

In Relentless Pursuit of Excellence: VX-30 Bloodhounds

Story and Photos by Jamie Hunter and Richard Collens

One of the most diverse squadrons in the Navy is located at Naval Base Ventura County Point Mugu, Calif. The *Bloodhounds* of Naval Weapons Test Squadron Point Mugu are a combat support unit, providing naval warfighters with systems improvements to enhance their ability to “put missiles in enemy cockpits and strike weapons through their front doors.” The squadron achieves its mission by conducting and supporting cutting-edge research, development, and test and evaluation of naval combat systems.

Established as Naval Weapons Test Squadron Point Mugu on 8 May 1995, the squadron was redesignated VX-30 in May 2002. Today, it is the principal naval flight and ground test support unit for all Point Mugu Naval Air Systems Command aircraft and aircraft functions, including logistics and training support. The squadron is ideally located near a large sea test range off the southern California coast, and only minutes away by aircraft from extensive Edwards AFB and China Lake overland test range complexes. The





Facing page, VX-30 skipper Cdr. Wade Knudson is one of the squadron's three Naval Aviators still current in the QF-4. Above, a *Bloodhounds* QF-4S on a mission flown by Cdr. Knudson.

VX-30 assets routinely deploy worldwide to meet unique weapons testing needs at remote ranges and to provide fleet support.

Reflecting its complex mission, the squadron flies an impressive mix of aircraft, including QF-4N/S Phantom IIs, F-14B/D Tomcats, DC/LC-130 Hercules, NP-3D Orions and SA227 Metroliners. The squadron's F-14 Tomcats are used to test new weapons, hardware, software and mission planning systems. VX-30 was responsible for the release of operational flight programs incorporating and integrating Navstar global positioning system navigation, APG-71 radar high-resolution mapping and the GBU-24 weapons system. Most

recently, the squadron deployed teams in support of the Tomcat community during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) to clear the GBU-31 Joint Direct Attack Munition for operational use.

In 2004, the squadron's F-14s will be retired and replaced by F/A-18 Hornets, with all subsequent Tomcat test work being performed at NAS Oceana, Va., until the Tomcat's retirement, scheduled for 2008. VX-30 chief test pilot and F-14 radar intercept officer Cdr. Tom Bourbeau commented, "I'll personally miss the Tomcat's high-speed, endurance and long-range capabilities, as well as the ability to find and engage aerial targets at much longer ranges than other current fighters."



Above, VX-30's DC-130A deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom in early 2003. Facing page inset, VX-30 develops and tests new equipment for the F-14. On 23 July, "Bloodhound 200," F-14D (BuNo 163416), departed VX-30 at Point Mugu, marking the end of Tomcat research, development, test and evaluation flight operations on the West Coast.

The *Bloodhounds'* NP-3D Orions have the capability to track targets in support of various missions by using an extensive suite of sophisticated telemetry, radar and optical systems, in addition to flying fleet support missions. They also provide vital range clearance duties, an important safety element of the testing conducted in the Pacific Missile Test Range off Point Mugu.

Daily passenger service and logistics support is provided by three SA227 Metroliners, while a pair of recently received C-130s add both lift capacity and the ability to launch subscale aerial targets. During OIF, the DC-130A was deployed to a forward operating location

where it was used to launch BQM-34 Firebee target drones near Baghdad, Iraq, dropping radar-jamming chaff and decoys to draw anti-aircraft fire away from coalition strike aircraft. The LC-130F was formerly operational with Antarctic Development Squadron 6.

One of the squadron's most versatile aircraft is the QF-4 Phantom II, which can be conventionally piloted as a test platform or flown via remote control as an unmanned aerial target. Of the Navy F-4s converted to the full-scale aerial target configuration, initially as QF-4Bs and later QF-4Ns, the QF-4S version is the last Navy Phantom II variant. The *Bloodhounds* provide



aggressive target presentations in support of test and evaluation flights and fleet training sorties around the world, with the QF-4 flown in NOLO (no on board live operator) configuration by a pilot at a remote ground station. Inevitably, most of the squadron's cherished Phantoms end up as realistic targets for hungry new missile systems during live missile tests conducted from San Nicolas Island off the southern California coast.

VX-30 skipper Commander Wade Knudson is a U.S. Naval Test Pilot School graduate and one of the squadron's three remaining QF-4 aviators. He has served as the *Bloodhounds'* CO since February 2003 and is

responsible for the safe and effective operation of the squadron's 38 aircraft. He deployed to Kuwait in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom and has notched up an impressive 3,000 flight hours in 70 different aircraft types. He said, "I've had the incredibly good fortune to work on both aircraft and weapons programs. The opportunities that I've had to work with fantastic teams of professionals are in large measure responsible for my selection as commanding officer of VX-30. The F-4N/S has had a long and distinguished history in the Navy. Every time I am fortunate enough to take one airborne I think about those who have gone before me and the advancements in technology that have kept Naval Aviation's capabilities on the cutting edge. It's interesting that the performance of the F-4, though serving primarily as a drone/target aircraft, is still unmatched by many aircraft in service around the world."

The fact that the Phantom II has been retained until now by the *Bloodhounds* is testament to the fact that the type

remains uniquely suited to the flight test requirements. The QF-4's performance as a test platform remains unchallenged. However, the Navy will end its 44-year association with the F-4 in 2004 when the last VX-30 Phantom IIs are retired from the squadron and the Navy inventory.

The end of the QF-4 at Point Mugu will herald the start of a number of significant changes for VX-30, with the F/A-18 Hornet and Super Hornet taking over most of the manned test missions. With unmanned target drone requirements being handed over to USAF QF-4s, the Phantom II will conclude its naval service. ✈