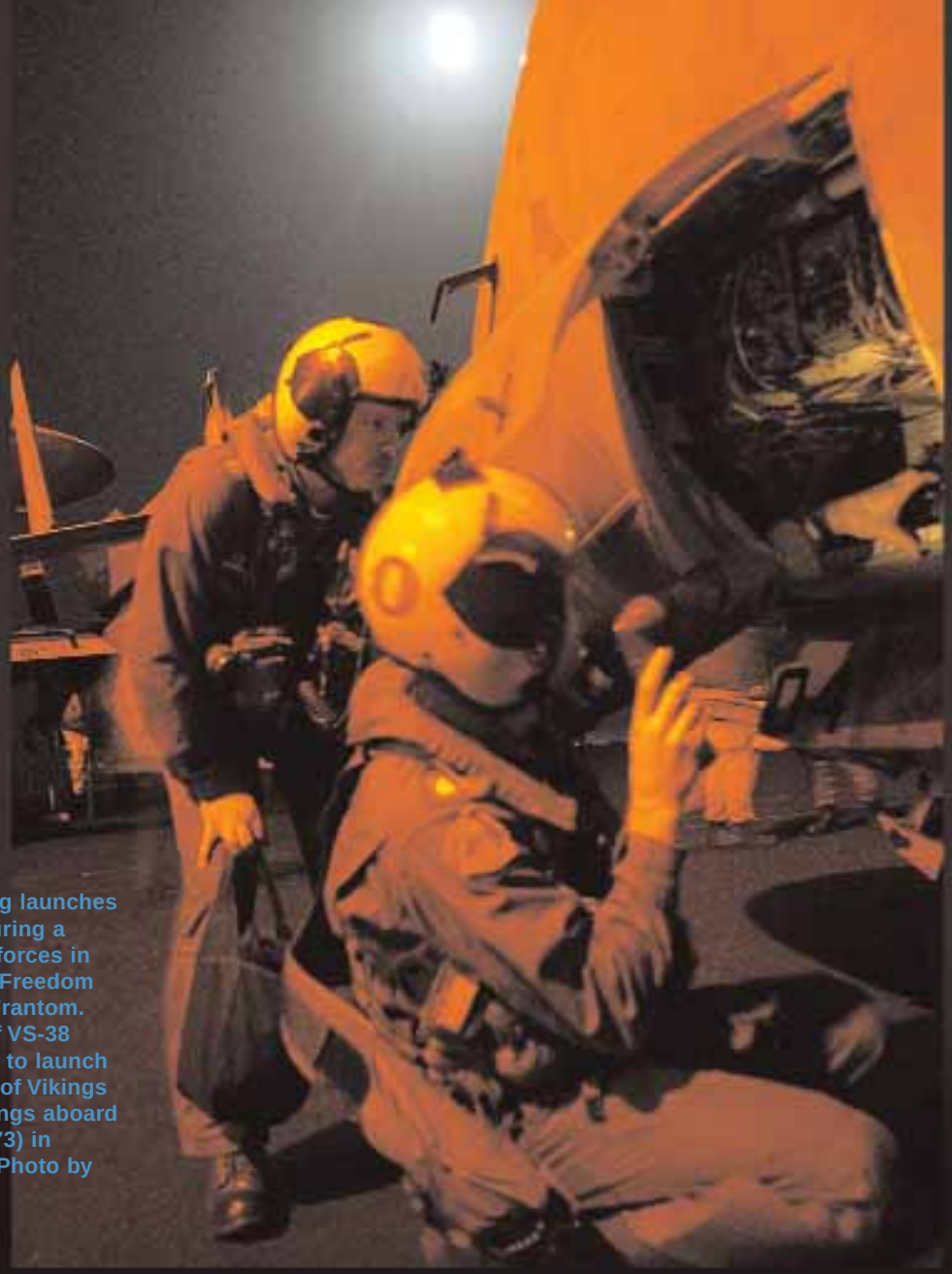
S-3B VIKING: WAR HOOVER

By Cdr. Chris Buhlmann

As the S-3B Viking moves through its first and expected last decade of the 21st century, it does so bearing the strongest set of warfighting and tactical support capabilities of its career. The platform has overcome system deficiencies and funding issues to find itself in a transforming role. The S-3B has enough depth of capability to ensure a successful transition to the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet/Joint Strike Fighter air wings of the future.

