

# America's Flagship: A History of USS Constellation (CVA/CV 64)

By Mike Weeks

The keel of the second *Kitty Hawk*-class attack aircraft carrier (CVA), hull number 64, was laid on 14 September 1957 at New York Naval Shipyard, Brooklyn, N.Y. She had been named *Constellation* on 7 November 1956. Christened by Mrs. Christian A. Herter, wife of the Secretary of State, the carrier was launched on 8 October 1960. Tragedy struck the ship on 19 December when a catastrophic fire caused the loss of 50 workers and \$75 million in damages. Following a seven-month delay, she was commissioned on 27 October 1961 as the nation's 16th active CVA, Captain Thomas J. Walker III commanding.

Following fitting out and acceptance trials, *Constellation* departed her home port of Norfolk, Va., on 7 February 1962 for initial air operations off the Virginia Capes. She conducted her first catapult launch and arrested landing the same day with Commander George C. Watkins, air group (CVG) 13 commander, at the controls of an A4D-2 Skyhawk of Attack Squadron 34. After a month of operating locally, *Connie* conducted a two-month shakedown cruise in the Caribbean.

In summer 1962, *Constellation* was transferred to the Pacific Fleet and CVG-13 was disestablished. For the two-month trip around Cape





PH3 Kristi Earl

**Facing page, *Constellation* nears completion at the Brooklyn Naval Shipyard in 1961. Above, the carrier's 40-year history concluded with a memorable final cruise, which included Operations Southern Watch, Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.**

Horn to her new home port of San Diego, Calif., *Connie* embarked elements of CVG-5 and departed Mayport, Fla., on 25 July. In November *Constellation*, with CVG-14 on board, commenced workup exercises for her upcoming maiden deployment to the western Pacific as a component of the U.S. Seventh Fleet. The uneventful cruise took place from February to September 1963.

*Constellation's* second deployment began on 5 May 1964. She relieved *Kitty Hawk* (CVA 63) on station in the Gulf of Tonkin off Vietnam on 8 June, and embarked Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 14 (air groups had been redesignated air wings on 20 December 1963) flew armed photoreconnaissance missions over Laos until 13 July. Following an upkeep period at Subic Bay, P.R., *Constellation* reached Hong Kong for a port visit on 27 July, but within a few days was called back into action.

Following an attack by three North Vietnamese torpedo boats on the destroyers *Maddox* (DD 731) and *Turner Joy*

(DD 951) on 2 August in international waters, *Constellation* got underway to return to the Gulf of Tonkin. Further word was received of a second attack on the destroyers on 4 August. That day, *Connie* launched F-4B Phantom IIs to provide air cover over the destroyers, and on 5 August launched retaliatory air strikes on North Vietnamese naval bases and vessels. CVW-14 lost two aviators, one killed in action (KIA) and the other taken as a prisoner of war (POW). Operations returned to a more normal cycle for the remainder of the deployment, and *Constellation* returned to San Diego on 1 February 1965, ending a nearly nine-month cruise. *Connie* and CVW-14 were awarded a Navy Unit Commendation (NUC) for the early August operations.

*Constellation's* first shipyard period followed, lasting eight months; then workups commenced for her first full-blown war cruise. The carrier, with CVW-15 on board, was underway for operations off Vietnam in May 1966.



During 111 days on station, *Constellation's* aircraft pounded roads, bridges and other targets, attempting to impede the flow of men and war materials south. The F-4B aircrew of pilot Lieutenant William M. McGunigan and radar intercept officer Lieutenant (jg) Robert M. Fowler from Fighter Squadron (VF) 161 shot down a MiG-17 on 13 July, marking the ship's first MiG kill of the war. *Connie* returned to San Diego in December after her seven-month combat cruise, having lost 16 aircrewmen and 15 aircraft. Subsequently, both *Constellation* and CVW-15 were awarded an NUC for this deployment.

