(Mediterranean Sea – April 1986) With rising tensions between the US and Libya over Libya’s support of international terrorism, USS America (CV-66) deployed 2 weeks early on March 10, 1986 to Join USS Saratoga (CV-60) and USS Coral Sea (CV-43) in “Attain Document III,” a three-phased Freedom of Navigation (FON) operation challenging Colonel Gaddafi’s proclaimed “Line of Death” (32° 30’ N within the Gulf of Sidra). The first two phases of Attain Document III were executed without incident. However, during the final phase, known as Operation Prairie Fire events escalated resulting in an armed confrontation. Anti-radiation missiles were used against Libyan SAM sites (SA-2 and SA-5 systems) at Sirte that had fired at USN aircraft and the first air-launched anti-ship cruise missiles were used to sink 2 Libyan patrol boats and disable another that were threatening the carrier battle groups. This marked the first use of the AGM-84 Harpoon anti-ship missile in combat by the Blue Blasters while sinking a Libyan “La Combattante” on the evening of March 24th.

After Prairie Fire, America and Saratoga proceeded to Souda Bay Crete for turnover with Sara eventually heading west for “outchop” and return to her homeport in Mayport, FL. The America/CVW-1 team had been assigned a long list of potential targets in Libya upon leaving Norfolk and the planning teams had been working daily in defining necessary strike details for high level review and approval. This allowed for selecting target sets in a particular area by target type, i.e. military, logistical, command and control, etc., to meet a desired response. This advanced planning allowed for a known response by decision makers on very short notice.

On April 5th, a terrorist bombing at the La Belle Discotheque in West Berlin killed 3 people and injured 230. Among the dead and injured were US Army personnel. President Reagan had declared “When our citizens are abused or attacked anywhere in the world, we will respond”. When what the President called “direct, precise and irrefutable evidence” was found linking Gaddafi to the attack, the response known as Operation Eldorado Canyon was put in motion. Targets in the vicinity of Tripoli and Benghazi were selected. In Tripoli, the airfield that supported terrorist movement, the frogman training facility at Sidi Bilal, and the Bab al-Azizia compound (command and control) were targeted. In Benghazi the Benina Airfield where Libyan MIGs were based and the Jamahiriya Barracks and MIG storage facility were selected. The original tasking had America taking the Tripoli targets and the Coral Sea taking the two Benghazi targets. VA-34 had had their A-6E/KA-6D compliment increased to 12/5 for contingency operations (an increase over the typical 10/4) so it was the preferred choice for the Tripoli 3 target set.

Shortly after receiving the tasking America was operating in the Central Med. This gave the Blasters the opportunity to do a “dry run” off the northwest coast of Sicily. 3 A-6E’s were assigned to 2 targets, and 4 A-6E’s against the third. The Tactical Mission Planning System (TAMPS) had not been introduced so all planning was “pencil and paper chart” with the exception of the WANG 2200 computer used for PK calculations, (PK - the probability that the selected weapons will do the desired damage to the target). The minimum PK for all targets was 0.7. Due to target defenses a night low altitude attack was selected for most Libyan targets. The preferred load for the Blasters was 16 Mk 82 SERET (500 lb general purpose (GP) bombs with Snakeye Retarded tail fins to allow low altitude weapon release). The 16xMK-82 SERET load on stations 1,2,4,5 was selected instead of a max 22xMK-82 due to the smoother ride on the deck and minimal difference in PK. The Skipper preferred this load as he had used the configuration in extensive combat ops in North Vietnam.

Of concern was the required aircraft timing and separation maneuvers to prevent simultaneous runs and possible fratricide. The plan was for a relative long range over land “back door” attack against the Tripoli Airfield. This allowed for good navigation/timing updates. The other 2 targets were located on the coast with minimal overland portion so the decision was made to hit the initial point (IP) as a flight on an offset heading and perform a “modified break maneuver” to get the desired interval. This also allowed for different run in headings for each target. After the practice strike, the
bomb racks (MERs) were not removed and MK-76 practice bombs were dropped on each subsequent flight to continually check the bomb release systems.

The plan was approved and following the mirror image dry run, the Blasters and Warhorses were ready to execute retaliatory strikes into Tripoli and Benghazi.

Blue Blaster Tripoli Target Practice for El Dorado Canyon

A Change to the Plan - After the initial practice for El Dorado Canyon utilizing only USN assets, it was decided to add USAF F-111F’s of the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath in the UK. They also had plans “on the shelf” for the Libyan targets so the integration and adjustment into the actual mission required sending a CVW-1 rep to Lakenheath for coordination. This coordination was crucial because even though the F-111s were hitting all three Tripoli area targets, they still required USN Fighter, Anti-radiation missile (ARM), and Jamming support. The TOT for all five Libyan targets was 0200 local.

