Last Trap of the Tomcat â€“ Part II

Description

From Part I, the â€œBottom Lineâ€•: The F-14 Tomcat was a superior piece of technology that would counter the threat posed by the Soviet Union and her client states. All things have their purpose.

In this part, I will present some things from my life that I saw of the influence of the F-14. Way back in 1971, I went to take a physical and when asked to â€œread line 6 on the chart on the back of the door.,â€• I squinted and said little for about 10 seconds> Next I heard: â€œDo you wear glasses?â€• Next I thought: â€œI CANâ€•T FLY!â€•

Yep, it was true. No 20/20 for me. In retrospect, I then also realized why it was sometimes a challenge to read things the teachers wrote on the chalkboard, but I had never connected it with bad eye sight, just to liking to sit in the back of the classroom. I also should have known that if both parents wear glasses, it most likely the offspring will also be so afflicted. Anyhow, as you might have grasped, I had planned on being a go fast kind of guy for many years before that fateful day in 11th grade.

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Fast forward to fall of 1975. It was the early part of Senior year and time to tell the people in the NROTC office which career path I wanted to go for. I still wanted to fly, but knew the only opportunity was to be a Naval Flight Officer (NFO) (also referred to as the â€œGuy in Backâ€• (GIB)). I sat down with the officer teaching us and asked his opinion of that choice. His advice was to look for something else I would enjoy, for, at that time, he said, you could be the best GIB in the world, and even a great leader, butâ€¦..it was rare to make it past Lt Commander. It seems the pilots had a lock on the upper level ranks, and also things like command of anything avaition. It certainly didnâ€™t sound like a career path for the option of longevity. Message to midshipman closing in on commissioning date was: You better love being the guy in the shadows due to your bad choices in genetic stock.

Ok, other options: Explosives Ordnance Disposal (EOD)? Wow! Get paid to play with things that go â€œBOOM!â€• and skydive/parachute and SCUBA dive all day (when not doing PT)? Sign me UP! Not so fast, due to the rule change that very year which required you to serve a tour in â€œUnrestricted Lineâ€• prior to applying to be accepted in the EOD. Ted Strong, discussed here had told me how much fun it was few months earlier when we met at the NAS Cubi Point O Club. So, scratch option #2. So, I told them I wanted to dress like this:

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to go to work in the Navy. That one worked. I would become a Salvor! Well, to make a long story shorter, a discovered when a whole bunch of diving school instructors were all over you at the bottom of the pool, I was getting a little too stressed, so I chose to take a different path, hence my adventures for the next 19 years in Surface Warfare. I did learn you can swim, tap dance on the slit at the bottom of the Ancostia River, and do so much more while wearing 198 lbs of â€œstuff,â€• and that â€œShorty,â€• an Army Sgt assigned to the school had little short, stubby legs, and he could beat us in any calestenics, but weâ€™d just leave him behind on the morning 4 mile run.

The F-14 is now reaching significant number in the Fleet at the time. THe special thing is the NFO, specifically called a â€œRadar Intercept Officerâ€• (RIO) in the back seat became a significant player in the full use of the F-14 system. As a matter of fact, the pilots became relegated to being bus drivers, so the GIB could get to wear he could open up a 55 gal drum of brush on whoop ass for any Soviet bombers coming inbound to the CVBG. The old â€œlineageâ€• of pilots being supreme beings, in the footsteps of Eddie Rickenbacker, Richard Bong, Manfred von Richtofen and Werner Voss were fading. The crack in the armor began to split. The pilots still got a workout in the Naval Fighter Weapons School (TOPGUN), in case they had to cozy up to the bad guys, yet they had no capability to target and launch the AIM-54 Phoenix missile. The RIO did the job.

That is the crucial way that the F-14 Tomcat community, from my outside view. By the middle of my career(mid 80s), some NFOs began to be selected for squardon commands. As time went on, that â€œticket punchâ€• than opened doors for the NFOs to command wings and eventually aircraft carriers.

Another phenomena of the times was the economics of the late 70s â€“ early 80s made it better for pilots, particulalry multi-engine rated, to get out after their obligated service was copleted. The airlines were recruiting heavily, and many pilots went. I remember the day I saw the ALNAV message that announced that NFOs could apply for pilot training, if they had served two years in their community. If selected, you would move forward (sideways) in the same airframe only, so P-3 ATACCOs could become P-3 pilots, and F-14 RIOs would go to the front part of the Tomcat cockpit. The vision requirments for the move were 20/200 (correctable). At the time, I was 20/50.

Had I been able to know this in 1975, Iâ€™d have gutted out two years in the backseat, knowing I could fly, and eventually have a fair shot at command. Water under the bridge, and I still did exciting things as a â€œshoe.â€•

As a note on the diving career that never happened, they made a Special Operations designator (not to be confused with Special Warfare (the SEALS)), which was comprised of Salvage Divers, EOD and Ordnance Management experts. Had I been a diver, I could have entered that program. I didnâ€™t and what happened was there were only 6 CAPT (O-6) billets in the entire community, and the 4 stripers wouldnâ€™t retire, so some great guys never made it very far in rank, only because of personnal issues, and nothing to do with their performance. Most likely, Iâ€™d have made LCDR and been â€œcontinuedâ€• until 20 years, then told to retire. One classmate from the Naval War College, Ed Kittel, happened to have this happen to him. He didnâ€™t get to the NWC because he was just someone filling a billet, he was there because he was very good at what he did. Ed Kittel became a special agent in the FAA, and worked on many crash cases after his retirement in 1992.

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The â€œBottom Lineâ€• here: The Tomcat manning conditions helped elevate the NFO to a greater professional plateau in the eyes of the â€œsystem.â€• Not only did it affect the RIOs in the F-14s, but it helped all the NFOs in all airframes become more of value to the Navy.

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