



# VF-124 and the Cutlass

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These two F7U/3s of VF/124 are awaiting the start of their deployment on board the USS Hancock. All photographs in this article were obtained by Bill Spidle and Mark Nankivil from the Vought Retirees Club, unless noted otherwise.

The Chance Vought F7U Cutlass was a new and exciting advanced fighter developed in the late 1940s, with its fair share of development problems. Following initial testing by Chance Vought, the NATC and VX-4, operational testing was performed by 'Project Cutlass', a small unit which operated the fighter in 1954. The unit executed an operational evaluation of the aircraft and although none of the unit's pilots were too favourable about the F7U-3, it was accepted into fleet use. With testing done, the Cutlass was sent to operational units including VC-3, a training unit, and the first operational unit, VF-124. These two were the first two fleet units to receive the Cutlass. VF-124 received its first few aircraft from the former 'Project Cutlass' fleet on 13 October 1954. Other aircraft were delivered directly from the Chance Vought factory in Dallas (TX).

VF-124 was slated to be the first fleet unit to bring the aircraft aboard a carrier for an operational cruise. After the first few F7U-3s had been received, the unit started training with their new aircraft, trying to master 'the beast'. Initially, training flights were flown from the squadron's home base at NAS Moffett Field (CA), but in later months, the squadron also performed Carrier Qualifications on carriers off California. A few aircraft were lost in the process, like 129690 on 18 November 1954 and 129595 on 14 July 1955,

the latter during the final work-up stages for the upcoming cruise. The latter was lost in a spectacular, albeit tragic, fashion and this is the incident repeatedly illustrated in many websites, books and magazines all over the world. The aircraft was on final approach to the USS Hancock, when 129595, flown by LCDR Jay Alkire, came in just a bit too low and it struck the carrier's ramp, disintegrating in a fiery manner before crashing into the sea, unfortunately with fatal results for LCDR Alkire.

Glenn Dunham, a former plane captain with VF-124, fondly remembers the Cutlass, despite its setbacks: "My first visual impression of the Cutlass was that it was a beautiful aircraft and I couldn't wait to get my hands on her. Unfortunately, due to the growing pains, the aircraft often were in a 'down' status, but the Cutlass was special and all of the squadron members were very proud of being selected to help change the look and performance of future jet fighters. In the beginning we were assigned twelve aircraft so you can imagine what a blow it was for a jet mechanic to see a hangar full of twelve aircraft 'down' and 24 engines pulled due to mechanical problem!" Eventually, most of the initial problems were overcome and the unit reached an operational capability. Glenn continues: "Watching a Cutlass in action was a wonderful sight, especially if you were the guy in charge of



**CVG-12 composition:**

Unit	aircraft	C/O	No a/c	No of pilots	tail code
VMJ-1 Det.G	F2H-2P	CAPTR. Bloss	4	5	MW x
VC-3 Det.G	F2H-3	LCDR C. J. Lee	4	5	NPxx
VC-11 Det.G	AD-4Q	LCDR J. R. Langford	1	4	NDxx
	AD-5W		3		
VC-35 Det.G	AD-5N	LTW B. Muncie	4	5	NRxx
VC-61 Det.G	F9F-6PD	LT G. R. Mont han	3	5	PPxx
VF-121	F9F-8	CDRR. E. Rhodes	22	28	D 1xx
VF-124	F7U-3	CDR J. S. Brown	14	16	D 4xx
VA-125	AD-6	CDR B. E. Hackett	16	21	D 5xx

the VMJ-1 detachment came on board for a few months only, from 15 September until 4 December 1955.

Two F7U-3s being respotted on the deck prior to flight operations at the start of Hancock's cruise. Note the lowered barrier on the carrier's flight deck. At this stage, the aircraft are handled by flight deck personnel, not by the pilots.



keeping her fit to fly! I don't know how many gallons of aluminum polish I used in the time I worked on #401, it must have been in the hundreds but I never heard a pilot complain about her appearance."

VF-124's one and only operational Cutlass cruise was made on the USS Hancock (CVA-19), between 10 August 1955 and 15 March 1956. During the cruise, VF-124 was part of CVG-12, a Carrier Air Group with a wide variety of units assigned (see list) which boasted a grand total of 69 aircraft. On 10 August 1955, the cruise started with Hancock's departure from San Diego, and the ship headed for Hawaii. The next few weeks were spent in the waters around Hawaii. Working together for the first time, the Air Group conducted several training exercises and their stay in Hawaii was concluded with an Operational Readiness Inspection, for which they received the mark 'Good'. However, following two minor accidents, VF-124 spent

part of the time based at NAS Barbers Point, and flew 28 sorties in support of the exercise from there. A 'first' for Hancock was the launch of a Regulus missile (a kind of early cruise missile, designed by Chance Vought to operate from carriers and submarines) just prior to the ORI, these missiles were controlled by VC-61 F9F Cougars while airborne.

