

BOGEYS AND BANDITS

THE MAKING OF A FIGHTER PILOT

ROBERT_____GANDT



BOGEYS AND BANDITS

THE MAKING OF A
FIGHTER PILOT



ROBERT GANDT

VIKING

VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in 1997 by Viking Penguin,
a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Robert Gandt, 1997
All rights reserved

Photographs courtesy of the author unless otherwise indicated.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Gandt, Robert L.

Bogeys and bandits : the making of a fighter pilot / Robert Gandt.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-670-86721-7

1. United States. Navy. Strike Fighter Wing. 2. Fighter pilots—Training of—Florida—
Jacksonville. 3. Hornet (Jet fighter plane). I. Title.

VG94.6.S77G36 1997

359.9'4'092—dc21 96-51439

[B]

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



Printed in the United States of America
Set in Bodoni Book
Designed by Susan Hood

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this
publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval
system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the
prior written permission of both the copyright owner
and the above publisher of this book.

ALSO BY ROBERT GANDT

Season of Storms: The Siege of Hong Kong 1941
China Clipper: The Age of the Great Flying Boats
Skygods: The Fall of Pan Am

To the memory of

Lieutenant Commander Scott Speicher USN

Lieutenant Kara Hultgreen USN

First Lieutenant Michael Blaisdell USMCR

PREFACE

U.S.S. Nimitz: Santa Barbara Channel, March 1995

It was all vaguely reminiscent: the hard lurch of the arrested landing, the wind and din of the flight deck, the orderly violence of the catapults hurling jets off the bow.

I climbed down from the C-2A turboprop that had just delivered me to the deck of the *Nimitz*. The scene had an old familiarity: fighters perched like hawks in a row with their wings folded, clouds of steam wisping from the catapult tracks, yellow-and-green-jerseyed deck crewmen in survival vests and Mickey Mouse ear protectors, scuttling between the shrieking jets.

It was a place I remembered, like a long-ago hometown.

But it wasn't until I had ducked through a steel door and started down a ladder that it hit me—the *smell*! I stood there, frozen on the ladder, stupefied by the scent—an evocative mix of oil, steel, jet fuel, paint, machinery, sweat—the peculiar internal atmosphere of a ninety-ton aircraft carrier.

A flood of old memories, anxieties, forgotten glories swept over me. *I was back!* I'd been transported in time, over a quarter of a century. Back to another life.



I had just turned twenty when my mother came to Chase Field, in the hill country of Beeville, Texas, to pin on my Navy wings. In a year and a half I had metamorphosed from college dropout to officer and aviator in the U.S. Navy. In a few more months, before I had yet reached legal drinking or voting age, I'd be launching off aircraft carriers with nuclear weapons hung on my jet.

Which seems unimaginable today. No one that young gets near a Navy cockpit or is allowed such immense responsibility. Today's naval aviation candidates are all college graduates *before* they are even considered for flight training. Most have degrees in engineering or the sciences, and many have graduate degrees. To win their wings and fly Navy or Marine Corps jets, they incur obligations that keep them in uniform into their thirties.

It wasn't always so. By the age of twenty-five I had completed my service and bade farewell to the Navy. I would be an airline pilot, instructor, journalist, husband, father, air show pilot, writer of aviation and military books. And, always, frustrated fighter pilot.

Now I wanted to write a book about modern Navy fighter pilots—who they were, where they came from, what they did. My motives, of course, went beyond just reporting. I wanted to get back in the cockpit of a Navy jet. This was going to be a sentimental journey.

For such a journey, I needed inside help. Most of my old squadron mates who stayed in the Navy were now retired. One of the few still on active duty was Dick Allen, a fellow graduate of the old naval aviation cadet program. Allen and I had arrived together as fresh young pilots in Carrier Air Group Three, and we twice deployed together on extended cruises aboard the carrier *Saratoga*. Because of his freckle-faced, cherubic looks, Allen drew the nickname, Sweepee, after the cartoon character in *Popeye*.

Sweepee survived Vietnam, Tailhook, and the perils of military politics. He rose in rank to command a squadron, an air wing, an aircraft carrier. And he kept going. Now Sweepee wore three stars and commanded all the naval air forces of the Atlantic Fleet. I had my inside help.

