



TOPGUN Farewells the Tomcat

Story and Photography by Ted Carlson



For 30 years, the F-14 Tomcat has played a role in advanced fighter pilot training with TOPGUN, the Navy's premier tactical fighter training program. From its establishment as the Navy Fighter Weapons School at NAS Miramar, Calif., to its existence today as a syllabus under the training department at the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center (NSAWC), NAS Fallon, Nev., TOPGUN's mission has remained the

same. It trains weapons and tactics instructors who can return to the fleet and pass along the skills they learned to other fleet aviators. As the fleet continues to transition to the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and phase out the Tomcat, the F-14's role in this training has drawn to a close. In September 2003, the last Tomcat class completed the TOPGUN curriculum, marking the end of an era.

TOPGUN department head Commander Richard Butler explained how the Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor course adapted over the years to match the growing capabilities of the Tomcat. “Initially, it was very F-14 centric, training specifically to air-to-air missions. Through time, though, TOPGUN has evolved, adding an air-to-ground syllabus that caters to the multirole capability of the F/A-18 and, more recently, the F-14.” Although the Tomcat will no longer be part of the syllabus, the legacy it has left will be felt in the fleet for years. Cdr. Butler continued, “The F-14 will soldier on through FY 07 with fleet units, so it still remains critical to maintain knowledge of the Tomcat’s capabilities. The personnel going through this NSAWC class will be responsible for imparting this knowledge to the fleet as the curtain gradually falls on the F-14. Many F-14 crews will transition to the F/A-18F in which they

will apply what they have learned here to the Super Hornet.”

One of the last four Tomcat students was Lieutenant Steve Djunaedi, an F-14A radar intercept officer. “Since the 1986 movie *Top Gun*, people associate the Tomcat with TOPGUN,” he said. “Only two crews were selected for this class, marking the final opportunity for an F-14 aircrew to earn a TOPGUN patch.” Pilot Lt. John Brattain added, “I feel honored to be one of the last F-14 guys to go through TOPGUN. The training is graduate level and unequalled in the service.”

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Above, Cdr. Richard Butler of TOPGUN. Background photo, a TOPGUN F-14A, left, and a Fighter Squadron 32 F-14B cruise the skies over Nevada.





From foreground, an F-14A Tomcat, F/A-18A Hornet and F-16B Falcon of the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center fly over Lake Tahoe.



Through the years, TOPGUN instructors have flown F-14s in two distinct roles: in support of class fighters in blue air training and as adversary aircraft for TOPGUN classes, air wing training and fleet support. TOPGUN instructor Lt. Jeremy Andrew said, “I love flying the Tomcat here. The flying and training we do at Fallon is aggressive, precise and second to none. You continually learn and work with professionals in the business of aerial combat. Since TOPGUN was established, the F-14 has participated in nearly every class, excluding the first four years. We have to take our hats off to the maintainers who have done a superb job of keeping the F-14 flying and at the forefront of Naval Aviation.”

Cdr. Scott Guimond, TOPGUN’s one-versus-one air combat expert and the NSAWC Operational Risk Management department head, commented, “When

TOPGUN was founded, the F-8 [Crusader] pilots helped the F-4 [Phantom II] fliers. Then the F-4 folks imparted their knowledge to F-14 crews. The F-14 crews later helped the F/A-18 and now the Super Hornet communities. It makes a big difference when everyone is willing to help each other. The new F-14 instructors deserve a pat on the back.”

The F-14 has become an icon of both the Navy and TOPGUN, and TOPGUN’s rich Tomcat heritage passes on a legacy of excellence and experience to the Navy’s tactical air community. 

Ted Carlson is a professional aviation photographer. The author thanks VAdm. Michael D. Malone; RAdm. D. C. Nichols; Capts. Jim Knight and Dan Dixon; Cdrs. Richard Butler and Scott Guimond; LCdr. Robert Jones; Maj. Mike Sobkowski; Lts. Jeremy Andrew, John Brattain, Rick Burgess, Steve Djunaedi, John Hildebrandt, Rob Simone and Matt Thrasher; OSC Brian Bassett; and all of the NSAWC personnel who contributed.