



Super Hornet Soars with Flying Eagles

Story and Photos by Erik Hildebrandt

On the same October 2001 morning that the long-term future of U.S. tactical aviation was decided with the award of the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) contract to Lockheed Martin, I climbed into the back seat of the Navy's newest carrier-based strike fighter, the Boeing F/A-18E/F. I was hosted by the *Super Hornet* fleet readiness squadron, the *Flying Eagles* of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 122, based at NAS Lemoore, Calif.

The *Super Hornet* is an adaptation of the proven *Hornet* platform and is to be charged with filling the voids left by the F-14 *Tomcat* and S-3 *Viking* communities and will complement the omnipotent JSF when it arrives on carrier decks. It is now thought that when the last *Tomcat* flies off for good, the *Vikings* will stay in the pattern for a while, and some of the elder *Hornet* squadrons will transition to this newer version.





Above, a VFA-122 *Super Hornet* traps aboard *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72). Right, a *Flying Eagles* F/A-18F catches a wire. Opposite, VFA-122 instructor LCdr. Phil Poliquin will go on to a department head tour in VFA-14, one of the first fleet *Tomcat* squadrons to transition to the *Super Hornet*.

As these time-honored mainstays of the fleet slowly fade from the carrier air plan, the fledgling *Super Hornet* squadrons will absorb not only the missions, but many of the seasoned aircrew personnel as well. Intended primarily as the successor to the *Tomcat*, initial *Super Hornet* ranks have also drawn from the A-6 *Intruder* community and the more than four million flight hours of F/A-18A–D *Hornet* experience. The consolidation of these widely experienced pilots and Naval Flight Officers affords new E/F units valuable continuity and serves to shorten the learning curves associated with employing a new aircraft in familiar tactical mission profiles.

As a civilian observer of Naval Aviation, I have followed the *Super Hornet* program since 1997 when I was fortunate enough to photograph the initial test aircraft, E1 and F1, as they underwent testing at NAS Patuxent River, Md. Subsequent assignments have afforded me repeated exposure to the program, resulting in a body of work of which I am very fond. To me, the *Super Hornet* takes the best characteristics from its F/A-18A–D heritage and combines those with next-generation technologies that result in a virtually new aircraft.

Most noticeable in the updated cockpit is a touch-screen panel where the radios and a numeric keypad used to reside. In fact, all of the steam gauges are gone except for a few small emergency standby instruments. The center display on which the moving map is usually shown has been enlarged and now affords not just a bigger picture, but a





considerably sharper image. For our photo ops, we manned up a jet for its second flight since delivery to the squadron. There were no scratches in the paint, the canopy was crystal clear and the cockpit still had that showroom-new smell.

The *Super Hornet* is about 20 percent larger (in length and wingspan) than the other versions. However, the cockpit and canopy are the same, so from an aircrew's perspective there is no real sense of increased size—except maybe the

feeling of being a bit higher off the ground. In the air, the jet feels considerably more stocky than the *Hornet*.

The *Super Hornet* seems to reflect its name as the superlative F/A-18, and the E/F fleet program is ramping up. VFA-115 is already preparing for deployment in April, and in the coming months both Fighter Squadrons 14 and 41, recently back from action over Afghanistan, will make the first fleet transitions from the *Tomcat* to the *Super Hornet*. Surely, there will be ongoing comparisons between the two platforms, but as VFA-122 has already proven, in the end it is the combined contributions of all aviation communities that make a successful Naval Aviation team.



Erik Hildebrandt is a professional aviation photographer and writer. Special thanks to VFA-122 schedules officer Lt. Brandon Harris and LCdr. Jeff Bender, *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN 72) public affairs officer, for their support.