After a short workup cycle, *Constellation's* third combat deployment commenced in April 1967. With CVW-14 embarked, the carrier operated first on Dixie Station off South Vietnam with strikes in the Iron Triangle region, and then moved north to Yankee Station

**A KA-3B Skywarrior prepares to launch from *Constellation* operating off Vietnam on 26 August 1967.**

for a total of 121 days on the line. Reflecting the intensive nature of air operations, F-4Bs of VFs 142 and 143 accounted for four MiG kills. The eight-month deployment ended in December, having totaled losses of 16 aircraft and 20 personnel, including 7 KIAs and 8 POWs. Both the carrier and CVW-14 received an NUC.

Returning to Vietnam in May 1968 after six months stateside, the *Constellation*/CVW-14 team was restricted to strikes below the 20th parallel of North Vietnam as a result of a March presidential order. This was followed by a complete halt to strikes over the north on 1 November. *Connie* spent 128 days on the line, flying more than 11,000 combat and support missions and dropping almost 20,000 tons of ordnance. Fifteen aircraft were destroyed, nine due to enemy action. Six aircrew members perished, five were listed as KIAs and three

were taken as POWs. The eight-month deployment ended in January 1969.

By August, it was time for *Connie* to return to Vietnam for a fifth combat deployment, again with CVW-14. Following an initial 20-day period of supporting strikes in South Vietnam as well as Laos, *Constellation* sailed to Defender Station in the Sea of Japan, which had been created as a result of increased tensions on the Korean Peninsula. A return to Yankee Station on 1 November also produced a major milestone in the carrier's life when the F-4J aircrew of air wing skipper Cdr. R. K. Billings and Ltjg. Jeff Taylor of VF-143 conducted *Connie's* 100,000th arrested landing. During a mission on 28 March 1970, the VF-142 F-4 crew of Lts. Jerome E. Beaulier and Steven J. Barkley downed a North Vietnamese MiG-21. Following a total of 128 days on the line, *Connie's* nine-month deployment ended in May, with CVW-14 suffering the loss of seven total aircraft, five to enemy action. One aircrewman was taken as a POW, but there were no fatalities.

Upon her return *Constellation* began a nine-month major shipyard overhaul, her second since commissioning. In spring 1971 she welcomed aboard a new air wing, CVW-9, and departed San Diego on 1 October for what would become a historic combat deployment. Air operations commenced with strikes against mainly logistic targets in Laos as well as reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam into 1972. On 19 January, the VF-96 F-4 Phantom crew of Lt. Randall H. Cunningham and Ltjg. William P. Driscoll scored a kill against a MiG-21, the first for a Navy aircraft since *Connie's* VF-142 kill on 28 March 1970. The carrier was nearing the end of her scheduled deployment when her tour was extended to meet the threat posed by the North Vietnamese "Easter Offensive" of 2 April 1972.

Initial air strikes in support of ground troops were followed by a new, more intensive series of air strikes against major targets in North Vietnam. On 8 May, the same VF-96 aircrew team of Cunningham and Driscoll scored against a MiG-17. Then on 10 May, Cunningham and Driscoll downed three MiG-17s, becoming the first aces of the Vietnam war. Three more MiG-17s were downed by two other VF-96 crews, two by Lts. Michael J. Connelly and Thomas J. Blonski and one by Lt. Steven C. Shoemaker and Ltjg. Keith V. Crenshaw. Adding to the score, VF-92 aircrew Lt. Curt Dose and Lieutenant Commander James McDevitt

downed a MiG-21. All told, *Constellation* fliers downed seven MiGs on 10 May. The nine-month deployment ended on 1 July, the carrier having spent 154 days off Vietnam. Seven aircraft were lost, two aircrewmen were reported KIA and two became POWs. The *Connie*/CVW-9 team received the Presidential Unit Citation for their outstanding efforts.

In January 1973, *Constellation* headed back to Southeast Asia. The Vietnam Peace Accords took effect on 28 January, but CVW-9 aircraft continued to strike targets in Laos until a cease-fire in that country was called on 21 February. Thus *Connie*, which had been on station at the beginning of combat operations in Vietnam in 1964, was on station at the end, nine years later. The remainder of the nine-month deployment consisted largely of flights in support of mine-clearing operations in North Vietnam.

