



LAUNCH

USN, CDR Raoul "Smiley" Alvarez, USN

Vee Ess Eff—Very Small Fighters

by CDR Robert R. "Boom" Powell, USN(Ret)



A VA-45 Det 1 A-4E Skyhawk loaded out with AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles and flying from USS Intrepid (CVS-11) keeps station on the wing of a Soviet Tu-95 Bear during a 1972 intercept.

Editor's Note: VSF, or ASWFitRon, was a squadron that provided fighter aircraft to the specialized anti-submarine aircraft carriers (designated CVS and operated from 1955 to 1973) to protect those ships from enemy air attacks.

The two VSF squadrons (four, if Navy Reserve squadrons are included) deployed only one detachment in their intended role, but went to sea as normal attack squadrons. The detachments that did deploy aboard CVSs came from fleet VA or Marine Corps squadrons. The Blackbirds of VA-45, a fleet replacement squadron, came closest to the original VSF concept on the last CVS cruises. Although used officially for only a brief period, VSF is a convenient way of saying "fighters operating from an ASW aircraft carrier," and will be used as such in this article.

Carrier-based anti-submarine warfare did not begin as a specialty. During World War II, all aircraft were used for anti-submarine patrols — even the fighters. After Korea, the increased capabilities of submarines demanded specialized aircraft to detect, track and kill them. The Grumman *Avenger*, which began life as a torpedo bomber, was heavily modified to become the first dedicated carrier-based ASW aircraft. The large, short-lived AF *Guardian*, which operated in a two-aircraft team, followed for a short time before the multi-crew, multi-engine S2F (later designated S-2) *Tracker* dominated ship-based ASW for the next two decades.

Specialized anti-submarine carrier air wings (CVSGs) were created consisting of two air anti-submarine (S-2) and a helicopter anti-submarine (H-34/SH-3A) squadron, plus detachments for early warning and ECM. A CVS with several surface combatants formed an ASW task group (*The Hook*, Su '05) and usually operated far from shore- or carrier-based air protection. The threat from Soviet long-range maritime aircraft was indeed real, and the addition of fighters to the CVSG was seen as the answer.

The concept was developed on three deployments. VF(AW)-4 Det 50 operated F9F-5 *Cougars* from USS *Antietam* (CVS-36) in late 1956 before she became the full-time training carrier in Pensacola. VA-44 had later-model F9F-8 *Cougars* in *Wasp* (CVS-18) in late 1957 and VF-92

Det N flew F2H-3 *Banshees* from *Yorktown* (CVS-10) October 1958 to May 1959. The fighter detachment concept worked well, prompting the formation of more detts.

Enter the Skyhawk

However, newer, more capable Navy aircraft also were larger, heavier and faster. In 1960 all eight CVSs had hydraulic catapults and limited deck space and simply were not able to operate fighters such as the *Demon*, *Skyray* or *Crusader*. Enter the A-4 *Skyhawk*.

The nicknames of Douglas' A-4 — Scooter, Tinker Toy, Heinemann's Hot Rod — reflected the aircraft's small size, light weight and agility. VA-34 provided the first detachment of *Skyhawks* (A4D-2/A-4B) during the 1961 *Essex* (CVS-9) Atlantic deployment. The *Blue Blaster Skyhawks* carried a centerline fuel tank, two AIM-9 *Sidewinders* and two 20mm cannon for use in the air-defense role. This loadout would remain standard. Eleven more detachments with A-4s on CVSs followed.

USN



VA-34 Blue Blasters A4D-2 traps on board *Essex* (CVS-9), 6 Apr '61.



USN, LT Dave Boaz, USN



USN, LTJG Bob Krall, USN



VA-64 had a detachment of A-4Bs in *Wasp* from February to June 1962 before the entire squadron embarked in *Independence* (CVA-62) for the Cuban quarantine. VA-22 provided four A-4B *Skyhawks*, six pilots and 48 enlisted men (a typical VSF det size) on board *Kearsarge* (CVS-33) from June to December 1963. A highlight of the Pacific deployment was the recovery of space capsule *Faith 7* with astronaut Gordon Cooper on board.

The Marines Join the Party

The Marine Corps embarked its first det in 1963. Unfortunately, *Essex* was hit by a huge storm returning from the Med during which the steel mast broke off the top of the island. One of the yardarms punched a hole through an H&MS-32 det *Skyhawk* and the wooden flight deck. A planeload of jet fuel splashed over the flight deck and drained into the hangar bay. Fortunately, there was no fire.

On the same deployment, a Soviet Tu-95 *Bear* made several low-altitude runs over *Essex*, misjudged a turn and crashed spectacularly into the sea within view of everyone on deck.

A det from the VMA-214 *Black Sheep* went to WestPac with A-4Bs in *Hornet* (CVS-12) as part of CVSG-57 from October 1963 to April 1964. The VA-34 *Blue Blasters* had overlapping detts in *Randolph* (CVS-15) and *Intrepid* (CVS-11) from late 1963 into 1964.

The *Skyhawks* turned out to be useful in the ASW role as well. With their speed they could search wide areas visually or dash to a distant

Left, from top: VA-93 Det Q A-4B cruises near Mount Fuji, Japan, during the 1964 WestPac cruise on board *Bennington* (CVS-20). • VA-93 Det Q *Skyhawk* escorts a Soviet Tupolev Tu-16 *Badger* C. The admiral did not like “postcard” shots like this and told the pilots to get closer. As a spoof, VA-93 Det Q painted their noses black as if they had radar. The tail below the horizontal stab was also black for a pretend tail-warning radar. • Beriev Be-6 *Madge* intercepted by Det Q OinC LCDR Tom Randall on 16 Jul '64. Note the A-4B is nose high to stay with the piston-engined *Madge*. The Soviet seaplane was in the area conducting SAR for a downed *Badger*. **Below:** VA-113 Det Q A-4B deployed in *Bennington* from March to October 1965 with the standard configuration for the fighter detachments — 20mm cannon, two AIM-9 *Sidewinders* and a 150-gal. centerline drop tank. The side number is a Roman numeral. • The distinction of landing the first A-4 *Skyhawk* on board the aircraft carrier *HMAS Melbourne* (21) went to VA-113 Det Q in 1965, two years before the Australian navy had its own squadrons of A-4Gs. Here, a Det Q A-4B is poised to launch from *Melbourne*'s only catapult while a *Supermarine Sea Venom* and a pair of *Fairey Gannets* with double-fold wings are parked to starboard.

contact much faster than the S-2. Submarines did not expect a threat from high altitude. The *Scooter* pilots carried cameras and soon became proficient at low passes to closely observe ships.

