

U.S. Navy Tomcat Flight Demonstration Team: Showcasing the F-14

By Lt. Bill Lind

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If you're involved in Naval Aviation, or just have a love of flying and aircraft, chances are you've spent more than one hot summer day at an air show. And chances are that the highlight of those air shows was the spectacle of military high-performance aircraft amazing the crowd with their speed, agility and power. No single aircraft is more exciting, more sought after on the show circuit than the F-14 *Tomcat*.

The only *Tomcat* squadron authorized to stage flight demonstrations is Fighter Squadron (VF) 101, the *Grim Reapers*. Stationed aboard NAS Oceana, Va., VF-101 is the F-14 fleet readiness squadron, which is responsible for training new *Tomcat* aircrews for fleet service. The demo team is selected each winter from the squadron's staff of instructor pilots and radar intercept officers (RIOs). All have an operational fleet tour and over 1,000 hours of F-14 time under their belts, and each is a volunteer for many weekends away from home during the show season.

One big difference between the *Tomcat* Demo Team (as well as its F/A-18 *Hornet* counterparts from Strike Fighter Squadrons 106 and 125) and flight demonstration teams such as the *Blue Angels* or *Thunderbirds* is that the aircraft and crews performing the demonstrations aren't special purpose. The aircraft you saw at a West Coast show was likely training a "nugget" aircrew the day before off the Virginia coast. Although this puts a strain on the aircraft and the maintainers, it gives the public a unique chance to see a fully combat-capable fighter up close, flying to the limit. Last year, the *Tomcat* Demo Team appeared at over 20 shows throughout America and was seen by over 5 million people.

The preparation for the season is a real transition for the crews. Although the maneuvers in the show are nothing new or unique to a tactical jet aircrew, they strive for perfection to put on the most exciting and crisp performance. It starts with briefings and chalk talks from previ-



ous demo crews, and quickly moves into the F-14A/B flight simulator. The simulator has recently been upgraded with a half-dome color graphic capability, enhancing the realism in this vital training environment. The simulator can't replicate the true sensations of highly dynamic flight so it only allows the pilots and RIOs the chance to hone procedural skills, but this basic training is critical for a new demo aircrew.

Then, it's off to the jet, first flying the demonstration with a 5,000-foot "floor." As the crew's experience and skills progress, the altitudes are slowly lowered until they are proficient at the show the public sees. This training occurs not only at NAS Oceana, but at the Navy Dare Bombing Range in northeast North Carolina and NAF El Centro, Calif. Each crew is certified in writing by VF-101 and Commander Fighter Wing, Atlantic, and they are the only F-14 crews authorized to perform at air shows.

Every air show is unique, from the restrictions and limitations imposed by the Federal Aviation Administration

or show organizers to the terrain, population and obstructions around the airfield. The demo crew for each show consequently spends a tremendous amount of time reviewing field diagrams, charts and photographs while still at Oceana. The crew and primary aircraft arrive at the air show site on the Thursday before the weekend event. The crew again reviews the areas in which they'll fly, this time firsthand. Friday is spent practicing the performance, and come Saturday and Sunday, it's showtime!

Above left, a VF-101 *Tomcat* accelerates after takeoff on a recent training det at NAF El Centro, Calif. Right (L-R) Lts. Brad Dennis, Jerry Morick and Bill Lind evaluate a practice flight after landing. A full debrief with other demo team members and ground observers will take place later.

The landing and shutdown of the mighty *Tomcat* doesn't mean the show is over for the crew. The rest of their day is spent with the air show fans, answering questions about the performance, the F-14, flying or Navy life in general. It's an awesome opportunity to display the Navy at its best for citizens who rarely see the machines and people who make up their sea service.

All this public exposure wouldn't be possible without the support of the *Grim Reaper* maintenance department. While supporting the day-to-day training at Oceana, as well as over 18 detachments a year to different bases and carriers, VF-101 still provides the demo team with at least two fully capable aircraft and a support crew for each show. Again, everyone involved with the team is an integral part of VF-101 each day—their duties with the demo team are in addition to their roles as instructors or maintainers.

Fighter Squadron 101 skipper Commander Steve Voetsch and all the *Grim Reapers* invite you to observe the U.S. Navy *Tomcat* Flight Demonstration Team in action at an upcoming air show (see page 30 for schedule). See you there! ✈

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