accused my new air group of being yellow

LCDR Charles Kerlee, USNR



[cowardly] and wanted me to order the transfer of the group commander and most of the flight leaders. I told him that he would have to do it in writing, and we had a terrific brawl.” In a 6 March letter to his wife, he reflected on the command situation. “I am walking a tightrope every minute ... But it’s tough. Jocko tells me again and again — ‘If you are wrong, I’ll request your detachment.’ It’s on the line — I wouldn’t have it any other way. It develops my character, loyalty, and everything else.”

In March the fast carriers returned to the waters off the Japanese Home Islands, with Doyle writing on 21 March that he never remembered being so tired and that he had had his first bath in a week. *Hornet* endured six single-plane air attacks over the course of a few days, her gunners shooting down three of the attackers and assisting in the destruction of another.

On 18 March, a bomb narrowly missed hitting the starboard side of the ship and an enemy dive bomber was hit as it passed overhead, shedding parts onto the flight deck before it exploded just 100 yards off the port beam.

On 29 March, Doyle wrote his wife about a new Jeep the ship had acquired that he was looking forward to using the next time in port. Unfortunately, a VB-17 SB2C *Helldiver* returning from a strike hit the island structure during recovery and destroyed the skipper’s prized vehicle. On a more serious note was his relaying news of lost friends. Annapolis classmate CAPT Arnold J. “Buster” Isbell was killed on board *Franklin* (CV 13) and CDR Charles Crommelin, one of five brothers who graduated from the Naval Academy, lost his life in a mid-air collision with another aircraft over Okinawa while temporarily assigned to fly from *Hornet*.

Observing his young crew in action and thinking of those going ashore in the island invasions the fast carriers supported had an impact, which Doyle expressed in a letter to his father. “The older generation, yourself

SB2C-3 Helldivers assigned to VB-11 overfly Hornet before entering marshal for recovery following strikes on Japanese shipping in the South China Sea in Jan '45.

included, have every reason to be very proud of successfully passing down the country’s traditions to their sons and grandsons. Just think of that fight at Iwo ... [The] Marine Corps ordered to go in and take a place that was considered impregnable ... A very grim, but absolutely necessary business.”

On 1 April, U.S. forces went ashore on Okinawa, beginning a monthslong campaign marked by bitter fighting on land and the intensification of kamikaze attacks against U.S. ships. In hopes of helping clear the skies over the U.S. fleet for the suicide planes, on 6 April the Imperial Japanese Navy initiated *Operation Ten-Go*, sending the giant battleship IJNS *Yamato* and escorting ships toward Okinawa as decoys. With Japanese warships having been swept from the seas, reports of this target sent electricity through the ready rooms of *TF-58* carriers. Luckily, *Hornet's* CVG-17 was among the first to reach the enemy ships, attacking under overcast skies on 7 April. Intense anti-aircraft fire shot down one *Hornet*-based airplane and damaged nine others, but aircrews claimed four bomb hits on *Yamato* and three on the light cruiser IJNS *Yahagi*. In the U.S. Navy’s last great aerial torpedo attack of the war, VT-17 *Avengers* claimed to have put four fish into *Yamato's* port side.

The sinking of the battleship was symbolic for officers of Doyle’s generation, who spent the interwar years proving the offensive power of aircraft carriers in a battleship-oriented fleet. “It was a great achievement and poetic justice, for this veteran ship is about the best that they’ve had out here.” In short order, a crewmen added the silhouette of the Japanese battleship exploding to *Hornet's* scoreboard documenting the ship and air group damage inflicted on the enemy.

“Tell Pete [Doyle’s son] that the Air Group went out and got an aircraft factory for him to celebrate his birthday,” Doyle wrote to his wife on 15 May. “We are all well and reasonably happy although the ship is a trifle tired from being out 15 months without ever getting near civilization. Most of the boys, including me, would like to put their arms around their sweetie again.” The day would come sooner than expected and it would not be the divine wind that sent *Hornet* home, but Mother Nature.

On 4 June 1945, *Hornet* and the other ships of *TG-38.1* were in the middle of underway refueling when they received orders to cease that operation with the approach of a typhoon. Doyle went to bed that night



Waves slam into Hornet’s bow and over the flight deck during the Jun '45 typhoon.



Combat artist LCDR Dwight Shepler drew on his memory from being on board the ship to depict a kamikaze attack against Hornet off Kyushu on 18 Mar '45.

confident his ship was steaming away from danger, leaving instructions to alert him if there were any orders to change course. He recalled being awakened around 0130 by the officer of the deck, who stated, “We are going back into it, Captain.”

Not until three hours later did VADM McCain, Commander, *TF-38*, give permission to change course, but by that time it was too late. At 0642, *TG-38.1* received orders to lay to. Doyle “placed the seas about two points on the starboard bow and kept the position by alternately backing my engines.” Towering waves measuring 60 feet from crest to trough pummeled the carrier, collapsing the forward section of the flight deck, the steel girders supporting it bent like “spaghetti” in the recollection of a crewman. Winds measuring as high as 120 knots blew away the antenna mast. Recalled one of Doyle’s Marine orderlies, “Never have I seen waves so high ... Our great big ship was no more than a peanut shell in that big storm.”



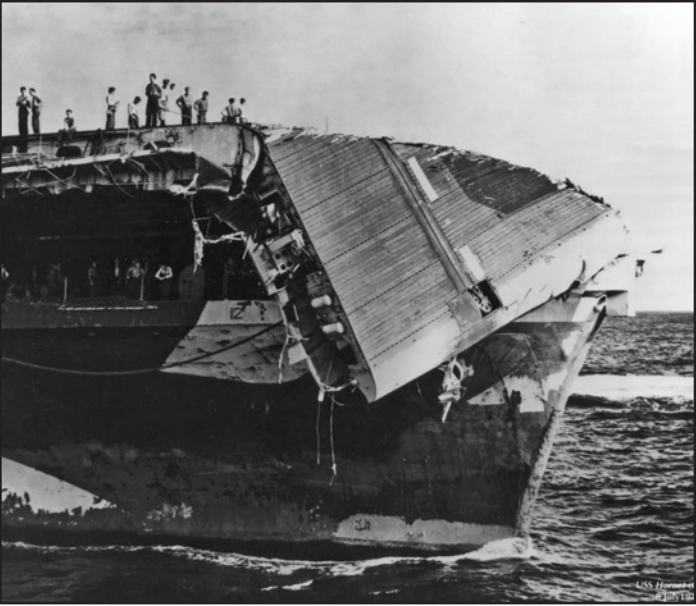
On 6 June, after the storm had passed, an F4U *Corsair* assigned to USS *Shangri-La* (CV 38) that was on board *Hornet* spun in on launch as the carrier resumed flight operations. Fortunately, the pilot escaped, but it was evident that the collapsed corners of the flight deck disturbed air currents and made launches dangerous. Clark initially ordered the sections cut off, but that was beyond the ability of the crew’s capabilities. Eventually, the decision was made to steam in reverse and launch airplanes over the stern, and in this manner CVG-17 provided air support over Okinawa, attacked targets in Kanoya and covered a surface bombardment of Minami Daito Jima.

The carrier then set course for Leyte and on 15 June, Clark lowered his flag and Doyle announced to the crew that *Hornet* was heading home for repairs. “At 0730, midst shouting and whistling of a might (*sic*) happy crew, we steamed under [the] Golden Gate Bridge,” read the ship’s war diary entry for 8 July, “home again after 16 months and 9 days in the broad Pacific.” The carrier moored at NAS Alameda and on 17 July, Doyle departed on leave, returning to the ship while she was in drydock. At 0939 on 1 August, he read his orders as CAPT Charles R. Brown relieved him as commanding officer.

Doyle did not record his feelings about turning over command of *Hornet*, but a letter written some months before captured them. “Everyone on board is disappointed not to get home after such a long time, but their reactions are simply magnificent, and I swell with pride,” he wrote on 7 May 1945. “I wish you could see this ship, rusty, weather-beaten, obsolete equipment in comparison with some of the new ones, but with a spirit that makes even the most cynical specialist stop at our scoreboard in the hangar deck to pay his respects.”



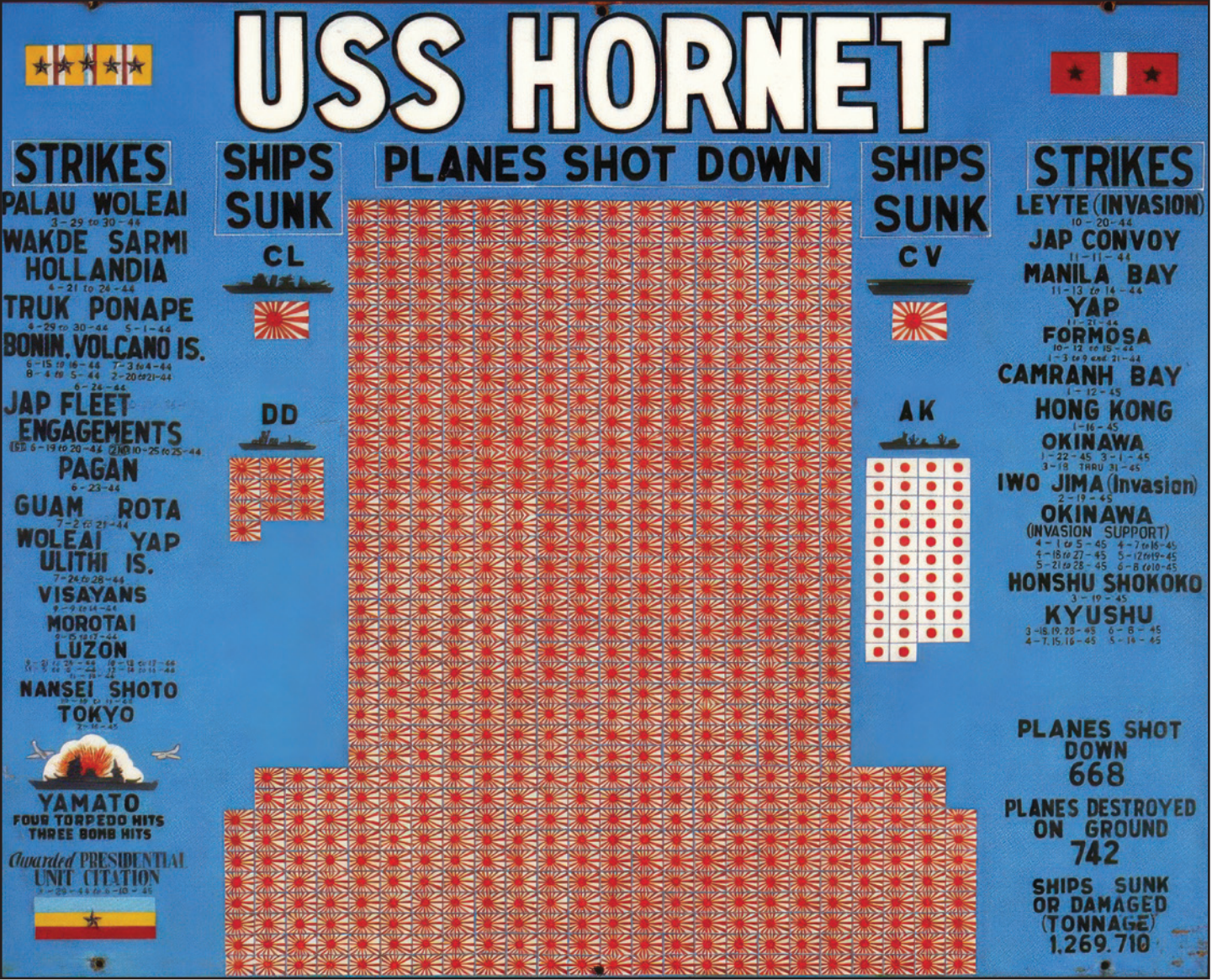
National Naval Aviation Museum



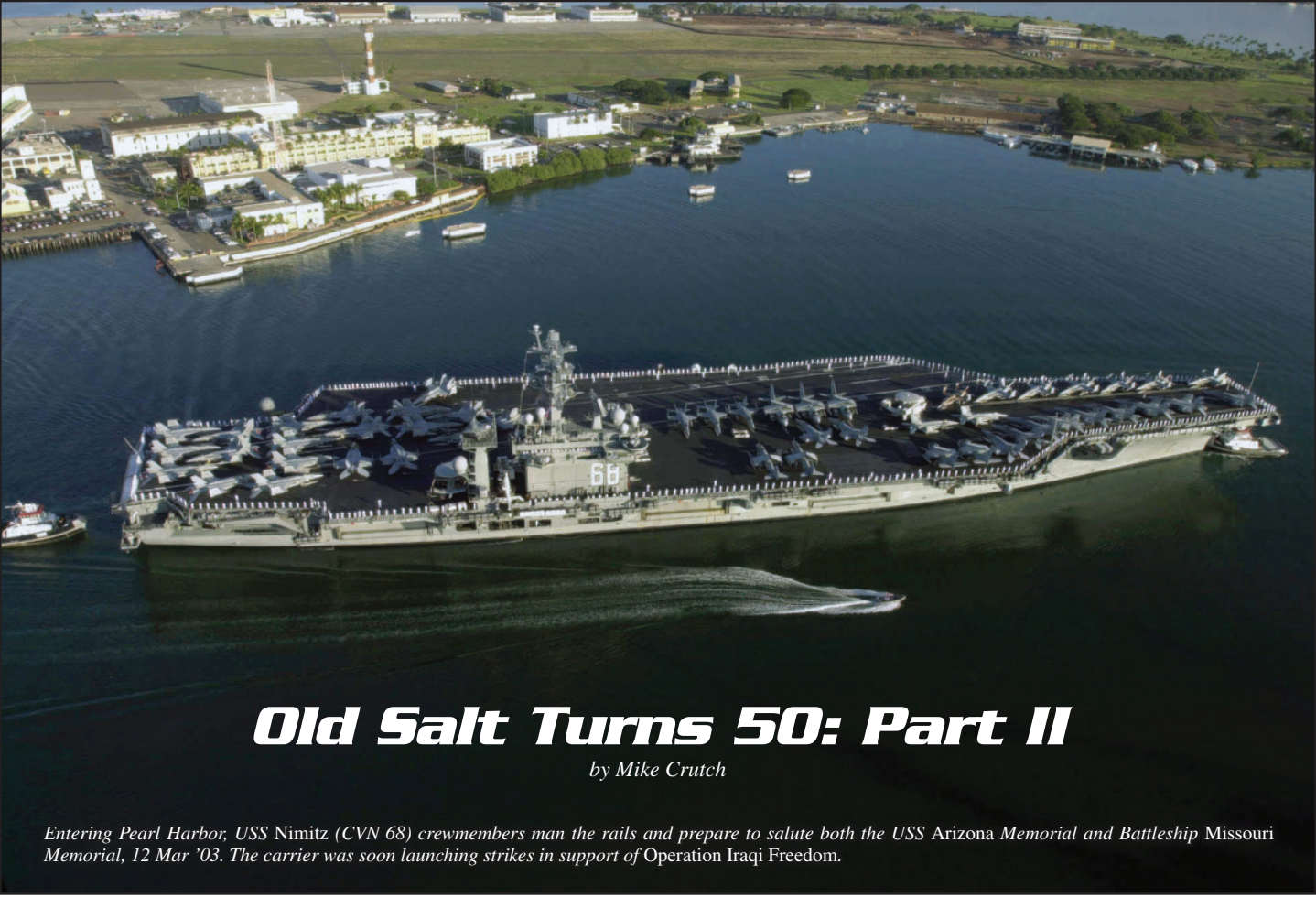
View of Hornet’s collapsed flight deck in the aftermath of the typhoon.

Below: Hornet’s hangar deck scoreboard, now on display at the National Naval Aviation Museum, highlights the combat record of the carrier and her embarked air groups.

National Naval Aviation Museum



PH3 Kristi Earl, USN



Entering Pearl Harbor, USS Nimitz (CVN 68) crewmembers man the rails and prepare to salute both the USS Arizona Memorial and Battleship Missouri Memorial, 12 Mar '03. The carrier was soon launching strikes in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The arrival of USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) at her new home port of NavSta Bremerton, Wash., on 2 July 1987, began a new chapter for the carrier, the Pacific Northwest gripped with “*Nimitz fever*” as one newspaper called it. The transfer also brought a new air wing, CVW-9, *Team Shogun* (tactical callsign) having just completed a cruise on board USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63).

Not until 8 February 1988, following an extended maintenance period, did *Nimitz* get underway from her new home port, sailing south to reach NAS North Island to embark CVW-9 personnel. The new ship and air wing team put to sea together for the first time on 15 February, heading out into waters off Southern California for carrier qualification (CQ) and refresher drills to begin the cruise work-up cycle. In July, they took part in the *Rim of the Pacific* (RIMPAC) '88 exercise in and around Hawaii. This included some of the carrier’s aircraft teaming with destroyers in a practice bombardment of the island of Kaho’olawe as if preparing for an amphibious assault, with pilots briefed in detail to avoid hitting archaeological sites there. Also participating in RIMPAC was USS *Missouri* (BB 63), the battleship on whose deck FADM Chester W. Nimitz participated in the formal surrender ceremony that ended World War II on 2 September 1945.

Ironically, *Nimitz* commenced her first full deployment as a Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) carrier on 2 September 1988, making a high-speed deceptive transit across the Northern Pacific. Having successfully evaded Soviet detection, she arrived in the Sea of Japan 11 days later to eventually begin overwatch duties as part of *Operation Olympic Presence*, deterring any possible North Korean desires to disrupt the 24th Olympic Games taking place in Seoul, South Korea. That mission complete, the *Nimitz Battle Group* eventually headed into the Indian Ocean, reaching the familiar waters of *Gonzo Station* on 1 November. The carrier spent the next 53 days supporting *Operation Earnest Will*, the U.S. mission to protect oil tankers transiting the Persian Gulf from attack by both sides of the ongoing Iran-Iraq War. The carrier came about in the final week of the year, threading her way back through the Western Pacific in the opening weeks of 1989 before returning to Bremerton on 2 March.

Hornets and Seahawks

One of the next at-sea periods for *Nimitz* brought a new look to the flight deck. A training cruise off the Aleutian Islands during June and July 1989 marked the carrier’s final time operating the A-7E *Corsair II* as the VA-146 *Blue Diamonds* logged flights in the *SLUF*. Their CVW-9 counterparts, the VA-147 *Argonauts*, had already begun transitioning to the F/A-18C *Hornet* at NAS Lemoore. In 1989–1990 *Team Shogun’s* VF-24 *Fighting Renegades* and VF-211 *Fighting Checkmates* became the first deployable Pacific Fleet squadrons to operate the F-14A+ model of the *Tomcat*, which featured the improved General Electric F110 engines, while the HS-2 *Golden Falcons* became the Navy’s first fleet *Seahawk* unit, flying both SH-60F and HH-60H variants after years in the venerable *Sea King*. These airframe changes required modifications to *Nimitz’s* engineering spaces during the carrier’s Extended Dry-docking Selected Restricted Availability (EDSRA) at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard between August 1989 and March 1990.



National Naval Aviation Museum



One of the first F/A-18C Hornet squadrons to operate from Nimitz was the VFA-147 Argonauts, this image capturing two squadron jets in formation in 1990.



An overhead view of Nimitz underway on 21 May '93, the embarked CVW-9 aircraft engaged in flying missions in support of Operation Southern Watch.

By the time *Team Shogun* went back aboard for training on 30 October 1990, Coalition forces were assembling in the Middle East in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait the previous August. The *Nimitz Battle Group* received orders to prepare for possible early deployment, undertaking a compressed training evolution as 1990 turned into 1991.

After the Storm

Operation Desert Storm, the multinational offensive to liberate Kuwait, was in its closing days as *Nimitz* departed Bremerton on 25 February 1991, and headed west from San Diego after embarking CVW-9. Fleet commanders wanted to rotate war-weary battle groups out of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR). *Nimitz* launched her first *Desert Storm* sorties — the codename was still in use despite the ceasefire — on 16 April from the Arabian Sea. For the first time in her career, the ship then passed through the Strait of Hormuz overnight on 17–18 April and entered the Persian Gulf to relieve USS *Ranger* (CV 61). Standing CENTCOM orders decreed that *Nimitz* maintain a strike package on six-hour alert on the flight deck to counter any surprise Iraqi aggression, while air wing assets performed deterrence patrols into Kuwaiti and southern Iraqi airspace. This routine continued until turnover with USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) on 13 July.

Nimitz pulled into Bremerton on 24 August and soon began a seven-month maintenance period that included the refit of support equipment for the Pratt & Whitney TF30 jet engine as both CVW-9 *Tomcat* squadrons reverted to F-14A models as all F-14Bs (as the F-14A+ had been redesignated on 1 May 1991) were concentrated with NAS Oceana-based units.

Nimitz departed Bremerton on 2 February 1993, heading once again to the CENTCOM AOR. It was the first cruise to include the upgraded S-3B *Viking*, which equipped the embarked VS-33 *Screwbirds*. They joined their fellow CVW-9 squadrons flying *Operation Southern Watch* sorties from the Persian Gulf on 23 March, policing a United Nations-mandated no-fly zone over southern Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein and his Sunni Muslim-based forces from launching aerial attacks against Shia Muslims in the region. During the cruise, the VA-165 *Boomers* conducted the Navy’s final missions with the KA-6D tanker variant of the *Intruder*.

When the carrier emerged from an extended maintenance period in dry dock in early 1995, her crew embarked on a new work-up format that included Tailored Ship’s Training Availability (TSTA), a Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX) and two Fleet Exercise (FLEETEX) phases before the battle group underwent its first-ever Joint Task Force Exercise (JTFEX). Joining CVW-9 for the first time in these work ups was a detachment (det) of the VQ-5 *Sea Shadows*, its two ES-3A *Shadows* performing organic electronic intelligence collection as the long-awaited replacement for the EA-3B *Skywarrior* on board ship.

Other CVW-9 changes included the HS-8 *Eightballers* replacing HS-2 in both anti-submarine and combat search and rescue duties, while a carrier onboard delivery (COD) det formed under the air wing for the first time in *Nimitz*’s history, the VRC-30 *Providers*, Det 4 supplying two C-2A *Greyhounds*.

Nimitz deployed from Bremerton on 27 November, reaching the Persian Gulf on 19 January 1996, to commence support of *Southern Watch*. In March, the carrier headed to the South China Sea, joining the forward-deployed USS *Independence* (CV 62) at the modified location soon unofficially nicknamed *Kung Pao Station*. There the carriers operated as a deterrent in the wake of the People’s Republic of China’s large-scale exercises near Taiwan. *Nimitz* resumed her patrol southeastward after three days but would return to the South China Sea for two weeks and conduct flight operations from the waters of what had once been *Yankee Station*. It marked the first time a U.S. carrier had sailed in the Gulf of Tonkin since the fall of Saigon in 1975. *Nimitz* reached Bremerton on 20 May, the deployment being the final cruise for VA-165 and its A-6E *Intruders*. Also conducting their last ride were the *Tomcats* of VF-24, the last of 10 front-line deployable F-14 squadrons disestablished following the end of the Cold War and the tightening of military budgets of the 1990s.

