

VIEW FROM THE SCOOTER'S BACK SEAT

Story and Photos by Bruce Trombecky

With the deactivation of Composite Squadron 8 in September 2003, the last TA-4 Skyhawks were retired from Navy service. In the following account, a former aerial photographer remembers the aircraft as a superior photographic platform.

My first exposure to the A-4 Skyhawk came in 1970 when I was in junior high school. My father took me to the Cape May, N.J., National Air Races where the *Air Barons* of NAS Glenview, Ill., performed a tactical aerial display for the crowd of thousands. Flying A-4Ls they demonstrated toss bombing, in-flight refueling and formation fly-bys. I thought the “Scooter” was a really neat, noisy little aircraft.

A few years later while photographing the weekend transient line at McGuire AFB, N.J., an Attack Squadron 127 pilot was preparing his Skyhawk for a cross-country flight back to the West Coast. We talked about flying and I asked him if Navy photographers ever flew in the back seat of jets. He told me they did and, to my surprise, he offered me a peek into the back seat of his TA-4J. Then and there, I was hooked and set my goal to join the Navy to fly in and photograph from jets.

My chance finally came as a Navy photographer's mate after flying several years in helicopters at NAS North Island, Calif., while assigned to the Fleet Air Photo Lab's aerial section. I already had my Escape Pac seat license and swim qualifications and was itching to move up into jets. During this time, I spent my weekends at NAS Miramar, Calif., tramping the flight lines photographing squadron aircraft and their colorful markings. With 8x10 aerial helicopter prints in hand as my portfolio, I managed to persuade the operations officer of Composite Squadron 13 to pencil me in on the flight schedule for later in the week.

At Miramar I met the pilots and briefed for the flight, which was an intercept mission to train shipboard controllers. We manned up and I readied my two cameras, a medium-format camera for making prints and a 35mm Canon F-1 for shooting Kodachrome slides, the gold standard of a serious photographer.

It was exciting strapping into the TA-4J. The cockpit was so small I felt that I was becoming part of the aircraft. I paid close attention to the cockpit brief given by the pilot, who told me not to touch anything on the throttle side and in an emergency do exactly as he instructed me to do. With the canopy up at engine

continued on page 12

Instructor pilot Lieutenant Bryan Ramsey of Training Squadron 24 leads Ensign Byron Higgins through aerobatic maneuvers. For the author, the Skyhawk proved to be as valuable a platform for photographic missions as it was for the Naval Aviators who trained in the A-4 on the way to earning their wings of gold.





start and later in the mousetrap position, the side-to-side view was very limited. All I could do was listen on the intercockpit communications system (ICS), watch the plane captain's hand signals and hope we had an "up" aircraft and were truly going flying.

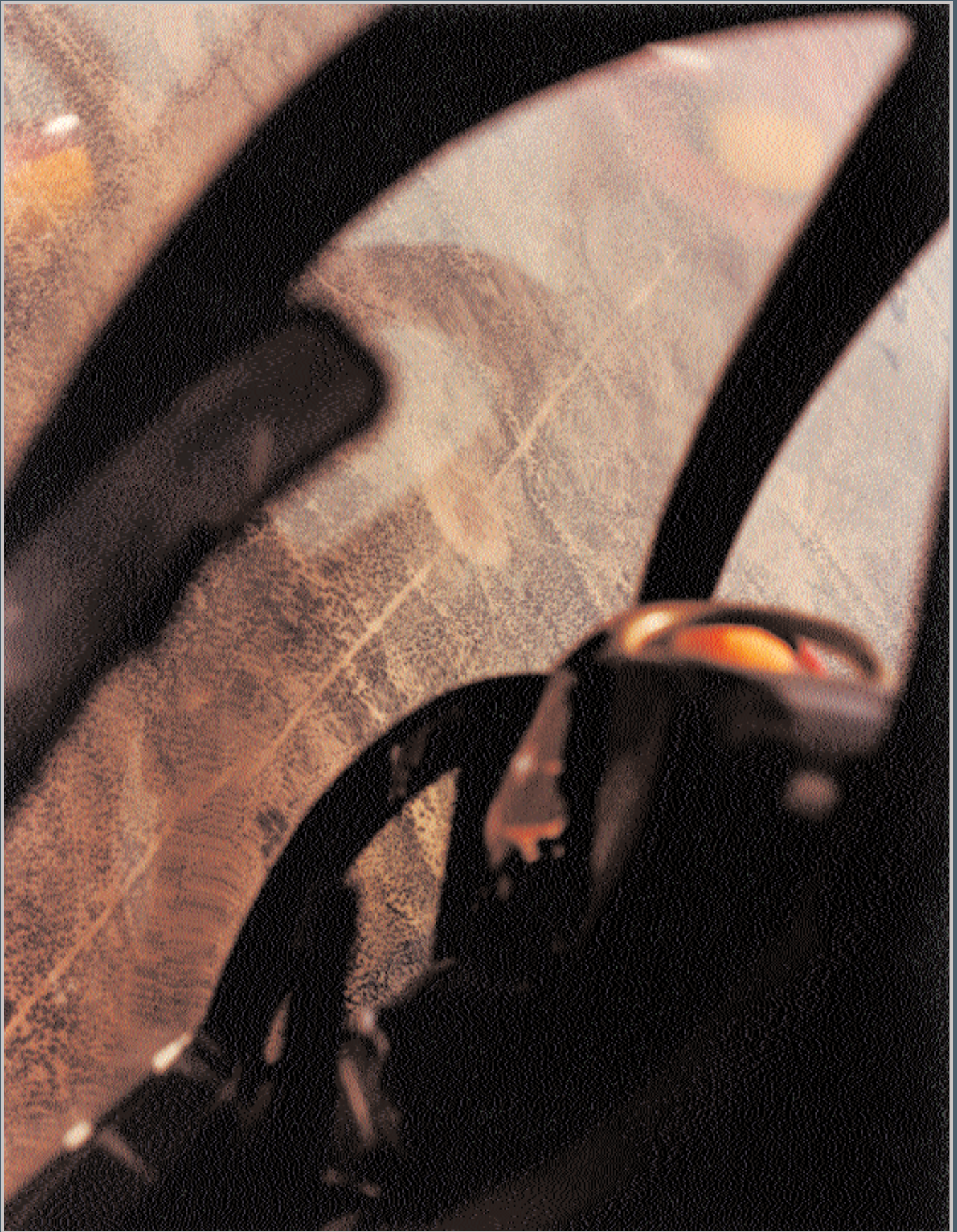
At the hold short with the canopy finally down and locked, I had a great view and was very excited about the photo opportunities of my first jet ride. Lining up on the runway for a two-ship formation takeoff, I asked the pilot to position slightly wider to have the flight leader's aircraft entirely within view of my lens. I wanted to get "MIRAMAR" painted on the gun tunnel pictured in the background during our climbout as we did the standard noise abatement right turn on takeoff. Going faster and faster down the runway, I was smiling so big under my oxygen mask that I may not have been breathing. I kept thinking, "I did it! I really did it!" I was overwhelmed by the sounds, colors and high contrast of the lighting at altitude. It's a different world up there.

