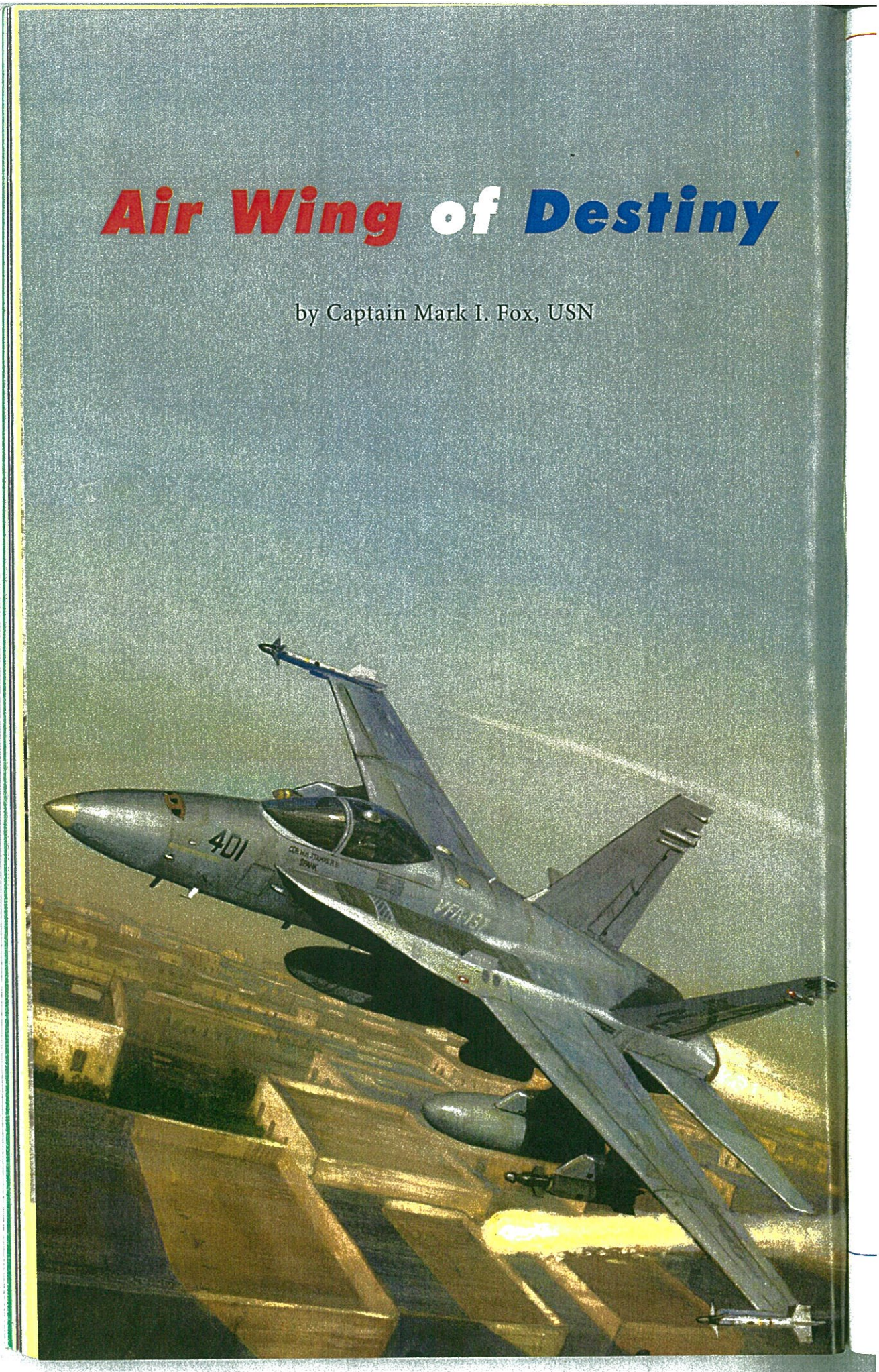
Air Wing of Destiny

by Captain Mark I. Fox, USN



The clear Iraqi night erupted into the most graphic and incredible fire and light show I have ever seen—dozens of surface to air missiles arced gracefully upward, some exploding well above our altitude, others snuffing out in mid-flight. Hundreds of AAA sites came to life around Baghdad, punctuating the night sky with streams of fire. Muzzle flashes sparkled all over the city, looking like the random flash photography at the end of the Super Bowl. At precisely 2100, a series of large, bright explosions throughout Baghdad graphically marked the beginning of the campaign to liberate Iraq. Certainly no shock from my perspective, Operation Iraqi Freedom's *"shock and awe" phase was awesome ... and I had a ringside seat.*

On 22 August 2001, after a year as Deputy CAG and toward the end of a "routine" summer deployment to the Persian Gulf and Western Pacific, I assumed command of Air Wing Two in a ceremony aboard USS *Constellation* (CV-64) at anchor in Hong Kong harbor.

In my change of command speech that sunny day, I remarked there was no way to know whether we lived in what would someday be described as a pre-war or post-war era until the history books were written, but that we would be prepared—regardless of what the future held. When I took command, I thought the eastbound Pacific transit home would be my only deployed time as air wing commander since *Constellation's* next (and final) deployment was scheduled to coincide with the end of my 18 month CAG tour in February 2003.

