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Peter E Davies

# US NAVY F-4 PHANTOM II UNITS OF THE VIETNAM WAR 1964-68



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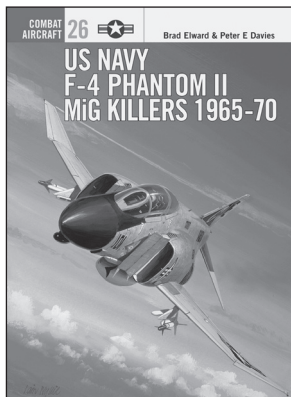
## Author

Peter E Davies has published 26 books concentrating on modern combat aircraft and the Vietnam War. He has written 16 previous Osprey titles and co-authored two others. Four of these have concentrated on the US Navy's use of the F-4 Phantom II, and another of his books, running to 250 pages on this topic for American publisher Schiffer, is still selling 16 years after publication. All his books on this subject have contained extensive input from interviews with more than 100 former US Navy Phantom II aircrew, maintainers and mission planners.

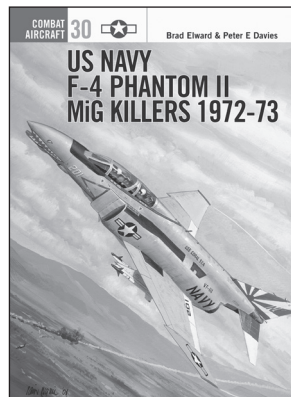
## Illustrator

Jim Laurier is a native of New England, growing up in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. He has been drawing since he could hold a pencil and throughout his life he has worked in many mediums creating artwork on a variety of subjects. He has worked on the Osprey Aviation list since 2000, and in that time he has produced some of the finest artwork seen in these volumes. He has specialised in aircraft of the Vietnam War period.

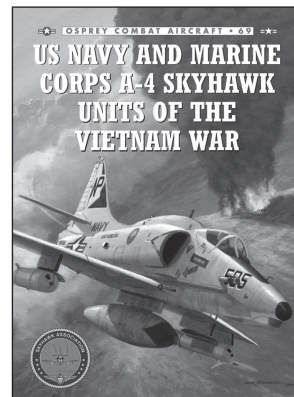
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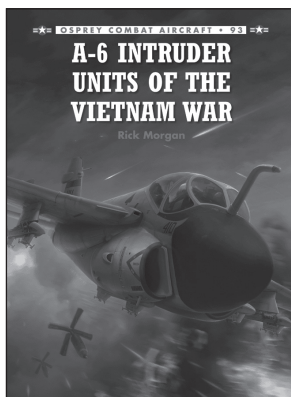
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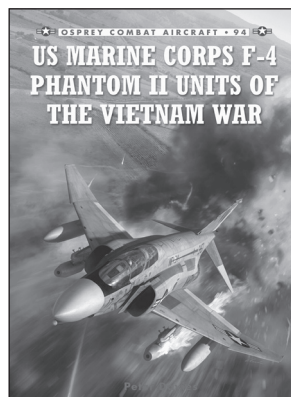
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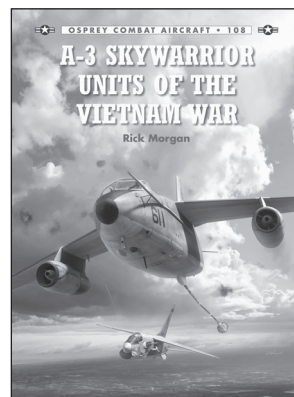
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SERIES EDITOR TONY HOLMES

