



Above: Missions are flown consecutive. After a mission, the F/A-18's are parked under the sun sheds, the crews get out, new crews get in and the Super Hornets take off again. All within 20 minutes time.

Right: Every squadron has them; specially painted machines. This beauty is VFA-151's commanders plane. Far right: A male and female pilot head out to their machines for another training mission.



VFA-151 Vigilantes: TRAINED TO FIGHT UGLY

Article by **Hans Drost**, Photographs by **Hans Drost** and **Dick Wels**

We all know the breath-taking movies of US fighter pilots operating from their aircraft carriers. The spectacular short takeoffs and the amazing achievement of “crashing” a fighter aircraft on the deck after a combat mission. We can’t get enough of it and keep watching movies like *Top Gun* and documentaries on Discovery Channel over and over. But what happens after the show is over, when the aircraft carrier returns after a cruise to its home port and the aircraft leave to be based on solid ground? Do the fighter pilots put their feet up and await the next cruise? On the contrary: they take their new experience into their training to perform even better on their next world tour. To find the answers to our questions, we headed out to Naval Air Station Lemoore in California, which is one of the three US Navy Master Jet Bases, where Navy pilots can train on all the vital parts of their missions at sea, including carrier landings. This story is about one of the squadrons at NAS Lemoore, the VFA-151 Vigilantes.

NAS LEMOORE

Naval Air Station Lemoore is the Navy’s newest, largest and only west coast Master Jet Base. Strike Fighter Wing Pacific, along with its associated squadrons, is home ported here. NAS Lemoore hosts five Carrier Air Wings, one of which is forward deployed to NAF Atsugi, Japan. The Lemoore figures are impressive. There are about 175 (Super) Hornets permanently based at NAS Lemoore, divided among 16 F/A-18 squadrons. Four other squadrons are based at NAF Atsugi. With over 200,000 aircraft operations annually, NAS

Lemoore is the busiest airfield in the US Navy. The base is home for 6,100 military personnel, 4,100 dependents, 1,500 Department of Defence civilians and contractors, and provides services to over 8,100 retired military veterans and their families. Also NAS Lemoore provides for 1,640 single-family residences and apartments for up to 2,000 bachelor military personnel. Because of the almost 12,000 personnel working or living on the base, NAS Lemoore is considered the fourth largest ‘city’ in Kings County, California.

ENTERING NAS LEMOORE

NAS Lemoore is located 180 miles northwest of Los Angeles in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley. The station covers almost 30,000 acres, 12,000 of which are used under an agricultural lease contract, making it the largest agricultural lease programme in the Navy. Entering NAS Lemoore over Reeves Blvd drives you right in the heart of US Navy's Hornet action. All the main ramps, sun sheds, hangars and squadron buildings

VFA-151 AND ITS HISTORY

VFA-151 was originally established as VF-23 in August 1948 at NAS Oceana, Virginia. At that time, the unit was flying the F4U-4 Corsair and F6F Hellcat. In February 1959, the squadron was redesignated Fighter Squadron One Hundred Fifty-One (VF-151) and in 1986, the squadron became VFA-151. Through the years, the squadron has flown a number of aircraft, including the F9F-2 Panther, F2H-3 Banshee, F4D-1 Skyray, F3H-2 Demon, F-4B Phantom II, F/A-18A Hornet and nowadays the brand-new F/A-18E Super Hornet. The squadron operated from the deck of lots of carriers: The USS *Coral Sea* (CVA/43), USS *Boxer* (CV-21), USS *Princeton* (CV-27), USS *Essex* (CV-9), USS *Yorktown* (CVA-10), USS *Kearsage* (CVA-33), USS *Hornet* (CVA-12), USS *Hancock* (CVA-19), USS *Midway* (CV-41), USS *Constellation* (CV-64) and now the USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74).

