Right: ***Super Hornet squadrons have 12 jets, two more than Hornet squadrons, because they also perform tanker duties.*** All images by the author unless stated

Below: **Ike *sails in the Mediterranean Sea with her impressive air wing ready for action. Alongside is the French aircraft carrier* Charles de Gaulle *(R 91).*** US Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Julia A Casper

Ike of

Gert Kromhout reports from the USS Dwight D Eisenhower during her deployment to the Arabian Sea in late 2012

THE US Navy aircraft carrier USS *Dwight D Eisenhower* (CVN-69), affectionately known as *Ike*, was deployed in the US Central Command area of responsibility (AOR) with its embarked Carrier Air Wing 7 in 2012 flying daily missions over Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Flagship of Carrier Strike Group 8 (CSG-8), she is commanded by possibly the most experienced operational fighter pilot in US Central Command, Rear Admiral Michael C Manazir, who still flies the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet from *Ike* on a regular basis.

The giant vessel departed her home port of Norfolk, Virginia, last June for what was scheduled to be the longest cruise a US aircraft carrier has made since 2004. It was originally planned she would return in March 2013, but maintenance delays with USS *Nimitz*

f Arabia

(CVN-68) have forced the US Navy to reschedule *Ike*'s deployment – it announced in late November that she was to return temporarily to Norfolk in early 2013 and redeploy to theatre with another crew.

Normally, cruises are of shorter duration, but the US President directed that two carrier strike groups are to be in the US Central Command area of responsibility because of the operations in Afghanistan and tensions in the Persian Gulf. "In addition to that," said Captain Samuel 'Pappy' Paparo, commander of embarked Carrier Air Wing 7 (CVW-7), "we also have our commitments in the Far East. That's a lot of responsibilities, and it takes a lot of effort to have three carriers out at sea at any given time."

During *AFM*'s visit, the eleven carrier strike groups and nine carrier air wings of the US Navy were stretched to their limits. The other carrier in the AOR was USS *Enterprise* (CVN-65) – though she was about to return to Norfolk for the very last time, with USS *John C Stennis* (CVN-74) en route to replace her. Because of the President's directive, *Stennis*' deployment was brought forward a couple of months. Meanwhile, Japan-based USS *George Washington* (CVN-73) was patrolling the Andaman Sea while the USS *Nimitz* was getting ready to go on deployment and USS *Harry S Truman* (CVN-75) was about to start her work up programme.

CAG 7

The air wing provided about a third of all close air support missions over Afghanistan, but only 20 F/A-18C/D Hornets, 24 F/A-18E/F Super Hornets and four EA-6B Prowlers were involved. They fly seven- to eight-hour-long missions. Remarkably, the Super Hornets carried only one external fuel tank in addition to three bombs – a mix of GPS, laser and dual GPS/laser-guided bombs. Two or even three external tanks might be expected on such long missions, but according to Lt Bryan 'Connie' Lingle of VFA-103 'Jolly Rogers', only one is carried for fuel economy purposes. "Additional external tanks produce much drag – we fly to Afghanistan, which takes 60 to 90 minutes, and refuel in flight upon arrival. In event of an emergency we can always divert to an air base in Afghanistan." An added benefit is that the aircraft save fuel.

The smaller 'legacy' Hornet, with less internal fuel capacity, flies in the so-called 'double ugly' ▶

configuration – a centreline tank and an external tank under the starboard wing with one bomb under each of the outer wing stations. On most missions, no ordnance is expended. Lt Lingle, who also deployed with VFA-103 in 2010, said there is no big difference compared to two years earlier. "There is a slight decrease in kinetic attacks [bombs and guns], but coming back, it was as if I never left."

The F/A-18Es and Fs are not equipped with the newer and more capable APG-79 active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar, but with the older APG-73, similar to the F/A-18C's. "That allows us to treat the Hornet and Super Hornet as the same most of the time," said Capt Paparo. "They can carry the same type of weapons, so we usually regard them as interchangeable fighters. However, the Super Hornet carries more weapons and carries them further. If my Super Hornets had the APG-79, we would use them differently. We might put them on the missions that require the most survivability or precise targeting through the weather."

Boredom!