Around the World

Nimitz’s next deployment brought an increased aircraft complement for the sole remaining F-14 squadron, the VF-211 *Fighting Checkmates*, and the addition of a third F/A-18C squadron, the VMFA-314 *Black Knights*. It marked a farewell to Bremerton when she departed on 1 September 1997, as the carrier began her first-ever circumnavigation of the globe, her ultimate destination a mid-life Refueling and Complex Overhaul (RCOH) in her Newport News birthplace.

On 19 September, the day after the carrier entered the waters of the *Seventh Fleet* AOR, two Tupolev Tu-142 *Bear-F* maritime patrol bombers flew close to the carrier, the first time in five years that the Russians had carried out such an act, which coincided with a time of renewed Russian submarine activity shadowing U.S. fleet activities off the West Coast. The carrier’s passage to the Middle East was hastened by a 29 September attack by Iranian aircraft on camps in southern Iraq, which took advantage of a gap in U.S. carrier presence in the area. The Iranian aircraft and the responding Iraqi jets violated the *Southern Watch* no-fly zone. *Nimitz* entered the Persian Gulf on 13 October and began a four-month stay in those waters. Regional tensions increased as Saddam Hussein continued to frustrate United Nations weapons inspectors and threatened to shoot down U.S. Air Force U-2 reconnaissance aircraft observing key facilities. As a result, at various times USS *George Washington* (CVN 73), *Independence* and the Royal Navy “*Harrier*



Nimitz transits the Suez Canal for the first time in her history en route to the Mediterranean Sea following operations in the Persian Gulf, 14 Feb '98.

carrier” HMS *Invincible* (R05) joined *Nimitz*. On the occasion they operated together, the carriers and their escorts formed the largest naval force in the region since *Desert Storm*. *Old Salt’s* (tactical callsign) arsenal reflected the changes afoot since that conflict seven years earlier, a news report noting that *Nimitz*’s magazines included five times as many precision weapons as carriers carried during the Gulf War, including the new AGM-154 Joint Standoff Weapon.

Departing the Persian Gulf, CVN 68 made her first-ever transit of the Suez Canal on 14 February 1998, returning to Mediterranean waters after nearly an 11-year absence. Most of CVW-9’s fixed-wing assets, including *Tomcats* for the final time in the ship’s career, departed the vessel on 25 February as *Nimitz* closed the Virginia coast. She docked in Norfolk on 1 March and commenced RCOH at Newport News

Shipbuilding in May. This entailed three years of work by both crew and shipyard staff, refueling the ship’s twin reactors and upgrading many of her systems. The carrier conducted sea trials during 25–27 June 2001, the following month bringing additional underway systems tests, including Flight-Deck Certification (FDC). When she put to sea on 21 September for a trip around Cape Horn to a new home port at NAS North Island, *Nimitz* entered a world transformed by terrorist attacks that would guide the next era of her service.

Barbwire Arriving

Nimitz’s return to the Pacific brought assignment of CVW-11, which was destined to operate from her flight deck for over 15 years, a rarity in the Navy of the 21st century. *Team Barbwire* (tactical callsign) included the brand-new F/A-18E *Super Hornets* of the VFA-14 *Tophatters* and the F/A-18Fs of the VFA-41 *Black Aces*, the first former fleet *Tomcat* units to transition to the *Rhino*. The ship/air wing team conducted pre-cruise training in the second half of September as the likelihood increased that the Global War on Terror would expand to include Iraq. During that training evolution, *Nimitz* became the first PACFLT carrier to perform tests of her Cooperative Engagement Capability, where various sensors aboard the carrier, her escorts and in the air wing were networked to provide a comprehensive threat and targeting picture. Such testing lasted throughout work ups, which continued into early 2003, the battle group conducting COMPTUEX and JTFEX phases back-to-back to be ready for deployment to the Middle East as soon as possible.

Nimitz stood out into San Diego Bay on 3 March, her crew aware of media speculation about the looming conflict with Iraq. *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (OIF) commenced in the early hours of 20 March, while *Nimitz* and her escorts were still making for the Persian Gulf. She eventually navigated through the Strait of Hormuz to relieve *Lincoln* as the *Task Force 50* flagship, with CVW-11 launching its first OIF sorties on 11 April. It would be a long, hot spring and summer, the carrier leaving on just two occasions to conduct *Operation Enduring Freedom* (OEF) missions over Afghanistan. When *Nimitz* departed the Persian Gulf on 3 September, her air wing had conducted 2,793 OIF sorties during her time there.



A flag flying on board USS Princeton (CG 59) frames Nimitz during Tailored Ship’s Training Availability off California on 29 Sep '02.

The effects of the opening phase of OIF on the Navy’s carrier force, combined with Japan-based *Kitty Hawk* undergoing post-combat cruise maintenance, required *Nimitz* to perform several *Seventh Fleet* duties before heading for home. She finally docked at North Island on 5 November to conclude 247 days deployed.

More with Less

On 1 October 2004, organizational changes aligned with the new Fleet Response Plan (FRP) saw *Nimitz* become the flagship of *Carrier Strike Group Eleven* (CSG-11). When she deployed on 7 May 2005, the ship carried a large film crew that followed members of the crew and documented the challenges they faced on an extended deployment separated from those at home. The result was the 10-part PBS documentary “Carrier” that premiered in 2008. Though the ready rooms of CVW-11 were part of the narrative, the focus was the life of the enlisted personnel on board the ship. “We really believe in our people, and we don’t feel they have had their moment yet,” stated CVN 68 Commanding Officer CAPT Ted Branch.

After completing a period of *Seventh Fleet* tasking, the carrier passed into the Indian Ocean during the first week of July and entered the Persian Gulf on the 14th of that month, launching the first OIF missions of the cruise that same day. Those sorties to support U.S. and allied troops on the ground in Iraq continued until the ship came about on 22 September, next heading for exercises with Indian naval forces as *Nimitz* crossed the Indian Ocean. The carrier reached North Island on 8 November, but the requirements of the FRP saw her strike group remain on “surge” status to emergency deploy into early 2006. Standdown to begin maintenance phase occurred on 1 March. Elements of CVW-11 next returned to the carrier on 30 September as she led San Diego’s Fleet Week celebrations, beginning pre-cruise training immediately afterward.

Deployment day arrived once again for *Nimitz* on 2 April 2007. She took just over a month to reach the *Fifth Fleet* AOR and began sorties in support of OEF on 11 May. These missions targeted not only enemy combatants in Afghanistan, but also terrorist groups in the Horn of Africa. *Nimitz* moved into the Persian Gulf on 22 May, her strike group operating alongside that led by USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN 74) as well as the expeditionary strike group led by USS *Bon Homme Richard* (LHD 6). Together, they conducted missions over Iraq as part of the ongoing OIF, also demonstrating American naval might to Iran as that nation upped its

PH3 Shannon Renfore, USN



Nimitz underway in the Pacific off Hawaii in 2005, a deployment during which film crews documented the crew and operations for the documentary “Carrier.”

nuclear weapons ambitions. This included time in Carrier Operating Area 4, which was devoid of oil rigs, had reduced merchant ship traffic and whose easternmost edge was only 40 miles from the city of Bushehr, Iran.

Nimitz departed the Persian Gulf on 27 June, heading east to make the first-ever visit by a nuclear-powered carrier to the Indian port of Chennai during the first week of July. The ship returned to the Gulf on 12 July for an additional nine days of OIF sorties before making her way to the waters off Guam to lead one of three carrier strike groups taking part in *Exercise Valiant Shield* during 7–14 August. “It’s a very challenging thing when you have 20 ships, 300 airplanes and 20,000 troops all working together like this,” commented LCDR Gary Lazzard of the complexities of the exercise, which provided a bonus for pilots at the end with a sinking exercise that sent the former USS *Jouett* (CG 29) to the bottom. CVN 68 and her escorts then resumed their patrol, heading westward and returning to the waters of the Indian Ocean to take part in the Indian-led *Exercise Malabar ’07* during the first week of September. With that commitment complete, the carrier headed for home and berthed at North Island on 30 September.

PH3 Jeremiah Sholtis, USN



Commanding Officer CAPT Ted “Twig” Branch welcomes Indian Navy Chief of Staff RADM Anup Singh aboard Nimitz during Exercise Malabar ’05 on 26 Sep ’05.



Water reflects crewmembers as they perform a flight deck scrub on board Nimitz in the U.S. Sixth Fleet area of responsibility on 28 Oct ’13.

The old joke of CVW-11’s *NH* tailcode standing for “never home” was uttered again by its crewmembers as the flexibility and unpredictability of the FRP doctrine saw the *Nimitz Strike Group* maintain its readiness with two underway periods held before year’s end. Into 2008, and with Japan-based *Kitty Hawk* undergoing maintenance, CVN 68 surged on 24 January for a WESTPAC cruise. The deployment, during which the strike group remained in *Seventh Fleet* waters, proved uneventful but validated the FRP’s flexible nature.

New Decade, Similar Challenges

Nimitz commenced training with CVW-11 for their next deployment on 18 February 2009, putting to sea on the last day of July bound for northern reaches of the Arabian Sea to relieve USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN 76), beginning OEF missions from 18 September. While in those waters on 7 October, an EA-6B from the VAQ-135 *Black Ravens* performed the 100,000th launch from the carrier’s No. 1 catapult. *Nimitz* passed into the Persian Gulf in late October, undertaking OIF taskings until 4 December before returning to the Arabian Sea. OEF sorties resumed from there and lasted until 25 January 2010, when *Nimitz* turned over with USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69). The strike group then headed for home, pausing for various activities in *Seventh Fleet* waters en route. CVN 68/CVW-11 and the rest of CSG-11 remained on surge status until September, and during an underway Sustainment Exercise (SUSTEX) in August, VAQ-135 brought its EA-6Bs to sea for the final time before commencing the squadron’s EA-18G *Growler* transition.

The Navy soon announced that *Nimitz* would shift her home port from North Island to NavSta Everett following her Docking Planned Incremental Availability (DPIA) at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. Work began on 16 December, and the carrier emerged from the dry dock phase of her overhaul on 29 September 2011. CSG-11 staff shifted from North Island to Everett in the closing days of that year ahead of *Nimitz* completing her maintenance period and returning to the fleet on 9 March 2012.

During their carrier’s yard period, CVW-11 underwent several changes as squadrons shifted between air wings due to such factors as the continued rollout of the *Super Hornet*, the shuffle of expeditionary *Prowler* squadrons back to sea as the first EA-18G squadrons stood up in land-based roles, the demise of CVW-14 as a constituted fighting

unit, and the expansion of an air wing’s helicopter assets with the advent of helicopter maritime strike (HSM) and helicopter sea combat (HSC) squadrons, flying MH-60R and MH-60S variants of the *Seahawk* respectively. The HSM-75 *Wolf Pack* and HSC-6 *Indians* filled those rotary-wing slots with CVW-11 for *Barbwire*’s return to *Nimitz*. The ship departed Everett on 16 April and participated in 2012’s RIMPAC wargames and work-up at-sea periods during the year. The former included experimental operations in which some of the carrier’s embarked aircraft used a biofuel blend. Despite completion of all phases on 13 November, the discovery of a faulty coolant system component in the carrier’s nuclear propulsion system contributed to a delay in deployment, which began on 30 March 2013. On station in June, the carrier launched OEF missions over Afghanistan until passing through the Strait of Hormuz on 4 July for liberty in Dubai. *Nimitz* returned south for further OEF taskings, conducting two additional line periods off the Pakistani coast until 2 September, when she proceeded west and took up station in the Red Sea. The move was a contingency following a 21 August chemical attack on civilians in the Syrian capital of Damascus, although tensions soon eased after the Syrian government vowed to handover its entire stockpile of such weapons.

The carrier completed operations in the Red Sea on 20 October, having received orders to head north through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean Sea as an overt display of U.S. resolve towards Syria. She visited Naples, the carrier’s first port call in the city in over 26 years, as October turned into November before being released to come about. After making her first-ever southbound Suez Canal transit, on 8 November, *Nimitz* set course for home. When the majority of CVW-11’s fixed-wing squadrons left the flight deck on 10 December, it was the end not only of the carrier’s time operating the EA-6B, but also the final PACFLT *Prowler* deployment. Those members of VAQ-142 *Gray Wolves* not fortunate to make the fly-off walked down the gangways when *Nimitz* reached Everett on 16 December after 261 days deployed, beating the ship’s 1979–1980 cruise record by two days. One of VAQ-142’s last EA-6Bs would bag some traps aboard *Old Salt* on 16 July 2014, off California as the squadron helped carrier qualify an EA-6B pilot prior to posting to the Navy’s last seagoing *Prowler* squadron, the VAQ-134 *Garudas*, ahead of the type’s final cruise.



Making History Again

Nimitz earned herself another line in Naval Aviation history books on 3 November 2014, when an F-35C *Lightning II* flown by lead Navy test pilot CDR Tony Wilson made the first shipborne arrested landing of the new Joint Strike Fighter. Two examples of the F-35C, operated by the VX-23 *Salty Dogs*, embarked for the type’s initial at-sea development trials lasting through 14 November. The carrier returned to Everett four days later to begin preparations for an unprecedented 20-month Extended Planned Incremental Availability, the longest yet planned for the carrier without the need for dry-docking. The ship moved to the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard on 7 January 2015, receiving upgrades to 14 major systems before getting underway for sea trials on 5 October 2016. She steered south for North Island, collecting elements of CVW-11 for FDC and CQs. The air wing had undergone some minor changes, including VAQ-142 having transitioned to the EA-18G. A new *Barbwire* squadron, the VAW-121 *Bluetails*, replaced VAW-117 and brought with them the brand-new E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye*.

Predeployment training began in the final weeks of 2016, lasting until the end of April 2017. *Nimitz* set sail on 1 June and just over a month later, her strike group reached the Indian Ocean to participate in that year’s *Exercise Malabar* with Indian naval forces. The carrier and her escorts continued westward, passing into the Persian Gulf on 24 July and remaining there until 22 October as CVW-11 conducted missions in support of *Operation Inherent Resolve* (OIR) against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant (ISIL) militia operating in both Iraq and Syria. After picking up some *Seventh Fleet* taskings en route home, the carrier eventually reached her home port on 10 December.

Once stood down from surge commitments, the carrier entered Puget Sound Naval Shipyard once again on 1 March 2018, this time for a 14-month DPIA maintenance period. Following sea trials, *Nimitz* returned to Bremerton on 28 May 2019, in readiness to join with CVW-17, the fourth air wing assigned to her. *Team Quicksand’s* (tactical callsign) complement included the VMFA-323 *Death Rattlers*, the last deployable squadron to operate the F/A-18C legacy *Hornet* at sea. September saw the commencement of predeployment training, which lasted into February 2020 as a new, non-military threat arose.

Fighting a Pandemic

With the eyes of the world watching the spread of COVID-19, U.S. Navy leadership faced unprecedented decisions. The effects of virus outbreaks amongst deployed ships’ crews were already impacting USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) and USS *Ohio* (SSGN 726). With

Thiep Van Nguyen II



Alexander H. Groves



An F-35C Lightning II pictured catching a wire on board Nimitz during the Joint Strike Fighter’s first carrier suitability flights in 2014.

the *Nimitz Strike Group* ready to deploy, every ship and squadron in CSG-11 received orders to enter isolation to minimize infection rates. In the case of *Nimitz*, her crew spent one month quarantined while still pierside before departing on 27 April, collecting “bubbled” CVW-17 personnel from North Island in the opening days of May and putting to sea for COMPTUEX.

With crewmembers tested regularly for infection and wearing face coverings, *Nimitz* returned briefly to North Island to take on stores before deploying from there on 8 June. The experience of “COMPTUEX and go” was not pleasant for Sailors and their families, especially set against what was by then a global pandemic. The carrier conducted joint operations with *Theodore Roosevelt* and her embarked CVW-11 (now back at sea following her enforced stay in Guam due to the virus) over 21–23 June before *Nimitz* docked in Guam’s Apra Harbor. COVID restrictions limited crews to either remaining on board or in designated quarantine areas ashore, which would become the norm for U.S. Navy ships in the months ahead. CVN 68/CVW-17 also worked with *Ronald Reagan* and CVW-5 in *Seventh Fleet’s* AOR before heading west.



MC3 Elliot Schaudt, USN

Nimitz and Princeton transit the Balabac Strait on 15 Jul ’20, her embarked CVW-17 including the VMFA-323 Death Rattlers making the final carrier deployment of the legacy Hornet.

The strike group entered the Persian Gulf on 18 September, conducting OIR sorties over Iraq as both Islamic State operatives and Iranian-backed rebels continued attacks on both Iraqi forces and U.S. troops still in-country. *Nimitz* departed the Gulf on 9 November, and one week later participated in *Exercise Malabar 2020*. At its conclusion, the ship and her escorts remained in the Indian Ocean, operating for much of the time in the Arabian Sea through the end of January 2021. During that period, CVW-17 executed missions for both *Operation Octave Quartz*, supporting U.S. ground forces as they deployed across eastern African countries to better engage the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab terrorist groups, as well as *Operation Freedom’s Sentinel*, the U.S. contribution to NATO’s *Operation Resolute Support* security mission in Afghanistan.

Nimitz eventually made her way home, reaching Bremerton on 7 March. If taken from the point the ship departed North Island post-COMPTUEX in June 2020, the “COVID cruise” lasted 272 days, breaking the carrier’s all-time deployment record (set in 2013) by 11 days. However, as *Nimitz* had left her home port in April 2020, she had been absent from Bremerton for 314 days, a record for a nuclear-powered carrier deployment and second only in the post-World War II era to USS *Midway* (CVA 41) and her 329-day Vietnam War cruise in 1965. The physical and mental demands placed upon her crew, and indeed that of the entire strike group, since the weeks running up to the cruise deserved the many messages of praise received upon their return.

That challenging 2020–’21 cruise was also the final carrier deployment for the legacy *Hornet*, with VMFA-323 having the honor with their 10 F/A-18Cs. The squadron had made the very first Marine *Hornet* carrier cruise alongside its VMFA-314 *Black Knights* counterparts in USS *Coral Sea* (CV 43) in 1985 as part of CVW-13. The squadron commander’s jet, *Snake 401* (Bureau Number 165220) flown by Capt Connor Landry, had made the final trap of a legacy *Hornet* on 19 February while *Nimitz* was off Hawaii. The same jet performed the final catapult launch six days later as *Snake 1* himself, LtCol William Mitchell, roared off the flight deck to lead his squadron home to MCAS Miramar.

Toward Sunset

After her return, *Nimitz* underwent post-cruise maintenance at her home port that lasted until November 2021. Entering 2022, the carrier and CVW-17 conducted training off Southern California. To fill the gap left by VMFA-323’s departure, the VFA-146 *Blue Diamonds* joined CVW-17 with their F/A-18Es, giving *Nimitz* an all-*Super Hornet* strike fighter squadron line-up for the first time.

Pre-cruise training was interrupted for the second half of September after aviation fuel contaminated the carrier’s drinking water, with *Nimitz* alongside North Island connected to the local water supply until the matter was resolved. CVN 68/CVW-17 finally got underway for their three-week COMPTUEX on 2 October.

The carrier stood out into Bremerton’s Sinclair Inlet on 28 November to begin her 2022–’23 deployment, reaching North Island two days later to collect the majority of CVW-17 crewmembers. CQ off California was completed on 7 December and the strike group then swung westward, reaching the *Seventh Fleet* AOR nine days later. She remained in WESTPAC while the forward-deployed *Reagan* underwent winter maintenance in Yokosuka, Japan.

A landmark in *Nimitz’s* career occurred on 22 April 2023, when the VFA-22 *Fighting Redcocks* CAG bird (F/A-18F, BuNo 166961), flown by CVN 68 Commanding Officer CAPT Craig Sicola with VFA-22 skipper CDR Luke Edwards in the backseat, recorded the ship’s 350,000th trap while underway in the South China Sea. *Nimitz* reached as far west as Thailand before returning home on 2 July.

MC3 Hannah Kantner, USN



Nimitz Commanding Officer CAPT Craig Sicola and CDR Luke Edwards, commanding officer of VFA-22, record Old Salt’s 350,000th arrested landing in a Fighting Redcocks F/A-18F Super Hornet on 22 Apr ’23.

CVN 68/CVW-17 undertook sustainment training together off California on 19–27 August, while November also saw a short at-sea period. *Nimitz* undertook a maintenance availability in early 2024 to prepare her for one last major deployment in her 50th anniversary year. September/October 2024 saw the carrier and her air wing perform TSTA drills off Southern California, with their COMPTUEX held across January into February 2025. Ahead of *Nimitz* departing Bremerton on 21 March to begin her final cruise, the Navy announced that the ship would officially change her home port to Norfolk effective 12 April 2026, prior to “inactivation.”

She performed the customary stopping off at North Island to take on the bulk of air wing personnel over 24–26 March, and after entering *Seventh Fleet* waters on 7 April, she pulled into Guam for a three-day stop beginning on 18 April. Next the strike group made for the South China Sea at a time when the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was exercising its aircraft carrier, CNS *Shandong* (17), in the region. *Nimitz* put into Malaysia’s Port Klang across 21-25 May, her last scheduled port visit before a planned, historic call to the Vietnamese city of Da Nang in late June, but it was not to be.

Tensions in the Middle East rose following the Israeli strikes on Iran beginning on 13 June, with *Nimitz* ordered to the region to augment (and eventually relieve) sister ship USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70). *Old Salt* entered the Indian Ocean five days later and took up station in the northern reaches of the Arabian Sea on 24 June.

In July 2025, the Navy announced a near two-year delay to the commissioning of USS *John F. Kennedy* (CVN 79), now scheduled for March 2027. With *Nimitz* in her final year of operations, the Navy will temporarily reduce to ten active carriers in 2028. Following her 2026 inactivation, the venerable *Nimitz* will eventually decommission around 2030 following the defueling of her twin nuclear reactors.

The illustrious record of her service, thanks to the men and women who have served aboard her since 1975, truly deserves a place in U.S. Naval Aviation history. CAPT John Ring captured the essence of what those tens of thousands of crewmembers did each time the carrier put

MC2 Hannah Kantner, USN



In the twilight of her lengthy service, *Nimitz* operates forward as the Navy intended when she joined the fleet in 1975, her half century of service spanning the globe.

to sea. “Many times I am asked where *Nimitz* will go when she deploys next,” he wrote in 2016 while in command of the carrier,” and each time I reply with this answer: In an uncertain world, where crisis or calamity can ensue at a moment’s notice, *Nimitz* will deploy forward, to the farthest reaches of the globe if necessary, ready to respond as needed to protect our national interests abroad. Since the birth of our nation, the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans have served as the moat protecting our country from those who would like to do us harm. The USS *Nimitz* and all of our naval ships deployed at sea are our nation’s first line of defense against any would be adversary. We deploy forward, so the bad guys can’t get to the moat, much less cross it and get all the way home to you.”



