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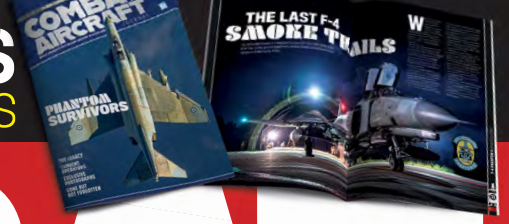

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'RIVER RATTLERS'

The US Navy Reserve flies some of the oldest Hornets in the US, yet it is able to provide meaningful fleet support and a valuable back-up force if the need to boost the front line arises.

REPORT **Dick Wels and Hans Drost**

IT'S WELL KNOWN that when you're working with the US military reserve forces, there's going to be a lot of experience around. That rings true for Strike Fighter Squadron 204 (VFA-204) 'River Rattlers', stationed at NAS Joint Reserve Base New Orleans in Louisiana. 'Classic' Hornets may be out of the frontline fleet squadrons now, but the navy's two reserve F/A-18 units continue to fly some of the oldest fighters in the inventory.

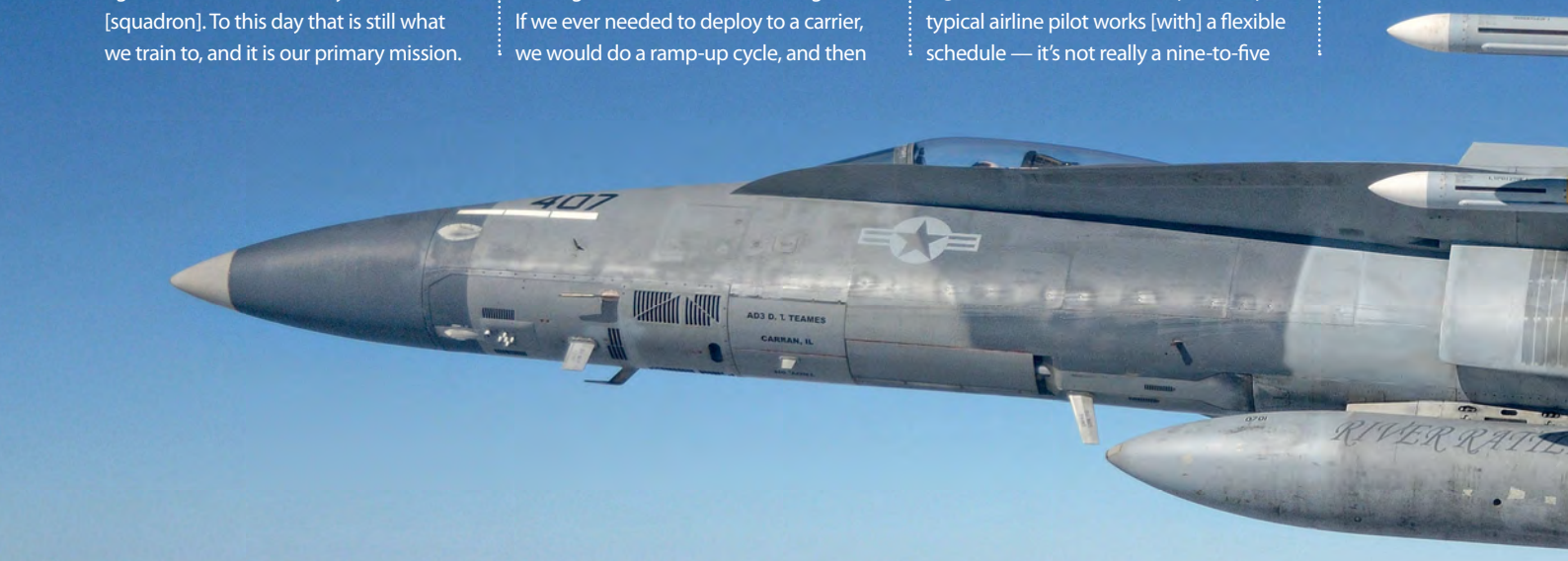
The US Navy Reserve includes just four fighter squadrons these days — two with Hornets and two with F-5s. Three of these — VFC-12, 13 and 111 — are tasked purely with adversary support, whereas VFA-204 is a true strategic reserve unit, ready to support the fleet as and when required, in addition to providing that same adversary support.

Squadron skipper CDR Ryan 'Slappy' McLaughlin told *Combat Aircraft Journal*: 'In the strategic reserve role we are a fighter/attack asset like any other F/A-18 [squadron]. To this day that is still what we train to, and it is our primary mission. We can carry air-to-ground ordnance and air-to-air, so we have a self-protection capability, and we do the multi-role mission. However, most of our flying is in the adversary role.

