

SUPERBASE 8

FALLOON

Supercarrier in the Desert



Tony Holmes

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Front cover NAS Fallon is all about the tactical training of pilots and aircrews, putting the 'sharp edge' back on the air wing. One of the vital tools in this training process is the venerable A-4F Skyhawk. Although the Skyhawk was designed as a light attack aircraft over 30 years ago, the US Navy has thoroughly exploited the agility of Ed Heinemann's classic over the past two decades. VFA-127 'Cylons', based at Fallon, are masters at wringing out every last drop of ACM manoeuvrability from the Skyhawk

Back cover A veritable army of 'wooden' weapons are dispersed all over the ranges at Fallon, thus heightening the realism of the missions flown there

Title pages Soon to be towed into the maintenance hangar for some routine engine work, this F-14A of VF-21 'Freelancers' basks in the warm Nevada sunshine. Tomcat '207' is a particularly rare machine in VF-21, as it wears the only low-vis paint scheme in the squadron

Right Many A-4 Skyhawks have ended their flying days at NAS Fallon, usually as decoys on the target range, but this veteran A-4C now resides permanently in a far more distinguished position near the station main gate. Unfortunately no US Navy adversary squadrons ever flew the 'C' model Skyhawk. At least the colour scheme is authentic!

For Lieutenant Mark 'Doppler' Lange. Your loss was not in vain



Introduction

Many miles separate the war ravaged city of Beirut from NAS Fallon in Nevada. However, events in the skies over the Lebanese capital half a decade ago unwittingly ensured that the sleepy little air station would assume a place of prominence in US naval aviation in the ensuing years.

On 4 December 1983, a series of events involving the American presence in the Lebanon came to a head. A strike force consisting of A-6 Intruders and A-7 Corsairs from USS *Independence* (CV-62), and Intruders from USS *John F Kennedy* (CV-67), was sent in to bomb a Syrian ammunition dump, a radar antenna dish, and surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. Political and strategic considerations resulted in the strike being ineffectual with two aircraft lost and a pilot killed.

Almost immediately, changes were made in the training syllabus for strike leaders, and the air wing in general. The most important of these changes was the establishment of the Naval Strike Weapons Center (NSWC) at NAS Fallon in October 1984. Modelled on the highly successful Naval Fighter Weapons School (NFWS), 'Top Gun', at NAS Miramar, the Strike Center has had a profound effect on NAS Fallon, nicknamed 'the biggest little air station in the world'.

Situated at 3000 feet above sea-level alongside the impressive Sierra Nevada mountain range, Fallon has always been associated with the training of aviators. Hastily constructed in 1942, Fallon was one of five bases from which the potential 'air war over

San Francisco' was to have been fought when a Japanese assault on the Californian coast seemed imminent. Controlled by the US Army Air Corps, the base eventually became the final stop for bomber crews completing their training before being posted to Europe or the Pacific.

Fallon became a Navy possession in 1944 and over the past 45 years virtually all 'tailhookers' have peppered the high desert with live ordnance at some time in their career. During the Vietnam conflict air wings worked up thoroughly at the air station just prior to departing for the Tonkin Gulf.

Blessed with fine weather for 361 days a year on average, Fallon is the perfect spot for strike training. Almost \$200 million will have been spent on improving the ranges and establishing the NWSC by the end of the 1980s. A Tactical Air Combat Training System (TACTS), similar to the one at Nellis Air Force Base, gives flying at NAS Fallon a realism that is unsurpassed anywhere in the world.

On average 11 air wings visit Fallon in a year, a figure which underlines the importance of the air station in modern US Naval carrier operations. Perhaps the ultimate accolade should come from a seasoned 'tailhooker' who recently passed through 'the biggest little air station' for the umpteenth time.

'When we are here, it is the most exciting flying we do, and the most challenging'.
Captain Bud Orr, Commander Air Group (CAG), Carrier Air Wing 14

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Right Operating alongside Skyhawks and F-5E Tiger IIs, VFA-127 'Cylons' also employs a number of F-5Fs in the adversary role. The twin seat Tiger II is as combat capable as its single seat brother, and like the Navy F-5Es, no radar is mounted in the aircraft's nose