With Admiral Allen's endorsement, I received official authoriza-

and husbands and children, their passions and fears, their larger-than-life dreams.

This book is their story.



Certain usages in the book deserve explanation.

These days the matter of pronouns can produce a migraine. *He, she, him, her, it?* Though it is now acceptable (and even fashionable) to use the female pronoun when generalizing about aviators, it can be confusing. Only a few women naval aviators were in uniform before the nineties, and *none* had joined fighter squadrons until after April 28, 1993 (when Secretary of Defense Les Aspin signed the order lifting the ban on women in combat).

Thus, an arbitrary decision: For clarity of understanding, when referring to military aviators in the aggregate, I have opted for the traditional male pronoun.

In the interest of readability, the time lines of some of the pilots in training have been compressed. The FA-18 strike fighter syllabus takes about five months, but the students' actual progress varies according to weather, medical problems, mechanical status of their jets, and available deck time on aircraft carriers. Though all my subject students of "Class 2-95" were in the FA-18 training pipeline at the same time, their actual beginning and finishing class assignments were staggered throughout 1995.

For reasons of privacy, certain of the characters' names and identifying characteristics have been changed. In two instances, the identities of separate persons have been merged into single composite characters.



I owe thanks to numerous officers and aviators of the Navy and Marine Corps. My old fellow cadet, Commander P. J. Burke, USNR, pushed the right button to get the project off the ground. Admiral R. C. "Sweepa" Allen, Commander, Naval Air Forces Atlantic, gave the crucial green light. Successive commanding officers of VFA-106, Captains Matt Moffit and George "Rico" Mayer, made me feel welcome in their squadron. Hornet pilots Commander John Wood,

tion to check into the Navy's FA-18 Hornet fleet replacement squadron at Cecil Field on January 23, 1995. Cecil Field was where I (and Sweepea) had spent four years flying the A-4 Skyhawk—then the Navy's state-of-the-art attack jet.

For the next six months I attached myself to a class of students in strike fighter training. I sat in on their mission briefings and debriefings as they progressed through each phase of the strike fighter curriculum—familiarization, strike, fighter weapons, all the way to the big one—carrier qualification. With them, I endured endless lectures on subjects ranging from instrument flight procedures to carrier deck protocol to AIDS prevention. I pored over FA-18 systems and procedures and logged numerous sweaty hours in the *very* realistic flight simulators.

Like everyone who flies Navy jets, I underwent flight physiology qualification: aeromedical exam, ejection seat training, high-altitude pressure chamber, and water survival qualification (wherein you are strapped into an aircraft cabin, inverted, and plunged to the bottom of a twenty-foot pool, ramming something like forty gallons of water up your nose). Somehow I survived the survival test.

With my tutor and fighter pilot friend, Lieutenant Tom Bacon, I flew the Hornet through all its realms—supersonic flight, aerobatics over the Atlantic, low-level navigation over the Florida hinterlands, dive-bombing on the Pinecastle range, field carrier landing practice at Cecil Field.

I accompanied the students on training detachments, most notably to the anything-goes Key West fighter weapons facility. On half a dozen mosquito-swarmed days and nights I stood in the weeds at the end of practice runways while they rehearsed day and night carrier landings. I stood again on the landing signal platform of the U.S.S. *Nimitz* while they did the real thing.

But mostly I listened. During hurried lunches in the squadron duty office, over beers in late-night bars, on the back porches of the students' rented Florida homes, in the eerily red-lighted ready room aboard the aircraft carrier—I listened to them talk. In snippets, small pieces at a time, they told me about themselves, their wives

Lieutenant Commander Allen “Zoomie” Baker, and Lieutenant Tom “Slab” Bacon perused the text for technical and literary errata.

The staff of the Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic, commanded by Captain John “Flamo” Fleming, extended unfailing courtesy and assistance with my many requests. I am indebted to the superb instructor pilots and the squadron landing signal officers of VFA-106 for allowing me to join their briefings, for patiently answering my questions, and for taking me to sea with them. Thanks to the officers and crew of the U.S.S. *Nimitz* for the sentimental cruise in the Pacific.

Special gratitude goes to my agent, Alice Martell, of the Martell Agency, and to Mindy Werner, executive editor at Viking Penguin, for their patient and professional guidance.

