

# Stirring Up a Hornet's Nest

By CDR M.I. Fox, USN

*"400, that bandits on your nose, 15"*

*Spurred into action by the E-2's call and surging with adrenaline, I selected a Sidewinder missile and promptly got a radar lock on a head-on, supersonic Iraqi MiG-21 about nine miles away. As I peered through the HUD, trying to see the fast approaching Fishbed, I kept caging the Sidewinder seeker to get a good tone. A few tense seconds later I got a missile tone at the same time I spotted the pinprick speck of the Iraqi fighter. When I squeezed the trigger, the Sidewinder fired with a characteristic WHOOSH... then simply disappeared. Shocked that the Sidewinder didn't appear to be tracking, I selected a Sparrow missile and fired it. This time I watched the missile streak toward the by now very visible MiG.*

Every year in mid-January I find myself thinking about the tumultuous and seemingly unbelievable events of the same month in 1991. This is a personal account of *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm* from a *Hornet* pilot's perspective.

I joined the VFA-81 *Sunliners* in March 1990 during work-ups for the first F/A-18 deployment aboard USS *Saratoga* (CV-60). The deployment, scheduled to begin in early August 1990, promised to be a true love boat cruise to the Mediterranean, with great liberty ports, highlighted by a 10-day pierside visit to Marseilles, France during Christmas and New Year's. My wife Priscilla updated her passport and we began making preparations for a romantic Christmas rendezvous in Paris.

In late July, I was extremely busy as maintenance officer, trying to ensure all the jets and troops would be ready to deploy on 7 August 1990. One jet in particular, *Sunliner 411*, had just come out of major depot-level modification, and required an enormous amount of work

to get it ready to fly. With the bulk of my troops and their tools moving aboard *Saratoga*, I was challenged to get the jet put back together and test flown in time to be confident about it being reliable enough to fly.

With *411* consuming most of my attention, I didn't pay much attention to the news that Iraq invaded Kuwait on Thursday, 2 August 1990. Since most of our troops were aboard *Saratoga*, a non-deploying *Hornet* squadron, VFA-82, hosted us to launch our jets to the ship. My MO counterpart in VFA-82, then-LCDR George Dom, and I were chatting the day before we deployed, and he said "MRT, this thing in the Middle East with Iraq is really heating up. Maybe you guys will have a chance to bag some Iraqi MiGs before it's over!" I replied: "Hey man, my only concern right now is to get *411* out to the ship!" Little did either of us know that we both would be flying in combat in fewer than six months.

Old "Super Sara" made what must have been a record-setting transatlantic crossing for a 34-year-old carrier. We arrived in the Red Sea by mid-August, relieved USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN-69), prepared for the worst.

From a glance at the map, it was obvious we'd need a lot of external tanking support to conduct combat operations from the Red Sea. In early September I got my first taste of the time and distance involved when I led a flight of six CVW-17 aircraft to the eastern side of the Saudi Peninsula. Five hours, several refuellings and a couple of piddle packs later, I climbed out of my *Hornet* wishing it had a relief tube and a more comfortable seat.

Our original contingency plans were pretty sketchy and basically reactive. For those of us who grew up in the 1980s, our focus had been on countering the Soviet threat, either matched

directly against the Soviet Navy or indirectly against surrogates such as Cuba, Libya or Syria; from my perspective, at least, there wasn't much Navy corporate knowledge about Iraq. We envisioned our participation to include suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) in support of USAF B-52s, and some sort of battlefield air interdiction (BAI) or close air support (CAS) in support of the Saudi Army. Given the paucity of information with which we had to plan, it's a good thing Saddam didn't attack the Saudi oil fields in August or early September.

*Saratoga* was by no means the only carrier involved; USS *Independence* (CV-62) had arrived on the Persian Gulf side of the Saudi peninsula within days of the Iraqi invasion. Whereas our deployment had been regularly scheduled, *John F. Kennedy* (CV-67), deployed only a week or so after we did, but on an incredibly accelerated timetable. JFK joined us in the Red Sea in late August. Having two carriers to work with enabled us to establish a continual CV presence the Red Sea with one while allowing the other carrier to participate in exercises or (equally important) get some liberty in the eastern Mediterranean.

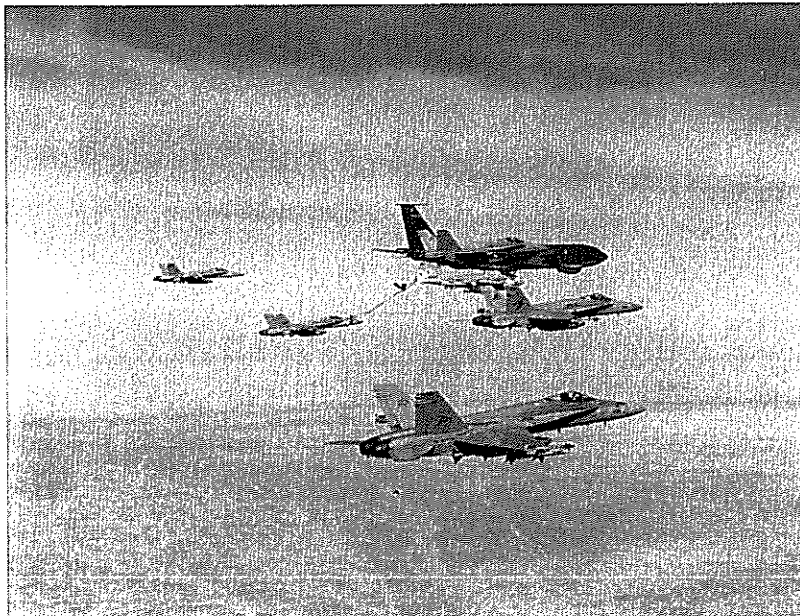
As the Coalition increased strength and more military forces arrived in theater, our contingency planning focus shifted from the early defensive mindset to an offensive air campaign. A carefully planned opening series of four large CV-based strikes from the Red Sea was developed in concert with the overall air campaign plan generated in Riyadh, and we began flying large scale "mirror image" strikes that replicated

the times, distances and procedures of the planned strikes. Having the opportunity to work out the details of large strikes was of immense value, and greatly contributed to the effectiveness of the air campaign.