Upon her return in October 1973, *Constellation* enjoyed a nine-month workup cycle, and departed in

*continued on page 16*



**Above, special events aboard *Constellation* included the wedding of BM3 R. Stroud in the carrier's forecabin on 14 February 1971. Left, Lt. Randy Cunningham and Ltjg. William P. Driscoll discuss their first MiG kill in early 1972. The F-4 Phantom aircrew would become the first aces of the Vietnam War.**



## USS Constellation (CVA/CV 64) Major Deployments

This list provides the squadron number, type of aircraft and tail code. The tail codes include the first number of the series; the remaining series numbers are indicated by Xs.

### Caribbean Shakedown (CVG-13)

03 Mar–06 May 1962

VF-131	F3H-2	AE1xx
VF-132	F8U-2N	AE2xx
VA-133	A4D-2	AE3xx
VA-134	A4D-2	AE4xx
VA-135	AD-6	AE5xx
VAH-10	A3D-2	AE6xx
VAW-12 Det 64	WF-2	GE70x
VFP-62 Det 64	F8U-1P	GA90x
HU-2 Det 64	HUP-2	Hxx

### Western Pacific (CVG-14)

21 Feb–10 Sep 1963

VF-141	F-8E	NK1xx
VAH-10	A-3B	NK2xx
VF-143	F-4B	NK3xx
VA-144	A-4C	NK4xx
VA-145	A-1H/J	NK5xx
VA-146	A-4C	NK6xx
VAW-11 Det F	E-1B	RR78x
VFP-63 Det F	RF-8A	PP90x
HU-1 Det 1	UH-25B	UP5

### Western Pacific/Vietnam (CVW-14)

05 May 1964–01 Feb 1965

VAH-10	A-3B	NK1xx
VF-142	F-4B	NK2xx
VF-143	F-4B	NK3xx
VA-144	A-4C	NK4xx
VA-145	A-1H/J	NK5xx
VA-146	A-4C	NK6xx
VAW-11 Det F	E-1B	RR78x
VFP-63 Det F	RF-8A	PP90x
HU-1 Det 1	UH-25B	UP5

### Vietnam (CVW-15)

12 May–03 Dec 1966

VF-151	F-4B	NL1xx
VF-161	F-4B	NL2xx
VA-153	A-4C	NL3xx
VA-65	A-6A	NL4xx
VA-155	A-4E	NL5xx
VAH-8	A-3B	NL6xx
RVAH-6	RA-5C	NL70x
VAW-11 Det D	E-2A	NL75x
VAW-13 Det 1	EA-1F	VR7xx
HC-1 Det 1	UH-2A	UP31

### Vietnam (CVW-14)

29 Apr–04 Dec 1967

VAH-8	KA-3B	NK1xx
RVAH-12	RA-5C	NK12x

VF-142	F-4B	NK2xx
VF-143	F-4B	NK3xx
VA-196	A-6A	NK4xx
VA-55	A-4C	NK5xx
VA-146	A-4C	NK6xx
VAW-113	E-2A	NK75x
VAW-13 Det 1	EA-1F	VR77x
HC-1 Det 64	UH-2A	UP41

### Vietnam (CVW-14)

29 May 1968–31 Jan 1969

VAW-13 Det 64*	EKA-3B	NK10x
VAH-2 Det 64**	KA-3B	NK11x
RVAH-5	RA-5C	NK12x
VF-142	F-4B	NK2xx
VF-143	F-4B	NK3xx
VA-196	A-6A	NK4xx
VA-97	A-7A	NK5xx
VA-27	A-7A	NK6xx
VAW-113	E-2A	NK75x
HC-1 Det 64	UH-2C	UP70

\* became VAQ-130 on 01 Oct.

\*\* became VAQ-132 on 01 Nov.