In early October Lt Lingle had completed 51 Operation Enduring Freedom missions. "Most were the same. I discussed this with my cousin, who's a Los Angeles police officer, and agreed OEF missions sound a lot like police work. In both jobs there's a lot of boredom, punctuated by moments of sheer terror. I have not yet had any moments of terror. If we're supporting troops and they are safe, then my mission is fine. I'm not keyed up to drop a bomb."

One of the missions was different: Lingle and his wingman were pre-tasked to work with a joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) on the ground. "Army Rangers had been engaged all day and had lost a couple of guys, unfortunately. It's quite something to talk to somebody on the ground who's taking fire and who's lost some friends. We employed weapons against an enemy firing position. Helping him and his friends was a meaningful experience."

Enter the Prowler

Non-kinetic support is performed with a 'show of force', a high-speed low-level pass with or without dropping flares or electronic jamming. The EA-6B Prowler excels in the latter – this big, fish-shaped, two-engine beast was originally designed as a suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD) platform. It has sensitive signal receivers and powerful jammers in externally-mounted electronic countermeasure (ECM) pods. Depending on the threat level, it can carry up to five such pods, and for hard kills the crew can use up to five AGM-88 high-speed anti-radiation missiles (HARMs). However, its primary role is to use its jammers in support of US and coalition ground forces.

Above: ***On cat one...*** Below: ***Deck crew attach chains immediately after the jet halts at its parking spot.***

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This Super Hornet has just returned from a mission; its pilot prepares for the next launch in the orange glow of the late afternoon sun.

The Prowler has four seats, for a pilot and three electronic countermeasures officers (ECMOs). The ECMO in the right-front seat operates all the comms and navigation; the backseat ECMOs (2 and 3) are interchangeable with ECMO 1. However, the Prowler community prefers using ECMO 1 to back-up the pilot – due to the nature of the Prowler's canopy layout, the pilot has reduced visibility out the right seat, so ECMO 1 plays a critical role in enhancing the pilot's situational awareness. In addition, he provides much-needed backup to the pilot during carrier landings, feeding him important flight parameters to help fly a safe 'pass'. ECMOs 2 and 3 handle communicating with the JTAC on the ground. "We prefer a JTAC with an EW [electronic warfare] background, so that he knows what we bring to the fight," said Lt Mark 'Megatron' Eisbrenner, an ECMO. "There is an inherent language barrier when we deal with Afghan forces, which makes it harder to explain our capabilities."

Electronic Attack Squadron 140 (VAQ-140) 'Patriots' often sends its aircraft over Afghanistan with only three crew members, rather than the usual four, due to the low threat level. The typical Prowler OEF ▶

A pilot on the ground

IN NURISTAN province, Capt Paparo was the commander of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). It seems unusual that an aviator should do a job more suited, perhaps, to an engineer or ground officer, but to Paparo there is some logic to it. "A PRT executes a stability operation in a non-permissive environment," he said. "In a PRT a lot of different specialties are gathered, such as an infantry platoon for security, mortar team, engineers, financial teams, civil affairs, battalion staff, truck mechanics, food service, medical, state departments, military police and more. The head of such a team has to be a good manager and move it towards success. Moreover, he needs to be a senior person in his 40s who can talk to village elders. It doesn't work if you have a 24-year-old lieutenant in charge. The PRT commander leads a complex enterprise, and nobody in the service is really prepared for this job."

The services all offer up various people. The navy personnel director thought Capt Paparo fitted the profile. "I have a degree in international studies and commanded a squadron. As a squadron commander, you're in charge of a wide variety of people and professions such as aviators, ejection seat specialists and maintainers."

For Paparo the assignment was a great experience. "The first thing I learned was that the Afghan people are the same as us. They are good, decent people. They love their families and want to have a better future. I developed affection for them." The second lesson is that the more people you have, the harder it gets. "I had a vision of what I wanted to achieve, but there are a lot of parties involved, and the more involved you get, the more visions you have. I worked with the Afghan Government, the state department and parties such as non-governmental organisations, the Afghan army and the police. Everybody has great intentions and they're good at what they do, but not everybody is ready to compromise. The more elements involved, the slower it goes and the more inter-agency conflict there is."