Operating as part of a coordinated (sometimes integrated) combined and joint air campaign was new to all of us, and posed new challenges. The USAF air tasking order (ATO) was unfamiliar, unwieldy and inflexible, but since the Navy did not have a better system, we operated in accordance with the ATO. USN and USAF communications didn't mesh too well, and each day's ATO had to be literally flown from Riyadh to the Red Sea CVBGs via S-3 and helo. Nevertheless, in spite all of the reported bad blood and interservice rivalries, real operators, regardless of their uniform, get along pretty well outside the Washington Beltway when the chips are down.

Of particular note, USAF KC-135 tanker support was simply superb. The Air Force has something like 300 KC-135s, and by the time Kuwait was liberated, I felt as if I had plugged each one. Over an eight month period, I can count on one hand the number of times the USAF or ANG tankers failed to meet their commitments, and in each case a back-up tanker was hustling to get there.

The flying during this portion of *Desert Shield* was some of the best of my life. USAF KC-135s held overhead daily, providing free Saudi gas, and since JFK had the last two A-7 squadrons instead of F/A-18s, we enjoyed outstanding parts support for our *Hornets*. It wasn't



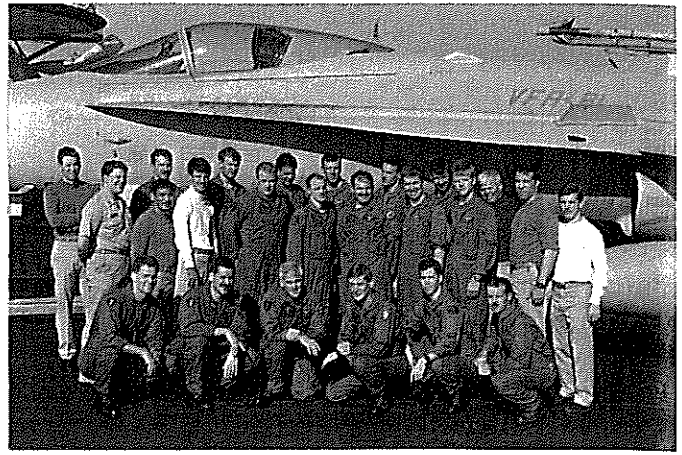
An A-6 and five VFA-81 F/A-18s line up at the filling station — an Air Force KC-135 — over Saudi Arabia en route to a strike. Photo courtesy CDR M. Fox.

uncommon to refuel two or three times in one sortie as we flew multiple, full-blown air combat maneuvering (ACM) engagements in one hop. Although we didn't use any low altitude tactics during the war, there were mountains and desert on the western side of the Saudi Peninsula that provided unmatched low-level flying. It was real roadrunner and coyote territory with twisting canyons, rugged peaks and broad mesas, but without the Stateside worries of making too much jet noise or disturbing some eccentric cattle rancher.

Shortly after we reentered the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal in early December, I became operations officer. We pulled into Haifa, Israel, for some much-needed liberty and wondered whether we had passed the mid-point of the deployment.

One bright spot for me was Priscilla's last-minute decision to keep our planned Christmas rendezvous (albeit a bit farther east of Paris). She arrived in Tel Aviv with an adventurous group of wives the day before the ship pulled into Haifa. I managed to get off the ship early and met her at Ben Gurion Airport for what turned out to be a very bittersweet but memorable visit to Israel. After a wonderful reunion, Priscilla and I drove to Haifa to leave our recall number with shore patrol, then returned to enjoy a leisurely meal in the old port city of Joppa. About 0230 we were awakened by a phone call in our Tel Aviv hotel room. Thinking the J.O.s were playing games when I first answered the phone, I was stunned to learn there had been some sort of a boating accident and that there was a general recall to the ship. I called my folks in Texas to let them know that whatever the disaster was, I was OK. My mother filled me in with complete detail as she described the real-time CNN coverage of the sinking of a ferry carrying 100 American sailors back to *Saratoga* at about midnight, Israel time. (It's an interesting sign of the times when you call Abilene from Tel Aviv and discover what's just happened in Haifa!)

Heartsick at the thought of losing any *Saratoga* or *Sunliner* shipmates, Priscilla and I prayed and wondered what would happen as we



VFA-81 (left to right) Front row: Tony Albano, Mark Fox, Bill McKee (squadron X.O.), Mike Anderson (squadron C.O.), Scott Speicher, Steve Minnis. Middle row: Dave Newcom, Ed Callao, Jim Ellis, Nick Mongillo, Tom Hoffman, Bob King, Craig Bartoletti, Phil Gardner, Chris Colon, Dave Harrod. Back row: Donnie Bodin, Marc Scaccia, Mike Meyers, Chris Adams, Barry Hull, Doug Cooper, Conrad Caldwell, Bob Wildermuth. Photo courtesy CDR M. Fox.

drove back toward Haifa. As we approached the city in the pre-dawn darkness, the eerie glow of parachute flares dropped by the IAF to illuminate the rescue effort added to our sense of uncertainty. All ferry transportation to the ship was suspended while the search and rescue was in progress, which lasted well into daylight. When we arrived at fleet landing at dawn, there were hundreds of *Saratoga* sailors sitting around, patiently waiting to return to the ship. Priscilla and I went up to the Dan Carmel Hotel for breakfast, where I left her with the group of wives with whom she'd flown over. I walked back to fleet landing, waited around for several hours and finally got back aboard the ship in the early afternoon.

I can't remember a time I was so tired, saddened, discouraged and frustrated. A forbidding sense of impending war filled the air; my ship and air wing had lost 21 young men in a terrible tragedy (fortunately, my squadron had escaped without loss); I'd had fewer than two hours sleep in the past 36 hours; and was again separated from the love of my life after having been only briefly together. When we parted, we were unsure of when we'd see each other again. (The rumors were thick that the ship was getting underway.) As I kissed her good-bye, Priscilla, half in jest, told me that she didn't want to be like Natalie in Herman Wouk's *The Winds of War*, inadvertently getting herself caught in a war zone!