The Vigilantes have a very rich history and were assigned to a lot of trouble spots all over the world. The squadron participated in the Korean War with three combat cruises, including a highlight of supporting the recapture of Seoul and Kimpo airfields. From 1965 to 1973, the Vigilantes were heavily involved in the Vietnam War. The Vigilantes made seven combat deployments and spent 927 days 'on the line', which is more than any other carrier-based unit. With 331 days on the USS *Coral Sea*, the squadron was part of the longest deployment of the Vietnam War. During a cruise with the USS *Midway*, VF-151 also stayed, with 208 days, the longest time on the line in the Gulf of Tonkin in front of Vietnam's coast. A carrier normally stayed "on the line" for 30–35 days with a leave of 6–8 "rest and recreation" days off in between line periods. After six line periods, the carrier usually sailed home to the continental United States, taking a tour to

are on both sides of this road that cuts across the base. There is a separate runway at each side of the road. In a way, it looks like a giant harbour complex, only with aircraft instead of ships. Our target is Strike Fighter Squadron One Five One 'Vigilantes'. The squadron is located on the left side at the very end of Reeves Blvd. While driving to the squadron you are literally surrounded by Hornets.

10½ months' duration.

From 1973 to 1991, the Vigilantes were forward deployed on permanent call. During that time, the squadron was involved in many historic moments, like the evacuation of South Vietnam and the US hostage crisis in Iran. The unit also protected Kuwaiti-owned tankers from Iranian attacks in 1987 and 1988 during the Earnest Will operations, and it was the first unit to respond to the shooting down by the Russians of the Korean Boeing 747 'KAL007' during its flight from New York to Seoul in 1983. In 1988, the Vigilantes showed up in Korea again for presence during the Seoul 1988 Olympics. In 1990, VFA-151 went to the Gulf region in support of Operation Desert Shield. It participated in the initial air strikes of Operation Desert Storm on 17 January 1991. The Vigilantes played a key role during Desert Storm. In total, the unit delivered over 817,000 pounds of ordnance on targets in Kuwait, Iraq and the Northern Persian Gulf.

In August 1991, VFA-151 and CVW-5 made their last journey with the USS *Midway*, because the carrier's operational life came to an end. It was transformed into a floating museum that welcomes many tourists in San Diego each year. Visitors get a good impression of what life on an aircraft carrier feels like. USS *Midway* was decommissioned in San Diego under a Vigilante fly-by. In the 1990s, the squadron took part in the enforcement of "no-fly" zones over Iraq. From October 2010 until March 2011 and from December 2011 until August 2012, the squadron was stationed in the Afghanistan region in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. At this moment, the Vigilantes have 15 pilots for 10 F/A-18C Super Hornets. The tail code of the Vigilantes is 'NG' and their call sign is "Ugly".



Above, left: The Vigilantes famous skull can be found everywhere in the squadron building. This plaque holds the names of VFA-151's aviators who participated in the WestPac tour 1994-1995 aboard the USS *Constellation*. Above, top right: A Super Hornet assigned to VFA-122 "Flying Eagles", in Digi-Cam scheme to celebrate 100 years of Naval Aviation. Above, right: Not every squadron at NAS Lemoore has sun sheds, the training unit VFA-122 has to do without them.



1.



3.



2.



4.

Above: **1** and **2** Although the sun sheds are wide enough for parking with unfolded wings, the Hornets usually taxi and park with their wings folded upwards.

3 A shiny hornet from VFA-137, just hand washed with broom and mob. **4** Lt. Joe Camp is posing in front of a VFA-151 Hornet. Camp is not only a F/A-18 aviator; his ground job is Public Relations Officer.

5 Before getting airborne, the pilot and ground crew go through a thorough pre-flight. **6** A VFA-151 F/A-18 taxis to the 'last chance' area for final checks before takeoff.

READY ROOM

On arrival at Hangar Number 5, we receive a warm welcome from Lt Joe Camp in the squadron's 'Ready Room'. "Every squadron on base has its own individual Ready Room," Camp explains. "The Ready Room is an all-purpose room. It is the place where flight crews come together for their training, meetings and—last but not least—socialising. The place is also very important for our Junior Officers. They learn a lot from all that goes on in the Ready Room." On board of a carrier, each squadron also has its own Ready Room. The one at sea is of a much smaller size and less cosy, but as important as the one ashore. "It's kind of home away from home when you are on deployment," Camp stresses. On board, the Ready Room is also used for mission briefing and debriefing.