The first of the two minor accidents mentioned above happened on 25 August, when F7U-3 129585 suffered a collapsed starboard main landing gear during a hard landing on the Hancock, while five days later, on 30 August, 129592 came in for a landing when the hook struck the ramp and missed all the wires. Subsequently, the aircraft took



Bottom: a line of F7U-3s along the edge of Hancock's deck. Top: F7U-3 129583 taking the barrier on 19 September, as related in the text. (photo: Glenn Dunham)

the barrier and although it was reported the aircraft suffered slight damage only, it was struck off charge following the incident and never flew again. Remember, these were the times of 'straight' carrier decks and there was no room to bolter (i.e. to go around and try again) once you had committed to a landing; all you could do was take the barrier that prevented you from crashing into the pack of parked aircraft on the bow. It comes as no surprise that one of the main outcomes of this first Cutlass cruise was the realization that the F7U-3 was completely incompatible with the straight (axial) deck concept. Operations of an aircraft like this needed a carrier which would be always able to provide a



Above: An impressive amount of hardware is parked on Hancock's deck just prior to departure from San Diego,. Apart from VF-124's F7U-3s, AJ-2s, AD-6s of VA-125, F9F-8s of VF-121 and the tail of a VC-3 F2H-3 can be seen. Below: a VF-124 F7U-3 Cutlass is being respocted.





A Cutlass just moments before being launched from the USS Hancock. Note that the deck is still made from wooden planks. This photograph also shows the distinctive markings for VF-124.

ready deck (i.e. a deck capable of receiving landing aircraft), which aircraft carriers with an angled deck could do – perhaps with a quick respot or two. Following the cruise, VF-124's C/O recommended that, while a carrier with Cutlasses operated in a multi-carrier task force, one carrier would always have to be configured as the 'ready deck carrier'.

On 2 September, Hancock said goodbye to Hawaii and headed west again. It arrived at Yokosuka on the 12th and this was to be their operating port for the rest of the cruise. Following departure from Yokosuka on 16 September, Hancock headed for Okinawa, where they rendezvoused with Task Force 77, the standing carrier Battle Group of the Navy's Seventh Fleet, which had gained fame during the war in Korea. At this time, Hancock took aboard a small USMC detachment of VMJ-1 with four photo reconnaissance Banshees (F2H-2Ps). Cutlass flight operations continued, but on 19 September, F7U-3 129583 took the barrier on USS Hancock when the tail hook failed during landing. Damage was slight (Class D). During the next few weeks; Hancock pa-

trolled the area between Okinawa and Formosa (better known as Taiwan nowadays), before heading for Japan again. On 4 October, about half of the Air Group flew ashore to Atsugi to continue operations while Hancock was in port at Yokosuka. This is where VF-124

Several of the Cutlasses of VF-124 carried refuelling probes on the nose, like this one.



suffered their fourth accident, when F7U-3 129577 ran off Atsugi's runway during landing on 5 October. The aircraft's nose wheel collapsed and although it spent the next period under repair, this was never completed and the aircraft was struck off charge. On 17 October, Hancock headed out to sea again, took aboard the shore-based aircraft and set sail for Okinawa again. In 1955, Okinawa still was an American protectorate and firmly under US control. It was not returned to Japanese control until 1972. Between 27 and 31 October, Hancock was in port in Yokosuka again, following which the carrier spent a few days operating off Kyushu, Japan, and participated in exercise "Operation Cross-fire", which was held between 3 and 5 November. Next, the ship headed for Formosa again and executed several simulated air strikes against the island between 8 and 10 November, following which the ship headed for Japan again. A short exercise off Okinawa followed, and on 18 November the ship was back in port at Yokosuka.

