

# VA-75 Flies A-6 into Retirement

By LCdr. Rick Burgess, USN (Ret.)

**I**t was a dark and stormy day. *Intruder* weather.

On 28 February the weather at NAS Oceana, Va., was very fitting as the Navy and the nation bid farewell to the Navy's first true all-weather, carrier-based jet attack aircraft, the Grumman A-6 *Intruder*.

The ceremony at Oceana, where the A-6 first entered operational fleet service in 1963, marked the disestablishment (officially 31 March) of Attack Squadron (VA) 75, the Navy's first fleet A-6 and last *Intruder* squadron. Also on 28 February, VA-196, the last West Coast A-6 squadron, was ceremonially and officially disestablished at NAS Whidbey Island, Wash. On the same day, Attack Wings, U.S. Pacific and Atlantic fleets were disestablished (officially 30 April and 30 June, respectively).

The festivities at Oceana drew an estimated 1,800 people—possibly the largest crowd ever gathered to farewell a single Naval Aviation squadron. Attending dignitaries included Secretary of the Navy John H. Dalton; Commander, U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Joseph W.

Prueher; Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet Admiral J. Paul Reason; Commander Naval Air Force, U.S. Atlantic Fleet Vice Admiral John J. Mazach; Commander Carrier Air Wing 17 Captain James M. Zortman; and Commander Edward W. Blind, the last Commander Attack Wing, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Guests also included former Secretary of the Navy

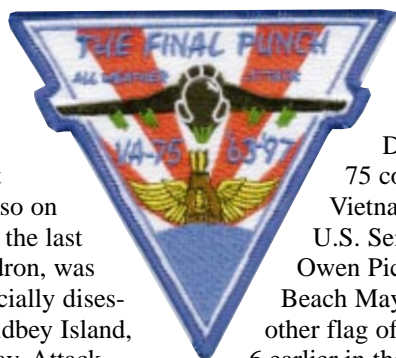
John F. Lehman, Jr., a former reserve A-6 bombardier navigator; retired Rear Admiral Jeremiah A.

Denton, a former VA-75 commanding officer, Vietnam prisoner of war and U.S. Senator; Congressman Owen Pickett (D-Va.); Virginia Beach Mayor Meyera Oberndorf; other flag officers who flew the A-6 earlier in their careers; and many former skippers of the VA-75 *Sunday Punchers*.

Flanked by two of VA-75's A-6Es (one painted in the squadron's 1960s markings), the crowd was seated among boxes of tissues for

the expected tears. Secretary Dalton remarked that the A-6 "exceeded our expectations anywhere, anytime." The A-6, he said was "distinctive looking, some would say 'optically challenged.'" Dalton drew applause when he repeated the old adage that "fighter pilots make movies, but attack pilots make history," and he credited the A-6 and its crews for helping to make the United States "the world's sole superpower."

The keynote speaker, Adm. Prueher, continued the tribute to the *Intruder's* record, noting the Navy accepted 687 production attack A-6s from the Grumman "Ironworks," and A-6 crews tallied 2.8 million flight hours. He described the A-6 as an "airplane built for the long haul . . . reliable but not racy," noting that such attack aircraft are "the only reason our aircraft carriers exist."



The large crowd which farewelled VA-75 was flanked by two of the Navy's last A-6E *Intruders*, one (far left) marked in the squadron's 1960s-vintage color scheme. Below, the vertical stabilizer of a VA-75 A-6E is permanently displayed in hangar 122, enshrining the *Sunday Punchers* in NAS Oceana's history.



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Adm. Prueher also praised the people who flew and maintained the A-6, speaking of the “bond of kinship, competition and spirit between East and West Coast squadrons and our Marine buddies at Cherry Point [N.C.].” To the maintenance crews, he affirmed that “everything good in a squadron comes from ‘up’ jets.” He also memorialized the 173 pilots and Naval Flight Officers who lost their lives in combat and mishaps while flying the A-6. Addressing VA-75, Adm. Prueher concluded: “You led the sprint through the finish line with spirit and professionalism.”

After VAdm. Mazach presented the *Sunday Punchers* with the 1996 Battle “E” award, VA-75 CO Cdr. James P. Gigliotti pointed out that “for the past 34 years, the *Intruder* stood the alert.” He then ordered: “VA-75, stand down the alert!” Ordnance crews unloaded missiles and bombs from A-6E number AA501 (BuNo 162179), and the cockpit crew dismounted. Cdr.

**“First In, Last Out” by Hank Caruso commemorates the disestablishment of VA-75 after almost 54 years. The *Sunday Punchers* were the first fleet squadron and the last unit to fly the venerable A-6 *Intruder* in operational service.**

Gigliotti announced that the final fly-off would occur on 19 March and that the A-6 records would be closed out on 21 March. After the *Sunday Punchers*’ colors were hauled down, power to AA501 was secured and Cdr. Gigliotti reported, “The A-6 *Intruder* has been properly retired after 34 years of service.”

Not so fast. One more mission awaited the *Intruder*. After an 18-month overhaul, *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) needed aircraft to conduct arrested landings and catapult launches to have the flight deck calibrated and certified. On March 12, VA-75’s three remaining A-6Es sortied from Oceana and made a total of 16 “traps” and 16 “cats.” The honors

for the *Intruder*’s last carrier operations fell to Capt. Zortman and his deputy, Capt. Bud Jewett, in AA500 (BuNo 164382); Cdr. Gigliotti and Lieutenant Commander Thomas W. Dacey in AA502 (BuNo 161662); and LCdrs. Phillip G. Hullinger and Thomas P. McKavitt in AA501.

The distinction of flying the Navy’s last A-6s to eventual storage at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., went to VA-75 XO Cdr. Peter S. Frano and LCdr. Hullinger in AA500, and Cdr. Gigliotti and LCdr. Dacey in A-6E AA501. On 19 March, near sunset, the Navy’s last *Intruders* took off in the rain and headed southwest.

It was a dark and stormy night. *Intruder* weather. ✈

Special thanks to Bud Joyce for his contributions to this article.

Note: A brief history of VA-75 appears in “Airscoop,” pp. 6–7.