AVIATOR TRAINING

To understand more about an aviator's life in the US Navy, Lt Camp starts by telling us something about the training of a Navy pilot. "To become a Naval aviator, officers start the flying part of their education at NAS Whiting Field, Florida or at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas. As a student naval aviator, you'll undergo the primary training, which takes approximately 22 weeks. It includes ground-based academics, simulators and flight training in either the T-34C Turbo Mentor or the T-6A Texan II. The primary training consists of six stages: familiarisation (FAM), basic instruments, precision aerobatics, formation, night FAM and radio instruments."

After completing the primary training, the "pipeline selection" takes place. This selection is based on the current and projected needs of the services, and the students' performance and preferences. Student naval aviators (SNAs) are selected for: maritime (multi-engine prop), E-2/C-2, rotary (helos), strike (jets) and the E-6 TACAMO. SNAs who enter the Strike (Jet) pipeline complete their training at either NAS Kingsville, Texas, in the T-45A or at NAS

Lt Camp is the squadron Public Relations Officer. "Every pilot has a 'ground' job," he says. "Being a pilot is the main job, but not the only task a pilot has in the squadron. Other ground jobs are for example Operations Officer, Safety Officer, Maintenance Officer, Administration Officer, Mission Planning Officer or Natops Officer. A Naval Aviator rotates through all of these jobs to become an all round professional."

VFA-151's mascot, "Old Ugly", is prominent present in the Ready Room. The famous skull with a dagger between its teeth looks at us from posters on the wall, a sign above the desk and coffee mugs. There is even a skull replica in the cupboard.

Meridian, Mississippi, in the T-45C. During strike training, pilots learn strike tactics, weapons delivery and air combat manoeuvring, and receive their carrier landing qualification. After receiving their Wings of Gold, Strike pilots report to an F/A-18 Fleet Replacement squadron for training and eventually go to their first Fleet squadron. After his training, Lt Camp reported to Hornet training squadron VFA-122 at NAS Lemoore to undergo a nine-month training course, learning the basics of air-to-air and air-to-ground missions, culminating in day/night carrier qualifications and subsequent assignment to VFA-151. Camp still remembers his first catapult takeoff from a carrier as if it were yesterday. "The feeling is overwhelming. You'll find yourself screaming like a little girl the first time you are catapulted off deck." The total education to become an F/A-18 pilot takes about 3.5 years, after which the students can call themselves Junior Officers. One stays Junior Officer for about three years. After that period, a Naval aviator can think about the next step in his or her career, like becoming an instructor pilot or test pilot.



NAS LEMOORE CARRIER AIR WINGS

CARRIER AIR WING

Two (CVW-2)
 Nine (CVW-9)
 Eleven (CVW-11)
 Seventeen (CVW-17)
 Five (CVW-5)

ASSIGNED TO

USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN-76)
 USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74)
 USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68)
 USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN-70)
 USS *George Washington* (CVN-73) forward deployed to NAF Atsugi, Japan



NAS LEMOORE SQUADRONS

SQUADRON	NAME	ASSIGNMENT	SQUADRON	NAME	ASSIGNMENT
VFA-2	Bounty Hunters	CVW-2	VFA-137	Kestrels	CVW-2
VFA-14	Tophatters	CVW-9	VFA-146	Blue Diamonds	CVW-11
VFA-22	Fighting Redcocks	CVW-17	VFA-147	Argonauts	CVW-11
VFA-25	Fist of the Fleet	CVW-17	VFA-151	Vigilantes	CVW-9
VFA-41	Black Aces	CVW-9	VFA-154	Black Knights	CVW-11
VFA-86	Sidewinders	CVW-2	VFA-192	Golden Dragons	CVW-9
VFA-94	Mighty Shrikes	CVW-17	VFA-27	Royal Maces	CVW-5 at NAF Atsugi, Japan
VFA-97	Warhawks	CVW-9	VFA-102	Diamondbacks	CVW-5 at NAF Atsugi, Japan
VFA-113	Stingers	CVW-17	VFA-115	Eagles	CVW-5 at NAF Atsugi, Japan
VFA-122	Flying Eagles	Training unit <small>(not assigned to CVW)</small>	VFA-195	Dambusters	CVW-5 at NAF Atsugi, Japan

WORKING ASHORE

We already outlined that VFA-151 spends a lot of time aboard carriers. But what happens when the squadron is home at NAS Lemoore? At the end of a deployment, the aircraft return together to their land base. This homecoming event is called the Fly In. Families are waiting eagerly at the concrete of the air station to welcome their long-missed family members. After that, a period of rest awaits, so squadron members can catch breath and spend time with their loved ones. When the internal batteries are loaded up again, the men and women return to base to start working again. A big difference from working on a ship is the working space. Camp describes this colourfully: “The working space at sea is small, sweaty and noisy.”

