

Star Warriors Deploy the Force over Iraq

By LCdr. Jim Leach

How many people do you meet who choose to leave their civilian desk job for a month of combat operations? This summer, members of Electronic Attack Squadron (VAQ) 209 did just that as they deployed to Turkey to fly in support of Operation Northern Watch, enforcing the United Nations-mandated “no fly” zone over Iraq.

As a Reserve Force squadron, VAQ-209 is comprised of Selected Reservists (SELRES) and their full-time support counterparts from the TAR (training and administration of reserves) community. The *Star Warriors* routinely deploy from

their home at the Naval Air Facility on Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C., for periods of active-duty operations throughout the year to support the needs of the active duty Navy.

“Joining up with VAQ-209 is a large commitment,” commented squadron skipper Commander Rich Montanio. “Balancing both a military and civilian career with a family life can be a big challenge, especially in a squadron as active as ours.” Flying in combat operations became a part of the challenge for the *Star Warriors* from 6 June to 6 July.

Under the watchful eye of plane captain AD3 Tom Heiser, *Star Warriors* NFOs LCdr. Steve Milone, left, and Lt. Lanny Johnston join pilot LCdr. Clay Tettelbach, already in the cockpit, for a *Prowler* flight.





Photo by Morgan Wilbur

The Star Wars



Above, an EA-6B *Prowler* takes on fuel from a British VC-10 during a recent deployment to Turkey. Right, a squadron bird sits with folded feathers in front of a hardened aircraft hangar at Incirlik Air Base. Below, *Star Warriors* XO Cdr. Clay Fearnow (left) and VAQ-209 air and ground crews helped enforce the no-fly zone over Iraq during Operation Northern Watch.



VAQ-209 joined other members of the coalition air force—comprised of units from the U.S. Navy, Naval Reserve, Air Force, USAF Reserve, Air National Guard and the Royal Air Force—at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, the staging area for the multinational Combined Task Force that oversees Northern Watch for the U.S. European Command. Under the leadership of Cdr. Montanio, VAQ-209 aircrews flew combat flights within engagement range of Iraqi surface-to-air missiles and fighter aircraft. Typical Northern Watch sorties for the squadron's EA-6B *Prowlers* lasted over four hours. Add

in the pre-sunrise mission briefings, strike planning into the evenings, an around-the-clock maintenance effort, and the searing summer heat and you get a picture of the rigors of duty at Incirlik. The only Naval Reserve EA-6B squadron flying the most current version of the *Prowler*, the *Star Warriors* accomplished many notable achievements during their month in support of Northern Watch. VAQ-209 was the first EA-6B squadron armed with high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARM) to fly in northern Iraq, enhancing coalition firepower in the no-fly zone. It also became the first EA-6B squadron with a designated overall mission commander for the coalition forces, taking the lead in planning

and executing combat missions in the Iraqi skies. "Leading an Air Force combat package is a unique experience," said Lieutenant Commander John Hayes, a squadron pilot who served as mission combined commander. "The shipboard element that occupies much of Navy strike planning is no longer a factor. The air assets are different, as are many of the tactics. It was a great experience."

While supporting Northern Watch, VAQ-209 personnel helped develop new jamming tactics and HARM shoot criteria. Operation Desert Storm veteran LCdr. Mike Alessi said, "The collective experience in this squadron exceeds most fleet squadrons. We were able to assess the mission here and recommend some appropriate changes to the concept of operations."

Cdr. Glenn Miller, an electronic countermeasures officer and mission commander, noted, "EA-6B support for Northern Watch is fairly new, so

Warriors

Electronic Attack Squadron 209 was commissioned on 1 October 1977 under the operational and administrative control of Commander, Carrier Air Wing Reserve 20. As part of its readiness posture, VAQ-209 regularly flies opposing force ("Orange Air") flights with elements of the Second Fleet, the U.S. Air Force and the National Guard. The squadron also maintains pilot currency in both day and night carrier arrested landings. In addition to Northern Watch, VAQ-209 supported Air Test and Evaluation Squadron 9 in Sigonella, Sicily, for Exercise Trial Mace, participated in Aegis cooperative engagement capability tests, and flew opposing force flights for fleet exercises, carrier battle group evaluations and joint task force exercises in FY 1998. Last year, the squadron was awarded the CNO Safety Award, F. Trubee Davison Award for best reserve tailhook squadron, and the Golden Wrench maintenance award.

Skipper Cdr. Rich Montanio noted that Washington, D.C., is a perfect location for the squadron. "We are able to draw from a talent pool of electronic countermeasures officers holding civilian positions that require their electronic warfare expertise to analyze joint operations worldwide. We have Naval Flight Officers who work at the Office of Naval Intelligence, National Reconnaissance Office, National Imagery and Mapping Agency, and for companies that are developing the ICAP (improved capabilities) III EA-6B

upgrade as well as other major DoD [Department of Defense] acquisitions.

These organizations fully support their employees' activities in VAQ-209 as a direct link to military operations."

Maintenance officer LCdr. Chuck Mingonet added, "The same holds true for many of our enlisted technicians. They're able to hone their technical skills as DoD contractors and preserve their 'hands on' proficiency as EA-6B maintainers here at 209."

The *Star Warriors'* highly skilled reserve force complements Naval Aviation in combined U.S. military operations.



we had a chance to build our tactics based on similar rules of engagement we encountered in a previous deployment to Bosnia." *Prowlers* now fill the jamming role previously

provided by Air Force EF-111 *Ravens* until their recent retirement. VAQ-209 achieved a noteworthy distinction as the first Naval Reserve squadron to participate in Operation

Northern Watch, but this was not its first combat role. The *Star Warriors* also made reserve history in 1995 by completing a four-month combat deployment operating from *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) and Aviano Air Base, Italy, for Operations Deny Flight and Deliberate Force. That deployment marked the first assignment of a tactical reserve squadron to combat operations in over 25 years.

Executive officer Cdr. Clay Fearnow concluded, "We're doing our part to provide personnel and operating tempo relief for active duty squadrons, and our presence in Northern Watch is yet another example of the critical role this squadron plays." ✈

LCdr. Leach is the operations officer in VAQ-209, NAF Washington, D.C.



On the tarmac at Andrews AFB, ADAN Brian Westlye of host squadron VAQ-209 (right) assists a VAQ-128 *Fighting Phoenix* ground crewman in attaching a tow bar to the nose wheel of a VAQ-128 *Prowler*.

JO3 Chris Gaines