MC2 Hannah Kantner, USN



Flames from the afterburner of an EA-18G Growler assigned to the VAQ-139 Cougars illuminates a flight-deck crewmember as it launches from *Nimitz* during operations in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility on 27 Jun '25



Through the Lens

by Dirk Plantinga

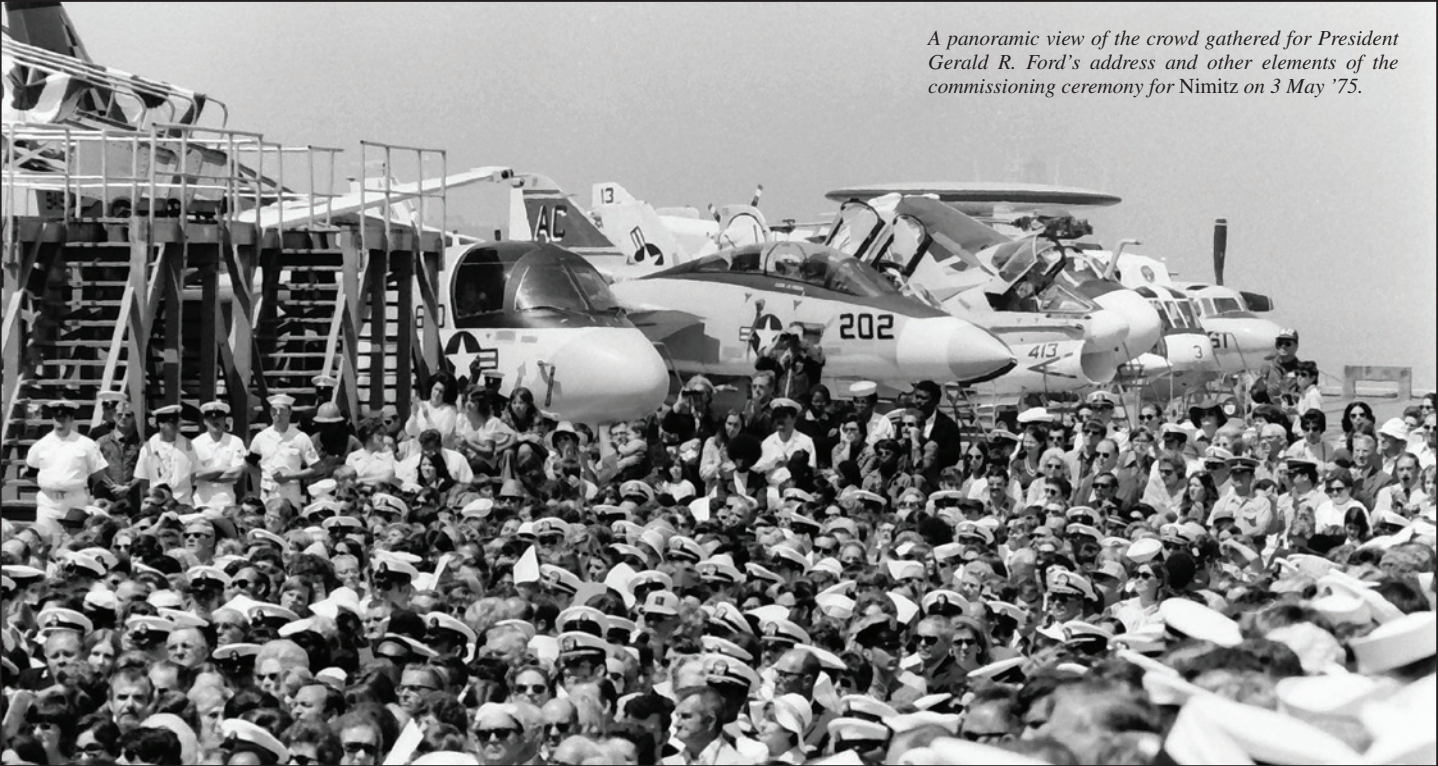
MC3 Hannah Kantner aims her camera to capture operations on the flight deck of USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) underway in the Pacific on 3 Jun '23.

As USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68), the longest-serving aircraft carrier in the current fleet, nears the end of her service, MC2 Hannah Kantner is one of the Navy photographers on board who is capturing what is scheduled to be the ship’s final deployment. In doing so, she echoes a legacy begun 50 years ago through the eyes of one of her predecessors, PH1 Harold J. Gerwien, USN(Ret), and a roll of film.

On 3 May 1975, Gerwien was in attendance, a Nikon in his hands and film in his pockets, to cover the commissioning ceremony for the Navy’s newest aircraft carrier and the second that would get underway under nuclear power. Such was the importance of the event that President Gerald R. Ford served as the principal speaker. For Gerwien, then a young photographer’s mate, it was an



PH1 Harold J. Gerwien, USN



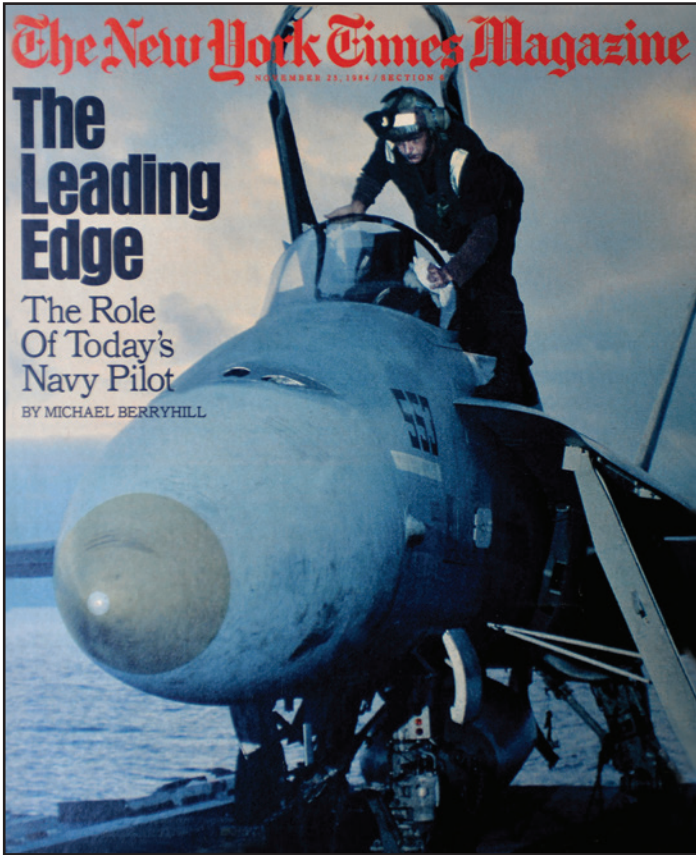
A panoramic view of the crowd gathered for President Gerald R. Ford’s address and other elements of the commissioning ceremony for *Nimitz* on 3 May '75.



Above: AD3 Elizabeth Yelton meditates after a religious service for Ash Wednesday in the chapel on board Nimitz on 22 Feb '23.

Below: Photographs taken by PH1 Harold J. Gerwien twice landed on the cover of the New York Times Magazine.

PH1 Harold J. Gerwien, USN



opportunity to capture history in the making, his subsequent time in uniform defined by his presence at dramatic moments putting his skills and training to use capturing memorable moments in Naval Aviation.

Half a century later, MC2 Kantner roams the weathered decks of that same carrier with a digital Nikon. Born decades after the ship first sailed — indeed, the commissioning covered by Gerwien took place before her parents were even born — Kantner, an Idaho native, has spent her Navy career attached to *Nimitz*, documenting her Sailors, flight operations and very soul. “I think being on the *Nimitz* in its sunset phase is an amazing opportunity,” she says. “This ship is 50 years old, and I constantly see Sailors from when she was first commissioned commenting on our photos and voicing their appreciation for being able to get an inside look into the lives of Sailors in 2025.” Kantner is part of a 20-person multimedia team on board the ship, responsible for shooting stills, producing videos, designing graphics and writing stories that reflect the daily life and mission of the Navy.

In 2023, Kantner was named Military Photographer of the Year for a portfolio of photographs taken on board *Nimitz*, the honor recognizing the clarity, depth and humanity of her images, many of which were published in near real time on the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS). This platform, celebrated in 2024 for its 20th anniversary, serves as a 24/7 digital hub, archiving and disseminating military photojournalism around the world. Kantner credits her visual sensitivity to her childhood in Idaho and the quiet artistic presence of her grandmother. “She taught me to look deeper into what you see, to see every moment as something special, something memorable. I think that influence on my life followed me into my pursuit of photography ... I try to add a candid view into the everyday routine we have here on the ship.” One of her favorite images was taken in the ship’s chapel during a quiet moment of devotion. Another, shared widely, shows her crouched behind the shooter on the flight deck as an F/A-18 *Super Hornet* roars down the catapult overhead. She is on a “constant quest for a fresh angle,” trying to see *Nimitz* anew every day, even as it nears the end.

Kantner is in the latest generation of highly trained Navy journalists. The sea service established the first rating for photographers in 1921 followed by the journalist rate in 1948. They combined to form the Mass Communications Specialist (MC) rate in 2009. Throughout this lengthy



A grief-stricken widow clutches a folded flag in honor of her husband's service in a portrait of the sacrifices made by military families.



history, the technology used to capture Navy operations has certainly evolved. Gerwien chronicled Navy life with a 35 mm camera, rolls of Tri-X film and countless hours in the darkroom. Whether on film of yesteryear or through the digital mediums of today, those behind the lens capture Navy personnel, platforms and operations in any clime and place, in war and peace. Gerwien’s service coincided with the Cold War era, taking him to a variety of places on land and at sea, even surfacing in a submarine through the ice near the North Pole. He was a staff photographer for Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, and three others who held that office. His notable work includes an iconic moment as an A-6 *Intruder* trapped aboard USS *America* (CV 66). Taken from the LSO platform, it remains a striking carrier aviation image years later. He also captured a haunting image of a grieving widow at a memorial service. She later used the sensitive and raw portrait to explain a grief words couldn’t capture. Gerwien was named Military Photographer of the Year in 1982 and twice his photographs made the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, earning him national acclaim.

Despite the distance in years and tools, Gerwien and Kantner share more than a ship. Both were accepted into the Military Visual Journalism Program at Syracuse University, a very selective yearlong certification designed to shape the storytelling skills of military communicators. Gerwien, a high school dropout in the 1970s, surprised himself with admission to the program on his third try. Kantner, already a rising star in her rate, says the program helped her understand how to better connect with the subjects she photographs. “Before Syracuse, I would just snap a pic,” she says. “Afterward, I understood the depth of how I was immortalizing someone in a split second. The pair represent the two ends of *Nimitz*’s arc, one documenting the ship beginning with analog tools and chemical baths and the other capturing its farewell with digital speed and real-time uploads. “Someday, when I and a lot of other current Sailors of her 2025 crew are older, and *Nimitz* is long gone, tucked away within naval history, these photos we take will live on,” Kantner says. “It feels good to give back to this old ship, and in a way, keep her memory alive long after she is gone.”





IN MARSHAL

Command Changes



NAVAL AIR FORCE ATLANTIC
RADM Richard Brophy
relieved
RADM Doug Verissimo
5 September 2025
USS Harry S. Truman



ELECTRONIC ATTACK WING, PACIFIC
CAPT Adam B. Green
relieved
CAPT David A. Ganci
1 August 2025
NAS Whidbey Island



VAQ-140
CDR Omar Sanusi
relieved
CDR Shane Salvatore
31 July 2025
NAS Whidbey Island



NAVAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMAND
RADM Greg Huffman
relieved
RADM Jeffrey Czerewko
18 June 2025
NAS Pensacola



NAVAL SCHOOL OF AVIATION SAFETY
CAPT Daniel Testa
relieved
CAPT Scott Janik
25 July 2025
NAS Pensacola



VAW-115
CDR Gerry Armstrong
relieved
CDR R.J. Fields
3 April 2025
NBVC Point Mugu



CHIEF OF NAVAL AIR TRAINING
RADM Max McCoy
relieved
RADM Richard Brophy
1 August 2025
USS Lexington Museum on the Bay



U.S. NAVAL RESEARCH LABORATORY
CAPT Randy Cruz
relieved
CAPT Jesse Black
13 June 2025
Washington D.C.



VAW-121
CDR Charles Sonntag
relieved
CDR Brad Weiland
7 August 2025
USS Nimitz



USS CARL VINSON
CAPT Joshua Wenker
relieved
CAPT Matthew Thomas
30 July 2025
USS Carl Vinson



ELECTRONIC ATTACK WEAPONS SCHOOL
CDR Robert Spence
relieved
CDR Christopher Anderson
5 June 2025
NAS Whidbey Island



VAW-126
CDR Ben Sanders
relieved
CDR Kallie Rose
26 June 2025
NavSta Norfolk



USS HARRY S. TRUMAN
CAPT Daniel Prochazka
relieved
CAPT Christopher Hill
3 July 2025
USS Harry S. Truman



HSC-6
CDR Ryan Yonkman
relieved
CDR Bob Dalton
11 June 2025
USS Nimitz



VFA-103
CDR William Dann
relieved
CDR Jonathan Gilliom
12 September 2025
NAS Oceana



CVW-3
CAPT James Huddleston
relieved
CAPT Marvin Scott
18 June 2025
NAS Oceana



VAQ-131
CDR Kyle Hanford
relieved
CDR James Jordan
3 July 2025
NAS Whidbey Island



VFA-125
CDR Christopher Case
relieved
CAPT Daniel Kuitu
18 June 2025
NAS Lemoore



VFA-131
CDR Andrew C. Stoner
relieved
CDR Sean M. Reed
17 July 2025
NAS Oceana



VFA-137
CDR Tony Kopp
relieved
CDR Hall Graham
3 July 2025
USS Nimitz



VFA-211
CDR Logan Peck
relieved
CDR Sean Stuart
22 May 2025
NAS Oceana

Mike Crutch



A VRC-40, Det 2 C-2A Greyhound off USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) visits RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland on 28 Aug '25.

ATTENTION SQUADRON COs and PAOs

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

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

The Hook Submissions should be sent to:

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Mail: Editor, The Hook
9696 Businesspark Ave.
San Diego, CA 92131-1643

In Marshal Deadlines:

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

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



A VFA-11 Red Rippers F/A-18F Super Hornet overhead USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) returning from a mission in the U.S. Sixth Fleet area of responsibility during the squadron's eventful last deployment.



USS Harry S. Truman
CAPT Daniel Prochazka



CVW-1
CAPT Leslie Mintz

VFA-11 RED RIPPERS

by LT Mike “Betty” Newby, USN

Following multiple extensions, the *Red Rippers* finally returned from our combat deployment to the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility (AOR) in early June. During this demanding and dynamic deployment, the squadron successfully employed over 300,000 pounds of air-to-surface ordnance and 14 air-to-air missiles in support of *Operations Poseidon Archer* and *Rough Rider*. The *Rippers* continued our proud tradition of success in combat and lived up to our “World-Famous” reputation while conducting numerous deliberate strikes into Houthi-controlled Yemen.

Following the tradition of “*Rippers* taking care of *Rippers*,” all squadron personnel enjoyed a monthlong post overseas movement (POM) leave period, taking time for some much-deserved rest and relaxation. As the *Red Rippers* transitioned back to shore operations at NAS Oceana, our focus has shifted to tackling the enormous strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) backlog built up during five months of sustained combat operations. Additionally, while crushing SFWT, the *Rippers* are focusing on our transition to Block III *Super Hornets*, becoming the first operational East Coast squadron to do so. Huge congratulations to LCDR Jesse “PEON” Arnold and LT Tyler “DNB” Armentrout on completion of their SFWT Level IV qualifications. DNB was also selected to attend the prestigious U.S. Naval Test Pilot School.

As we look to the future, we bid fair winds and following seas to some well-rounded aviators whose leadership and expertise were instrumental during their tenure with the squadron, including CDR David “BO” Manges, LCDRs Matthew “Magic Mutt” Buss, Christopher “Ponzi” Rochon, PEON Arnold and LT DNB Armentrout. As they move on to teach and train the next generation or transition to the next chapters of their lives, VFA-11 is proud of all they have achieved. The remaining *Rippers* look forward to future detachments (dets) to maintain our combat readiness. Here’s to Us!!!

VFA-143 CELEBRATES MILESTONES

by LT Michael “Fogell” Kach, USN

The *World-Famous Pukin’ Dogs* have returned home after a busy combat cruise in the Red Sea. After some well-deserved rest and leave to spend time with our families, we settled back into beach operations and have hit the ground running. We also have many milestones, both personal and professional, to celebrate.

The *Dogs* finished deployment strong, sprinting through multiple extensions all the way to the end. Answering the call in the fight for free and navigable waters, the squadron executed daily combat flights in support of *Operation Rough Rider* during a more than 50-day campaign against the Houthi terrorists in Yemen. All said and done, VFA-143 dropped over 315,000 pounds of ordnance and successfully engaged 11 one-way attack unmanned aerial vehicles and cruise missiles in a historic deployment.

On the home front, the *Dogs* had to say fair winds and following seas to several good friends over the past few months. LCDR Benjamin “CHIP” Waters left us for a new adventure with the VFA-106 *Gladiators*. Congratulations on a successful cruise and selection as the future skipper of the VFA-81 *Sunliners*! LTs Miranda “Spunkey” Kosmides and Zachary “Checkers” Mullins are both heading to the VFA-125 *Rough Raiders*, where they will bring some old school fourth-generation know-how to the F-35 Fleet Replacement Squadron (FRS). Additionally, LT Amadeush “FUNGUS” Skoczek, our temporary additional duty pilot, returned to the VFA-34 *Blue Blasters*, where he gets to be the “new guy” again! We also got to welcome some “Pukin’ Pups!” We know that the combat operations in the Red Sea have prepared our new parents well for the journey of parenthood.

Upon returning home, SFWT has been no stranger in the hangar. A big congratulations to LT John “Body Cam” Roakes on becoming the squadron’s newest Section Lead, as well as a shout out to LTs Julian “Lego Head” Torres and Dave “SHIF” Wiseman on their Combat Wingman qualifications. The rest of the team has been working hard, flying and studying their way through SFWT while also enjoying some down time with their families after eight months away.

The *Pukin’ Dogs* are looking toward the future. In September, we say goodbye to CVW-1 and all the good times we had on cruise. We are looking forward to joining CVW-3 and beginning our next adventure. We will also be saying goodbye to our combat-proven skipper, CDR Ty “LAR” Younts, as he passes the torch to CDR Jason “Pigans” Geddes. We wish him all the best in his future endeavors and thank him for his leadership and perseverance during the sometimes-long days of deployment. In this new administration, Pigans will be assisted by CDR Robert “Leawick” Patrick! The incoming XO is a *Pukin’ Dogs* alum, and we are ecstatic about having him join the team again. Welcome back!

We are excited at what the future holds! Sans Reproache!

VFA-81 SUNLINERS

by LT Caleb “Narrow Banana” Brown, USN

On an arduous eight-month deployment, the VFA-81 *Sunliners* maintained our standard as one of the elite strike fighter squadrons in the world. We are proud to boast an impressive scorecard from our recent combat cruise with 267,720 pounds of ordnance dropped and 18 air-to-air engagements. The squadron logged 1,664 sorties totaling 3,385.2 flight hours and 1,643 arrested landings during a historic deployment to the Red Sea and *Sixth Fleet* AOR.

On top of the remarkable combat statistics, the *Sunliners* continued to pursue excellence by completing SFWT events for all levels of the syllabus for both junior and senior pilots. In July, LCDR Andrew “Mr. Tumnus” Weatherholt and LT Evan “Milk Bone” Burgess took part in a high-level integrated event, working with the VFA-32 *Swordsmen*, VFA-34 *Blue Blasters* and several other squadrons and surface ships to better understand large-force integration and hone their skills for the next fight!

Now that the *Sunliners* have returned from deployment, we have moved into maintenance phase, supporting the fleet, providing maintenance actions and participating in several training dets. Another exciting part of returning to home port is taking jets on the road for flyovers supporting major sporting events such as the Ryder Cup, Major League Baseball games and, of course, the NAS Oceana Air Show! The squadron recently participated in a TOPGUN graduation 1-v-1 where aviators had the opportunity to test their skills, showing the Air Force how a fighter jet is supposed to fight.

None of the above could have been accomplished without the hard work put in by the *Sunliners’* operations, maintenance and administrative teams. It truly is an honor to work with the top one percent of our nation’s workforce, and we could not be prouder to be by their sides. We have enjoyed some much-deserved rest and will continue to build on our camaraderie at the upcoming VFA-81 command picnic and various squadron outings. Whether at home or abroad, the VFA-81 *Sunliners* always remain dedicated to the mission and are prepared to support, defend and ensure correct effects ON TARGET, ON TIME, FIRST TRY!



MC1 Jamica Thompson, USN



A jubilant LCDR Andrew Weatherholt embraces his daughter on the flight line at NAS Oceana on the return of the VFA-81 Sunliners from a deployment on board Truman, 30 May '25.

MC3 Logan Nystrand, USN



Surrounded by steam, a VFA-143 Pukin’ Dogs F/A-18E Super Hornet prepares to launch from Truman during a deployment marked by combat missions against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

VAQ-144 MAIN BATTERY
by LT Jonathan “Enigma” Ledet, USN

VAQ-144 has entered maintenance phase following a successful nine-month deployment to the Far North and both Mediterranean and Red Seas. During this incredibly successful deployment, where we supported our North American Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in *Sixth Fleet* and participated in *Operations Inherent Resolve*, *Spartan Shield*, *Poseidon Archer* and *Rough Rider* in *Fifth Fleet*, we were recognized with the Battle “E” and Safety “S” as well as the Blue “H,” Blue “M,” and Retention Excellence awards. Now home, we are preparing our aircrew, maintenance and administrative teams for whatever comes next. Toward those ends, the *Main Battery* is as of this writing supporting the VAQ-135 *Black Ravens* during *Red Flag* at Nellis AFB in Las Vegas.

We bid farewell to CWO3 Eliazar “Gunner” Bermea, who leaves Whidbey for warmer waters in Key West. We also bid farewell to CWO3 Chris Worsham, who will take over as Naval Aviation Maintenance Center for Excellence Maintenance/Material Control Officer at VAQ-129. On the horizon is the VAQ-144 Change of Command. Current XO, CDR Richard “LAMP SHADE” Delk, will relieve CDR Brant “Probie” Schmall. Skipper Schmall will be retiring following 25 years of military service after leading VAQ-144 on its maiden deployment and building the *Devils* (tactical callsign) into the fighting force we are today. As ever, we remain “ready to deal death in the dark.”

