

# The Tophatters

Formed in 1919, the Tophatters were to become the first American carrier based fighter squadron in 1926 when assigned to the USS Langley, the Navy's only aircraft carrier

In his three part article, Norm deWitt examines the history of one of the US Navy's most famous F-14 Tomcat Squadrons, VF-14, the Tophatters. During his research, the story was to lead from San Diego to Hollywood, then to New Zealand and finally, into space aboard the Space Shuttle. The Tophatters really have been everywhere. The first part of this article deals with the operational history of the unit...

**B**uilding upon the foundation provided by Glenn Curtiss' from 1911-1914 and the furious pace of aircraft development that followed from 1914-18 during The First World War, the US Navy was keen to expand and develop its aircraft operations. Given that the US air corps had used allied aircraft built by others for its operations in Europe, and that the vast majority of that demand had come from the US Army, the US Navy created its Naval Aircraft Factory in Philadelphia during 1917-18 to develop and manufacture naval aircraft. This would ensure that it would have designs that met the Navy's own unique requirements, initially focusing upon flying boats.

The formation of the Pacific Fleet Air Detachment in 1919, marked the beginning of the first Naval Air Squadron, based at North Island in San Diego bay. The following year, this squadron was given the designation VT-5, as a torpedo and bombing squadron. 1921 brought more new designations with VP-4-1 (Patrol and Observation) and VP-4, a Fighting Squadron. By July 1922, the designation had changed again, this time to perhaps the most famous designation, VF-1 (or the later VF-1B) where they were known as Fighter Plane Squadron One.

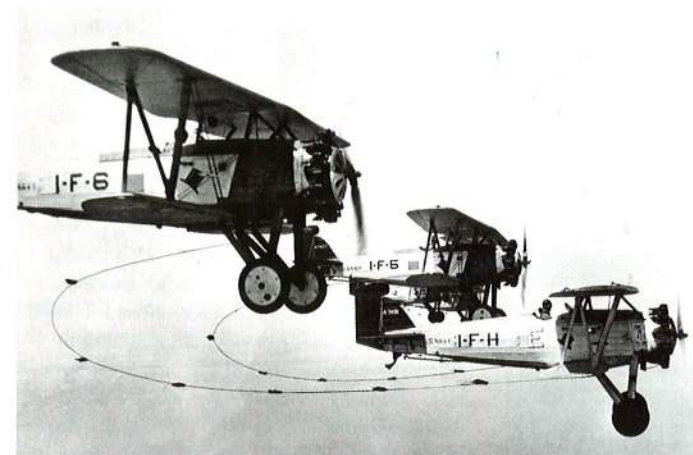
Soon after, VF-1 first received the Vought VE-7 fighter, previously used as a trainer by the US Army, which used the Hispano-Suiza V8 engine made famous in the SPAD S.XIII. The production aircraft were built by Vought as well as the Naval Aircraft Factory. Despite having a similar appearance, the Vought was inferior in almost every category to the 220hp French SPAD. The SPAD had double the firepower (twin Vickers machine guns), higher maximum speed, better rate of climb and a massive superiority in service ceiling. These aircraft were equipped with floats for deployment by crane from a ship... much as Glenn Curtiss had demonstrated to be possible with the USS Pennsylvania in San Diego bay 11 years before.

1923 brought the latest design from the Naval Aircraft Factory, the TS-1. These planes were built by Curtiss, and were retrofitted with floats. The performance was enough of an improvement over the VE-7 to where maximum speed was now a match for the SPAD, however the VE-7s were still to remain in service for many years. It was a VE-7 that made the historic first takeoff from the newest ship in the Navy's arsenal, the aircraft carrier USS Langley, named after the aviation pioneer Samuel Langley, an early competitor of the Wright brothers with his 'Aerodrome' designs at the turn of the century.

The first American aircraft carrier had



The US Navy's first aircraft carrier, the USS Langley, at San Diego with the USS Arizona in the background. **National Museum of Naval Aviation**



The Boeing F2Bs of the VF-1 aerobatic team regularly flew its displays tied together with bunting! **National Museum of Naval Aviation**

deployed a tethered observation balloon near Hampton Roads to report on the locations of nearby Confederate artillery. This was followed by the CSS Teaser in 1862, a Confederate version of the same concept. However, the first American aircraft carrier with a now-conventional permanent flight deck for heavier than air flight operations was the USS Langley. Langley began life as the USS Jupiter, which had been built in 1911 at Mare Island, in north San Francisco bay. The conversion to aircraft carrier came after the First World War, and it was commissioned in 1922. The ship was then the subject of numerous testing and training missions, as they were developing a new class of ship, and Langley was not to arrive at North Island until late 1924.

San Diego, the birthplace of naval aviation, had, by the 1920's, expanded into a hotbed of naval aviation development. VF-1 was assigned to the USS Langley in 1926, flying the TS-1. With that assignment, VF-1 had become the first carrier based fighter squadron in the US Navy. In 1926, the powerful Boeing FB-5 was delivered to the squadron, which was equipped with twin machine guns, state-of-the-art at the time. During this period, the squadron adopted their High Hat logo, along with being given the new designation VF-1B, all the while remaining the fighter Squadron on the USS Langley. One of the most popular dance groups of the late 1920's was singer Frank Luther and the High Hatters, which may have been an influence, given Luther's



Ops! The Boeing F2B, like many aircraft of its day, was tricky to handle on the ground. Here a

## DESIGNATIONS OF THE TOPHATTERS

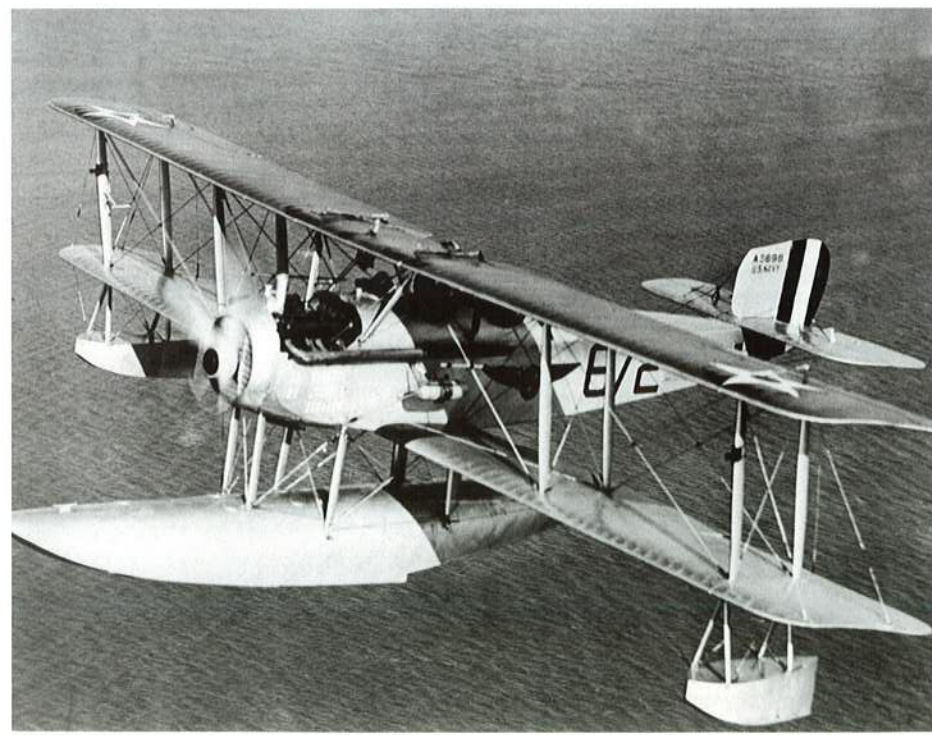
Sep 1919 Pacific Fleet Air Detachment	Jul 1, 1939 VB-4 Bombing Squadron
Jun 15, 1920 VT-5 Torpedo & Bombing Squadron	Mar 15, 1941 VS-41 Scouting Squadron
Sep 7, 1921 VP-4-1 Patrol Squadron	Mar 1, 1943 VB-41 Bombing Squadron
Sep 23, 1921 VF-4 Fighting Squadron	Aug 4, 1943 VB-4 Bombing Squadron
Jul 1, 1922 VF-1 Fighting Squadron	Nov 15, 1946 VA-1A Attack Squadron
Jul 1, 1927 VF-1B Fighting Squadron	Aug 2, 1948 VA-14 Attack Squadron
Jul 1, 1934 VB-2B Bombing Squadron	Dec 15, 1949 VF-14 Fighter Squadron
Jul 1, 1937 VB-3 Bombing Squadron	Dec 1, 2001 VFA-14 Strike-Fighter Squadron



