

MIDDLE EAST

THE NAVY AT WAR: ON DEPLOYMENT WITH THE U.S. 5TH FLEET

Honed to a razor's edge, the carrier strike group sets out to influence the globe as well as shape the battlefield. During this transformational era, the fleet is more relevant than ever before.







January 12, 2010, Gulf of Oman. The motto of the USS Nimitz, "Leaning Forward", spans the business end of this legendary carrier. This photo was taken as the first event prepared to start yet another day at the tip of the spear. The SH-60 photo mission was flown by HS-6 skipper "Cowboy" McCall and "Pop" Puno with AWRCS "Senior" Milligan, AWR3 "Tokyo" Morishita and fellow shooter LCDR Troy Wilcox.

On the Other Side of the World by William Gortney

When the editors of this book asked me to contribute an article, I was not sure how to approach such a daunting task. Then it dawned on me.

With all of the phenomenal technological advances that have been made over these 100 years, two aspects have remained constant: the naval aviator at the controls and the collective team of professionals who ensure that aviator has an aircraft that is fully mission capable. For 100 years this team of patriots has, and continues, to fight and win our nation's wars.

I am the son of a naval aviator. My dad earned his wings in 1944, and I earned mine 34 years later in 1978. During the years between his retirement and my winging, Dad worked for Ling-Temco-Vought, which built the A-7E Corsair. Naval aviation has always been personal, and for 68 years the Gortney name has been attached to our chosen profession as it fought our nation's wars—World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War, Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom—and helped keep the violent peace separating those wars.

From 2008 to 2010, I was lucky enough to command the U.S. 5th Fleet and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, home ported in Bahrain. For two years I held the best operational assignment a three-star naval aviator could dream of having—barring elevating squadron command to the flag officer level. I oversaw naval operations in the U.S. Central Command's Area of Operations (AOR).

On an average day, we currently have over 13,000 sailors' boots on the ground—6,000 in Iraq, a little over 2,000 in Afghanistan and 10,000 afloat. So that tells you we have more ashore than we do at sea. And the Navy's presence in the AOR is just over 23,000 sailors. Whether it's in Bahrain, Baghdad or Bagram, our sailors are making a tremendous difference every single day.



A rare view of the landing area (LA) at the very moment a Rhino engages the arresting gear. It looks like it is going to be an OK 3 wire. Not long after this photo was taken, the RF energy from the ship's main RADAR fried one of my digital camera's main circuit boards, rendering it DOA and forcing a trip to the Bahrain mall to buy an new camera body before heading downrange on the rest of my 2-week AOR tour.



Clockwise from top left: The happiest plane captain on the boat:AOAA Caitlin Cullen. VFA-41 #100 "Start 'em up" with "Heavy" Burkes and WSO "ToFu" Gensley.A CAT 4 burner launch. VFA-14 pilot grabs the "towel rack", waiting to start the mission. LCDR Eric "Frosty" Frostad flying Sidewinder #406 snaps a salute to the shooter indicating his jet is good to go and ready for the shot. "PETA" Gendreau looks over his ejection seat before strapping in for our photo ex.

As most are aware, the U.S. Navy has maintained an aircraft carrier strike group presence in the AOR for over two decades. And for the past several years, the carrier has been primarily operating in the Arabian Gulf supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). However, late last summer, at the direction of CENTCOM, we moved the carrier's primary area of operations outside the Arabian Gulf, and it's now supporting Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan full time. The air wing sorties shifted from full support of OIF to OEF.

That was no small change, not only in the strategic implications of the location of the carrier and her air wing, but also to the flights that the aviators would be flying. Despite the fact that the average close air support mission over Afghanistan is a seven- to eight-hour flight with two to three refuelings, naval aviation is providing approximately 30 percent of the close air support to troops on the ground throughout Afghanistan. Currently, it's the USS *Harry S Truman* and Carrier Wing 3, and they are on station today, having a remarkable impact, providing close-air support for the U.S. and allied forces against the enemy.

We still have shore-based aircraft, P-3s and EA-6Bs in OIF, but the embarked air wing is providing direct support, close-air support, to the troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

Every day I witnessed incredible examples of the best of naval aviation in support of ongoing operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These examples include those performing traditional aviation missions, as well as those serving in assignments well outside the cockpit. They range the full spectrum of operations and include examples of putting ordnance on target to protect troops on the ground to training side by side with dozens of international coalition counterparts.