VAW-126 SEAHAWKS
by LT Stephen “DB” Reilly, USN

In May, the VAW-126 *Seahawks* returned from an eventful eight-month combat deployment in the Red Sea. The squadron and its five E-2D *Advanced Hawkeyes* were integral to searching for, identifying and tracking cruise missiles and drones launched from Yemen, ensuring the protection of *Carrier Strike Group Eight* (CSG-8), American allies and civilian shipping in the region.

In addition to providing strike group self-defense, the *Seahawks* led a forward-deployed det to an undisclosed location in support of direct tasking from the Secretary of Defense. In doing so, the squadron simultaneously supported operations in both *Sixth* and *Fifth Fleet* AORs. Upon CSG-8’s arrival in the Red Sea in December 2024, VAW-126 continued its support of *Inherent Resolve*, flying missions into Iraq. The squadron also provided support to *Operations Sentinel Shield*, *Prosperity Guardian* and *Poseidon Archer*. In March, we began *Operation Rough Rider*, during which the squadron executed near-continuous flight operations, providing carrier strike group defense as well as executing strike missions against Houthi rebels. After departing the Red Sea for the final time and entering the Mediterranean, CVW-1 *Team Tarbox* (tactical callsign) participated in the *Joint Exercise Neptune Strike*, showcasing the



The VAW-126 Seahawks assembled on the flight deck of Truman in front of a squadron E-2D Advanced Hawkeye that helped counter Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

MC3 Logan Nystrand, USN



The VAQ-144 Main Battery’s recent deployment on board Truman marked the squadron’s first since establishment, its combat actions in the Red Sea carrying on the fighting tradition of the squadron whose nickname it adopted, VA-196.

ability to operate in a multi-domain environment and integrate seamlessly with NATO partners in support of high-end maritime operations.

Returning to NavSta Norfolk, VAW-126 enjoyed a few weeks of POM leave, visiting family and friends, travelling and recharging. Since returning from deployment, we said goodbye to a few key members of the wardroom, sending off LTs Mark “ELSA” Garrity (U.S. Naval Test Pilot School), Lulu “Sour Patch” Acosta (U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School), Emma “Fiona” Lee (VAW-120 (FRS)) and LCDR(sel) David “Schweddy B” Allshouse (VAW-120). The squadron also held a Change of Command on 26 June 2025, during which CDR Benjamin “Silverback” Sanders relieved CDR Kallie “KFR” Rose. We welcomed CDR Ian “P-Way” Kimball as the new executive officer.

The *Seahawks* quickly returned to tactical training, traveling to Michigan for *Exercise Northern Strike 2025*. This is an annual, multicomponent and multinational event hosted at Camp Grayling, focusing on building readiness and enhancing interoperability among allied forces. The squadron also sent four pilots — LTs Tyler “Durden” Bozeman, Sean “DIMM” Gorman, Charlie “Pottles” Kiernan and Stephen “DB” Reilly — to the LSO School at NAS Oceana, enhancing their capabilities to recover fixed-wing aircraft safely and efficiently. Finally, the *Seahawks* celebrated LT Emily “BONIT” Beres’ acceptance to the TOPGUN Air Intercept Control course of instruction. She will spend two months this fall at NAS Fallon, learning the latest tactics, techniques and procedures to bring back to the fleet.

VAW-126 is now in maintenance phase and our maintenance department will work tirelessly to rejuvenate our aircraft and fully train incoming maintainers, ensuring the highest levels of safety, capability and combat readiness. Only the best in AMERICA’S SQUADRON!



MC3 Nate Jordan, USN

An F/A-18E Super Hornet assigned the VFA-113 Stingers launches from USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) during the CVW-2 fly-off following Team Broadsword’s recent deployment, 12 Aug ’25.

VFA-113: A CHRONICLE OF OPERATIONS
by LT Cole “House Call” Green, USN

Over the past several months, VFA-113 — the *Stingers* of Stingtown — have remained at the forefront of U.S. naval air power. As a key part of CVW-2 and *Carrier Strike Group One* (CSG-1), VFA-113 has executed a high-tempo deployment across multiple theaters.

Through the summer, the *Stingers* conducted continuous strike operations against Iranian-backed Houthi targets in Yemen, contributing to regional stability until establishment of the ceasefire. In parallel, VFA-113 supported allied naval forces, including the Royal Navy, in countering persistent Houthi unmanned aerial vehicle threats across the region. Afterward, the squadron stood the watch with CSG-1 and CVW-2, partnering with the U.S. Air Force to deter further Iranian aggression following *Operation Midnight Hammer* strikes against targets in Iran. This show of force demonstrated the squadron’s readiness and the strength of Joint operations in defending U.S. interests and assuring allies.

With combat operations concluded, the *Stingers* began the long journey home, transiting the Pacific through *Seventh Fleet’s* vast and strategically significant area of responsibility (AOR). Throughout, we upheld the highest standards of professionalism and readiness.

This chapter also marked several transitions within the squadron. We welcomed LTJG Rafal Bierzowicz aboard as our new intelligence officer and bid farewell to LTJG Matt “Trans-Am” Groom, who we expect will proudly carry the torch (and his drinking glove) in Charlottesville, Vir. We also welcomed LT Sam “Perm” Wales from Strike Fighter Weapons School Pacific and LCDR Travis “B.U.D.” Franklin from the Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center. Each brings a wealth of knowledge and tactical experience. At the same time, we said farewell to LCDR Alex “Click” Mickle and wish him all the best as he embarks on his next and greatest mission — fatherhood.

Over the last two years, the men and women of VFA-113 have spent over 450 days at sea, a testament to our resilience, dedication and unwavering commitment to the mission. As we return home, the *Stingers* look forward to a well-earned period of rest and recovery with our families and loved ones. But even in home port, our eyes remain forward as we continue to train, hone our craft and prepare to be the most lethal and combat-ready fighter squadron in the world.

DRAGONS IN THE FIGHT
by LT Sequoia Chun, USN

The *World-Famous Golden Dragons* of VFA-192 spent this quarter on board USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70). While in the *U.S. Fifth Fleet* AOR with CVW-2 *Team Broadsword* (tactical callsign), we conducted combat operations against Houthi rebels in Yemen and deterrence operations to counter Iran in support of U.S. strategic interests. *Team Broadsword* also assured our allies through Joint exercises with the Royal Navy’s *Prince of Wales Carrier Strike Group* on its world deployment.

After receiving news of a three-month extension and a call to combat operations in *Fifth Fleet*, the *Dragons* enjoyed a port call in Guam in March for some much-needed rest before undertaking a new mission set and demanding operational tempo. We used our transit time from *Seventh Fleet* to rapidly train to the tactics required in this new AOR. The *Dragons* took advantage of our time in *Fifth Fleet* as an opportunity to demonstrate our professionalism,



MC2 Marissa Johnson, USN



Sailors conduct a check of a VFA-192 Golden Dragons F/A-18E on the flight deck of Carl Vinson underway in the Pacific Ocean on 10 Aug ’25.

flexibility and tactical prowess. The squadron logged 931.7 combat hours with 482 combat traps. *Dragon* pilots defended CSG-1 through two air-to-air engagements and employed 38,211.8 pounds of ordnance in support of *Operation Rough Rider*. This marked the *Dragons’* first combat operations since 2013, demonstrating that now, as always, the squadron stands prepared to fight and win in combat.

None of our achievements this quarter would have been possible without our maintenance team’s devotion to providing full mission capable aircraft. While in *Fifth Fleet*, the maintenance department supported 1,087 flight hours over 572 sorties on board *Vinson* with a 95 percent sortie completion rate, along with an impressive 100 percent combat sortie completion rate. This quarterly performance included 5,809 maintenance actions and 14,313 hours of maintenance.

The *Dragons* recently welcomed four new pilots to the ready room — CDR Conor “Fat Monch” O’Neil as executive officer, LCDR Griffin “Pushpop” Stangel as a department head, LT Kevin “CHUBS” Grier as training officer, and new pilot LT Mark Dellefave. We have also said farewell to senior JO LT Fraser “Spuddle” Nadin, RN, Department Head LCDR John “Edgar” Goodrich and Skipper CDR Ian “Slick” Kemp, who passed command of the *Dragons* to CDR Benjamin “Mario” Rothenburg in March. SSHWFGD!

**FIRST TO FIGHT: VFA-97 WARHAWKS
DEFINE F-35C’S ROLE IN COMBAT**

by LT Caleb Champion, USN

Fresh off five-and-a-half months operating in the *Seventh Fleet* AOR, the VFA-97 *Warhawks* were extended an additional 107 days to support *Operation Rough Rider*, a U.S.-led operation launched to defend freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The mission came in response to increasing threats from Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, who had stepped up attacks on commercial vessels transiting the Bab-el-Mandeb (BAM) Strait.

VFA-97 quickly transitioned from a presence/deterrence mindset to combat operations. Throughout April 2025, the squadron executed a series of precision strikes targeting Houthi coastal missile infrastructure, air defense systems and command nodes. During these operations, the *Warhawks* achieved a series of historic firsts for the Navy's fifth-generation fleet:

- The first sustained combat deployment of the F-35C platform in naval history
- The first air-to-air kill by an F-35C
- The first Navy F-35C air-to-surface combat employment

USN



These milestones not only demonstrated the operational maturity of the Navy’s carrier-capable stealth fighter but also validated its ability to conduct high-tempo Joint strike operations in a complex maritime threat environment.

None of the combat operations could have been completed without the professionalism and expertise of the *Warhawk* maintenance department. While the pilots are important for executing the mission, the squadron is only as strong as its maintenance department allows it to be. Maintenance is the cornerstone of Naval Aviation, and the *Warhawk* maintainers were the heart of the squadron through its extension. Despite the lack of a robust shore-based supply infrastructure, the maintenance team accomplished a series of impressive feats. In three months, they replaced three motors, seven canopies, one main landing gear strut, five Power and Thermal Management System controllers, and executed six Tier II lifetime sustainment inspections. And to top it all off, they did so safely with no major incidents, a testament to the squadron receiving the Fiscal Year 2024 Chief of Naval Operations Safety “S.”

Following a ceasefire agreement between Houthi leadership and U.S. representatives, VFA-97 transitioned into a role that focused on maritime interdiction operations (MIO). Operating in support of U.S. Navy and Coalition maritime forces, the squadron received tasking to locate and track vessels suspected of smuggling weapons and illicit cargo into Yemen. The F-35C’s sensor fusion, electronic surveillance and Link 16 network integration allowed the *Warhawks* to provide real-time identification of suspicious contacts. Operating both independently and in support of surface task forces, VFA-97’s patrols expanded the reach and responsiveness of maritime domain awareness efforts throughout the region. While less kinetic than the April strike phase, the interdiction mission proved essential in the disruption of destabilizing logistics chains and asserting operational control over critical shipping lanes.

As regional dynamics shifted yet again, VFA-97 and *Carl Vinson* transitioned to the Gulf of Oman during the height of tensions between Israel and Iran, assuming a forward deterrence posture. While the *Warhawks* conducted no strikes during this time, the visible presence of low-observable, fifth-generation naval strike fighters in contested airspace sent a clear strategic message. The *Warhawks’* round-the-clock readiness served to stabilize the operating environment during a period of escalatory exchange between regional powers.

The squadron’s performance during this extension period represents more than just tactical execution. It marks the arrival of the F-35C as a fully combat-integrated platform. VFA-97’s operations during *Operation Rough Rider* and its aftermath affirmed the platform’s role not

just in peer conflict preparation, but in real-world combat, interdiction and deterrence missions. The *Warhawks* delivered on every front, and in doing so etched our legacy into the evolving history of 21st-century naval air power.

THROWING DOWN THE GAUNTLET IN CENTCOM

by LT Andrew Hild, USN

Despite what you might have read in our previous In Marshal submission, the *Gauntlets* did not celebrate our return to home port in April. Instead, in the middle of March, CVW-2 received the call to head west in support of *Operation Rough Rider*, supplementing CVW-1 off the Arabian Peninsula. To prepare, *Team Broadsword* made a quick pit stop in Guam to restock, rejuvenate and take enjoyment in destroying CAG Biz in some air wing vs. air wing fighter die. Sadly, the *Gauntlets* also took this opportunity to bail CDR Paul “Disco” Ritter, who valiantly led the squadron for the past year and a half. This opened the door for CDR Will “Bag-O” Bogdanowicz to take over and lead *Team Ironclaw* (tactical callsign) into U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) as we faced what would become a 100-day extension.

Carl Vinson and *Team Broadsword* spent the transit time shifting their training focus from *Seventh Fleet* to *Fifth Fleet*. Upon arrival, the *Gauntlets* quickly got to work as CVN 70 operated in the Gulf of Aden to pressure the Houthis from a new angle. VAQ-136 *Growlers* were the first CVW-2 jets downrange in support of strikes, providing electronic attack the first night in theater. Throughout the month of April, “America’s Favorite *Growler* Squadron” assisted the air wing with both defensive counter air (DCA) and simultaneous strikes when protecting the carrier from one-way attack drones became an all-night job as the flight schedule shifted to “Vampire Ops.” Only rarely were aircrew lucky enough to be scheduled on the last event of the day to fly the sunrise Case 1 stack. The *Gauntlets* also integrated with Air Force assets in the region for continuous strikes on Houthi-controlled Yemen, providing electronic attack in support of Joint missions.

Following the ceasefire in the beginning of May, CVN 70 remained in the area to provide stability and ensure freedom of navigation. *Team Ironclaw* bailed LTs Chandler “FADD” Chiappe and Ryan “Cap’n Bender” Dougherty as they moved on to the Fleet Replacement Squadron and duty as a *Growler* Tactics Instructor, respectively. The squadron was also stoked to welcome our new executive officer, CDR Per “Leaf” Rychecky, and LCDRs Todd “Baloo” Rapp and Jonathan “Buddy the Elf” Lewis, who all immediately proved to embody the *Gauntlet* spirit. In March, the squadron received the Safety “S” for our top-tier record

MC3 Nate Jordan, USN



Afterburner fumes create a blurry canvas for a photograph of an EA-18G Growler assigned to the VAQ-136 Gauntlets during flight operations on board Vinson in the South China Sea in early 2025.

in 2024. After eight months at sea, including 124 consecutive days with no port calls, *Ironclaw* finally steamed east. Upon returning home, the *Gauntlets* took some much-earned leave following back-to-back deployments, spending 20 of the past 26 months at sea.

VAW-113 BLACK EAGLES

by LT Reese Orsini, USN

“REDEYE, SINGLE GROUP STONE 123/45, ALTITUDE UNKNOWN, TRACK SOUTHEAST, MOSQUITO, BRAVE COMMIT.”

On the heels of a traditional six-month deployment to *Seventh Fleet*, more widely known as WESTPAC, VAW-113 quickly found itself pivoting from preparing to return to home port to shifting to a more dynamically moving and kinetic CENTCOM AOR. The *Black Eagles*, traditionally known as *Redeye* during combat operations, along with *Vinson* and CVW-2, rapidly adjusted to the CENTCOM environment, including a 107-day extension, reshaping a six-month deployment into one lasting nine months and folding in offensive and defensive combat operations. VAW-113 made the long transit to the *Fifth Fleet* AOR to participate in offensive strikes against Houthi rebels in support of *Operation Rough Rider* and provide sensor coverage defending against Houthi retaliatory actions.



Courtesy of VAW-113



While stationed in the Gulf of Aden, VAW-113 supported CVW-2 assets in overland offensive strikes and simultaneously defended CSG-1 against Houthi low-altitude cruise missiles and one-way attack unmanned aerial systems. In total, squadron aircrew, in coordination with CVW-2 DCA, eliminated numerous threats inbound to the strike group and served as the command and control (C2) platform during nearly 100 offensive strikes within Houthi-controlled territory inside Yemen.

One of the crowning achievements during CENTCOM operations was 16 hours of continuous sensor coverage in support of the southern transit of HMS *Prince of Wales* (R09) through the BAM Strait during *Operation Highmast*. With support from U.S. Air Force KC 46 *Pegasus* tankers, the *Black Eagles* E-2D *Advanced Hawkeye* — known as the “Chariot of the Gods” within the community — leveraged aerial refueling for extended missions and successfully supported safe passage of *Prince of Wales* through the strait, with their longest flight clocking in at 9.1 hours. Two weeks after *Operation Highmast*, *Redeye* again successfully supported a BAM Strait transit, and provided 14 hours of continuous sensor coverage for two *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers, USS *Truxtun* (DDG 103) and USS *The Sullivans* (DDG 68). After a ceasefire, CSG-1 pivoted to support a new line of effort to deny Houthi rebels and other terrorist actors within the region from acquiring armaments. The *Black Eagles*, participating in MIO, supported Coast Guard maritime security response teams in search and seizure execution across 412 flight hours.

In mid-June, VAW-113 received direct tasking from higher headquarters to immediately establish a detachment (det) ashore supporting the regional air defense matrix and to defend key U.S. installations and forces. Dubbed *Desert Eagle*, they provided critical airborne C2 for partner nations and U.S. forces throughout the 12-day conflict between Israel and Iran, while the *Black Eagles* afloat provided high-value unit defense of CSG-1. Following the aggregation of the *Desert Eagle* det in early July, *Vinson* turned east and transited across *Seventh Fleet* to return to home port.

As the *Black Eagle* team reintegrates to life back in the United States, keep an eye out for those Sailors donning the squadron crest where the eye of the eagle is red, signifying that the member served within the command during a combat deployment. In the end, *Black Eagle* aircrew and Sailors alike defined what success looks like within two complex and cosmically diverse AORs as *Team Broadsword* showcased why it remains the Air Wing of the Future.

“REDEYE, SPLASH SINGLE GROUP WITH BRAVE, RESET CAP; REDEYE RTB AT THIS TIME.”

HSM-78 BLUE HAWKS

by LT Eddie MacGuire, USN

The mighty *Blue Hawks* of HSM-78 finally returned home after a long nine-month deployment in August. The squadron finished its 2024–’25 WESTPAC deployment with a three-month extension in *Fifth Fleet*, followed by a warm reception from family and friends at NAS

MCSN Pablo Chavez, USN



An HSM-78 MH-60R Seahawk assigned to the HSM-78 Blue Hawks flies past Carl Vinson underway in the Pacific Ocean in late 2024, honing skills ultimately employed in combat against Houthi rebels in Fifth Fleet.

North Island. From the decks of *Vinson*, “America’s Favorite Carrier,” and escorts USS *Princeton* (CG 59), USS *Sterett* (DDG 104) and USS *William P. Lawrence* (DDG 110), the *Blue Hawks* spent most of the year demonstrating the all-weather, day/night lethality that we bring to the fight with CSG-1.

Following our 2023–’24 WESTPAC deployment, Air Wing Fallon and *Rim of the Pacific 2024*, the *Blue Hawks* departed NAS North Island on 18 November 2024, once again bound for WESTPAC. We hit the ground running immediately, conducting freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea to “maintain an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, free of all forms of coercion,” as emphasized by RADM Mike Wosje, Commander, CSG-1. In February, the strike group integrated with the *Charles de Gaulle Strike Group* in the Celebes Sea for *Pacific Steller*, a French-led exercise to demonstrate power projection and allied cooperation in the region.

In April 2025, the squadron was due to return home to San Diego. However, due to real-world events, CSG-1 received a three-month extension to support *Operation Rough Rider* in the *Fifth Fleet* AOR. The *Blue Hawks* and CSG-1 raced to join USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75) and *Carrier Strike Group Eight* in maintaining freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Following our arrival in *Fifth Fleet*, the *Blue Hawks* bid farewell to our skipper, CDR Brian “Magnum” Connor, who was relieved by CDR Rick “Sweet D” Murray on 21 April 2025.

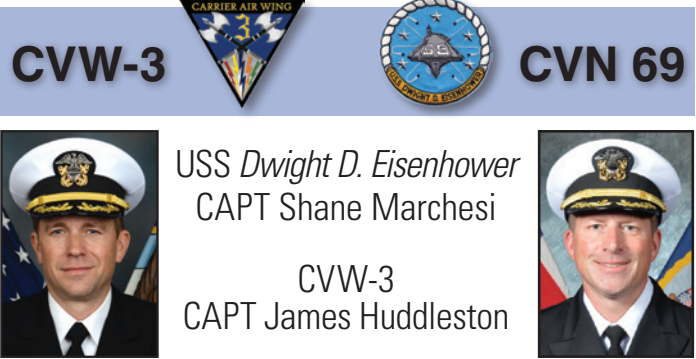
In *Fifth Fleet*, the *Blue Hawks* were instrumental in deterring the Houthi threat in Yemen. We are most notably credited with shooting down two enemy drones, maintaining the most air-to-air kills of any helicopter squadron in the Navy. The squadron also conducted MIO in conjunction with U.S. Coast Guard elements to disrupt illicit weapons trafficking to the Houthi rebels. After posturing against Iran during the 12-day war with Israel, the *Blue Hawks* and the rest of CSG-1 finally made it home to family and friends. The squadron flew hundreds of combat hours in support of *Operation Rough Rider*, an accomplishment we will be proud of for many years to come.

The *Blue Hawk* family had many rotations for new and old during the nine-month deployment. The squadron bid fair winds and following seas to LCDRs Nathan “Lucky” Stump, Charles “NEO” Scott, LTs Trent “TRENK” Kurek, Chandler “NARC” Dwyer and Peter “Big Perm” Huang. The squadron welcomed LTs Jonathan “JORN” Lim, Artie Booth, Tony Piston, Eddie MacGuire, Erica Clay, and Tristan Anderson. Finally, congratulations to some of the squadron’s newest Helicopter Aircraft Commanders — LTs Gerardo “Gandhi” Charles, Joshua “Glizzy” Weber, Lauren “Yoshi” Cockle, Landon “Wee-Bey” Lain, Ryan “Lemon” Sams and Zachary “SAACK” Richards. The *Blue Hawks* have been busy during the past year and are excited to get some much-needed downtime and head into maintenance phase. Excellence is the standard and always will be for the mighty *Blue Hawks* of HSM-78. “Red, White, BLUE HAWK!”

MCSN Jahlen Williams, USN



ADC Mark Sandusky prepares an F/A-18F Super Hornet attached to the VFA-32 Swordsmen for a flight from NAS Oceana on 16 Jun ’25.



USS Dwight D. Eisenhower
CAPT Shane Marchesi

CVW-3
CAPT James Huddleston

LIVE, LAUGH, SFWT

by LT Sheridynn “Smitty” Scheppers, USN

The VFA-32 *Fighting Swordsmen* are relentlessly pursuing excellence (and the perfect oyster happy hour) during maintenance phase at NAS Oceana.

The *Gypsies’* (tactical callsign) selfless, stoic “if not me, then who” mindset at Fleet Week New York proved fruitful, with aircrew performing multiple successful Hudson River runs in addition to the inspirational flyover above the *Intrepid* Museum. Since then, *Gypsy* side quests have been kept to a minimum, allowing for the real mission of strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT).