In its final configuration El Dorado Canyon was modified to have the USAF F-111s strike the three Tripoli targets and the two Benghazi targets were split with the Warhorses of VA-55 hitting Benina Airfield, and the Blue Blasters hitting the Jamahiriya Barracks and MIG storage facility. One last wrinkle for the Blasters was that the target was originally planned for 4 A-6Es (PK better than 0.7), but this was then increased by two to six A-6Es and the two add-ons were to carry a different bomb load, 8 MK83 SERET (1,000 lb GP bomb with tail fins to allow a low altitude release. This proved to be a non-standard configuration with dual fusing).

The Jamahiriya Barracks and MIG storage facility were located 2 miles from the coast and not radar significant so the plan was to use radar-significant Offset Aim Points for the attack. During Attain Document III the Blasters had collected radar scope photography (RSP) of the target area and this proved invaluable for OAP and NAV Check Point selection.
Compounding the strike planning difficulty was a “NO HIT” area near the target. Based on this complicating factor it was determined that the best tactic to achieve separation at the IP would involve a 6 plane formation going 180 degrees from the attack heading doing a 30 second modified break maneuver to achieve aircraft separation. This allowed all strike aircraft to be on the same inbound heading. This was later called the “caterpillar” tactic!
The target area defenses consisted of SA-2/3/6/8 SAM systems and guided and unguided AAA. In April 1986 the Tripoli and Benghazi SAM and AAA air defenses were considered some of the most sophisticated and deadly in the world. America and Coral Sea EA-6Bs and A-7Es/F-18s delivering SHRIKE/HARM anti-radiation missiles were to be used for the suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) in both the Tripoli and Benghazi target areas.

Benghazi Air Defenses - April 1986

In order to expedite and simplify rendezvous of the flight, a daytime Case I type covey launch (i.e., a launch in which airplanes are launched seconds apart) based on a launch sequenced plan (LSP) was used. This was somewhat higher risk as it also used strict emissions control (i.e., EMCON, operating without radio or electronic emissions) for the launch in pitch black moonless conditions. The LSP was flawlessly carried out by the America Air Department. The flights did one turn overhead and then used air-to-air A/A TACAN as necessary for join-up enroute to the initial point (IP).
The specifics of crew assignments, aircraft configuration is contained in the following documents.

VA-34 April 14, 1986 Flight Schedule

Aircrew Kneeboard Card
“Quick and Dirties” (Radar Scope Predictions) of the Jamahiriya Barracks and MIG storage facility.

Blaster One OAPs and “No Hit Area”

Blaster One Nav Check Points (Pier and POL Pipeline)
Blaster Two “Quick and Dirties” at 5nm and release

Blaster Two’s Coastal Nav Check Points
On April 12th a final coordination meeting was held with the Coral Sea strike group. The Blaster commanding officer (CO), air wing commander (CAG) and America Battle Group commander (CARGRU) flew to Coral Sea to brief the America strike plan to 6th Fleet, the Coral Sea CARGRU, CAG and the VA-55 strike lead.

**Execution** - Launch, RDVU, tanking, were uneventful (spare not used). The “Caterpillar” maneuver worked but there were navigation discrepancies within the various aircraft as no updates were available prior to the IP and all aircraft were radar silent. Four of the six Blasters made full system deliveries utilizing radar OAPs. Blaster Two saw Blaster One’s impacts and with good visibility (the lights of the city were on) elected to do a visual laydown on Blaster One’s bomb stick (actually Blaster Two had some of the better hits!). Blaster Four had a slew stick malfunction and performed a Radar Manual Range Line (MRL) delivery. The Blaster Ordnancemen had done their job. Out of 80 MK-82/83s only one did not release (A single Blaster Five MK-83 SERET) which was later safely jettisoned after feet wet.