Most of all, thanks are owed to the men and women—strike fighter pilots—whose lives I shared for six months, and for whom I developed a profound admiration. I salute them all.

RG
Summer 1996

PART ONE
NUGGETS



nug-get (nŭg' ĭt) n. 1. A small, solid lump, especially of gold. 2. Neophyte naval aviator, wearer of shiny new gold wings. 3. Occupier of lowest stratum in naval aviation hierarchy.

PROLOGUE

His squadron call sign was “Mongo,” an inevitable mutation of his real name—Nick Mongillo. Mongo was an unlikely hero. He was what they called a “nugget,” which meant the same thing as “rookie”—a naval aviator on his first squadron assignment. He had only been in the squadron three months when they were sent to the Red Sea.

As a nugget Mongo had already done most of the knuckleheaded nugget things: being out of position as a wing man, missing frequency changes, losing sight of his flight leader. It was all part of learning to be a fighter pilot.

But no one had prepared him for his new role: Nick Mongillo—hero. Suddenly he was supposed to act like some sort of celebrity, grinning and spouting one-liners for the fans back home. He was supposed to be cool.

Instead, Mongo was standing there like a zombie. He couldn’t think of anything cool. He looked like he was still scared to death from the five-hour mission. And, in fact, he *was* scared to death—but it wasn’t from anything out there over Iraq. At the moment, Mongo was scared to death of Christiane Amanpour and all those freaking CNN cameras and lights that were trained on him like a battery of howitzers.

Here she was, dressed up like Ernie Pyle in her war correspondent bush jacket, sticking that goddamn microphone in his face, peering at him with those big brown eyes, asking the kind of question television reporters think they have to ask to prove that *they* comprehend the ghastliness of war.

Her question was: "What did it feel like to kill another man?"

Mongo stared at her blankly. The question had come off sounding like an accusation, which, of course, it was. For the life of him, he couldn't come up with a good answer. But he knew what *not* to say. In a tiny, flea-speck portion of his brain, Nick Mongillo knew that it definitely wouldn't play well back home in millions of living rooms if he stood there and blabbed the truth: *It felt GLORIOUS! The guy flying that MiG was trying to kill me. But I smoked the fucker first. . . .*

He didn't say it. Mongo just shrugged and tried to look anguished about having performed such an execrable act of aerial homicide. He mumbled something about just doing his duty . . . war was hell, you know . . . they were all in it together . . . he hoped it would be over soon . . .

And other such balderdash.

Later the Navy would complain that they "lost the media war." This was because their heroes in Desert Storm, they claimed, didn't receive the same treatment by the media that had been given the Air Force. But that was nothing new; it had always been so. The Air Force always managed to outplay the Navy in the public relations department, somehow coaching their heroes to deliver the apple-pie, Boy Scoutish, Rotary Club answers to inane questions. For whatever reasons, Navy pilots just didn't know how to talk to reporters like Christiane Amanpour. They never seemed to have the right answers to questions like, "What did it feel like to kill another man?"

It felt GLORIOUS . . .



The reason it felt glorious was because the war had become very personal for the fighter pilots aboard the U.S.S. *Saratoga*. During

the previous night, on the first strike of Desert Storm, one of them had become the first American casualty.

No one knew—officially—what happened to Scott Speicher. He had been number four in a flight of FA-18 Hornets thundering through the darkness toward the target. On the way to the target, something happened. Speicher disappeared.

So the next day, there was Mongo, a nugget on his first squadron tour, on his way to bomb the enemy. He was busy—almost too busy—to be scared. Almost.

“It was like juggling crystal,” Mongillo remembered. “They kept throwing new pieces to juggle. You were scared that you were going to drop one.” It was hard to keep up with all the frenetic activity around him. He had to keep sight of the other three fighters in the flight. He had to keep track of where they were going, how much farther they had to go to the target, had to interpret data from the airplane’s mission computer, had to listen to all the hysterical radio calls flooding the tactical frequency.

That was the hardest part: listening to the nonstop hysterical jabbering on the radio. The frequency was a cacophony of madness. Everyone was yelling. No one was transmitting in a normal voice. You could *smell* the adrenaline pumping through each cockpit.