### Vietnam (CVW-14)

11 Aug 1969–08 May 1970

HC-1 Det 5	SH-3A	NK00x
VAW-113	E-2A	NK01x
VF-143	F-4J	NK1xx
VF-142	F-4J	NK2xx
VA-97	A-7A	NK3xx
VA-27	A-7A	NK4xx
VA-85	A-6A	NK5xx
RVAH-7	RA-5C	NK60x
VAQ-133	EKA-3B	NK61x

### Vietnam (CVW-9)

01 Oct 1971–01 Jul 1972

HC-1 Det 3	SH-3G	NG00x
VAW-116	E-2B	NG01x
VF-96	F-4J	NG1xx
VF-92	F-4J	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6A	NG5xx
RVAH-11	RA-5C	NG60x
VAQ-130	EKA-3B	NG61x

### Vietnam/Western Pacific (CVW-9)

05 Jan–11 Oct 1973

HS-6 Det 1	SH-3G	NG00x
VAW-116	E-2B	NG01x
VF-96	F-4J	NG1xx

VF-92	F-4J	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6A	NG5xx
RVAH-12	RA-5C	NG60x
VAQ-134	EA-6B	NG61x

### Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-9)

21 Jun–23 Dec 1974

VAW-116	E-2B	NG01x
VF-96	F-4J	NG1xx
VF-92	F-4J	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6A	NG5xx
RVAH-5	RA-5C	NG60x
VAQ-131	EA-6B	NG61x
HS-6	SH-3A	NG73x

### Western Pacific (CVW-9)

12 Apr–21 Nov 1977

VF-211	F-14A	NG1xx
VF-24	F-14A	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6E	NG5xx
VAW-126	E-2C	NG60x
VFP-63 Det 1	RF-8G	NG61x
VAQ-132	EA-6B	NG62x
VS-21	S-3A	NG7xx
HS-6	SH-3A	NG72x

### Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-9)

26 Sep 1978–17 May 1979

VF-211	F-14A	NG1xx
VF-24	F-14A	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6E	NG5xx
VAW-126	E-2C	NG60x
VFP-63 Det 3	RF-8G	NG61x
VAQ-132	EA-6B	NG62x
VS-37	S-3A	NG7xx
HS-6	SH-3D	NG72x

### Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-9)

26 Feb–15 Oct 1980

VF-211	F-14A	NG1xx
VF-24	F-14A	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6E	NG5xx
VAW-116	E-2C	NG60x

VFP-63 Det 1	RF-8G	NG61x
VS-38	S-3A	NG7xx
HS-6	SH-3H	NG72x
VRC-50 Det	C-2A	RGxx

**Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-9)**

20 Oct 1981–23 May 1982

VF-211	F-14A	NG1xx
VF-24	F-14A	NG2xx
VA-146	A-7E	NG3xx
VA-147	A-7E	NG4xx
VA-165	A-6E	NG5xx
VAW-112	E-2C	NG60x
VAQ-134	EA-6B	NG60x
VS-38	S-3A	NG7xx
HS-8	SH-3H	NG72x
VRC-50 Det	C-2A	RGxx

**Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-14)**

21 Feb–24 Aug 1985

VF-154	F-14A	NK1xx
VF-21	F-14A	NK2xx
VFA-113	F/A-18A	NK3xx
VFA-25	F/A-18A	NK4xx
VA-196	A-6E	NK5xx
VAQ-139	EA-6B	NK60x
VAW-113	E-2C	NK60x
HS-8	SH-3H	NK61x
VS-37	S-3A	NK7xx
VRC-50 Det	C-2A	RG4xx

**Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-14)**

(Operation Ernest Will)

11 Apr–12 Oct 1987

Same as previous cruise.

**Western Pacific/Indian Ocean (CVW-14)**

01 Dec 1988–01 Jun 1989

Same as previous cruise.

**Post-SLEP Caribbean****Shakedown (CVW-17)**

04 Mar–08 Apr 1993

VF-74	F-14B	AA1xx
VA-35	A-6E	AA5xx
VAW-125	E-2C	AA60x
VAQ-132	EA-6B	AA62x
VS-30	S-3B	AA7xx
HC-16 Det	SH-3H	BFxx
VRC-40 Det	C-2A	JKxx