On 11 September 2001, *Constellation* was about 700 nautical miles east of Hawaii, steaming east toward San Diego with an air power demonstration scheduled for our 1,200 "Tigers" (friends and family members who had joined us in Hawaii). Upon learning of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, we cancelled the air power demo and started figuring out how we would get the Tigers off if we turned around.

Constellation ultimately continued east while we went through a dozen other "what if" drills.

Facing Page: An illustration from U.S. Navy Hornet Units of Operation Iraqi Freedom Part One *(Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2004) depicting Captain Fox's low altitude pass over An Najaf on 10 April 2003.* Tony Holmes/Chris Davey

Below: Aircraft assigned to Carrier Air Wing Two (CVW-2), fly over USS Constellation *(CV-64) in a tight formation, at the conclusion of a practice air and sea power demonstration for their "Tiger Cruise" aboard the ship, 20 May 2003.* USN Photo/PH2 D.J. McClain

USS Constellation *(foregound) and USS* Kitty Hawk *(CV-63) underway in the Arabian Gulf during their last deployment together in support of Operation* Iraqi Freedom, *April 2003. Both carriers and their respective air wings provided much-needed air support to the ground troops entering Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein's regime. Following her successful combat deployment,* Constellation *was decommissioned 7 August 2003.* USN Photo

Three days after the terrorist attacks, the air wing flew off and *Constellation* moored at her NAS North Island pier. Returning to a nation that had changed since we had left, our homecoming was subdued, filled with raw uncertainties and new security measures.

Immediate preparations began for what I was certain would be a combat deployment. Whenever I addressed the air wing during the next 13 months, I told them that we would undoubtedly carry the fight to our enemies on our next deployment and that we had a "rendezvous with destiny." Each time we finished a major training milestone, I built on the "air wing of destiny" theme and emphasized how each phase of training better prepared us for the inevitable combat to come. Barely a year after the terrorist attacks and the end of our last cruise, we embarked again aboard *Constellation* for her final history-making deployment.

Constellation entered the Persian Gulf on 17 December 2002, relieving USS *Abraham Lincoln* (CVN-72). The previous deployment's frustrating "Groundhog Day" pattern was long gone; this time, reactions to increasing Iraqi efforts to down coalition aircraft were sharp and decisive. Conducting a Response Option (RO) attack on our third day of operations in the Gulf, CVW-2 delivered more ordnance, hit more aimpoints and destroyed more Iraqi targets in that one strike than we had during the entire 2001 deployment.

On 26 December 2002, three days after the Iraqis downed a USAF *Predator* unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), I led a joint USN-USAF retaliatory strike that destroyed key air defense command and control nodes in southern Iraq. Delivering ordnance in anger for the first time since *Desert Storm*, the strike also marked the first time I had dropped GPS-guided weapons as well.

Preparation for conflict

In early December 2002, weeks prior to our arrival in the Gulf, I sent a CVW-2 liaison team to the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. Seamless connectivity was essential, and I wanted to be absolutely certain that we understood how to effectively operate and communicate from day one. Having seen firsthand the difficulties of connecting with CAOC during *Desert Shield/Storm*, as well as various other contingency operations

(*continued page 74*)

Constellation *aviation ordnancemen load GBU-31 JDAMs aboard an F/A-18* Hornet *during night flight operations in the Arabian Gulf in March 2003. These "smart bombs" provide multi-target strike capability to modern U.S. military aircraft.* USN Photo

Naval Aviation's ability to deliver precision ordnance improved dramatically in the years after *Desert Storm*—both *Tomcats* and *Hornets* now carry targeting pods to guide laser-guided munitions, as well as the GPS-guided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM: a "dumb bomb" body with a GPS guidance kit).

Although the weather we encountered on 26 December 2002 would have prevented us from hitting our targets with dumb bombs in *Desert Storm*, we dropped our JDAMs through an overcast layer, hitting every aimpoint and destroying every target. The revolutionary nature of such improved accuracy has changed everything about the air wing's effectiveness and lethality: We used "sorties per target" as a strike planning factor during *Desert Storm*. During Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, we used "targets per sortie." A single, modern military aircraft is now capable of destroying more targets in a single sortie than a four-plane division could during the first Gulf War.

Aviation ordnancemen assigned to the "Death Rattlers" of VMFA-323 prepare to install a GBU-35 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) 1,000 pound bomb onto the wing of an F/A-18C Hornet *on the flight deck of USS* Constellation. USN Photo/PH2 Richard Moore.

in the mid-1990s, I kept a rotating team of CVW-2 liaison officers at Prince Sultan to ensure that communcations between the air wing and CAOC were strong, wanting our contribution to the CAOC to be so great that they would choose us any time they needed the job done right on short notice.

Conflict seemed imminent upon arrival, and that feeling remained until the war started. Every moment to plan and prepare for combat was golden. Flying almost daily over Iraq in support of Operation *Southern Watch* further prepared us for the coming campaign. Knowing Iraq's geography, understanding the threat, and carrying and expending live GPS-guided ordnance against real targets during *Southern Watch* unquestionably enhanced our effectiveness once full-blown combat began.

