The VX-9 Vampires and the Tomcat

Since the first deliveries to Navy squadrons in 1972, the **F-14** **Tomcat** *has been the Navy's premier fighter platform. The aircraft maintains that position by remaining technologically state of the art, which includes new software, upgraded systems—and the* **Vampires** *of Air* **Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 9.**

Story and Photos
by Ted Carlson

The primary responsibility of VX-9's detachment at NAS Point Mugu, Calif., is to validate new *Tomcat* software, weapons and aircraft modifications for introduction to the fleet. The *Vampires* typically receive an upgrade from a developmental test unit, such as the Naval Weapons Test Squadron at Point Mugu, and test it in a "fleet representative" manner. Areas considered include compatibility with carrier operations, ease of maintenance, ability to interface with other systems and user friendliness.

Officer in Charge Commander Steve Leslie, who has over 2,700 hours in the *Tomcat,* said, "The VX-9 people are great. They work very hard and are truly dedicated professionals. Although the F-14A will be phased out within the next few years, the F-14B and D models will be around for years to come, and estimates of the *Tomcat's* service life ranges between the years 2010 and 2015."

Cdr. Leslie added, "VX-9 performs a vital role and is instrumental in assuring a good final product for fleet F-14 squadrons. When you look at conflicts such as Iraq and Kosovo, it is important that we deliver in a timely fashion, test the products thoroughly and ensure a safe and reliable system before the end user employs it in the fleet."

With the demise of the Cold War and increase of third world threats, the F-14 community has accomplished a successful multi-role change. The *Tomcat* can perform a lethal air-to-ground weapons delivery mission using the Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) and other new ground attack systems.

"Although we are flying a 25-year-old aircraft, we are now at the point that we are day-and-night strike capable with the LANTIRN system, and the F-14 is the platform that battle group commanders are going to select," said Chief Operational Test Director Lieutenant Commander John Einhorn. "With a good payload capacity, both air-to-air and air-to-ground roles and the Tactical Air Reconnaissance Pod System, the *Tomcat* is still performing better than most aircraft out there." And the *Vampires* will make sure it stays that way. ✈

Above, an F-14B *Tomcat* practices bombing runs with Rockeye bombs over the Pacific Ocean. Below, members of the maintenance team load an AIM-54C *Phoenix* missile. Opposite, "Vandy One" was the last *Tomcat* off the Grumman production line.