A rare photograph of a Boeing FB-5, this one of Fighting Squadron VF-3B, pictured in flight on December 13, 1926. **National Museum of Naval Aviation**

popular single Barnacle Bill the Sailor. In those early days what later became known as the Top Hat was known as the High Hat... different terminology for the same logo.

By early 1928, the High Hatters, as VF-1B was now known, had received the new Boeing F2B, and with the completion of the newest carriers USS Saratoga and Lexington, VF-1B was assigned to Saratoga during 1929. The Saratoga had originally been meant to be a battle cruiser, but the Washington Treaty, which limited the international building of capital ships, had meant the ship could not be completed for its intended use. As a direct result of this treaty, the US Navy was forced into a direction that would eventually help save the day for America in the Pacific war, forcing the early development of a carrier strike force. This was proven in January 1929 when during fleet war games,



The Vought VE-7 was also fitted with floats and used as a catapult aircraft from capital ships

About this time the squadron received the new Curtiss F8C-4 Helldiver, which although unremarkable, may be the most visually recognisable plane flown during the 'High Hatters' era, mostly due to being in multiple movies like Hell Divers and King Kong. It was used for a year or so, despite poor performance figures almost unbelievably similar to the SPAD XIII of 14 years earlier.

The Boeing F4B arrived the following year, and variations of this fighter were flown throughout the early 1930s. 1934 brought the 600hp Curtiss F11, and along with the name change for that aircraft to the BFC-2, the squadron designation also changed to Bombing Squadron VB-2B. This later became VB-3 in 1937, and then VB-4 in July of 1939. By 1938, thankfully the new monoplane Vought SB2U Vindicator was coming into service, as American aircraft development had fallen tremendously far behind Germany, Japan, and Britain. Each nation was preparing for war in an ever-escalating arms race, one with national survival very much at stake. Compared to the previous Curtiss BFC-2s, the SB2U had an increase of 50mph in top speed and an increase



A Curtiss F8C-1 Helldiver, A-8431, of VF-1B wearing the Squadron code 1-F-11. Lt. Langford was flying this aircraft on January 29, 1931 for this picture. **Rich Dann**

in operational ceiling of an additional 2500ft. The new monoplane dive bomber was a huge leap forward, but far more was needed in a world of Bf-109s and A6M Zeros, and soon.

In the mid of this modernisation, the Squadron was relocated from the Saratoga to the USS Ranger, eventually to see combat in the Atlantic theatre of operations. Although Ranger was the first US ship built from the outset as an aircraft carrier, she was smaller

and slower than the other carriers built before the war. She left San Diego in 1939, to new base assignments in the Atlantic theatre of operations. In 1941, there was yet another change of Squadron name to VS-41 (Scouting Squadron), followed two years later to VB-41 (Bombing Squadron).

During the war, USS Ranger took part in the attacks upon the Vichy French bases at Casablanca and carried out various other missions in European waters. These included the 1943 attacks upon German shipping in Norway, carried out with the newer Douglas SBD Dauntless. USS Ranger was the only American aircraft carrier to not engage the Japanese in battle, but by 1944 VB-4 (yes, changed again) had been transferred to USS Bunker Hill, an Essex class carrier, for the Leyte battles, before being transferred to the USS Essex itself in 1945.

During this time, the Squadron had re-equipped to fly the 1900hp Curtiss SB2C Helldiver. The dive bomber combined a top speed of almost 300mph with poor stability and handling, which led to the plane's nickname of 'The Beast' or 'Son of a Bitch 2nd Class (SB2C)'. American pilot Jerry Coleman flew the Helldiver near the end of the war, and was unimpressed with its flight characteristics in comparison to his usual SBD Dauntless. Others went so far as to describe the SB2C as having appalling handling. The saving grace of the latest Helldiver was that it carried double the bomb load of the SBD Dauntless and that, coupled with increase in speed, led the US Navy to deploy the SB2C into combat operations.



The Vought SB2U Vindicator was a leap forward for US Naval Aviation, its Pratt and Whitney R-1535 825hp engine gave it a maximum speed of 251mph and a ceiling of 27,500 feet. These are SB2U-1s of VB-3. **National Museum of Naval Aviation**



Postwar, the squadron was assigned to the USS Tarawa, changing designation again to VA-1A, then to VA-14, and finally in 1949 to VF-14 (fighter squadron), a designation that was to last for over 50 years. The Vought F4U Corsair came into the mix, and remained the primary equipment of the squadron until the arrival of the latest jet fighters after the Korean War. The Douglas F3D Skyknight was only in service for a short time until the McDonnell F3H Demon arrived, which remained the mainstay for VF-14 into the 1960s. The Tophatters, as they were now known, were deployed for two cruises on the USS Forrestal, before finding a long term home aboard the USS Franklin D. Roosevelt in the late 1950s. The arrival of the F-4 Phantom in 1964 spelled the end of the McDonnell Demon era, as the F-4 was to hold a decade long position as America's premier operational naval fighter.

1969 brought the assignment of VF-14 to the USS John F. Kennedy, where the Tophatters were to remain through 1982. In the mid of these many deployments, came the arrival of the F-14 Tomcat to the fleet during 1974 and 5. Peter 'Pistol' Ulrich was one of the pilots with the Tophatters that flew the F-14. Peter: "My grandfather died in a plane accident during the Second World War. When I finished flight school and got my fleet assignment, my first squadron was the Tophatters, VF-14. When I told my mom and showed her the insignia, she got this funny look on her face, went down to the basement and a little while later came up with a few things from this old trunk... my grandfather's logbook and an old patch from when they were VB-4... Bombing Squadron 4, flying Vindicators... it turned out that his first squadron was also the Tophatters. His name was David 'Woot' Taylor. It's funny how things come full circle."