Certain aspects of *Southern Watch* were completely new. We dropped dozens of leaflet-filled *Rockeyes* throughout Iraq, using paper to influence the Iraqi military and telling Saddam's troops not to fight or use chemical or biological weapons. Somewhat skeptical of this information war, I dropped non-explosive ordnance over Iraq for the first time in my life in February 2003.

Constellation brought a unique capability to what the air wing junior officers called "Operation Litter Bug," in that we could both print and stuff leaflets into the *Rockeye* canisters aboard *Connie*. When preliminary post-war analysis revealed the information campaign's effectiveness in convincing the Iraqi Army not to fight, my skepticism eased just a bit. I was glad we had done our part to help win the information war.

My goals were straightforward: accomplish the mission, put our ordnance precisely on target, not kill any good guys or innocents on the ground and bring everybody home.

Avoiding fratricide, or more simply put, not killing American Marines and soldiers in a ground war, was at the top of my combat priorities. We worked hard to prepare for the close air support mission, working closely with the CAOC planners as well as reaching out to the I Marine Expeditionary Force and Army V Corps units ashore in Kuwait. We honed our tactics and procedures required to ensure we had absolute certainty of who was on the receiving end of our ordnance. In particular, our own airborne forward air controllers—a cadre of well trained VF-2 Radar Intercept Officers (RIOs)—contributed in proportion far greater than their numbers in our successful execution of the close air support mission during the war.

A Carrier Air Wing Two F/A-18 Hornet *comes aboard USS* Constellation *during flight operations in the Arabian Gulf during Operation* Iraqi Freedom. USN Photo

Captain Fox is greeted by deck crewmen after completing his 3,000th hour of flight time in the F/A-18 Hornet, *1 March 2003.* USN Photo/PH3 C.D. Tweedell

Abraham Lincoln and CVW-14 (extended on their deployment) returned to the Gulf in late January 2003 after a break in Australia. We conducted dual carrier operations, worked closely together flying *Southern Watch* missions, and prepared for outright combat.

As the coalition forces in the region grew stronger, the challenge of deconflicting aircraft in confined airspace and ships in limited sea room continued to grow. Whereas my main concern in the power projection mission was putting fused ordnance on the enemy while not killing friendlies, I considered the mid-air collision potential both in and outside of Iraq to be one of the greatest risks we faced—whether in combat or not. In concert with the CAOC planners and our CVW-14 teammates, we created simple procedural airspace deconfliction measures—three dimensional "highways in the skies," complete with off-ramps, reporting points and altitude splits that helped mitigate the mid-air hazard. Still, the prudent aviator always stayed on altitude, did belly checks and kept his head on a swivel when joining the tanker!

USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) and CVW-5 joined us in late February, creating three carrier strike group operations in the Gulf. Sister ships and Vietnam veterans, *Constellation* and *Kitty Hawk*, operated together for the very last time. Both *Connie* and *Hawk*, each more than 40 years old, kept pace with their less mature, nuclear-powered sister, *Lincoln*.

Anticipating the need for around-the-clock operations, *Constellation* moved to the night page. Shifting our daily schedule exactly 12 hours from normal, with reveille at 1800, lunch at midnight, dinner at 0600 and midrats at 1000, we started flying at 2100, flew through the night and finished up around noon. It was a peculiar schedule and tough to keep track of which day of the week it was when the calendar date changed in the middle of your day. I watched the sun rise from a cockpit more in March and April 2003 than the rest of my flying career combined!

Embedded media

In early March, a group of approximately 20 journalists joined us aboard *Constellation*. Although dealing with their insatiable desire for access and information complicated an already demanding schedule, I thought the idea of embedding reporters and expanding their access was a stroke of genius. Under the leadership of the *Constellation* Carrier Strike Group Commander, Rear Admiral Barry Costello, we began daily press conferences to educate and inform the embarked media members about the myriad technical issues and warfighting concepts relevant to our mission, including basic shipboard life, flight operations, power projection, strike

warfare, air-to-ground weapons and maritime intercept operations.

My previous interactions with the media had consisted of one-time-only or "drive-by" interviews. Embarking journalists aboard *Constellation* provided the media personnel with all of the joys and challenges of shipboard life, imparting a much better understanding of the environment in which we lived and operated. Seeing them blearily trek down a passageway looking for an available shower after reveille, or overhearing them describe how hard it was to sleep during flight operations made me smile. Furthermore, it gave the journalists far greater access to repeatedly interact with the incredible young people in today's Navy and Marine Corps, volunteers all, who serve so skillfully, honorably and well.

Air Wing Two aviators brief in Ready Room Five aboard USS Constellation, *21 March 2003. Carrier Air Wing Two pilots and crewmen played significant roles in the* Iraqi Freedom *aerial campaign.* USN Photo/PH2 Felix Garza Jr.

"No one tells our story better than we do," I told the air wing at a fo'c'sle follies prior to the reporters' arrival. "Go out of your way to cooperate and interact with the journalists in a positive, enthusiastic manner. Seek them out and sit with them at meals in the wardroom. Stick to what you know, don't speculate, don't lapse into 'acronym-ese', and describe what you're doing in terms your grandmother can understand."