The Armament Control Unit (ACU) settings were very straight forward except that the MK-83 SERET loads (Blaster Five and Six) were using DST 40 Mine ballistics (aerial mines intended to be placed in shallow water to close harbors). The MK-83 load was planned to be fused the same as the MK-82 load in that there was a mechanical nose fuse and an electrical tail fuse. On the afternoon of April 14, America was sprinting across the Med to lose the Soviet AGI spy ship that had been tailing the battle group. As the “Ordies” were hard at work loading the bombers, the Blaster Gunner discovered a problem with the MK-83 SERET load. As the Snake Eye fins were meant for DST 40 destructors, which use only tail fusing, there was no attachment point for the safety “belly wire” to the mechanical nose fuse. The Gunner was one of the many unsung Blaster heroes that evening. He recommended replacing the nose fuse with a steel nose plug. This meant redundant dual fusing was lost BUT if dual fusing was used w/o a belly wire there was a good chance that a fin failure would cause Blaster Five or Six to frag (i.e., potentially blow themselves up), if the 1000 pound MK-83 warhead prematurely detonated a few hundred feet away from the aircraft.
The Libyan Air Defenses put up a vigorous response from their SAM and AAA batteries. All Blaster crews were engaged (thankfully with negative results!) with the estimates being from “too many SAMs to count” to “at least several dozen”. Blaster Five reported “it looked like the 4th of July on a grand scale! “ Several crews commented on seeing numerous SAM impacts on the ground in and around the city proper. Other issues that got everyones attention included altitude gain immediately after dropping 8,000 pounds of ordnance in the heart of SAM envelopes and the trade-offs between aggressive jinking to avoid the SAMs and AAA and “safely” staying below 500 feet AGL while doing so in a high threat environment.

All Blaster crews reported “Feet Wet Tranquil Tiger” for mission success once clear of the Benghazi SAM envelopes.

The following day was spent supporting the unsuccessful SAR effort searching for the crew of Karma-52, the F-111 that was lost near Tripoli and planning for follow-on strikes in the Tripoli area.

It took over a week to receive a detailed Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) from post-strike analysis. HQ USAFE RAMSTEIN and CINCUSNAVEUR reported the MIG-23/Flogger Warehouse containing MIG-23 spare parts including 6 crated MIGs had been destroyed. It was also reported that “more than seventy died in the Benghazi Army Barracks Facility”. It further reported that “Twenty-One people were killed at Benina Airfield, the majority being sentries around key facilities”.

Post-strike US media reporting was very positive for the Reagan administration’s decision to respond to the Berlin Disco bombing with the massive USN/USAF retaliatory strike. This was very good for morale as we spent the remaining months of the deployment at a high state of readiness ready for additional strikes if necessary.
As soon as possible after the strike each Blaster Crew provided individual lessons learned. These provided the basis for programmatic recommendations to Pentagon Staff that were debriefed in the Fall of 1986 by the Skipper.

Pentagon Debrief

After the deployment the Blaster Skipper was invited to the Pentagon to brief programmatic staff on the strike and identify issues that should be addressed for future A-6 improvements/updates. Items discussed included:

- **Navigation.** The current Inertial Navigation System (INS), was not up to the task to serve as an accurate, standalone navigation input especially with carrier alignments. The mission did not use navigation updates (none were available) and depended on Blaster One’s INS to get the entire strike package to the IP which was just a point in the Mediterranean Sea 60 nm off the coast of Benghazi. It was strongly suggested to include the developing NAVSTAR (GPS) satellite navigation system to future upgrades.

- The Intel image products supplied just days prior to the strike to the air wing mission planners were using the new WGS-84 Geodetic System (unbeknownst to the planners). This caused coordinate errors with the Defense Mapping Agency (DMA) paper charts using older WGS and local (European Datum) geodetic systems and the Intruder whose DIANE fire control system actually used “flat earth”. It was requested to include MILSPEC 1760 (this defined the WGS-84 geodetic system in DoD aircraft) in future upgrades and also have DMA upgrade paper charts to conform to WGS-84 (DMA updated their charts Jan 1, 1987).

- **After the strike there was a request for infrared video (FLIR) tape for senior leadership and the press. This revealed the shortcomings in the 1950’s vintage A-6 tape recorder system. First the location was in the “bird cage,” (an avionics bay located in the tail of the aircraft) which required tail over deck to load/unload. Second the record**
time was very short (about 15 min with FLIR) so when the tape was full the B/N could not replace the tape. In the F-111, the recorder was in the cockpit and used standard ¾” video tape. The A-6 system was unique in that the tapes could not be reviewed on any standard video playback. The A-6 tape playback machines were only available in the Carrier Intelligence Center (CVIC) on each carrier and at the A-6 training squadrons at Oceana, VA and Whidbey Island, WA. The only FLIR tape available post-strike was provided by the F-111s against the Tripoli targets.

The only item addressed while the A-6 was in service was a separate rack was added to the CVIC playback device that allowed FLIR video to be transferred from the 2” reel tape to a ¾’ cassette, playable on any commercial ¾” VCR device. The A-6F/A-12 would have most assuredly been MILSTD-1760 compliant and would have incorporated GPS in the navigation system and a state of the art video recorder if they had made it “to the fleet”!

Benghazi Target Views Today (Google Earth)