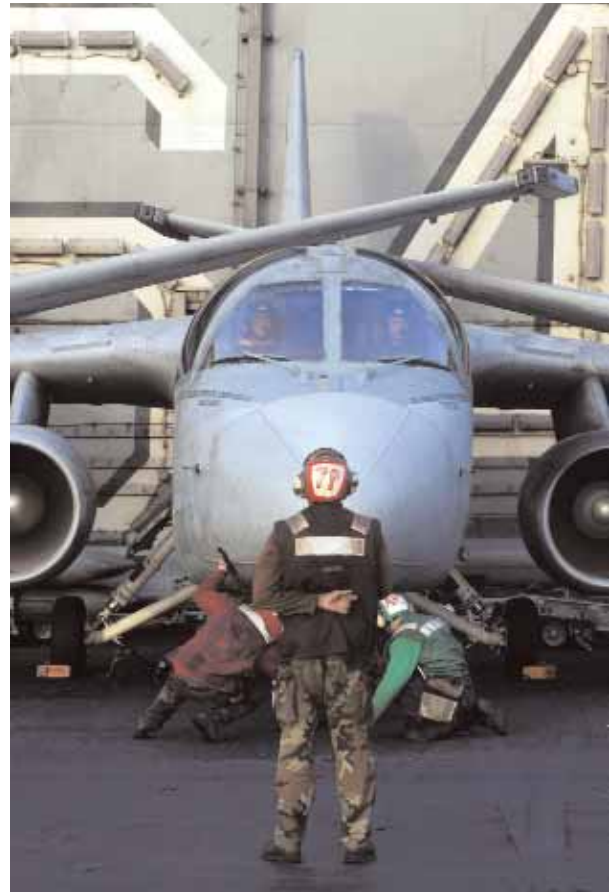
**Korea/Arabian Gulf (CVW-2)**

(Operation Southern Watch)

10 Nov 1994–10 May 1995

VF-2	F-14D	NE1xx
VMFA-323	F/A-18C	NE2xx
VFA-151	F/A-18C	NE3xx
VFA-137	F/A-18C	NE4xx

**Maintenance personnel prepare an S-3B Viking for morning flight operations in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom on 23 March 2003.**



VAW-116	E-2C	NE60x	VFA-137	F/A-18C	NE4xx
HS-2	SH-60F	NE61x	VAW-116	E-2C	NE60x
	HH-60H	NE61x	HS-2	SH-60F	NE61x
VAQ-131	EA-6B	NE62x		HH-60H	NE61x
VS-38	S-3B	NE7xx	VAQ-131	EA-6B	NE62x
VQ-5 Det D	ES-3A	NE72x	VS-38	S-3B	NE7xx
VRC-30 Det 2	C-2A	RW3x	VRC-30 Det 3	C-2A	NE3x

**Arabian Gulf (CVW-2)**

(Operation Southern Watch)

01 Apr–01 Oct 1997

VF-2	F-14D	NE1xx
VMFA-323	F/A-18C	NE2xx
VFA-151	F/A-18C	NE3xx
VFA-137	F/A-18C	NE4xx
VAW-116	E-2C	NE60x
HS-2	SH-60F	NE61x
	HH-60H	NE61x
VAQ-131	EA-6B	NE62x
VS-38	S-3B	NE7xx
VQ-5 Det C	ES-3A	NE72x
VRC-30 Det 3	C-2A	RW3x

**Korea/Arabian Gulf (CVW-2)**

(Operation Southern Watch)

18 Jun–17 Dec 1999

VF-2	F-14D	NE1xx
VMFA-323	F/A-18C	NE2xx
VFA-151	F/A-18C	NE3xx

**Arabian Gulf (CVW-2)**

(Operation Southern Watch)

16 Mar–15 Sep 2001

VF-2	F-14D	NE1xx
VMFA-323	F/A-18C	NE2xx
VFA-151	F/A-18C	NE3xx
VFA-137	F/A-18C	NE4xx
VAW-116	E-2C	NE60x
HS-2	SH-60F	NE61x
	HH-60H	NE61x
VAQ-131	EA-6B	NE62x
VS-38	S-3B	NE7xx
VRC-30 Det 2	C-2A	NE3x

**Arabian Gulf (CVW-2)**

(Operation Iraqi Freedom)

02 Nov 2002–02 Jun 2003

Same as previous cruise.