My guidance to the air wing and attitude toward the media was largely shaped by my experience in *Desert Storm*, where I had had no training or experience in handling an interview at all. In January 1991, I viewed reporters with great suspicion and had no desire whatsoever to talk to them after my first combat hop. Even though my MiG kill mission was certainly newsworthy, I reluctantly (and only after a bit of persuasion) spoke to CNN's Christiane Amanpour and other reporters that day because I felt it was nothing more than a good way to get myself into trouble.

In the years following *Desert Storm*—after many sessions with reporters and authors—my attitude changed. Although still guarded, I realize how important a free press is to our society and to our all-volunteer military. In my parents' generation, everyone had friends and family members who served in the military. Today, as a natural consequence of our all-volunteer force, the number of citizens with military experience in our society is much smaller. Hence, how our society views the military today is shaped less by direct experience and more by indirect means—primarily the media.

We in the military do inherently interesting, newsworthy and relevant things, but few jour-

nalists today have enough military experience to give a proper perspective or to anchor their reporting. As defenders of our nation's freedoms, including a free press and free speech, the remarkable young men and women who serve in today's military represent the very best of our society. Giving them an opportunity to explain to a reporter who they are, what they do and why they serve adds a much needed voice in our national dialogue.

Approaching conflict

The first version of the campaign plan, referred to as OPLAN 1003V, called for an air campaign kicked off with a massive airstrike (A-day and the beginning of shock and awe) followed a number of days later by the ground war (G-day). OPLAN 1003V evolved, however, as the conflict grew nearer. The delta between A- and G-days grew progressively smaller, with good reason: days of heavy air strikes without a ground war would tip our hand, giving Saddam the opportunity to sabotage Iraq's bridges, domestic oil fields and offshore oil platforms before the Army and Marines could intervene.

In early March, the CAOC assigned mission commander responsibilities for the opening strike to CVW-2, and since I was CAG, it was my job to lead it. Having spent my entire career in tactical aviation preparing for just this moment, I was in exactly the right place at precisely the right time and was honored to lead such a momentous strike.

Planning the first strike against Baghdad presented a massive timing, coordination and deconfliction problem. Consisting of waves of continuous attacks for well over half an hour, the strike began with several hundred cruise missiles launched by ships, submarines and B-52 *Stratofortresses*, followed by F/A-18 *Hornet*-launched stand-off weapons (HARMs, JSOWs and SLAM-ERs), followed by B-2 *Spirits* and F-117 *Nighthawks* delivering JDAMs, and concluded by F/A-18 *Hornets* and F-14 *Tomcats* delivering JDAMs. The indispensable U.S. Navy and Marine Corps EA-6B *Prowlers* provided continuous multiple axis jamming in support of the approximately 70 strike aircraft attacking nearly 100 different targets throughout Baghdad.

Designed to saturate and destroy Iraqi air defenses, neuter the Baghdad 'Super MEZ' (Missile Engagement Zone), destroy key command and control nodes and degrade the Iraqi ground forces' ability to defend Baghdad, the opening strike was an impressive demonstration of precision demolition.

Not knowing exactly when 'A' day would be kept our head in the game. We coordinated the opening strike with the CAOC and every coalition entity involved—the two other Persian Gulf carrier air wings, USAF F-15C *Eagles*, F-15E *Strike Eagles*, F-16C *Fighting Falcons*, B-2s, F-117s, U.S. Navy shore-based EA-6Bs, and RAF GR4 *Tornados*. Improved communications—voice, data and video-teleconferences—were priceless. Coordination that would have taken months and weeks using military messages happened in days and minutes using secret internet and secure telephones. Among other things, we maintained 24/7 connectivity with the CAOC in the "Current Operations" cell, which greatly helped us understand what they were thinking when there were glitches in the Air Tasking Order.

Spirits were high as we watched President Bush address the nation on 18 March 2003. Anticipation continued to build as Vice Admiral Tim Keating, Commander 5th Fleet, visited us briefly on the 19th, telling us, among other things, the name of the campaign to liberate Iraq. Operation *Iraqi Freedom* was about to begin.

Decapitation Strike and G-Day

The much planned opening sequence changed even in the final hours before the A-day shock and awe portion of the campaign. Late in the evening of 20 March 2003, I was finishing planning of the next day's opening strike when the CAOC called with a short-fuzed request: could we immediately launch an EA-6B to provide suppression for a high value target decapitation strike? The answer, of course, was a resounding yes! Our solo *Prowler* and the USAF F-117s successfully tackled Baghdad's "Super MEZ" within hours—not hitting Saddam, but demonstrating undaunted courage in a bold and valiant effort.

Finally, in addition to special operations forces working in western Iraq, coalition ground forces secured the southern Iraqi oil fields and off-shore oil platforms before the opening strike in a successful effort to prevent them from destruction by Saddam. G-day, the beginning of ground operations, had arrived before the much planned for A-day! The embedded reporters kept asking me, "Have we started? Has the war begun?" For the time being, all I could do was shrug and smile. The rest of the story would come soon enough.

My desire to address the entire air wing

one final time and put the capstone on the air wing of destiny theme before sustained combat operations began was overcome by events. No matter—we were ready.

"Shock & Awe"

Ready Room Five was crowded—standing room only—for the late afternoon strike brief on 21 March 2003. A hushed atmosphere and unmistakable feeling of "This is it" filled the ready room as the journalists and aviators crowded in for the brief.