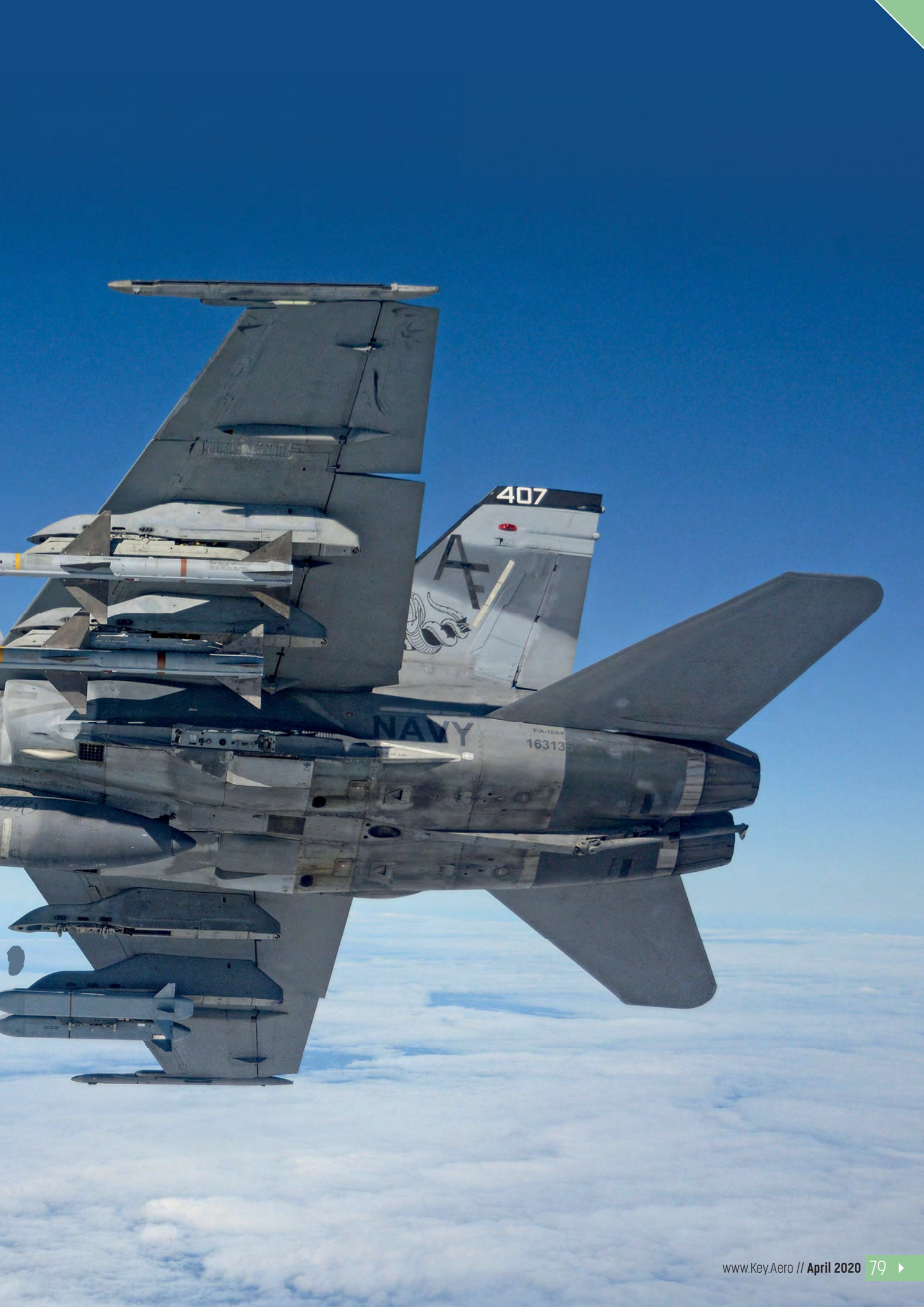
'Every single one of our pilots has been a fleet naval aviator for at least 10 years. They are extremely experienced when they show up here, with a minimum of 800-1,000 F/A-18 hours.' The squadron doesn't receive pilots fresh from the training pipeline; these are seasoned hands and well used to whatever comes at them, whether that is flying from a carrier or deploying on the road to provide high-end adversary support. CDR McLaughlin said: 'We could deploy to an aircraft carrier if required, but we haven't done that in a number of years. We used to go to the aircraft carrier routinely for currency, but they found it is really not required. It's really more of a concern with the maintainers' experience than the aircrew. Once you get a couple of hundred landings on the boat, it's like riding a bike! If we ever needed to deploy to a carrier, we would do a ramp-up cycle, and then we would get plenty of touch-and-goes on the aircraft carrier at that point. So we really don't need to do that recurrent training — it's expensive and it is tough on the airplanes.'