The airborne strike controller in the Air Force E-3 AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) jet was trying to call out information to the strike fighters:

“Bogeys twelve o’clock, forty!”

“Where? Where? Say again!”

“Manny, one-eight-zero, thirty-five.”

“Quicksand Four hundred,” the controller said, using the lead strike fighters’ call sign, “bogeys are at Manny, two-zero-zero, thirty . . .”

“Manny?” Mongo tried to remember what the hell Manny was. It was a spot on the ground, an airfield or something up north, that they decided to use as a reference point. The technique was called “Bullseye Control,” referencing everything around a geographical point, or “bullseye.” All unidentified aircraft would be called out in

relation to the point called "Manny." If something was south of Manny at thirty miles, you were supposed to give the bearing and distance: "Manny, one-eight-zero, thirty." Trying to orient everything around "Manny" was a mental gymnastic that was getting very difficult.

The chatter was incessant, overwhelming. None of it was making any sense to Mongo. He was Dash Two—the number two position in the four-plane flight—stuck out there on the left flank of the formation. They had only forty miles to go to the target.

Four more minutes. Mongo stopped trying to make sense of the radio chatter. It was time to think about bombing.

A "bogey" was an unidentified airplane. By the stringent ROE (rules of engagement) applied by the allied coalition command to the Navy strike fighters in Desert Storm, you couldn't take a shot at a bogey until he had been labeled a "bandit," which meant he had been positively identified by an airborne electronics ship, either a Navy E-2 Hawkeye or an Air Force E-3 AWACS, as a bad guy. The only other way you could legally shoot was after a VID (visual identification), which meant you had to get close enough to see that the bogey was, indeed, a bandit. Of course, the bandit might already have reached the same conclusion about you. The confrontation then became an aerial quick draw.

The restriction made sense, considering the skies over Iraq were now more congested than the New York air traffic control area. They were crammed with coalition warplanes, all hell-bent on shooting something—anything—as long as it might be an enemy.

The problem was, the Iraqi fighter pilots suffered no such restrictions. They could point their missiles in almost any direction and be sure they were aimed at a coalition warplane.

Which explained, at least in the Hornet pilots' minds, what happened to Scott Speicher the night before. Inbound to their target, Speicher's flight leader had reported obtaining a radar lock on a bogey. The bogey was coming head-on. On the Hornet's air-to-air radar, the bogey showed up electronically as a supersonic MiG-25.

That wasn't good enough to mark the stranger as hostile. According to the ROE, they had to obtain a confirmation from the AWACS. Or

they had to make a visual identification, which was not possible in the pitch-blackness over the desert.

The bogey, therefore, was not a bandit. Not legally. No one took a shot. Within seconds, the bogey, whoever he was, passed behind the flight of Hornets and disappeared.

Minutes later, the Hornets arrived over their target. But now there were only three in the formation. Scott Speicher, who had been number four, was missing. He was never seen again.

The next day the coalition command issued the report that Speicher has “probably” been downed by a Russian-built SAM-6 surface-to-air missile.

The pilots knew better. They knew in their guts what really happened: The bogey was a real-life bandit—an Iraqi MiG-25—who performed what was called a “stern conversion.” He had executed a well-timed turn to fall directly behind the flight of Hornets. He locked on to the number four Hornet and fired an AA-6 air-to-air missile.

And took out Scott Speicher.



All this was on Mongo’s mind now. The flight of Hornets was inside the Iraqi border. Thirty miles to the target. Mongo’s head was moving like it was on a swivel—left, right, up, down, sweeping the sky, the desert, the horizon. There were nasty things out there, things that would kill them: SAMs, antiaircraft, enemy fighters, *friendly* fighters.

They were going like hell now, nearly supersonic. Mongo had to keep “tapping” his afterburner—jamming the throttles past the full power detent—to stay up with the formation. In combat, speed was your best friend. Speed was life. The more, the better.

The babble on the radio was getting worse. It sounded like feeding time at the monkey zoo.

And then through the clutter of radio transmissions came a call from strike control. It cut through the babble like a knife:

“Quicksand Four hundred, *two bandits* on your nose at fifteen.”

A spike of adrenaline surged through Mongo. The controller had said *bandits*. Not bogeys. *Bandits*.