From that point on, I strove to fly in the Skyhawk at every opportunity, and had soon worked out an efficient routine for photographic flights. The pilot would train his mirrors on me (mine were taped over because of glare) for visual signals, getting glimpses of my inputs while flying in formation. This

continued on page 14



Top, instructor pilot Lt. Doug Muzik flies a Training Squadron 22 TA-4J Skyhawk over *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63). Above, Fighter Adversary Squadron 45 Skyhawks—a TA-4J piloted by Lt. Bill Buddin with Lt. Mike Little and an A-4E with Lt. Terry Foley at the controls—illustrate the Skyhawk's adversary role.



Above, instructor pilot Lieutenant Tyrone Taylor of Training Squadron 24 prepares to deliver a practice bomb on a target near El Centro, Calif. Pages 14–15, a reserve Fleet Composite Squadron 13 TA-4J piloted by Lieutenant Commander Wendt with Major D. Collings, USMC, completes a formation loop maneuver over the southern California operating area.



came in handy when the photography became very dynamic either in a formation loop or at other times when reaching for the ICS would have been too time consuming, thus losing the shot. I learned to arrange my equipment within the compact cockpit for maximum efficiency. The medium-format camera was parked by my hip, between the seat pan and cockpit wall above the radios on a cushioned helmet bag. The 35mm camera was placed on top of the instrument visor hood on the right side. When performing radical maneuvers, both cameras were well secured. Nothing was stowed on the left side of the cockpit by the G-suit and oxygen hoses or throttle quadrant.

While aerial photography is a challenging task—in which you are operating from a dynamically maneuvering cockpit “office” to capture one-time events with no excuse for failure—the Skyhawk’s capabilities helped make my photographic flights a success. It could be cross-controlled easily to obtain unusual photographic aspect angles, and the canopy was virtually distortion-

free in clarity and color. The P-408 engine allowed it to stay in formation with high-performance, dissimilar aircraft. Fuel consumption provided more than enough flight time to achieve photographic objectives either briefed or improvised. Even with an occasional tanking extending a flight’s duration, we would have run out of fuel before I ever ran out of film, because I always followed the photographer’s cardinal rule: never run out!

I enjoyed many outstanding flights in the Skyhawk, and it makes me sad to know that this capable platform is gone from the inventory. Of course, to me, one of most advantageous aspects of the Skyhawk was that in many squadrons, it almost always had an empty back seat for me to talk my way into. ✈

Bruce Trombecky was a Navy photographer’s mate from 1974 to 1980, completing his last tour with the *Blue Angels*. He has held civilian aerial photographer positions at Boeing in Seattle, Wash.; NAS Point Mugu, Calif.; NAS Patuxent River, Md.; and with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