A demanding second job

The majority of the aviators at VFA-204 are part-time operators of the Hornet, with most being airline pilots as their regular occupation. It makes for a busy lifestyle as the minimum flying-hour requirement sits at around 100 hours per year in the Hornet cockpit, according to McLaughlin: 'That can be difficult to reach. Our average flight time is probably not much longer than an hour. When you look at our typical reservists, they are flying one time a day when they are here. To get one hour of flight time, it probably takes about four-to-six hours of time, depending on the depth of the debrief. The pilots have to show up here 80 to 100 days a year just to get that 100-hour minimum. It's a big commitment. Fortunately, the way a typical airline pilot works [with] a flexible schedule — it's not really a nine-to-five



A VFA-204 F/A-18A+ carries a brace of live AIM-7 Sparrows plus two ADM-141 TALDs (Tactical Air-Launched Decoys). The TALDs are dropped as targets for the missile shots. **José M. Ramos**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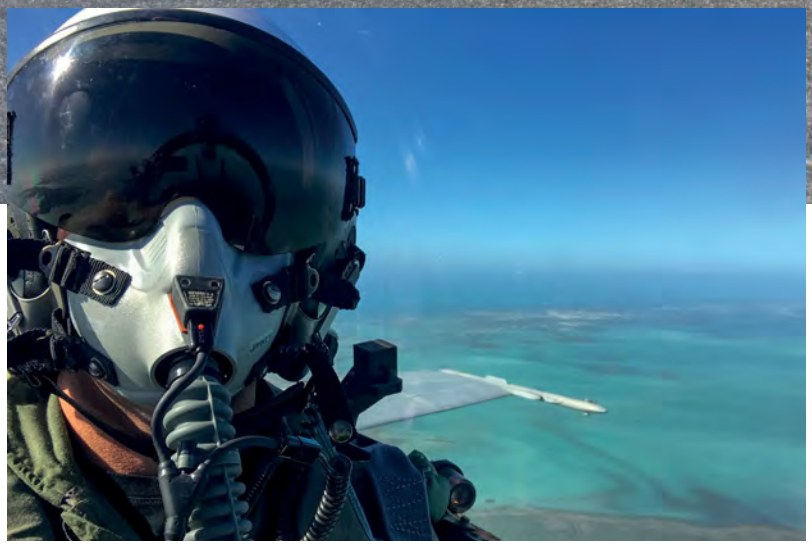


job — the airlines are really co-operative and by law they are required to give the reservists time off. So, typically, a reservist airline pilot does four trips a month for the airline, plus their days here.'

The current squadron includes 18 pilots, six full-timers and 12 part-time, with 16 aircraft on the books, four of which are in upgrade. Speaking to *Combat Aircraft Journal* in late 2019, CDR McLaughlin said: 'We currently have 12 aircraft on hand that are ours. Of those, one is in the hangar awaiting a spare part for the wing.' He explained that spares can be tough to locate these days for 'classic' Hornets: 'They cannot be taken from [jets in storage in] the boneyard because they are required to keep those jets at a certain level of readiness.

'We have a two-seat D-model, three F/A-18A+ Hornets and the other eight are F/A-18Cs.' The plan was to migrate away from the older A+ jets by early 2020. The squadron has a broad requirement to be able to get eight jets into the air at any given time.