I briefed the strike earlier than normal to create a time margin and establish an unhurried atmosphere of clinical, calculated and deliberate professionalism. Only lightly touching on the momentous nature of our undertaking, there was no need for any, "Rendezvous with destiny," or, "Win one for the Gipper," comments. Everyone's head was in the game tonight.

For me and my element, the launch was smooth, the flow to the tankers exactly as planned, and the weather was, for the first wave, very workable. Having worked carefully on this plan, I knew each element by call sign as they checked in. Using night vision goggles (NVGs), I watched the multiple dozens of aircraft launched from three carriers and several land bases proceed to their tanker tracks over and into Iraq as if we had practiced it a dozen times. It was like flying over New York, Chicago or Los Angeles on a busy night, but with no air traffic control center to coordinate and deconflict flightpaths. After all the effort to build simple airspace rules in the previous weeks and months, watching the first strike smoothly unfold was a beautiful thing indeed.

With tanking complete and our element formed, I worked the time-distance problem to Baghdad with a northwesterly 120 knot jetstream adding variables to my calculations. About 100 nautical miles south of Baghdad, the high overcast layer receded to reveal a dark, clear night. F-15Cs, flying combat air patrol west of us, left high contrails that paralleled our northbound flightpath.

Baghdad, a city the size of Detroit, was faintly visible on the horizon to the naked eye, but brightly lit in green hues when viewed through NVGs. As I looked east, familiar geography emerged. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were defined by the cultural lighting of Iraq's southern towns and cities. To the west, the empty expanse of the desert was marked by an occasional light visible only on goggles.

Up north, things were heating up. *Prowlers* began jamming and cruise missiles started exploding, kicking off the most impressive fireworks display I have ever seen. Dozens of unguided surface-to-air missiles gracefully arced upward, some exploding well above our altitude, others snuffing out in mid-flight. Hundreds of AAA sites around Baghdad punctuated the night sky, their muzzle flashes sparkling like the scattered flash photography at the end of the Super Bowl.

The graphic light show intensified. All over Baghdad fireworks streaked skyward, and the rate of bright explosions blossoming on the ground accelerated. It was like an extended climax at the end of a Fourth of July fireworks display, with countless explosions both in the air and on the ground.

Not everything was going as planned. While working to get to my JSOW release point on time, I was simultaneously figuring out a way to get all the strikers to their targets in spite of emerging lapses in the Super MEZ suppression effort. A flight of *Hornets* carrying anti-radiation missiles had been delayed during tanking and was out of position to fire preemptive HARMs in support of a JDAM-carrying *Tomcat* division. The *Tomcats*, on timeline, would be in the heart of the Super MEZ without a key element of suppression. To delay until the HARM shooters arrived would run the F-14s low on gas, add to their exposure in the Baghdad area, and otherwise disrupt the strike flow. Of all times to rely on the Iraqi defenses being confused and saturated, this was the night. I told the *Tomcats* to press on to their targets as planned without the HARM support.

Baghdad's fires and the building crescendo of explosions were almost too bright to view through NVGs. The Iraqi defenses were spectacular but ineffective. None of the SAMs were guiding, no one had any indication of being illuminated by fire control or target tracker radars, and the vast majority of the fireworks were in front of and mostly below us. Still, co-altitude AAA bursts and SAM trajectories rising through our altitude kept our jets in constant maneuver and our eyes out of the cockpits for the entire attack.

Having never launched multiple JSOWs before, I was relieved when the third consecutive "thunk" indicated a normal release of my last weapon. Wrapping up into in a hard right

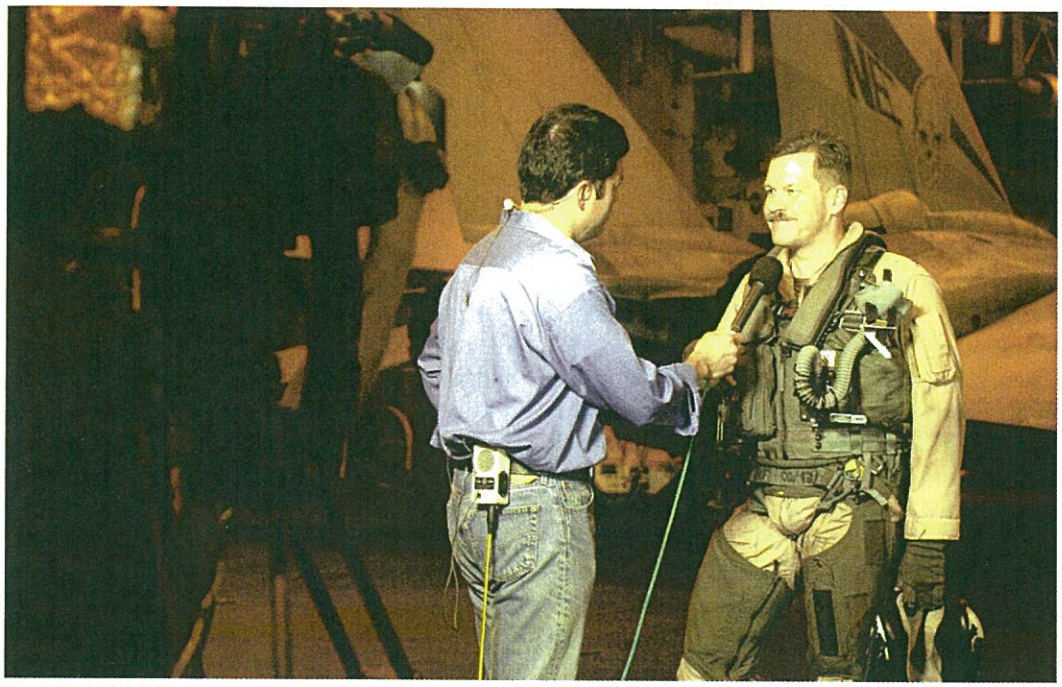
turn, I glanced straight down from a steep angle of bank and was intrigued by a series of sparkles arrayed below in grid squares. Fascinated by the spectacle, I stared at barrage fire from a unique perspective, directly above hundreds of Iraqi troops deployed along the roads of Baghdad's southern suburbs, firing their weapons straight up in the air. Safe in a sanctuary well above the firestorm, I thought to myself "This would be a bad night to go low."