VA-93 deployed Det Q in *Bennington* (CVS-20) from February to September 1964. Detachment pilot Bob Krall commented on shooting at a banner towed by a T2V *Sea Star*, “The deployment at Yuma didn’t produce any results that det pilots could brag about at a fighter-pilot bar. Despite efforts at boresighting the guns, the A-4 was not suited for air-to-air gunnery.”

VA-153 Det R in *Kearsarge* made a fast turn in December 1964 to join the parent squadron for deployment in *Coral Sea* (CVA-43).

VA-113 formed Det Q in *Bennington* in 1965. Marc Pierce, who later would join VSF-1, remembers training with the F-8 RAG, VF-124, at NAS Miramar. A-4s competed unofficially against F-8s with a TF-9 *Cougar* towing a target for air-to-air gunnery. Even with a fixed gun sight, the *Skyhawk* pilots did better than the *Crusaders* with their lead-computing sights, although experienced A-4 pilots versus replacements new to the *Crusader* may have had something to do with it.



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SULTRY LADIES AT SEA

During more liberal times, the Marines of H&MS-15 Det N serving as anti-submarine fighter protection in USS *Hornet* (CVS-12) from August 1965 to March 1966 gave their four A-4C *Skyhawks* names that were in florid script on the nose of their birds:

BuNo 147681, YV 81 *Fanny Hill*
 BuNo 147809, YV 82 *Polly Adler*
 BuNo 147829, YV 83 *Mamie Stover*
 BuNo 148464, YV 84 *Ko Sisters*

Fanny Hill — The 1749 book is subtitled “Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure.” Considered the first erotic novel, it has become a byword for censorship controversy.

Polly Adler — A New York City madam in the 1930s who was famous for entry scenes at Manhattan night clubs with her girls.

Mamie Stover — A woman of dubious morals forced to leave San Francisco for Hawaii in a 1956 novel. Suggestive mostly because of the movie version with Jane Russell.

Ko Sisters — Japanese women’s names tend to end in “ko,” and since most Marines did not have much command of Japanese, it was a standard way to refer to Michiko, Fumiko, Sajiko, Akiko and the other girls who worked in the o’ club at Iwakuni and the bars in town.

CDR Doug Siegfried, USN(Ret)



Like all the CVSs (except *Intrepid*) at the time, *Bennington* had hydraulic catapults that restricted the A-4 to a 150-gal. centerline tank with two AIM-9 missiles. During the deployment to WestPac, VA-113 Det had the unique opportunity to have the first U.S. Navy aircraft to land aboard the Australian aircraft carrier HMAS *Melbourne* (21). With the situation in Vietnam becoming more tense, VA-113’s det also did a fast turn to go aboard USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) in October 1965 for the first strikes into North Vietnam.

The same year, the *Bulldogs* of VMA-223 Det T and their A-4Cs finished a deployment in *Yorktown* and immediately moved ashore to the new Marine base at Chu Lai.

Marine Air Group 15’s Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron deployed to the Tonkin Gulf in *Hornet* as 1965 became 1966. The det’s six pilots flew bomb strikes along with their carrier protection mission, and all made centurion. On a wry note, their A-4Cs were named for ladies of dubious reputation — *Fanny Hill*, *Polly Adler*, the *Ko Sisters* and *Mamie Stover*.

VSF-1 — The Early Days

The importance of the VSF mission and the success of dets to date justified the creation of a specialized squadron that would provide a detachment for each CVS. Protection of ASW task groups would be the primary mission rather than the collateral role it had been. *Anti-Submarine Warfare Fighter Squadron One* was established 1 July 1965 at NAS Lemoore. Plank owners included CDR Charles E. Waring, a lieutenant and a dozen enlisted men. The squadron would be based at NAS Alameda and was to be assigned A-4Bs.

The first commanding officer, CDR Waring, had flown 65 missions in F4U-4 *Corsairs* in Korea in VF-54 from *Philippine Sea* (CVA-47) and *Valley Forge* (CVA-45). He made *Midway*’s (CVA-41) around-the-world



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Left: A VMA-233 Det T A-4C traps on board *Yorktown* (CVS-10) during the 1965 cruise. Top: “*Mamie Stover*” A-4C of H&MS-15 Det N being led up the deck of *Hornet* (CVS-12) by a tillerman with his steering bar through the nose-wheel. Bomb symbols on the intake are for missions into Vietnam when not acting as fighter protection for the ASW Group. Above: H&MS-15 maintenance personnel in front of “*Fanny Hill*” in this cruisebook photo.

cruise in VF-174 flying F9F *Cougars* and was XO of VA-155 flying A-4A/Bs in WestPac on board *Coral Sea*. Recently promoted after several years in Izmir, Turkey, with the 6th Allied Tactical Air Force, Waring was assured by the commander detailer and legendary LSO, CDR Toby Tobin, that the VSF assignment was a “good deal.”

The first pilots went through an abbreviated syllabus at Lemoore. Since Waring was already A-4 qualified, he was finished with VA-125 after only two refresher hops. Later pilots bound for VSF-1 went through the entire attack/nuclear-delivery syllabus — and as a bonus, they earned per diem while at Lemoore, because their final orders were to NAS Alameda.

The eagle head featured in the squadron insignia was adapted from the Waring family’s silverware, with green slashes added to match the painted portion of the A-4’s rudder. Waring argued that as a fighter squadron, VSF-1 should have red as the squadron color. Although powers that be decreed otherwise, the skipper’s airplane always seemed to feature red while the rest of the squadron was painted green.

VSF-1's aircraft side numbers began with the CO's 70 and eventually reached into the 90s. Assigned the letter code NA, squadron jokers claimed it stood for "Not Applicable."

Waring was a skipper from the old school. LTJGs Howie Fowler and Fred Kasch arrived with the author at Alameda from VA-125 at the same time. Waring welcomed us by putting us on the next day's flight schedule. No chase, no old-hand along to watch us — just the three of us taking turns

leading the flight. Howie's family was from a town near Mount Shasta in Northern California, so we flew up there to say hello. Fred and I were tucked in tight for the fly-by when the radio call came, "On count of three, we pull up!" I looked forward to see lots of green trees and steep cliffs filling the Scooter's windscreen.