Our concerns were misplaced. After spending a frustrating night aboard the ship where I could see Priscilla's hotel from the flight deck, I met her the next day when she came aboard *Saratoga* with several other wives to attend the memorial service for the ferry mishap victims. Later that afternoon we returned ashore and resumed our Israel visit, saddened and subdued from the recent tragedy, but overjoyed to be together again.

We spent the rest of our time treasuring each moment together while trying to deal with the raw feeling of the recent tragedy and ignore the ugly specter of an impending conflict.

Priscilla and her group of adventurous friends left Israel the same day *Saratoga* got underway. Saying good-bye was hard, but I was really glad she came over. After the war started, it was sobering to realize that less than three weeks passed between the time she and I strolled along the streets of Tel Aviv and *Scuds* began landing there. Sometimes this Navy job provides more adventure than you bargain for!

The new year found us back in the Red Sea, putting finishing touches on the four carefully planned sequential strikes that would open the campaign, as well as making other contingency plans. The 15 January 1991 UN deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait drew steadily closer with no diplomatic progress toward a peaceful resolution.

By now, the lineup of who was flying on each of the first four strikes had already been determined. I was scheduled as a spare on the second strike launched from the Red Sea against

H-3 airfield in western Iraq, led by VFA-83's C.O. My primary mission was as the HARM element lead for the third strike, also against H-3 airfield, led by VA-35's X.O.

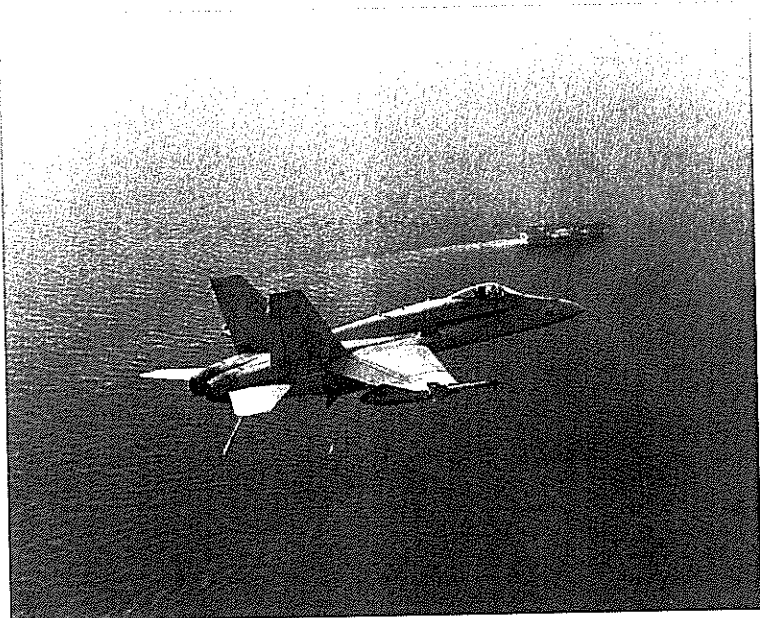
Although dissatisfied not to be on the first strike, a nighttime SEAD attack against a target near Baghdad led by my C.O., CDR. Mike "Spock" Anderson, the lineups were locked in place by the time I took over Ops, and I couldn't shuffle my name into the first attack. I just hoped it wouldn't be a one-strike war.

As the 15 January 1991 U.N. deadline approached, it was becoming more and more obvious that conflict was unavoidable. My journal entry summed up my feelings:

*10 January 1991... I am at peace, mentally and spiritually. My prayers continue to ask for a peaceful solution, but if war does occur, to be strong, courageous, and filled with extraordinary awareness and judgment in combat.*

We received the execute order late on the 15th; the first strike would launch late the next night, with a time on target (TOT) of 0300, Thursday, 17 January 1991.

A fellow *Sunliner* department head, LCDR Scott "Spike" Speicher, was originally scheduled as a spare for the first strike against the Iraqi air defenses near western Baghdad. He approached me and said, "MRT, I've prepared all my life to fly in combat, and I don't want to be on the sideline when this thing starts. Can you shift the lineup around so I can count on flying this mission? It's important to me." I told him I knew exactly how he felt, and promised to talk to Skipper Anderson about it. Spock agreed to



*An F/A-18C from VFA-81 returns for landing on the USS Saratoga (CV-60) during Operation Desert Storm. Photo courtesy CDR M. Fox.*

(Left to right)  
 AOAN Shen, AO3  
 Xilch, AO3 Stevens,  
 and CWO-4  
 (Gunner)  
 Wildermath send  
 their greetings from  
 VFA-81 and the USS  
 Saratoga during  
 Operation Desert  
 Storm. U.S. Navy  
 photo.



the shuffle and moved Spike's name from the spare to the list of go aircrew for the first strike.

*16 January 1991: The execute order has been received — CVIC has exploded into a controlled frenzy of polishing strike plans...*

*... A variety of moods, emotions and feelings — Relief that we at last are going to act; concern and fear of the unknown. Bravado, camaraderie, introspection, fatigue... a blend of many conflicting emotions.*

*Thoughts of Priscilla, William, Collin, Mason and Abigail — What a cruel place this world can be. God protect them from the rancid and ugly evil that causes wars.*

*... This is clearly going to be very intense for the foreseeable future.*

I felt as if I was being left out as I watched the first wave HARM shooters finish their briefs and suit up. My last conversation with Spike

was one of light-hearted banter and kidding around in the ready room as he took the *Sunliner* orange laces out of his boots and replaced them with plain black ones. Those of us not on the first strike had helped in every way we could, turning the jets, BIT testing the HARMs, typing in and checking the navigation coordinates — doing everything we could think of to attend to every detail. Nevertheless, the lonely weight of executing the mission rested on each individual pilot.