The stroke of bad luck for CVG-12 continued. On 1 November 1955, VF-124 unfortunately lost F7U-3 129586 and its pilot. While coming in for a trap, the aircraft 'floated' over the deck, missed all the wires but hit the barrier. Even though the pilot attempted to eject, he was killed. By now, the Air Boss and the squadron C/O had had enough and this in-

cident spelled the end for VF-124 Cutlass operations from the Hancock. It was decided to offload them and continue flying from Atsugi. While flying from NAS Atsugi, the squadron came under the operational control of Commander Fleet Air West Pacific (COMFAIRWESTPAC). Some consideration was given of transferring the squadron to USS Bennington, which had completed angled deck mods a few months earlier, but due to the lack of a steam catapult on that carrier, the shore-base option was chosen instead. It was not just VF-124 that suffered from its share of accidents. Although damage was mostly minor, VF-121 damaged thirteen F9F-8s in landing accidents during the entire cruise; they also lost F9F-8 131107 and its pilot following an in-flight fire on 16 February 1956. VA-125 fared even worse. Although they suffered only a single barrier crash; they lost three Skyraiders along with their pilots. On 29 September 1955, AD-6s 135307 and 135333 collided in mid-air during a bombing run. The former was lost along with its pilot; the latter managed a safe landing on the carrier. On 14 November, the bridle broke while AD-6 135303 was being catapulted from the carrier. It never attained enough speed to remain airborne and ditched. Unfortunately, the pilot drowned before he could be rescued. Finally, on 15 December, 135335 and its pilot were lost at sea while investigating

*Another fascinating old-fashioned flight deck scene of a VF-124 Cutlass being respotted on deck. Note that underwing tanks were used to extend range.*





Hancock at anchor in San Diego Bay, prior to the start of the cruise. On the right are the AD-5Ns of VC-35 Det.G.

a potential submarine contact. Of the other units on Hancock, only VC-11 and VC-61 suffered a few minor (Class C) accidents.

A known deficiency of the Cutlass again manifested itself during the cruise: bad visibility from the cockpit. During landings into the sun, or with the glare of the sun in the water, or when flying in the rain, it was almost impossible to see the LSO. The only solution was to have the pilot fly its own approach and stay in radio contact with the LSO. Another persistent problem for VF-124 was the bad reliability of the F7U-3's jet engines. Flight operations from the USS Hancock were mainly conducted during daylight, but about 7% of the missions were flown at night. Night flying still was rather uncharted territory at that time and only a handful of specialized units attempted night flying from carriers. Although VA-125 flew about 120 hours at night during the cruise, most hours were flown by the Detachments of VC-3 (137 hrs – they were the night and all weather jet squadron on board Hancock, with four Banshees assigned) and VC-35 (216 hrs), who specialized in this kind of operations. None of the other units, including VF-124, put in any amount of nocturnal flight time. However, when VF-124 was flying from Atsugi, they

did do some night flying; during December and January 66 hours were flown at night.

Meanwhile, Hancock continued the cruise without the Cutlasses. Between 9 and 13 December, the ship joined the USS Bennington (CVA-20), USS Boxer (CVA-21) and USS Kearsarge (CVA-33) for a combined exercise (exercise name 'Jack Pratt'), flying strikes against Okinawa which included 'special weapons' operations (i.e. with simulated atomic weapons) by the VA-125 Skyraiders. New guests on board Hancock were a few AJ-2 Savages of VC-6 Det.A, which usually resided at Atsugi. They came along for participation in the aforementioned exercise only. Following the exercise, the cruise's second Regulus missile was fired on 14 December. Hancock then headed for Yokosuka again and arrived in port on 27 December. Again, half the Air Group was offloaded to NAS Atsugi, and continued some sort of flight operations. On 8 January 1956, the ship sailed for Okinawa and Formosa again, and made a port visit to Hong Kong between 23 and 29 January. More port visits followed: between 4 and 7 February Hancock was in port at Sangley Point, Philippines, and on 8 February in Subic Bay. Next, the carrier operated off Okinawa and Iwo Jima for a few days. On 20 February,

VF-124 cruise statistics	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb
Carrier-based sorties	117	81	12	3	0	0	0
Carrier-based flight hours	124	97	15	2	0	0	0
Shore-based flight hours	65	6	131	176	222	248	191
Carrier landings	75	72	0	2	0	0	0

the third and final Regulus missile was fired against a small island near Iwo Jima. During these launches, the Regulus was controlled by an airborne drone controller (the F9F-6-PD), which flew along with the missile until it was nearing its point of impact. Hancock entered port at Yokosuka, for the final time during this cruise, on 25 February.

