

From Tomcats to Super Hornets:

VF-2 Becomes VFA-2

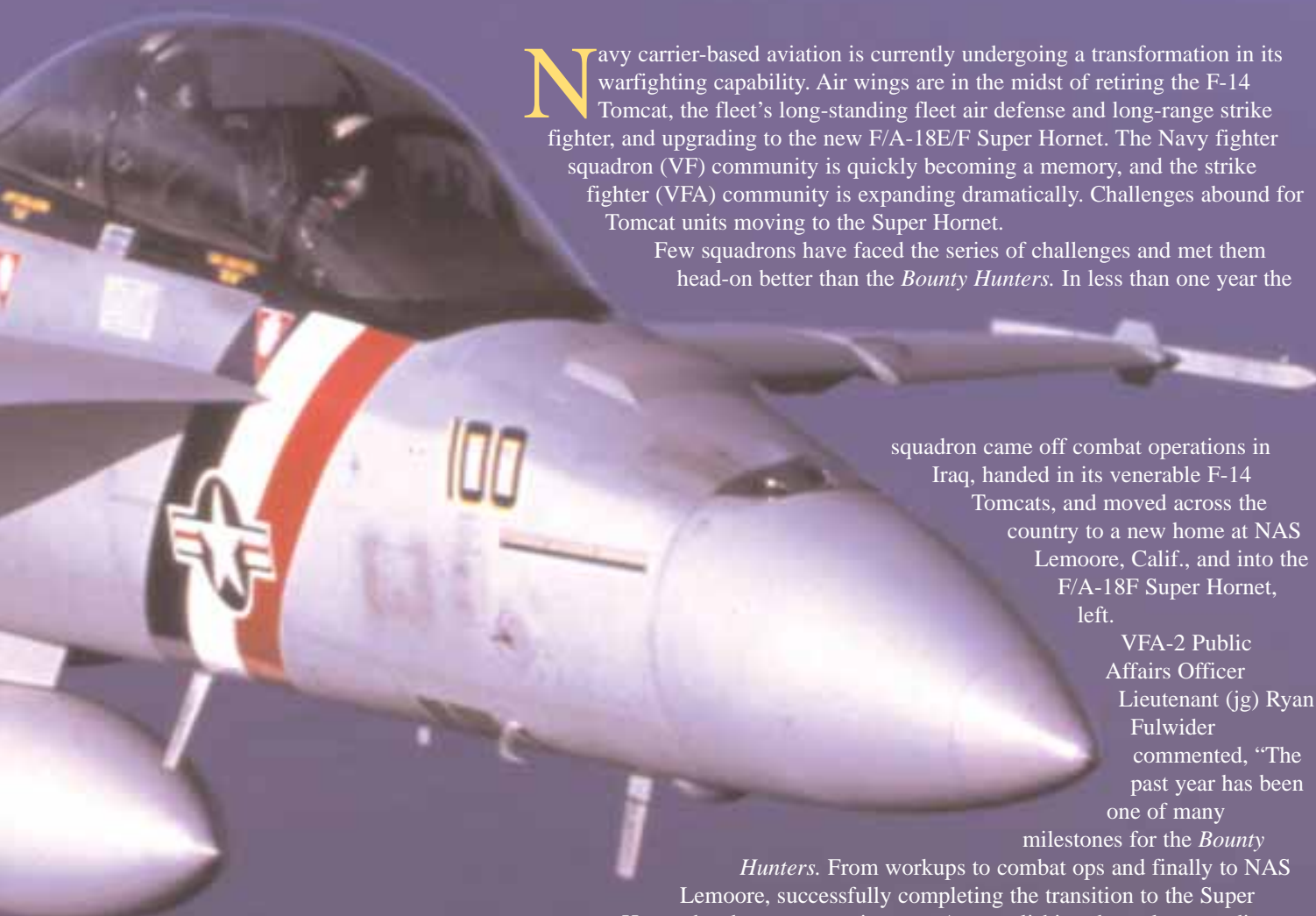


Bounty Hunters

Story and Photos by Rick Llinares

We are going to continue to train and deploy as the world's greatest and most capable strike fighter squadron. We will get home safely. We will fly, fight and win. We will train for war, take care of our people and take care of our 12 F/A-18F Super Hornets.

—Cdr. Doug Denny, VFA-2 Commanding Officer



Navy carrier-based aviation is currently undergoing a transformation in its warfighting capability. Air wings are in the midst of retiring the F-14 Tomcat, the fleet's long-standing fleet air defense and long-range strike fighter, and upgrading to the new F/A-18E/F Super Hornet. The Navy fighter squadron (VF) community is quickly becoming a memory, and the strike fighter (VFA) community is expanding dramatically. Challenges abound for Tomcat units moving to the Super Hornet.

Few squadrons have faced the series of challenges and met them head-on better than the *Bounty Hunters*. In less than one year the

squadron came off combat operations in Iraq, handed in its venerable F-14 Tomcats, and moved across the country to a new home at NAS Lemoore, Calif., and into the F/A-18F Super Hornet, left.

VFA-2 Public Affairs Officer Lieutenant (jg) Ryan Fulwider commented, "The past year has been one of many

milestones for the *Bounty Hunters*. From workups to combat ops and finally to NAS Lemoore, successfully completing the transition to the Super Hornet has been no easy journey. Accomplishing the tasks are a direct result of the hard work and professionalism of squadron aircrews and maintainers.