Heading southeast on a tangent away from Baghdad, I leaned left and took a last look at the epic scene, our attack vividly marked by a continuing series of explosions blossoming throughout the city. Contrails formed behind our jets as we climbed up to the high 30s to egress.

Departing central Iraq in our "egress altitude block," we passed waves of attacking jets in their preplanned "ingress altitude block," headed toward Baghdad. When we approached the Iraq-Kuwait border from the northwest, we could see evidence of the coalition ground attack into southern Iraq marked by flashes of gunfire and explosions. Although not as vivid or graphic as the sights of Baghdad a quarter hour before, the fact that soldiers and Marines were advancing into Iraq was momentous.

Post-strike tanking and return to the ship was uneventful, with all aircraft accounted for. Trapping aboard close to midnight, I was very pleased that *Constellation* and CVW-2's first combat flight operations in *Iraqi Freedom* culminated in a "gold star," (no bolters or wave-offs) Case III recovery. A small point, but with great professional satisfaction!

After debriefing Rear Admiral Costello and the intelligence team in CVIC, I did exactly what I had told the air wing's aviators to do after the strike—talk to the embedded journalists. Still in my flight gear, with helmet hair and an oxygen mask imprint on my face, I gave CNN's Frank Buckley a live interview down in the hangar bay. It was quite a contrast with the experience after my first hop in *Desert Storm*!



USN Photo/PH3 P.A. Hughes III

Captain Fox is interviewed by CNN's Frank Buckley following his first mission in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, *21 March 2003. Carrier Air Wing Two met its mission objectives without losing a single aircraft during this opening mission of the air campaign.*

Operation Iraqi Freedom

The next few weeks were full. Pre-planned, large, coordinated strikes against well-defended, static targets gave way immediately to smaller, flexible coordinated elements supporting Marine and Army ground forces advancing toward Baghdad. The precision weapon training and close air support emphasis paid off. Smart bombs accounted for 95 percent of the air wing's ordnance expenditure, and 75 percent of our *Iraqi Freedom* strike sorties received targeting

Captain Fox gives a thumbs-up sign before launching on his final flight as air wing commander, 15 April 2003. USN Photo/PH2 Felix Garza Jr.

information in flight.

On 25 March, after trapping aboard in the midst of a terrible sandstorm at sea that produced near zero-zero ceiling and visibility, I, with *Constellation* commanding officer Captain John "Fozzie" Miller's consultation and concurrence, recommended to Rear Admiral Costello that we knock off flight operations until conditions improved. Minutes later, the CAOC's U.S. Navy "night O-6," Captain Gary "Craze" Mace, called with an urgent and compelling request: "We think the Marines are going to get 'slimed' (a chemical or biological attack) tonight. We really need you to launch a quick reaction strike in support of the Marines. We have the target coordinates for your GPS weapons. All the ground bases are socked in and no other carriers are flying. You're the only ones who can launch right now."

My pre-war desire of having the CAOC choose CVW-2 for a really hard job had been fulfilled in a way I could never have predicted. Only minutes after deciding to stop flying because of the sandstorm, I not only reversed my previous recommendation but urged that we increase the size of the next launch to support the CAOC's request.

The soul-searching moment for Captain Miller, me and ultimately Rear Admiral Costello defined the concept of "operational necessity." We accepted the risk that we might lose aviators and aircraft based on the need to support the Marines ashore, and we launched the strike.

We continued to fly through the night and into the next day in the most difficult conditions imaginable, ultimately recovering all aircraft without mishap. I was very much relieved when our fly day ended with everybody in one piece.

While high altitude tactics were structured to minimize our exposure to the Iraqi threat, we had a sacred duty to support our troops on the ground, regardless of the threat. My guidance to the air wing was explicit: "Do whatever it takes to support our ground forces, including exposing yourself to high risk threats if necessary, but *do not* abuse my permissive guidance to do stupid things or be a cowboy."

As the ground war progressed, controllers began to request strafing support, and I was pleased the air wing provided such "up close and personal" support for our ground forces when asked. At the same time, I personally debriefed aviators from each strafing mission in order to fully understand how we were being tasked, and, just as important, to keep the aggressive young warriors in the air wing honest by providing a bit of accountability and CAG supervision.