Eager to develop the fighter mission, Charlie Waring arranged weapons detachments to NAS Fallon and MCAS Yuma, set up combat maneuvering practice and fired AIM-9 *Sidewinders*. Also, he directed that "Rudolf" be built.

Rudolf was an A-4B (BuNo 145002) that featured an F-8 air-to-air radar "borrowed" from the China Lake Weapons Center and installed by NARF Alameda. The unique, longer nose, modified from the nose of an F-11 *Tiger*, was painted red — and the name naturally followed.

What was intended as the prototype for future VSF fighters had not been approved by higher authority. Neither was taking Rudolf on the carqual sessions scheduled for VSF-1 pilots on *Kearsarge* and *Hornet*. Waring himself flew Rudolf's first trap.

Cancellation of a planned det in *Yorktown* in 1966 was the first hint that the squadron's VSF mission was about to change. The change became official when VSF-1 was assigned to *Shangri-La* (CVA-38). The war in Southeast Asia was heating up and attack assets were needed there desperately. To fill the requirement, an Atlantic Fleet VA squadron was to deploy to WestPac, and VSF-1 was scheduled to take the squadron's place in a deployment to the Med in November 1966 as a normal-size attack squadron.

With a large number of pilots and aircraft in the pipeline headed for VSF-1, a second attack squadron was to be formed, and both would retain the VSF designation. In what turned into administrative mayhem, VSF-1 Det Alameda grew larger than its parent organization, at sea half a world away.

The shift to becoming an attack squadron began immediately with the squadron launching a weapons det to Fallon and bombing and rocket practice at NALF Crows Landing, just across the mountains in the central San Joaquin Valley. VSF-1 also used Crows Landing for field carrier landing practice before it headed east to join CVW-8 at NAS Cecil Field and the Med deployment.

Four pilots, including ex-NavCad ENS Al Cartwright, were called upon to report to Billy Phillip's *Air Wing 19* to replace pilots he was less than happy with. Cartwright said leaving VSF-1 was hard — not because he was headed to WestPac, but because Waring was so good to work for. Several "combat limited," (i.e., combat deployment veterans) arrived to fill the vacant slots.

VSF-1 in the Med

After six weeks of work ups on the East Coast, *Shangri-La* departed Norfolk on 29 September 1966. On board were the *War Eagles* of VSF-1 with 14 A-4B *Skyhawks*. The tail code was now the AJ of *Air Wing Eight* and side numbers temporarily began with 570.

VSF-1 deployed to the Mediterranean on *Shangri-La* (CVA-38) from Nov '66–May '67 as an attack squadron with 16 A-4B *Skyhawks*. Side numbers at first began with 570 and were later changed to a more conventional 500 series; the squadron color remained green.



A-4B BuNo 145002, which after modifications to add an F-8 radar to the nose, should have become the YFA-4B. Late on 28 Oct '66 at NAS Alameda, Clay Jansson took one photo and was asked to not shoot that airplane, so he moved to the next but kept "Rudolf" in the frame. The sensitivity was probably more about the unapproved modifications than any classified equipment.

Other than a junior pilot landing hard enough to break the wing of an A-4 during a dive-for-deck trap at night, the time in the Med in support of 6th Fleet operations was routine, and all *War Eagle* pilots became Shang Centurions. CDR Donald K. Wilson assumed command of VSF-1 on 14 April 1967 while the ship was in Palermo, Sicily. Soon afterward, *Shangri-La* returned to Norfolk and VSF-1 flew back to NAS Alameda.

VSF-3 Is Formed

VSF-3 was established in March 1967. CDR Leslie C. Hofto went from XO of VSF-1 to officer in charge Det Alameda and finally to commanding officer of VSF-3.

Hofto began his flying career in AD *Skyraiders* and was assigned to the CVG-7 staff as LSO. He made a Med deployment before going to combat in Korea in *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA-31). Then he extended for three months to assist CVG-15/*Princeton* (CVA-37) LSOs who were unfamiliar with jets. Hofto later was senior LSO in *Bennington* for the legendary recovery during the "Mariner Miracle" (*The Hook*, Wi '91). After a Washington, D.C., tour, he found himself in a quiet but fun assignment as director of the Navy/Marine Corps exhibit at the 1964 New York World's Fair.

His detailer's call with assignment to VSF-1 was as confusing as it was for most. The author remembers that, as a red-hot jet pilot with shiny new wings, his heart stopped in the pause between "VS" and "F One" for his first squadron. He'd thought the detailer meant "VS," or an air-anti-submarine squadron flying Grumman S-2 *Trackers*.



USN





CAPT Frederick Oliver (right), commanding officer of NAAS Fallon, presents the red-tailed hawk which would become the VSF-1 mascot, to the squadron's commanding officer, CDR Charlie Waring.

Charlie Eagle's Service to VSF-1

Charlie Eagle's service with the Navy began when a SAR helicopter crew rescued an injured red-tailed hawk and took the bird back to NAAS Fallon. Navy corpsmen removed the birdshot, but its wing was severely damaged and his flying days were over. Since the hawk could not be released into the wild, the folks at Fallon kept it.

The commanding officer of Fallon, CAPT Frederick W. Oliver, was wondering what to do with his charge when brand-new VSF-1 arrived for weapons training. Emblazoned proudly on the pilots' flight jackets and A-4B airplanes was the squadron patch inspired by the first CO's family crest — an eagle head *en profile* on *fesse vert*.

A hawk looks like an eagle, especially a stylized one. And the squadron flew *Skyhawks*. It was a perfect match. A small ceremony was arranged and the hawk was officially presented as the mascot for VSF-1. How could the CO, CDR Charlie Waring, refuse?

At the end of the weapons training, the transport folks who were to fly the squadron troops and equipment back to NAS Alameda balked at carrying a live animal — against regulations, you know — until skipper Waring “persuaded” them.

The sex of the bird was never determined, but it was soon named “Charlie Eagle.” The airframes shop built a large cage painted in VSF-1 green and placed it at the back of the ready room on the second deck looking out over the flight line, the Alameda runways and the Oakland Bay Bridge crossing to San Francisco.