The career of the S-3 has been one of quiet professionalism. Today, the S-3B provides an air wing with its most advanced capabilities yet, due mostly to the Viking's Maverick Plus Stand-off Land Attack Missile system. The past two years have seen a marked contribution of the platform to the total force potential of the air wing.



Facing page, an S-3B Viking launches from *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) during a deployment with coalition forces in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Photo by PH3 Todd Frantom. Right, aircrew personnel of VS-38 preflight their aircraft prior to launch during OIF. Below, a brace of Vikings from VS-31 spread their wings aboard *George Washington* (CVN 73) in preparation for a mission. Photo by PHAN Janice Kreischer.

Above, an S-3B Viking of VS-22 refuels an F/A-18 Hornet from Strike Fighter Squadron 105 during combat operations from *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Photo by Cdr. Thomas Lalor.

S-3B Squadron Deactivation Plan

VS-21	February 2005
VS-22	January 2009
VS-24	January 2007
VS-30	December 2005
VS-31	May 2008
VS-32	May 2007
VS-33	September 2007
VS-35	March 2005
VS-41 (FRS)	September 2007
Commander Sea Control Wing, U.S. Pacific Fleet	September 2005
Commander Sea Control Wing, U.S. Atlantic Fleet	January 2009
Sea Control Weapons School	September 2007
Weapons Training Unit	March 2006

Data as of 27 Apr 04 via Commander Sea Control Wing, U.S. Pacific Fleet.

During Operation Enduring Freedom, S-3Bs provided strike mission tanker support in which the combination of two S-3B squadrons delivered fuel equivalent to that of three KC-135 Stratotankers per day, every day. With the Air Force having only 10 KC-135s as support, the organic "Hoovers" increased fuel in the air in theater by 30 percent.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, S-3Bs worked with the Tactical Dissemination Module/Rapid Precision Targeting System run by the Combined Air Operations Center at Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia. The Vikings were able to receive nine-line information, existing satellite imagery, current imagery or streaming video for re-tasking through their Rapid Imagery to Aircraft system. This allowed the S-3B to extend itself into the sea strike definition of platforms that leverage strategic flexibility, operational independence and information superiority to take the fight to the enemy. This was never more apparent than when a Sea Control Squadron (VS) 38 S-3B Viking, working with an F/A-18C Hornet as the laser designator, destroyed the Iraqi presidential yacht with an AGM-65E Maverick. This historic event was the first overland combat strike by a Viking, and its first firing of a laser-guided missile in combat.

During an OIF review at the 2003 Tailhook Convention, one air wing commander stated that his S-3Bs were flying 30 to 33 sorties a day in tanker support with just 9 crews for his air wing alone. "We nearly flew the wings off those planes." With the stated uncertainty of "big wing" gas in these theaters of operation, the S-3B is transforming sea strike in a key axis, enabling assets and weapons to extend their reach deeper into the overland battle.

Below, an S-3B Viking assigned to VS-21 prepares to land aboard *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63). The carrier and embarked Carrier Air Wing 5 were operating with coalition forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Photo by PH3 Todd Frantom. Bottom, two VS-35 Vikings drop Rockeyes on the NAS Fallon, Nev., bombing range in January 2004.

Despite the S-3B's contributions, a sign of things to come took place on 30 April with the deactivation of VS-29 and VS-38 (see the Mar–Apr 04 issue). Eventually, the "War Hoovers" will occupy desert parking spaces next to the A-6 Intruders, A-7 Corsair IIs and F-14 Tomcats with which they served. The deactivation plan removes a Viking squadron as its air wing fills out with two complete F/A-18E/F squadrons. The plan takes place over a four-year period, with the Viking fleet readiness squadron (FRS) shutting its doors in September 2007. Already S-3 aircrew transition boards are functioning.

Though four years of planned flying still involves a lot of carrier landings and flight hours, the end of this tremendous platform will come sooner than we realize. When the S-3B is retired, the aircraft will go out on top, having helped secure the Navy's vision of the future. When the last S-3B TF-34 engine winds down on a desert tarmac, all of Naval Aviation will applaud the role the Viking has played in the history of carrier Naval Aviation.

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