

Purple Prowlers

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During a conflict in which air power comes to the fore, enemy air defenses must be suppressed so that strike aircraft can work more safely within a hostile airspace. Carrier-based Navy and Marine Corps EA-6B *Prowler* squadrons now have a land-based counterpart in that mission: four joint, or “purple,” land-based expeditionary squadrons which include Air Force personnel in their complement.

Electronic Attack Squadrons (VAQs) 128, 133, 134 and 143 deploy for three-month periods to shore stations, compared to their fleet counterparts’ six-month carrier deployments. They receive the same training as fleet EA-6B squadrons through the fleet readiness squadron, VAQ-129, including carrier qualifications.

These “purple” *Prowler* squadrons combine the land-based expertise of the Air Force with the maritime expertise of the Navy, providing great flexibility for the national command authority in times of crisis.

EA-6B *Prowlers* of VAQs 128 and 129 fly formation on a KC-10A *Extender* tanker from Travis AFB, Calif., during Operation Red Flag.



The integration of Air Force officers into the EA-6B crew allows a combination of expertise to best perform the mission. "Having aircrew in our squadron from different services and warfare specialties means we have a head start on understanding the needs of the different platforms we protect and different approaches to understanding our own mission goals as well," commented LCdr. Ian Anderson, VAQ-128 pilot. These combined crews train as they would for the fleet, including carrier qualifications. "The steepest learning curve for me was to take my experience from landing on 10,000 feet of runway and putting it on 300 feet of landing surface only 70 feet wide," said pilot Maj Ken Edwards. "For an Air Force guy, doing that was a trick."

Above, LCdr. Mike Walls pilots a VAQ-128 Prowler over Nevada during a recent Red Flag exercise. Right, Lt. Kent Mathes in the electronic countermeasures officer (ECMO)-2 seat reviews mission notes while flying off the coast of Washington state. ECMO duties include navigation, radar and communications jamming and flight communications, as well as controlling the firing of high-speed antiradiation missiles.



“Unlike the *Prowler’s* role in the fleet, the expeditionary EA-6Bs are now protecting huge strike packages over land, and that is where Air Force crew members have a lot of experience.”—Maj. Ken Edwards, USAF



The expeditionary squadrons perform a slightly different mission than their fleet counterparts, as VAQ-128 ECMO Capt. Robert Zabel, USAF, explains: "Traditional Prowler squadrons are more focused on anti-ship, missile defense and roles at sea. Our primary focus as an expeditionary unit is force protection and bringing down an enemy's integrated air defense system within a campaign scenario."



Above, the ability to carry the high-speed antiradiation missile gives the EA-6B *Prowler* a potent offensive capability in addition to its radar-jamming prowess. Left, many of the Air Force members of Navy expeditionary squadrons had previously flown a similar mission in the EF-111A *Raven*.