ENS Al Cartwright, the squadron's most junior officer, was put in charge of Charlie. Much to the chagrin of the authorities, Cartwright raised mice in the Alameda BOQ to feed the hawk. After he transferred to CVW-19 Charlie's diet became raw liver with an occasional lizard caught by maintenance officer Phil Dougherty's nine kids.

However, Charlie's gory mouse meals continued as part of the initiation of new men into the squadron. LT (later RADM) Dan March would buy mice at a local pet shop. When the sweet old lady clerk questioned why he bought so many, Dan responded with a straight face that they kept escaping from their cage.

As the door to his cage was usually open, Charlie would hop onto chair backs and up to the top of the cage. From there he would occasionally launch for the front of the room, hit the waxed linoleum deck and skid into the wall. These “flights” went into the squadron log as “arrested landings.” On other occasions, Charlie would target the squadron duty officer at his desk. Looking up into the outstretched talons of a hawk was a thrill experienced by most of the junior officers serving as SDO. Mercifully there were no injuries — to bird or duty officers.

Deciding that mice and lizards were insufficient for a warhawk, a guinea pig was purchased for sacrifice. As a crowd of officers watched, the guinea pig was tossed into the cage, saw the hawk and immediately froze. Charlie sat on his perch turning his head side to side as he studied this round, furry, oversized “mouse.” After many suspenseful minutes, the guinea pig decided there was no danger and began snuffling around the cage.

That was too much for Charlie, who dived on the guinea pig, talons extended and ready for lunch. The guinea pig sensed the attack, whirled, and bit Charlie's foot. The hawk squawked and retreated to the back of his cage. Having successfully stood his ground, the guinea pig was removed from danger and went home to the Dougherty kids.

With VSF-1 scheduled to deploy, Charlie was passed to VSF-3 to continue his service as a mascot. When time came for the squadron to deploy as well, Charlie Eagle was sent PCS to the Oakland Zoo, where he outlived both the squadrons.



Achieving notoriety early in the squadron's life, VSF-3 made television news and newspaper headlines in late 1966 with a “Navy Bombs Oakland!” banner after a Mk 76 practice bomb fell into one of the few vacant lots in that city. A flight of four had launched from NAS Alameda, and as Dash 3 closed in, he asked, “Two, how many bombs did you have when you took off?”

“Six. (pause) Why?”

“Well, you only have five now.”

Additional proof of VSF being short for “Very Screwy Fellas” was VSF-3's assignment to CVW-10 and *Intrepid* (CVS-11). *Air Wing 10* and the other two of its A-4 squadrons were at NAS Cecil Field in Florida. *Intrepid* was in Norfolk.

Lessons learned in Vietnam dictated increased ECM capabilities and the *Shoehorn* installation — a package of several ALQ-designated jammer/warning/deceiver black boxes developed for the A-4. Aptly named for the difficulty of finding space to install the magic black boxes, the modification involved removing the port cannon and leaving the other with only 40 rounds. BuNo 154002, the *Skyhawk* with the special nose, was among the aircraft reworked at NARF Alameda. With the modification complete, the aircraft emerged as a standard A-4B — Rudolf was no more.

While the parent squadron was deployed in *Shangri-La*, the VSF-1 det made two 10-day visits to Fallon for weapons practice and flew a carquel session in *Bon Homme Richard*. After the det was established as VSF-3, the squadron carrier qualified in *Kearsarge* before joining

CDR Robert “Boom” Powell, USN(Ret)



VSF-3 A-4B on fighter alert with two AIM-9 Sidewinders during *Intrepid's* (CVS-11) transit to or from Yankee Station in 1967.

Intrepid in Norfolk. Work ups on the East Coast continued for the next two months with few chances for visits to Alameda. Finally, the squadron airplanes were taxied from NAS Norfolk to the naval base and hoisted aboard *Intrepid* for the voyage to war — the long way.

VSF-3 Deployed

Middle East tensions were high, and Jordan had signed a treaty with Egypt while *Intrepid* was in the eastern Mediterranean. Aircraft were armed and crews put on alert. After several days of uncertainty, *Intrepid* entered the Suez Canal in June 1967, and all hands were restricted from



Another view of an Intrepid VSF-3 A-4B on fighter alert, 1967.

the weather decks for the transit. Although there were overflights by Egyptian fighters and troops were sighted on the banks of the canal, the worst the Egyptians did was display banners and shake their shoes at the ship. The Arab-Israeli Six Day War began four days later. *Intrepid* was the last warship to go through the canal until it was reopened in 1975.

The two-week transit to the Pacific was filled with all-pilot meetings for training and briefings. Two meetings a day were the norm, and for VSF-3, the meetings usually ended the same way — the new squadron needed an insignia. Sketches of half a dozen candidates were presented and discussed. The selection was whittled down to two, with a final choice to be made the next day. By the next day, other options appeared and the choices were back up to five or six.

The final compromise was a knight chess piece on a checkered field with red jags to match the tails of the squadron's aircraft. The agreed-upon name was *Chessmen*.

The radio callsign *Nevada City* had been used by both VSF-1 and VSF-3 from the beginning. There was a small town of the same name on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, which prompted many low-level flights to the area to check out the namesake.

After a brief stop in Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, and adjacent NAS Cubi Point, VSF-3 entered combat for the first time on 21 June 1967. The veterans of VA-15 who had been with *Intrepid* the previous year assumed that operations would begin again on Dixie Station and eventually work their way north.

They were wrong. The air war in the summer of 1967 was at full pace. VSF-3 operated over North Vietnam for its first missions. By the end of the first line period it was flying over the Haiphong suburbs and over the Big H's (Hanoi and Haiphong) by the second line period.

Though many aircraft returned to *Intrepid* with battle damage, only two were lost. LTJG Fred Kasch was the squadron's only fatality. Early in July, he was hit by AAA over Hai Duong and crashed while trying to glide his flamed-out *Skyhawk* to safety in the Tonkin Gulf. His wingman, ex-NavCad LTJG Dick Harriss, heard him call, "I'm at 500 feet." Harriss told him to get out, but there was no apparent ejection. The Navy listed Kasch as MIA until his remains were returned in 1989. He was flying BuNo 145002, the A-4B once known as Rudolf.