740

730

VFA 127

NAVY

43

F-5 Tiger II

Below Based at Fallon since October 1987, VFA-127 formerly called Naval Air Station Lemoore, in California, home. The 'Cylons' received their F-5s from the Naval Fighter Weapons School and VF-45 when both of these units traded up to the potent F-16N in 1987. VFA-127 also took delivery of eight former USAF 527th TFFS F-5s last year from RAF Alconbury. The F-5 is a basic fighter when compared to its adversaries at NAS Fallon, the F-14 and the F-18. However, the elite band of 18 pilots assigned to VFA-127 turn the small Northrop fighter into a deadly opponent, more than a match for the fleet 'heavyweights'

Left Several T-38 Talons are also flown by VFA-127 in the adversary role. These aircraft, like the F-5s, are ex-'Top Gun' machines. The Talon was the forerunner of the highly successful F-5 series of fighters and was privately developed by Northrop under the designation N-156T. Although the Talon was designed in the 1950s it still performs admirably in the blue skies over Fallon





Above US Navy adversary squadrons and their USAF counterparts have always been known for the lavish paint schemes which adorn their aircraft, and VFA-127 are no exception. Although two gun barrels protrude from the nose of the F-5F, the aircraft has only one M-39 cannon fitted. The right barrel acts as a cooling scoop for avionics mounted in the nose

Right above The F-5F's flown by the Navy differ in several respects from their USAF brothers. The Air Force has never operated the two seater as an aggressor aircraft, using them to train foreign pilots only. They also have radar fitted which leads to the third difference between navalized and Air Force F-5Fs. To provide the proper balance for the aircraft after the longer nose and extra cockpit had been added, a 300 pound weight had to be bolted on between the engines beneath the aircraft. As mentioned before, the Navy F-5F has no radar and this lack of extra weight in the nose means the aircraft can dispense with the weight

Right below Like several other operators of the F-5, VFA-127 has recently experienced some problems with wing over-stressing on their aircraft. This has resulted in the grounding of their machines and the dismantling of the wing area from the fuselage. The wing is then X-rayed for faults and re-stressed if necessary. The overall wing area on the F-5E is quite small and this detracts from its air combat manoeuvrability as the CO of VFA-127, Commander Ridge 'Junkyard' Corbin, explains. 'The F-5 bleeds off speed and energy terribly during a big "bat turn" but in a straight line it has the speed to track down an F-18.' This particular F-5E is temporarily grounded, hence the tarpaulins over the cannon barrels, canopy, and engine exhausts



The twin engine arrangement in the T-38A is one of the neatest and most compact powerplant packages ever designed. The General Electric J85-GE-8 engine is a development of the YJ85-GE-1 used to power the USAF's Hound Dog missile in the 1950s. This Talon wears a two-tone grey scheme which is one of the most effective worn by adversary aircraft





VFA 127

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QT-38 Talon

Formerly based at the Naval Weapons Center (NWC) at China Lake in California, this QT-38A was acquired by VFA-127 when it became redundant to the Center's needs. Flown for a short time by the squadron XO, the Talon was found to be riddled throughout with corrosion. Permanently grounded as a result, Commander Corbin was desperately trying to get it struck off the squadron books at the time of the author's visit







F-16N Falcon

Left The ultimate adversary.

Although based at NAS Miramar in southern California, VF-126 'Bandits' and the Naval Fighter Weapons School usually take it in turns to temporarily send a quartet of F-16Ns to Fallon to help VFA-127 with the ACM training of the deployed air wing. Representing a fourth generation adversary like the MiG-29 or the Mirage 2000, the 'nautical' Falcon has slotted into the Navy's ACM training programme superbly. This F-16N belongs to VF-126 and is being pre-flighted by the civilian groundcrew from General Dynamics just prior to departing on an F-16 and A-4 versus an F-18 mission

Inset The F-16 is not a big aircraft, but then neither is this sailor from VF-126! Plugged into the pilot's intercom, she informs him that the tailerons, flaps, slats, and rudder are all performing as they should when he operates them from within the cockpit. Mounted on the wingtip above her head is a dummy AIM-9L Sidewinder missile



Above The view from the cockpit in the F-16 is unsurpassed by any of its contemporaries. This important factor, combined with the aircraft's excellent thrust to weight ratio and remarkable agility, makes the Falcon virtually unbeatable in ACM

Right Powered by a single General Electric F110-GE-100 turbofan, similar to that which is being installed in the F-14A Plus and the F-14D, the F-16N is the 'hot rod' of the Falcon family. Using only a basic radar and dispensing with the M61A-1 rotary cannon, the F-16N is a very lightweight fighter. The VF-126 badge on the tail combines a Soviet star with a front-on view of the F-16. Previously the small profile of the A-4 adorned the red star