How did Ulrich become 'Pistol Pete' "When I was in practice bomb drops and shooting the guns and rockets out in the desert, I was doing really well. When I came back, everybody was comparing notes on their scores and the skipper said "Wow, this guy's like Pistol Pete (Pete Maravich, a remarkable basketball player during the 1970s)."

Pistol continues: "My favorite F-14 story was fighting against a fellow named Dale



Still designated VA-1A, the Squadron then operated the Chance Vought F4U Corsair. **National Museum of Naval Aviation**



A VF-14 Douglas F3D-2 Skyknight on board the USS Intrepid (CVA-11). This jet night fighter had a short career with the Squadron. **Rich Dann**



A VF-14 McDonnell F3H Demon is ready for catapult launch on USS Franklin D. Roosevelt (CVA-42) in 1961. **Rich Dann**

'Snort' Snodgrass. He'd been around for quite a while, well known for being quite the character, and doing some pretty fancy flying over the years." Peter mastered the art of understatement with that summary, as the history of the F-14 will forever be intertwined with that of Dale Snodgrass. A brief summary of Snort's career would include being the first pilot to go into F-14s straight out of flight school, an honours graduate at Top Gun, over 5000 hours of time in the Tomcat, the most ever, with over 1200 carrier landings. Seeing action as commander of Strike Force 33 during Desert Storm, he led 34 missions of over 30 aircraft without a loss. He was the US Navy's fighter pilot of the year in 1985 and Grumman's F-14 pilot of the year in 1986.

Pistol continues: "He's the one with the famous photo where that plane looks awful big when the wingtip is below the flight deck

as he's going by. Shortly after that, he was selected to be the Flight Wing Commander at Oceana for the Atlantic Fleet, in charge of all the Tomcats. He would occasionally take advantage of that prerogative and fly with the individual squadrons. As a Junior Officer, I was tasked to go out on a mission with Snort, we were going to go to a local range and practice strafing before climbing up for some one-v-one dogfighting. One of the Junior RIO's was going to fly with Snort, and we were going to give 'em quite a ride. It was a matter of pride, and I wasn't going to lose to the old man." ➤



Wearing a very early colour scheme, this Grumman F-14A Tomcat of VF-14 was pictured in 1975, the year the Tomcat joined the fleet. **US Navy**



A pair of VF-14 McDonnell Douglas F-4B Phantoms from the USS Franklin D. Roosevelt (CVA-42)

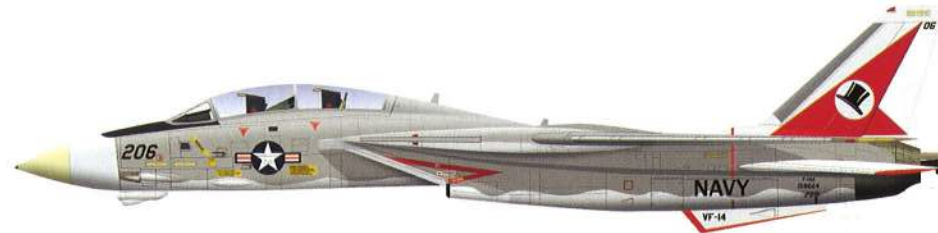


A Grumman F-14A Tomcat of VF-14, usually based aboard the USS John F. Kennedy but

Dogfighting with Snort was facing a real-life Kobayashi Maru, the Starfleet Academy simulated no-win scenario that James Kirk had defeated in Star Trek lore by reprogramming the game. Pistol Pete went the James Kirk route – “My RIO and I talked it over and decided that we were going to cheat. In the old Tomcat A’s that we were flying at the time, you had a bleed air source that was used to cool a lot of the aircraft... the electronic boxes, especially the radar which puts out a lot of heat. You could select that ‘off’ in the cockpit for emergency situations. If you did that, it was like getting an extra zone of burner. You had five zones of afterburner, and we called that zone six. We figured we had a minute or so before we fried the radar completely. As long as the engagement didn’t last more than a minute, we’d be alright.

“The second one was playing around with the wing sweep, as the Tomcat has a variable sweep wing. They were programmed automatically most of the time to optimise the lift or minimise the drag for different airspeeds or angle of attack... but you could over-ride that with a manual handle in the cockpit that could set the wings to the position you wanted. The plan was that when I hit the merge, I was going to be going 500 knots but instead of having the wings back where they’d normally be, I was going to have them fully forward, like we were going a lot slower. It was going to confuse Snort as to how fast I was really going, and I wanted to be able to whip that plane around quicker than Snort, which was a real danger as you could over-stress it with more wing than you’d expect to have at that speed. We had an advantage on him after a couple of passes, so he got really slow and we got really slow.”

Time for surprise number 3... “We looked across at each other and I cut back and got behind him, by lowering the flaps down. On the Tomcat there are these automatic slats on the front edge of the wing, and on the back



A VF-14 Grumman F-14A Tomcat. **Keith Draycott**



The F-14s of the US Navy were modified to include a ground attack capability. Here a VF-14 Tomcat carries a pair of Mk 84 bombs on the underfuselage forward stations. **Rich Dann**

edge of the wing. They are automatically programmed to shape the wing a little more concave when you slow down. They also move to a full down position for takeoff or landing, when you are going really slowly. So, to put these flaps in that position while manoeuvring was a really risky move, as you could easily over torque the tubes and controls... it’s only designed to go a couple of degrees either way in manoeuvring configuration. But, I was not going to lose this fight. So, I pulled the handle with the main flaps all the way down and it was like getting on an elevator, we popped up a couple of hundred feet above him, got right over to get a quick guns call to lock on Snort, then re-set the flaps, got the air source back on, put the wings back... I don’t think he ever

knew what happened.” So, did you hear about a Tomcat with every control linkage or surface being bent? “(Laughs) we never heard from maintenance that anything was bent or broken, so I think we successfully escaped that.”

The F-14 fighter, with all its variants through to the Super Tomcat, was to have a previously unbelievable operational life of over three decades. Given this long tenure it is only appropriate that for most (including numerologists, one assumes) VF-14, the Tophatters, will always be primarily associated with the F-14 Tomcat. However, in the mind of the public, it may be their many appearances in the movies during the Golden Era of Hollywood that will forever make the 1930’s High Hatters Squadron the most memorable. ➤

Tophatters today. Seen here in Squadron 90th Anniversary colours, a VF-14 F-18 Super Hornet is catapulted from the USS Nimitz. **US Navy**



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# Hooray for Hollywood

## The Tophatters and the Silver Screen

**B**y 1930, the VF-1B Squadron was well known for its flying prowess through the appearances of its demonstration flying team, so it was understandable that the Squadron was chosen for a new Hollywood production in 1931 called Hell Divers with Wallace Beery and Clark Gable. In a case of art imitating life, this story of competing flyers in the High Hatters Squadron took place on the USS Saratoga with the cooperation of the US Navy, using the Squadron's real Curtiss F8C-4 Helldivers appropriately enough.

Two years later came the blockbuster movie of its day... King Kong. A legendary film which set the standard for stop-motion special effects for a generation, Kong met his demise at the hand of these same biplanes, the Curtiss O2C-2 being essentially the same as the F8C-4 Helldiver. The logos were an invention, and the planes did not carry the logo of any individual squadron, instead featuring a graphic of Mickey Mouse riding a glider.

