

# On board the 'Gold Eagle'

**Robin Powney** reports from on-board the *USS Carl Vinson*, aka the 'Gold Eagle', somewhere in the Med during July. Pictures by the author and **Paul Tiller**

Leaving Bremerton for the last time early in the morning of 13 January 2005, the *USS Carl Vinson* (CVN-70) and airwing CVW-9 of the Pacific Fleet, set sail for a JTFEX and a rare six-month world cruise whereby she would leave Washington, conduct operations and then head towards Naval Station Norfolk for her scheduled thirty-three-month long Refuel and Complex Overhaul (RCOH) and the accompanying change in homeport to Norfolk. During her twenty-three years, the *Vinson* has seen many combat theatres and was the first carrier to operate in the Bering Sea and last ever carrier to conduct A-6E Intruder launch and recovery operations. She was also the first USN ship to be named after a living civilian.



Carrier's wings  
F/A-18C Hornet



F/A-18F Hornet



Relieving *USS Harry S. Truman* (CVN-75) on 19 March, CSG-3 (Carrier Strike Group 3) has since wrapped up a grueling four-month deployment in support of multinational forces in Iraq, all the while enduring the oppressive 120° F heat; during this deployment on 18 April the *Vinson* also received her fourth 'Battle E' - the 2004 Battle Efficiency Award for West Coast carriers. Having herself been relieved by *USS Nimitz* (CVN-68), the world cruise then took the massive 100,000-tonnes ship into the cooler 40°C climes of the Mediterranean. This transition through the Mediterranean to the Atlantic meant a relatively rare appearance in European waters of a Pacific Fleet carrier and her embarked NG-coded airwing.

It is in the Mediterranean where your author got up close and personal with CVN-70 over the weekend of 16/17 July - and it proved to be an unforgettable experience. Having found out at almost the last possible minute that we would be heading out to the *USS Carl Vinson*, it was a scramble to secure the airline tickets, a hotel and a car but somehow we managed it... maybe Sicily, in July, isn't a popular tourist destination? Whatever the reasons, we made it to Palermo on Friday night (considering the Sicilian style of driving is an achievement in itself).

Arriving at NAS Sigonella on Saturday, the base PAO welcomed us and we were taken to Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Four's (HC-4) hangar and a quick safety brief about what we had to wear and what we had to do should the huge MH-53E end up taking a swim. Our taxi, MH-53E '40', left the ramp at Sigonella (which it was sharing with Navy C-9s, P-3Cs, Ramstein AB C-130s, one Dover AFB C-5, two C-2 Greyhounds, two EA-6B Prowlers that had recently operated from Al Asad AB, Iraq, and a single Nimrod MR2) and roughly an hour later, after a relatively comfortable though VERY hot flight, we were on the deck of America's Favourite Carrier, the 'Gold Eagle'.

We were then escorted down to the press centre, our 'home' for the next twenty-four hours and where we met Lt Cdr McIlroy, his assistants and the USN journalists assigned to help us out. It is here we found out we sadly wouldn't get to see any fixed wing flight ops due to a much needed underway ships replenishment.

Whilst aboard the *USS Harry S. Truman* back in April, I was acutely aware of just how warm the ship was (and that was in UK 'sunshine') and wondered to myself just how do people live and work in temperatures like these - well, it now transpires the *Truman* must have had the air-conditioning units switched off as the *Vinson* was perfectly comfortable in areas that mattered (the a/c didn't cover the entirety of the ship). In fact, in certain places, it was almost too cool - but with a deck sat baking in the Med's sunshine, anything cool was well received. Some corridors were beyond bearable for anything more than a few minutes as they weren't air-conditioned and on the subject of corridors, how anyone can move round a CVN without getting completely and utterly lost is somewhat of a puzzlement. Every corridor looks the same, stairwells look the same - it all looks the same!

A short while later, The Shogun Strike Team (aka CVW-9) became the target for our cameras - the fantastic early evening sunlight couldn't have been any better. After a walk round the hangar deck, we went up 'topside' for well over an hour, and were getting first-hand experience of deck life as personnel were moving aircraft about

right, left and centre in readiness for the UNREP in the morning. One 'blue shirt' was even heard to exclaim, to us, "God, what an excellent job!"... who are we to argue, apart from being very jealous and I did wonder where the application forms for





deck crew were! Beautiful sunset, great camaraderie and the fact that you're trusted with anything up to \$80m worth of frontline US Navy airpower. The Shogun Strike Team is currently made up of VFA-154 Black Knights (F/A-18F Super Hornet), VMFA-323 Death Rattlers (F/A-18C Hornet), VFA-146 Blue Diamonds (F/A-18C Hornet), VFA-147 Argonauts (F/A-18C Hornet), VAQ-138 Yellowjackets (EA-6B Prowler), VAW-112 Golden Hawks (E-2C Hawkeye), HS-8 Eightballers (SH-60F/HH-60H Seahawk) and VS-33 Screwbirds (S-3B Viking).