The *Gypsies* are incredibly proud to announce five Level IV aircrew! Congratulations to LCDR Zachary “Midrat” Zatorski, LTs Doug “Choco Taco” Boisse, Rodney “TROG” Hill and Zachary “Slimy Jack” Kriesmer! Additionally, the *Gypsies* have two new Level III aircrew — LTs David “Dexter” Carris and Brandon “Kronk” Hensley!

We are sad to say goodbye to LTs Isabelle “T-PAIN” Babb and TROG Hill, but find comfort knowing they will be embodying their inner hammers as VFA-106 instructors. Slimy Jack Kriesmer will also keep the fleet sharp by building the foundation of future Level I candidates at VT-86 on board NAS Pensacola. VFA-32 is deeply saddened to see LCDR Ryan “Squirt” Shults depart but is excited to have a trusted ally on the inside at PERS-43 in Millington, Tenn. Lastly, the *Gypsies* said goodbye to CDR Jason “IAD...S” Hoch (but look forward to a crash pad in Washington D.C.) as he embarks on the ultimate side quest — earning his master’s degree. Every night he lets a member of JOPA crash on his couch earns him one day in the *Gypsy* JOPA group chat. The *Gypsies* are excited to welcome new Skipper CDR Kyle “Sweet P” Terwilliger and new Executive Officer CDR Samuel “R10” Rykaczewski!

The *Fighting Swordsmen* will continue to sharpen the tactical blade one laser-guided training round drop at a time. Until we speak again, I will leave you with the VFA-32 inspirational quote of the quarter — “*The lioness does not concern herself with the hard deck*” — courtesy of LT Sheridynn “Smity” Scheppers (circa fifth High-Aspect Basic Fighter Maneuvering look).

VFA-34 BLUE BLASTERS

by LT Amadeus “FUNGUS” Skoczek, USN

The VFA-34 *Blue Blasters* have kept our maintenance phase action-packed, proving that our motto, “Have Gun, Will Travel,” is more than a chant and truly is a way of life. When USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75) returned to home port, the *Blasters* welcomed back two FNGs, LTs Jacob “Merkin” Granick and Amadeus “FUNGUS” Skoczek, from their adventures. Their arrival came with sacrifice as the squadron bid farewell to LCDR Charlie “SKYLORD” Johnson, who departed to instruct at the U.S. Naval Academy. LT Brian “Barnacle” Floyd respectfully declined his bail, however, choosing to remain with the *Blasters* a little longer before heading to the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School.

The *Jokers* (tactical callsign) have been training hard to maintain our famed perfection with LCDR Matt “PWOP” Van Dine and LT Mitch “Zohan” Pendleton both attaining SFWT Level III designations. In true *Blue Blaster* fashion, the squadron also demonstrated its commitment to the fleet by sending LCDR Chris “Meat” Honeycutt to CVW-8, currently deployed on board USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN 78), to supplement their ranks and deliver that highly sought-after *Blue Blaster* presence.

Continuing to train and prepare for its next deployment, VFA-34 stands ready to seize any opportunity that comes its way. The squadron embodies the spirit of “one team, one fight,” always ready to support any squadron that could use a little help from the *Blue Blasters* to see how it’s done.



MC2 Nicholas Avis, USN



The pilot of a VFA-34 Blue Blasters F/A-18E executes a touch and go during flight operations on board USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) in the Atlantic Ocean on 10 May ’25.



USS *George Washington*
CAPT Timothy L. Waits



CVW-5
CAPT Brian Kesselring

VFA-27 ROYAL MACES
by LT Nate Bermel, USN

When we left you last, the *Royal Macs* were enjoying an idyllic spring in Japan. The crowds at the Atsugi and Iwakuni Friendship Festivals attested to the fact that international “*Mace* Mania” has never been more alive. Soon thereafter, the lengthening days and falling cherry blossoms marked the onset of summer, which in CAG Bizz can only mean one thing — it is time to head back to sea.

The run-up to deployment kicked off with a massive maintenance push, and after a herculean effort by our Sailors (especially on those sweet and salty Service Life Modification birds), the *Maces* had a full lineup of finely tuned Block III war machines with top marks on multiple inspections to prove it. Next, it was off to Iwo To for a week of cave exploration, all-out die’s-in competition in the Dojo and middle-of-the-night half marathons that ended atop Mt. Suribachi at sunrise. Oh, and there was some field carrier landing practice (FCLP), too.

Following Iwo, it was time to bid adieu to LCDR Ryan “LARP” Corbin at the conclusion of a dynamic department head tour. LARP and the JOPA took a bullet train north minus LTs Stephen “ЯOZY” O’Donnell and Nate “Probie” Bermel, who flowed cold for an extra hour after they mistakenly hopped on the southbound train. Following the accidental

pump, the element reformed in Kyoto to send LARP off with an epic night of barhopping and karaoke until sunrise. LARP then spent a few weeks tying up some “loose ends” across Japan before heading to the U.S. Pacific Fleet Maritime Operations Center in Hawaii. We wish CDR(sel) “Live-Action-Role-Play” nothing but the best during his next adventure.

Soon the *Maces* and the rest of CAG Bizz were underway on board USS *George Washington* (CVN 73). The boat was still rebounding from nearly six years spent in the shipyard, but as the “G-Dub” ironed out the wrinkles, the *Maces* did not complain. Instead, we helped in our own special ways.

When the ready room’s air conditioning went down, Skipper CDR James “IBM” McMillan kept the troops cool by handing out his all-time favorite drink —a nice, fizzy pomegranate LaCroix — without any insults cast down upon his steely-eyed gang of privileged pilots and their “French water.” LT Sam “Squatch” Schultz graciously assisted the boat’s communications team by renaming J-Dial caller IDs across the air wing, enhancing situational awareness and providing comic relief for the few ready rooms with digital phones. For his part, LCDR Samuel “Shy Ronnie” Magilke has been conducting one-man FOD walkdowns, probably preventing the loss of our Aerial Refueling Store pod to a blowing two-by-four.

These selfless acts were not limited to just *Maces*. Our sister squadron, the VFA-147 *Argonauts*, earned praise from the Big XO for having “the best head” on the boat! Bravo Zulu indeed! However, the Wi-Fi has been noticeably slower due to the *Argos*’ “streaming habits” in the shower ... let’s keep it at least PG-13, fellas.

Unusual circumstances this underway have left many asking, “Where exactly is everybody?” Many *Maces* have become de facto staffers at varying echelons. Executive Officer CDR Matthew “CROMO” Warshaw, apparently fed up with boat life, “voluntarily” departed after

only three weeks underway for some “R&R in Australia” with return plans unknown. Our DINO (Department Head in Name Only), LCDR Ryan “Mayhem” Mahon, is in Honolulu putting in a lateral transfer package to be a Maritime Space Officer; the folks at Naval Space Headquarters (or something like that) report that they have never seen anyone worse at using crutches in their lives, but are thrilled that a real-life (med down) fighter pilot is paying attention to them. In addition to air wing tactical execution and standardization, LCDR Matthew “GASH” Schulteis has also taken charge of “good ideas” exploration, animation and realization. LT Riley “SPORT” Turk has assumed the duties of Carrier Strike Group Joint Interface Control Officer as he attempts to limit the number of international exercises this deployment derailed by split networks to just the first one. Godspeed, gentlemen. We’re all counting on you!

The remaining “*Mace* Men” have had to pick up the slack. We’ve got ground officers standing squadron duty officer on fly days and Shy Ronnie triple-hatting as safety officer, administrative officer and XO (SAXO); certainly, no manning/retention concerns here! Things are so bad, we’ve even got LT Forrest “PLUMP” Cullings learning how to write an evaluation, and he can’t even read all that good. And what about the young guns? LT Bo “Probie” Peng can’t seem to stop saying “we” during conversations about helicopter squadrons (old habits die hard), while Probie Nate has been struggling to see the ball over the nose of the jet (the seat and his GPA only go up so high). Our third and newest new guy, LT Matthew “Probie” Royce, whose first fleet flight was off the steam-venting runway of Iwo To, announced his arrival in style, jumping on stage at The Long Bar in Manila to shred the guitar in front of the entire air wing. With incredible talent like this, the future remains bright!

Jokes aside, our first half of cruise has also come with a list of key accomplishments and agenda items. In mid-July, the strike group joined with the Brits and Aussies for *Exercise Talisman Sabre 2025* with the goal of strengthening integration with our allies. In support of our diplomatic efforts, ЯOZY O’Donnell spent the week speaking with an Australian accent. He has not stopped, and we are not actually sure what his real voice sounds like anymore. During IWREX (if you don’t know what it stands for, you probably will soon), the operations and maintenance teams flew nine jets in the same triple-cycle event two days in a row, with a tenth fighter up and ready in the hangar bay, an incredible feat for a 10-jet squadron!

Another priority this underway has been defending our spot at the bottom of the Case I stack. Following our annual fantasy ball flyer draft organized by LT John “Bath Salt” Brooks, the *Mace* ground pounders have been coaching their pilots on the only real rule to live by — park the damn car! Speaking of teaching, “SPORT” Turk invited any and all air wing nerds to his “Crypto University” lectures and, while no one fully understood what he was saying about segmented encryption keys, everyone could see that he was fully “Turked.”

Rest assured, your *Maces* and friends are thriving. Some have hit major milestones recently. Skipper IBM, LCDRs Bobby “Juice” Ward and Uncle “Milton” O’Donohoe each celebrated, acknowledged, and/or seriously questioned their 20 years in the Navy; LCDR Greg “Sassy” D’Alessandro marked his 690th consecutive day running at least 1.5 miles; XO CROMO hit exactly 29 days between traps following a “mission-critical” *Seventh Fleet* liaison officer gig and, after surpassing 4,000 *Rhino* hours, Skipper IBM showcased his unrivaled type/model/series experience by expertly easing guns into the (circle) 1-wire for his 1,000th arrested landing. CVW-11 alums will attest that it was the finest SAR, 1-wire entry into the Grand Club since then-CAG CAPT Michael “Snap” Langbehn. Well done, gentlemen!

With the rest of 25-1 ahead of us, all’s well that’s started and hasn’t ended. Stay tuned for future updates from our “working port call” at MCAS Iwakuni and the second half of cruise! Until next time, cheers and MIYF!

DAMBUSTERS DOWN UNDER!

by LT William Hammond, USN

Picking up where we last left off, the *Dambusters* have been hard at work since our departure from MCAS Iwakuni. Buckle up, because this edition of the *Chippy Chronicles* is packed with high seas adventures, international collaborations and good old-fashioned tailhook shenanigans!

The 2025 patrol cycle kicked off with the necessary evils of carrier qualification (CQ) and Combat Operations Efficiency (COE), and more than a little help from the *Carrier Strike Group Fifteen* evaluators. Word

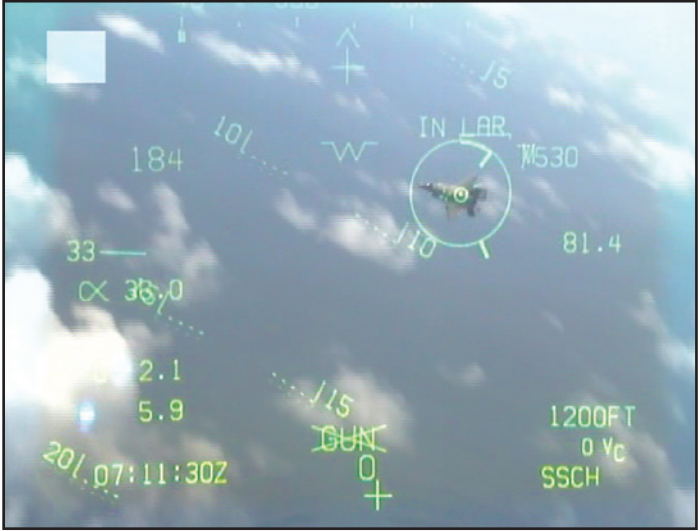
on the street is LCDR “Kramer” Gonzales brought back the COE bingo cards, though the prize for filling one out was reportedly more paperwork. You did not hear it from us, but a little squadron swag goes a long way!

Following a smooth CQ and COE, the *Dambusters* set a course southward, beginning our transit through the hotly contested South China Sea. The squadron remained vigilant, ensuring freedom of navigation and projecting power in the region with this year marking the first in over a decade that *George Washington* graced the South China Sea with her presence. After doing our part to hold it down for a free and open Indo-Pacific, it was time for a welcome port call in Manila, which provided a much-needed dose of R&R. The squadron sampled the local cuisine (and maybe a few too many libations), proving once again that the *Chippy* (tactical callsign) spirit transcends cultural boundaries ... and (in-port) crew rest. The *Dambusters* enjoyed the vibrant culture and warm hospitality of the Filipino people while engaging in a variety of community relations events and building lasting friendships.

Next, it was time for the squadron to head down under for *Talisman Sabre 2025*, a Joint and multinational training exercise held in Australia. The *Dambusters* integrated seamlessly with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), U.S. Air Force, the United Kingdom’s *Prince of Wales Carrier Strike Group*, and other members of the Australian Defence Force. This complex exercise involved many scenarios, ranging from simulated combat missions to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. The *Dambusters* honed our skills in multinational operations, strengthening interoperability and building valuable partnerships with our allies.

Once finished in the Southern Hemisphere, the *Dambusters* headed northward to participate in *Pacific Arsenal*, where the real fun began. We rejoined the *Prince of Wales Carrier Strike Group*, USS *America* (LHA 6) and the Japanese helicopter destroyer JS *Kaga* (DDH 184). The *Chippies* partook in several dissimilar air combat training flights with British F-35B *Lightning IIs* from HMS *Prince of Wales* (R09) and racked up countless aerial victories, showing the Brits some up-close and personal *Chippy* pride and style. We then had the opportunity to execute some live-fire exercises that provided the *Dambusters* with a chance to unleash the full potential of our F/A-18E *Super Hornets*. *Chippy* aviators shot live Joint Standoff Weapons and High-speed Anti-Radiation Missiles, which allowed the squadron to flex its tactical muscles and pass along a gentle reminder that the *Dambusters*’ strike power is not something to be trifled with. Speaking of leveling up, huge congrats to LTs “Richie Rich” Lindow and “Air Bud” Janssen for earning their strike fighter weapons and tactics Level III qualifications, proving their mastery of advanced tactics and flight leadership skills!

However, not all news was good news. The *Dambusters* begrudgingly bid farewell to LT “derp” Jennings, who departed for the VX-9 *Vampires*. We are pretty sure he’s going to miss us, but we are confident he is going to enjoy those flex Fridays and testing advanced weapon systems. We wish him the best of luck in his new role, shaping the future of Naval Aviation.



The head-up display in a VFA-195 Dambusters F/A-18E shows F-35B Lightning II from HMS Prince of Wales (R09) in the crosshairs during dissimilar air combat training over the Pacific Ocean.

Following the myriad exercises and other jubilations of the 25-1 patrol, the *Dambusters* conducted a flyoff, returning to Iwakuni for a well-deserved halftime. This brief respite allowed us to reconnect with our families and recharge before the next phase of the 2025 patrol. The *Dambuster* maintenance department performed masterfully, getting all aircraft ready for the second half, proving once again that they are the unsung heroes of the *Chippy* show!

While ashore, the *Dambusters* conducted a change-of-command ceremony during which CDR “Corndog” Reddick passed the torch to CDR “YoSoFH” Burns. Joining the team is CDR “Humpty” Pollock, who assumed the role of executive officer. We bid fair winds and following seas to CDR Reddick and thank him for his outstanding leadership as he takes the fight on behalf of Naval Aviation to Washington D.C. in the Office of Legislative Affairs. We also welcome CDR Burns and CDR Pollock to their new positions and wish them a fantastic tour. We know they will continue the long legacy and tradition of *Dambuster* excellence.

After a short halftime breather, the squadron returned to Iwo To for a series of FCLPs, ensuring our proficiency in carrier operations. Those who know can tell you that nothing says “fun” like practicing carrier landings on a volcanic island with no divers. The *Chippies* honed our skills, respected the local property and ensured they remained ready to trap those jets on the boat, no matter what the weather throws at them.

The *Dambusters* are honored to carry forward the legacy of the great aviators who earned us our name, patrolling the Indo-Pacific as the Navy’s longest continuously serving Forward-Deployed Naval Forces squadron. We continue to provide lethal, determined, and credible combat air power to the USINDOPACOM AOR with our trademark *Chippy* Pride and *Chippy* Style. For the *Dambusters*, *CHIPPY* HO!

VAQ-141 SHADOWHAWKS

by LT Joshua Krogman, USN

During the month of May, the VAQ-141 *Shadowhawks* and our fellow CVW-5 squadrons executed FCLP on the historic island of Iwo To. During this period, CAG Bizz regained the necessary proficiency in preparation for going aboard *GW*. The members of VAQ-141 proved our mettle in the air and on the die tables during this “gauntlet of heavy training” and successfully qualified the entire squadron in both domains.

MCSN Nicolas Quezada, USN



A VAQ-141 Shadowhawks EA-18G Growler flashes by in a blur while catching a wire on board George Washington underway in the Pacific Ocean on 26 Aug '25.

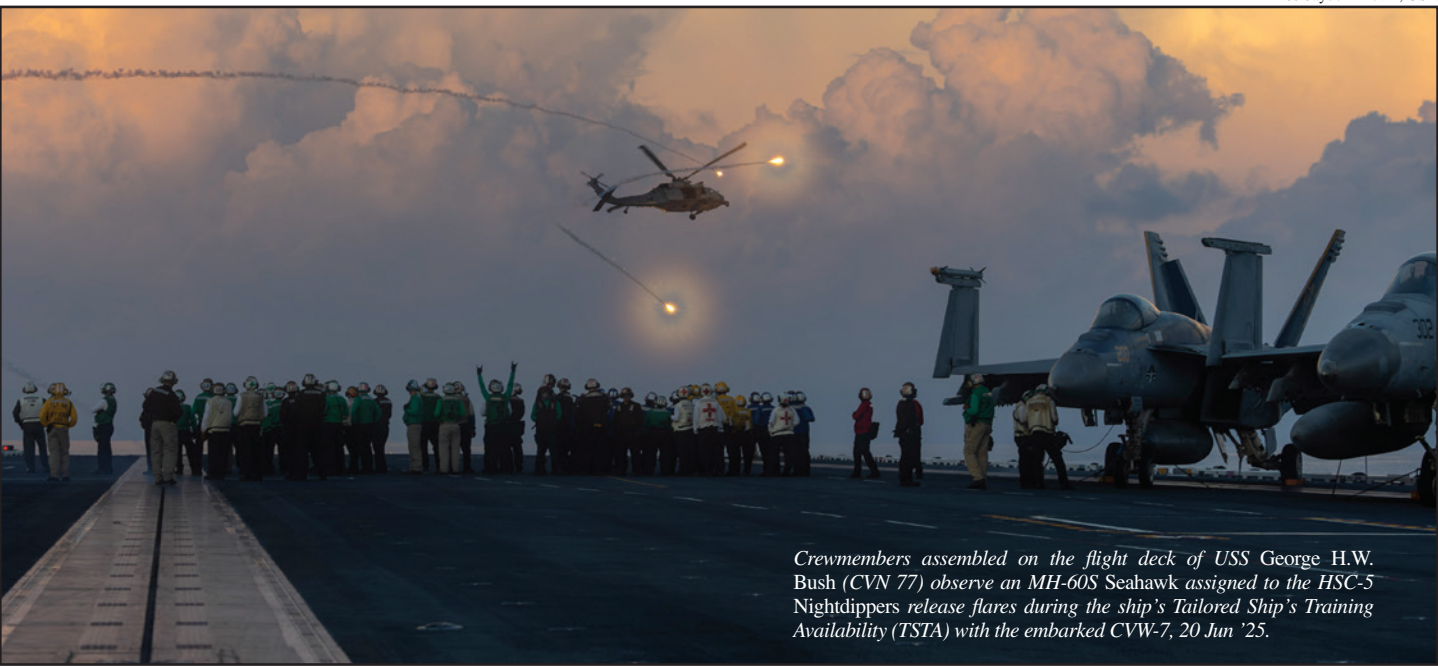
Afterward, VAQ-141 returned home for a brief time to get ready for the first of two 2025 underway periods.

During the first week of June, VAQ-141 and the rest of CVW-5 moved thousands of Sailors and thousands of pounds of equipment from Iwakuni to Yokosuka to board CVN 73 for the 25-1 patrol. Within the first week following the fly on, the entire crew of CVN 73 and the aviators and Sailors of CVW-5 were integrating as a unified team, completing hundreds of sorties to CQ air wing pilots. By the end of the following week, COE was complete, and the ship/ air wing team began steaming south.

In the beginning of July, CVN 73 stopped in the territorial waters of the Philippines, dropping anchor for a quick port call in Manila. While there, the *Shadowhawks* took time to rehack our die proficiency, restock Zyn stores and test our luck at the Baccarat tables. We also said goodbye to the squadron intelligence officer, LTJG “Floornivore” Rodgers, and welcomed his replacement. Throughout the port call, squadron members enjoyed spending time amongst the Filipino locals, further strengthening the bonds with a key partner nation.


Afterward, CVN 73 steamed farther south, conducting freedom of the seas flight operations the entire way. Upon reaching the coastal waters of Australia, VAQ-141 participated in *Talisman Sabre 2025*, a multilateral large-force employment (LFE) exercise dedicated to developing multiforce tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) with allied partners of the U.S. around the INDOPACOM AOR. Alongside airborne and surface forces from the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marine Corps, Australia, Norway, Canada, and Great Britain, VAQ-141 executed multiple LFE flight events, providing both kinetic and non-kinetic effects against Red Air and surface threats. The Joint exercise strengthened the partnership between the U.S. and its allies and provided excellent learning opportunities and skill development for all involved.


Immediately following *Talisman Sabre*, VAQ-141 along with CVW-5 and CVN 73, began developing and proving the effectiveness of cutting-edge ship/air wing TTPs that will help shape the future of operations in the INDOPACOM AOR. The entire VAQ-141 team — Sailors, ground officers and aircrew — are proud of our efforts thus far during the 25-1 patrol and look forward to maintaining our reputation as the premier airborne electronic attack squadron in the fleet.




Crewmembers assembled on the flight deck of USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) observe an MH-60S Seahawk assigned to the HSC-5 Nightdippers release flares during the ship's Tailored Ship's Training Availability (TSTA) with the embarked CVW-7, 20 Jun '25.

CVW-7






CVN 77



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



CVW-7
CAPT Martin N. Fentress Jr.

CVW-7: SEAMLESS INTEGRATION,
SUPERIOR LETHALITY

by LT Jake “Jingle” Jones, USN

As summer 2025 rolls on, CVW-7 continues to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to operational excellence and tactical readiness across a demanding slate of training and preparation exercises. With a steadfast focus on mission integration, carrier operations and multidomain warfare, *Team Freedom* (tactical callsign) is forging ahead through the Optimized-Fleet Response Plan (OFRP) in preparation for our 2026 deployment.

