



VFA-106 HONES THE HORNET'S STING

Story by Rick Llinares



Guiding Naval Aviators through the transition from Tomcat to Hornet, or from Hornet to Super Hornet, is an important responsibility for Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 106, especially since the Navy retired the F-14 while shifting more fleet responsibilities to the F/A-18 platform. Based at NAS Oceana, Va., VFA-106 is the Hornet fleet replacement squadron and trains pilots, naval flight officers, and maintainers in both the older F/A-18A–D models as well as the new F/A-18E and F Super Hornets for assignments with Hornet squadrons throughout the Atlantic Fleet.

The squadron was established at NAS Cecil Field, Fla., on 27 April 1984 flying F/A-18A Hornet. The Gladiators moved to NAS Oceana in summer 1999 and began flying F/A-18E/F Super Hornets in 2004 while continuing to fly older Hornet models. “As fleet squadrons transition, the FRS is the bullpen for the respective fleet squadrons,” Operations Officer LCdr. Steven Hejmanowski said. “VFA-106 accepts, maintains, and flies these aircraft as part of our stable.

VFA-106 Hornet fly in formation near NAS Oceana, Va. The Gladiators train Naval Aviators transitioning to the F/A-18 from other jets or older Hornet models. Photo by Rick Llinares.

As the fleet squadrons complete transition to the Super Hornet, the aircraft are then sent with the squadrons back to the fleet as they return to full operational status.”

The Gladiators train aircrews by dividing the squadron into two sides based on aircraft model. “The command essentially has two maintenance departments, two operations departments, and two training departments,” LCdr. Hejmanowski said. “The CO obviously has oversight over the entire organization, but the respective ‘sides’ are responsible for the training of respective students in the appropriate model/series. Because syllabi for the C/D and E/F are very similar, however, both sides can work together to provide training and assets to accomplish our missions.”

Aircrew members transitioning to the Hornet must be trained in all aspects of the F/A-18 from basic familiarization to carrier qualifications to combat maneuvers. VFA-106 instructors, who were top performers in their fleet squadrons, are selected from variants of the F/A-18 as well as the former F-14 communities. Though the Tomcat was retired in September 2006, instructors with F-14 experience are still needed to train pilots transitioning to the Hornet from former Tomcat squadrons and those going back into the cockpit following extended shore or staff assignments. The Gladiators have

50 instructors, 30 pilots and 20 weapons system officers (WSOs) on the E/F side and 30 pilots on board the C/D side.

Each “side” conducts six to seven classes a year with a syllabus that takes about nine months to complete. There are roughly 200 academic events totaling 300 hours of instruction, with approximately 50 simulator events totaling 60 hours of simulator time leading to more than 70 flights totaling about 110 hours of flight time. The students spend numerous hours outside of these syllabus events preparing for flights and simulators through self-study in the Topgun manual, NATOPS, TACMANS, and other publications, as well as with computer-aided instruction.

“The FRS teaches the students utilizing a ‘Part Task Training’ approach,” LCdr. Hejmanowski said.

“Each event in each phase has learning and training objectives that are the focus of each event. The familiarization phase teaches aircraft systems, NATOPS, emergency procedures, and



With the retirement of the F-14 Tomcat and other aircraft, the VFA-106 Gladiators are responsible for training pilots, flight officers and maintainers in newer aircraft such as the F/A-18F Super Hornet, above. Photo by Rick Llinares. Left, a VFA-106 LSO guides a Super Hornet onto the flight deck of *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) during flight deck certifications on 29 October 2005. Photo by MCSN Christopher Molinari.



checklists. The focus here is from startup to shut down. This is essentially the last time the students fly as a single plane. The rest of the syllabus involves formation flying on almost every other hop.”

With the formation phase comes day and night sorties within a section then as a division. The focus then shifts to employing the aircraft as a weapon. All weather intercepts are 1v1 basic radar sorties followed by section radar attacks which are 2v2 intercepts. The strike phase of the training involves multiple pattern bombing hops, low altitude tactical training, live bomb day strikes, close air support, and smart weapons employment. The course continues with dogfighting followed by the fighter weapons phase with multiple 2v2 and 2vX tactical sorties. The strike fighter phase wraps up with an introduction to self-escort strikes, the use of night vision goggles, and tanking.

The last and perhaps most difficult phase involves carrier qualifications. Hornet crews spend a month conducting field carrier landing practice before hitting the boat for both day and night catapults and arrested landings. “While all pilots have obviously CQ’d in a previous platform prior to walking through our hangar

doors, they have not CQ’d in this particular aircraft or at night,” noted LCdr. Hejmanowski. “Our CAT I students go to the boat by themselves, E pilots obviously CQ alone, and the F pilots CQ with one of their contemporary WSOs. And for the new WSOs, this is their first time in the CQ environment.”

The complexity of flying a new platform makes the entire training challenging for flight crew members, regardless of experience. “Any time you fly two aircraft in close proximity to one another presents its own unique challenges, like the formation phase,” LCdr. Hejmanowski said. “But once out of FAMs and FORMs, the students are taught to employ this aircraft for what it was designed for—to be an instrument of war. What we do is a combination of both art and science. While the science aspect tends to be easier to teach than the art of aerial combat, it is teaching the ‘art’ that defines a good instructor.” ✈

Rick Llinares is a professional photojournalist specializing in aviation.

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