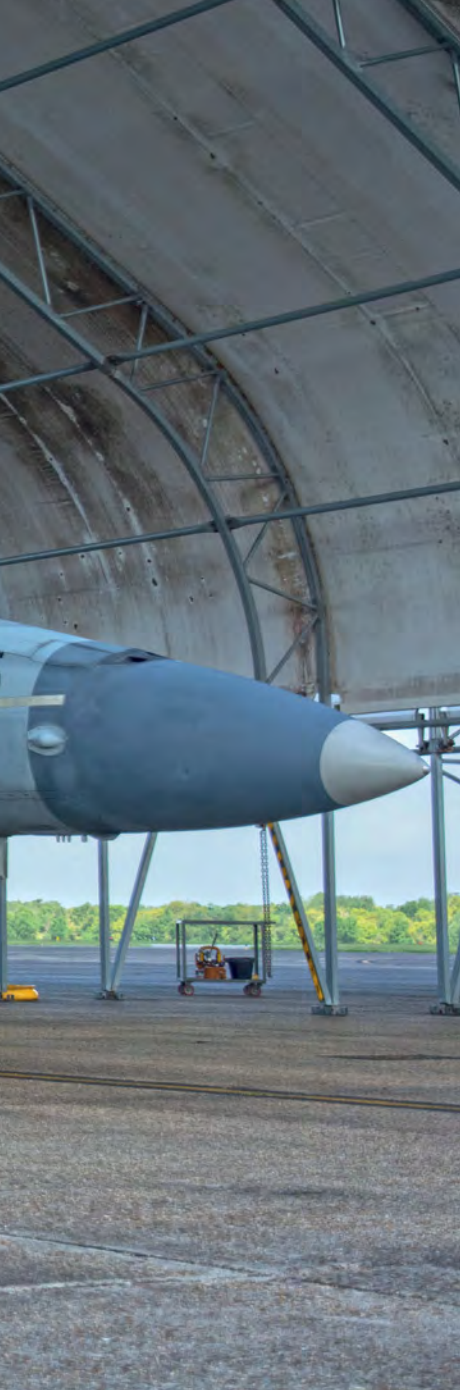
'Since we are predominantly a full-time unit [across the board] we have — on any given drill weekend — about 20-30 selected reservists that show up. A lot of those part-time reservists have a lot of requirements that the full-timers don't — a lot of it is human resources type of stuff that they just don't have time to do, because they are only here during the drill weekend.'

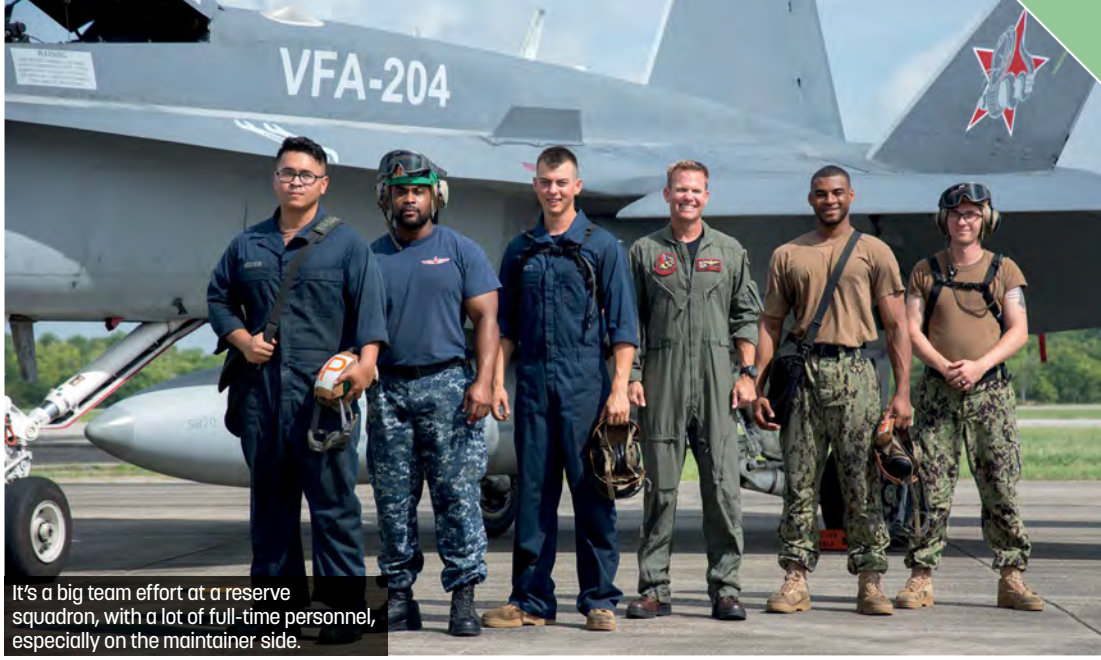
Staying sharp

In addition to its adversary work, VFA-204 also has an important role in training Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs), which can equate to as much as 25 per cent of its flight time. 'Nowadays, when we are dropping ordnance in close proximity to our troops, they require constant training. Probably once