He spoke frankly about his accomplishments. "When I got there I arrogantly believed that I, with my superior vision and outstanding Western education, would completely transform the Nuristan province. Of course that didn't happen. Some villages now have clean water they never had before; many villages have micro hydro-power plants they never had before, and foot and road bridges. We also treated a lot of patients and our surgeons worked with local doctors. Locally, we had an impact – at the campaign level I don't know if we had any impact at all. Maybe we did, maybe we didn't. Maybe we kept a few people from taking up a rifle. It was a very difficult year. We lost a few soldiers and had quite a few wounded."

Above: ***Commander of the Air Group Captain Paparo greets an Afghan National Army colleague during his mission ashore as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) leader. While it may seem strange for a naval aviator to be involved in such a mission the Captain is the holder of a degree in international studies.*** US Navy

On patrol

Capt Paparo led his PRT team as he led CVW-7 – as a real leader who doesn't step back from difficult missions. So he went on patrol almost every day and has seen the effect of airstrikes. The PRT experience influenced his leadership in a couple of ways: "One, we have a commitment to doing the things that we do well, and we have a commitment to what the ground force commanders are trying to achieve. Two, I developed a very strong leadership against causing civilian casualties. I made my pilots aware that they take ownership of their weapons and that if there is the slightest thing wrong with the upcoming attack, don't do it. They are the ones deciding to drop, not the man on the ground directing the attack. One bomb is not going to win this war, but it can certainly ruin it for us. The ground force commander owns that weapon and has got release authority of that weapon. But knowing the effect that our weapons can have we can help guide them along their way. Just the show of force itself and the mystique of American air power can stop an attack. Our priority is to save our troops and not inflict any damage on people who don't deserve it."

Commander Air Group (CAG): Captain Paparo

Captain Paparo has seen a lot of Afghanistan since 2001, both from the air and on the ground. In the first night of Operation Enduring Freedom in late 2001 he was in the cockpit of an F/A-18 Hornet flying from the carrier USS *Enterprise*. Since then he has completed two seven-month carrier deployments in theatre and is currently on his fourth. He also completed a 13-month ground tour in Nuristan province. In between these deployments, he served as the Battle Director at the Central Command Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar. In this capacity he was responsible for the daily direction of coalition air assets in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Horn of Africa. He has logged an astonishing 6,000 flying hours in fighters and has made more than a thousand carrier landings. These are extraordinary numbers, which only a very few get to reach nowadays. However, though proud, he does not brag about it. In fact he opted to delete the figures from his official navy biography leaflet. "I don't want to be labelled as some flyboy and not taken seriously on serious matters," he said. "I have had a lot of operational tours and deployments, which means a lot of traps and hours."

Captain Paparo has flown a variety of aircraft including the F-14, F/A-18C and F/A-18E and flew a tour as an F-15C pilot with the 71st FS at Langley AFB. He is a Top Gun graduate and has been commanding officer of VFA-195 'Dambusters' at NAS Atsugi, Japan, and VFA-106 'Gladiators', the (Super) Hornet Fleet Replacement Squadron at NAS Oceana. A Commander Air Group (CAG) serves three years in an air wing – half the time as deputy, the other as boss. As boss he was privileged to fly more than just one aircraft type and chose the Hornet, Super Hornet and Seahawk. He left the air wing in December.

The personal F/A-18F Super Hornet of the 'Jolly Rogers' commanding officer being prepared for a night mission.

combat load-out consists of three ECM pods and two external fuel tanks. VAQ-140's aircraft are of the latest ICAP III standard and are the most capable Prowlers ever fielded: in fact, according to Capt Paparo, they have some capabilities their successor, the EA-18G Growler, does not.

Libya

VAQ-140 also participated in the war over Libya in 2011, a contrast to its OEF tasking. "A big difference is that, in Afghanistan, we support our troops on the ground. In Libya, we were in the SEAD role, supporting coalition aircraft, and carried HARM," said Lt Eisbrenner, a pilot with the unit. "We don't carry HARM in Afghanistan. We arrived later in the Libyan campaign, and most air defences were already down. We did not fire any HARMs." According to Capt Alain 'Pedro' Martinez, a US Air Force exchange ECMO, another big difference is that in Afghanistan the battlespace is more static compared to Libya, where there was a dynamic front line which changed daily. "Over Libya there was not much to do, but they were still valuable missions because we were there to support others against any threat that might show up," he said.