June 1974 for her first peacetime deployment in 10 years. On 23 November, she became the first carrier to enter the Arabian Gulf since 1949. The six-month cruise ended on 23 December 1975.

A 14-month major overhaul and upgrade at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, Wash., commenced in February 1974, during which *Constellation* was modified to reflect the Navy's new multipurpose air, surface and antisubmarine warfare role for carriers. She was redesignated a CV on 30 June 1975. With the overhaul completed in April 1976, *Connie* could now operate both the new S-3A Viking and F-14A Tomcat. However, the workups uncovered problems, and a 26-day drydocking in late 1976 at Long Beach Naval Shipyard, Calif., was required. The highlight for the remaining workup cycle was participation in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) multinational exercises held in and around the Hawaiian Islands. An uneventful April to November 1977 deployment, *Connie's* tenth, to the Far East followed.

*Constellation's* next deployment, from September 1978 to May 1979, was originally scheduled to end in March but was extended due to her sortie into the Indian

**Above, an impressive variety of aircraft types is visible on *Constellation's* flight deck in December 1978 during her 11th deployment.**

Ocean in reaction to a political crisis in Yemen. Following a relatively short eight-month turnaround cycle, she was underway again in February 1980. After participating in RIMPAC exercises, *Constellation* steamed

westward to the Arabian Sea, where Gonzo Station had been established following the November 1979 takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran. *Connie* had reached the eastern Indian Ocean when the unsuccessful 24 April 1980 raid to free American hostages took place, and she relieved *Coral Sea* (CV 43) on Gonzo Station on 1 May. This at-sea period would last a record-setting 110 days. The deployment ended in mid-October.

During the 1981 workup cycle President Ronald Reagan visited *Constellation* on 20 August, and proclaimed the carrier "America's Flagship" while presenting the crew a presidential flag. An uneventful deployment to the western Pacific and Indian Ocean from October 1981 to May 1982 followed. In January 1983, *Constellation* entered the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard for a 13-month complex overhaul, during which the ship's Terrier missile system was replaced with NATO Sea Sparrow, the Phalanx Close-In Weapon



System was added and modifications were made to allow the carrier to operate the new F/A-18A Hornet strike aircraft. *Connie* deployed from February to August 1985 with CVW-14 embarked, marking the first deployment for the F/A-18.

As preparations for a 1987 deployment proceeded, it was announced that *Constellation* had earned the coveted Pacific Fleet Battle Efficiency Award (Battle E) for the 18-month period ending on 30 June 1986. During an April to October 1987 deployment, *Connie* conducted air operations in support of Operation Earnest Will, the escorting of reflagged Kuwaiti tankers in the Arabian Gulf as a result of Iranian attacks against international shipping. Following a 14-month turnaround period stateside, the *Connie*/CVW-14 team deployed on 1 December 1988 for the Indian Ocean. This uneventful deployment ended six months later at San Diego on 1 June 1989.

With CVW-9 embarked, *Connie* departed San Diego on 12 February 1990 for the East Coast. Following exercises with the air forces of several South American countries while en route and preparations at Norfolk, Va., *Constellation* entered Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, Pa., in July to begin a \$800-million, three-year Service Life

Extension Program (SLEP). Completed in March 1993, the SLEP was a cross between new construction and a comprehensive overhaul, designed to add 15 years to the carrier's operational life. *Constellation* conducted her post-SLEP shakedown with a number of CVW-17 squadrons then moored at Mayport, Fla., on 8 April. With CVW-2 assigned, *Connie* departed Mayport on 29 May and conducted exercises with various South American air forces while en route to San Diego, where she arrived on 22 July 1993.

During May–June 1994 *Connie* and CVW-2 participated in RIMPAC exercises, and on 10 November departed San Diego for an extended deployment for the first time in six years. Exercises off Okinawa were followed by a number of exercises off Korea—a region that had once again become the focus of world attention with the news that North Korea was attempting to develop nuclear weapons. On 11 January 1995, the *Constellation* battle group entered the Arabian Gulf to take up station in support of Operation Southern Watch (OSW), enforcing the “no-fly” zone over southern Iraq. The six-month deployment concluded with her return to San Diego on 10 May. *Constellation's* next deployment, from 1 April to 1 October 1997, included a return to the Arabian Gulf for OSW activities, now under operational control of the Fifth Fleet. In over 10 weeks of operating in the gulf, CVW-2 flew more than 4,400 sorties, with well over 1,000 sorties in direct support of OSW.