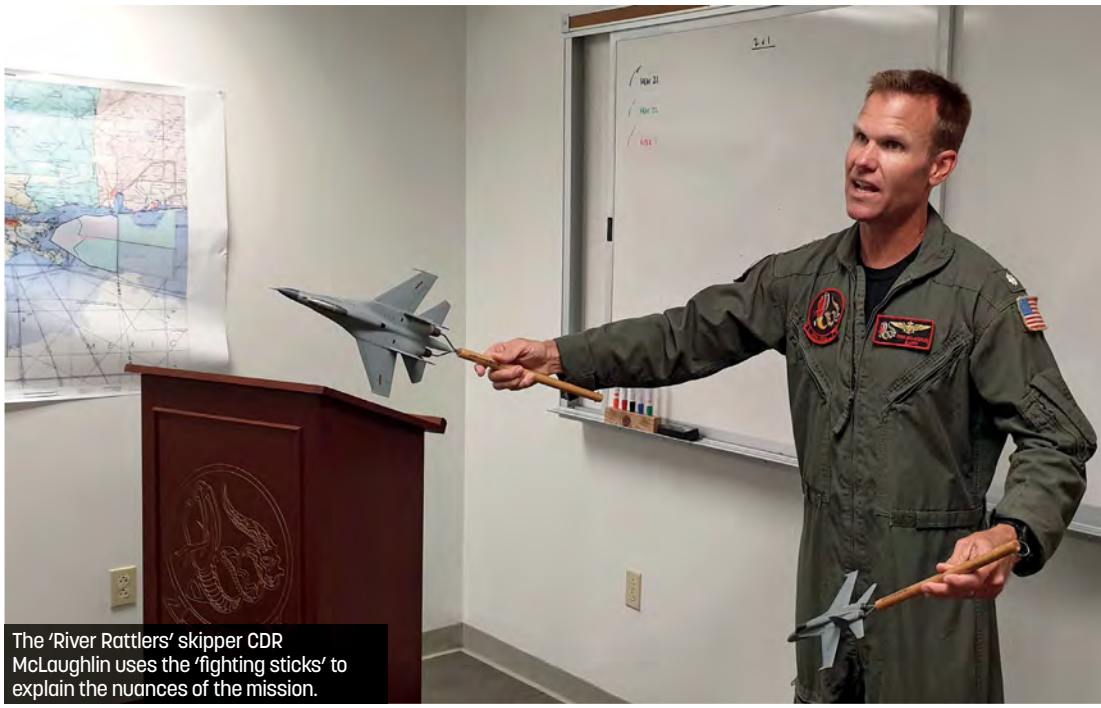
Above: A plane captain runs through a start sequence under the sun shelter at JRB New Orleans. **All photos Dick Wels/Hans Drost unless credited otherwise**

Left: CDR McLaughlin in the cockpit on a mission from NAS Key West. **US Navy/CDR McLaughlin**



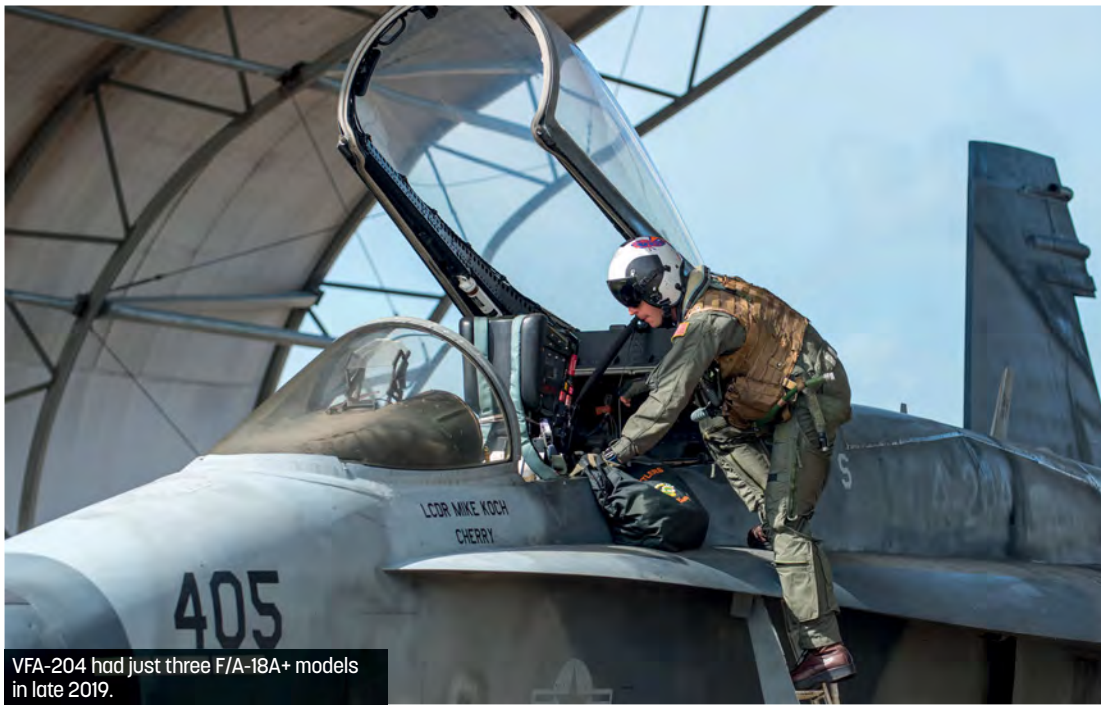


It's a big team effort at a reserve squadron, with a lot of full-time personnel, especially on the maintainer side.