"VF-2 was deployed aboard *Constellation* (CV 64) with Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 2 from 14 October 2002 to 2 June 2003," Fulwider continued. "The *Bounty Hunters* participated in Operations Enduring



Freedom, Southern Watch and Iraqi Freedom (OIF), flying more than 2,000 combat hours and 483 sorties. The challenge of keeping the squadron's 10 aging F-14Ds ready for all taskings was met by the dedication and effort of the sailors and chiefs. It cost nearly 60 maintenance man-hours per flight hour, but the effort paid off in a 98-percent sortie completion rate during OIF and dropping 320,000 pounds of ordnance with 100-percent weapon systems reliability."

On 28 February 2003 during Southern Watch, aircraft 111, flown by Commander Dave Burnham and Lieutenant Justin Hsu, delivered the first Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) from an F-14D in combat. The *Bounty Hunters* worked hand in hand with Air Test and Evaluation Squadrons 9 and 31 at NAWS China Lake, Calif., and personnel at NAS Patuxent River, Md., to ensure that the F-14D community would have the JDAM capability in time for Iraqi Freedom. Subsequently, all three deployed F-14D squadrons utilized JDAMs during the Iraqi war.

In May, VF-2's fly-off ended the *Bounty Hunters*' 30 years of flying the F-14. As the squadron made its way back for a fly-in at NAS Oceana, Va., aircraft 100, flown by Lieutenant Commander Kurt Frankenberger and Cdr. Doug Denny, was met by one of the F/A-18Fs that they would be flying in a few months. Cdrs. Keith Taylor and Mark Adamshick of VFA-122, the Super Hornet fleet readiness squadron (FRS), flew the aircraft out to welcome them.

On 1 July 2003, VF-2 officially became VFA-2 and began transition training to the F/A-18F Super Hornet. The

VFA-2 *Bounty Hunters* took delivery of their first F/A-18F on 1 October. Currently, VFA-2 is fully operational with 12 aircraft. All of the squadron's F-14s remained at NAS Oceana for dispersion to other Tomcat squadrons. At full manning, the squadron will have 17 pilots and 17 weapon systems operators, as well as 4 maintenance officers and 200 enlisted personnel.

When asked how VF-2 came to be selected for transition to the two-seat Super Hornet, Ltjg. Fulwider said, "All Tomcat squadrons are eventually scheduled to transition to the F/A-18F, with the exception of VFA-14. The reason for this is that each air wing had one Tomcat squadron except CVW-11 which had two, VFs 14 and 41. When they transitioned, in order to diversify the air wing and bring the different benefits of both platforms, VF-41 went to the F, and VF-14 went to the single-seat E."

While the new Super Hornet represents the cutting edge of Naval Aviation technology, the transition has not been as dramatic as one might think. Even though the Super Hornet is a different aircraft with different systems, the mission hasn't changed. The challenge has been for the aircrew to learn to employ the new aircraft as effectively in the same missions.

VFA-2 Operations Officer LCdr. Mike Peterson, a Super Hornet weapon systems operator, explained, "As Tomcat guys, we were familiar with the Hornet because we had three F/A-18 units in the air wing. F-14 strike fighter squadrons and Hornet units had similar missions. It's like a

football team. One team might use the run-and-gun offense while another runs the West Coast offense, but they both do the same basics: blocking, tackling and passing. F-14 crews are familiar with offensive counter-air, air-to-ground strike and forward air control missions. With standardized procedures, we had an easier time than you might think moving to the Super Hornet.

“One of the most important aspects of the F-14 to F/A-18F transition is the continuation of the two-seat strike fighter community,” Peterson emphasized. “The F/A-18F allows us to fulfill several missions that are simply too complex for a single person. Forward air control and the electronic warfare mission with the eventual replacement of the EA-6B Prowler are examples.”

Ltjg. Fulwider noted, “VF-2 aircrews had the luxury of flying the F-14D with a digital cockpit, unlike other Tomcats. This made transition to the Super Hornet’s digital cockpit a lot easier. Initially, the change was tougher for the maintainers, going from an aircraft built with Cold War technology to one with next-generation systems. Now, they are beginning to enjoy the benefits of working on an aircraft that takes roughly 15 maintenance hours per flight hour as opposed to the F-14D’s 50 maintenance hours per flight hour.”

Fulwider went on to outline VFA-2’s training process since transitioning to the F/A-18F, “The squadron was split up into two classes at VFA-122. The first class completed a fighter

weapons detachment to NAF Key West, Fla., and spent a week getting their carrier qualifications on board *John C. Stennis* (CVN 74). The second class went to NAF El Centro, Calif., for a strike detachment and then on to carrier quals. The aircrew syllabus at the FRS included approximately 41 flights for 61 flight hours, 40 simulators for 50 hours and 215 hours of either classroom or computer-aided instruction. The maintainers completed 6 months of classes and training to recertify and qualify 14 shops to work on the Super Hornet.”

Cdr. Denny summed up the transition training, “The FRS was incredibly efficient and I was very pleased with the high quality of the syllabus. We had fantastic weather and I never missed a sortie. To give you an idea of how good these new airplanes are, I’ve flown about 30 times and I’ve never gone down, never written a gripe. Sure, other guys have gone down on the line or have had to return from the area early, but it is rare. Someday, the jet will get old and may even become a maintenance challenge, but for now it is very impressive.” ✈

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

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Facing page, two VFA-2 F/A-18F Super Hornets mark the beginning of a new era for the *Bounty Hunters*. Below, the F-14D Tomcat served the squadron well.

