

VAQ-134 GARUDAS IN COMBAT

By Cdr. Jay Johnston and Lt. Dev Lavery



VAQ-134 was established on 7 June 1969 at NAS Alameda, Calif., as the Garudas, flying the EKA-3B and KA-3B Skywarrior. After standing down in July 1971 to transition to a new aircraft, the Garudas were reactivated as the Navy's third EA-6B Prowler squadron in 1972, and moved homeport to NAS Whidbey Island, Wash. Assigned to Carrier Air Wing 9 on board *Constellation* (CV 64), the squadron began its first deployment with the new Prowlers, departing for the Western Pacific (WESTPAC) in January 1973, just prior to the termination of hostilities in Vietnam. Upon return in October 1973, the squadron transitioned to the Expanded Capability (EXCAP) version of the EA-6B. Over the next 20 years, the Garudas were embarked on a total of six aircraft carriers, and completed 12 deployments to WESTPAC and the



Indian Ocean. In early 1989 VAQ-134 became the first EA-6B squadron to launch a High-speed Antiradiation Missile (HARM) from a carrier-based aircraft.

During the time of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the Garudas flew and maintained up to six Prowlers. VAQ-134 led suppression of enemy air defense missions in support of the U.S. Central Command's Operation Southern Watch on 13 and 18 January 1993. Garudas EA-6Bs launched AGM-88 HARMs against strategic surface to air missile sites in the no-fly zone over southern Iraq, marking the

Above, a section of EA-6B Prowlers prepare for a break over Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, during arid, summer conditions. Facing page, the snow-covered mountains of northeastern Afghanistan provide a contrasting background for the Garudas during winter operations. Photos by Lt. Dev Lavery.

first time a VAQ-134 aircraft fired a HARM in combat.

In March 1995, as the squadron prepared to disestablish, the Garudas were once again called on to defend the flag in a new role.

Operating as an expeditionary squadron, VAQ-134 Prowlers provided electronic warfare support in shore-based areas, taking on the role previously filled by the USAF EF-111 Raven. When the decision came to not decommission the Garudas, the squadron had already transferred all aircraft and many key enlisted personnel. New aircraft began arriving in September, and by May



Above, a VAQ-134 Prowler launches from Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. A combination of high temperatures and the enemy threat environment require longer take-off rolls and faster airspeed climb outs. Photo by CMSgt. David Stuppy, USAF. Right, a launch crew works through six inches of snow while preparing for a two-plane launch. Photo by Lt. Dev Lavery. Below, much like a finely tuned NASCAR pit crew, Garudas maintenance personnel replace a left main mount on a Prowler at Bagram. The challenging runway conditions at the air field also make tire changes a frequent occurrence. Photo by Cdr. Randy Lynch.



1996 the squadron deployed with four EA-6Bs, despite having suffered an 80 percent turnover of personnel over the previous 16 months.

Over the next nine years, the Garudas' deployments alternated between MCAS Iwakuni, Japan; Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia; and Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, in support of operations Southern Watch and Northern Watch. The squadron was training in CONUS when it deployed in February 1999 to Aviano Air Base, Italy, as part of Operation Deliberate Force. After returning home in early March, the squadron redeployed two weeks later to Italy to take part in Operation Allied Force, arriving on the first day of operations. This five-week deployment earned the squadron the Navy Unit Commendation for maintaining a 100 percent sortie completion rate.

While participating in Operation Southern Watch from Prince Sultan Air Base, the Garudas were scheduled to return to the United States in early May 2002. However,

two weeks prior to coming home, the squadron was reassigned to Bahrain to support Operation Enduring Freedom missions in Afghanistan. Garudas jets flew over Afghanistan for the first time on 17 May. The squadron relinquished the watch to VAQ-140 on 19 May and departed Bahrain the following day for the United States.

After a final deployment to Incirlik in 2003, the Garudas focused their full attention on Operation Enduring Freedom, deploying for the first time on Afghani soil for a four-month deployment to Bagram Air Base in 2004. In 2005, VAQ-134 once again provided electronic attack missions for ground forces during an arduous deployment to Bagram.