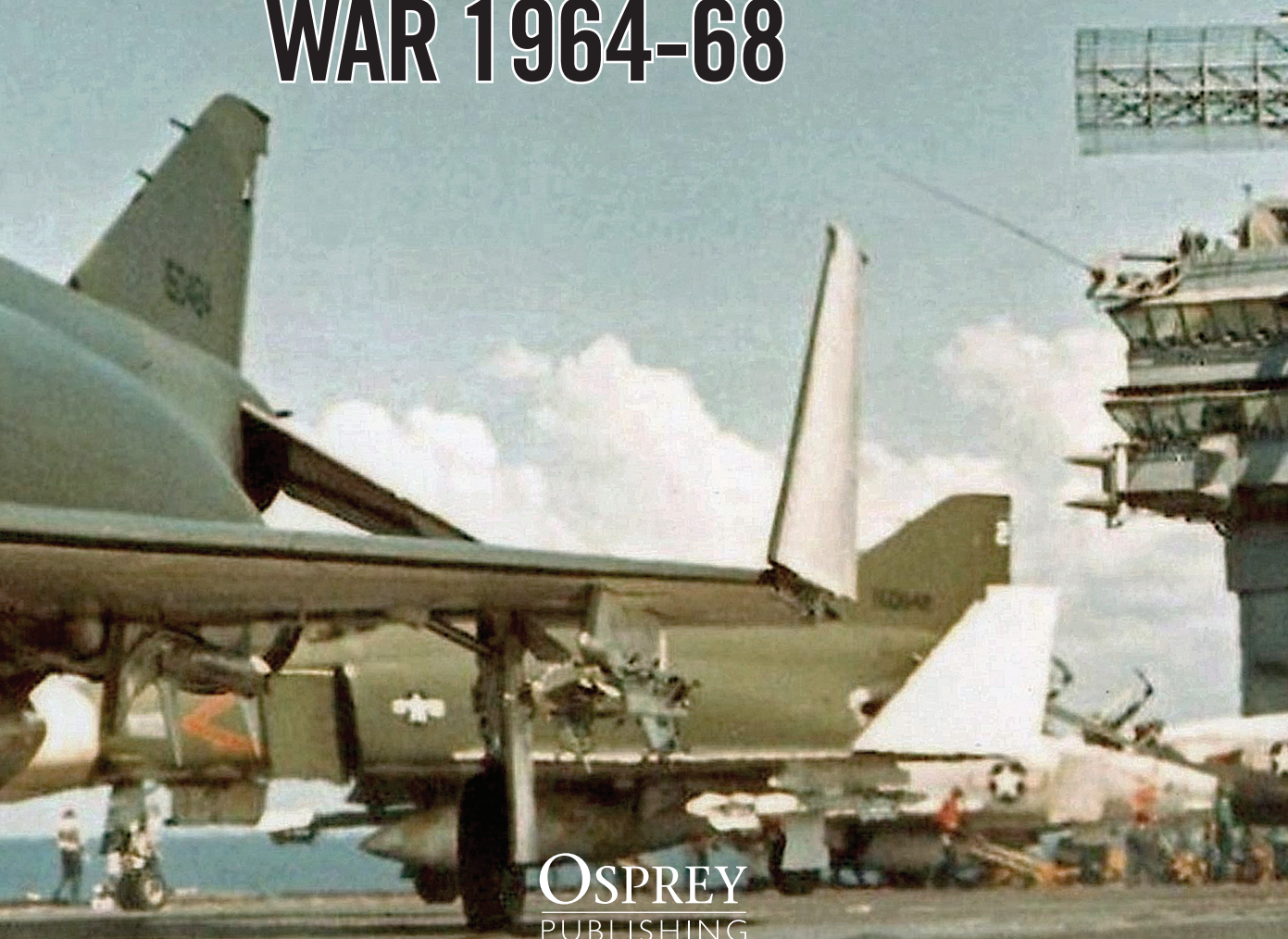
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# US NAVY F-4 PHANTOM II UNITS OF THE VIETNAM WAR 1964-68



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## **This book is dedicated to the memory of Capt John Nash, US Navy**

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### **Front Cover**

On the night of 26 October 1965 F-4B Phantom II BuNo 151505, call-sign 'Victory 208', from VF-84 'Jolly Rogers', embarked in USS *Independence* (CVA-62), was involved in a three-aircraft attack on targets of opportunity located on Bach Long Vi Island, 70 miles off the North Vietnamese coast. Lt Grover Erickson (pilot) and Lt(jg) John Perry (RIO) arrived on target over a torpedo boat anchorage at 0100 hrs and dropped six Mk 24A parachute flares from a height of 6000 ft in order to illuminate the target. They followed up with a firing pass in which four LAU-3A rocket pods of 2.75-in unguided rockets were launched from 2500 ft in a 450-kt 20-degree dive.

