

A dramatic aerial photograph showing a massive, billowing plume of white and grey smoke or dust rising from a military strike. The plume is dense and turbulent, with a bright white core. In the dark sky to the right, a small jet is visible, flying away from the viewer. The overall scene is one of intense military action.

YOU MUST SHOOT AT A SPOT OUT IN SPACE
WHICH WILL BE FULL OF AIRPLANE
WHEN YOUR BULLETS GET THERE.

—LCdr. James H. Flatley

VFCs 12 and 13: Adversaries in Reserve



Story and Photos by Rick Llinares

Air combat proficiency is an acquired skill, and one that is highly perishable. The ability to succeed in the demanding world of modern aerial combat is proportionate to the effort expended in preparing for it. It's a use-it-or-lose-it scenario. The training needed to prepare new Naval Aviators for the air combat environment, as well as honing the skills of strike fighter pilots in Navy carrier air wings, is handled largely by a cadre of pilots in two Naval Reserve squadrons. The *Fighting Omars* of Fighter Squadron Composite (VFC) 12 and the *Saints* of VFC-13

Above, VFC-12 operates the F/A-18 Hornet in adversary tactics training to replicate fourth-generation foes, such as the MiG-28 and SU-27. Facing page, Art Director Morgan Wilbur illustrates a combat scene in which an F/A-18F Super Hornet crew applies skills learned flying against an adversary squadron.

are dedicated training units that are key players in sharpening the tip of the spear of Naval Aviation.

Based at NAS Oceana, Va., the *Omars* fly 10 F/A-18A and 2 two-seat F/A-18B Hornets, while the *Saints* operate 20 single-seat F-5E and 3 two-seat F-5F Tiger IIs from their home base at NAS Fallon,

Nev. Both squadrons fulfill a two-part mission. The first, to provide air combat training for fleet fighter squadrons, includes advanced training for the air wing strike fighter advanced readiness program (SFARP). The second is basic air combat training for fleet readiness squadrons

(FRS) that train new aircrews in the F-14 Tomcat and F/A-18 Hornet.

VFCs 12 and 13 are part of Carrier Air Wing Reserve 20 under the Naval Reserve Forces Command based in New Orleans, La. The units' respective 26 and 36 pilots comprise a wealth of flying experience within a mix of active duty, full-time and part-time reservists. The discipline required to maximize the teaching aspect during the flights makes experienced reservists a perfect choice for the adversary tactics training role.

Both units were established on 1 September 1973 as composite squadrons and were redesignated VFCs on 22 April 1988. They both flew the A-4 Skyhawk, the agile single-engine jet that was a staple within the Navy's adversary program for many years.

In 1994, the *Omars* traded their A-4s for the F/A-18 Hornet, a more capable threat replicator of the MiG-28 and SU-27 fighters being built by the former Soviet Union. The *Saints* upgraded to the Hornet from

the Skyhawk in 1993, but subsequent force structure alignments required the unit to give back the Hornet. They received the F-5 Tiger II in 1996.

There are four levels of qualification for pilots based on their level of proficiency, experience and certification. A rigorous in-house training program is maintained by both VFC units in order to teach their pilots to be experts in the field of adversary tactics simulation and training. The focus of the unit is not to beat up on fleet Navy pilots during air combat training hops, but to teach them and prepare them for real combat operations. A combination of academic syllabus and proficiency



check flights builds adversary pilots' body of knowledge. The building-block approach allows them to control increasingly more complex scenarios. It can take up to a year for a VFC pilot to go from a Level 1 to Level 4 qualification.

The downsizing within Naval Aviation over the past decade has impacted a once robust adversary program. In its heyday of the 1980s, there were over 10 dedicated adversary squadrons. Today, there are just three units.

VFCs 12 and 13 are joined by the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center (NSAWC) in filling this specialty. This

command incorporates the former TOPGUN program, as well as the air-to-ground and airborne early warning programs known as STRIKE U and TOPDOME, respectively. Located at NAS Fallon, NSAWC is considered the center of excellence for Navy advanced adversary tactics.

In the post-9/11 era, Navy carrier air wings are heavily tasked to fulfill commitments in support of the war on terrorism. As a result, turnaround cycles between deployments can be compressed, and VFCs 12 and 13 train the air wings prior to deployment primarily with the high-intensity SFARP. This is the best opportunity for squadron-level training in which individual air combat



The adversary pilots of VFC-13 fly the sleek F-5E Tiger II. Based at NAS Fallon, Nev., the Saints benefit from the large instrumented ranges there.

skills are honed. Over a two-week period, the squadron conducts eight graded events in which every aspect of the flight is reviewed in detail.

VFC-12's training officer Lieutenant Commander Paul Ratkovich explained, "A single SFARP flight requires a six- to eight-hour evolution with the brief, flight and post-mission analysis. It's an intense, graduate-level training program in which we nitpick the smallest details in an effort to make the pilots better.

"The SFARP requires the use of Level 4 adversary instructors and not all of our pilots are at this level at one time," Ratkovich continued. "One of our other main assignments is working with Strike Fighter Squadron 106 and Fighter Squadron 101, the Hornet and Tomcat FRSs. This is less dynamic, more scripted flying because the pilots are newer and less experienced. We sometimes have other reserve fighter units assist us with this tasking."

LCdr. Gregory Gusinde of VFC-12 noted, "The qualification matrix for pilots fighting as Blue Air during SFARP is much different than acting as adversary pilots. Blue Air refers to the fleet fighter pilot (F/A-18 and F-14) executing a normal strike fighter mission. The adversary pilots are concerned with the quality of threat replication. It is a totally different mindset.

"A Level 1 adversary is a 'bandit' wingman playing the role of a junior threat pilot," Gusinde explained. "A Level 2 adversary represents a threat country that is able to lead two airplanes into battle. A Level 3 is an adversary division leader of a four-plane group of Red Air fighters. The Level 4 bandit leads large force exercises."

Each VFC squadron completes up to five SFARPs per year, as well as eight to nine FRS evolutions per year. When not handling these responsibilities, the squadron



Top right, both VFC squadrons adorn their fighters in paint schemes similar to potential foes. This jet is wearing standard Desert Brown. Above left, VFC-12 operates a pair of two-seat F/A-18 Hornets. This jet was photographed taking off from NAS Oceana, Va. Left, an F-5 taxis back to the VFC-13 flight line after a mission.



works on the in-house qualifications of its pilots. LCdr. Ratkovich said the most challenging aspect of the VFC mission is “staying up to speed on new terminology and tactics. We work very closely with the TOPGUN program at NSAWC, and this keeps us in step with the latest tactics and enhances our credibility.”

Summing up the value of the VFC units, Ratkovich stated, “We dramatically affect and enhance the learning ability of Navy fleet fighter pilots and their

readiness for deployment. After we conclude an intensive SFARP, we get feedback directly from the pilots about the lessons they learned. If they come away with two or three things that they add to their repertoire, that’s great for us.” ✈

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