

ENTERPRISE AND IWO JIMA COMPLETE AFGHANISTAN OPS

Edited by Alfred M. Biddlecomb





Navy and Marine Corps aircraft provided a one-two punch in support of ground forces in Afghanistan as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) went on the offensive against Taliban targets from 2 September through 1 November 2006. The air support helped coalition forces engage Taliban extremists in the Kandahar Province as part of Operation Medusa while Operation Mountain Fury targeted the Taliban in the southern and eastern mountains near the country's border with Pakistan.

Operating from *Enterprise* (CVN 65) in the northern Arabian Sea, squadrons from Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 1 expended 120 weapons against the Taliban positions near Kandahar. F/A-18F Super Hornets from the Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 211 Checkmates and F/A-18C Hornets from the VFA-86 Sidewinders and the VFA-136 Knighthawks performed strafing runs and dropped precision-guided bombs against Taliban fortifications while coalition forces engaged the enemy on the ground.

AV-8B Harrier IIs, as part of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) aboard *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7), flew 136 sorties between 9 and 21 September 2006 while supporting coalition forces in Afghanistan. While the Harriers operated mostly from the deck of *Iwo Jima*, the MEU sped up its turn-around time between missions by inserting a small detachment of maintenance personnel and ordnancemen at an airfield in Kandahar. While openly challenging coalition forces in southern Afghanistan, Taliban insurgents

Left, Marines with Medium Helicopter Squadron 365 (Rein) move an ordnance cart down a runway toward an AV-8B Harrier II in Kandahar, Afghanistan, during flight operations on 15 September 2006. This 20-person detachment provided a quick turn-around for Harrier pilots flying multiple sorties against Taliban targets in the southern part of the country. Above, Cpl. Joseph Wisniewski, a powerline mechanic with HMM-365, signals that an AV-8B Harrier II is ready for flight operations on 15 September 2006. Photo by Cpl. Jeffrey A. Cosola.

frequently exposed themselves to waiting bombers and jets loitering above.

“Our Harriers were invaluable in filling the gaps of coalition air cover,” said Maj. Pete Lee, who led the first section of Harriers into Afghanistan. “We would regularly show up when no other aircraft were on station and coalition forces were engaged with the Taliban, and we would deliver lethal fire on the enemy. Our presence on more than one occasion resulted in the destruction of the Taliban and their weapons.”

The quick turn-around rate kept *Iwo Jima*'s crew busy preparing Harriers above and below deck as the sorties mounted. Working in teams of 11, the ordnancemen were able to safely assemble and prepare the ammunition, in the form of 500-pound bombs, at a rate of 8 to 10 per hour. “The AOs are a truly unified group,” AOC (AW)

Keith Turnipseed said. “The quality of their work is nothing short of spectacular.”

Once armed, the Harriers arrived on the flight deck where the ship's aviation boatswain's mates took over. “Even in almost intolerable heat, and after 14 hour days, those men and women will treat each aircraft launch like it is the most important thing they have done in their entire life,” said ABCS (AW/SW) Michael Mappin, the air department's leading chief petty officer. “It never ceases to amaze me how hard the ABs work. It makes me proud.”

The combination of blue and green air power kept pressure on the Taliban, giving ground forces the edge in carrying out Operations Medusa and Mountain Fury. Aircraft from CVW-1 began providing air support for Operation Medusa on 2 September, flying reconnaissance





AV-8B Harrier IIs of HMM-365 (Rein) operated from *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7) in support of coalition ground troops in Afghanistan in September 2006. Photos by MCAN Michael Minkler (above) and LCpl. Andrew J. Carlson (left).



and strike missions to support ISAF ground troops. As ISAF troops engaged Taliban extremists, enemy positions were called in to CVW-1 aircraft.

“These air strikes exemplify the quickness and adaptability of the *Enterprise* Strike Group team,” *Enterprise* skipper Capt. Larry Rice said. “Our ability to provide continuous support to ground forces demonstrates the success *Enterprise*-based aircraft have experienced while working with ISAF troops in Afghanistan.”

Super Hornets from VFA-86 along with Hornets from VFA-136 and VFA-211 flew nearly 100 missions during one of the busiest stretches of fighting between 13 and 19 September, hitting Taliban buildings and safe houses near Kandahar with 500-pound laser-guided GBU-12 and GPS-guided GBU-38 bombs. CVW-1 provided the first combat air support to Operation Enduring Freedom from an aircraft carrier in more than three years and was the first East Coast air wing to operate in the western Pacific in 18 years.

By the time the operations off Afghanistan were complete on 1 November, CVW-1 aircraft had hit Taliban targets with more than 120 precision-guided bombs. The Afghanistan operations complemented *Enterprise*'s work supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom



Above, an F/A-18F Super Hornet launches from *Enterprise* (CVN 65) while an F/A-18C Hornet is directed onto the catapult on 26 September 2006. Photo by MC2 Milosz Reterski. Right, ordnancemen load a laser-guided bomb onto a VFA-136 Hornet on the flight deck of *Enterprise* on 25 September 2006. Photo by MCSN Noe Solis. Below, *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) relieves *Enterprise* (foreground) on 31 October 2006. Photo by MCSN Rob Gaston.



earlier in the ship's deployment. During their seven-month deployment, the squadrons of CVW-1 delivered 65,000 pounds of ordnance, including 137 precision weapons, in supporting ground operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. They completed more than 8,300 sorties, including 2,186 combat missions, while flying more than 22,500 hours and making 6,916 day and night arrested landings.

"After nearly two consecutive months of operations, *Enterprise's* steadfast contribution to stability and security in the region is without question," Capt. Rice said. "From the Cuban Missile Crisis to Vietnam, to the first air operations in Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, *Enterprise* has resolutely stood 'ready on arrival.' This deployment is no exception." ✈





VFA-86 flight deck personnel echo the pilot's thumbs-up during flight operations aboard *Enterprise* (CVN 65) in the Arabian Sea on 24 October 2006. Photo by MC2 Milosz Reterski.