I watched the launch from CATCC, and silently lifted up a prayer as each aircraft took off. Spike, flying AA 403, was the last *Sunliner* airborne. The spare didn't launch.

After a short, restless night, I woke early and called the ready room to find out how the first strike had gone:

*17 Jan 1991: The first strike from Saratoga is complete, and Scott Speicher in 403 is the only guy who did not return. No mayday call, no comm — I can only pray that he diverted, or in worst case, ejected, and is now hopefully to be picked up.*

*A distant sense of dread of losing a friend — small things hit me as being suddenly presumptuous — putting my laundry out this morning, for example, presumes I'll be back to get it back.*

*I am ever so aware — now more than ever — of my total dependence on God's grace. I am choosing to be strong and courageous.*



The author, LCDR Fox debriefs, Saratoga flight deck crew after a mission, January 1991. Photo courtesy CDR M. Fox.

Some of the HARM shooters from the opening strike were in the wardroom when I ate breakfast. Pale with fatigue, but animated and talkative, they recounted the chaotic, confusing and spectacular events of only a few hours before. As I watched and listened, I silently envied them and thought to myself: "They've been blooded and met the test. How will I handle myself in this?"

Briefers, aviators and onlookers filled CVIC for *Saratoga's* first daylight strike brief, a complex, 36-plane attack against an airfield in western Iraq named H-3. The CVW-17 strike included an F-14 MiG sweep, multiple HARM shots, multi-axis EA-6B jamming, a deception group launching airborne decoys, a stand-off weapon axis delivering *Walleye* glide bombs and finally (the element for which I was the spare) six *Hornets* going straight up the middle, flying right over the airfield to drop 2,000-lb. Mark 84 dumb bombs on various targets in the airfield complex. I watched the ship's meteorologist's hands shake as he waited his turn to brief the weather. Although CVIC was cold, I knew his shiver wasn't caused by air conditioning alone. The mood in the brief was one of tight-lipped determination colored by a grim awareness of our loss last night. We knew we would be facing an extensive and sophisticated network of layered defenses consisting of fourth-generation fighters, radar-guided and heat-seeking SAMs and lots of AAA. For those of us who would actually overfly the airfield, the six SA-6 sites defending H-3 gave us the most concern. Even though this strike had been planned and practiced for months, there was still a flood of last-minute details to digest and an awful lot of uncertainty about what we'd actually be facing. The intelligence briefer mentioned the possibility of a *HAWK* SAM site, captured from the Kuwaitis, "possibly" located on the strike's route of flight south of the target! A collective groan came from the crowd.

The only way for me to prepare for this strike was to mentally put a knife in my teeth and literally hope and pray that I would actually fly in it. Although I knew I would fly a combat sortie later that evening, I wanted with all my being to participate in this strike as well. I didn't allow the smallest thought of, Gee, I hope nobody has any problems with their jet to creep into my mind. I was prepared, mentally, emotionally and spiritually to plunge into combat.

Much of who I am comes from a deep-seated

faith in God. Fortunately, my faith existed well prior to *Desert Storm*, and I had already answered the tough questions about being a Christian in combat before the shooting ever started.

As the spare, I reviewed everyone's aimpoints, jotted down different fusing delays for each target, listened in on section and element briefs and mentally prepared myself to fill into anyone's place.

My *Hornet*, *Sunliner 401*, was loaded with four air-to-air missiles and four 2,000 lb. Mark 84 general-purpose bombs. The six designated "go" aircraft carried the same missile loadout, but substituted a jamming pod designed to counter the SA-6 instead of a fourth Mark 84.

Soon after launching as an airborne spare, I realized I was going to fly on the strike. My fellow *Sunliner* department head, LCDR Steve "Ammo" Minnis, (also my roommate and Naval Academy classmate) had a problem with his aircraft's mission computer that forced him to abort the mission prior to the rendezvous, so I took his position as Dash-3 (the second section lead) of the six-plane *Hornet* element.

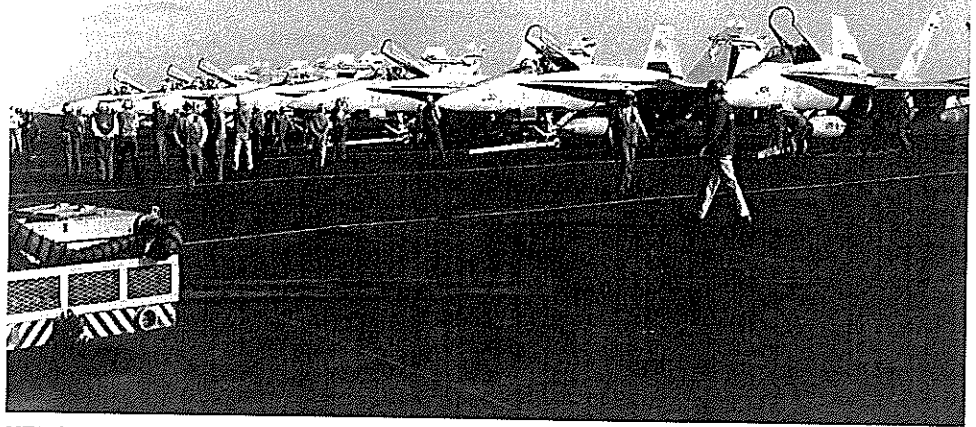
"OK," I thought, "This is fairly straightforward; just plug into Ammo's place and don't screw it up! I'm glad I psyched myself up for this."

Once we got to the tanker track, my new wingman, LT Doug Cooper, couldn't get his centerline droptank to transfer fuel, so he also aborted. CDR Bill "Maggot" McKee, VFA-81 X.O. and *Hornet* strike element lead, moved his wingman, LT Nick "Mongolo" Mongillo into a closer tacwing formation and made me, in effect, Dash-2 flying combat spread off McKee and Mongillo as if they were one aircraft.

Just prior to crossing the Iraqi border, ENS Carl "Cajun" Trahan, dash-last of the formation, lost his cockpit pressurization and aborted. Another formation shift, but by now my ability to flex was diminishing. McKee directed me to drop back to become LCDR Chuck "Bouncer" Osborne's wingman.

