

THE STORY BEHIND “TOP GUNS,” EHUD YONAY’S ARTICLE THAT INSPIRED THE HIT MOVIE “TOP GUN”

By Alex “Yogi” Hnarakis

The movie “Top Gun” was inspired by an article that was published in California magazine in May 1983. That article, titled “Top Guns” and written by Ehud Yonay, followed an F-14 pilot and RIO as they went through the Navy Fighter Weapons School training program. That F-14 pilot, Alex “Yogi” Hnarakis, wrote the following as a tribute to Yonay who he considers a real genius for his detailed reporting and digging, and especially his dynamic writing. This material is copyrighted by Alex Hnarakis and used with his express permission.

“Who is from California?” LCDR Mike “Wizzard” McCabe, one of the instructors, asked the question at the start of class during the first week of the 5 week US Navy Fighter Weapons School (Topgun) course at NAS Miramar, San Diego, CA, in 1983. None of the 16 Topgun students who made up the eight F-14 crews initially responded. So LT Dave “Possum” Cully, my Radar Operator (RIO), said he was not originally from California but went to high school in Newport Beach. Wizzard said that would do. “Possum, you and Yogi see me after class.”

My callsign was Yogi. I was an F-14 pilot in Fighter Squadron 1 (VF-1), and after completing a 7½-month deployment I was selected to attend the Topgun class. I was excited about the opportunity to experience the challenging flying and incredible training that Topgun was known for, long before the movie came out. I figured I would have my hands full with the class and wasn’t looking for more distractions, but Wizzard said a writer was doing an article on Topgun for *California* magazine and wanted to interview a crew going through the course. It had all been cleared by Navy public affairs, which was important since in those Cold War days, fighter crews didn’t talk much with the press. Wizzard indicated it would be two interviews, one now and one at the end of the course. Possum and I agreed to help out.



California magazine article author Ehud Yonay, c.2012 (photo from the Internet)

Ehud Yonay was a probing interviewer who dug deep to gain full understanding of the subject he intended to write about. Most of the initial questions were what might be expected to glean insight on the journey to become Topgun students and what was being learned there. “Where are you from? Tell me about flight school, initial F-14 Tomcat training, your first fleet squadron, the VF-1 Wolfpack, landing aboard the aircraft carrier, overseas deployments. What’s it like to fly fighters, how did you get crewed together, describe dogfighting, what’s the best part of what you

do, what's the worst?" We answered all questions and provided amplifying information. We described the teamwork as a crew, with a wingman or flight lead, with the E-2 Hawkeye crew for early warning, with larger strike packages with A-7 Corsair and A-6 Intruder attack aircraft. We described the close camaraderie within a fighter squadron, in a carrier air wing, between flight crews and our hard charging Sailors who maintained, fixed and launched our jets. We tried to get Ehud to include LT "Jungle" Jim Russell and LT Tom "Crock" Joyce of the VF-2 Bounty Hunters in the interviews with us since the fundamental fighting unit is a section of two aircraft and crews not one. We alternated with Jungle/Crock as flight lead and wingman for our Topgun flights so we thought that would be a natural for the interviews. But Ehud chose to focus on one crew instead; possibly a limitation of copy space available for his article. We also let Ehud know that we just represented many other crews on the base in other squadrons, in carrier airwings on other ships, who were every bit as skilled and motivated. He did connect with a few others, including LCDR Chuck "Heater" Heatley from our squadron. Heater was my first flight lead in VF-1 and as a former Topgun instructor, he was a great teacher for a new wingman to learn from. He was also an exceptional aerial photographer; many of Heater's photos would be used in the *California* magazine article.



