

A-6s I Have Known and Loved

By Stephen Coonts

I first met Grumman's A-6 *Intruder* on a hot summer afternoon in 1969 at NAS Kingsville, Texas, where I was a student in the Advanced Training Command. As I did every Sunday, I visited the flight line to see if any interesting planes had flown in over the weekend.

My first A-6 had a battery as dead as Julius Caesar. Two hung-over Marines trying to get back to Cherry Point, N.C., were pumping vigorously on a handle jammed in a socket in the nose wheel well to open the canopy. That done, they let me look in the cockpit of their dead steed. With all the buttons, knobs, switches, dials and gauges, the cockpit looked as complicated as the spacecraft that had taken Neil Armstrong to the moon a few days earlier. I definitely wanted something simpler when I got to the fleet. Switches and knobs weren't my thing. I also didn't like the fact that a bombardier navigator (BN) sat right beside the pilot. It would be like hauling your grandmother around, I thought.

The worst of it was the way the plane looked. There was no getting around the fact that it didn't have much sex appeal. Nope, I decided. A-6s weren't for me. An A-7 *Corsair II* would fit my pistol, or even an A-4 *Skyhawk*. Or an F-8 *Crusader*. Something sexy, fast and without too many gadgets or gizmos.

Of course, when I got my orders, there it was in mimeograph blue: A-6s.

I met my next *Intruders* at Attack Squadron (VA) 128 at NAS Whidbey Island, Wash. The A-6 I remember most clearly from those days was one I flew on my first night low-level mission in the mountains of central Oregon. The instructor BN had been watching me fly terrain avoidance with steely

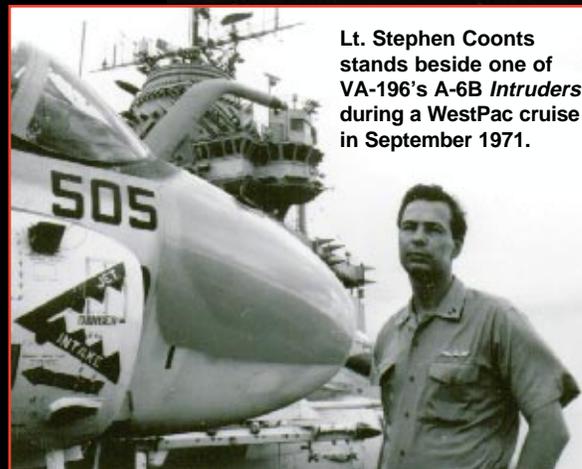
intensity for about 20 minutes when he decided to leave me to my own devices while he typed another way point into the computer. I relaxed.

Then I noted a disturbing vector symbol on the Vertical Display Indicator. Out of the corner of my eye, I could just glimpse a bit of late evening sky lining a ridge ahead, well above me. I pulled the stick back into my lap and slammed the throttles forward to the stops just as the radar altimeter warning went off. The Gs almost broke the instructor BN's neck.

When I was finally able to recover, the plane was at 11,000 feet, my heart was thumping two beats a second, and I was terrified. The BN was a pro. Massaging his sore neck, he got me calmed down and back en route. Both of us were years older but much wiser.

Then there was the A-6 I landed at Fallon Municipal Airport in Nevada instead of NAS Fallon, a classic "misidentification of the airport" error. That was on my first night visual dive-bombing mission in VA-196. What a stud I was then! I had this A-6 stuff smoothed and grooved and in one sock. The squadron flight surgeon wanted to go for a night dive-bombing hop and my BN wanted to go to Mom's Casino, so I said, "Why not?"

After mistakenly parking my trusty A-6 amid the Cessnas at the Fallon airport, I finally got back to the BOQ about midnight. My CO and the air group commander were not happy, yet all I got was a good tongue lashing and a "pathfinder" award at the end-of-deployment all-



Lt. Stephen Coonts stands beside one of VA-196's A-6B *Intruders* during a WestPac cruise in September 1971.

officers meeting. Today, I fear, a similar dumb stunt would get the fledgling pilot canned. Times were simpler then. In 1970, the heavies understood they were training combat crews, not airline pilots.

Even though many years have passed, I vividly recall the A-6s I flew in combat. They were splattered with green preservative, dirty, greasy and the greatest airplanes ever made. Easy to fly and relatively easy to land aboard ship, they carried me and hundreds of other scared kids into combat and brought us home—most of the time. Although the bombing system in the A-6A was a maintenance nightmare, when it worked we



PH2 William R. Curtsinger

dropped bombs in any weather, day or night, with state-of-the-art accuracy. And when the system didn't work, we still had a first-class dive-bomber—one as good as the man at the stick.

I met my first A-6E at VA-128 in 1973. It was brand new, with just 10 hours on the clock. It smelled like a new car and looked just as pretty. The computer and radar worked with Swiss watch reliability. We thought we had reached the zenith of man's technological capability.

I flew my last A-6 in September 1975. That day, with orders in hand to *Nimitz* (CVN 68), I suspected this might be the last time I sat at an *Intruder's* controls. After 1,600 hours in A-6s, I did four touch and goes, just to make the final flight last a little longer. Then I made a full stop, taxied in, parked her and walked away into the rest of my life.

The people and the emotions of that great A-6 adventure I have

carried with me every day since. Faces of young men I shared cockpits with, windy mornings on the flight deck at sea, the smell of sweat and fear and jet exhaust embedded in my flight gear, the terror of night cat shots, being so scared when I manned up for night low-levels over North Vietnam that I almost vomited, the exhilaration of being shot at and missed (and occasionally hit), riotous liberties, the fiery trail of a surface-to-air missile at night zeroing in, movies in the ready room, poker games, nightmares about being shot down. I have only to close my eyes and all of it, the good and the bad, comes back as fresh as yesterday.

I grew up in the Navy. For good or ill, the people I knew there and the times we shared made me the man I am. The A-6 symbolizes that part of my life. I never see a photo or painting of an *Intruder* without pausing for a moment to

study it and reflect.

Fifteen years after my last A-6 flight with the stick in my hand, I had a chance to meet an A-6 up close and personal one more time. In the summer of 1990 I flew as a passenger in an A-6E TRAM (Target Recognition and Multisensor) bird at NAS Oceana, Va. My dominant impressions of that flight were a sense of freedom and the joy of being alive, as the pilot skillfully and smoothly flew us along a visual flight rules navigation route and dropped a few bombs on a target.

What an extraordinary adventure A-6s were, and I had the marvelous good fortune to be a part of it! A-6s will fly in my memory as long as I draw breath. ✈

Stephen Coonts is the author of six best-selling novels: *Flight of the Intruder*, *Final Flight*, *The Minotaur*, *Under Siege*, *The Red Horseman* and *The Intruders*.