



VA-55 Warhorses - Operation Eldorado Canyon - April 1986

The first VA-55 was so designated on 16 August 1948 flying TBM-3; during its years of service it evolved to fly multiple versions of the A-4 during the Viet Nam era. The squadron was dis-established on 12 December 1975 and re-established on 7 October 1983, now an A-6E squadron. The squadron was assigned to CVW-13, making her maiden deployment 1 October 1985 through 19 May 1986 on board The Ageless Warrior, USS Coral Sea (CV 43). This deployment coincided with the first East Coast deployment of the F/A-18, as well as the HARM missile. The squadron was allotted a complement of 14 A-6E TRAM and 5 KA-6D aircraft; the air wing complement included two Navy and two Marine F/A-18 squadrons, but no EA-6B Prowlers. Due to the pressure to maintain adequate fuel airborne during this first east coast F/A-18 deployment, each A-6E was configured with a D-704 Buddy Store to enable each aircraft to provide airborne fuel should it become necessary. Additionally, the squadron aircrew assignments provided only two combat experienced aviators with the majority of crews being on their first A-6 tour, a fairly green wardroom due to the rapid expansion of the A-6 community that was occurring in the early 1980s.

The squadron saw its first combat operations in March 1986 during Operation Prairie Fire when a Warhorse A-6E attacked a fast-moving Libyan Nanuchka PTG with four MK 20 Rockeye II Cluster Bomb Units (CBUs). After a single pop up Laser Boresight attack, the ship was left burning and dead-in-the-water, to be sunk 30 minutes later by a VA-85 Buckeye employing a Harpoon missile.

Coral Sea was enroute to end of deployment out-chop when tasking arrived for her to return to the central Mediterranean to participate in Operation Eldorado Canyon, a retaliatory strike against Libya for having bombed a German night club in which several American service members were killed. Initially, VA-55 was assigned all five targets in the Benghazi area, those at Benina Airfield as well as those in downtown Benghazi, with VA-34 Blue Blasters from USS America (CV 66) assigned targets in Tripoli. Subsequently, USAF F-111 strike aircraft were added to the strike force and assigned all targets in the Tripoli area, allowing VA-55 and VA-34 to share targets in the Benghazi area. VA-55's target set was the Benina Airfield, coincidentally one of the first Libyan CONOPS targets, among many, planned and briefed by the Warhorses enroute the Mediterranean. The strike plan called for Coral Sea to launch 34 aircraft:-eight A-6E's for the strike, two F/A-18 Combat Air Patrol (CAP)/Suppression of Enemy Air Defense (SEAD) escorts, six F/A-18s to employ AGM-88 High Speed Anti—Radiation Missiles (HARM) in SEAD, four F/A-18 Combat Air Patrol (CAP) two E-2 command and control aircraft, one A-3 to gather signals intelligence, two EA-6B for electronic combat and nine aircraft following the strike package for tanker, rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP), and surface combat air patrol

(SuCAP). Specific VA-55 targets included MIG-23 aircraft on hot pads, in revetments and on alert as well as hangars and warehouses housing aircraft and parts at Benina airfield. Five VA-55 A-6Es were configured with 14 CBU-59 APAM (Anti-Personnel, Anti-Material Cluster Bomb Units) targeting aircraft on the ramp and alert pads and three were configured with 16 MK-82 SE (Snakeye high-drag bomb fins to enable a low altitude weapons release) with delayed fuses targeted against hangars and warehouses to allow weapon penetration into the building prior to explosion.

The complexity of the strike involving two carrier battle groups and an Air Force strike and electronic combat package launching from the United Kingdom resulted in multiple pre-strike coordination meetings. Coordination involved face-to-face meetings between VA-55, VA-34, the Battle Group's Air Defense Commander, Commander Sixth Fleet, Commander, U.S. Forces Europe and finally, the 48th and 20th Tactical Fighter Wings from RAF Upper Heyford in England to address F-111F and EF-111A issues. During a pre-strike coordination briefing with the USAF in Germany, the USAF questioned the choice of the CBU-59s instead of weapons which would allow cratering the runway and taxiways. The Warhorse representative's response was "We're taking down the Libyan Air Force, not just the airfield." The USAF response was simply "That makes sense."

Admiral Frank Kelso, Commander Sixth Fleet, permanently endeared himself to Coral Sea aircrews by visiting the ship to discuss the strike and ensure the aircrews were comfortable with their targets and the strike plan. Similarly, as the Warhorse aircrews were suiting up in the Ready Room, the Commanding Officer of Coral Sea, a former A-6 squadron CO and Commander Medium Attack Wing One at Oceana passed the word that once airborne, the crews would find themselves about 50 miles closer to their target than they expected, i.e. with a little more gas at the back end of the strike.

An additional complicating factor for Coral Sea/VA-55 was CVW-13's air wing composition, which did not include EA-6Bs. To meet strike requirements, a composite package of four EA-6Bs drawn from multiple squadrons were hurriedly flown from NAS Whidbey Island to Coral Sea to provide the strike package with electronic combat capability. The first indication to the Prowler aircrews that a trip to Med was pending came when a member of Whidbey's Wing staff interrupted a Whidbey Island hot tub party to inform some number of the players that they were deploying in the near term. The additional aircraft necessitated off-loading several F/A-18s to make room on the flight deck. One decision that may at first glance appear unusual was the strike A-6E configuration. After careful risk analysis, the Warhorse Skipper decided to fly the strike with each A-6E configured with four multiple ejector racks (MERs) for bombs and a centerline buddy store. The decision to maintain the fully operational and tested air refueling system on each aircraft was made to ensure there would be no hiccup with the ability to provide fuel for F/A-18s during Coral Sea's follow-on operations.