Captain Martinez was previously assigned as a weapon systems officer (WSO) with the 494th Fighter Squadron, part of the 48th Fighter Wing, based at RAF Lakenheath in the UK. "I volunteered for this job because it is good for my resumé. There are not that many electronic warfare specialists in the air force since they retired the EF-111." He is a mission commander and thoroughly enjoys his assignment. "The Prowler community is a great one, and I enjoy how the navy has fewer rules than the air force!"

This is the last Prowler cruise for VAQ-140 before converting to the EA-18G Growler.

CVW-7

CVW-7 'Freedom Fighters' comprises seven squadrons and one detachment. The squadrons are VFA-83 'Rampagers' and VFA-131 'Wildcats' (both Boeing F/A-18C(N) Hornet); VFA-103 'Jolly Rogers' (Boeing F/A-18F Super Hornet); VFA-143 'Pukin' Dogs' (F/A-18E); VAQ-140 'Patriots' (Grumman EA-6B Prowler ICAP3); VAW-121 'Bluetails' (Grumman E-2C Hawkeye); HS-5 (Sikorsky SH-60F, HH-60H); and VRC-40 'Rawhides' detachment 3 (two Grumman C-2A Greyhounds). In total CAG-7 is responsible for 1,500 men and women.

Iran

During her deployment, *Ike* patrolled near Iran and Pakistan and occasionally passed into the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz. This area is of utmost strategic importance for the world and is currently tense because of Iran's nuclear programme. Israel continues to threaten to attack the nuclear installations and Iran threatens to close the strait.

Threats include speedboats or an air attack. Iranian maritime patrol aircraft visit the strike group on a regular basis, according to Capt Paparo – but, he said, they are very professional in their behaviour. Lt Cdr Martin N Fentress Jr, an E-2C Hawkeye senior mission commander with VAW-121 'Bluetails', concurs. "The strike group has had interactions with Iran, just as we've had with all other countries' military forces surrounding the Arabian Gulf and Northern Arabian Sea. Those interactions have been courteous and professional. We've not had any heated exchanges at all."

VAW-121's mission is to protect the carrier strike group and coalition vessels and it does not fly over Afghanistan. "We look for any unidentified surface or air radar contacts that may pose a threat to the Carrier Strike Group and our coalition partners," said Lt Cdr Fentress. "Our mission is not sexy in any way – we're here to enhance the situational awareness of both the Fleet Commander (5th Fleet in Bahrain) and Strike Group Commander. In the off-chance that tensions

Above: ***The workload for the Prowler crews over Afghanistan is such that a third ECMO is not needed: hence only one seat in the back is occupied.***
Right: ***USS* Enterprise *speeding up for her last 'replenishment at sea' before she commenced her return to Norfolk, Virginia, for the very last time.***

Above: ***All CAG-birds (00 modex) are colourfully painted, but AG-400 of VF-131 is special. The vertical tails are blue on the port side and bright red on the starboard side.***
Below: ***This is how the armourers remove or attach weapons on the flightdeck.***

Above: ***Rear Admiral Michael C Manazir in the front seat of a tanker-configured F/A-18F in the break for landing.***
Below: ***MH-60S of HSC-22 flying freight from the Eisenhower during replenishment at sea. The helicopter was detached to the cargo ship.***

increase and professional interactions break down, Bluetail aircrew would potentially be the first to detect an inbound aircraft, vessel or striking force."

While the focus of the air operations is on Afghanistan, *Ike* remained at a close distance to the Strait of Hormuz and Iran, in case of any attempts by Iran to block shipping through this vital sea lane.

Transition time

VAW-121 was originally scheduled to be the first squadron to convert to the new E-2D Hawkeye, but the timetable has slipped and the transition will now start in 2014. That is not the only big change for CVW-7: the venerable EA-6B Prowler is on its last cruise with VAQ-140. It then starts the transition to the Boeing EA-18G Growler. HS-5 is also converting – it will trade the SH-60F Seahawk helicopter for the MH-60S and will be renamed HSC-5. In addition, the air wing is to get another helicopter squadron equipped with the MH-60R (the squadron number was unknown in at the time of writing).

Capt Paparo will not be part of the process. This tour was his last as an operational fighter pilot and he left in December as his three-year stint came to an end. As might be expected from a fighter pilot, he will miss it. "I'll give almost everything to trade places with one of these young guys on his first deployment," he said. afm

Night scene forward of the castle. The orange colour is from floodlights.