The producer, co-director and co-writer of King Kong for RKO studios was former combat pilot Merian Cooper. Flying as a bomber pilot in the US Army during the First World War, he was shot down by the Germans, and became a POW for the remainder of the war. Soon after, he was a volunteer in the American Kosciuszko Squadron that defended the Polish in the

1920 conflict with Russia. Shot down, he again spent months as a POW, this time escaping. Cooper also was to portray the pilot that killed King Kong in the movie on the final strafing run, with his rear gunner being the other co-director of the movie, Ernest Schoedsack. Not that many years later during the Second World War, Cooper was to return to active duty, involved with the logistics of the Doolittle raid on Japan and then the airlift of supplies into China, before becoming the chief of staff for Claire Chennault and his China Air Task Force, previously known as the Flying Tigers. Having risen to the rank of Brigadier General, Cooper was on the battleship USS Missouri during the surrender of the Japanese in Tokyo Bay.

The creator of Kong had not only been the actual Kong Killer, but also was a veteran of three wars. In 1973, 40 years after the debut of his greatest movie, Merian Cooper passed away in San Diego at age 79, having led a full life by any definition. Rightly, his star remains on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

The Tophatters Squadron was to gain further fame by being the squadron of choice in the wildly popular 1941 movie Dive Bomber, where Errol Flynn and Fred McMurray tried to overcome the challenges that pilots faced during high altitude flight. Filmed mostly at North Island NAS, McMurray's fatal crash while developing the latest pressure suit was on Point Loma just past the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery,



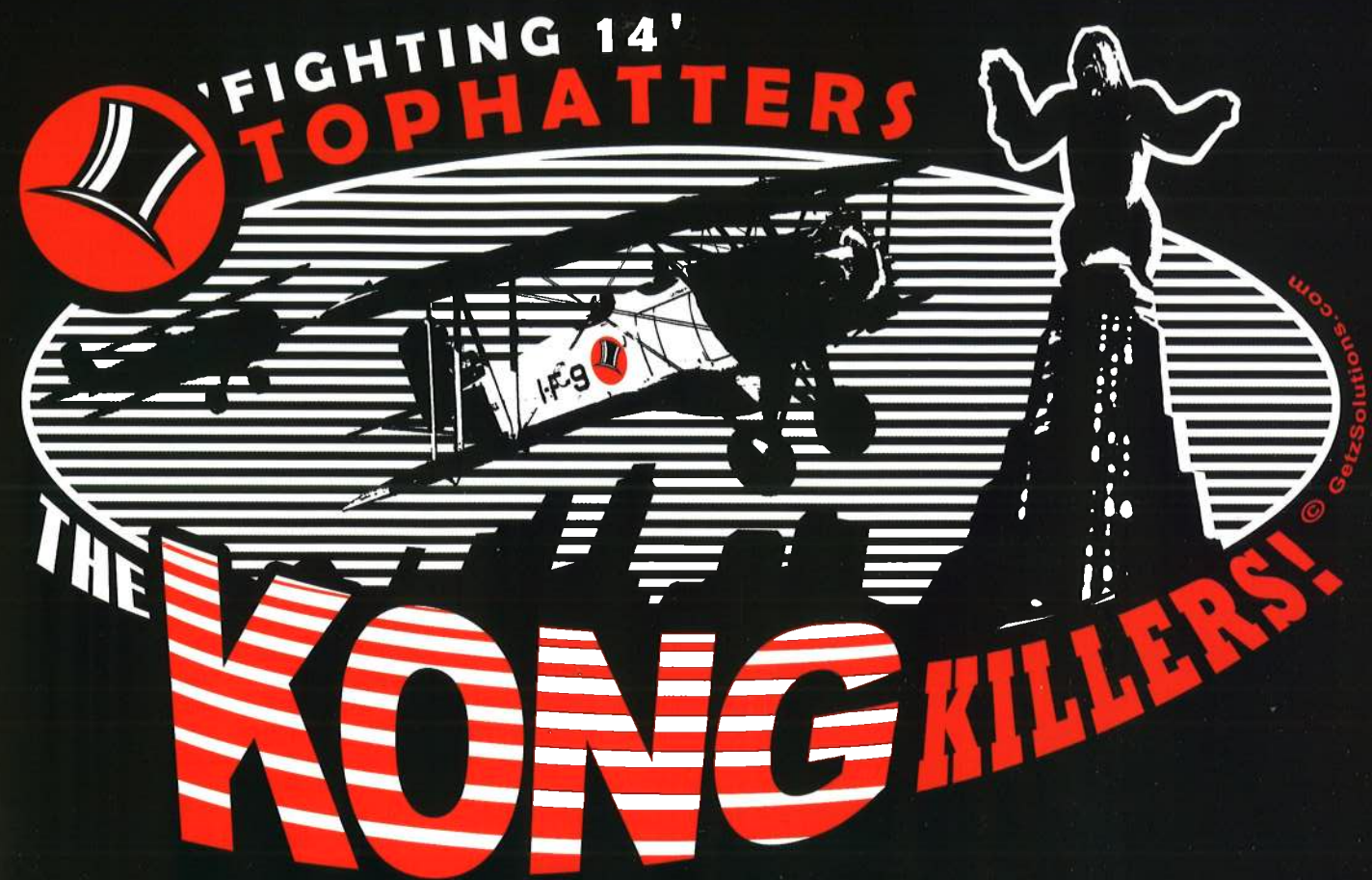
The movie poster for the first film to star the High Hatters, as they were known at the time, Hell Divers of 1931. **Norm deWitt**

with the famous Point Loma lighthouse as a backdrop. In the closing scenes of the movie, McMurray's Vought SB2U with its Tophatter logo is front and centre at the memorial service on North Island.

All this fanfare on the silver screen, plus the Squadron's stellar real life history likely played a part in New Zealand's Peter Jackson deciding upon using the Tophatters (or High Hatters considering when the film is set) Squadron for the attack on King Kong in his 2005 remake of the 1933 classic, a film that Jackson had adored since childhood. The Vintage

Far left: Fred MacMurray and Errol Flynn on the Tophatters flight line during the making of Dive Bomber. **Norm deWitt**

Left: In the final scene of Dive Bomber



VF-14 - The Kong Killers! shirt design. Design copyright Travis Getz. All Rights Reserved. [www.SquadronStore.com](http://www.SquadronStore.com)

Aviator Ltd (TVAL) in New Zealand built two of the Curtiss Helldiver replicas that were used for filming the final battle scene atop the Empire State Building. TVAL's Gene DeMarco - "Regarding the Curtiss Helldiver replicas used in Sir Peter Jackson's remake of King Kong; the aircraft were chosen because they resemble the aircraft used in the original film and 'could' have been nearby at the time. In the original movie I believe the film featured several Curtiss O2C-2's (Navy F8C-4's) and at least one consolidated NY-1. These planes were flown by Navy pilots stationed on Long Island, New York. I believe Mr. Jackson wanted to remain faithful to the original production and chose these aircraft for that very reason. Two non-flying replicas were built for the film by The Vintage Aviator Ltd. I believe at the time the movie takes place the Top Hatter Squadron was known as VF-1B and was assigned to the carrier Saratoga and she 'could' have been in the vicinity when Kong was terrorising New York."

