

The Back Story on How the Navy's Jolly Rogers Remained an Active Squadron

By Alex "Yogi" Hnarakis

INTRO: The Jolly Rogers have for years been one of the Navy's high-profile fighter squadrons. Former Tomcat pilot and Jolly Rogers commanding officer, CAPT Alex "Yogi" Hnarakis, USN (Ret.), told me the following story and has given me permission to use it. Yogi's story:

In the fall of 1995 when VF-84 was decommissioned, VF-103 adopted the Jolly Rogers name to replace their previous name, the Sluggers. That decision dated back about nine months prior to the VF-103 change of command reception, when CAPT Dale "Snort" Snodgrass, the Fighter Wing Commander, asked VF-103's new CO, Steve "Snotty" Schlientz and me (as the incoming XO) to visit him the next workday.

Snort laid out that the VF-84 Jolly Rogers and VF-14 Tophatters were both on the chopping block as the Navy moved from two Tomcat squadrons per airwing to one. He had "shopped" the existing Tomcat monikers, Jolly Rogers and Tophatters logos to the expanding Hornet community. But Snort had no luck even with newer Hornet squadrons that had no lengthy history. Since the Tophatters were the oldest continuously active squadron in the Navy and the Jolly Rogers dated back to at least WWII as part of several different squadrons, Snort wanted those long standing monikers preserved.

When Snort had to field a phone call while we were in his office, Snotty and I huddled and agreed that Snort wasn't really asking, he was informing us in a way that sounded like asking. When Snort finished his call, Snotty told him that we needed to socialize it with our squadron but that if required, we would rather switch to the "Bones" (assume the Jolly Rogers identity). Snort said the decommissionings were still months away, not completely final, but that the Tophatters would have priority due to their "oldest" status.

Snotty and I organized truly anonymous polling within the squadron without any "sales pitches" about whether or not to change from the Sluggers, but if so, to which one: Jolly Rogers or Tophatters. It turns out there was overwhelming support at all levels within the squadron to convert VF-103 to the Jolly Rogers from the Sluggers.

Several months later, the Tophatters came off the decommissioning list. They would continue as VFA-14 flying SuperHornets. In VF-103, we worked with VF-84 to make the moniker/logo transition a smooth one at their decommissioning in October 1995, and also worked with FighterWing to secure official approval at the highest levels of the Navy. For example, we needed to comply with Naval History rules that said each squadron had only one 'official history' and VF-103's official history was the Sluggers until switch to Jolly Rogers. Any mention of the Jolly Rogers that pre-dated VF-103's official conversion was to be completely unofficial. For less-formal VF-103 squadron histories, such as those printed for change of command brochures, we envisioned a mix of the official history as VF-103 Sluggers and those accomplishments, and then carried forward officially as the VF-103 Jolly Rogers from fall 1995. But we also envisioned doing a quick "rewind" to unofficially acknowledge all the previous units that had used the Jolly Rogers moniker. That way we were trying to maintain unofficial awareness of both Sluggers and Jolly Rogers past accomplishments no matter which squadrons had previously used them.

Snotty, as our CO, fielded some phone calls before the switch from some former VF-103 Sluggers expressing displeasure that we were going to switch to the Jolly Rogers. He was diplomatic and explained our path forward to attempt to unofficially preserve awareness of the Sluggers and Jolly Rogers. Naval Aviation, like all military forces, has colorful histories that are worth preserving, even if it sometimes requires passing the banner to a new team.