Being ashore is kind of waiting for the next deployment to take place. During that “wait”, it is important that all the qualifications a pilot has to meet are kept up to date: low-level flying, delivering ordinance, air intercepts, in-flight refuelling, carrier landings etc. The squadron executes numerous training missions to do so. Flying hours are divided quarterly among the squadrons. All training missions start with a meeting in a special briefing room. Normally, a briefing takes 30–90 minutes, depending on the type of mission. During the briefing, a set protocol is followed to pay attention to all the specifics of the upcoming mission, like weather, off-limits areas, and emergency procedures. After the pilots return from their mission, a debriefing is scheduled to learn from the execution of the mission by watching tapes recorded during the flight. They discuss what went wrong and what went well so they don't make the same mistake during a wartime mission.

To keep carrier landing qualifications up to date, pilots simulate carrier landings at NAS Lemoore by conducting a series of touch-and-goes. This process is called Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP). Like on a carrier, an optical landing system is used to give glide path information to pilots in the final phase of their touch down. A series of coloured lights is used to sign to the incoming aircraft. A landing signal officer (LSO) grades and evaluates each landing. The LSO guides the pilot during the last three quarters of a mile by talking and signalling to the pilot to keep the aircraft on the right glide path. During the landing, the LSO holds the “pickle switch”, the wire to control the lights and to give a wave-off signal in case the pilot is out of limits for a safe landing. In that case, a red light flashes to warn the pilot to go

around and make another attempt to land safely. The pickle switch is held above the head to signal a foul deck. A regular FCLP involves about 8–12 touch-and-goes and lasts about 45 minutes.

Lt Camp tells us that the squadron normally knows well ahead when their next deployment is scheduled. “We usually have a work-up of 8–12 months to the new deployment. We use this time to prepare ourselves as best as possible.” In the work-up period, the squadron trains for the upcoming tasks. During the work-up period, the pilots fly approximately two or three times a week. “There are several settings in which we can perform our training,” Lt Camp tells us. “To practice bombing, we head out to NAS Fallon and to practice low-level flying, we use airspace R2508, which is over the Upper Mojave Desert, near Edwards AFB. Of course, there is also over-sea practising, mostly used for air-to-air intercepts, but which also includes carrier landings to train both pilots and carrier personnel for the upcoming tour.”

Air-to-air refuelling is also a major part of training. There are two air-to-air refuelling options. The first one is hooking up to a flying gas station, the KC-135 ‘Iron Maiden’, the KC-10 ‘Extender’ or the KC-130. “Air-to-air refuelling by a KC is a difficult job,” Camp explains. “We must keep a twist in the probe during the refuelling, which makes it tough.” Once connected, a Super Hornet is fully tanked in 5–8 minutes. The second air-to-air refuelling option is to connect to another Super Hornet. Compared to the ‘legacy’ version of the Hornet, the Super Hornet can carry 33% more internal fuel, increasing its mission range by 41%. But it still gets thirsty during long missions. Every Super Hornet can be converted into a tactical tanker without modifications by attaching an Aerial Refuelling System or ‘buddy store’ for the refuelling of other aircraft. The system includes an external 330-gallon (1,200 L) tank with hose reel on the centreline along with four external 480-gallon (1,800 L) tanks. Together with the internal tanks, the Super Hornet can carry a total of 29,000 pounds (13,000 kg) of fuel on the aircraft.

When, after months of preparation, another deployment begins, the squadron holds a Fly-Off ceremonial. Family and friends gather at NAS Lemoore and after saying goodbye the squadron flies out to the carrier, fully prepared for another tour throughout the world. And, when necessary, the Vigilantes are ready to “Fight Ugly”. **PW**

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