Just one of many references to Merian Cooper's original film came early in the film when Denham (Jack Black) is trying to cast the female role in his movie, and inquires about using Fay (Wray). Denham's assistant replies "She's doing a picture with RKO". Denham's response - "Cooper, huh? I might have known" - as music from the original

Fay Wray was approached about doing a cameo in the final scene of the movie, but sadly she passed away before the opportunity could be realised. The lights of the Empire State Building were extinguished for 15 minutes in her memory.

In a further homage to the original, much as Merian Cooper had done in the 1930s, Peter Jackson is the gunner in one of the Curtiss Helldivers strafing Kong on the Empire State Building. Jackson's pilot is Rick Baker, the actor who put on the Gorilla suit to play King Kong in the less memorable 1976 version. The 2005 film was dedicated to those who made the 1933 original, Producers Merian Cooper, Ernest Schoedsack, Max Steiner (who had created the stellar score), and Fay Wray.

James Dietz was one of the pilots used in the filming for that 2005 version of King Kong. James: "This all came about because Peter has been nice enough to buy a painting of mine from time to time. When I heard rumours that he was doing King Kong again, I mentioned that I had always planned to do a painting of Kong. Peter asked if I would still like to do that painting, and that he would commission it. Then he asked if I would like to come over when they were filming it and fly one of the airplanes. A year or so later Peter emailed and said that if I came over in February or March



Producers Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack





22 22A

23 23A

24 24A

25 25A

26 26A

**Above, left to right:**

King Kong star Fay Wray in a publicity still from the 1933 film. Sadly, she died before she could take part in Sir Peter Jackson's 2005 film. **Norm deWitt**

Kong's revenge! One of the Curtiss O2C-2s falls to the mighty ape. **Norm deWitt**

Wallace Beery and Clark Gable in flying clothing from Hell Divers, note the High Hatter badges on their jackets. **Norm deWitt**

Biplane two seater aircraft attack King Kong in a scene from the 1933 classic film. **Norm deWitt**

Merian C Cooper and Earnest B Schoedsack were the producers of King Kong but also played the victorious aircrew in the final scenes of the film. **Norm deWitt**

Soon after, James was making his film debut. "I still didn't believe it... but it seems like everybody in New Zealand has worked on one of Peter's movies. Same with Lord of the Rings... all the extras are friends, family, the mayor of Wellington... everybody shows up. And the people who worked on the movie... there were very few inflated egos involved, and everybody seemed to be having a pretty good time. They love their work and they love working for Peter. Richard Taylor (now Sir Richard) who runs WETA is a stickler for doing things that you won't notice... he is a genius, that's the only way to put it. Everyone there works on computers and at the time of making King Kong, they said they had the ninth greatest amount of computing power in the world."

TVAl's two replica Helldivers were not flying replicas, as they were made specifically

for the close-up shots during the attack on Kong. James: "The airplane was really perfect, and they put the whole thing on a giant gimbal. The rudder was connected, the ailerons were all connected. For all the world, it was like the little coin operated airplane that rotated and rattled around outside the supermarkets, except it was way up off the ground and it had two very real and firing Browning machine guns. Peter wanted to make sure that when they fired, you would see real shell casings coming out the shell chute. On this gimbal they had, through the magic of computers, built into the room a sun... a very bright light that was on a track. They would program the airplane's relation to the sun that would tie in with the computer graphics that would be added later on."

There was an enormous effort to get the correct location of the sun vs. aircraft, in relation to where the moving plane was in relation to Kong. James: "That's exactly right, and they had a good idea of where all this was as they had done a rough animation so that the computer guys, and the camera guys, and the assistant director had a good idea as to how it would all work out scene to scene. This was all put into a 'blue room'... which is actually a green room. Most of the people involved were friends of Peter, who got in some of the shots as well. Another friend of Peter's, one of the assistant producers for Lord of the Rings, was the gunner and that's how I can tell the scenes I'm in, because he stands up and does a lot of the firing. A delightful guy, I spent two days with him, as the seven seconds that we appear on the screen took two days of shooting... part of which was that I'm an inept actor, and that the twin Brownings refused to fire all the time.

"They were antique guns from the 1920s, and they had a really hard time trying to get a steady burst from both guns for a long enough period of time. They had an armaments guy from Australia who was supervising everything, but they jammed all the time. Every time they'd jam, they'd have to put a ladder up to the airplane. He'd crawl up, clear the jam, and then get back down again so we could do the shot. If the guns worked, then it was something that I or the other guy did wrong... we had a moment to moment thing we were supposed to do, as we were supposed to see the ape, fire, and then turn our heads to look over our shoulders as if we had just flown by the Empire State Building. If I did everything right, the guns didn't work. If the guns worked, I did something wrong. We were in the flight gear all day, and they had it so that the plane would shake and turn. It was a massive 'I need a bathroom break' kind of day. I asked the assistant director what was the hardest shot he'd ever had to do for a film... he looked at me bleary-eyed after blown shot after blown shot and said 'It may be this one.' It was fun to be involved, but I don't know if

"The plane that Gene made had an easily removable top wing. The second day of filming the wing was off to clear the computerised camera that was about a foot from my face. It would swing around the front of the aircraft and go right by my ear. But you are concentrating so hard on not doing something wrong that you are hardly aware of the camera anymore except when it's right in front of your nose. Then, after the second day, they took me to something like an MRI and did full scans of my face... I don't know if they were just doing that for animated backup in case they needed my head to be doing something." Any future plans for a film career? "No, I believe in starting at the top and quitting."

"Peter is just nuts about First World War airplanes, and practically nothing else gets him going. He had a table full of 1/32nd one-off models, perfect little unpainted models. Now they are available as model kits, the best in the world. He is just in love with that, he told me it goes back to when he would watch the Blue Max as a little kid. A couple of years ago he was doing tests on doing a remake of Dambusters. He had built maybe six full scale plastic Lancaster bombers, and looking at them from across the runway you could not tell that they weren't Lancaster bombers. I also heard there was a gorgeous model made of a Messerschmitt 110 night fighter with about a six foot wingspan. I'd love to get my hands on that... I have the perfect place in the house."