• • •

But to fully understand 5th Fleet and how we got to where we are today, you really have to begin with Bahrain.

This small island nation began its relationship with the United States with the establishment of the American Mission Hospital in 1903. In the



Looking over the shoulder of VFA-41's "PETA" Gendreau as he taxis our F/A-18F Rhino onto CAT 3 for a non-standard, "asym-3" high acceleration CAT shot required when a Super Hornet is configured with an asymmetric load out. Man, what a BANG! On the right multifunction display in the cockpit, you can clearly make out the pre-launch checklist page as the yellow shirt lines up the launch bar with the shuttle track.



Clockwise from top: Staring down the barrel of the gun, the E-2C Hawkeye is always the first to launch. The Hornet launch bar tracks up and then drops into the shuttle just prior to the shooter calling for "tension." VFA-41 Rhino crew waits for their turn on the waist CAT for the event 3 launch.



With the hold back-bar fixed and the launch bar set under shuttle tension, LCDR Eric “Frosty” Frostad flying Sidewinder #406, a legacy Hornet, is almost ready to be shot. After a salute from the pilot, thumbs up from all the checkers on the deck and finally a visual scan of the foul lines, the shooter will drop to one knee and touch the deck, settling into that tell-tale pose that means you are going for a ride.



Prop wash will blow you down the deck just as fast as jet blast if it catches you off guard. Working up “on the roof” is one of the most dangerous yet exhilarating places on earth. With so much going on, you can make a great picture wherever you point the camera. The hard part is isolating the definitive moments that best describe the purpose and objectives of the action.

years immediately following World War II, the Arabian Gulf became an area of vital concern to the Navy. With the Mediterranean and Western Pacific fleets of the time running almost exclusively off of oil produced in the Gulf, the Navy determined there was a requirement for a command and control structure, along with associated facilities, to manage the shipping traffic that provided that oil.

Accordingly, on Jan. 20, 1948, the Navy established Task Force 126 to control the shipping traffic out of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. After several iterations, on Aug. 16, 1949, it was redesignated the Middle East Force, which would ultimately evolve into NAVCENT and 5th Fleet. The U.S. Navy has maintained a permanent presence in the region ever since. The Kingdom of Bahrain has now served as host to the U.S. Navy for over 60 years.

During that time, the two nations have become long-standing allies in this region of the world. Our navies have developed a strategic relationship that is invaluable to our shared goal of regional maritime security, and it is our sincere desire to continue this critical partnership for many more decades to come. I like to use the word partnership; remember that because we will come back to it.

The United States 5th Fleet executes the six pillars of the U.S. Navy's maritime strategy 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. These pillars are:

- Forward Presence
- Deterrence
- Sea Control
- Power Projection
- Maritime Security
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response

• • •

The 5th Fleet is the only U.S. numbered fleet continuously engaged in combat while also preventing greater conflict.

And while advances in technology over the past six decades may have



Shot from the HS-6 starboard-defense helo, this perspective shows the converging angles of the waist CATs 3 and 4. A near simultaneous or “covey” launch of 2 Super Hornets completes the first event on January 12, 2010, in the Gulf of Oman.



January 11, 2010. Clockwise from top shows VFA-14 skipper “Mongo” Koss tracking northeast up “the boulevard” airway on which the vast majority of coalition aircraft traverse Pakistani airspace en route to the Afghanistan theater of operations. VAW-117 E-2C #603 approaching “feet dry” the Pakistan coast flown by CDR “Boards” Overstreet, LCDR “Gucci” Thomas, LCDR “Nuts” Dees, LT “Fez” Pecquera and LTJG “FNG” Beilke. Loving his job, VRC-30 C-2 pilot “Jose” Dominguez cracks himself as we kill time waiting for the photo op of the returning division of Hornets seen later in this section.

increased the speed, accuracy and, when necessary, lethality of how we execute our day-to-day operations, the most remarkable key to NAVCENT/5th Fleet's continued success is not the technology we use.