In June, CVW-7 embarked USS *George H.W. Bush* (CVN 77) for a rigorous Tailored Ship’s Training Availability (TSTA), reuniting *Team Jackpot* to execute complex carrier qualifications and advanced flight operations with precision, professionalism and safety. This integrated team of squadrons and ship’s crew worked seamlessly to enhance air-to-ship coordination and refine maritime strike capabilities. Throughout TSTA, *Team Jackpot* strengthened interoperability by forging strong partnerships that ensured cohesive and effective mission execution. During this period, CVW-7 also successfully requalified two Mission Commanders, further bolstering leadership depth and combat readiness ahead of upcoming fleet exercises.

Shortly after a well-earned Fourth of July break, *Team Freedom* returned with renewed focus, diving into Fleet Synthetic Training – Gulf Coast (FST-GC), a critical exercise designed to sharpen multidomain tactics within a high-fidelity simulated environment. Simultaneously, the air wing intensified preparations for the Integrated Air Defense Course and Air Wing Fallon, reinforcing its readiness across the full spectrum of mission areas. FST-GC challenged CVW-7’s ability to synchronize Joint air operations with surface and subsurface warfare elements, underscoring *Team Freedom*’s agility and adaptability in responding to evolving real-world threats as the air wing moves decisively through the OFRP.

Summer also brought important personnel milestones as we welcomed two highly capable officers to the CVW-7 staff in LTs Alex “Big Poppy” Hodges and Eugene “Tutti Frutti” Benvenuti. Their expertise and leadership will be invaluable as the air wing moves forward through its demanding operational cycle. Additionally, congratulations are in order for LT Ashley “Jelly” Gamelgaard on her well-earned promotion to lieutenant commander, a testament to her dedication and outstanding performance within the enterprise!

As *Team Freedom* navigates the challenges of a dynamic maritime environment, our commitment to excellence, teamwork and innovation remains unshaken. Guided by seasoned leadership and empowered by a skilled and motivated team, CVW-7 continues to set the standard for naval air power projection.

VFA-103 JOLLY ROGERS

by LT Brian “Sniffy” Mazzone, USN

The VFA-103 *Jolly Rogers* have stayed busy since our last update. Whether operating from the comfort of the beach or underway on board *George H. W. Bush*, the *Bones* have been hard at work doing what we do best — flying fast, maintaining readiness and reminding everyone that we still make the best squadron logo in the fleet.

Over the course of a few weeks, we executed the Integrated Advanced Readiness Program (IARP), welcoming the VAQ-140 *Patriots* and VAW-116 *Sun Kings* to Virginia Beach for some good old-fashioned air wing integration. In the time that followed, VFA-103 celebrated the week of the Strike Fighter Ball with the usual display of squadron pride and mild chaos, delivered through golf, softball, flight line shenanigans and one very memorable night at the Norfolk Waterside Marriott.

Shortly afterward, we embarked CVN 77 for TSTA, shaking off the rust and embracing the joys of shipboard living to include close quarters, endless late-night drills and the unmistakable sound of dry cat shots in the morning. The squadron was bolstered by the temporary addition of LCDR Alex “Friendzone” Land, who brought energy, experience and plenty of sea stories. We also welcomed LTs Andrew “FNG” Hunt and Michael “FNG” O’Neill to the team. One of these two new JOs wasted no time diving into the mix, adjusting to squadron life and learning the ropes from our resident professional troublemakers. The other enjoyed a two-month vacation back in Lemoore to finish his Fleet Replacement Squadron syllabus, followed by a “relaxing camping trip” to Kittery. We are, of course, excited to welcome them both aboard. Additionally, we bid farewell to LCDR Tim “Fluffy” Baker and LT Nick “Mr. Tenderkiss” Mascaro, whose contributions to the squadron extended far beyond the cockpit. Whether it was steady leadership or expertly navigating the social battlefield, both left a mark on the ready room and will be sorely missed, though their names will undoubtedly live on longer than they would like.



This fall also marked a major milestone with a squadron Change of Command. We bid farewell to CDR Jonathan “Paddles” Gilliom, whose leadership and vision guided the squadron through some of its most demanding training and operational cycles. His ability to build a culture of excellence, empower his people and maintain just the right amount of squadron chaos control made a lasting impact, and he leaves behind a legacy the *Bones* will carry forward with pride.

Relieving the watch is CDR William “Magic Legs” Dann, a seasoned leader with a clear-eyed focus on mission readiness, warfighting lethality and upholding the *Jolly Rogers*’ high standards. We also look forward to welcoming our next executive officer, CDR Jason “KIA” Carrier, who brings experience, tenacity and the drive to help propel the squadron into the next chapter.

As we look ahead, the *Bones* remain sharp and locked in on the horizon. With deployment preparations underway, the squadron continues to build readiness while keeping morale high, spirits up and the skull flying proudly on the tail. Until next time, Here’s to Victory. Here’s to the *Bones*.

VFA-131 WILDCATS

by LT Ben “Clifford” Longacre, USN

It has been another standout quarter for the VFA-131 *Wildcats*. After completing IARP with excellence, the squadron quickly transitioned to preparing for TSTA on board CVN 77. While the main body of squadron personnel was gearing up for life aboard ship, a small contingent traveled to Tyndall AFB in Panama City, Fla., to take part in the Naval Weapons System Evaluation Program (NWSEP). Here the *Wildcat* team flexed the advanced kill chains of the F/A-18E and employed two valid AIM-9M *Sidewinders* on a target drone over the Gulf of America. Shortly after returning to NAS Oceana, *Wildcat* aircrew employed an AGM-154 Joint Standoff Weapon and an AGM-88 High Speed Anti-Radiation Missile (HARM). As always, the *Wildcat* team performed flawlessly in these evolutions.

The squadron then flew aboard *Bush* for TSTA and were immediately welcomed by the ship’s crew and amenities. During this training evolution VFA-131 executed a variety of mission sets and employments, bolstering readiness for the upcoming deployment. Junior *Wildcats* dropped air-to-surface munitions on the Pinecastle Bombing Range in Florida and worked toward completion of their air-to-air strike fighter weapons and tactics syllabus flights, while *Team Jackpot* prepared for *Atlantic Alliance 2025*, a major East Coast Joint naval integration exercise involving the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, and allied forces from the Netherlands and United Kingdom. The exercise, spanning from North Carolina to Maine, the largest of its kind in the Western Atlantic in over a decade, involved over 8,500 personnel. It was an absolute pleasure for the *Wildcats* to be an integral piece of the planning process for this evolution and the whole *Jackpot* team could not have performed better.

Returning from TSTA, the *Wildcats* quickly pivoted to preparations for Air Wing Fallon, the comprehensive, predeployment training conducted in the high desert of Nevada. It is a crucial phase where the entire air wing, including various squadrons and aircraft, integrate into realistic battle scenarios.

It is with great sadness this quarter that we say goodbye to a few *Wildcats* who have moved on to other squadrons, commands and civilian jobs. Skipper Ross, “Kaz,” “Huggie,” “PoLR” and most notably, yours truly. This fine group of gentlemen left an indelible mark on the *Wildcats* with their distinguished professionalism, acute attention to detail and overall good dudeness. You all will be greatly missed! As for myself, it has been an honor to be the voice of the *Wildcats* in *The Hook* for the last three years, and I could not have asked for a better place to spend my JO tour. The entire wardroom has touched me, and I’m quite sure I’ve touched them. ONE TEAM, ONE FIGHT, SINGLE-SEAT FOREVER and I’ll see you at the merge *Wildcats*!

VFA-105 GUNSLINGERS:
ECHO DRIVER ... FOX FIGHTER!

by LT Anthony Polo, USN

Throughout the summer of 2025 and deep into the OFRP work-up cycle, the VFA-105 *Gunslingers* continued sharpening our warfighting edge with grit, precision and tactical innovation. As the squadron pressed forward refining the combat capabilities of the FA-18E/F *Super Hornet*, the *Gunslingers* took pride in leading from the front, not only as a new

Courtesy of VFA-103



Against a mountain backdrop, a VFA-103 Jolly Rogers F/A-18F flown by LCDRs CL “Spanky” Keedy and Brad “Boss” Mitchell pictured on approach to Colorado Springs Airport during transit from NAS Fallon to NAS Oceana, 28 Mar ’25.

MC3 Jayden Brown, USN



ABHC Jose Toromelendez directs an F/A-18E Super Hornet assigned to the VFA-131 Wildcats onto a catapult on board Bush during a recent TSTA while underway in the Atlantic Ocean, 18 Jun ’25.

composite squadron now operating four F/A-18Fs and eight F/A-18Es, but also as the first unit to fully and operationally integrate the LITENING targeting pod into its tactical arsenal.

In May, VFA-105 closed a defining chapter in its operational history with the Navy’s formal recognition of the squadron’s outstanding 2024 deployment on board USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) in the Red Sea. The *Gunslingers* earned a rare trifecta of top honors, including the Battle “E,” Captain Michael J. Estocin Award as the Navy’s outstanding strike fighter squadron and Boola Boola Award for tactical excellence, a testament to the squadron’s disciplined execution and combat effectiveness across multiple mission areas.

The month also marked a new beginning with the arrival of pilot LT Ryle “Gus Gus” Cannon and the squadron’s first ever weapons system officer (WSO), LTJG Dean Waite, officially ushering VFA-105 into the composite era. Their arrival sparked the adoption of a new squadron mantra — Echo Driver . . . Fox Fighter — a phrase that honors the squadron’s legacy while embracing its forward-leaning transformation into a multiseat, multirole fighting force. This transition was possible in no small part through the mentorship and tactical insight provided by VFA-103, which led the way as the Navy’s true first composite squadron. The *Jolly Rogers* generously supported the *Gunslingers* with lessons learned, tactical crew coordination training and WSO flight support, laying a solid foundation for VFA-105’s future as a single-seat and two-seat-capable strike fighter squadron. Their support exemplifies the spirit of Naval Aviation and the power of squadron-to-squadron teamwork.

In June, the *Gunslingers* embarked *George H.W. Bush* to support TSTA, executing complex carrier operations with trademark precision, professionalism and safety. While embarked, the squadron contributed to *Atlantic Alliance 2025*, a multinational exercise designed to enhance North Atlantic Treaty Organization maritime interoperability and bolster regional security. Amidst the high operational tempo, LTJG Margot Behrens earned her Information Warfare Officer qualification after months of rigorous preparation, a significant milestone for both her and the command. That same underway also welcomed VFA-105’s second WSO, LTJG Jacob Bloomstein, strengthening the squadron’s two-seat capability and deepening its tactical bench.

Courtesy of VFA-105



Members of the VFA-105 Gunslingers gather for a “cigar burn” during a break in TSTA flight operations on board Bush this summer.

The summer also saw significant tactical milestones, with multiple aircrew earning key qualifications. LTs Christopher “TINA” Ballas and Matthew “Pool Boy” Baugh qualified as Combat Division Leads, while LCDR Parker “Condor” Phelps achieved Combat Section Lead qualification, further sharpening the squadron’s leadership depth and readiness.

The month of July brought a moment of pause and reflection as the *Gunslingers* celebrated our first Fourth of July stateside in more than three years. The brief reprieve came during an otherwise relentless work-up schedule, offering a welcome opportunity to reconnect with families and recharge as the squadron prepared for the next phase of training. The month also marked a leadership







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turnover as the squadron bid farewell to Condor and welcomed incoming department heads LCDRs Evan “Tommy Boy” Bokhart and Zach “Midrat” Zatorkski.

Even with the holiday respite, the squadron maintained an aggressive focus on tactical development. Aircrew executed close-air-support sorties with the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, expended valuable Non-Combat Expenditure Allocations ordnance in preparation for deployment during air-to-surface training events, and honed their air-to-air mission sets in preparation for any high-end operations they may encounter.

With an unyielding commitment to tactical excellence, combat leadership and crewed integration, the *Gunslingers* remain at the forefront of strike fighter innovation and fleet readiness. Fueled by teamwork, sharpened by mentorship and grounded in heritage, the squadron continues to fly with the strength, skill and spirit that defines the best of Naval Aviation. Tonight ... We Ride!!

VAQ-140 PATRIOTS FULL SPEED INTO WORK UPS

by LT Francisco “Funchle” Navarro, USN

As the VAQ-140 *Patriots* endured the chilly Whidbey Island winter, spirits were high as we pressed into our work-up cycle. After a successful Flight-Deck Certification in December, the *Patriots* were excited to continue working with our newly assigned strike fighter squadrons, the VFA-83 *Rampagers*, VFA-131 *Wildcats* and VFA-105 *Gunslingers*.

In February, we began our work-up cycle with the Electronic Warfare Advanced Readiness Program, a seven-week course comprised of lectures, simulators and flights during which we honed our evolving *Growler*-specific tactics prior to integrating with the fixed-wing assets of *Team Freedom* in April.

Despite the demanding pace, the *Patriots* maintained an impressive operational tempo. The squadron executed many successful cross-country flights in support of national air shows, proudly representing Naval Aviation in cities such as Yuma, Ariz., and Deadwood, S.D. VAQ-140 also demonstrated logistical flexibility and mission readiness with four major squadron movements across the continental United States in April and June, each evolution reinforcing our ability to operate forward and support the air wing effectively.

Further underscoring our warfighting proficiency, the *Patriots* executed two successful AGM-88 HARM missile shots, validating our tactical edge and readiness for high-end conflict.

The squadron also took time to celebrate our officer community with a formal dining out, which provided an opportunity to honor tradition, recognize excellence and strengthen camaraderie amidst a high-tempo operational period.

July marked a leadership transition for the *Patriots* as we bid farewell to Commanding Officer CDR Shane “BP” Salvatore. A foundational member of the VAQ community and originally an EA-6B *Prowler* JO, BP’s steady leadership and deep tactical expertise have been instrumental

MC2 Samuel Wagner, USN

in driving squadron success. As we thank him for his service and wish him fair winds, we are proud to welcome CDR Omar “Odd Job” Sanusi as our incoming commanding officer. Odd Job brings a wealth of experience, energy and vision as we continue charging through the work-up phase.

The *Patriots* have a full calendar ahead, including the *Growler* Ball in September, and Air Wing Fallon in October as we prepare for deployment next year. With sharpened tactics, a strong team culture and new leadership at the helm, VAQ-140 remains ready, resilient and lethal.



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Shooter LT Legrand Guerry signals for the launch of a VAQ-140 Patriots EA-18G Growler during flight operations on board CVN 77 underway in the Atlantic on 7 Dec '24.

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VFA-213 FIGHTING BLACKLIONS

It has been a busy spring and summer for the *World-Famous Fighting Blacklions*! From rigorous training exercises to real-world operations, tactical execution, as always, is our number one focus.

We completed Air Wing Fallon and the Composite Training Unit Exercise (COMPTUEX), returning home with two goals — preparing for deployment and winning *Mutha*. Under the capable instruction of our training officers, the *Blacklions* honed our skills and demonstrated our dedication to proficiency with numerous aircrew achieving significant strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) qualifications. “Spot 7” Hyland earned his Level IV and IV+ while “Mushu” Seals attained Level IV. Not to be outdone, “sadiM” LaRocco, “Bop-It” Platt and “Bodega” Wesner completed Level III, and “JEB!” Lopez, “Choo Choo” Tran, “Unga Bunga” Timpe, “Mr. Jingles” Spedero, “Señor Leche” Strehlke, “Omaha” Costigan, “Kool-Aid Lips” Hertel and “FNG” Pellistri all earned their Level II qualifications.

When our hard work was finished, shots validated and debriefs completed, we turned our focus to a seemingly impossible task, winning *Mutha* for the second consecutive year. As Strike Fighter Sports Week commenced, the JOs brainstormed, “How could they reclaim *Mutha* and return Tanuki to its rightful place with the *World-Famous Fighting Blacklions*?”

They determined they would need a sweet ride that would make Xzibit proud. But where would we find such transportation for 32 squadron aircrew? We had to look no farther than the *Gypsies* (tactical callsign) of VFA-32. The only items required were ChatGPT and some enterprising JOs. With a little window paint and a lot of zaps, you could not even tell it used to say “Swordspeople!”

Later, during the Strike Fighter Golf Tournament, the *Blacklion* JOs received another kindhearted gift. Two FNGs from the VFA-103 *Jolly Rogers*, who might have had too many White Claws, were acting like unsuspecting henchmen from Austin Powers. When the bones of an old grandma they call Jack Ernie are chained to a golf cart, you just steal the golf cart, and the rest will buff out.

That afternoon, armed with Jack Ernie’s bones and driving the *Gypsies*’ blue police bus, we arrived at *Mutha* Actual’s house with an offer he couldn’t refuse; join our shenanigans at Smartmouth Brewing. However, some treachery was afoot; two *Jolly Rogers* FNGs attempted to reclaim the bones during the party using a wife and small child as decoys. The terrorist tactics were quickly thwarted using superior intellect, 1980s technology and overall better athleticism that repelled them with ease.

The *Jolly Rogers* terrorist attack was coordinated with other VFA-103 JOs attempting to (re)steal the *Gypsies*’ bus from us! While initially successful, they failed to study their diesel NATOPS and did not realize that poor hotwiring will quickly drain battery power, which left them stranded on Laskin Avenue. After consuming our fill of Smartmouth brew, we sighted two slack-jawed *Jolly Rogers* who could not fight their way out of a wet paper bag attempting to fix the derelict vehicle on the side of the road. Demonstrating what *Mutha* Actual called “the true meaning of fighter spirit,” our very own “JEB!” activated his fatherly instincts and pulled over to assist these damsels in distress. The *Blacklions* taught the *Jolly Rogers* a bit about diesel engines, batteries and fighter spirit to return the sad “Swordsmenmobile” to Partial Mission Capable status. The next day the *Blacklions* graciously returned the bones to VFA-103 and took home Tanuki for an unprecedented second straight year, marking three *Mutha* victories in the last four years!

Courtesy of VFA-213

The VFA-213 Blacklions JOPA pictured with the VFA-32 “Swordsmenmobile” that supported their successful multifront effort to secure Mutha for the second consecutive year.

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The Hook, Fall 2025

With *Mutha* secured in an undisclosed but extremely comfortable and cryptic location, the *World-Famous Fighting Blacklions* are now on board the mighty USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN 78), America’s Biggest and Baddest warship. Our current adventure takes us east across the Atlantic, trained, ready and incredibly capable of cleaning up any merge and striking any target with precision and lethality. Two Tails ... Give ’em Hell!

VFA-31 TOMCATTERS

by LT Logan “Lantern” Opp, USN

The VFA-31 *Tomcatters*, led by CDR Wes “Wooly Willy” Mize, are back at it again, checking in from our home away from home on board *Ford* while attached to CVW-8. After returning to NAS Oceana from our 2024 Tailored Ship’s Training Availability, the *Tomcatters* continued to work in preparation for our 2025 deployment. In January, we enjoyed four weeks of tactical sharpening in the high desert at NAS Fallon. After an eternity of mission planning and a few terrifying night large-force exercises, CVW-8 proved our proficiency as an integrated fighting unit. Following that, we wrapped up COMPTUEX, the culminating exercise in a rigorous work-up cycle. *Felix* (tactical callsign) also mixed in a bit of play, enjoying a night of camaraderie and debauchery in March with our squadron dining out led by our very own LT Logan “Lantern” Opp and his trusty redcoat, LT Lewis “Speedbird” Phillips, RN.

With minimal down time, *Felix* executed a robust schedule prioritizing SFWT sorties and unit-level training. This resulted in qualifications galore for squadron pilots. LCDRs Andrew “Movel” Casson and “POM POM” Dulaney qualified as Mission Commanders. LT Chris “Supperman” Wright completed the SFWT Level IV+ syllabus a mere two years into his JO tour and was designated a Team Lead. LT Victoria “Pfingers” Krause completed her SFWT Level IV syllabus and was designated as a Combat Division Lead. LTs Ruben “Slappy” Hays and Jake “TRASH” Yoon earned their SFWT Level III Combat Section Lead qualifications. Lastly, LT Patrick “Ned Flanders” Simons and Lantern Opp finished SFWT Level II and are “just happy to be here.” The *Felix* team is officially at full capacity after adding our new safety officer and JOPA appreciator, LCDR Gavin “Scrat” Falcona, as well as our newest JO, LT R.J. “Trailor Swift” White. The CAG’s finest XO, CDR Robert “STORC” Gordon, continues to be a schedule writer’s and Follies dream come true with his constant stream of enjoyable “Skeds” quotes.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the squadron’s maintenance department, pilots gained valuable training and experience in both the air-to-air arena and the air-to-surface environment. The *Tomcatters* added some first-time missile shooters to their mix with Ned Flanders shooting an

Team Felix assembled on the NAS Oceana flight line with their F/A-18E Super Hornets prior to the current deployment on board USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78).

The Hook, Fall 2025

AGM-88C, TRASH Yoon employing a JSOW-A and Slappy Hays shooting an AGM-65E *Laser Maverick* air-to-ground missile.

As of this writing, *Felix* is now two months into cruise in the sunny and beautiful Mediterranean, executing deterrence missions as well as flying with our North Atlantic Treaty Organization partners during *Exercise Neptune Strike*. We are excited to see and report what the rest of deployment has in store and hopefully get jacked, ripped nasty diesel in the process. *FELIX RULES*!

A TRIP TO HACK CITY

by LT Harrison “FNG 2” Jones, USN

Deployment comes again for CVW-8, and as *War Party* (tactical callsign) jets from VFA-87 fire up their auxiliary power units on the flight deck of *Gerald R. Ford*, there is only one destination in the minds of their illustrious pilots. That destination is “Hack City,” the land of impromptu basic fighter maneuvering (BFM) that can be located anywhere a *War Party* jet graces the skies. On the way to surface search and coordination? Take a quick pit stop in Hack City. Late check-in to marshal? It was probably because the neon lights of Hack City came calling. In the *War Party*, we use every ounce of tactical gas to train for air-to-air combat, and we build our ladders accordingly. As our esteemed training officer once said, “Well, I got a 5.8 at the top — leaves us with about 12k of tactical gas.” That math checks. Hack City is not just a place; it is a state of mind.

As jets check in to marshal one-by-one awaiting recovery, the standard monotony of radio calls associated with the Case III CV-1 approach is often broken when a pair of *War Party* jets check in with a 5.0 fuel state. If you happen to find yourself abeam to the *War Party* in the Case I stack, the phrase “speed and angels right” may be heard on BTN 1. Defend yourself. Training opportunities are vital. Why not make use of the time?

Defensive counter air (DCA) combat air patrols (CAPs) are also not immune from the occasional day trip to Hack City. “Bear,” our trusty E-2D brethren, understands to direct counter-rotating CAPs to provide the best merge geometry. When querying why both *Party 11* and *Party 12* descend to 5,000 feet above ground level on every passing, the standard response of “Hack City” became apparent to them. Flying Red Air and setting two groups azimuth? We call that an abeam set. Whether the mission is Event 1 BFM or a DCA lasso, CVW-8 can expect to see *War Party* Precise Participant Location and Identifications engaged in fierce aerial combat.