As Lt Erickson turned hard right to clear the target he felt two AAA hits on his aircraft, one in the tail area and another in the wing root. He quickly lost rudder control, the undercarriage extended and then retracted and fire warning lights appeared. As smoke began to enter the cockpit and a complete electrical failure occurred the two men ejected and were soon recovered by a UH-2A rescue helicopter (*Cover artwork by Gareth Hector*)

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THUNDER CLOUDS

As hostilities in Southeast Asia intensified in mid-1964, McDonnell's F-4B Phantom II was already well established as the US Navy's all-weather, missile-armed interceptor. Within the Pacific Fleet, five squadrons – VF-21, VF-92, VF-96, VF-114 and VF-143 – were in business with F-4Bs by 1963, joined by VF-142, VF-151, VF-154 and VF-161 by December 1965. Nine Atlantic Fleet squadrons were also operating Phantom IIs by that time, and several of them would eventually be involved in the Vietnam War too. Most of these units had converted from McDonnell F3H Demon or Douglas F4D Skyray fighters, but from 1964 several F-8 Crusader squadrons, including VF-32, VF-33, VF-84 and VF-154, began to transition to the two-seat Phantom II. However, in July 1964 F-8s still outnumbered F-4s in the Pacific Fleet, although the balance was steadily shifting towards the more versatile Phantom II with its greater attack capability. Excelling in the 'day fighter' role, Crusader squadrons had achieved 18 confirmed MiG kills by the end of Operation *Rolling Thunder*, with three losses to MiGs, compared with ten official kills for the F-4 units and four losses to MiGs.

The Phantom II component in a carrier air wing for the larger carriers (*Midway* class and above) usually comprised two squadrons, each with 12 aircraft, although space restrictions often meant that ten would be embarked and two or more retained ashore undergoing repair or kept as spares. For their 1965 cruises, USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) and USS *Midway*

McDonnell's predecessor to the F-4 Phantom II was the F3H-2 Demon, which equipped VF-14 'Tophatters' from January 1956. The squadron had previously flown the F3D-2 Skyknight from 1954, gaining some pioneering experience in all-weather, radar-equipped interception. VF-14's original 1955 conversion date to the Demon was long delayed by development problems with the F3H. The 'Tophatters' eventually deployed, onboard *Forrestal*, for the first time in January 1957 and made their last Demon cruise in April 1963 before upgrading to the F-4B Phantom II (US Navy)



(CVA-41) paired single F-4B units with F-8D squadrons. Although Crusader 'gun-fighter' pilots remained fiercely loyal to their steeds, many were depressed to see their definitive F-8Es loaded with bomb pylons and equipped with radar that greatly increased the pilot's work-load. In an F-4 there was a Radar Intercept Officer (RIO) to take care of all that. Many pilots also believed that the Phantom II was a better fighter at the medium to low altitudes where most Vietnam War aerial engagements occurred.

Early skirmishes with the North Vietnamese in 1964 developed into the sustained bombing campaign known as Operation *Rolling Thunder* from 2 March 1965, which soon involved the increasing number of F-4B units. Targets were chosen at points advancing progressively closer to Hanoi and Haiphong in order to ratchet up the pressure on the North Vietnamese government.

The *Rolling Thunder* Coordinating Committee selected targets for armed reconnaissance missions followed by pre-planned attacks on fixed points by large formations of combat aircraft launched from several carriers. Known as Alpha strikes, these missions were initially scheduled to be conducted during three-hour periods over the target area to avoid conflict with USAF operations. However, in April 1966 a revised plan drawn up by senior officers in the USAF and US Navy saw North Vietnam divided into six geographical sectors or Route Packages (RPs). USAF and US Navy forces took responsibility for operations over each RP on a weekly rota. Even the smallest targets, choices of ordnance and numbers of aircraft involved were selected and approved by the White House at President Lyndon Johnson's Tuesday lunch meetings with his advisors.

