



USS  
ENTERPRISE  
CVN 65

136

410

OPERATIONAL

# KNIGHTHAWKS CRUISE THE WORLD

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Photographs by Lt. Peter Scheu

On 2 May 2006 the VFA-136 Knighthawks departed NS Norfolk, Va., with Carrier Air Wing 1 on board *Enterprise* (CVN 65) for a deployment that would take them more than 30,000 miles and through 26 time zones. Arriving with *Enterprise* in the northern Arabian Gulf in June, the Knighthawks marked the beginning of an eventful

deployment that would include combat operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Knighthawks' F/A-18C Hornets performed extensive flight operations in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Squadron F/A-18C Hornets performed border patrol and countersmuggling operations; conducted surveillance missions for improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mortars, and rockets; and supported soldiers, Marines, and other coalition forces on the ground. Following the death of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the head of Al Qaeda operations in Iraq, the Knighthawks were on the scene, working with ground troops to identify and destroy terrorists attempting to flee the area.

Additionally, on a separate flight over Tikrit, Knighthawks aircrew members observed a fire inside the city. Terrorists had attempted to destroy a communications tower with an IED, and had fled the scene to a house down the street. The Knighthawks observed their movements, talked additional air and ground forces onto the scene, and aided in the capture of the terrorists.



An F/A-18C of the VFA-136 Knighthawks prepares to launch from *Enterprise* (CVN 65) on 28 September 2006. The Knighthawks supported operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan while embarked aboard *Enterprise*.

Supported by a top-notch maintenance department, the Knighthawks fielded 108 sorties for 640.3 hours of green ink in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The squadron also flew 23 additional missions in the Arabian Gulf to deter attacks on Iraqi offshore oil platforms, helping maintain Iraq's primary source of income that will help rebuild the country's infrastructure.

Upon wrapping up operations in Iraq, on 1 July the Knighthawks celebrated their 21st birthday in style, halfway around the world in the Western Pacific. As CVW-1 bid farewell to CAG Capt. Gregory Nosal, a Knighthawks F/A-18C was the platform in which he flew his 1,000th trap prior to his departure. During the WESTPAC, VFA-136 took 6 of the 10 Top Hook spots, including the #1 ball flier for the air wing and the #2 nugget for the air wing, and proudly took the CVW-1 Top Hook Award back to their ready room.

Other WESTPAC highlights included *Enterprise's* participation in dual carrier strike group operations with CVW-5 and *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63). The Knighthawks also conducted a squadron detachment to NAF Atsugi, Japan, to complete Strike Fighter Weapons and Tactics Level III and IV qualifications for four of its pilots. While the transit was long, it was well worth it to make a port call in Pusan, South Korea, a chance to see the great city of Hong Kong, an adventure on the island city-state of Singapore, and the opportunity to tour Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Upon departing Malaysia in August and passing through the Straits of Malacca, the *Enterprise* Strike Group turned west, back toward the 5th Fleet area of responsibility. *Enterprise* and CVW-1 spent two months in the north Arabian Sea, supporting simultaneous combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. While most





of the CVW-1 aircraft operated from the carrier to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan, F/A-18Cs from VMFA-251 and pilots from VFA-136, VMFA-251, and VFA-86 pressed ashore to Al Asad, Iraq, to participate in OIF.

Operations in Iraq for the Al Asad detachment during September and October were very similar to the initial OIF operations that CVW-1 conducted in June. "Our role was part of Operation Together Forward II, which is a combo platter of Multinational Coalition-Iraq and Iraqi army and police forces trying to peacefully clean up what has been until recently an insurgent safe zone,"

said VFA-136's Maintenance Officer. According to the Knighthawks' Training Officer, "our main job here is nontraditional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. We are providing presence ops, raid support, and overwatch . . . we are the eyes in the sky."

During the deployment the Al Asad detachment completed 450 sorties for a total of 2014.7 flight hours in support of Army, Marine Corps, and coalition forces supporting the new democratic government of Iraq and its people.