Coral Sea began launch operations at 0015 on 15 April, 1986 with the strike package launching between 0055 and 0110. During the launch the ship was operating in complete EMCON, no radio emissions - including the flight deck mouse used by Yellow Shirts to coordinate on-deck

aircraft sequencing and movement. The follow-on strike package launched between 0150 and 0215 to ensure rescue forces were available, a ready deck and the ship and battle group were safe from any potential follow-on Libyan attack.

At the time of the strike, Libya had one of the most sophisticated air defense networks in the world, consisting of SA-5 long-range missiles, SA-2, SA-3, SA-6, SA-8 and Crotale II short-range surface-to-air missile systems and an extensive battery of anti-aircraft artillery (AAA). Due to the lethality of the air defense system, the strike group made extensive use of strict emissions control (EMCON) and low-altitude tactics. Following launch, the strike group rendezvoused in three groups just below 7,000 feet. Once the strike package was together, the groups separated and proceeded to their individual stations while the overland strike package of six aircraft, (one on deck abort and one post-launch mission abort due to an electronic equipment failure), rendezvoused amidst turbulence and lightening in a 6-plane starboard echelon to accommodate the planned "caterpillar" separation maneuver. As noted by one of the more experienced pilots "the multi-plane rendezvous in heavily laden aircraft in turbulent weather while maintaining formation integrity in the extended echelon was probably the most demanding flying he had ever done." Following separation, individual aircraft descended to 200-300 feet AGL heading north to south until the coast in point. The stream raid tactic (with one-minute separation between aircraft) was used to preclude fratricide as all six aircraft were operating in close proximity at approximately 200-500 feet AGL over the airfield and adjacent ramps. An active SA-6 site was the designated coast-in point as it provided the shortest overland run in to the target and it was the only radar significant point in an otherwise flat, indistinguishable (from low altitude) coast line was an additional benefit. The SA-6 was the most feared surface-to-air weapon system at the time so the coast-in point selection reflected tremendous aircrew confidence in the HARM missile, which would see its first use in a SEAD role during this strike, including against this specific SA-6 battery. EMCON was planned to be broken with the A-6E's airborne ground mapping/targeting radars switched on 40 miles prior to the target. The lead aircraft went feet-dry over the SA-6 site at 0153 with a two-minute run to the target. The strike package found the airfield lit up like NAS Oceana on a Saturday night, with all of its lights on, including the rotating beacon, and a ramp full of parked MIG-23s and multiple helicopters. Since it was a dual-use field, the aircrew also found it populated by commercial aircraft as well. As is often the case, the lead aircraft encountered no opposition in terms of surface-to-air missiles or AAA, but that was not the case for following aircraft which saw an extensive response from both. The third aircraft in the strike experienced an Armament Control Unit (ACU) failure mid-way through its weapons release so the pilot selected emergency jettison to get the weapons and the centerline buddy store off the aircraft. The buddy store, still containing fuel, precipitously tumbled into a warehouse full of MIG-23 parts adjacent to the ramp, exploded and set the warehouse afire. Coming off target, the lead aircraft noted an uncharted, but well lighted radio tower and made the single radio call of the strike to alert others to its location. Habit pattern took over for the pilot of the fourth aircraft, who looked over his shoulder after release to see the entire airfield ramp full of fire and explosions. When he returned to his egress, he found himself bore sighted on the recently announced uncharted tower that loomed as large as the Eiffel Tower of Paris. The aircraft avoided the tower, only to be acquired and tracked by an SA-3, which was able to maintain

track on the aircraft for some time, despite the aircraft's low altitude and aggressive maneuvers. The evasion continued long enough to cause a need for unplanned air refueling prior to return to the ship, which was accomplished with some drama as the tanker aircraft was operating not only EMCON, but also lights out (i.e., midnight), making for a challenging rendezvous.

The strike was not immediately recognized to be as successful as it later proved to be with the decrease in activity from the Libyan Air Force. An SR-71 photo reconnaissance flight the next day showed the airfield with a lot of scorch marks on the ramps and hot pads where aircraft had been parked during the strike, but little obvious carnage or wreckage. Obviously, the Libyans had bulldozed the remnants of their destroyed aircraft out of sight so there was little physical evidence remaining other than the destroyed warehouse and hangars.

Following the strike, Coral Sea turned west and proceeded to out-chop and return home. The Warhorse Commanding Officer flew off the ship for post-strike briefings, but was able to re-join the ship and squadron for the NAS Oceana fly-in. Briefings were given to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense - in the Tank with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretaries of both the Navy and Air Force, the CNO's Director of Air Warfare and scheduled, but cancelled, for the President.

After a momentous 19 plane fly off, and spectacular fly-by of Hangar 122, the real "post-cruise de-brief" with squadron wives revealed that by chance, they had a light social function the evening of the strike. They had begun heading home as CNN reporting began interrupting normal television broadcasting with reports of the strike; some watched the live reports describing events and grew concerned. As it was mid-evening hours in Norfolk VA, 6 hours behind the strike time, the wives' call tree was smoking as they shared information and concerns. So not only did Eldorado Canyon introduce the F/A-18 and HARM missiles into Navy strike operations, it likely was one of the first instances where near real-time combat information was provided to America at large for TV consumption, including the families at home.