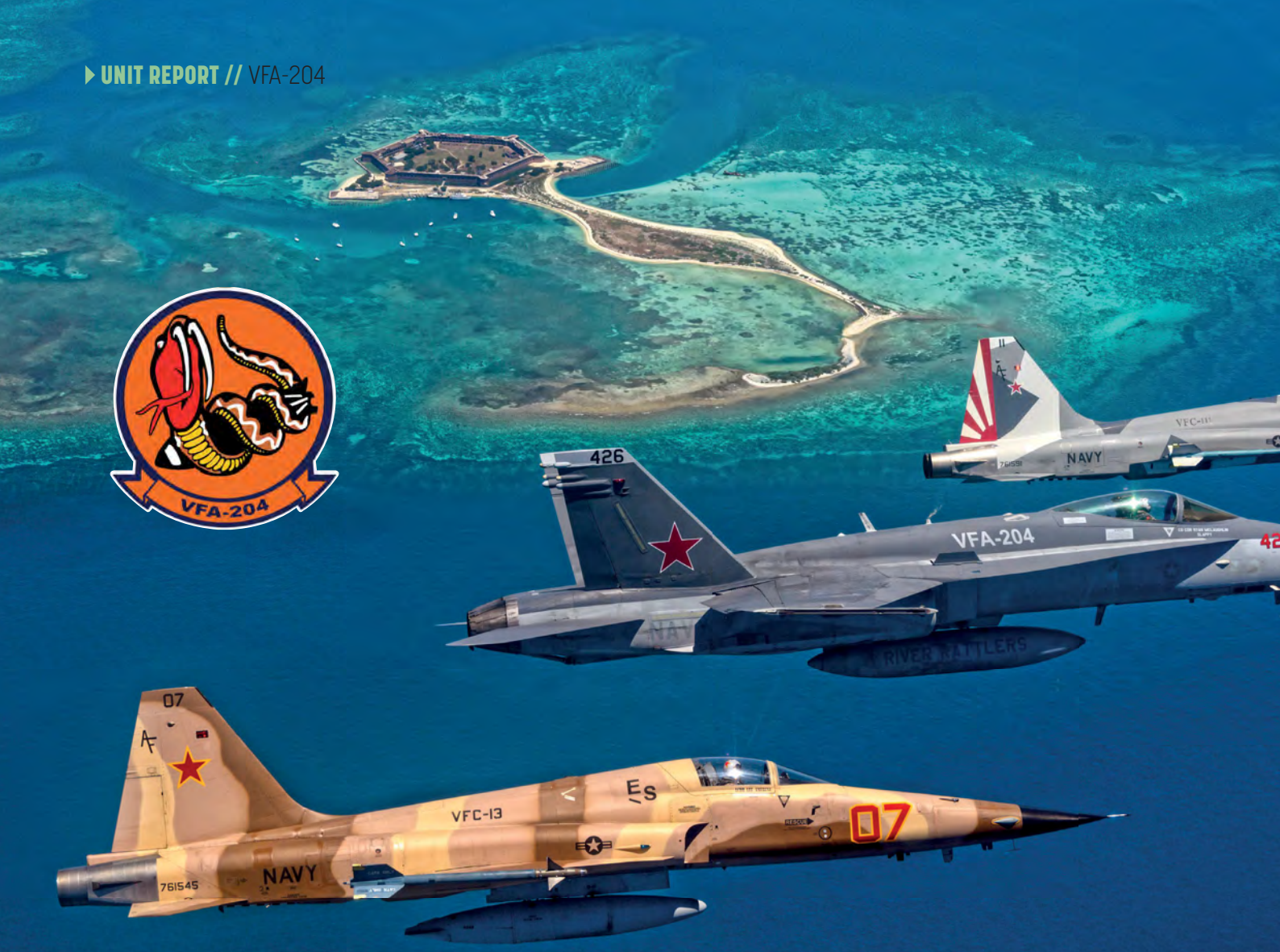

The 'River Rattlers' skipper CDR McLaughlin uses the 'fighting sticks' to explain the nuances of the mission.