Our lifeblood today is the same as it was 60 years ago. It is the men and women of the ships, squadrons, battalions, commands and staffs who operate that hardware and execute the multitude of missions they are assigned. Most of these sailors and Marines are on their first deployment. Others are adding to the numerous small bronze stars on their sea and overseas service ribbons. The sailors and Marines deployed to this region are part of the greatest Navy that has ever sailed the earth's oceans, seas, gulfs and rivers. And they are extraordinarily well trained and equipped to fight and win both low- and high-intensity conflicts.

They join their teammates in the region in actively fighting against the violent extremists who would cause harm to peace and prosperity here and around the globe. Their mission is to fight and win the battles at hand, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and prevent future breakouts of hostilities whenever and wherever they might occur.

To be successful, they are trained to dominate any battle space assigned, support their teammates ashore, integrate and train with allies, all the while doing everything in their power to prevent any miscalculation that might lead to major combat. But when they are directed, they execute their orders with the swift and efficient application of naval combat power.

The 5th Fleet's prime directive is to ensure the security of the sea lines of communication. Or, said another way, it is to maintain the free and safe passage of maritime traffic in the international waters of the entire region, thereby guaranteeing the stability of the global economy. Both current and potential adversaries are forewarned not to test either 5th Fleet's resolve in preventing conflict or its effectiveness once engaged.

• • •



Shot from the back seat of a VFA-41 F/A-18F Rhino flown by "PETA" Gendreau, the huge moving map depicts our progress up to the Pakistani waypoint where we would turn back from the strike package. In the distance, Prowler #503 from VAQ-135 drives toward their station flown by LCDR "Beav" Zetner with LT "Umpa" Kephart, LCDR "Stones" Tonga and LCDR "Shibaz" Bouyer working their 'tron magic.



January 11, 2010. Prowler #503 from VAQ-135 flown by LCDR "Beav" Zetner with LT "Umpa" Kephart, LCDR "Stones" Tonga and LCDR "Shibaz" Bouyer enjoys CAVU conditions on top of the solid overcast that obscures the southern coast of Pakistan prior to their push north toward Afghanistan. Within 2 hours of trapping aboard Nimitz, I had been briefed and was rocketing down CAT 3 on this photo mission.



But this command is much more than just U.S. 5th Fleet or NAVCENT. It is also the Combined Maritime Forces, a coalition of the willing, able to execute more missions because of its composition: aircraft, ships and sailors, from many nations. This coalition is much more effective than any single ship, navy or country could be alone. The Combined Maritime Forces' principle mission is maritime security.

Maritime security operations include many tasks, such as rescuing sailors on vessels in distress, providing supplies and assistance to those in need, denying pirates a foothold in the region, protecting maritime infrastructure and visiting fishermen and merchant vessels so they know they can count on the coalition and our commitment to maritime security. The execution of the multitude of these tasks

establishes a network of mutual trust and respect between the navies represented here today.

The Combined Task Forces that execute these missions are commanded by the coalition navies themselves. The strength of the coalition is significantly enhanced when these task forces are commanded by navies whose territorial waters mix with the international waters of the region.

First the Pakistani navy, commanding CTF-150 four times, protects the waters outside the straits. And Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, commanding CTF-152, protect the waters in the Arabian Gulf. Also our international partners who have commanded: Australia, Canada, Denmark, France,

For this mission, the balance of the strike package consisted of two more legacy Hornets from VFA-97: #300 LCDR "Tod" Doyle and VFA-86 #400 LT "Monica" Walinski. Essentially, "PETA" launched first with the Hawkeye and shot photos of them up the boulevard. As we completed our shots, we then circled back to intercept each of the trailing elements. Rinse, repeat until we ran out of airspace and the strikers continued in-country.



January 11, 2010. Shortly after we started taking pictures, the comms began crackling with urgent cryptic transmissions. Almost immediately, we were done with the Hornet photos and our subjects quickly accelerated toward a Marine patrol that had just come under attack and had suffered multiple casualties. Tasked with overhead security for a helo CSAR operation that was in progress, it was chilling evidence of the ongoing combat. Two Marines and a British journalist were killed that day. Additional evidence of the war is the live ordnance visible under the wings of VFA-41 #100, flown by "Heavy" Burkes with WSO "ToFu" Gensley.



Photos complete and with the gas running low, "PETA" rolls out of the groove on glide slope for an easy day recovery in calm seas.