As we crossed the border, we were essentially a wall of strike-fighters headed north with, from left to right, Mongillo, McKee, myself and Osborne each spaced about a mile apart.

A couple of important points: The air-to-air rules of engagement were necessarily restrictive to prevent fratricide, or blue-on-blue engagements. We had to visually identify an Iraqi aircraft to kill it, with two important exceptions: First, we always retained the right of self de-



VFA-81 and 83 F/A-18s aboard USS Saratoga, armed for a strike mission against Iraq, late January 1991. Photo courtesy CDR M. Fox.

fense; Second, we could fire at an enemy aircraft beyond visual range if it had been identified as a bandit by the E-2 or AWACS and correlated by the engaging fighter.

The ATO promulgated regional bull's-eye points throughout Iraq, allowing all coalition aviators (USAF tacair, USN tacair, AWACS, the E-2, etc.) to work from a commonly known reference point in order to orient themselves to bogey/bandit calls. The bull's-eye point in western Iraq on 17 January, code-named "Manny," was H-3 northwest airfield, located about 15 miles from our target, H-3.

We crossed the border just below the contrail level at 30,000 feet, going as fast as possible without using afterburner — approximately 0.9 Mach (about 600 knots ground-speed). It was clear the Iraqis were airborne. Snatches of the E-2's bandit calls referencing "Manny" crowded into my mind as I tried to keep a mental plot of how the strike was developing. The quantity and intensity of transmissions over the strike frequency increased, and my attempts to keep the big picture faltered as we continued north. A series of streaking contrails to our left grabbed my attention until I realized they were caused by HARM antiradiation missiles headed toward the target. After a brief jolt, it was comforting to see visible evidence the strike timeline was working.

Although I knew where "Manny" was and had it in my navigation system, I couldn't force myself to come inside the cockpit long enough

to change waypoints. Despite the E-2's bandit calls, I had a hard time mentally plotting their position relative to mine. My focus was on getting to the target and watching out for SA-6 plumes. Unconsciously ignoring uncorrelated bandit calls, I reverted to the basics: Keep sight, keep quiet, fly good wing, find the target and bomb it. Working hard to stay ahead of the airplane, I selected the air-to-ground master mode about 35 nm south of the target and immediately noticed the effects of the 100-kt westerly jet-stream as my HUD symbology skewed off to the right and became HUD limited. I made a mental note to make a westerly offset into the wind, then roll in to the right in order to solve the skewed HUD symbology problem. I also increase my groundspeed across the target by 100 knots.

Seconds after selecting the air-to-ground master mode, the E-2 controller, LT John Joyce, made the call that finally registered: "400, that bandit's on your nose, 15." Now that was a call I understood! I immediately went back to the air-to-air master mode by selecting *Sidewinder* and got a lock on a head-on, supersonic Iraqi MiG-21 about nine miles away. I wanted to kill this guy as soon as I could, but couldn't get a good tone, so I kept caging the *Sidewinder* seeker to look down the radar line of sight. I heard the *Sidewinder's* distinctive growl at the same time I saw the speck of the Iraqi fighter, and squeezed the trigger. The missile fired like a passing train ... then simply disappeared,

which produced in me quite a visceral reaction. Although vaguely aware we had smokeless *Sidewinder* rocket motors, I wasn't prepared for the missile to just go away. Over my career, I had fired several *Sidewinders* against drones in various missile exercises, but all of them left a telltale white plume that always led to the target. This one just vanished!

Things were happening really fast; our relative closure was over 1,200 knots, and the MiG was getting bigger. Assuming the *Sidewinder* wasn't working, I thought to myself as I selected a *Sparrow*, "Well, he won't get away from this," and squeezed the trigger. This time I clearly watched the missile streak toward him. While the *Sparrow* accelerated, the MiG briefly disappeared in a bright flash and cloud of black smoke, then emerged, still nose on, but trailing flame and smoke. The *Sparrow* hit the doomed fighter with yet another explosion, but incredibly, there was still an airplane there, albeit clearly burning, decelerating and descending. As he disappeared under my nose, I rocked up on my left wing to watch him pass about 1,000 feet below me. The front of the Iraqi MiG-21 was intact, with the rear half enveloped in flames. The pilot didn't get out. I passed through the black smoke from the first missile impact as we continued toward the target.

Mongo's excited "splash one!" shifted my attention to the left where his kill was marked by a huge smear of flame and smoke. *Bouncer's* much calmer "splash two" gave me the impression that the first explosion on my MiG was caused by one of his missiles. "Oh well, *Bouncer* beat me to the draw ... At least I'm still alive and didn't jettison my bombs. Maybe I'll get an honorable mention for shooting a burning MiG."

There was no time to savor the kills. We were entering the heart of H-3's SAM defenses, and I was still aware I wasn't carrying the pod designed to counter the SA-6. Almost immediately, we got radar locks on another group of airplanes slightly west of the target that were initially nose on, but began to slowly turn to the east. The peculiar thing about these bogeys was they were extremely slow, about 0.4 Mach, (or about 200 kts) at 23,000 feet! Whatever those guys were doing, I didn't like the situation at all. 200 kts at 23,000?! This time there were no bandit calls from the E-2, and we had no indications of who they were. They must be some kind of bait, trying to lure us into a trap, I thought, and started

doing deep six checks for about the next minute. Satisfied no one was sneaking up from behind, I refocused my attention out ahead, and had a no escape *Sparrow* shot on whomever I was locked on, with a flashing shoot cue to remind me. By this time he was basically tail-on to me, and I was closing fast.

But at my right two o'clock was H-3! To chase the bogey down would mean I'd have to fly past the target in a predictable stern conversion in order to visually identify him, and I was lugging 8,000 pounds of bombs around ... not what one normally carries in a VID scenario.