As CVN-70 has undergone a homeport shift from Bremerton, WA to Norfolk, VA, CVW-9 units now have a longer trip home as they are from west coast bases (Lemoore, Miramar, Whidbey Island, San Diego and North Island) - they now have a massive 3,000 mile trek to look forward to following the 'fly-off'. One HS-8 crewman told us that they would be looking at four days of near continuous flying and a VFA-147 pilot mentioned that due to the short legs of the Hornet, they'd be making three or four fuel stops en-route to Lemoore.



It has to be said that the CVN of the future will look a somewhat less impressive place as most roles will be undertaken by a Hornet of some description. Super Hornets have taken the role of the mighty F-14 in providing Fleet Air Defence and precision strike (not to mention the additional ace up its sleeve in that it is able to refuel other aircraft thanks to the buddy refueling pod system and the much increased fuel capacity); 'legacy' Hornets will continue in their current roles (until USN Hornets get replaced by more Super Hornets - the USMC will retain their Hornets until they get the F-35) and Prowlers will be replaced by EA-18G Growlers. Thus, within ten to fifteen years, a typical Nimitz-class carrier will be chock full of F/A-18E/F Super Hornets; even the helicopter fleet is being 'standardized' onto the H-60/S-70, with the USN looking at carriers being embarked with MH-60R Seahawks and MH-60S Knighthawks, rather than the current SH-60F/HH-60H Seahawks. One point that a Prowler WSO was keen to emphasise was that VAQ-138 were the only true attack squadron on board - their only mission is attack, be that electronically with the ALQ-99 pods or 'physically' with AGM-88 HARMs - either way, all they do is attack. The same WSO also pointed out that, at low-level, thanks to the Intruder genes, there's not a great deal can catch a Prowler. VAQ-138 has also recently been awarded CVW-9s hotly-contested 'Golden Wrench' to recognise the superb maintenance condition of their jets - the Yellowjackets had the highest mission-capable rate in the deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



EA-6B Prowler

S-3B Viking

E-2C Hawkeye



Whilst wandering on the deck, trying not to get in someone's way, we were introduced to Col Yurovich, DCAG. This man is not far off a walking legend; his logbook includes forty aircraft types including the A-4, F-4, AV-8 and being part of the weapons test program for the F/A-18, not to mention the fact that he currently flies F/A-18Cs. However, he is also in the Marine Corps, thereby meaning he is the first ever USMC DCAG and will soon become a CVW's first ever Marine CAG when he takes over command of his own Carrier Air Wing. He also took time to explain to us why the aircraft had all had a black USMC logo and 'Semper Parvum' added to them - VMFA-323 painted black bands on the tails of their Modex 200 'CAG bird' after the sad loss of two of their pilots over Iraq and the rest of the airwing followed suit with the addition of the somber black markings as a mark of respect to their missing colleagues. Unfortunately, aircraft '200' was down in the hangar deck and, at the time (i.e. prior to being told), we didn't know what the black bands represented and it was in a difficult position to get a decent photo of.

Later that evening, after raiding the squadrons for souvenirs, the choice was - "Do you want to go and take photos of the gym or go for a pizza?" Well, tough question! Let's just say the US Navy do know how to feed people. The pizza was fantastic and Saturday also turned out to be 'near beer' night, as USN ships are dry, the closest the personnel get to beer is the 0% ABV 'near beer', which, when ice cold, is actually very pleasant. Whilst we were tucking into our pizzas and 'beer', we were joined by a yellow-shirted 'shooter'. The jealousy for the job of the aforementioned blue shirt is nothing compared to the jealousy for the job of the shooter! This guy gets to launch the jets with their wings just feet above his head. Quite what the cranial (the funny looking helmet with built-in ear defenders) will do if you get hit on the back of the head by the wing of a thirty-tonne jet doing 200+km/h is beyond me... I would hazard a guess at not a great deal.

The next item on the itinerary was something, if I'm honest, I wasn't looking forward to - sleeping. I had visions of uncomfortable cramped bunks in a hot room. How wrong could I be! We were allocated bunks in a four-man room (we were to share with two Boeing employees) and that was end of my visions - the bunks are comfortable, the rooms are cool and were not the ridiculous temperature I expected, although there is one slight pitfall... an aircraft carrier is working 24/7. Thus you have to get used to bizarre noises, doors (including the big lumps of steel they call 'hangar doors') shutting, making bangs that sound like we've gone to war again, and the odd feeling experienced when the ship turns - you get used to them quick if you want any form of sleep. I don't know how I managed it but I got a good night's sleep, until the six-am wake-up anyway...