January 12, 2010. Probably one of the luckiest and best shots of carrier flight operations I have ever taken. This is a true one-in-a-million moment that captures a wartime deployed air wing, during an actual launch, with a loaded division in marshall for recovery. What makes it even better is that my old friend "Mongo" Koss is lead with VFA-41 "Focker" Royles and LTJG Jason "IADS" Hoch on the left wing finally getting in a photo. VFA-97 XO CDR Zeno "Pmüger" Raus flies right wing with VFA-86 LT Colin "Ima" Quirino in Sidewinder #400 rounding out the formation as Dash-4. Sometimes it is better to be lucky than good.

Italy, the Netherlands, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

The Combined Maritime Forces is a coalition of the willing, comprised of 24 member nations from around the globe, with an additional six nations who provide staff members, whose navies peacefully sail the international waters of the region and whose only purpose is to improve maritime security of all the nations who share these international waters.

Since its inception, the Combined Maritime Forces has grown and matured into the benchmark of maritime security efforts in the world. It is through this partnership, and only this partnership, that many of these nations find themselves not just interacting, but also working together towards a purpose that is as unifying as it is just.

After 33 years of naval service and five command tours, I can say unequivocally that no commander has ever been blessed with better leaders and staff. Their professionalism and excellence has set the bar for all the operational headquarters that span the seven seas. As the American ambassador to Bahrain put it, "NAVCENT is the cement that holds this region together."

Every single day they work with over 46 nations from around the globe to ensure stability and security in this critical part of our world. And these coalition navies would not be able to execute the multitude of assigned missions without command of the sea, and command of the air over the sea, or what we call air and maritime superiority.

This team of professionals can proudly say they are a part of a few, a happy few, a band of patriots from many nations, who together stand proudly for what we all believe in—stability and security at sea—and by doing so, help turn a remarkable page of history.

Vice Adm. William E. "Shortney" Gortney most recently commanded all naval forces in the U.S. Central Command.



The view of the back cockpit displays of the Navy's latest variant of the Super Hornet. Several of the monitors have been obscured for operational security, but it is easy to see why the WSO community is in love with this workstation. While the rear control stick has been removed for spatial consideration, rumor has it that if you bring along a section of 2" PVC pipe, you can still log some stick time. So I've heard.



An interesting view of the Nimitz during recovery from the HS-6 helo before the RADAR ate my camera. Notice the nice, shallow angle of attack (8.1) of the Super Hornet. The F-35C is expected to have an approach AOA of 12.3, which is sure to be significantly different than the traditional sight picture from both the LSO platform and the cockpit.



Air Boss CDR Eric Wright observes the recovery from his perch up in PRIFLY. Special thanks to the Boss for working with HS-6 on all of these non-standard perspectives we found during both the launch and recovery phases of flight operations.



Mystical and somewhat ghostly, these night scenes are as close to reality as I have ever been able to capture. The newest generation of digital cameras allows for much more vivid and accurate color representation. What is still impossible to convey is the level of noise that practically makes it seem as if you are under water. There is also a distinct mix of sea air, greasy steam and jet exhaust that you will forever associate with your time on the boat. Bottom left shot shows shooter LT Albert Guajardo enjoying the relative comfort of the foul weather bubble where the jet blast can't blow over his cup of coffee.



PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE:

The latest generation of digital still cameras have an incredible low-light capability that allowed me to capture images that convey the true drama and beauty of nighttime flight ops aboard ship. In the past, such clarity and exposure would have required a tripod and a flash, both of which are forbidden on the flight deck. In this series of photos, which were all taken during a single launch/recovery cycle aboard *Nimitz*, you can actually see stars in the black sky. These are all hand-held photos made with exposures between two-four seconds. During the next day while flying around the ship in a SH-60 helicopter making the pictures on the previous pages of the daytime launch/recovery, the RF energy from *Nimitz's* main RADAR fried the circuits of my new Nikon D3... dead. Back in Bahrain, I had to run to the mall and purchase a new body to finish out the two week trip.



January 11, 2010. The flashing tail strobe of a landing Rhino freezes the face of CAG Paddles, LCDR "Huck" Flynn out on the LSO platform as a shower of sparks punctuates the completion of yet another safe sortie into harm's way on the Gulf of Oman. No matter how many times you may return to the boat, watching night recoveries never grows old. The pilots you're watching, however, could not care less if they never saw another night TRAP ever again.