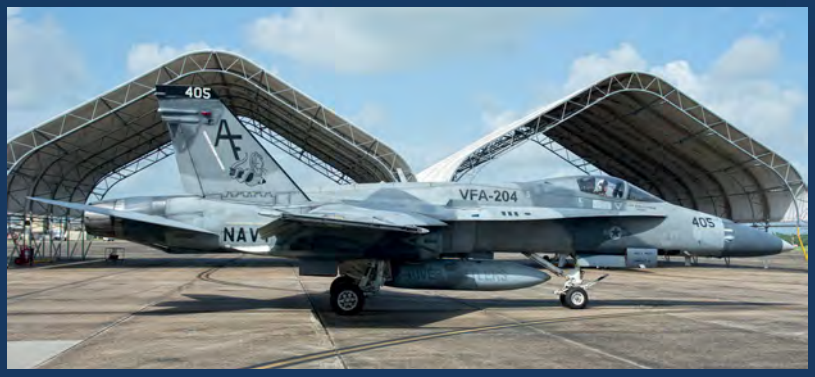
a month we go and deliver ordnance to these folks in Louisiana or Mississippi. On the ranges where we do the JTAC training, we can drop live or inert air-to-ground bombs.

'Almost all of our pilots have been through TOPGUN,' CDR McLaughlin continued. 'So much of that TOPGUN training is about assessing other aircraft and being able to tell what they are capable of, based on energy state when you look at an aircraft. The big question is, can they or can they not shoot you?' He described the intricacies and detail that goes into performance in a close visual fight: 'When you come into the fight you turn across the tail and you assess. If you decide to go nose low and the [opponent] turns, what do you want to do with your airplane at that point? Do you want to try to fly up front and take a shot? Or do you to try to get behind, and



VFA-204 had just three F/A-18A+ models in late 2019.





Above: Three US Navy Reserve squadrons working together – VFC-13 and 111 F-5Ns plus a VFA-204 Hornet during a Strike Fighter readiness phase at NAS Key West. **José M. Ramos**

Left: One of VFA-204's last F/A-18A+ Hornets looking every bit its age.

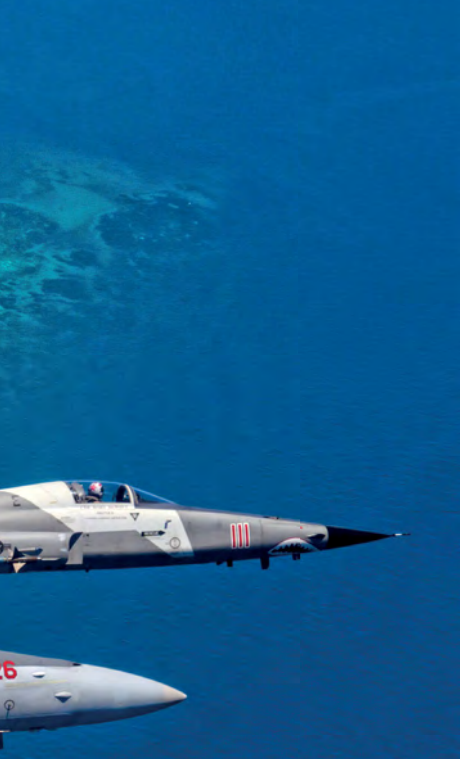
maybe extend the range to work with an air-to-air missile? When you look at basic fighter maneuvering [BFM] it's more of an art than a science. You've got to have the science down with the numbers as far as employing the aircraft. The art of looking back there and assessing the other plane is important. It is also important to train with dissimilar aircraft so you get used to them. When I go and train against one of my squadron mates, we know each other — there's a familiarity there. But when you go and train with someone from a different squadron, even though they may not be real adversaries, it adds realism with those different units.'