Meanwhile, back on board *Enterprise* in the north Arabian Sea, Operation Medusa kicked off in southern Afghanistan, with the objective of ridding the areas around Kandahar of Taliban fighters. As International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel pushed forward in the areas west of Kandahar seeking out the Taliban, they came in contact with some well-entrenched anticoalition militia forces. When a coalition team became involved in a firefight with enemy forces established in two buildings, VFA-136 F/A-18Cs were tasked with taking out the Taliban strongholds. Upon checking in with the ground controller, one Knighthawk

**A Knighthawk pilot in an F/A-18C tests his flares prior to heading over Afghanistan in support of coalition ground forces on 15 October 2006.**





Above, a Knighthawk pilot talks with the squadron flight deck chief and one of the trouble shooters prior to an OIF mission in June 2006. Right, a VFA-136 Hornet refuels from an Air Force KC-10 over southern Afghanistan on 15 October 2006.

pilot “executed standard joint close air support (JCAS) procedures and the call was made authorizing release. The building was soon a memory.” The picture on the display from the targeting pod looked like “a swarm of fireflies as the building disappeared,” the pilot continued. “My wingman then made his run on the second target, with the same effect. We left the scene with a sense of accomplishment and comfort that we had made a difference.”

Operations in Afghanistan were a great example of operational flexibility, with forces from different services and different nations working together toward the common goal of eliminating the Taliban fighters. On one mission deep in country, ordnance was needed immediately on the ground in support of troops under enemy fire from an elevated position. Hearing the sounds of gunfire and the distressed tone in the controller’s voice over the radio, the Knighthawks knew that the friendlies were in close contact with the enemy, and that precise delivery was a must. However, to build an exact and accurate picture of the situation, each Knighthawks pilot had to coordinate with



different air and ground personnel. Although the environmental conditions were challenging, the Knighthawks were able to acquire the target area, and made two strafing runs to provide suppressing fire.

With the squadron's Hornets now critically low on fuel due to the strafing runs, Air Force tankers went out of their way to provide immediate support to allow them to get back on station rapidly. Once the Knighthawks aircraft were back overhead, the controller requested a reattack. Several bombing runs were executed successfully with exacting results. The dynamic situation made it very challenging to provide assistance to the

ground personnel. However, because each VFA-136 aircraft worked independently with other forces, they were able to quickly and accurately deploy ordnance. Additionally, the rapid, precise, and professional actions by the Air Force tanker, Navy fighters, and U.S. and Afghan National Army ground forces demonstrated the teamwork involved in the joint operations being conducted in Afghanistan.

The Knighthawks' skipper summed up the deployment: "The Knighthawks have been directly engaged in the most important and rewarding combat mission—supporting and protecting our brave troops on





the ground in harm's way against a ruthless adversary. On some days, the thunderous noise of a Hornet screaming by was enough to gain the desired effect, while other days it required the employment of precision guided munitions or 20mm cannon fire, usually against an enemy in close contact with our friendly forces. Regardless of what was required, the Knighthawks and the CVW-1 team proved very effective in protecting our heroes on the ground.”

VFA-136 completed combat operations on 16 October, and enjoyed a well-earned port visit as *Enterprise* pulled into Dubai following more than 60 days underway.

*Enterprise* completed turnover with *Eisenhower* (CVN 69) in the Red Sea and passed through the Suez Canal on 1 November en route to a final port visit in Lisbon, Portugal. To cap off the unique deployment, while in Lisbon the carrier took on family members for the trans-Atlantic crossing, marking the first trans-Atlantic Tiger cruise in decades for a U.S. Navy ship. The VFA-136 Knighthawks returned to NAS Oceana, Va., in time to celebrate Thanksgiving and the completion of a unique combat cruise. ✈

LCdr. Shuman recently completed his department head tour with VFA-136. Lt. Scheu is the Knighthawks' PAO.





Left, a VFA-136 Hornet launches from *Enterprise* during a unit level training mission on 22 August 2006. Above, Knighthawk pilots gather on the flight deck while *Enterprise* transits the Indian Ocean on 20 August 2006. Below, VFA-136 plane captain ADAN Michelle Jones waits for a pilot to arrive during flight operations on *Enterprise*.