What is on the packing list for Hack City? Forget your bingo plus five fuel ladder. Leave that for the *Growlers*. Bring only the knowledge of Portable Air Defense Systems, BFM

Courtesy of VFA-31

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Members of the War Party gather for a photograph on the flight deck of Ford during a break between flights to “Hack City.”

axioms, your Captive Air Training Missile (CATM) 9X, a bag of knots and a kneeboard card with wingspan values for every possible aircraft in the area of responsibility. With air combat maneuvering authorized on every flight with currency requirements met, and despite 2k being as overcrowded as Wardroom 3, the warm waters of the Mediterranean provide a place where all training objectives are achievable. As sure as day follows night, the *War Party* remains prepared to execute an alternate mission of visiting Hack City.

Today, Hack City places VFA-87 in the tax-free paradise of the Adriatic Sea. Tomorrow, who knows? Dry suits in the frigid Norwegian Sea? Desert tans as our heroes pay a visit to our friends in the Middle East? It does not matter. Hack City is an all-season destination where all with a warrior ethos are welcome. FIGHT’S ON!

BEAR ACES MARK NEW ERA OF AERIAL REFUELING
by LTJG Andrew “ReDiva” Watson, USN

Earlier this year, VAW-124 became the first operational squadron to conduct air-to-air refueling (AAR) with the Air Force KC-46 *Pegasus* tanker during *Operation Maverick’s Armistice* (OMA). In addition to integration with the new USAF platform, the *Bear Aces* were able to employ lessons learned from the test and development community to evaluate the utility of the *Pegasus* for operational AAR. With KC-135 *Stratotanker* operations currently suspended, there are very few non-organic tankers available to support *Advanced Hawkeye* AAR while operating in theater. This milestone underscores both the evolution of the Navy’s airborne command and control capabilities, as well as increasing integration of the KC-46 into front-line aerial refueling missions.

The E-2D is a high-demand, low-density asset for every combatant command. However, the aircraft’s mission radius and endurance are limited by fuel capacity, making in-flight refueling a crucial capability. The aircraft’s non-organic AAR options were limited to Omega Aerial Refueling Services platforms and C-130 variants, but with the release of the In-Flight Clearance for the KC-46, a state-of-the-art tanker derived from Boeing’s 767 commercial airframe, a new option has opened up for the *Advanced Hawkeye*. Based on its enhanced refueling flexibility, a

Courtesy of VAW-124



VAW-124 Bear Aces E-2D Advanced Hawkeyes conduct air-to-air refueling from a U.S. Air Force KC-46 Pegasus, a first for a fleet airborne command and control squadron.

KC-46 can be low enough in altitude and airspeed to remain within the E-2D’s AAR envelope within 30 minutes of takeoff. Additionally, with its separate boom and drogue systems, the *Pegasus* greatly reduces *Advanced Hawkeye* pilot workload when compared to the KC-135. While tanking on the “Iron Maiden,” the pilot’s margin of error was very slim based on the propeller arc being less than 10 feet from the hose and adapter.

When performing AAR with the KC-46, VAW-124 pilots noted multiple distinct challenges unique to the platform that were in line with the data provided by the test community. First, upon successful contact with the drogue, pilots noted continual sinusoidal oscillations in the fuel hose causing the refueling probe to flex and vibrate more than other platforms. Additionally, with a larger basket, much of the pilot’s view is obstructed, leading to slight modifications to positioning while flying within the refueling range. Although testing provided these data points, seeing these issues as fleet aviators proved eye-opening and manageable based on previous AAR platforms. The *Bear Aces* were able to capture many of these unique KC-46 peculiarities with GoPro footage and passed them throughout the community to reinforce salient data points via video to all E-2D pilots.

Using the experiences gained through OMA, VAW-124 integrated KC-46 tanking in the U.S European Command area of responsibility during the *Neptune Strike 25-2* exercise alongside CVW-8 and NATO aircraft during multiple large-force events within the first months of deployment. This allowed the E-2D to provide direct command and control support to air wing and NATO assets over an increased combat radius. This critically extended the carrier strike group (CSG) surveillance area, and defensive and offensive training opportunities.

The KC-46, like the E-2D, is in limited supply throughout the Department of Defense. However, the *Pegasus* is now the preferred non-organic AAR platform for operations based on its enhanced capabilities to meet the *Advanced Hawkeye* refueling envelope easier and quicker than its USAF predecessors. Tactically, the KC-46’s ability to change configuration airborne, support the E-2D at decreased altitudes and speeds and increase the E-2D’s on-station time will fundamentally change how the E-2D is integrated in long-range CSG, Joint and Coalition operations.

Courtesy of VAW-124



Elements of Team Shogun, including a VAW-117 Wallbangers E-2D, VAQ-133 Wizards EA-18G, VMFA-314 Black Knights F-35C and VFA-41 Black Aces F/A-18Fs carrying AIM-174 Gunslinger missiles, pictured in formation during a recent flight from USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72).



USS *Abraham Lincoln*
CAPT Daniel J. Keeler



CVW-9
CAPT William Frank

TEAM SHOGUN

by LCDR Cory “Juicy” Couture, USN

As Naval Aviators gathered in Reno to celebrate the incredible legacy and exciting future of our community at Hook ’25, CVW-9 *Team Shogun* (tactical callsign) got to work on board USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72), launching flight operations, completing Blue-Water Certification and joining *Exercise Northern Edge 2025* in the Gulf of Alaska. We wanted to be there with you, but if we had to miss Hook ’25, there’s no place we’d rather be than staring down the Russian Bear, fighting the fight and carrying forward the legacy of tailhook aviation. We take pride in wearing the Wings of Gold, just as our brothers and sisters do at Hook, because each of them has been, or will be, in this same stack and same fight at some point in their careers. That shared experience binds us, past and present, to the enduring spirit of Naval Aviation.

Operating in the challenging and unpredictable environment of the Gulf of Alaska, we did not just check the box on training, we pushed the limits. *Northern Edge* brought together Joint and Coalition forces across every domain, creating a high-end, contested battlespace. CVW-9 launched precision strikes, executed complex multidomain scenarios and seamlessly integrated with our partners, proving again that we are ready to deliver combat power anywhere, anytime.

Every launch and recovery on board *Lincoln* reaffirmed our commitment to the mission and one another. Though not able to attend Hook this year, we honored Naval Aviation’s legacy where it matters most, on the flight deck and in the air. This underway period marks a critical milestone as we prepare for our upcoming deployment, and the *Abe/Shogun* team met the challenges with focus, grit and professionalism.

Fresh off our 2024 combat deployment, we have entered sustainment phase with focus and urgency. We’re not just maintaining readiness. We’re building on the foundation we forged during deployment, pushing ourselves to new levels of integration and execution across every mission set. Every sortie, event and evolution sharpens our skills, strengthens our cohesion and reinforces our warfighting capability. This team stands ready, forged in combat, refined through relentless training and prepared to strike with precision and lethality.

Hook ’25 celebrated the heritage that shaped us. Operating in the frigid waters of the High North, we built on that legacy by flying, fighting and leading from the front. We will come off deployment sharper, more experienced and ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with our Tailhook community at Hook ’26. Until then, *Shogun* will stay on mission, honoring those who came before us and preparing the next generation to answer our nation’s call. Fly Navy!

VFA-151 VIGILANTES

by LT Alex “Michael JackZyn” Petroy, USN

The last dispatch from the VFA-151 *Vigilantes* found us soaring above the Nevada desert on the way back from a successful Air Wing Fallon detachment. This exceptional training pushed both our airframes and aircrew to the limit as we tackled increasingly complex mission sets with the rest of CVW-9. We returned to NAS Lemoore battle-tested and ready to continue honing our warfighting skills.

Since returning to home base, the pace has not slowed. The *Vigilantes* have been immersed in a demanding series of flights, utilizing the facilities and airspace available at NAS Lemoore. This rigorous schedule recently saw two of our own achieve significant milestones. LT Jake “NAMPON” Benavidez earned his Level III strike fighter weapons and tactics (SFWT) qualification, showcasing his growing expertise in tactical employment and earning him the right to lead a section of F/A-18s into combat. Shortly after, our senior JO, LT William “RED” An, demonstrated exceptional proficiency, completing his Level IV SFWT qualification. Representing the culmination of his SFWT training, he may now lead a full division of F/A-18s into combat. These milestones are a testament to their dedication and the quality of instruction provided by the squadron’s experienced senior pilots.





A VFA-151 Vigilantes F/A-18E Super Hornet launches from Lincoln underway in the North Pacific participating in Northern Edge 2025, 21 Aug '25

While we celebrated these successes, the challenges were far from over. The *Vigilantes* embarked *Abraham Lincoln* for Sustainment Exercise (SUSTEX) II, followed immediately by participation in *Northern Edge* off the coast of Alaska. This demanding exercise involved partners in the Air Force and Air National Guard, challenging us by simulating the complexities of modern naval combat while operating in the carrier environment. It proved a crucial opportunity to assess our tactics, execution and integration with the air wing.

Amidst these comings and goings, we are proud to welcome a new member to the *Vigilante* family, LT Zach “Zyndaya” Swenson. We look forward to integrating him into the squadron and benefiting from his skills and dedication. Welcome aboard, Zyndaya! Whether it’s the high-altitude ranges of Nevada, the familiar skies above Lemoore or the open ocean during SUSTEX and *Northern Edge*, the *Vigilantes* remain committed to one unwavering goal, our preparedness to fight and win against our nation’s enemies. We continue to sharpen our skills, adapt to evolving threats and stand ready to FIGHT UGLY!

WIZARDS IN ACTION: CASTING A SPELL ON SUSTAINMENT

by LT Abby “Mansplain” Savidge, USN

The VAQ-133 *Wizards* have excelled during our busy sustainment phase schedule both on the boat and back on the beach. Pushing hard through



Viewed from flight-deck level, maintainers on board Lincoln work on a VAQ-133 Wizards EA-18G Growler, ensuring its readiness for the next Northern Edge 2025 sortie, 24 Aug '25.

demanding training and operational events, VAQ-133 earned the 2024 Admiral Arthur Radford Award as the *Growler* Squadron of the Year.

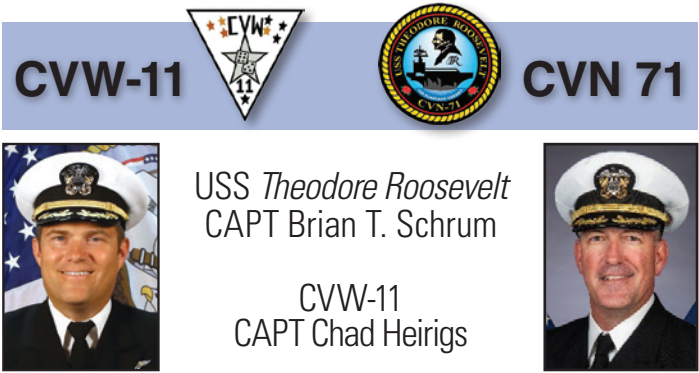
After a few short months of rest following return from deployment, the *Wizards* executed a successful SUSTEX I, racking up 101.4 flight hours and 58 arrested landings. LTs Abby “Mansplain” Savidge and Jerry “The Tizzler” Kigerl each earned their Centurion patches, marking 100 successful carrier landings aboard CVN 72. Quickly following SUSTEX I, the squadron traveled to the desert of Nevada to sharpen its tactical edge as part of a Carrier Air Wing Readiness Refresher Exercise on board NAS Fallon, adding another 110.9 hours to the logbook, much needed qualifications to the ready room and exposure to the best training in the fleet. The *Wizard* team’s relentless work ethic was on display during the compressed timeline with a high operational tempo.

The squadron has also been pushing hard through the *Growler* Weapons and Tactics Program (GWTP) syllabus events, completing multiple sorties since last deployment and earning key qualifications. LTs Zachery “Mad Libs” Miller and Cody “SHIA” Horst earned their Level III *Growler* Mission Commander qualifications. LT Kevin “Mr. Weeboto” Vicencio and SHIA achieved their Level IV qualification as Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses Element Leads, adding additional tactical experts to their warfighting cadre. The LSO shack welcomed fresh talent as Mad Libs completed his squadron LSO qualification, and LT Thomas “StUFS” Wickum earned his LSO field qualification, reinforcing the squadron’s commitment to safe and effective carrier operations. LT AJ “Cabin Boy” Aldrian received a nomination to begin his journey as an LSO, joining the proud tradition of Paddles as one of Naval Aviation’s Angels in White.

VAQ-133’s roster continues to evolve as we welcome the next generation of *Wizards*. LTs Thomas “FNG” Beaudoin, Claire “FNG2” Graziano and Michael “FNG3” Milana have all joined the squadron, bringing fresh energy and enthusiasm to the ready room. The *Wizards* look forward to watching them grow into seasoned fleet aviators.

At the same time, we bid farewell to several senior JOPA who left their mark on the squadron. LTs Samir “Stuka” Patel and Keith “Yertle the Salty Sea Turtle” Henzer joined the VAQ-129 instructor ranks, continuing their service by preparing the next wave of *Growler* aircrew.

From traps to tactics, qualifications to transitions, the *Wizards* of VAQ-133 continue to move forward — upholding the proud traditions of Naval Aviation with grit, skill and just a little bit of Magic. We look forward to deploying with *Team Shogun* and the rest of *Carrier Strike Group Three* this winter and to an even happier return home.



VFA-25: MAINTENANCE PHASE IN NAME ONLY

by LT Joseph Merkel, USN

In the great pantheon of boredom — watching paint dry and grass grow, reading the Terms and Conditions — Naval Aviators know there’s one soul-crushing experience that stands above the rest — maintenance phase. But true to *Fist* (tactical callsign) form, VFA-25 decided to spice things up with a little roster roulette.

In a single roll of the dice, we traded away our defensive countermeasures subject matter expert (aka our department head “Yogi”), our AIM-120 whisperer (aka our Training Officer “BARB”) and our charming, witty and toothless British exchange JO (aka “BABS”). For this trio, who collectively brought 4,200 flight hours, two TOPGUN patches and six cruises, we received three shiny new JOs straight from the Fleet Replacement Squadron. Did we panic? No. Did we fire up the gouge cannons and say, “Welcome aboard, it’s about to get weird?” Absolutely.

To herd these fresh-faced killers, we brought back a familiar name on the flight line, but with an extra stripe. LT ... sorry, LCDR Eric “Thriftshop” Nelson joined us as training officer, bringing tactical wisdom, motivational one-liners and an unrivaled love for fighter spirit.

We also welcomed back LTs Teddy “Sweet Steven Janowski” Papenthien and Nate “Mot3l 6” Largent from their temporary duty (TDY) stints with the VFA-81 *Sunliners* and VFA-146 *Blue Diamonds*, respectively, both presumably still finding sand in their boots. We also welcomed a TDY hard charger, who promptly joined the schedules team.

Big changes hit the front office, too. On 25 April 2025, CDR Michael “Stoner” Christoph relieved CDR Taylor “Swift” Hesse as commanding officer of VFA-25. His first act was remaining calm, cool and fully caffeinated. CDR Ryan “Domo” Aldrich joined him as executive officer ready to bring balance, spreadsheets and chaos in equal measure.

With the cast set, the *Fists* shook off the cobwebs and launched into the air-to-surface Strike Fighter Advanced Readiness Program (SFARP) in early June. For three glorious weeks, we burned dinosaurs, practiced maritime strike and generally reminded everyone why *Fist of the Fleet* is not just a bumper sticker. We pushed strike fighter weapons and tactics candidates, flew jets and uttered the phrase “one more event” far too many times.

Massive credit to our maintenance department, the hardest-working crew in Naval Aviation. While we were in the air solving complex tactical problems (like “Where the hell did the FNG go?”), they were turning



A VFA-25 Fist of the Fleet F/A-18E Super Hornet conducts low-level training near NAS Lemoore in May '25.

wrenches and performing miracles. Shoutout also to Strike Fighter Weapons School Pacific for the top-notch instruction and for tolerating our collective overuse of whiteboards and sarcasm.

We wrapped up SFARP in a literal blaze of glory, launching an AGM-65 *Maverick* and watching PBXN-110 do its thing, turning desert into glass, all in accordance with “Thriftshop’s” favorite line — “It’s good to have fun, but it’s more fun to be good.”

Looking ahead, we are staring down Flight-Deck Certification (FDC) on board USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) and air-to-air SFARP, but before these evolutions we enjoyed the ever-sacred pilgrimage to Hook '25. “The Year of the *Fist*” has begun, and we’re full throttle into the work-up cycle for next year’s deployment. The jets are hot, the dice game is strong, and morale is ... as dangerous as ever. *Fist* ’Em!

VFA-86 SIDEWINDERS

by LT Anthony “BIG DOOG the Impaled” Alberico, USN

Since our last check-in, we have been keeping ourselves busy at VFA-86. In May, the *Sidewinders* executed our first detachment as an F-35C squadron to Nellis AFB in Las Vegas for *Black Flag*. During the exercises, the *Winders* (tactical callsign) had a 100 percent sortie completion rate while receiving adequate doses of Vitamin D at the Circa Pool and mentoring our new guys on how to lose their child’s college tuition on digital craps.

Upon return to NAS Lemoore, our very own LCDR Zach “Jerry” Williams was announced as the Commander, Naval Air Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet Pilot of the Year, a testament to his exceptional skill and teaching ability as a Naval Aviation leader. On 22 May, VFA-86 marked a significant milestone with a Change of Command, bidding farewell and thanks to CDR Nathan “Franken” Staples and welcoming CDR Patrick “Judas” Lakusta as skipper and CDR Troy “FUBU” Vantrease as executive officer.



LT Austin “Chuck E Chadds” Douglas of the VFA-86 Sidewinders signals to AN Yevheniy Lyashenko as part of preflight checks in advance of a sortie during Red Flag-Alaska 25-2 at Eielson AFB on 18 Jun '25.



The VFA-211 Fighting Checkmates accept the Commander Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic Golden Wrench Award in the squadron hangar on board NAS Oceana on 2 Jun '25.

In early June, the *Winders* once again packed our bags and headed to Eielson AFB in beautiful Fairbanks, Alaska, to participate in *Red Flag Alaska 25-2*. During the exercise, the squadron integrated with the U.S. Air Force, Japan Air Self-Defense Force and Republic of Korea Air Force, learning valuable lessons in mission planning and integration. While at *Red Flag*, the *Winders* again had a 100 percent sortie completion rate thanks to the hard work and dedication of our crack maintenance team. We also became intimately familiar with F-16 *Viper* traditions, mainly the fact that the pilots douse themselves in aftershave just prior to walk. This tradition was questioned and denied by former F-16 Weapons School and TOPGUN instructor “Hobo” Hartman, who stated emphatically, “Yeah, that’s not a thing.” While in Alaska, we bailed LCDR “PEOTE” Pagenkopf on the summer solstice and wished him fair winds and following seas as he goes on to pursue his master’s degree at Stanford University.

Upon completion of *Red Flag Alaska*, the *Winders* begrudgingly welcomed “Cloufbooters 1 and 2” back from their “good deal” temporary additional duty deployment with the VFA-97 *Warhawks*; the ready room has not been quiet since. Additionally, the JOPA strengthened in numbers with LT “Brawndo” Haynie as Super JO and LT “Cloufbooter 5” Jorgensen. Our department head corps also strengthened as we welcomed LCDR “Kunu” Wagoner into the hinge ranks.

Quickly shifting mindsets, the squadron conducted the first F-35C FDC for *TR*, with CDR Lakusta dusting off his Test Pilot School patch to complete the Joint Precision Approach and Landing System certification. During field carrier landing practice (FCLP), one *Winder* LSO earned his squadron qualification, and another earned his field qualification, building expertise in preparation for work ups and deployment. In early August, the *Winders* put the tactical hat back on to begin SFARP and Integrated ARP (IARP) with CVW-11 as they continue the Optimized-Fleet Response Plan. ’86 ’Em!

VFA-211 FIGHTING CHECKMATES

by LT Ben “Goonru” Hogin, USN

Since our last update, the *Checkmates* have been hard at work completing a productive and intimate SFARP syllabus. As the only CVW-11 squadron based at NAS Oceana, the *Nikels* (tactical callsign) have had Strike Fighter Weapons School Atlantic’s (SFWSL) undivided attention, and we have made the most of it! The world-class training we’ve received would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the entire SFWSL team, most notably LT Alex “Dr. Lexus” Jabaley. Thank you for keeping us sharp and ready to fight!

SFARP has also provided several of our JOs with the chance to advance their strike fighter weapons and tactics qualifications. LTs Cole “Touchdown” Cathey and Seth “Dilly” Brooks both earned their Level IV qualifications, and we will be relying heavily on their experience and leadership as we continue through work ups and prepare for our next deployment. Our *Checkmate* MVP, LT Chris “Chunder” Armstrong, who received this year’s “Brutus” Award for exceptional performance as a junior officer, was recently selected to attend the prestigious TOPGUN

course. We are incredibly proud of Chunder and know he will tackle this next challenge with the same unceasing enthusiasm he brings to the squadron every single day.

In other exciting news, the *Checkmates* recently received the CSFWL Golden Wrench Award for superior maintenance performance on board NAS Oceana. This recognition reflects the relentless dedication and professionalism of our maintenance team, whose expertise and hard work keep our jets flying safely and effectively every day. We could not do what we do without them. Congratulations to our talented maintainers for setting the standard!

The squadron also welcomed a new face, LT Colton “FNG” Schiefer. He joins us as a fresh graduate of VFA-106 and has already proven to be a welcome addition to the team. We’re excited to have him on board as we push ahead.

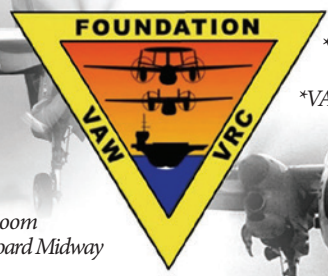
Looking forward, the *Checkmates* are gearing up to start FCLPs to get back aboard the ship and ensure our carrier currency stays fresh. Soon after, we will head to sunny Lemoore to join our CVW-11 brothers and sisters for IARP. We can’t wait to get the entire air wing back together again and continue building on the momentum we’ve gained thus far.

Thank you for your continued support and interest in the *Fighting Checkmates*. We’re proud to keep representing the finest squadron in the fleet. Until next time, *Nikel* Up!

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The VAW VRC VUQ Foundation hosted a Community Admin and a Community Brunch at Tailhook 2025. We received very positive Feedback from Active Duty personnel, our Corporate and Individual Members on both events. The Foundation is hosting the Community annual syposium in Norfolk and both Community Balls on Both Coasts this Fall. For more information on the Foundation and Foundation activities and to receive the Foundation IMC(Newsletter) and to join and support the Foundation go to the Foundation Website at VAW VRC Foundation.