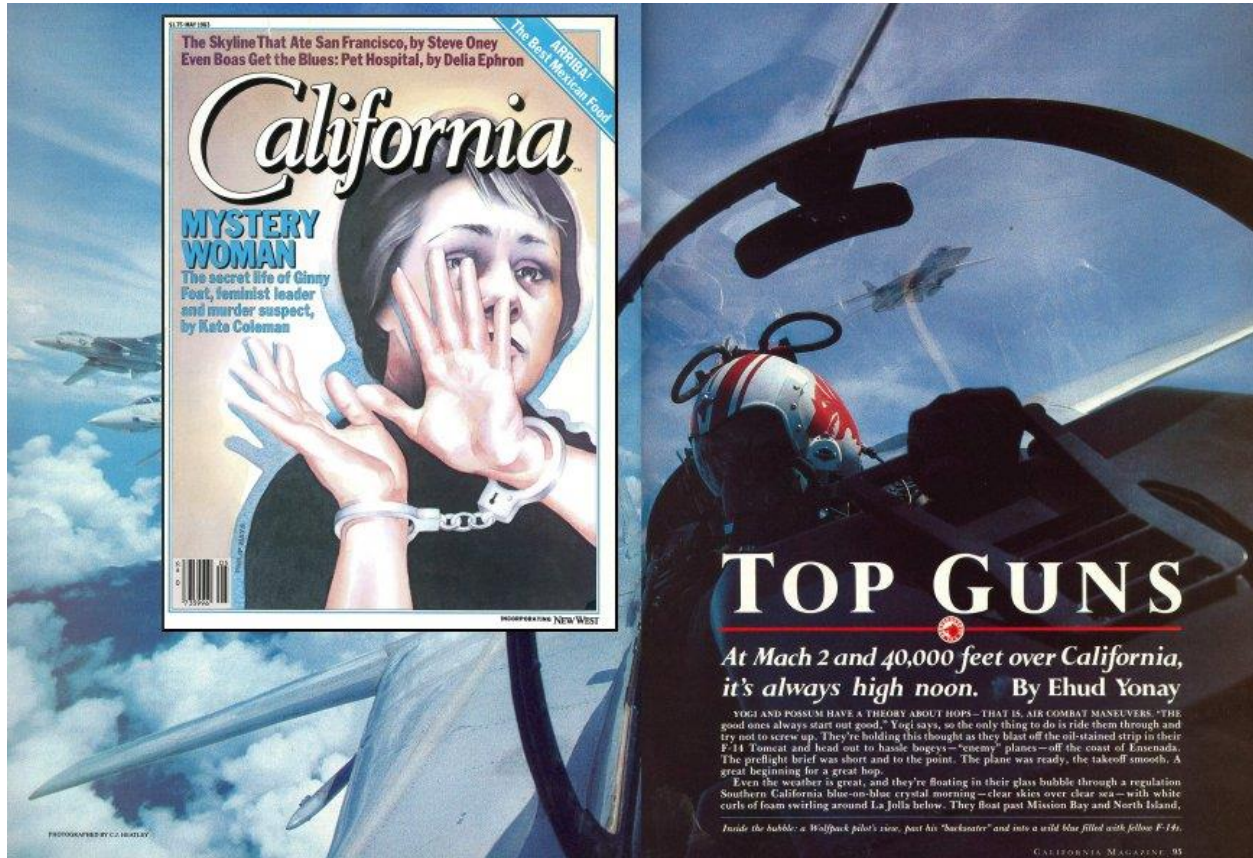
Possum (L) and Yogi during the Topgun class (photo from California magazine)

After about four interviews within the first week (so much for one interview now and one at the end), Ehud began interspersing some outlandish questions. He tried to goad us with ones like, "You can level with me...I've been told fighter crews sometimes go to the TACTS Range east of Yuma, turn off their squawks, fly below radar coverage, and buzz houses over Mexico." After Possum and I exchanged 'you gotta be kidding me' looks, we told Ehud that was simply not true because no one would give up a dogfighting mission on TACTS (the most fun in a fighter and legal) for buzzing houses in Mexico (not fun, illegal, lose your wings, create an international incident, etc). After interspersing several more leading questions among mostly legitimate ones, we got the impression that Ehud was going to write a preconceived, inaccurate, totally bogus article...as bad as the short-lived TV show of the day called "Red Flag." Worse yet, we feared our names and quotes were going to be included to give it some false legitimacy. Our skipper got back to us after hearing our concerns and asked us to stick with Ehud since he had a good track record of writing very good and accurate articles on topics he previously had no background on.

In the end, after a couple dozen interviews, Ehud, true to his reputation, wrote an exceptional article! In those days, before high definition video and Go-Pro type cameras, the written word combined with still photography was the only practical and affordable way to convey to others what flying fighters was like. Ehud's story was among the very few articles that transported the average reader into the action, emotion, and visuals (through his gifted descriptions) of what we were so fortunate to do in fighter aviation. Most prior articles by others were dry, technical or written so only other fighter crews could actually understand them. In hindsight, it's no surprise someone later recognized potential movie material after reading Ehud Yonay's dynamic **Top Guns** article in California magazine.