In October 1967 LTJG Al Perkins was hit by AAA while on a flak-suppression mission over Haiphong. Perkins, wounded in the leg, barely could control his airplane. As he jettisoned his canopy in an attempt to clear the dense smoke in the cockpit, he was either hit again or his engine exploded. Perkins ejected and landed in Haiphong Harbor, where an H-2 *Seasprite* helicopter from HC-1 picked him up a few yards away from an enemy ship.

Once in WestPac, although *Intrepid* picked up a VFP-63 photo-Crusader detachment and VF-111 provided three F-8Cs and four pilots, VSF-3 was considered the carrier's resident fighter squadron. The squadron color was red, Ready Room One, nearest the flight deck, was assigned, though shared with the 'Sader pilots. During ship transits, the squadron stood flight deck alerts in an A-4B with a centerline fuel tank and a pair of AIM-9 *Sidewinders* on the rails.

On 5 October 1967, *Air Wing 10 Skyhawks* encountered MiGs in force. A 27-plane Alfa strike had launched against a target near the Kien An Airfield. During the egress, half the strike group ran into MiGs. Dick Harriss was first aware of them



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Where Do We Get Such Men? — An Incredible Night Combat Rescue!

Naval Aviation: Issues and Answers

Wednesday, 10 May 2006

1300–1700 Golf Tournament (A.C. Read Golf Course)

Thursday, 11 May 2006

0745–0830 Navy Band Concert (Atrium)

0830–0930 Hall of Honor Enshrinement

VADM Donald E. Engen, USN*

CAPT Arthur Ray Hawkins, USN*

CAPT R. E. Mitchell, MC, USN (Ret)

CAPT Eugene A. Cernan, USN (Ret)

*Deceased

0945–1145 Session I: Remarkable Rescues (Atrium)

Moderator: VADM Donald C. Thompson, USCG (Ret)

Panelists: CAPT Ted Le Feuvre, USCG

CAPT Bruce C. Jones, USCG

CDR Stephen H. Torpey, USCG

LCDR Joseph E. Balda, USCG

LT Michael Odom, USCG

AETC Fred Kalt, USCG

AST2 David M. Yoder III, USCG(Ret)

1200–1315 Luncheon (Flight Deck)

Guest Speaker: Mr. Cliff Robertson

1330–1530 Session II: Incredible Night Combat Rescue!

Moderator: RADM Frederick L. Lewis, USN(Ret)

Panelists: CAPT John A. Burns, USN(Ret)

CAPT John W. Holtzclaw, USN(Ret)

CDR C. LeRoy Cook, USN(Ret)

Mr. Bruce Dallas

1900–2100 Opening Reception (Quarterdeck)

Friday, 12 May 2006

0900–0945 Navy Band Concert (Atrium)

0945–1130 Session III: Naval Aviation:

Issues and Answers (Atrium)

Moderator: VADM James M. Zortman, USN (CNAP)

Panelists: To Be Announced

1815–1900 Reception (Flight Deck)

1900–2100 Banquet (Atrium) — Speaker: The Hon. B.J. Penn



when he saw tracers coming down past him. He fired at the overshooting MiG but saw no hits and, out of ammo, Harriss headed for the water. The official account of the action is typically confused, but at least six different MiG-17s were involved.

CDR Georges LeBlanc, XO of VSF-3, maneuvered behind a MiG and squeezed the trigger. His one cannon fired once and jammed. He called for his wingman, LTJG Dan Swinford, to close in, but Swinford had no radio. Both *Skyhawks* broke off and cleared the area.

The *Air Wing 10* operations officer, Ed Gilreath, was flying VSF-3's *AK 107*. When he heard the MiG warnings, he held the rockets he carried for his flak suppression mission and headed for Kien An. His wingman, LTJG D. "Huey" L'Herault in *AK 105*, had fired all his rockets at the assigned target. He describes what followed:

As we circled behind the strike group of *Intrepid* A-4s to follow them "feet wet," I made the initial visual of a single MiG-17 at about ten o'clock low ... we were at about three hundred knots and five or six thousand feet.

As I was in trail on Ed at full power, he called to arm up our guns, and we turned hard left and initiated a dive toward the MiG. The enemy aircraft then turned hard right, and as we made a reversal to follow, I glanced behind me and there were three MiG-17s flying a loose formation and firing tracer cannon rounds at me. I called Ed to break hard right, and from there I ended up in a one-v-three for three reversals. Somehow I avoided their bullets.

In the midst of this I saw Ed only one time, and that was to see a stream of 2.75-inch rockets fill the air [*AK 107* had fired eight *Zuni* five-in. rockets and 20mm cannon earlier] as he made an almost head-on pass at the three guys concentrating on me. When the MiGs split — two went high and one went low — Ed called to jettison all externals [fuel tanks, racks and rocket packs] and we headed directly out to sea. At full speed with about fifteen hundred pounds of gas left, we went right down on the deck. I remember seeing airspeed of over five hundred fifty knots.

LTJG Fred Kasch, USN



VSF-1 Med Deployments II and III

VSF-1 began transitioning to the A-4C in August. The second cruise began in April 1968 with CDR Marty Asbacher the new CO. The *War Eagles* spent their second Christmas deployed, in Athens this time, and were consistently the top flight-time squadron aboard *Independence*.

In late 1968 *Wasp* was operating in the Mediterranean and VSF-1, as well as VA-76, provided temporary detachments to the smaller carrier, though the deets were never very far from the parent squadrons on board *Independence*.

In 1966 LTJG Fred Kasch (the only pilot lost when VSF-3 went to Vietnam) used his new SLR camera to photograph the author, then-LTJG Powell, over the Golden Gate Bridge in a VSF-1 A-4B soon after the squadron transitioned to the attack role.



Left: The commanding officer's A-4B from the full-strength VSF-1 traps on board Shangri-La during the 1966-'67 Med deployment during which all pilots became CVA-38 *Centurions*. **Above:** Photo-op in 1966 for Howie Fowler's *Northern California* hometown newspaper. Fowler is at right, author Powell by NA 93. Coincidentally, both pilots later flew RA-5C *Vigilantes*.

The last missions were flown at the end of November 1967. Most of the flight crews were to fly home on a "Magic Carpet" airliner from Clark AFB. An unlucky few officers and most of the men remained on board *Intrepid* for the month-long voyage across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Atlantic to Norfolk.