The Vintage Aviator Ltd (TVAl) in New Zealand built two Curtiss F8C-4 Helldiver non-flying

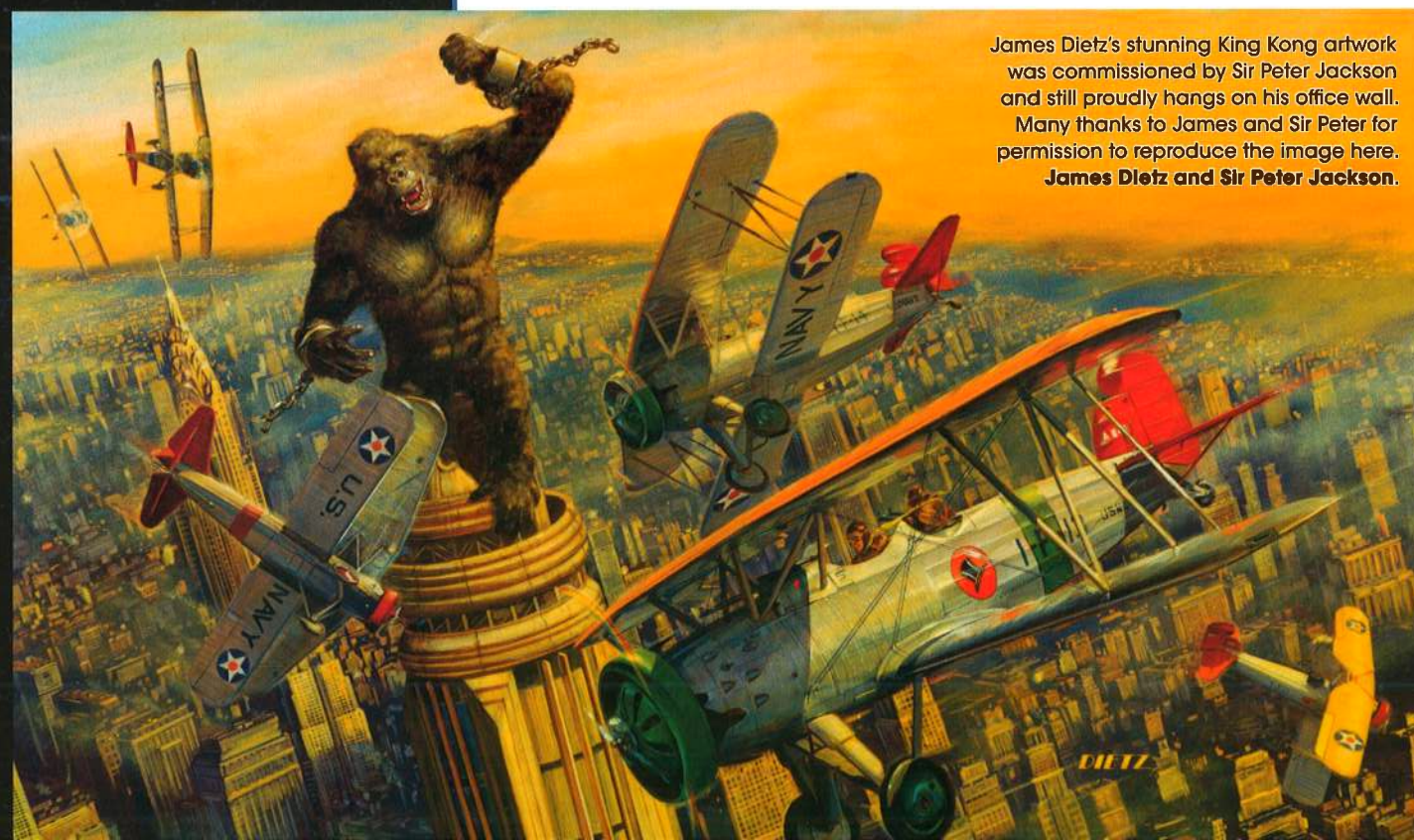


In 1941, the Tophatters were again in the movie spotlight with the release of the hugely popular Dive Bomber. **Norm deWitt**

All of us involved with vintage aviation can be thankful that we have such a highly visible and talented proponent. If there is such a thing as an honorary Tophatter, one has to assume that Sir Peter Jackson has made the cut. ▶



One of the Curtiss F8C-4 Helldiver replicas on set at WETA. The Tophatters badge is clearly



James Dietz's stunning King Kong artwork was commissioned by Sir Peter Jackson and still proudly hangs on his office wall. Many thanks to James and Sir Peter for permission to reproduce the image here. **James Dietz and Sir Peter Jackson.**

# Tophatter in space - Pierre Thuot



Pierre J Thuot, a former Tophatter, in his Shuttle mission work suit. **NASA**



This photo shows the successful capture of the Intelsat VI satellite. Left to right, astronauts Richard J. Hieb, Thomas D. Akers and Pierre J. Thuot have handholds on the satellite. **NASA**

**P**ierre Thuot was destined to be a Naval Aviator from the beginning. Pierre: "My dad was a Naval Aviator, he flew AD's in Korea, and all kinds of different prop planes, so I grew up around Naval Air Stations and airplanes. I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps."



The maiden launch of Space Shuttle Endeavour on STS-49 in May 1992. **NASA**

Getting his degree in physics from the US Naval Academy, he was on his way. "When you get out of the Naval Academy, you go to flight training. Somewhere along the way based upon merit and what your choices are, they try to match it together and you either go into fighters, attack or ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare)... I was fortunate enough to fly fighters. When I graduated I got an assignment to F-14s and went to VF-101, the Grim Reapers. It was what we called the 'replacement squadron', where they train all the replacement pilots and RIO's (Radar Intercept Officers) for the Fleet Squadrons. My first carrier landing was with the Commanding Officer of the VF-101. When I eventually got to the fleet I only had two traps (carrier landings), and two touch and go's. It was pretty exciting, as you're coming aboard at about 135-140 knots, with a sink rate of 600-700 feet per minute, so it's quite a whack. I reported in May 1979 to VF-14 as an Ensign, just about to be Lieutenant Junior Grade. I was a back seater, a RIO, and my call sign was 'Pepe'.

"There were guys who graduated flight training in 1978 who were still going into F-4

Phantoms... some went Phantoms, some went Tomcats. I wanted to go Tomcats, as it was a relatively new airplane. It was considered the premier fighter so I wanted to go into that. When I was with the Tophatters, we won two Battle Efficiency awards, and the 'Battle E' is for the best fighter squadron. We also won the Safety award one of those years, and we got a Meritorious Unit Commendation because of that performance.



The official mission patch of STS-36. **NASA**

Two of our Commanding Officers made Flag rank, Rear Admiral Tim Wright, who was my first CO, and Rear Admiral Jack Dantone who was my second CO... I flew with him as his RIO. We had a pretty good Squadron.

"The year before the Libya shutdown, we were operating in the Gulf of Sidra. We intercepted some Libyan Mig-23s and some Su-17s. We were operating off the John F. Kennedy. I have a couple of pictures on my wall of the Mig-23 and the Su-17. Back in that day, there was Vietnam... which was pretty far behind us with nothing else on the horizon, so that was pretty exciting. I was with the Tophatters for three years, and one of the things about the VF-14... it is the oldest continuously active squadron in the Navy.

"We had made a lengthy cruise to the Mediterranean, almost eight months. We came back and we had 12 F-14s on that ship. Our maintenance folks who were responsible for keeping those airplanes up had every single one of them up. When we got close enough to Oceana, we flew all 12 of them off the ship and did a three diamond fly-by. Not very often can 12 airplanes be flown off a ship like that. The Tophatters were back to Oceana... and it was pretty exciting." The long tradition of excellence continued.