"Well, I came here to drop bombs on the target." I thought as I reluctantly broke lock and switched to the air-to-ground mode. I jinked left into the 100 kt. jetstream, then reversed right and rolled in. Unable to see the earth-covered bunker that had been my original target, I quickly picked a secondary target, a big hangar with a white roof, and made the sweetest dive bombing run of my life.

Determined to see where my bombs hit, but unwilling to rock up on a wing like a big predictable grape, I built in a series of peeks back at the target into my off-target jinking plan. Glancing back the first time, I saw my four 2,000-lb. bombs falling together like a small school of fish. I then noticed the dust and smoke kicking up all over the airfield from AAA batteries shooting at us, and the crazy zigzag corkscrew smoketrails of dozens of hand-held, heat-seeking SAMs streaking into the sky. Spectating too long, I resumed jinking with a renewed zeal. (I discovered jinking doesn't need to be taught. It is a very natural act under the right circumstances. The real key is not kill so many snakes in the cockpit that you bleed yourself out of airspeed.) My next peek paid dividends; it was a beautiful sight to watch those bombs explode on that hangar! I came off target also hopeful of finding the bogeys we'd let escape prior to rolling in, but never saw them.

We got back together and headed south as fast as we could make our jets go. As we passed abeam the area where we'd run into the MiGs, there was a final reminder of our encounter; two columns of black smoke rising up from the desert in the same relative formation they'd been when we shot them down.

Still convinced *Bouncer* or someone else had put that first missile into my MiG, my hopes began to rise when we checked each other over for battle damage and I saw that only Mongo



was missing a missile. I was more certain that it must have been my *Sidewinder* that caused the first explosion after all, but I put it out of my mind for fear I'd bolter when I got back to the ship.

I had a low-fuel light when I plugged into the KC-135 south of the border. The boom operator kept pointing to the empty missile station on my right wingtip and giving me big congratulatory smiles and thumbs up. Feeling fully alive and relieved to have successfully completed the mission without loss was simply overwhelming. What a hop!

The return to the ship was uneventful. Even if I'd been absolutely sure I had the kill, I was in no mood to do anything extraordinary (like a victory roll in the break) upon return to the *Saratoga*; I'd been raised in the Light Attack 'quiet professional' school, and it just didn't seem like the right thing to do in light of Spike's loss last night. I did manage to get aboard my first pass with an OK-3 wire, ending the most eventful and demanding flight of my life.

The post-strike debrief in CVIC was like the locker room of a winning team in a championship football game. *Saratoga's* C.O., CAPT Joe Mobley, gave me some good-natured ribbing about firing a *Sparrow* into an already burning airplane. I shrugged and smiled, "I just wanted to be sure, Skipper."

I was still in my flight gear, debriefing in CVIC, when preparations for the next strike brief began. Plunging into the mental preparation for another strike was a tonic. Tonight's strike was also against H-3, but this time the A-6s were attacking at low altitude in the darkness, with a robust SEAD effort to suppress the radar guided SAMs in the target area.

The brief, man-up and launch went smoothly. I took it as a good omen that I was again flying *Sunliner 401*, the airplane in which I had the MiG kill. When we got to the tanker tracks, however, a wide band of broken and layered stratus clouds made the tanking evolution very difficult. The five KC-135s, spaced about a mile in trail and stepped up 1,000 feet in a stair-step fashion, each had four or five Navy aircraft flying formation in an out of choppy, turbulent clouds. It was a vertigo-inducing environment, and at one point one of my wingmen, LT Bob 'Kong' King, said on the back radio, "MRT, I've got vertigo" at the same time I watched a set of aircraft lights prescribe an arching barrel roll over the tanker on which we were flying forma-

tion. Thinking it was Kong, I snapped at him to level his wings and 'get on the gauges'. His reply was "MRT, I'm underneath you flying column." I watched whomever it was recover from his unusual attitude and rejoin.

Getting plugged into the basket at the end of a swinging, unsteady boom took every bit of flying ability and concentration I could muster. The fact that we all got our gas without incident was miraculous. Happy to have all the HARM shooters fueled and in one piece, we headed to our HARM launch points arrayed like spokes of a wheel. Although we talked about avoiding night vision loss when firing our antiradiation missiles, I couldn't resist watching the spectacular (and dazzling) view of my HARMs racing toward the target.

Our A-6's low level attack did not fare well against the Iraqi's withering low altitude defenses. One *Intruder*, *Raygun 510*, flown by LTs Bob Wetzel and Jeff Zaun, was shot down not far from the target. (They were both captured and held as POWs until the end of the war.) Another A-6, *AA 502*, was badly shot up by small arms fire and AAA, but managed to limp into Al Jouf, a Saudi divert field. The overcast layer had prevented me from seeing any of the of the target area fireworks from my vantage point as a HARM shooter, but I still had vivid recollections of the scene from earlier in the day.

Knowing we lost an airplane and crew made the flight back to *Saratoga* especially long. After I finally trapped aboard at 0115, I wearily made my way to CVIC to debrief the flight. Reflecting on the day's events, I mentally rode the incredible rollercoaster of the previous 24 hours. Going to war... Spike's loss... launching as a spare... the MiG kill... the tough hop tonight... What a day! I wrestled with the thought that if I hadn't helped Spike fly on the first strike, he'd still be aboard, greeting me with a smile and wisecrack. I built a mental wall against his loss, and refused to surrender hope that he was still alive.

The next day a news team came out to the ship to report on the highs and lows of the CVW-17/*Saratoga* team. Certainly the loss of three aircraft, three aviators and the downing of two Iraqi MiGs in the first 36 hours of the war was newsworthy. CDR Steve Kaczmarek, called me to ask if Mongillo and I would agree to an interview. He made it very clear it was strictly voluntary. I wasn't excited at the prospects of dealing with the media, and my initial response

was lukewarm at best.

After discussing the matter with my C.O. and the deputy airwing commander (and gaining their concurrence), I finally told the ship's X.O. "No thanks." (Mongillo and I had agreed that we would be unanimous in our decision to either do the interview together or not at all.)