The RP plan was soon modified so that the US Navy had responsibility for the coastal RPs (2, 3 and 4) while USAF tactical wings, flying mainly from Thailand and South Vietnam, controlled the inland RPs 5 and 6A,

'Freelancers' F-4B-06-MC BuNo 148379 waits its turn to ride *Midway's* starboard catapult as another VF-21 aircraft climbs away. The F-8D Crusader on the port catapult belongs to VF-111, which was the other fighter squadron in CVA-41's CVW-2 for the 1965 Vietnam cruise that included the US Navy's first two confirmed MiG kills of the war, both for VF-21, and a third to a VA-25 A-1H Skyraider (*US Navy*)



including most of Hanoi, although US Navy aircraft sometimes operated there too. RP 1, adjoining South Vietnam, was managed directly by Gen William Westmoreland, head of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, from his HQ in Saigon. Targets in RP 1 were predominantly the USAF's responsibility, although the area also kept locally based US Marine Corps aircraft busy too. The guiding principle of *Rolling Thunder*, in the words of RADM Malcolm W Cagle (author of *Task Force 77 in Action off Vietnam*), was not to 'inflict maximum damage on the enemy. Instead, it is a precise application of military pressure for the specific purpose of halting aggression in South Vietnam'. The result was a protracted, immensely costly campaign that impeded North Vietnamese aggression but never halted it.

## ALPHA TEAMS

Alpha strikes concentrated a carrier air wing's power into maximum effort 'packages' of up to 35 aircraft, depending on the size and composition of the carrier air wing, from the two or three carriers that were normally on station. Usually, 16 A-4 Skyhawk bombers or fewer A-6 Intruders (from June 1965) were escorted by about ten F-8 Crusaders or F-4s, which included flak suppression flights. *Iron Hand* A-4s (later, A-7A Corsair IIs) preceded the formation to attack radar-controlled flak batteries and missiles, and the force was supported by EA-1 or EA-3B electronic countermeasures aircraft, KA-3B aerial tankers, E-1B Tracer airborne early-warning aircraft and two SH-3 search and rescue helicopters. On smaller 39,000-ton *Essex/Hancock*-class carriers, which could not operate F-4Bs or A-6As, the mix was usually 16 A-4 Skyhawk and F-8C/E Crusader bombers, two *Iron Hand* A-4Es carrying AGM-12 Bullpup or AGM-45 Shrike missiles and flying with an F-8 escort, and two F-8 combat air patrol (CAP) flights.

Each CAP included two or four fighters. F-4s performed this role from the 62,600-ton *Midway*-class carriers (*Coral Sea*, *Midway* and USS *Franklin D Roosevelt* (CVA-42)) or the much larger 86,000-ton 'supercarriers', including USS *Forrestal* (CVA-59), USS *Saratoga* (CVA-60), USS *Ranger* (CVA-61), USS *Independence* (CVA-62), USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) and USS *Constellation* (CVA-64). They were joined in this rotational deployment schedule for Task Force (TF) 77 off Vietnam by the nuclear-powered USS *Enterprise* (CVN-65) in 1965 and, later in the war, by USS *America* (CVA-66).

During their deployments, lasting up to ten months, carriers routinely conducted 'cyclic' operations, with 12 hours of flying followed by an equal period of maintenance and planning. Deck operations were usually timed from midnight to noon (Red schedule), while a second carrier ran its air activities from noon to midnight on the Blue schedule. For regular operations, groups of 20-25 aircraft, including six fighters, were launched in 'events' that were carefully coordinated with recovery times for each group. A stand-down day was normally scheduled after about ten days of operations. A third carrier could fit in its operations to overlap on an 0600 hrs to 1800 hrs 'White' schedule. Alternatively, all three carriers could generate Alpha strikes simultaneously if additional pressure on the enemy was required, as it was in 1972 during Operation *Linebacker III*. By 1969 *Midway* was in fact routinely generating four Alphas per day, amounting