Shortly after we finished the course at Topgun, but before Ehud had completed his article, he flew in the backseat of a Topgun F-5 aggressor aircraft with LT Al "Shoes" Mullen. He got to see first-hand from the F-5 cockpit a twisting, turning, straight up and down, 1v1 dogfighting training mission against an F-14 flown by Possum and me. It occurred

over the desert east of San Diego from several starting positions. On the radar intercept events, Possum called out our position to try and help Ehud get a tally-ho before the merge. From abeam set-ups, he had an initial tally. We learned in the debrief that Ehud got glimpses but had difficulty keeping sight during the engagement. My impression was that he had an epiphany on this flight...that all we had shared with him over many interviews was the real deal. Of course, Ehud humbly shared his impressions of that dynamic, 3D, high-g flight experience in the sidebar article also in *California* magazine; he called it "The Agony and the Agony; The truth behind yanking and banking".



The opening pages of the article, with magazine cover as an insert. Inflight photo by "Heater" Heatley, who was an F-14 pilot and Topgun instructor himself.

Top Guns, by Ehud Yonay was published by *California* magazine, May 1983. It was condensed for *Reader's Digest*, September 1983. Ehud's article caught the eye of Jerry Bruckheimer and Don Simpson and they credit it as the inspiration for their movie **Top Gun**.

A while later, the Navy public affairs people approached Possum and me about answering early research questions from Hollywood. We reminded them of what we shared with Ehud...we were just one crew among many others on the base and in other squadrons who were every bit as skilled and motivated. We suggested they see if other crews could help out, and if not we would. They were able to have other crews do that initial coordination which was fortunate since carrier workups with VF-1 on USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63) were intensifying and we left in early 1984 on our next 7 month Western Pacific/Indian Ocean deployment. Following that deployment, Possum transferred to VF-124, to be an instructor in the F-14 training squadron at NAS Miramar. I transferred to the US Navy Test Pilot School at NAS Patuxent River, MD.

Top Gun, the movie was released in May 1986. The flying scenes are great! The dialog and plot make for a fun story. They used some Hollywood artistic license but hey, it's a movie! It was also superb for Navy recruiting! Neither Possum nor I were part of making the movie since we were either on deployment or in my case on the other coast. The definitive source for the Navy's role in making the movie **Top Gun** is the book **Topgun Days** by Dave "Bio" Baranek published in 2010. Bio was a Topgun instructor in 1985 when the movie was made and participated extensively in the Navy's help with the actors and film crew.

Over a decade later, in 1996, Possum and I leveraged our junior officer (JO) days in VF-1 from 1981-1984 and our time crewed up as Topgun students in 1983. We were on deployment on different aircraft carriers doing turnover in the Persian Gulf. I was Commanding Officer, VF-103 Jolly Rogers and Possum was Commanding Officer, VF-31 Tomcatters. We were unable to catch up in person but connected using email on these first aircraft carrier deployments with email capability. We arranged to trade flights for some RIOs from both squadrons. Possum's JOs got an early look at the LANTIRN FLIR and targeting pod for precision air-to-ground strike that were on the maiden F-14 deployment with my F-14B Tomcats on USS Enterprise (CVN-65). My JOs got exposure to the markedly superior air-to-air avionics in Possum's F-14D Tomcats on USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70).

Ehud Yonay died in Aug 2012. I'm sorry I missed the chance to re-connect with him after many years to share a laugh about how tough of an interviewer he was, praise him again on how dynamic his article was, and congratulate him on inspiring the movie **Top Gun**.

"Yogi"



Bio (L) and Yogi at the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum in 2013.

AUTHOR ALEX "YOGI" HNARAKIS (CAPT, USN, RET.) SERVED IN VF-1 FLYING THE F-14A TOMCAT AND ATTENDED THE TOPGUN CLASS AS DESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE. HE THEN SERVED IN VF-32 AND LED COMBAT MISSIONS DURING OPERATION DESERT STORM. HE COMMANDED VF-103, FLYING F-14B TOMCATS AND INTRODUCED THE LANTIRN TARGETING SYSTEM TO THE NAVY. HE LATER COMMANDED THE NAVAL WEAPONS TEST SQUADRON AT POINT MUGU, CALIFORNIA, NAVAL AIR WEAPONS STATION (NAWS) CHINA LAKE, AND NAVAL TEST WING PACIFIC (NTWP). HE HAS FLOWN THE F-14 A/B/D, QF-4 N/S, AND F/A-18 A/B/C/D/E/F. HE IS THANKFUL TO HAVE SERVED WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS, MENTORS, AND SAILORS. HE ESPECIALLY ENJOYED FLYING A SAILOR OR FLIGHT TEST ENGINEER IN AN F-14 OR F/A-18 FIGHTER TO EXPERIENCE FIRST-HAND THE FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR. HE RETIRED IN 2008 AFTER 30 YEARS OF SERVICE AND HAS RETURNED TO HIS HOBBY OF SERIOUS SPORT PARACHUTING AND HAS FLOWN IN WARBIRDS.