

VF-103: THE JOLLY ROGERS LIVE ON

By Rick Llinares

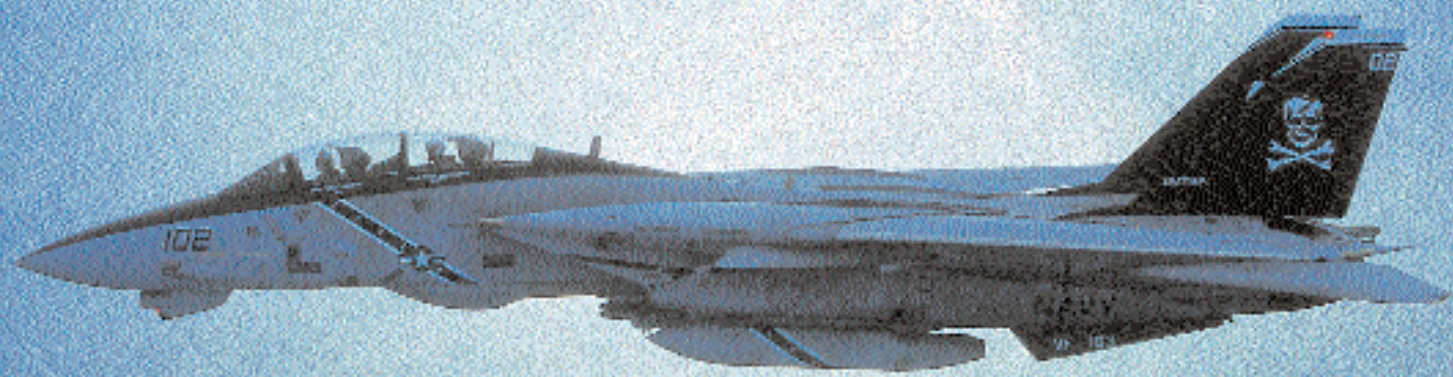
The *Jolly Rogers* of Fighter Squadron (VF) 103 at NAS Oceana, Va., began their 50-year history on 1 May 1952 as the *Sluggers*. Today, they carry on the traditions of their current namesake. The twin tails of the squadron's 10 F-14B Tomcats are adorned with the various awards the unit has received. The "Battle E" for efficiency award on the tail signifies VF-103 as the best overall F-14 squadron in the fighter wing in 2000. Also awarded in 2000 to the *Jolly Rogers* was the Joseph C. Clifton Award recognizing the best F-14 squadron in the Navy. In addition, the unit received the Defense Phoenix Award for Maintenance Excellence for which all services compete. *Jolly Rogers* CO Commander Gary Williams explained, "Two selectees are picked from within three categories. It's a nice

tribute to our maintenance department [in the small category] considering we were competing with units operating the much newer F-16 and F/A-18 aircraft."

At the time of this writing, the *Jolly Rogers* were deployed with Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 17 aboard *George Washington* (CVN 73) in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The first *Jolly Rogers* squadron dates back to WW II when it was established as VF-17 on 1

January 1943. Flying the F4U *Corsair*, the unit fought in the Pacific against the Japanese. VF-17's CO Commander Tom Blackburn wanted a squadron name that would instill a sense of pride in being part of the young squadron as it headed off to war, along with an intimidating logo painted on the engine cowlings of the gull-winged fighter. The black flag with white skull and crossbones symbol was adopted to signify





VF-103's F-14B Tomcats proudly sport the skull and crossbones in carrying on the traditions established by the *Jolly Rogers* moniker.

the *Jolly Rogers*.

The *Jolly Rogers* name and traditions were passed on when VF-17 was redesignated VF-5B on 15 November 1946 and then redesignated again as VF-61 on 28 July 1948. VF-61 was disestablished on 15 April 1959, and the *Jolly Rogers* insignia became available for use by other squadrons. On 7 August 1959, the VF-84 *Vagabonds* requested authorization to adopt the logo.

Although the squadron shared no lineage with the former squadron, it wished to carry on the traditions and character of the original VF-17. The request to use the *Jolly Rogers* insignia was approved on 1 April 1960. In a similar effort, after the disestablishment of VF-84 on 1 October 1995, the VF-103 *Sluggers*, also wishing to maintain the presence of the *Jolly Rogers* within the fighter community, requested official authorization to use the insignia. The request was approved on 11 October 1995, and VF-103 became today's *Jolly Rogers*.

VF-103 initially operated the F4U Corsair before transitioning into jets with the F-9 Cougar. The unit later flew the F-8 Crusader, F-4 Phantom II, F-14A Tomcat and finally the F-14B (originally designated F-14A+) Tomcat. In 1996 the VF-103 *Jolly Rogers* became the first Tomcat unit to deploy with the low-altitude navigation and targeting infrared for night system that provides a precision ground attack capability to the F-14 community. On board *Enterprise* (CVN 65), the resulting "Bombcats" proved the flexibility of the Grumman-engineered aircraft design.

VF-103's skipper is rare among Naval Aviators in that he has served in both the front and rear seat cockpits of the F-14. This gives the skipper a unique perspective of the Tomcat. Cdr. Williams said, "I have flown the T-34,



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T-2, T-47, TA-4, F-14A and F-14B. I have been extremely fortunate to be able to [pilot] the Tomcat for my whole career, and wouldn't have wanted to fly anything else. I liken it to driving a monster truck amongst all the little sports cars."

As for his unique perspective gained from radar intercept officer (RIO)-to-pilot experience, Williams emphasized, "It was a fantastic opportunity and it gives me a greater appreciation for what it takes to make it through both training tracks and the [fleet readiness squadron]." It also gave him a much better understanding of both cockpits.



Several squadrons have sported the skull and crossbones insignia. Above, this aircraft illustration by Cdr. Rich Dann, USNR depicts VF-17 CO Cdr. Tom Blackburn's F4U Corsair in WW II. Below, a VF-103 F-4J Phantom II prepares to launch from Saratoga (CV 60) during the squadron's 1972 WESTPAC/Vietnam deployment.

"When I was a RIO from 1985 to 1989 flying F-14As, we were strictly in the air-to-air business and had very little of the neat new equipment that is in the F-14Bs we are flying now.

The transition was a great opportunity and I am extremely grateful for being in the right place at the right time."

He admitted, however, that it was somewhat different after five years in the fleet to jump back into the training command with all of the newly commissioned ensigns right out of school. But, Williams added, "Being a RIO and understanding how Naval Aviation worked made the pilot transition significantly easier by allowing me to focus on mastering the skills of 'flying' the jet. Talking on the radios, navigating and everything else was second nature."

Summing up his experience, Cdr. Williams said, "Many times, I have





PHAN Lindsay Switzer

At sea on board *George Washington* (CVN 73) during Operation Enduring Freedom: above, a VF-103 *Tomcat* comes in for a landing on the busy flight deck. Below, an aviation boatswain's mate gives a thumbs-up as a *Jolly Rogers* F-14 launches.

told the first-tour RIOs that I am glad I did the transition, because the workload on RIOs has quadrupled since I was sitting in the back seat, and I am not sure I would have been able to handle it. Fortunately, the front seat has not changed as much over the years. The basics remain the same: pull back on the stick and the houses get smaller; push forward on the stick and the houses get bigger. Thank God for simple things.”

Rick Llinares is a professional photographer and writer specializing in Naval Aviation.

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PHAN Jessica Davis