TRIBAL SALUTE



**Lord, guard and guide the men who fly
Through the great spaces in the sky,
Be with them always in the air,
In dark'ning storms or sunlight fair.
O, hear us when we lift our prayer
For those in peril in the air.**

Like sailors on every warship under way, we make the best use of the most precious thing: space. And below deck, aircraft, engine parts and people are all jammed together without sentiment, only unsparing efficiency.

Yet I am reminded of a different scene on this hangar deck off the coast of southern California. On that morning, the aircraft were pushed to the side and in the space in the middle was made room for a memorial service. That day, sentiment trumped function.

A handful of photographs frame young, smiling faces, two officers and one enlisted sailor. In the photographs they look playful, full of joy, young, exuding exuberance, even confidence, in their flight suits during exhausting qualifications.

On the evening of May 19, 2009, they took off from *Nimitz* on a training mission. They picked up two aviators in a simulated downing in a hostile environment, part of a two-ship formation, and headed back for the carrier.

At 11 p.m., just off the coast of Coronado Island, the aircrew on the lead ship looked back at the trailing one in the night. And saw... nothing. The pilot yanked the lead aircraft into an arc to conduct a real search and rescue now, but found nothing.

Aboard *Nimitz*, the dreaded words "a plane is in the water" passed through the ready room. I glanced at the computer screen, which showed all planes on deck. And then I caught the last two lines showing the helos. I felt sick.

It is one thing to see headstones in cemeteries; they are somehow impersonal, even my grandfather's at Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It is quite another to know the dead, to spend hours planning, flying and living with them aboard this ship.

But even in death, sentiment awaits function here. Three days pass between the crash and the memorial service. When it comes, on a Saturday, we stand

in formation. There is an invocation, the Navy hymn and the reading of the lost crew's biographies.

Allison, who brought calm and femininity to a testosterone-laden, mostly male profession, was to be married. Samuel, the rescue swimmer, had a three-year-old, a one-year-old and one more on the way. The rest left young widows and small children, save one. He was three months shy of turning 21. We pray:

**Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bid'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
O hear us when we cry to thee,
for those in peril on the sea.**

Lt. Ben "Prof" Kohlmann USN VFA-41 Pilot
Aboard the USS *Nimitz*
Persian Gulf
January 2010



January 12, 2010, Gulf of Oman. Painted to honor their lost squadron mates, HS-6 CAG bird #610 depicts an Indian brave holding a spear up over his head with five feathers on the spear, all pointing up towards the heavens where an eagle is swooping down, talons outstretched. The composition was created by artist Shayne Meder, also known as Flygirlpainter. On this day, #610 was flown by "GT" Todd and "Lennie" Teschner with "Brown-eye" Martinez and "FNG" Watkins in the back. In remembrance of LCDR Eric "Purv" Purvis, LT Allison "Lula" Oubre, AWC(Hon) (AW/NAC) Samuel "G" Kerslake, AW2 (AW/NAC) Aaron "Ski" Clingman and AW2 (AW/NAC) Sean "Wardo" Ward.

DEVIL DOGS IN THE SANDBOX: MARINE AIR OPERATIONS DOWNRANGE



January 18, 2010, Camp Bastion, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. SSgt Bradley Boroff and Sgt Destin Waldron serving with HMLA-367, Team Scarface, standby for the signal to climb aboard their upgraded UH-1Y as a MV-22 Osprey transitions from helicopter to airplane mode headed for another mission downrange. On the opposite page, another Osprey assigned to VMM-261 returns to the relative safety of this remote yet sprawling outpost of aviation. In the foreground of that same shot is CH-53D #42 from HMH-463 based in K-BAY, Hawaii.





The War in the Middle of Nowhere by Erik Hildebrandt

CAMP BASTION, Afghanistan – On the flight into Afghanistan, the first thing you notice looking down is nothingness —the very absence of human inhabitation.

Not unlike flying over the Grand Canyon in Arizona, or Nevada, there is nothing beneath us besides rocks and desert. Even when we are cleared to land, I look out through the windscreen between the two pilots and I still have to squint to make out the military base from the surrounding wasteland.