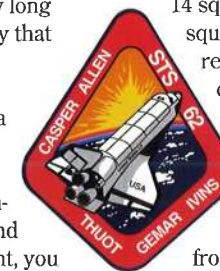
"After I finished with VF-14, I went to Pax (NAS Patuxent) River for test pilot school. After that in 1983, I spent a year doing flight testing, got a little F-4 Phantom time, F-14s and A6s. The F-14 cockpit is so much nicer for a back seater than the F-4. The field of view is unbelievable compared to a Phantom, where



On his last flight, Pierre Thuot took a Tophatters 75th Anniversary patch into space with him. It hangs today in the Smithsonian.

you can turn around in your seat with your shoulder perpendicular to the seat and see the entire aft fuselage of the airplane, you can see between the tails. From a fighter standpoint, one of your jobs being a back seater, is to keep your Six clear (directly astern), and it is a fabulous airplane for doing that."

Many still bemoan the loss of the F-14 Tomcat. Pierre: "Absolutely, it was a tremendous airplane, one of a kind as far as some of its capabilities. Extremely long range radar, the two seat capability that gives you things that a single seat airplane doesn't do. Tremendous weapon system, the airplane was a huge leap over the F-4. But the F-18 is a big advancement over the F-14 in terms of maintenance man-hours, and costs per flight hour and all that kind of thing. At some point, you have to retire the old airplanes. I remember at one point when



The official mission



With his feet anchored in a portable foot restraint on the remote manipulator system end effector, astronaut Pierre J. Thuot is pictured during one of four sessions of extravehicular activity. The STS-49 mission specialist awaits with a special grapple bar as the space shuttle Endeavour heads for a rendezvous with the Intelsat VI communications satellite. **NASA**

14 squadrons, turning them into F-18 squadrons, and they were talking about retiring the Tophatters, but thankfully cooler heads prevailed and the Tophatters continue on.

"Once I finished test pilot school, and did the testing, I worked as an instructor for a year until being selected by NASA. It was a phone call from George Abbey, the director of flight crew operations at the time who called and said I was selected. I went

spaceflight was in February 1990 on Atlantis STS-36, carrying a DOD payload. "One of the guys that I was crewed with in the Tophatters was Stuart Witt. We flew together, we went to Top Gun together... when I came back from my first Shuttle mission he was there to greet me at Edwards Air Force base. A couple of the other Tophatters were there, it was really cool to have some of my squadron mates there after my first space flight to say 'hi' and welcome me back to the planet. Stu and I... we're Tophatters and still very much in touch



The scene at the Kennedy Space Centre as the Space Shuttle Atlantis is rolled out for mission

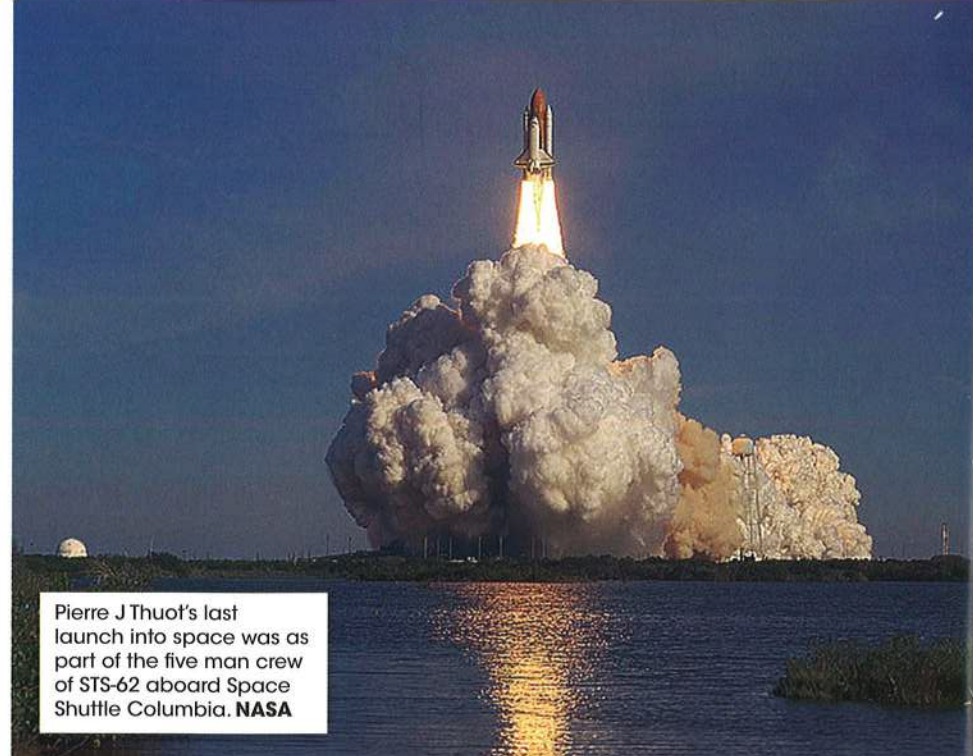


The entry door to the VF-14 ready room exhibit in the Smithsonian includes an appropriately dressed Tomcat badge. **Norm deWitt**

The maiden flight of Endeavor STS-49 in May 1992 was one of the most challenging missions in shuttle history. "Probably the most exciting thing was the second Shuttle mission, where I did three space walks to repair a satellite. It had launched on a Titan rocket a couple of years before, and it was supposed to have its own rocket motor that was supposed to separate from the Titan. Since it didn't separate from the Titan, they had to send a command to separate the satellite from its rocket motor. The Titan and the rocket motor re-entered the atmosphere and burned up while the satellite was left in this 200 mile orbit that was useless.

"The satellite needed to go to 22,000 miles, so we put together this mission to bring up a new rocket motor. The objective was to grab the satellite, attach a new rocket motor, and deploy it out of the Shuttle's bay. What pushes it out of the Shuttle bay were some springs that are canted in such a way that when the satellite comes out, it starts a rotation... it causes the thing to spin so it is stable like a top. A day later they fire the rocket when it's away from us. I didn't plan to do three space walks... we had all kinds of difficulty but were eventually successful. The last of the three spacewalks had three persons, the only time that's ever been done. Dan flew the Shuttle up under the satellite and we just grabbed it."

Pierre had some special cargo for what was his final shuttle flight, Columbia STS-62... a 75th anniversary Tophatters patch. "The patch thing was cool, as the Tophatters were having a big 75th reunion, where I got to present it. We can bring up a few personal items... our 'personal preference kit'. I flew a little Tophatters flag too." Today that 75th anniversary patch hangs in a place of honour... the Tophatters ready room, which is on display at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC. ■



Pierre J Thuof's last launch into space was as part of the five man crew of STS-62 aboard Space Shuttle Columbia. **NASA**



The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Naval Aviation exhibition area includes a complete VF-14 ready room, with exhibits such as this complete set of Tophatters badges. **Norm deWitt**

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**F-14B (BuNo 162916)** - On loan to Veterans of Foreign Wars, Post No. 8896, East Berlin, Pennsylvania - VF-32 "Swordsmen" Gypsy 100

**F-14B (BuNo 162926)** - On loan to New England Air Museum, Suffield, Connecticut 06078 - VF-143 "Pukin Dogs"

**F-14D (BuNo 163893)** - On loan to Arnold Air Force Base, Manchester, Tennessee 37355 - VF-213 "Black Aces"

**F-14D (BuNo 163897)** - On loan to Aerospace Museum of California, McClellan, California 95652 - VF-31 "Tomcatters"

**F-14D (BuNo 163902)** - On loan to Hickory Aviation Museum, Hickory Regional Airport, North Carolina 28601 - VF-31 "Tomcatters" aircraft 107, flew the retirement ceremony with Lt Cdr Chris Richard and Lt Mike Petronis at the controls.