Led by Cdr. Jay Johnston, the Garudas deployed their four EA-6B Prowlers along with 25 aircrew and 180 maintenance personnel from their home station in Whidbey Island, Wash., in late July 2005. Having learned from their previous experience in Afghanistan, the Garudas were able to optimize their tactical efforts and successfully flew for 188 consecutive days during the deployment.

Arriving during the Afghan summer and staying until late January 2006, the Garudas experienced the full temperature extremes that a high desert operating area has to offer (Bagram is located at 5,000 feet above sea level). July temperatures easily exceeded 105 degrees, and temperatures as low as 14 degrees were experienced

Acting as the only LSO in Afghanistan, Lt. Stephen Allum, left, stands with VAQ-134 CO Cdr. Jay Johnson as they wave a Prowler in snowy conditions at Bagram Air Base. Photo by Lt. Ryan Carmichael.





Above, the Garudas' trans-Atlantic journey to Afghanistan required several refueling evolutions for thirsty Prowlers. Photo by Lt. Dev Lavery. Below, All hands gather for a VAQ-134 command photo at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. Photo by MC1 Mikel Bookwalter.

in mid-January. This tremendous shift in conditions made operations challenging, especially with the high winds and dust storms during the summer and ice formation and snow storms during the winter months. Low ceilings and poor visibility also meant that on several occasions the only aircraft airborne out of Bagram were the Garudas' Prowlers.

The squadron successfully flew 672 sorties totaling nearly 1,900 flight hours, while achieving an impressive 100 percent combat mission completion rate in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The Garudas supported nearly 1,500 air support requests, and every electronic attack mission that VAQ-134 flew was in direct support of U.S. and coalition troops engaged in combat with enemy forces. During the deployment, the squadron also supported a significant number of joint combat

operations, working with coalition partners in Afghanistan including British, French, Italian, and German units. The Garudas flew up to six sorties per day, providing electronic spectrum dominance and communications jamming for Marine, Army, and Special Operations forces. Garudas aircrews also supported the landmark Afghan elections in fall 2005, as well as the critical ballot counting process that followed.

VAQ-134's operations while in the Afghan theater were successful despite the numerous challenges experienced while operating in the austere expeditionary environment. Bagram Air Base was built before the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and was used as a base for MiG-21s and MiG-23s until the late 1980s. The runway and ramp areas had suffered from decades of severe weather,



neglect, and disrepair. Truly heroic efforts by coalition engineers allowed air operations to continue out of Bagram while a new runway was under construction. The Garuda became accustomed to the challenges of only using half of the runway width at a time and being acutely aware of the significant FOD hazards present.

During the deployment, Garuda maintenance personnel kept the squadron's Prowlers and jamming equipment operating at peak levels of efficiency. These efforts by the Garuda maintenance team were required to maintain aircraft in an extremely hostile environment while under the constant threat of attack. The command supported numerous operations in which U.S. and coalition forces were engaged in direct contact with Taliban and other terrorist forces. Without the superb efforts of these maintenance professionals, many lives may have been lost on the battlefield.

As busy as VAQ-134 personnel were, significant contributions of time and resources were made toward humanitarian operations while deployed to Bagram. The devastating earthquakes which struck Pakistan in October



VAQ-134 CO Cdr. Jay Johnson and XO Cdr. Randy Lynch stand atop the remains of an old Soviet T-62 tank—a legacy of the Soviet occupation of Bagram Air Base in the 1980s.

2005 were met with a vast response by U.S. and coalition partners. Garuda personnel volunteered what little free time they had to help pack and prepare relief supplies that were later airdropped into the hardest hit locations. Several squadron members also volunteered their time at base hospitals, assisting with the treatment of many local nationals and refugees, who had been wounded by fierce fighting or by land mines. Garuda sailors also enlisted the help of their families back home in collecting several thousand pounds of relief supplies and winter clothing, which were

then donated to help the people affected by the earthquakes as well as Afghans displaced by the continued conflict.

The Garuda are extremely proud of their accomplishments over the past year and are ready to support U.S. and coalition forces again, whenever or wherever electronic attack assets are required. ✈️

Cdr. Johnston was CO of VAQ-134 from May 2005 to August 2006. Lt. Lavery, an Electronic Countermeasures Officer, is the Garuda's Public Affairs Officer.