Early on Sunday morning, CVN-70 edged closer and closer to AOE-2 USS Camden for the vital

SH-60F/HH-60H  
Seahawk



MH-53E Sea  
Dragon



P-3C Orion



The end of the  
day...



underway replenishment (headings and speed were defined by the Camden, the Vinson matching them and sailing alongside, 160ft abeam of the Camden's port side) - food, drinks, fuel, etc would be brought from the Camden and munitions would be moved over to the Camden. This particular UNREP was actually made up of CONREP and VERTREP - Camden's MH-60S Knighthawk (from HSC-21 Blackjacks Det 6) was used to airlift pallets (the VERTREP) from one ship to the other and cables/pulleys were used to pull pallets from the Camden to the Vinson (the CONREP). Witnessing an underway replenishment, with plenty that could go wrong, is quite an eye-opening experience - and even more so considering the USS Camden, when she gets home to Bremerton, will be decommissioned. Whilst it's fair to assume the Knighthawk crew(s) have done this sort of thing before, every time they came back to pick up more munitions they were swinging into exactly the right position each and every time (which is a very good thing considering some of these boxes contained enough explosive to make quite a mess), guided by a seemingly very competent Landing Signals Enlisted, or LSE. After an hour or two in the early morning sun watching this replenishment 'ritual' we went for the US Navy Sunday special - brunch and smoothies. If anyone says food on an aircraft carrier is substandard, don't believe them. I foolishly neglected to try one of the fresh waffles but the rest of the food was absolutely superb.



A short while after brunch we were briefed on on-deck safety procedures including the safety equipment we were to wear - the 'floatcoat' and what bits of it did, as we were to go topside to watch the VERTREP from more of a 'worms-eye' view. Whilst down on the deck, one cannot fail to be impressed by the organisation of the whole replenishment procedure and pallets/boxes/etc are taken to wherever they need to be to be picked up within seconds of the Knighthawks departure to the Camden. So too the skill of the aircrews and landing signals personnel who were putting the MH-60 bang on the numbers and at the right height for the red shirts to hook-up the load every time. VERTREP is obviously a strenuous and stressful operation, not just for the crews but for the helicopter itself as it made numerous 'circuits' in order to cool down a little - not surprising considering it was 30°C by seven in the morning!



During our time aboard we also got a quick tour of the heart of the ship - basically the control rooms - and the Air Ops room where they have a scale representation of the two decks and small aircraft 'shapes' to show where they are on the real deck. A selection of coloured pins and nuts also lets Air Ops know what the precise state of the aircraft is in terms of fuel levels and maintenance condition. The Combat Direction Centre is where everything happens - radar plots of the surrounding area and the ability to talk to any department on the ship in order to do what they need to do. From this room, a single officer can recommend a course of action directly to the Captain who may agree with the suggestion or have an alternative idea. The 'air traffic control' also has to be seen to be believed - little wonder a Carrier Air Wing can mount missions twenty-four hours a day; if things got so bad (i.e. fog, rougher seas, the pilot being tired after hours in the cockpit over hostile territory), the systems in here can actually bring any of the fast jets in for a perfect landing (so much so that each landing is in pretty much the same position) - and the pilot takes his or her hands completely off the controls. The unlucky E-2C, C-2A and S-3B crews will have to fly in on talkdown or divert to the designated emergency runway.



Time quickly passed and it was then once again time to don the gear (cranial, lifejacket) for the flight back to Sigonella. The walk towards MH-53E '45' was perhaps the worst part of the trip. We knew that in roughly ninety minutes, we'd be back on terra firma and that in two hours, the 'Gold Eagle' would resume flight ops... The flight back was much more comfortable as there were only fifteen or so of us on this flight, rather than the thirty-odd on the flight out to the carrier, so it felt a little cooler and we had much more legroom. The second MH-53E in the two-ship flight provided plenty of opportunities for air-to-air shots although the windows were not conducive to photography - I was more bothered about reflecting on one of the best weekends I've ever had.

We arrived back at Sigonella to witness the departure of the two VAQ-138 EA-6Bs that had been calling Sigonella home for about a week, but not before we got to have a quick chat with one of the aircrew in the HC-4 squadron shop, the 'corral'. More of a surprise was a taste of home in the shape of four Tornado F3s (three unmarked aircraft, one with full XI(F) Sqn markings) and the Nimrod MR2.



Many thanks and appreciation must go to LTJG David Lockett; LT Jon Groveman; LCDR Scott McInay and all in his PAO team; all CVN-70 JOs involved with helping us out; and the crews and personnel of HC-4 Black Stallions, the best airline in the Mediterranean. Without whom this extremely memorable and worthwhile trip would not have been at all possible. I'd also like to thank all those CVN-70 and CVW-9 personnel that we got to talk to.