

VMFA(AW)-121 HORNETS BRING FIRE FROM ABOVE

Story and Photos by Ted Carlson

Destroying enemy armor and delivering close air support for fellow Marines on the ground while providing crucial reconnaissance imaging is all in a day's work for the VMFA(AW)-121 Green Knights, who take advantage of the F/A-18D Hornet's versatility through the use of the Advanced Tactical Airborne Reconnaissance System (ATARS). Based at MCAS Miramar, Calif., the Green Knights operate

three ATARS-equipped Hornets, which have proven to be well suited for combating anticoalition fighters in Iraq. ATARS is installed in the Hornet's nose and replaces the 20mm cannon. This allows the Green Knights to track enemy positions and movements while sanitizing areas for Marines on the ground—something that was key in the squadron's 2003 deployment during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

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Previous page, Green Knights F/A-18D Hornets perform a flight breakup during exercises over the southern California desert. Above, although the ATARS replaces the Hornet's 20mm cannon, the aircraft's expanded reconnaissance capabilities have proven valuable to Marines on the ground. Right, ATARS and non-ATARS-equipped Hornets are purposely grouped together in section flight in order to exploit the capabilities of each aircraft.

Pilot Capt. Warren Bruce recalled one mission during the squadron's deployment in the Al Anbar province when surveillance of insurgents from the air saved lives on the ground. "This particular mission, while using our targeting pod, we caught two people in the act actually placing an improvised explosive device (IED). We advised the ground troops of what and where it was happening. The troops went to that location, apprehended the insurgents, and stopped the emplacement from happening."

Green Knights CO Lt. Col. Joseph Craft had some initial concerns about the ATARS' effect on the F/A-18D squadron's mission, and the need to give up a gun in order to carry it. After taking the ATARS into combat, however, Lt. Col. Craft has seen the value it adds to the Marine Corps mission. "Even if you went out and didn't drop bombs, you may return with imagery of enemy positions and that could be crippling to the enemy," he said. "The first time I returned with ATARS imagery of enemy positions, I was excited and the amount of detail was phenomenal."

While the ATARS-equipped Hornet often serves as the

eyes and ears for ground units, it retains the strike capabilities of the F/A-18D, making it more than a reconnaissance aircraft. Having two people in the jet also gives the F/A-18D an advantage. "Our time to kill is quicker than any other platform," Capt. Bruce said. "When we checked in with the ground forward air control (FAC) and they instructed us to drop weapons, the pilot would be working the geometries of air speed, altitudes, headings, and aircraft deconfliction, while the weapon systems officer (WSO) would be acquiring the target with the targeting pod and handling the weapon release administration. Two people working together can do this a lot more quickly than a single-seat aircraft pilot can."

During the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the squadron's primary missions were airborne FAC, strike coordination, and reconnaissance. "That was an eye-opening experience, realizing the incredible power that we possess," Lt. Col. Craft said. "We constantly had an F/A-18D on station and did what we called the chainsaw—having a replacement D-model show up when

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the aircraft on station had to return to the tanker. We had global situational awareness of the target area that the incoming aircraft may not have yet, and by relaying that data we were able to rapidly put everyone's bombs on appropriate targets. This may include us buddy lasing for laser guided bombs or providing precise coordinates for GPS bombs, and we essentially decimated the targets. In the afternoon, the Ds would go out and take ATARS imagery of the target areas and return. Once the imagery was downloaded and deciphered, we used that information and our forward-looking infrared while on station to discriminate between good and bad target areas."

The combat experience helped the squadron adapt and do things they weren't necessarily trained for—including working with unmanned aerial vehicles to identify

targets. "We may have a Pioneer come down on the deck to maximize the target area and as a result we have dropped our LGBs so close to the ground FACs they can sometimes even hear the bombs' fin motors making final adjustments just before impact," Lt. Col Craft said. "There is no more lethal fighting force than an F/A-18D squadron."

Lt. Col. Craft recalled an attack on an enemy tank complex during Operation Iraqi Freedom, demonstrating the flexibility of the ATARS-equipped Hornets to strike enemy forces and transition to conducting unplanned reconnaissance in an instant. "We were doing the chainsaw rotation between [VMFA(AW)] 121, 225, and 533 aircraft. We hit numerous T-72 tanks with bombs and then spent all night lasing for other aircraft that

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A pair of VMFA(AW)-121 Hornets bank over a range near Twentynine Palms, Calif. Each aircraft is carrying four live Mk-82 500-pound bombs.



systematically destroyed the remaining tanks one by one. The enemy dug slit trenches nearby and when the fireworks started, the crews evacuated the vehicles and sought refuge in the trenches, creating their own heat signature there as well and sealing their fate.”

With no shortage of targets or aircraft waiting to strike, the Green Knights made the most of their seven-hour missions by dropping ordnance and guiding other aircraft in for more strikes. “All the D-models would carry at least one GBU-31 2,000-pound JDAM for time critical targets,” Lt. Col. Craft said. “If a ground unit ran into trouble, we would be able to take care of business both quickly and accurately. Other times we would be on the scene and direct Navy aircraft to the targets. Since they came from a carrier, they did not have a lot of time. The Air Force would roll in next listening on our frequencies. Jets were stacked up and the airspace became thick with aircraft ready to drop ordnance.”

After the Iraqi army’s armor was destroyed during the initial surge of OIF, the task turned to antipersonnel missions in urban

Maj. Paul MacKenzie (left) and Capt. Derek Oliver walk across the tarmac at MCAS Miramar, Calif., with an ATARS-equipped Hornet in the background.





areas close to friendly troops. This called for laser precision guided munitions such as laser Mavericks or 500-pound GBU-12s. While the Hornet crews often faced heavy fire from small arms and shoulder-launched SAMs, the sense of accomplishment in helping fellow Marines on the ground was well worth the risk. “It was rewarding and is probably the most worthwhile mission any strike fighter pilot can perform,” Capt. Bruce said. “It is a privilege to fly, but it is even more of a privilege to be there for the young Marines below that have to go through the streets and face hazards such as kicking down doors in a hostile urban environment.” ✈

Ted Carlson is a photojournalist specializing in naval aviation.

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