Due to a jurisdictional quirk, those pilots due to be airlifted back could not depart from Clark until *Intrepid* "chopped" to the Atlantic Fleet somewhere in the Indian Ocean. The pilots spent a boring week at Cubi playing touch football early in the morning before it got too hot, followed by swimming and afternoon naps. At least they could go to the o'club for a legal drink — and they were not getting shot at.

1968

The decision to standdown VSF-3 was made while the squadron was in the Tonkin Gulf. When hearing the news, the pilots speculated that they would be sent to A-4 or A-7 fleet squadrons, since they had only the one combat deployment. However, BuPers considered all the time spent in VSF, including time at Alameda for those who were in VSF-1 or the det, to be sea duty. Distribution was varied, with about half going to sea-going squadrons. Alameda-based VA-152 had returned from WestPac in *Oriskany* (CVA-34) and was transitioning from A-1 *Skyraiders* to A-4 *Skyhawks*. A cadre of pilots transferred from VSF-3 and at one point, VA-152 owned a dozen Spads and a mix of 14 Bravo and Charlie *Skyhawks*. A few ex-VSF-3 A-4Bs went to the Navy Reserves, while others were reworked and sent to Argentina where they later flew in the Falklands War.



Above: A VSF-1 A-4B tanks an always-thirsty VF-13 F-8D. **Above, right:** A VSF-86 A-4L at NAS New Orleans. **Right:** A VSF-86 A-4L bearing USS Ticonderoga (CVS-14) markings during a two-week AcDuTra cruise in 1971.

Returning to Alameda early in 1969, VSF-1 experienced a 50 percent turnover of pilots and received a batch of new *Skyhawks*. The training situation was complicated because VSF-1 was to revert to its original anti-submarine support mission in January as well as remain committed to CVW-7 in a contingency status. During work ups with *Independence*, the squadron received extra personnel to accommodate a planned *Yorktown* detachment. *Independence* and *Yorktown* left together for NATO exercise *Operation Peacekeeper* in the North Atlantic. The VSF-1 det intercepted a Soviet *Bear* two days before the actual exercise — the only deployment of VSF operating in its intended role was under way.

During the subsequent visit to Portsmouth, England, in September, word of VSF-1's coming disestablishment arrived. The det stayed out until 11 December, and by the first day of 1970 no ASWFitRon existed as a front-line unit.

Reserves as VSF

VSF-11X1 and -11X2 were created on paper in July 1968 at NAS New Orleans as part of the reorganization of the Naval Reserve. Flying A-4B *Skyhawks*, these squadrons, planned as full-size units, were soon reduced to only four pilots. Another shake-up of the Reserves resulted in the squadrons being designated VSF-76 and VSF-86, both squadrons to be fully manned and equipped with A-4C/L "Scooters." While neither squadron made any full deployments, the *Flying Saints* and the *Gators* were at sea for two-week AcDuTra cruises in 1971 in *Wasp*, *Ticonderoga* (recently designated CVS-14) and *Randolph*.

After flying A-4s and A-7s on active duty, Ed Moir had joined the Reserves, and was among the *Gators* pilots. He said:

Our squadron stood up as VSF-86, part of NAS North Island-based CAG 80 under CDR Tom Stanley. Our "fighters" were A-4Cs equipped with high-temperature J65 engines, and we flew with centerline tanks only or sometimes "slick." Though not performing badly for a Scooter, it still wasn't a fighter. We had fun and the mission was super — hassling and more hassling. The flight deck crew on Tico, despite having no recent jet experience, did a great job.

Section of VSF-1 A-4Bs hawk the delta pattern overhead Shangri-La on the 1967 Med cruise.



We held our change of command ceremony in *Ticonderoga* under way in the San Diego operating area in the first Navy Reserve change of command held at sea. Incidentally, the incoming CO, Tammy Etheridge, later made rear admiral, as did a squadron member, Dave Griggs.

The embarrassment of a Cuban airliner landing unannounced at New Orleans Airport prompted a local congressman to have both Reserve VSF squadrons assigned six F-8H *Crusaders* each to NAS New Orleans. It was the first fighter in the VSF role since VF-92's *Banshees* in 1959. The powers that be decided not to carquel the Reserves in the F-8, and with approximately one pilot for each *Crusader*, it was a flying club of the first order. The fun lasted a little more than a year, but with the CV concept in effect and no CVSs remaining in the fleet, VSF-76 and VSF-86 were disestablished in 1973. Assigned personnel and aircraft became the nucleus of today's VFC-13.



