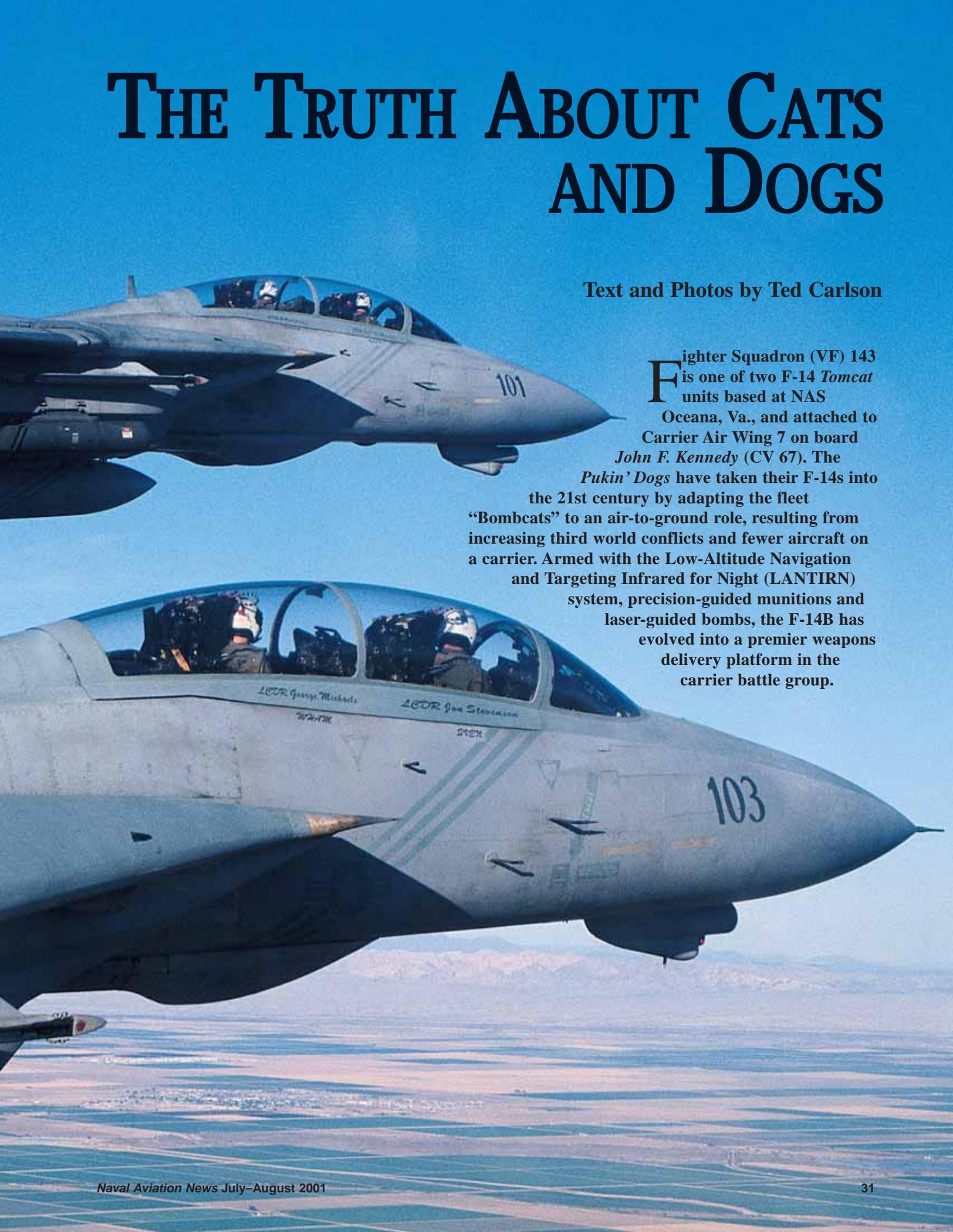




THE TRUTH ABOUT CATS AND DOGS

Text and Photos by Ted Carlson



Fighter Squadron (VF) 143 is one of two F-14 *Tomcat* units based at NAS Oceana, Va., and attached to Carrier Air Wing 7 on board *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67). The *Pukin' Dogs* have taken their F-14s into the 21st century by adapting the fleet "Bombcats" to an air-to-ground role, resulting from increasing third world conflicts and fewer aircraft on a carrier. Armed with the Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) system, precision-guided munitions and laser-guided bombs, the F-14B has evolved into a premier weapons delivery platform in the carrier battle group.