CVW-17



USS *Nimitz*
CAPT Douglas Graber

CVW-17
CAPT Brent Jaquith

CVN 68



OLD SALT AND VAMPIRE OPS:
NIMITZ AND CVW-17 RETURN TO FIFTH FLEET

by LCDR Colin “Safari” Howell, USN

As *Old Salt* (tactical callsign) continued burning her magic rocks across the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility (AOR) in a relentless show of presence and deterrence, eyes in *Fifth Fleet* began turning eastward. Their focus was the unmistakable silhouette of the Navy’s oldest operational aircraft carrier, USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68). With quiet menace and the proud posture of Cold War legacy, *Nimitz* began steaming west, tethered once again to the mission.

The scene felt oddly nostalgic, like a Portland native catching sight of a mint N64 in a dusty GameStop window. There was that same glint of curiosity, a yearning to press “start” one more time and see what that old beast could still do.

By late June, *Nimitz* had chopped into *Fifth Fleet*, linking up with USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) and CVW-2 in the Arabian Sea. The timing was anything but coincidental. As regional tensions spiked into the flashpoint now known as the “12-Day War,” dual carrier operations surged to the forefront of U.S. naval strategy. *Nimitz*, partnering with *Vinson*, brought layered capabilities, flexibility and something more intangible — grit.

The true backbone of naval airpower remains the ceaseless rhythm of carrier operations — launches, recoveries, maintenance and the unrelenting churn of sorties. *Nimitz* leaned into this cadence, shifting seamlessly into and out of “Vampire Ops,” extended night-to-day flight cycles that tested and proved the flexibility of CVW-17’s aircrew and maintainers. These operations became a crucible of coordination, forging tighter bonds across both strike groups.

Operating a 50-year-old nuclear-powered warship isn’t glamorous. It’s warfighting with wrenches and willpower. Catapults go down, arresting gear misbehaves, the haze of *Fifth Fleet* days blend into restless nights, and the pitching deck keeps everyone honest. No hand soap only yields stronger immune systems. The broken grill in Wardroom I and II only boosts morale with every disapproving stare from a SWO as the air wing overtakes Wardroom III. No gripes, just grit.

This is where *Team Quicksand* (tactical callsign), an inside nod to those in the chaos of flight ops, maintenance and day-to-day shipboard grind, thrived. *Nimitz* may be the fleet’s oldest flattop, but in *Fifth Fleet*



Outgoing VFA-137 Commanding Officer CDR Hall “Waffles” Graham conducts his final flight leading the Kestrels in Jul ’25. Note the 40th anniversary markings and retro fin insignia on the jet.



Flight-deck personnel pictured amidst the steam from catapult launches during flight operations on board USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68) supporting U.S. Central Command tasking on 21 Jun ’25.

this summer, she is no museum piece. She is a sword, a little weathered at the hilt, perhaps, but sharpened by decades of warfighting culture and carried by a crew that refuses to let time dull its edge.

Dual carrier operations with *Vinson* did not just increase combat capability. They reminded everyone, friend and foe alike, that resiliency, like deterrence, isn’t a talking point. It’s the quiet, relentless hum of steam under deck, the controlled chaos of flight ops in 110-degree heat and the thunder of freedom sounding during any hour of the day.

Nimitz answered the call, again, proving that old warhorses don’t fade quietly. They launch at night, fly into the unknown and return home to do it again.

VFA-137 KESTRELS

by LT Patrick “Thunderpig” Hesse, USN

The *Kestrels* are checking in again on board *Old Salt* herself! Since the last update, we have traded the calm waters of the South China Sea for the rolling waves brought by the monsoon season in the Arabian Sea ... yes, monsoon. Your *Kestrels*, along with the rest of CVW-17, made the transit across the Indian Ocean to patrol the waters of *Fifth Fleet*. This change also coincided with the end of another line period where once again, those tiny, yet so mighty *Kestrels* earned CVW-17 Top Hook. Huge shoutouts for those 4.0 GPAs earned by CDR Tony “Dirty” Kopp, LCDR Sean “1/2 Squatch” Brokaw (CVW-17 Top Hook) and LT Shane “SHCPAM!” Martin!

The VFA-137 ready room has some important changes to report! First, we bid farewell to our beloved skipper, CDR Hall “Waffles” Graham. He went out in true *Kestrels* fashion breaking the sound barrier as he roared past mom at the safe, prescribed



minimum altitude of “200 feet.” Sir, we thank you for your guidance and leadership as a *Kestrel* and for your more than 20 years of service. CDR Tony “Dirty” Kopp officially became the 33rd commanding officer of VFA-137 on 3 July 2025, during an airborne Change of Command. Practically reenacting the classic “Planes, Trains and Automobiles,” CDR Justin “Awesome” Chalkley concluded his two-week journey to *Nimitz* via Navy oiler to finally take the reins as executive officer. Welcome, sir! Last, but certainly not least, LT Shane “SHCPAM!” Martin departed the squadron bound for the VFA-106 *Gladiators*, where he will instruct the newest generation of *Super Hornet* pilots.

As the *Kestrels* continue operations in *Fifth Fleet*, we send our best wishes to friends and family back home. We miss you and we will be home soon!

VAQ-139 COUGARS

by LT Ryan “TCUP” Mostofi, USN

Trading the calm serenity of the South China Sea for the dynamic U.S. *Fifth Fleet* AOR, the *Cougars* have charged full throttle into new challenges. Morale remains as high as ever thanks to our enduring optimism, creative problem-solving and plenty of caffeine.

We waved farewell to LT Preston “D.E.Z.” Custer, whose epic wardroom storytelling and sharp wit are sorely missed. Additionally, we proudly congratulate and bid farewell to CWO3 Jhulem “JB” Edejer, who was selected as the assistant maintenance officer of the *Blue Angels*. Fair winds D.E.Z. and JB. We also welcomed new Command Master Chief, Norman Mingo. Welcome to the *Cougars*, CMC!

Since the start of deployment, the squadron has proudly executed our airborne electronic attack mission and ensured domination of the electromagnetic spectrum from the sea at any time and any place we are called upon to do so. The *Cougars* have been in high demand due to the unique capabilities of the EA-18G *Growler* and the major world events in the *Fifth Fleet* AOR in recent months.

Regardless of the mission, the AOR and the volatile geopolitical environment, the *Cougars* remain ready to tackle any challenge and laugh through the chaos.

VAW-121 CHANGES COMMAND IN THE GULF OF OMAN

CDR Charles “Sunny” Sonntag relieved CDR Brad “Broner” Weiland as commanding officer of the VAW-121 *Bluetails*. The ceremony took place in the skies above *Nimitz* on 7 August 2025, in the Gulf of Oman.

Courtesy of VAW-121



VAW-121 Bluetails officers strike a colorful pose in front of a squadron E-2D Advanced Hawkeye on the flight deck of Nimitz on 8 May '25.

CAG-17 CAPT Brent “Bob” Jaquith presided. CDR Weiland, from Northridge, Calif., enlisted in the Navy in 1999 and deployed twice aboard USS *Ramage* (DDG 61) as a fire controlman before selection to the Seaman-to-Admiral program. He graduated from Pennsylvania State University in 2007 and commissioned from the school’s NROTC program the same year. He assumed command of VAW-121 in June 2024 and led the squadron through its rigorous predeployment work-up cycle and much of its 2025 deployment.

CDR Sonntag, from Boca Raton, Fla., and a 2006 graduate of Jacksonville University, praised Weiland’s leadership and addressed the squadron on the future of the *Bluetails*. “I’m extremely humbled and honored to be the 49th commanding officer of the *Bluetails*! This deployment showcased the future of Naval Aviation, the desire and adaptability of the E-2D and the spirit of the United States Sailor. This squadron performed exceptionally well, and I could not be prouder. Our successes and accomplishments were one hundred percent due to our Sailors, a testament to their mettle and perseverance. Their drive motivates me and strengthens my desire to enrich each Sailor’s personal and professional experience.” CDR Ryan “Morton” January of Salinas, Calif., has assumed the role of executive officer.

The *Bluetails* have been hard at work, conducting Coalition tasking in the U.S. Central Command AOR. Our 2025 deployment has taken us all the way from San Diego to the South China Sea and the Gulf of Oman. Port calls included Guam and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

MC2 Carson Croom, USN



VAQ-139 Cougars EA-18G Growlers pictured in formations during the squadron’s airborne Change of Command overhead Nimitz underway in the South China Sea on 27 May '25.

AROUND THE FLEET

VFA-115 EAGLES

by LT Matt “Spyder FALCONE” Webber, USN

As the hot Lemoore summer days wind down, the *Talons* (tactical callsign) of VFA-115 look back on one full year in our new home. As we await our first shipment of F-35C aircraft this fall, pilots chug along through the Fleet Replacement Squadron syllabus. Skipper CDR William “Milkman” Gifford is projected to complete it in a brisk 13 months, and his eager Eaglets follow closely behind.

Meanwhile, the yearlong JO drought finally ended with the patching of LTJG Ahad “Nighthawk” Asim in June. We desperately hope his temporary additional duty (TAD) with the VFA-86 *Sidewinders* doesn’t turn him into a true “Clouf.”

With no actual *Panther* aircraft to speak of, the *Talons* conducted a sort of panther hunt of our own at this year’s Fighter Bash. After an arduous safari expedition, the VFA-125 *Rough Raiders*’ beloved idol (or possibly Chinese listening device) joined Nighthawk in the annual diving competition (almost no panthers were harmed in the performance), earning a very respectable second place.

While the fifth-generation pilots continue their search for the elusive *Panther*, the rest of the command remains hard at work. More than 150 Sailors remain TAD with VFA-125, gaining the qualifications and experience we will need to be “safe for flight” this February. We bade farewell to LT Hunter “rabbit” Zackowski, who after finishing his Level IV qualification with the VFA-103 *Jolly Rogers*, joined VFC-13 at NAS Fallon. We hope he can regain his single-seat bearings in time for “Viper U.” Operations Officer LCDR James “Friendzone” Land also enjoyed some two-seat time with the *Jolly Rogers* as he continues his search for the elusive Mission Commander qualification.

The *Talons* remain poised for the acquisition of our new fleet and the return to in-house tactical training. Hopefully as the Central Valley heat breaks late this year, you will once again hear some *Talon* callsigns in the Ocho, even if you never see them. Until then, watch this space. EFR!



Not just a participation award, but a bona fide second place finish by LTJG Ahad “Nighthawk” Asim in the Fighter Bash Diving Contest.

Courtesy of VFA-115

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Hook '25 Recap

by LT Grace “GLITTERS” Kording, USN

All photographs by CJ Machado



This year, we celebrated 69 years of the Tailhook Association and our annual symposium’s second year at the Grand Sierra Resort. From the symposium’s beginnings in Rosarito Beach, Mexico, to its modern face in Reno, members and families continue to enjoy the camaraderie that only this event can provide. This year’s symposium illuminated an equally modern theme, “Dominate Tomorrow.” Navy and Marine Corps aviators, veterans, industry partners and supporters attended the 21–23 August symposium to reunite with squadronmates, share sea stories and listen to marquee panels.

Guest speakers included ADM Steve Koehler, Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet; VADM John Gumbleton, acting Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command; VADM Dan Cheever, Commander, Naval Air Forces; RADM Daniel Martin, Commander, Naval Safety Command; CAPT Chris Hill, Chief of Staff, Naval Air Force Atlantic, and CAPT Leslie Mintz, Commander, CVW-1 among others.

The symposium focused on tomorrow’s warfighters, training, capacity and capability. The golden thread through every panel was a sense of urgency to put innovative technology into the hands of junior officers. Speakers emphasized the importance of the Tailhook symposium as a venue to foster a faster acquisition cycle between industry partners and warfighters.

“I’m continually impressed by the young folks I see across the [Naval Aviation] enterprise, to include the ones I got to speak with at this year’s event,” said Cheever. “They’re smart, resilient and they’re eager to learn. Tailhook is so important because it brings our community together to align our efforts, and those of the warfighters we lead, with the priorities of Navy leadership. This year’s event enabled us to focus on how we can strengthen the foundation that sustains Naval Aviation, sharpen our warfighting edge, and prepare world-class Naval Aviators who are ready to fight and win.”

The three-day event began with a panel reflecting on the past 50 years of aircraft carrier power projection, including remarks from RADM Lawrence Chambers, USN(Ret), who commanded USS *Midway* (CVA 41) during the evacuation of Saigon in 1975. On the second day of the event, LCDR Mark “Tugboat” Jbeily discussed artificial intelligence and innovation alongside aviation, surface navy and industry leaders. In an interview with “The War Zone,” Jbeily posed a question. “The wings on your chest are a sign of trust, ultimately, right? They represent that you’ve been through an established training pipeline. You’re going to behave in a predictable manner, in a standardized manner ... How do we take that concept of trust and now bring it to collaborative autonomy, or manned-unmanned teaming? How do we train to get them comfortable so, in the same way that if you and I were flying, if you were my wingman, I would know you’re going to behave in a repeatable, consistent [manner]?”

In perhaps the most moving panel of all, members of CVW-1 shared their experiences going over the horizon and operating in combat. Their historic 2024–’25 deployment on board USS *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75)



required intense mission planning, Joint collaboration and personal growth through unprecedented challenges. Junior officer panelists highlighted the camaraderie among the entire strike group and the critical role their training played in ensuring successful operations under high-pressure conditions.

On the last day of the symposium, Tailhook traditionally includes a winging ceremony during which Student Naval Aviators receive their Wings of Gold. Congratulations to them and their families!

- 1stLt David Niebel will be assigned to VMFAT-501 at MCAS Beaufort, S.C., to become an F-35B *Lightning II* pilot. He was winged by BGen Daniel B. Taylor, Director of Strategy and Plans Division, Plans Policies, and Operations, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps
- LTJG Nicholas Imig will be assigned to VFA-106 at NAS Oceana, Vir., to become an F/A-18F *Super Hornet* weapons system officer. He was winged by VADM Karl Thomas, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information Warfare and Director of Naval Intelligence.
- LTJG Justin Inman will be assigned to VFA-122 at NAS Lemoore, Calif., to become an F/A-18 *Super Hornet* pilot. He was winged by CDR Robert “Boom” Powell, USN(Ret) with Wings of Gold that belonged to the late CAPT Walter Ohlrich Jr.

The last day of Hook ’25 also included the RADM “Jig Dog” and Ginger Ramage Awards Brunch and the closing banquet. These ceremonies honor contributions by members of the Tailhook community. This year’s awardees include:

- Tailhooker of the Year: CAPT Doug “Pitch” Oldham
- Junior Tailhooker of the Year: LCDR Matt “Stuff” Huffman
- USMC Tailhooker of the Year: Maj Erik S. “Cosmo” Hopkins
- Ramage Award: USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) and CVW-3
- “Bug” Roach LSO of the Year: LCDR Sean “Piddles” Crain
- Large Business Leadership Award: Kallie de Vries — Lockheed Martin
- Small Business Leadership Award: Ward Carroll — Ward Carroll’s YouTube Channel
- Lifetime Achievement Award: Mark Aldrich
- Honorary Tailhooker of the Year: Janet Warren
- *The Hook* Contributor of the Year: Mike Crutch

ADM Koehler delivered keynote remarks at the closing banquet. He underscored the precision and tactical prowess of generations of Tailhookers who brought Naval Aviation to the heights it reaches today. From Lexington and Concord to today, Americans fought inside the weapons engagement zone to change the course of history. “The carrier and its air wing can, and does operate inside threat envelopes, and is vital to the mission today and in the future,” he said. “In 2026, we will celebrate our country’s 250th birthday thanks to our forebearers’ willingness to adapt, innovate quickly and operate inside the weapons engagement zone. This is part of our culture as Americans, and we must continue to embrace it.”



If you could not attend Hook this year, don’t forget to pencil in our 2026 dates. The third weekend of August will be the new norm for at least the next four years. Follow us on social media and our new LinkedIn page to see more Hook ’25 recaps!



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WAVEOFFS & BOLTERS

What is It?

by Mark Aldrich

The Summer 2025 mystery airplane jumped ahead many decades from our previous two offerings, representing one of those designs that appeared on paper but never made it into the air.

The somehow familiar and not familiar aircraft is a Ling-Temco-Vought (LTV) V-530 variant Type 4-B vertical/short takeoff and landing (V/STOL) anti-submarine warfare design proposal from the 1974-'77 period. During those years LTV studied a medium-speed concept (V-530) that incorporated a tandem-fan propulsion system in support of the Navy's "Type A" subsonic multimission V/STOL notional requirements. Of the four variants considered, this illustration represents the last.

Artist's conception of one of the LTV proposals for the V-530 and V-534 program.

The proposal was a high-wing monoplane with a moderate-aspect-ratio wing and winglets. It featured two shoulder-mounted engine nacelles with the V/STOL propulsion system essentially self-contained in the two nacelles. Each nacelle contained a core engine, two fixed-pitch fans with variable-inlet guide vanes, and associated inlets and nozzles.

LTV conducted several tests of the tandem-fan configuration and propulsion system components. These included a series of inlet tests with the NASA Lewis Research Center, front and rear nozzle tests, powered model tests to evaluate ground effects, and low-speed wind tunnel testing.

Some similarities in appearance to the S-3A Viking are notable. Eventually the Navy decided not to pursue the program, and no prototype was built.

The spotters that correctly identified this entry are Jack Bright and Peter Munro.

This was a tough one and our next challenge will certainly be a little easier test for you. 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

CDR Donald L. Frazier, USN(Ret), Life
CAPT Arthur Frederickson, USN(Ret) Life
CAPT Jerry B. Houston, USN(Ret) Life
CDR Vern Jumper, USN(Ret), Life
CAPT Aaron Dorian Lonquist, USN(Ret)
CDR William T. Walters, USN(Ret), Life

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What is It?

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ON DECK



Be “That Guy”: Pass It On

by CDR Scott “Lips” Ruppert, USN(Ret)

An A-4 Skyhawk assigned to the VC-7 Tallyhoers lands at NAS Miramar, Calif., on 22 Jan '74.

He flew in from somewhere in something called an A-4 *Skyhawk*. It was 1975. I was 20 years old at the time and dreamed of doing anything that had something to do with aviation. I was a rudderless, academically disinterested college jock that would have ended up as a very unhappy millionaire at my girlfriend’s family funeral home had it not been for “that day.” She had invited me to meet her brother-in-law, a Naval Aviator, as he flew in on a cross-country from someplace called Patuxent River.

He appeared on the horizon in what I later came to know as the break at what I then imagined had to be at least supersonic speed. He proceeded to wrap it up in a left-handed orbit and slowed the airplane down to landing speed by the time the orbit turned toward the runway. Taxiing to a stop right in front of me, the engine shut down, the canopy rose, and the pilot climbed down the ladder. I can still envision the 20-yard walk toward me 50-plus years later like it was yesterday — helmet and O2 mask, g-suit, survival gear and Naval Aviator swagger. The pilot’s walk from his aircraft changed my life. I wanted to be “that guy.”

He introduced himself as “Chic” (pronounced Chick — yes, there’s a story there as well). He spent two hours that evening telling me what it would take for me to become a Navy pilot. I got my rudder that night. I was no longer a disinterested college student but one with a purpose and the idea that someday I would wear that awesome flight suit. The biggest advice he gave me was that if I was serious about the Navy pilot thing, I needed to begin thinking like an adult rather than a typical 20-something who simply puts in the time at college with no real direction or purpose.

Following his advice to the letter, I graduated with the bare minimum GPA I needed but still failed the initial Navy aptitude tests they administered back in the seventies. No big deal; I was on a path and retook them successfully three months later. This led to a 20-year career flying A-7 *Corsair IIs* and F/A-18 *Hornets* for the Navy followed by Boeing and Airbus jets for an airline. Now, 48 years and 34,000 hours later, there is a bigger story that every Naval Aviator can tell.

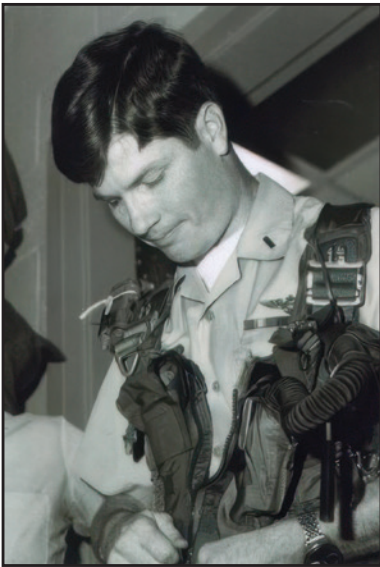
U.S. Navy pilots who spent their years flying on and off aircraft carriers make up a very small fraternity of some of the most elite pilots

in the world. We were not the same person we were before we took on that career. We lived a life of which most kids can only dream. Remember, I was one of them until Chic took the time to encourage me to go in that direction. That’s where the bigger story begins.

Our stories are unique, and they need to be passed on to the next generation. We need to take the time to put it out there with a sense of humility that is born out of equal parts of hard work and discipline we tackled when we took on the challenging opportunity in front of us. Don’t miss that opportunity we have in our later years. I guarantee there is some high school or college-age pilot wannabe that you can influence in an incredibly positive way.

Chic and I remained friends from that initial evening throughout my Navy training and well into our fleet years, he in fighters and me in the attack community. Our last correspondence was when he told me he had left active duty and accepted an airline job, continuing his career in the Naval Reserve. Chic’s real name was CAPT Charles Burlingame, USN(Ret), Naval Academy Class of 1971. He was the captain flying American Airlines Flight 77 that crashed into the Pentagon on 9/11. The time he took with me changed my life in 1975, and on that tragic September day 26 years later, he was part of the story that changed every American’s life.

Online resource



LTJG Charles “Chic” Burlingame, USN



USS *Hornet* (CV 12) World War II Squadrons

Commissioned on 29 November 1943, at Newport News, Vir., USS *Hornet* (CV 12) completed a short shakedown cruise and made her way to the Pacific theater, joining Task Force 58 in March 1944. Not until July 1945 did the carrier return to the United States after suffering damage in a typhoon while operating off Japan. During many months of combat, three air groups operated from the carrier, their squadrons flying in the Battles of the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf, supporting island invasions from the Philippines to Okinawa, and logging missions against the Japanese Home Islands. *Hornet* received the Presidential Unit Citation and seven battle stars for service in World War II.



VF-2 Red Rippers
F6F Hellcat



VB-2 Sea Wolves
SB2C Helldiver



VT-2
TBF/TBM Avenger



VF-11 Sundowners
F6F Hellcat



VB-11 Pegasus
SB2C Helldiver



VT-11 Little Butch
TBM Avenger



VF-17 Jolly Rogers
F6F Hellcat



VBF-17
F6F Hellcat



VB-17
SB2C Helldiver



VT-17
TBM Avenger



VF(N)-76
F6F Hellcat



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