Fighter Dets on CVSs and VSF Deployments

Squadron	Det	Aircraft	Carrier	Dates	Place
VC-4	Det 39	F4U-5N	USS <i>Antietam</i> (CVS-36)	15 Feb–29 Mar 1954	Caribbean
VC-4	Det 50	F4U-5N	USS <i>Antietam</i> (CVS-36)	12 Apr 1954–Aug 1955	* Atlantic
VC-3	Det N	F4U-5N	USS <i>Princeton</i> (CVS-37)	2 Nov 1954–31 May 1955	WestPac
VC-4	Det 51	F4U-5N	USS <i>Leyte</i> (CVS-32)	1 Sep–25 Sept 1955	† Atlantic/Caribbean
VFAW-4	Det 50	F9F-5	USS <i>Antietam</i> (CVS-36)	25 Sep–22 Dec 1956	Atlantic/Mediterranean
VA-172	Det 38	F2H-2	USS <i>Tarawa</i> (CVS-40)	3 Sep–22 Oct 1957	Caribbean
VA-44	Det 48	F9F-8	USS <i>Wasp</i> (CVS-18)	3 Sep–23 Oct 1957	North Atlantic
VF-92	Det N	F2H-3	USS <i>Yorktown</i> (CVS-10)	31 Oct 1958–22 May 1959	WestPac
VA-34		A4D-2	USS <i>Essex</i> (CVS-9)	3–29 Apr 1961	Caribbean
VA-64	Det 48/18B	A4D-2	USS <i>Wasp</i> (CVS-18)	18 Feb–6 Jun 1962	North Atlantic
VA-22	Det R	A-4B	USS <i>Kearsarge</i> (CVS-33)	19 Apr–3 Dec 1963	WestPac
VA-83	Det 18	A-4B	USS <i>Wasp</i> (CVS-18)	22 Apr–3 May 1963	Caribbean
H&MS-32	Det 1	A-4B	USS <i>Essex</i> (CVS-9)	1 Oct–23 Dec 1963	Atlantic
VMA-214	Det N	A-4B	USS <i>Hornet</i> (CVS-12)	9 Oct 1963–15 April 1964	WestPac/Vietnam
VA-34	Det 11	A-4C	USS <i>Intrepid</i> (CVS-11)	3 Dec 1963–13 Feb 1964	‡ Caribbean
VA-153	Det R	A-4B	USS <i>Kearsarge</i> (CVS-33)	19 Jan–16 Dec 1964	WestPac/Vietnam
VA-34	Det 15	A-4C	USS <i>Randolph</i> (CVS-15)	22 Jan–14 Feb 1964	Atlantic
VA-93	Det Q	A-4B	USS <i>Bennington</i> (CVS-20)	20 Feb–11 Aug 1964	WestPac
VMA-223	Det T	A-4C	USS <i>Yorktown</i> (CVS-10)	23 Oct 1964–17 May 1965	WestPac/Vietnam
VA-76	Det 9	A-4C	USS <i>Essex</i> (CVS-9)	8–20 Feb 1965	Atlantic
VA-113	Det Q	A-4B	USS <i>Bennington</i> (CVS-20)	22 Mar–7 Oct 1965	WestPac/Vietnam
H&MS-15	Det N	A-4C	USS <i>Hornet</i> (CVS-12)	12 Aug 1965–23 Mar 1966	WestPac
VSF-1	CVW-8	A-4B	USS <i>Shangri-La</i> (CVS-38)	29 Sep 1966–20 May 1967	Mediterranean
VSF-3	CVW-10	A-4B	USS <i>Intrepid</i> (CVS-11)	11 May–30 Dec 1967	WestPac/Vietnam
VSF-1	Det 18	A-4C	USS <i>Wasp</i> (CVS-18)	20 Aug–19 Dec 1968	Atlantic/Med
VSF-1	CVW-7	A-4C	USS <i>Independence</i> (CVA-62)	30 Apr 1968–27 Jan 1969	Mediterranean
VSF-1	Det 10	A-4C	USS <i>Yorktown</i> (CVS-10)	2 Sep–11 Dec 1969	North Atlantic
VA-45 Det 11	CVSG-56	A-4C	USS <i>Intrepid</i> (CVS-11)	16 Apr–15 Oct 1971	Mediterranean
VSF-86	CVSGR-80	A-4C	USS <i>Ticonderoga</i> (CVS-14)	24 Jul–8 Aug 1971	EastPac
VSF-76	CVSGR-70	A-4C	USS <i>Wasp</i> (CVS-18)	17–26 Aug 1971	Atlantic
VA-45 Det 1	CVSG-56	A-4E	USS <i>Intrepid</i> (CVS-11)	11 Jul–20 Oct 1972	North Atlantic NATO
VA-45 Det 1	CVSG-56	A-4E	USS <i>Intrepid</i> (CVS-11)	24 Nov 1972–4 May 1973	Mediterranean

Notes:

* VC-4 Det 50 made 10 short Atlantic/Med/Caribbean cruises for ASW and Middie cruises during this period.

† VC-4 Det 51 made three short Caribbean cruises for ASW exercises during this period.

‡ VA-34 Det 11 made two short Caribbean cruises for ASW exercises during this period.

Blackbirds as ASWFitRon

Unlike many pilots of the era, LT Larry “Worm” Elmore was not confused by his orders to VSF duty. After cruising in the Vietnam war zone with the notorious Jack Woodul, aka Youthly Puresome, as a VA-86 *Sidewinder*, Elmore left active duty, tried the airlines in the hire-to-fast-furlough era, and joined the Reserves where he “...was flying my buns off in A-4Cs from Los Alamitos and Point Mugu.” He soon got a call from CDR John Paganelli, his Ops O in VA-86 and at that time the skipper of VA-45, who asked Worm to return to active duty to be the LSO and Ops O of the A-4C det that was to deploy in *Intrepid*. Elmore

accepted the job and, as he says, “It turned out to be the best deal I had in twenty years in the Navy.” The OinC originally selected did not go, so Elmore was given the job.

Intrepid and VA-45 Det-11 left Norfolk in April and returned mid-October, 1971, having made only one run into the Mediterranean. Most operations were in the North Atlantic, including “Blue Nose” forays above the Arctic Circle, the stomping grounds for the Soviet Northern Fleet. Ports of call included Lisbon, Kiel, Naples, Cannes, Barcelona, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Greenock, Rosyth, Portsmouth and Bergen. Det 11 made more than 125 intercepts on Russian *Bears*, *Badgers* and

USN



USN



Blinders, plus several Soviet fighters. Det pilots bagged more hours and traps than a typical pilot on a Med deployment — it was a “best deal,” indeed.

There were so many intercepts that some of the snoopers became familiar with one another. Worm joined on a *Bear* (Tu-95), whose tail gunner was a friendly fellow and would wave and hold up the box lunch he was eating. He once held up a sign in English that said, “How do you do?” When they encountered one another a few days later, Elmore held up a sign in Russian that said, “Come on back with me.” The Russian had a good laugh.

Det 11 was doing so well that in August 1971, VA-45 Det 1 was established and equipped with A-4Es for a follow-on *Intrepid* deployment with LCDR Raoul “Al” Alvarez assigned as the OinC. Det 11 returned in November, turned in their seven A-4Cs and disbanded the following month. At the start of 1972, an increase in size for Det 1 was authorized with the intention of splitting off Det 2 for deployment on the remaining PacFlt CVS, *Ticonderoga*. This did not happen.

After a carqual session on *Lexington* (CVT-16), Det 1 took five A-4Es to sea in *Intrepid* in March and April of 1972 for an exercise with the Spanish and Portuguese navies. The det sailed on 9 July as part of CVSG-56 together with three S-2 squadrons (VS-24, VS-27, VS-28) and HS-11.

While some pilots worried about “missing the war,” Al Alvarez had flown *Skyraiders* in combat as a VA-145 *Swordsman* in *Intrepid*. Interestingly, considering his assignment to the VA-45 VSF detachment, VSF-3 was also on board *Intrepid* as part of *Air Wing 10*. Before joining the *Blackbirds*, he instructed in VT-21 as it transitioned to the TA-4.