It has been only a three-hour flight from Bahrain over Pakistan and into Afghanistan. But upon touchdown, I know I am in a very different place, a war zone. The sky meets the ground at a diffused horizon, obscured by haze and dust and muted shades of tan that defeat any color and detail. Unloading our gear and crossing the airfield, convoys of burly, armored “Buffalo” trucks are loaded for bear as they head beyond the concertina wire.

It is clear: Anything could go wrong here, at any minute. Indeed, it frequently has, just out there beyond the wire. Shrewdly placed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have blown British Land Rovers to bits. Suicide bombers have driven motorcycles into patrols. And of course, there have been the more simple surprise firefights. In 2009, more than a thousand were rushed to the hospital here, a quarter of them combat casualties.

In 2010, more than 30 British troops died and Prince William came to lay a wreath at a simple stone and concrete monument to them. In some cases, too, wounded civilians and even wounded Taliban fighters have lain on the table next to them at the base’s huge hospital complex. Indeed, the British surgeons here call Sundays “Holy Shit Sundays” because that’s the day the Taliban are most likely to hit NATO troops.

The British, of course, have had a lot of experience in Afghanistan. They fought three wars here between 1838 and 1919. They fought in brutal winters and scorching summers in leather boots with sabers, marching to battle in pith helmets to the sound of regimental drums and into musket fire. Much of that fighting took place in this same province, Helmand.



On the morning hump down the flightline after shooting at the pre-dawn Osprey launch seen later in this section, we passed the fitness club at Bastion hoping to catch a glimpse of their famous synchronized spinning class. All we saw was a lonely SSGT working off the steak and Alaskan king crab from the night before. All kidding aside, the further you were from civilization, the better the food got. On the Friday night I was there, it really was Alaskan king crab and steak night... and not those crappy snow crab clusters like at Red Lobster either; these were the real deal. For dessert, there were fresh strawberries and a serve-yourself Baskin Robbins sundae bar.



Clockwise from top: An AH-1Z is parked in background as a UH-1Y air-taxi back to the line. The very same Brit C-17 seen on the right was actually at the Rhode Island airshow in 2009 supporting the Red Arrows US tour. Bastion seems like a more appropriate setting for the big jet. Sporting a carbon fiber face shield to protect against rotor wash and other harmful debris, SSgt Bradley Boroff sights down the laser atop his impressive .50 BMG GAU-16/A. Sgt Destin Waldron prefers the GAU-17/A fire hose mounted on top of the starboard LAU-131/A loaded with 7 Hydra WAFARs (Wrap-Around Fin Aerial Rockets).

No less a military genius than the Duke of Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, warned against an Afghan campaign. And not one of those wars ended well for the British. "I feel sure that the less the Afghans see of us," a British field marshal dryly remarked in the 19th century, "the less they will dislike us."

The British, of course, returned to Afghanistan for a fourth time, with the Americans, in the wake of 9/11. Scratched out of the dirt in 2006 by just two Royal Air Force air controllers, the first dirt runway here received its first aircraft just 90 minutes later. That one was then followed by hundreds and then thousands of more landings.

Then the Americans laid a massive concrete runway. "It's one of the surest signs that Britain and the United States, now co-located at Camp Bastion, intend to stay for a long time," writes Michael Evans, the defense editor of *The Times* of London. Soon, the base handled more air traffic than most British airports.

Now, Bastion is the largest overseas military base built by Great Britain since World War II. Four miles wide by two miles long, the base is home to more than 2,000 British, Danish and American troops, as well as 2,000 more Afghan troops. There are separate districts, pizza parlors, armored vehicles roaming around $\frac{1}{M}$ all against the sound of outgoing rocket fire and incoming aircraft. It takes fully two hours to drive the perimeter.

The ramps are jammed with aircraft. There are Russian aircraft, mostly helicopters, fulfilling contract logistic support roles identical to the daily air plan being carried out by the Marine units located on the eastern side of the base. Over there CH-53 Super Stallions, MV-22 Ospreys and the newly modernized lethal aerial duo of AH-1Z and UH-1Y bustle on the steadily expanding U.S. operations ramp.

Upon arrival, the U.S. side of the base bears one striking similarity to its troops' home country. The place is awash in every conceivable mainstream, consumable product of every brand: sunglasses, Xbox games and beef jerky in every conceivable size, shape, amount and flavor. I laugh out loud at the time I spent carefully figuring out what to bring from home to give my hosts when it turns out they probably would've appreciated a pre-paid FedEx account with which to ship home all the stuff they've bought while deployed to the dark side of the moon.