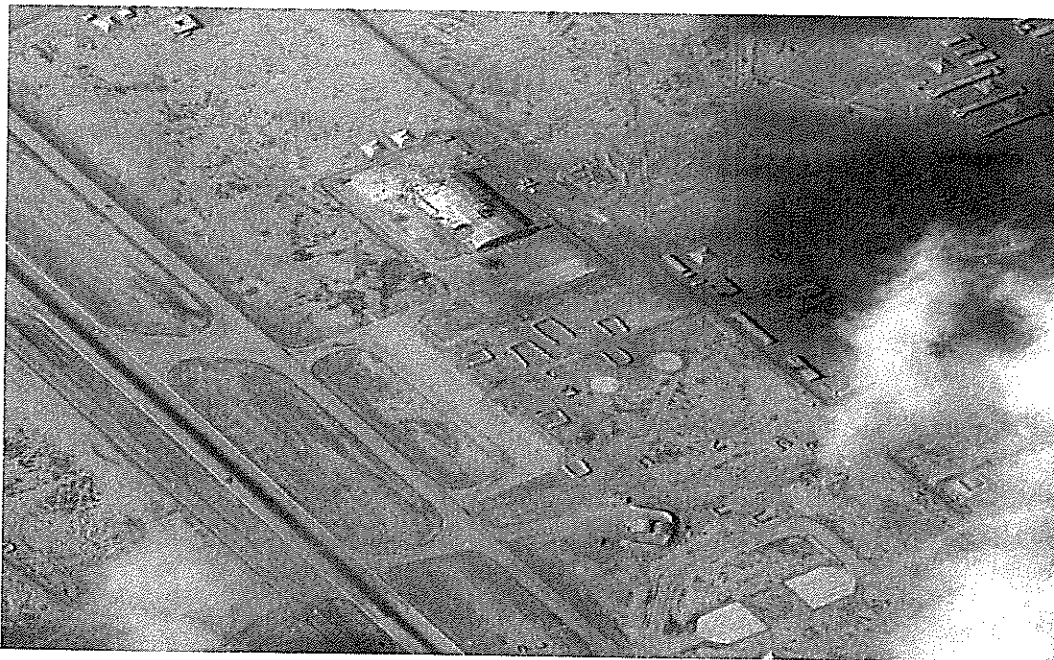
CDR Kaczmarek initially accepted our refusal, but called back later and asked us to reconsider our decision. He gave some perspective on the subject, emphasized the legitimacy of the media's interest, and reminded us the press team had traveled a long way to cover the story. Furthermore, he told us we could establish whatever groundrules we felt comfortable with during the interview. After a brief discussion, Mongo and I agreed to grant the interview providing it was kept reasonably short, first names or callsigns were used, and no cameras.

The journalists, although disappointed in not being able to use their cameras, were professional and direct. They did ask questions clearly intended to evoke an emotional response. Legitimate questions, perhaps, but I resented their asking them. There had been no time to gain any perspective from the raw events of the previous two days. As the interview progressed, I explained my misgivings and reasons for being reluctant to meet with them. The interview was kept mercifully short, but the journalists liter-

ally followed us into the passageway to ask more questions as we left. They honored our request to remain anonymous, although I had my doubts when I ran into Christianne Amanpour from CNN the next day and she informed me with a twinkle in her eye that she had just seen the *Hornet* with my name and callsign on it. "Great," I thought. "Mongo and I really know how to pull the wool over their eyes, don't we?"

My next combat hop also started as a spare, only this time I wound up with a strike lead! Since I was ahead of every one else with my two combat sorties on the first day, I only scheduled myself as a spare on a strike planned by "Spock" Anderson to go after some *Scud* sites in western Iraq. Spock's aircraft went down, so I launched and headed toward the tanker track. The alternate strike lead experienced some radar problems, and was uncomfortable being out front of the strike package with a weak radar ... So I wound up leading the strike. I'm glad I stayed awake for the brief!

The next six weeks provided me with some of the most vivid and stark experiences of my life. On one hand, I loved meeting the challenge of combat, leading air wing strikes, watching my bombs explode on target and being totally focused on the mission. Facing uncertainties and dangers heightened my appreciation for life in general. The sun shone brighter, the ship's food



Hangar on airfield H-3 that Fox dropped his bombs on after his MiG kill. U.S. Navy photo.

On the following two pages is the painting, *The Hornet's First Victory*, which depicts CDR Fox's MiG kill.

tasted better, and my senses seemed sharper. On the other hand, I was aware of the fact that the war was an evil that took the lives of young men in their prime — one of them a good friend of mine — and the sooner it was over, the better.

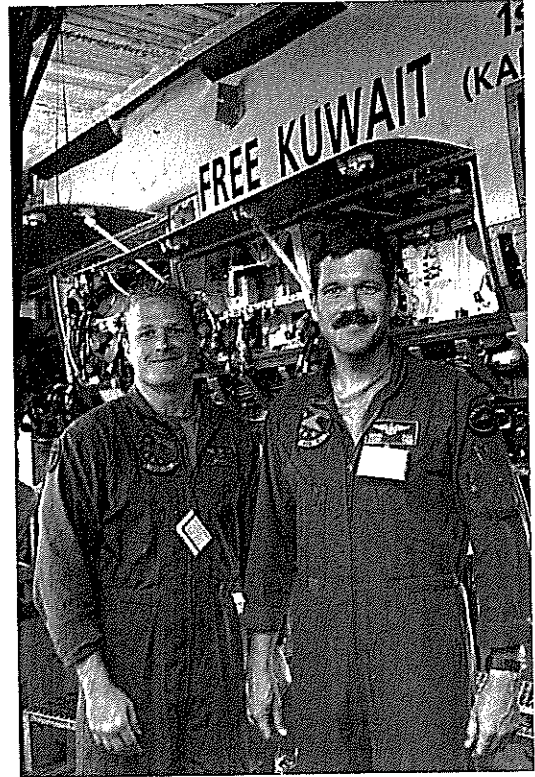
I flew 18 combat sorties into Iraq and Kuwait, and even with that relatively small number of missions, I could write a book describing those experiences. Flying through someone's rock-hard jet wash in the dark as I crossed the border into Saudi Arabia after a KTO strike; rolling in on the phosphate plant at Al Qaim, unsuccessfully trying to ignore the incredible sight of glowing yellow and orange streams of AAA rising slowly in the darkness; watching a refinery and oil storage tanks disappear under an angry, dark red explosion that blossomed up thousands of feet; flying through the surreal daytime darkness caused by smoke from the oil well fires; playing traffic cop with 12 low-state *Hornets* as we discovered we had one KC-10 with a single hose instead of three KC-135s.