A major change came in August 1972. During October and November of the previous year, on the way home after a Med cruise, *Saratoga* added VS-28 and HS-7 to *Air Wing Three*, and operated in the vicinity of Bermuda. The combined air wing was tasked with anti-submarine duty, convoy escort and short- and long-range strikes against sea and land targets. Although *Saratoga* was designated CV-60 on 30 June 1972, (*The Hook*, Sp '90), the practical transition from CVA to CV was interrupted by final efforts in Vietnam. To support *Linebacker II*, Lant Fleet carriers *Saratoga* and *America* (CVA-66) made emergency deployments to the Tonkin Gulf.

In order to meet the requirement for two carriers with attack squadrons in the Mediterranean, VADM Frederick H. Michaelis, Commander Naval Air Forces, Atlantic Fleet, boosted VA-45 Det 1 to a 16-aircraft unit with the missions of conventional and nuclear attack, all the while continuing task-group air defense. The Chief of Naval Personnel authorized LCDR Alvarez, who had screened for command of an A-7 squadron, to wear the Command-at-Sea breast insignia, since his position was the equivalent of a squadron command — and a difficult one at that.

Intrepid's North Atlantic deployment was cut short, and Det 1 was back at Cecil on 19 October. Alvarez later wrote:

The unique situation under which this unit made its transformation from a seven-officer, sixty-five-man, five-plane VSF detachment to a twenty-seven-officer, two hundred ten-man, sixteen-plane multi-purpose command in ten weeks shows again that the Navy still “can do.” Again, it was the American Bluejacket, with his bitching and swearing about eighteen-hour days and seven-day work-weeks, that got the job done. To say that this command was unique is only saying that not since World War Two has one unit been asked to build up so fast and take on the full bag of missions in such a short time.

Opposite page: A Navy Reserve NAS New Orleans-based VSF-86 F-8H and a close-up of the “Gator” painted on the squadron’s rudders. **Right:** Among the more than 200 intercepts that VA-45 Det 1 made during the 1972 cruise was the first-ever of the Tupolev Tu-114 Moss, the Soviet “AWACS-ski.”



A section of VA-45 Det-1 humpbacked A-4Es flying from Intrepid in 1972.

The commanding officer of parent squadron VA-45, CDR Paganelli and his successor, CDR Joe Gilmore, also deserve credit for the transition. VA-45 began training pilots and acquiring A-4Es at Cecil for the buildup while the small det was still at sea, all while continuing shore-based instrument and transition training with 16 TA-4F/Js. Remarkably, by June 1972 the squadron had flown 34,000 accident-free hours. The expanded Det 1 was ready when *Intrepid* deployed again on 29 November 1972. VA-45 Det 1 returned in May 1973 from *6th Fleet* operations on what was the swan song of VSF.

Kitty Hawk (CV-63) deployed in 1975 on her first peacetime WestPac since 1964 with the last two fleet squadrons of S-2s. From then on, S-3 *Vikings* were an integral part of all air wings. Two VF squadrons equipped with F-4s or F-14s would now defend the task force.

The need for sea-based anti-submarine fighter squadrons was no more.



A COUPLE OF QUESTIONS

An unsubstantiated but frequently heard story has VA-45 Det 1 flying A-4L (reworked Charlies with a hump) *Skyhawks* on board USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVA-42) in 1973. Det 1 had returned to NAS Cecil Field in May from deployment as a full size squadron, so it may have had the most shipboard-current A-4 pilots available. In the hangar bays of FDR the U.S. national insignia and Navy markings were painted over. The *Skyhawks* were flown off to Israel as replacements for aircraft lost during the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. Can anyone verify this, or is it still hush-hush after 32 years?

VSF-3 may not be gone after all. The squadron “stood down” in January 1968, not disestablished or otherwise deactivated. Researchers, including this author, have not turned up a date for the squadron’s “official” end. So, just maybe, due to a bureaucratic error, perhaps VSF still exists.





VA-93 Det Q on board USS *Bennington* (CVS-20), 1964. From left: LTJG Harry "High-G" Cameron, LT Dick Luthi, LCDR R.J. "Big D" Dapogny, LCDR Tom Randall (Det OinC), LT Dave Boaz and LTJG Bob Krall.

A VSF Scrapbook

Photos courtesy of CDR Robert "Boom" Powell, USN(Ret)



VF-62 fighter pilots dowse for water on the frequently fresh water-restricted *Shangri-La* (CVA-38). VSF-1 A-4B and VA-81 A-4E in the background.



CDR Charlie Waring, the first commanding officer of VSF-1, with his classic G-2 jacket showing previous tours and the new eagle head patch.



Typical pilot (in this case, the author) in 1967 wearing Mk 3C floatation gear, early survival vest and modified USMC fatigues in front of a VSF-3 A-4B. The port cannon was removed as part of the Shoehorn ECM installation, so the helmet bag is hung on the ladder instead of the cannon muzzle.



LCDRs Robert "Skip" Leuschner, left, (later CO of *Enterprise* (CVN-66) and RADM) and Jack Sarphie of VSF-3 during post-prandial stroll on *Intrepid's* (CVS-11) flight deck, 1967.



VA-45's CDR John "Pygmy" Paganelli (left) and LCDR Larry "Worm" Elmore.



VA-45 Det 1 on board *Intrepid*.



VSF-1 nuggets in posed 1966 photo. From left: LTJGs Howie Fowler, Gerry Evans, Bob Powell and Phil Mall. Fowler deployed with VSF-1 in *Shangri-La*, while the others wound up in VSF-3 in *Intrepid*.



The officers of VSF-1 on board *Shangri-La*, fall 1966.



VSF-3 officers on board USS *Intrepid*, Tonkin Gulf, 14 Oct '67 in front of A-4B *Skyhawk* AK 110 BuNo 142772. Back row, from left: LT Phil Dougherty; LTJGs Dan Swinford, R.R.Powell, D.J. "Huey" L'Herault; LT Al Hopcus; ENSs Dick Harris, Mike White; LTJGs Bruce Hollinger, Kenneth James Peters; ENS Al Perkins; LTJGs Gary Hall, Phil Mall, Gerry Evans; LCDR Jim Day; ENS Jack Locke (AI) and WO Bob Friedenreich. Kneeling, from left: LCDRs Bill Best, Tom "Cork" Corkhill, R. "Skip" Leuschner, Bob Boyd; CDRs Les Hofto (CO), Georges "Frenchy" LeBlanc (XO); LCDRs George Fenzel, Jack Sarphie and Jerry Romano.