January 17, 2010, over Pakistan at flight level 39,000' on the flight from Bahrain to Camp Bastion aboard the USMC UC-35D on the VMR DET from Andrews with LTCOL Mike "Mikey the J" Jimenez and MAJ Chris "Rude" Bergrud. When we arrive, "Mikey the J" says, "OK, see you in 2 days. Don't be late." And I'm thinking: "Me be late? Don't you be late... Sir... please." Sure enough, 2 days later, up glides a Cessna Citation and out steps "Mikey the J". Phew, year-long deployment averted.



January 18, 2010. Out of all the units I visited over the 2 weeks I spent in-theater, VMM-261 was the only group I did not actually fly with to take pictures. Whether it was a communication breakdown or a failure to grasp the significance of what I was selling, these ramp shots were all I was able to capture to showcase the amazing story of this versatile and unique aircraft after finally achieving operational status. While very disappointed by their lack of enthusiasm for the project, part of me was strangely relieved to watch them fly away without me.



These HMM-261 Ospreys are spooling up for the day's first pre-dawn event. The green arcs are from the formation tip lights that help aircrew visualize the position of their massive rotors in the dark. From this angle, you can see there are very few windows along the side of this bird. Unless you are riding up front, there is not much to see from the air.



January 21, 2010. HMM-166 CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters, better known as Phrogs have been in service nearly half of the 100 years that mark the centennial of naval aviation. Despite the age of the fleet and the exhaustive workload that the Marines subject these old birds to, they still manage to fill the gap left by the late operational arrival of the MV-22. This image was made on a flight from their DET base at Camp Buehring, also known as the Udairi Range Complex. Lead Phrog pilots: "Leche" Boksanske with "Big Ern" Harvey. Crew CPLs: Porter and Humphreys. Phrog #03 pilots: "Pig Pen" Connor with CAPT Sean Stamps. Crew LCPLs: LeBlanc and Whitmore.

The Americans have thrown up a massive complex, too, built from timber hauled from Austria, Germany and Brazil and constructed by Navy Seabees, a technique perfected in the Vietnam War. While it has the feel of permanence it will likely just be dismantled and shipped elsewhere when, or if, the Marines leave. There is also a sea of empty metal Connex containers seemingly waiting for that day. Those, too, are converted to modular living, working and storage until that day comes. There are so many Connex containers that outside the wire, one enterprising Afghan actually built an apartment complex out of them.

As the sun draws low in the sky, the place looks remarkably like Baja Mexico to me with its distant, jagged mountains and thirsty arroyos. The dry daytime taste of the air is familiar, although by dusk it lacks the telltale evening flavor of mesquite smoke that would signal it's time for a beer and to find a place to settle in for the night. Instead, Bastion has its own brand of sunset smoke: the waste disposal incinerators trying to stay one step ahead of all the material goods that keep arriving around the clock to fuel this war in the middle of nowhere.

PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE:

At first glance, it seems like we are flying between abandoned villages and small towns with deserted traffic intersections and bridges that lead nowhere. Then over the intercom, "Gus" explains that all of these buildings are just plywood training scenarios built as part of the massive Udairi Training Range. As we fly around this expansive area, there are virtually thousands of these tactical mock-ups resembling very specific urban environments. There are several prison-type facilities and multiple airfields complete with heli-pads and partial runways. It is staggering to try and estimate not only the manpower it took to construct the complex, but to imagine how many sheets of plywood were transported to this resource vacuum in the middle of the desert. One of the most frequent emotions that would grip my consciousness on this trip was the absolute disbelief at the scale of the financial expense the United States was willing to invest in our attempt to stabilize the region.



Our 2-ship Phrog photo formation flies over one of the many training complexes built of plywood to represent various tactical scenarios. There was a vast array of these "villages" that covered the sprawling remote area known as the Udairi Training Range.



January 22, 2010. CAPT Ryan "Spidey" Welborn with gunner CAPT Gregory "Jorge" Sorelle form up on the HSC-26 camera ship during the Udairi Range photo mission in Kuwait.



"Spidey" leads the photo ship back to base over a Kuwaiti "ranch" that likely was the residence of the local camel cowboy we flew over just a few minutes later.