I was preparing to lead my fifth strike when the war was unilaterally stopped. Although much has been written on the wisdom of how and when the war ended, I was overjoyed. My birthday is March 1st, and I couldn't think of a nicer gift. Like a leaky tire kept inflated by the heat of rolling, I didn't realize how weary and tired I was until the cease fire was announced, and promptly went to bed for about 12 hours.

Our return in late March was truly the "Mother of all Homecomings." The nation's welcome home was exhilarating and memorable, yet humbling. The blur of the fly-in, my neighborhood's banner proclaiming "Welcome Home, Mark" (The banner sufficed for both of us who made our home on Winfred Drive; CDR Mark Fitzgerald was C.O. of an A-7 squadron on the *Kennedy*); all the joy of returning from the sea with the added intensity of a rapid victory ... it was almost too much to take in.

I went for a run the day after returning home and attracted a crowd of little boys on their bicycles as an escort. As I ran along the road along the St. John's River with eight or ten boys in tow, I couldn't help but reflect what a wonderful nation we are blessed with ... a republic certainly worth sacrificing for to keep free.

The days following the homecoming were full. I spoke to groups ranging from the Senate Armed Services Committee to kindergarten classes; from the Naval Fighter Weapon School (*Top Gun*) to church men's groups. My orders



*Fox and LT Nick Mongillo at the McDonnell Douglas Plant in St. Louis to publicize the first F/A-18 built for Kuwaiti Air Force, April 1991. McDonnell Douglas photo by Don Dinkelkamp.*

in June to a joint assignment in Belgium took me out of the spotlight, thank goodness.

I learned that the unknown bogies over the target that day were Iraqi MiG-29s.

Scott Speicher was declared killed in action, although his remains were never recovered.

Nick Mongillo made another deployment in VFA-81, then became an adversary pilot.

When I screened for command, I marveled at the irony that returned me to the same squadron, air wing and ship I had been in for my department head tour. I checked into VFA-81, this time as X.O., in December 1993. When *Saratoga* got underway for her final deployment in January 1994, the memories of the same time only three short years before were overwhelming. It was strange to be in Bill McKee's old stateroom; almost everything looked the same, except all the faces had changed.

I marked a personal milestone when I assumed command of the *Sunliners* in March 1995. Although a different *Sunliner 401* from the *Hornet* in which I got the MiG kill, it made me proud to have my name painted on the side of the skipper's bird.



*Homecoming at NAS Cecil Field. LCDR Fox is greeted by his son Mason, who outran the rest of the Fox family, 27 March 1991. Photo courtesy CDR Mark Fox.*

The events of that January and February five years ago made an indelible impression on me. I learned that combat brings out different facets of people that would otherwise never surface.

I also learned a lot about myself. All my life I'd wondered if I had what it took to perform in combat, to really be a warrior. What I discovered during *Desert Storm* surprised me in its simplicity. The first point is you never rise to new heights of performance in combat - you fall to whatever level to which you've trained. You can't pull a rabbit out of the hat unless you've first placed one there. In the world of tactical aviation, solid, realistic training is the act of putting the rabbit into the hat.

The second point, and more important than the first; even though you may feel scared or doubtful about performing the mission, true mental strength and courage is a choice, an act of the will - not a feeling. Regardless of whether you feel courageous or not, the job still has to be done.

Scott Speicher displayed that kind of strength and courage when he figuratively elbowed his way onto the first strike — not for personal gain, but because he was a braveheart. We've named the squadron's most prestigious award in his honor. My desire is to imbue the squadron with the virtues and principles "Spike" personified: strength, courage, dedication, excellence and selflessness. And I want to honor him by keeping his memory bright. →

*CDR Mark I. Fox, USN, a native of Abilene, Texas, was commissioned on 7 June 1978 upon graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy. He received his wings in March 1980, and completed A-7E Corsair II training. He joined the VA-72 Bluehawks aboard USS John F. Kennedy (CV-67) in November.*



*CDR Fox completed F/A-18 transition and became a plank-owner of the VFA-132 Privateers. In July 1987, CDR Fox reported to the Naval Military Personnel Command and served as the Light Attack/Strike Fighter junior officer detailee. He subsequently served as flag lieutenant to Commander, Naval Air Forces, Atlantic Fleet and the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare) from 1988 to 1989.*

*Returning to the fleet in 1990, CDR Fox served as administrative, maintenance, and operations officer for the Sunliners of VFA-81, participating in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm aboard USS Saratoga (CV-60). CDR Fox scored the first Navy MiG kill of the war moments prior to delivering his bombs on an Iraqi airfield on 17 January 1991. He led four major airwing strikes and flew 18 combat sorties during the conflict.*

*In June 1991, CDR Fox reported to Supreme Headquarter, Allied Powers Europe in Belgium, and served as the maritime plans officer for Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. He returned to the Sunliners as X.O. in December 1993. CDR Fox became the C.O. of the Sunliners in March 1995.*

*His awards include the Silver Star, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal, six Air Medals (four individual Air Medals with Combat "V", two strike-flight awards), two Navy Commendation Medals (one with Combat "V") and the Navy Achievement Medal. Fox received the Pat Anderson Memorial Award for excellence in ordnance delivery and the Max Trap award for lieutenants from The Tailhook Association.*

*CDR and Mrs. Fox (the former Priscilla Wood of Arlington, Va.) are the parents of four children: William, Collin, Mason and Abigail, and reside in Orange Park, Fla.*