Pages 30–31, two *Pukin' Dogs* F-14s fly formation. Above, a VF-143 *Tomcat* prepares for a sunset launch. In February, VFs 143 and 11 became the first two fleet squadrons to drop a live JDAM. Below, *Pukin' Dogs* RIO Cdr. Calvin Craig, left, and pilot LCdr. Jon Stevenson flew their F-14 (opposite) on the history-making flight.

One of the newest weapons employed by the fleet is the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). The weapon is global positioning system-guided and can be released at high speeds and altitudes, safely out of reach of some air defense weapons. The F-14 can carry up to four JDAMs mounted on the fuselage belly. During training at El Centro, Calif., in February, the *Pukin' Dogs* and sister squadron VF-11 made history by being the first two fleet F-14 squadrons to drop a live JDAM. The Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 9 Detachment from NAS Point Mugu, Calif., guided the operational testing and orchestrated the JDAM introduction into the fleet.

LCdr. Jon Stevenson flew the VF-143 bird that made the JDAM drop. He commented, “The JDAM is all-weather, you do not have to see the target, and the release envelope is very forgiving. You could actually simultaneously pickle four JDAMs and hit four different targets miles apart. When you release the 2,000-pound weapon, you can certainly feel it come off and there is no question that it departed the aircraft. Here at El Centro, we also validated the JDAM with aircraft equipped with the old style head-up display. The maintenance guys did a tremendous job of



getting the jets ready and made several last-minute repairs to make it all come together.”

Pukin' Dogs Executive Officer Commander Calvin Craig was the radar intercept officer (RIO) in the VF-143 aircraft that dropped the first JDAM. “We flew several missions, ensuring the new software in the F-14 and the weapon were compatible. Every hop was successful, mainly due to the cooperation between the civilian engineers who work with VX-9 and our maintainers. The maintenance folks, especially the ordnance guys, were fantastic. We couldn’t have done it without them.”

Commanding Officer Cdr. Bill McMasters said that fleet F-14s dropping the first JDAMs “ushers in a through-the-weather bombing capability. The *Tomcat* makes an excellent air-to-ground aircraft. It has great range and endurance, is fast, carries a lot

of ordnance and can recover aboard the carrier with most of those weapons still attached. It is a much better bomber than originally thought. With F/A-18 *Hornets* and F-14s both air-to-air and air-to-ground capable, the battle group commander now has the versatility to call upon 46 aircraft to perform either role in our air wing. This flexibility is important with the limited space on the

carrier deck.”

RIO Lieutenant John Gayanich has been with the *Pukin’ Dogs* for two years. He noted, “The training here in El Centro is excellent. My pilot and I have dropped eight live MK 82s since we arrived. That is a reflection of how well the maintenance personnel have been doing. Without their hard work, the bombs won’t come off the jets. It is awesome that we take off with four bombs strapped on and return with an empty aircraft, indicating that everything went well.

“The LANTIRN pod is very user friendly and is intuitive to learn,” Gayanich continued. “It doesn’t take long to get up to speed using the system, although target acquisition takes some practice. As a Naval Flight Officer, having this job is the best. I can’t think of anything more challenging. This is a RIO’s airplane—a lot is happening in the back!”

Tomcat driver and VF-143 Operations Officer Lieutenant Commander Ray Worthington added, “The LANTIRN gives us a precision strike capability, enabling us to carry an array of laser-guided bombs. With a crew of two, our situational awareness is enhanced and we do not become as task saturated as in some single-seat aircraft. We used to be only air superiority and reconnaissance guys, but now we are bomb droppers, as well.”

A newer role for the *Tomcat* is forward air controller (airborne), or FAC(A), responsible for directing strike

aircraft/packages or artillery to a given point to engage enemy ground forces. During a FAC(A) mission, the *Tomcat* may work with an array of platforms, including joint coalition forces. VF-143 personnel took advantage of El Centro’s range-rich environment and favorable weather to hone their FAC(A) skills.

“Here at El Centro,” Cdr. McMasters said, “we have six *Tomcats* working the ranges day and night. With many communities going multimission, everyone needs both high- and low-range airspace. Our FAC(A) crews are working very hard to complete the demanding syllabus, and our maintainers are working just as hard to support them.”

Though the 1970s-vintage F-14 is getting older, it is getting better with age. Until F/A-18E/F *Super Hornets* are well established in the fleet, the B and D model *Tomcats* are the backbone of long-range precision strike for the Navy. With the LANTIRN system and the recent addition of JDAM, the *Cat’s* claws are sharper than ever! 

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