

# VFA-122 MAKES THE GRADE

By Anita A. Lesko



In mid-January, 10 Super Hornets and 15 pilots from Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 122 flew to NAS Pensacola, Fla., for a two-week Instructor Under Training detachment. Each pilot flew one or more two-hour sorties per day, with an emphasis on air-to-air missions against F/A-18 Hornets of Composite Fighter Squadron 12. Instructor pilot Lieutenant Michael DePalma explained that the adversary squadron provided “the most disciplined, the most professional, and the most accurate representation of what a real enemy threat would be out there.” This level of training ensures that the instructors remain at the top of their game and can translate this experience to their future students.

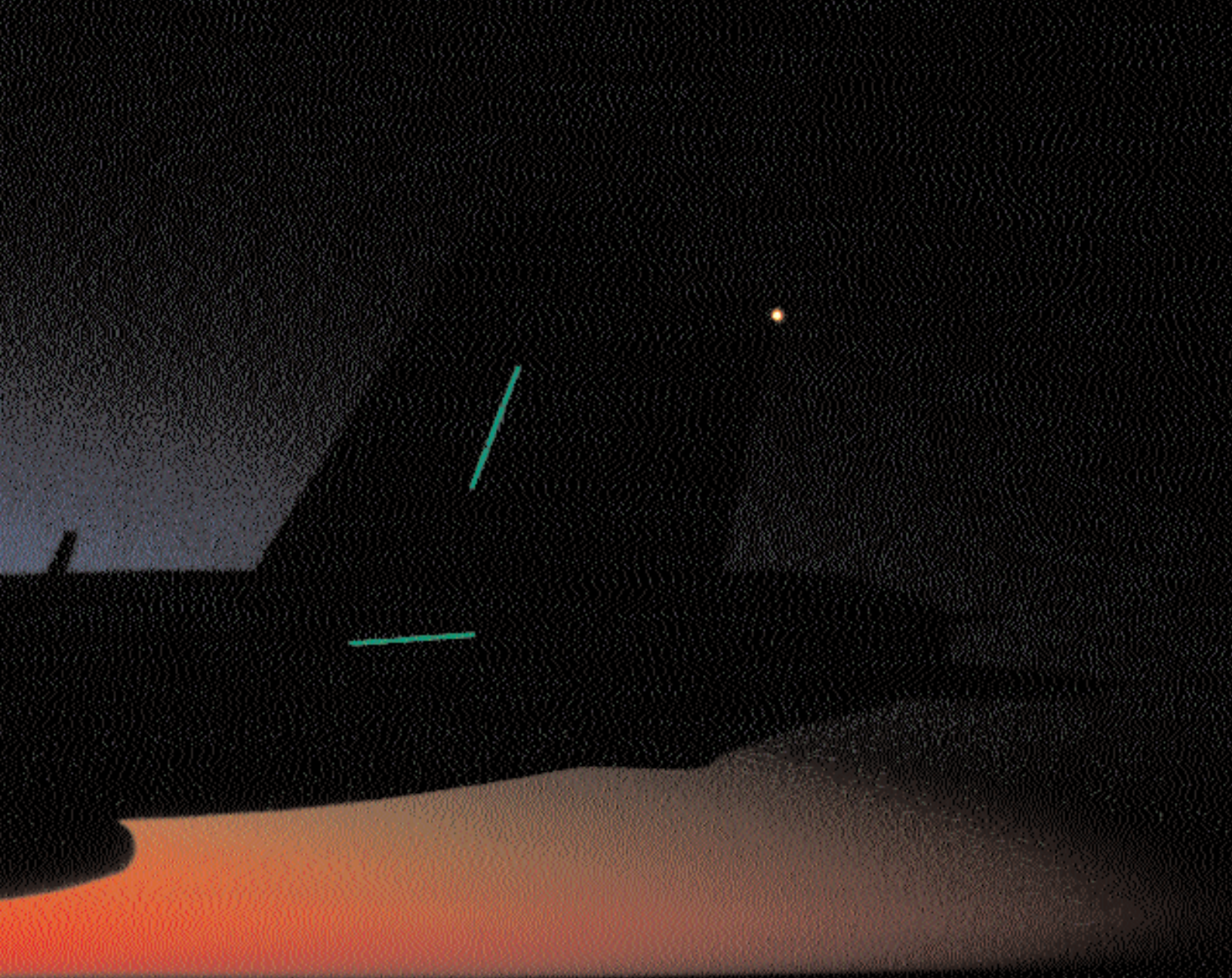


Background, Ted Carlson shot a VFA-122 F/A-18F at sunrise with formation and position lights aglow. Above, Lt. Michael DePalma captured the view from the back seat as a squadron Super Hornet banks over NAS Pensacola.

As the F/A-18E/F fleet readiness squadron (FRS), VFA-122 trains all fleet aircrew and maintenance personnel for the Super Hornet. Based at NAS Lemoore, Calif., the squadron is comprised of 55 instructor pilots (IP), 15 weapon systems operator (WSO) instructors, and 485 enlisted maintenance personnel. As deployed instructors return to the squadron from the war in Iraq, VFA-122 expects to ramp up to approximately 65 IPs and 20 WSO instructors. The squadron’s 37 Super Hornets include 11 single-seat E models and 26 two-seat F models, 8 of which are dual-control flight trainers.

Prior to any flights in the F/A-18E/F, all students train in the squadron’s two dome simulators and three





operational flight training simulators. After completing approximately 40 events in the simulator syllabus, students enter the appropriate training category. Category 1 is designed for new pilots just completing advanced jet training in the T-45A or T-45C Goshawk. The 8-month program consists of 10 phases: familiarization, formation, all-weather intercepts, section radar attack, basic fighter maneuvering, fighter weapons, low-altitude tactical training, strike, strike-fighter, and carrier qualification. Fleet F-14 Tomcat aircrew members enter the Category 2T syllabus, in which the types of flights are determined by the aircrew's experience. The most significant challenge is for pilots who are used to having a radar intercept officer in the back seat and must transition to the single-



The WSO's view during a canyon run in an F/A-18F Super Hornet. Photo by Lt. Michael DePalma.

seat E model. Category 2H is designed for Hornet pilots transitioning to the F/A-18E/F who will complete the program and either return to the fleet or become instructor pilots themselves. Due to the similarities between the new Super Hornet and the previous Hornet models, these pilots are required to fly only 11 sorties.

As more Super Hornets enter the Navy's inventory, additional Tomcat and Hornet squadrons will make

the transition, while new pilots will continue to report to the FRS for training. VFA-122 is well equipped to handle this challenge, and will continue its tradition of providing top-notch training for the fleet. ✈

Anita Lesko is an aviation writer based in Pensacola, Fla. Special thanks to Lt. Michael A. DePalma, a VFA-122 instructor pilot, and Mr. Dennis McGrath, public affairs officer at NAS Lemoore, Calif.