**F-14D (BuNo 163904)** - On loan to Naval Air Station Ford Island, Ford Island, Hawaii - VF-31 "Grumman Markings"

**F-14D (BuNo 164342)** - On loan to Wings Over Miami Museum, 14710 SW 128th St, Miami, Florida 33186 - CAG of VF-31

**F-14D (BuNo 164343)** - On loan to Evergreen Aviation Museum, 500 NE Captain Michael King Smith Way, McMinnville, Oregon 97114 - VF-31 "Tomcatters"

**F-14D (BuNo 164346)** - On loan to Virginia Aviation Museum, 5701 Huntsman Road, Richmond, Virginia 23250-2416 - VF-31 "Tomcatters". The last Tomcat to operationally trap aboard a US Navy carrier.

**F-14D (BuNo 164350)** - On loan to Joe Davies Heritage Airpark, 001 E Avenue P, Palmdale, California

**F-14D (BuNo 164601)** - On loan to Castle Air Museum, Santa Fe Dr, Atwater, California 95301 - VF-101 "Grim Reapers"

**F-14D (BuNo 164603)** - On loan to Northrop Grumman, Bethpage, New York - VF-31 "Tomcatters". Felix 101 from VF-31 is the last Tomcat to fly in US Navy service. Final flight was from NAS Oceana, Virginia to the American Airpower Museum at Republic Airport Long Island, New York on October 4, 2006 where it was displayed for a year and a half before being moved to Grumman Plant 25.

**F-14D (BuNo 164604)** - On loan to Naval Air Station (NAS) Oceana, Virginia

## UNKNOWN BUNOS

**F-14A** - On loan to The USS Midway Museum, 910 N Harbor Drive, San Diego, California 92101 - VF-213 "Black Lions"

**F-14A** - On loan to USS Battlestar



An F-14D on display at Palmdale which made the last flight by a Tomcat in 2006. The aircraft belonged to VF-31 and carries Grumman and Tomcat markings on the fin. **Keith Draycott**



This pedestal mounted F-14A makes an impressive introduction to the National Museum of Naval Aviation at Pensacola, Florida. **National Museum of Naval Aviation**



The F-14D currently on display at the National Museum of Naval Aviation at Pensacola, Florida, following deployment aboard the carrier Carl Vinson (CVN 70) while serving with VF-213 during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. **National Museum of Naval Aviation**



A close up view of the front of YF-14A 157990 at the March Field Museum, showing the right wing fully swept and the left wing further back in the 'superswamp' parked position. **Norm deWitt**

# Dale 'Snort' Snodgrass

## The real Top Gun

No magazine about the Tomcat can be complete without mention of arguably its finest proponent, a man who amassed in excess of 4800 flying hours on the F-14 and flew displays in the aircraft that people still talk about today. Here, Dale Snodgrass talks to Norm deWitt.

There have been many pilots who flew the F-14 over the years, but only one is synonymous with the Tomcat, Dale 'Snort' Snodgrass. He is the most experienced Tomcat pilot in the world, serving for almost the entire flight history of the airplane.

"My father was a Marine Aviator during the Second World War flying C-46s initially, and then Corsairs at the end of the war. Then he was an engineering test pilot in San Diego, in the civilian world doing a number of flights with Consolidated, Lockheed, Convair, and then eventually moved over to the flight research department for Sperry Gyroscope in Long Island, NY, where I was born, and then eventually migrated over to Grumman."

The apple didn't fall far from the tree, and Dale started his Naval Flight Training in 1972. "There were about 90 guys who got orders between all the bases, and I was fortunate enough to be at the top of that chain. I was one of the first guys in flight school to get one; I got first choice along with another guy... Rich Stark... we were the first two guinea pigs to come right out of the Training Command to get those Tomcats."

Of course the F-14 was coveted as it was the latest and greatest. "That's right. The Training Squadron at that time was VF-124, the Gunfighters at Miramar; from there I got assigned to my first Operational Squadron VF-142 the Ghostriders, which was a West Coast F-4 squadron that was being moved to Oceana. The squadrons were all transitioning from F-4s at that point."

What were the initial experiences of the Tomcat? "Well, it was a wonderful experience



Dale with squadron ops officer Dirk Hebert at right, in 1990 when the Officer Commanding



On the 1988 Dependents' Day Cruise of the USS America, Dale was captured by a crewmember doing what he did best, a close, low and extremely tight flying display. This has since become one of the most famous F-14 images. **Dale Snodgrass**



The view from the other side. Dale gets airborne in a MiG-17 for another display. **Dale Snodgrass**

in that the airplane was brand new but it did have some growing pains. I remember the first flight I took; at that point things were breaking all the time. It took about 45 minutes to get out of the line; the jet was very complicated for a young guy coming out of Training Command. Somehow, we all managed to muddle through it. Miramar at the time was very robust in fighter pilots and fighter pilot lore, the Vietnam War had just ended and F-4s were all over the place. The F-14 was the brand new beast on the block and it was pretty cool being a young Ensign, flying the Tomcat at Miramar... in those days it was quite an experience."

It didn't take 'Snort' long to rise to the top of the talent pool, named the Navy's Fighter Pilot of the Year in 1985, and then the Grumman Aerospace "Topcat of the Year" for 1986. Dale - "There was a lot of posturing about how good the MiG-21 was, but in reality it was very capable in a dog fight but not spectacular. A Tomcat in the hands of a good pilot, especially against those guys, would have cleaned up. As far as visual combat goes, my only experience was four engagements with Libyan Mirage IIIs/Vs and MiG-25s. In those engagements we were able to get very offensive (gun solutions), only problem was the ROE wouldn't allow us to pull the trigger unless the Libyans shot first. Worse yet it didn't matter if they shot at your squadron mates 35 miles away, the bogies you were

In the Gulf War of 1990-91 Dale was the Commander of Fighter Squadron 33, leading 34 missions without a single loss. "There was a massively good tanker plan that got us in-country across the Iraq border, every single plane in the Strike package was topped off. When you looked on paper at the time, before Desert Storm, they had a very formidable Air Force. We thought this could be a pretty exciting couple of weeks here if it developed, but it didn't develop. I was a Strike Leader and Squadron C.O., and one time I chased a MiG-29 for 200 miles, in afterburner going the opposite direction (from home). He was running for Iran and I ran out of gas chasing him. It was pretty much slim pickings, as the MiGs were few and far between. Pretty much every one that came up to try and do anything got blasted."

Dale now keeps occupied as one of the top air show pilots in the US. As a result, Dale is one of the few persons who can give an honest informed assessment of the planes that flew against each other in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, as well as some from his Father's era. "I'm flying the Corsair now... it's gone full circle as I'm flying something on the air show circuit that my father flew in combat. Even more 'full circle' is that now I'm flying airplanes that were on the other side of the fence, as I'm flying a MiG-17 in the air shows and am about to get the keys to a MiG-21. It's kind of funny how all this stuff comes around