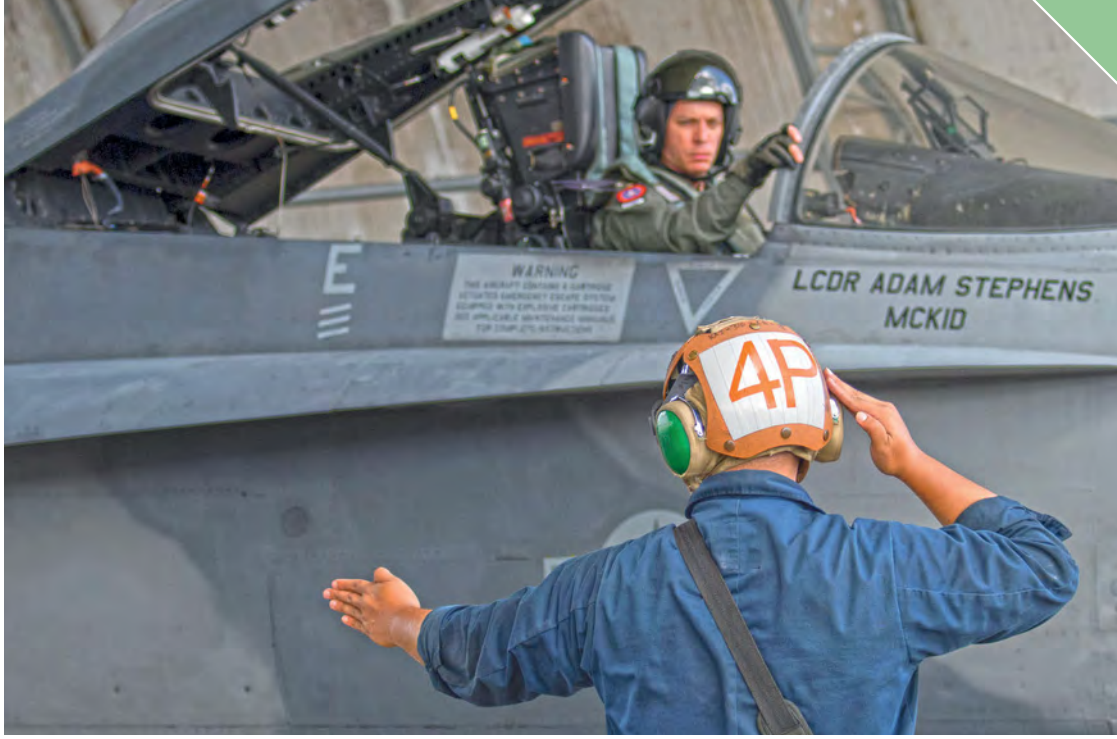
Maintaining a 'classic'

The 'River Rattlers' operate some of the oldest fighters in the US Navy, and McLaughlin spoke highly of his engineers: 'Most of our maintainers are young, but they are very dedicated to their jobs. Although we fly the oldest fighters in the US Navy, I have never felt [for] a second unsafe in my aircraft.'

After joining and receiving initial qualifications, the maintainers are all about on-the-job training. 'They will be with somebody who is teaching. The first thing that they learn before they do any maintenance is to be out there on the flight line, to direct the start-up and the recovery of the aircraft. We do that to get them excited about aviation and get them to recognize the big picture of what we do. Then they go to C-school — more of a graduate level of education. It can last from four weeks to three months, after which they come back here for more on-the-job training.'

The squadron is often on the road, usually at NAS Fallon, Nevada, or to MCAS Miramar, California, another hub of 'classic' Hornet operations within the US Marine Corps. 'We deploy to Miramar so we can qualify folks not only dropping ordnance on the aviator side, but having all of our maintainers do that end-to-end training





Above: The pilots at VFA-204 are very experienced, with the part-timers switching seamlessly between airliner and Hornet cockpits.

Below: The large over-water Gulf of Mexico ranges are a quick 'hop' from New Orleans and make ideal training areas for the 'River Rattlers'.

of getting the bombs to the jet, loading them, making sure the jet communicates with the bombs correctly and then actually going out and being able to release that weapon. We have about 160-170 full-time folks in the squadron and about 120 of them are maintainers.'

New iron

When asked about future plans for VFA-204, CDR McLaughlin said: 'Well, we need new airplanes! What we have are still capable and we can execute any mission that the US Navy asks us to do right now, but they are getting to the limit of their service lives. The maintenance effort to keep them airborne is significant. I don't know what the answer really is or what our future will be like. I know they are looking at a lot of different options [for] a new lightweight fighter aircraft that could possibly do a dual role as an advanced training aircraft and also as an adversary-type simulation platform.

If we get something like that, we would obviously not be able to do the strategic reserve mission any longer. There's talk about getting us Super Hornets, and that makes a lot of sense. Getting the Joint Strike Fighter probably makes the most sense, as you have F-35 pilots in the regular navy who are transitioning outside. With the F-35 at VFA-204 there would be a capability to utilize them as a part-time reservist and maintain that strategic reserve posture. I think if you asked the leadership in the reserves, the F-35 is probably the way to go.' Of course, that isn't currently funded, as the fleet squadrons are only just starting to re-equip with the F-35C. This is reflected in CDR McLaughlin's conclusion: 'I think we are going to have these 'legacy' Hornets for three to five years to come.'

The authors would like to thank Andrew Thomas, Public Affairs Officer NAS JRB New Orleans, for his help in making this article possible.