Tanker tracks moved into southern Iraq, giving us increased range and loiter time. In addition to the bomb-dropping *Hornets* and *Tomcats*

and suppression of the *Prowlers*, the rest of the air wing was heavily involved as well. Our E-2C *Hawkeyes*, finally free from "microwave alley" over Kuwait, flew into Iraq, brilliantly facilitating air support for the ground campaign and providing invaluable coordination. Our S-3B *Vikings* valiantly provided much-needed organic gas in some extremely demanding conditions, and in one memorable hop, made *Viking* community history by going feet dry and blasting Saddam's yacht at a Basrah pier with a *Maverick*.

For me, *Iraqi Freedom* was a challenging kaleidoscope of demanding but fascinating combat flying: watching 15 JDAMs from five *Hornets* precisely hit 15 different aimpoints at Al Taquadum airfield; refueling at night on a KC-135 *Stratotanker* in the midst of a thunderstorm; the hectic CAS flight over Baghdad under an overcast layer the night the 3rd Infantry Division entered the city, maneuvering to avoid Air Force A-10 *Thunderbolt IIs* working the same target area in the murky darkness; and flying over downtown Baghdad in broad daylight, with fires and smoke looking like a surreal scene from a *Mad Max* movie.

My own experience reflected the conflict in a microcosm. During my first 11 *Iraqi Freedom* combat missions, I delivered only precision ordnance, JSOWs, JDAMs, *Laser Mavericks* and LGBs, against a wide variety of fixed and mobile targets throughout Iraq. In my last three flights, without tasking to drop, I brought my bombs back to the ship.

My twelfth *Iraqi Freedom* combat sortie, the first no-drop mission, turned out to be one of my most interesting *Iraqi Freedom* flights of all. Holding south of Baghdad on the morning of 10 April 2003, my wingman, Lieutenant Commander Steve "Odie" Cargill, and I systematically worked through a number of different controlling frequencies trying to find someone who needed our support. Finally directed to check in with a ground FAC in An Najaf with a call sign of *Diablo* 69, I was concerned. The Army had captured that area weeks earlier, and the fact that we were headed back south could not be good news.

Diablo 69 was a beleaguered G.I. distributing

Eight commanders from the Constellation *Battle Group are awarded the Bronze Star at the Pentagon for their roles in Operation* Iraqi Freedom, 17 December 2003. *Rear Admiral Barry Costello, Battle Group Commander, presented the awards. The recipients and their previous commands, from left to right: Commander Andy Whitson, CO, VF-2; Commander Dave Dober, CO, VFA-97; Commander Kevin Andersen, CO, VAW-116; Lieutenant Colonel Gary Thomas, CO, VMFA-323; Rear Admiral Barry Costello,* Constellation *Strike Group Commander; Captain Mark Fox, Commander, CVW-2; Captain John Miller, CO, USS* Constellation*; Commander Jeffrey Harley, CO, USS* Milius (*DDG-69*) *and Commander Michael Gilday, CO, USS* Higgins (*DDG-76*). USN Photo/PH1 Dana Howe

humanitarian relief to the civilian population of An Najaf and had "a near-riot on his hands," with a large, unruly crowd of Iraqis pressing for supplies. Assuring us via weak hand-held radio there was no threat, he asked us to distract or disperse the crowd with a series of high-speed, low-altitude passes over the center of the city.

An Najaf, a good-sized city about 100 miles south of Baghdad on the western bank of the Euphrates River, appeared untouched by modern times except for an airfield south of town, vehicles on the road and a few microwave towers. A strikingly beautiful large, gold-domed mosque downtown contrasted dramatically with the city's otherwise drab and unremarkable tan buildings.

Skeptical of the FAC's "no-threat" assessment, we carefully scoped out the scene, maintained good mutual support and did some quick time/fuel/distance-back-to-the-ship calculations. We came up with a simple gameplan; keep one set of eyes looking for ground fire while the other made the high speed pass, then swap roles, with each pass coming from a new direction.

Descending to about 100 feet, I pumped out pre-emptive flares and rolled left into a knife-edge turn over the middle of town, using the mosque dome like a pylon at the Reno Air Races. Focused briefly on the town square in the turn, the snapshot freeze-frame image of a startled Iraqi boy on a street corner looking up with his mouth in a perfect "O" registered. I smiled to myself and breathed a prayer: "Lord, please let that little guy grow up to be a pilot—he'll never forget his first close-up glimpse of an airplane!"

After several passes of "mission essential" flathatting over downtown An Najaf, *Diablo 69* said we had helped and thanked us as we climbed away. I didn't realize it at the time, but my bomb-dropping days were over.

For me, the war ended more abruptly than it began. Having been focused on nothing but combat preparations for over a year, I was surprised and relieved when it ended. My last flight as CAG, and *Constellation*'s last day of combat flight operations, was 15 April 2003. After relinquishing command of CVW-2 the next morning, I left the ship aboard a helicopter that afternoon, and headed home on board a commercial airliner out of Bahrain that evening.

Comparisons with Desert Storm

Since returning from *Iraqi Freedom*, I've been frequently asked to compare it with *Desert Storm*. As previously mentioned, our precision and lethality have dramatically improved; although the *Hornets* and *Tomcats* from both conflicts look much the same, today's jets, carrying targeting pods and 'smart' weapons, are much more effective than the same jets a decade ago. Additionally, while only the A-6 *Intruder* community used night vision goggles in *Desert Storm*, NVGs are used by aviators in every tactical aircraft except for the S-3 *Viking* today, dramatically enhancing situational awareness at night.