Just prior to departure back home, VF-124 comes into the picture again, and on 1 and 2 March 1956, the Cutlasses were taken aboard Hancock again, while VF-121 left behind most of its Cougars in Japan for reassignment to other units. The next day, the ship headed for home and with a short stop at Pearl Harbor on 10 March (where VC-35 transferred three of its AD-5Ns to the USMC in Hawaii), the carrier arrived in San Diego on 15 March. On 13 April, USS Hancock entered dry-dock for conversion to angled deck configuration; this work was completed in November 1956.

In his Operational Report sent to CinCPAC after the cruise, CDR C. N. Conatser, CAG-12, summed up several of the problems encountered with the Cutlass. First of all, it suffered from poor availability rates. Overall, just 51.4% of VF-124's aircraft were capable of flying an operational mission. At the start of the cruise, this figure was 70%, but the accidents and lack of available spares did not do much to improve upon that figure. In December, it was down to 33.3%. There were some maintenance issues with the aircraft, although most were considered to be minor

and aircraft availability rates did not suffer. However, one major problem was that it was found to be nearly impossible to change an engine while on board the Hancock. An overhead electric hoist was available to lift the engines from the engine bay, but it took extensive respots on the hangar deck to place an aircraft directly under the hoist and as a consequence, just a single engine was changed aboard ship. Two other methods of changing an engine, either using a sling track or using an overhead engine stand, were considered to be unsuitable for ship-board operations. However, while operating from NAS Atsugi, a total of 19 engines were changed, 15 of which due to FOD! Most of these were caused by dirty taxiways at Atsugi. It was found that the tread on the nose wheel tire was picking up small stones,

*Cutlass flight operations are in full swing with one aircraft on the catapult and another pair awaiting their turn. Note the primitive blast deflector.*





An F7U-3 has just been brought above decks on the USS Hancock. Note the large number of arresting cables on

which were thrown into the airstream ahead of the intakes and sucked into the engines. It was found to be impossible to clean the taxiways sufficiently and it was recommended to change the tire to treadles examples. A lot of work went into repairing these engines and in one case, an F7U-3 was out of action for 47 days.... Another problem for the Cutlass was the severe corrosion encountered on magnesium and aluminum skin panels, but as soon as they were painted, the problems were a thing of the past. While at Atsugi, the Cutlass fleet was grounded for over a week following problems with the slats, which did not extend after moisture in the slats had frozen during descent from high altitude. While older propeller aircraft often could be cared for by a single plane captain, it was realized that the new high-performance jets required larger teams of maintenance crews to service a Cutlass and a change of procedure was recommended to CNO to add a seaman helper to the aircraft's single plane captain.

In his Operational Report sent to CinCPAC, CDR C. N. Conatser, CAG-12, also argued for better training for the Air Groups personnel prior to sending them on a cruise with a new type of aircraft, especially one as advanced as the Cutlass (he thought of the Cutlass as 'the beginning of a new era in naval aircraft design'). He also stated that the CAG did not have enough information 'on the differences in terms of capabilities and/or limitations' and argued that 'a brochure should be distributed to better acquaint the fleet with any unusual logistic or operational requirements'. Also, in 1955, it was normal for squadrons to report to the Air Group commander just 7 days prior to the start of a cruise, while the Air Group itself did not report to the carrier until

just prior to embarkation. Unlike today, there were no coordinated Air Group training exercises prior to a cruise and this caused a lot of confusion early in the cruise. In the future, CDR Conatser wanted to bring the entire Air Group together at least 4 weeks prior to the cruise to give them the opportunity to work together as a group, much like the work-ups prior to a cruise nowadays.

VF-124 had not been one of the most active units of the Air Group. While flying from the carrier, the squadron racked up a mere 213 sorties. Apart from a large number of 'ferry flights' (83), these included CAP missions (75), strike missions (24), gunnery missions (16) and a few special weapons and close air support missions. By comparison, VF-121 had flown 2,114 missions during the entire cruise, while VA-125 had racked up another 1,158. Even the VC-11 Det, with just four aircraft, had flown 259 missions! Even though Cutlass operations proved to be troublesome, to say the least, it was thought that the experience gained during the first part of this cruise would provide invaluable experience for future Cutlass units. It did, but these other units, like VA-12, VA-66 and VF-81, encountered similar problems and after a few years of operating the F7U-3, the Navy retired them all. VF-124 in the meantime, had started conversion to the F3H-2N Demon after their cruise and the first few examples of this aircraft were received in the summer of 1956.

Credits: Glenn Dunham, Mark Nankivil, Angelo Romano, Mads Bangso, Sid Nanson, Vought Retirees Club, the official Navy Operational Report of the cruise.