As *Connie* prepared for her 1999 deployment, tensions were once again rising on the Korean Peninsula following an exchange of gunfire between North and South Korean vessels. *Constellation* departed San Diego on 18 June 1999 for the Korean Peninsula to monitor the situation. On 28 August, she entered the Arabian Gulf and in 10 weeks conducted more than 5,000 sorties and 1,256 OSW sorties. This period was highlighted by air strikes against two Iraqi radar stations and an attempt by VF-2 to engage an Iraqi jet with the long-range Phoenix air-to-air missile on 14 September. CVW-2 aircraft engaged in nine specific ordnance-dropping air strikes while in the Arabian Gulf. The battle group departed the gulf on 5 November and was home for the holidays on 17 December. At year's end, *Constellation* was awarded her second Battle E as the Pacific Fleet's best carrier for the 12-month reporting period.

*Constellation's* 20th deployment began on 16 March 2001. She entered the Arabian Gulf on 30 April and immediately commenced operations in support of OSW. On 13 May Capt. John W. Miller assumed command as *Connie's* 30th skipper, and her last. She ceased OSW operations on 4 August, having conducted multiple air strikes in response to Iraqi violations of the no-fly zone. On 11 September *Connie* was approaching Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to take on board dependents for the traditional Tiger Cruise on the final leg to San Diego, when word was received of the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Despite discussions about turning the battle





Facing page, clockwise from bottom: a rainbow graces *Connie's* island as she returns from her final deployment. During the carrier's 7 August 2003 decommissioning ceremony, her colors are lowered for the last time, and Command Master Chief Mark D. Hayes presents CO Capt. John W. Miller with the ship's commissioning pennant. *Constellation* was designated a night carrier for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Left, aviation ordnancemen load Joint Direct Attack Munitions onto an F/A-18 Hornet, and a Hornet launches for an OIF mission, above.

PH2 Charles E. Alvarado

group around, the carrier was allowed to complete her regularly scheduled deployment. *Connie* arrived in San Diego on 15 September and celebrated her 40th birthday the next month.

Following an abbreviated turnaround cycle, *Constellation* prepared for her final deployment and the opportunity to fight in the global war on terrorism. She departed on 2 November 2002 and was soon supporting Operation Enduring Freedom; on 17 December she


entered the Arabian Gulf to begin OSW missions. By 20 March 2003, with two carriers in the eastern Mediterranean and three in the gulf, Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced. *Connie* was designated a night carrier and remained on station throughout the major ground combat phase. She launched more than 1,500 sorties and CVW-2 aircraft delivered over 1.7 million pounds of ordnance. While one aircraft was lost in an operational mishap, there were no fatalities.

PH2 Charles E. Alvarado



PH2 Prince A. Hughes III

*Connie* departed the gulf on 17 April and steamed for San Diego for the last time. On 1 June a Sea Control Squadron 38 S-3B Viking crewed by Lt. Hartley Postlethwaite, Ltjg. Arthur Gutting and CO Capt. Miller recorded *Connie's* 395,710th and final arrested landing. Her 21st and final deployment ended the next day.

On 7 August 2003, *Constellation's* commissioning pennant was hauled down and her deck log closed. Her legacy might best be remembered today in the words of President Ronald Reagan from 1981: "Let friend and foe alike know that America has the muscle to back up its words, and ships like this and men like you are that muscle . . . you are America's Flagship." 

Mr. Weeks, a former naval reservist, is a contributing editor to *The Hook* magazine and an avid Naval Aviation researcher. He extends special thanks to the Naval Aviation History and Archives Branch of the Naval Historical Center; Lt. Wendy Snyder, *Connie's* Public Affairs Officer; and the Tailhook Association for assisting with this article.



Capt. Faris P. Farwell