Our training has become much more focused and disciplined, with higher standards and better accountability. Today's air wings are the most lethal, effective, and combat capable air wings we've ever fielded.

Having operated over Iraq for more than a decade during Operation *Southern Watch* (in which, remarkably, we never lost an aircraft in spite of Saddam's best efforts) we were fully prepared for success in I*raqi Freedom*. Everyone fully understood the operating environment and the Iraqi threat.

During *Southern Watch*, we used airplanes enforcing "no fly zones" instead of large massed ground units in Kuwait to deter Saddam. As a result, *Iraqi Freedom* began where *Southern Watch* left off, right on Saddam's doorstep just south of Baghdad.

Whereas *Desert Storm*'s six-week air campaign culminated in a four-day land war, during *Iraqi Freedom*, the ground war actually preempted the air campaign, and the air campaign directly supported the ground war for the entire conflict. *Desert Storm*'s systematic approach of attacking fixed targets gave way to *Iraqi Freedom*'s dynamic targeting and extensive CAS focus from day one.

Nevertheless, despite changes in weapons, tactics and doctrine, common themes connect *Desert Storm* and *Iraqi Freedom*. In both conflicts, America's all-volunteer military liberated oppressed countries quickly, precisely and efficiently. Today's sailors and Marines are writing the pages of tomorrow's history books with professionalism, dedication and courage.

It's hard to quantify, but a remarkable spirit of cooperation permeated the *Iraqi Freedom* effort. Leaders at all levels worked well together and created a synergy of getting tough jobs done in spite of daunting challenges. Personal friendships and professional relationships established in peacetime paid off when absolute trust was needed in the midst of crisis, confusion and conflict. I personally knew all of the CAGs, carrier COs, the

MAG CO as well as each Navy O-6 in the CAOC and had absolute confidence in their professionalism and judgment. The bonds of brotherhood forged from a career's worth of flying, training and working with your professional peers are intangible but real.

Conclusions

Since major combat operations in OIF ended, some have questioned whether our efforts to liberate Iraq were worth it. From my point of view, there is no doubt. Having deployed to the region five times since 1990, I flew in both crises and conflicts caused by Saddam prior to Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. That he failed to down a coalition aircraft in the years following *Desert Storm* was certainly not for lack of effort; Saddam posted generous rewards for successful shoot-downs. Those of us who studied the region during multiple deployments and who flew over Iraq with a bounty on our heads were repeatedly shot at by Saddam's gunners while enforcing a UN-sanctioned no-fly zone, so we understood the nature of the threat posed by his regime. I'm thankful Saddam no longer poses such a threat.

Assisting in the creation of conditions for a democratic Iraq has been a bold undertaking. Only by looking through history's lens, after the Global War on Terror is won, will we know how our liberation of Iraq reshaped the Middle East.

Enough time has now passed to recognize that August 2001 was clearly the last 'pre-war' month for quite a long time. My premonition after the attack on America that our air wing would carry the fight to our enemies was correct—CVW-2 was indeed an "Air Wing of Destiny." ✪

Captain Mark I. Fox, USN, is the Deputy Director of the White House Military Office, responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of all military support to the President.

A native of Abilene, Texas, Captain Fox was commissioned in June 1978 upon graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy. He was designated a Naval Aviator at NAS Kingsville, Texas in March 1980.

During his career, Captain Fox has deployed nine times in five fleet tours, flying the A-7E Corsair II *and F/A-18* Hornet *in over 100 combat and contingency missions off of Lebanon and Libya, and over the Balkans and Iraq. He scored the first U.S. Navy MiG kill of Operation* Desert Storm *on 17 January 1991.*

Captain Fox has commanded Carrier Air Wing Two, the Strike Fighter Wing, U.S. Pacific Fleet, served as the first commanding officer of VFA-122 (the Navy's first F/A-18E/F Super Hornet *squadron) and commanded VFA-81.*

Shore tours include duty as an A-7E instructor pilot in VA-174; a tour as the Light Attack/Strike Fighter Junior Officer Detailer in the Naval Military Personnel Command; assignment as aide and flag lieutenant for Commander, Naval Air Forces, U.S. Atlantic Fleet and the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare-OP-05); joint duty as the Maritime Plans Officer at Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Casteau, Belgium; and a tour as the Joint Strike and Aviation Programs Liaison Officer in the Navy's Office of Legislative Affairs in Washington, D.C.

Captain Fox has logged more than 4,700 flight hours and 1,320 arrested landings on 13 different aircraft carriers. Military awards include the Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Distinguished Flying Cross (with Combat 'V'), Bronze Star, five individual Air Medals with Combat 'V', as well as various other meritorious service, commendation and achievement medals.

Captain and Mrs. Fox (the former Priscilla Wood of Arlington, Virginia) are the parents of four children: William (Ensign, USNR), Collin (Ensign, USNR), Mason (a Midshipman in the class of 2007 at the U.S. Naval Academy) and Abigail. The Fox family currently makes their home in Annandale, Virginia.