

## Hornet Babies

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*John Scanlan*



The author, in his salad days, having graduated from the F-4S to the F/A-18D.

Courtesy John Scanlan

I recently received this e-mail from a Marine Corps captain in the F/A-18D squadron in which I served in the early 1990s:

LtCol. Scanlan,

My name is Captain Mario Martin, and I am the historian for VMFA(AW)-121. As the squadron begins the transition process from the F/A-18D Hornet to the Joint Strike Fighter, I am assembling an archive concerning the F/A-18D. Would you be willing to donate a copy of your book, *Speed is Life, More is Better*?

Wait a second. What? VMFA(AW)-121 is getting the F-35? Didn't they just get the F/A-18D? I did some math in my head.

Twenty-four years ago, back in 1988, I was a bonehead first lieutenant with VMFA-212, stationed at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. Nearing the end of my three-year tour, the squadron conducted the final overseas deployment of the venerable F-4S Phantom. I had been in the back seat, as a radar intercept officer. The new F/A-18A had a single seat—no place for me. I began to look for a job in the real world, but the Marine Corps dangled a carrot before me in the form of the F/A-18D, a two-seat Hornet, and I bit.

Unfortunately, the D model was not to come into service until 1990. I had a little over a year to kill. Where could I hide? The Corps piped up: "We've got a job you can do for a year." So

while my fellow radar intercept officers left the Marine Corps like rats jumping off a sinking ship, I did a one-year tour with the infantry as a forward air controller. That is, it was supposed to be a one-year tour, but the Marine Corps kept moving the carrot, and I ended up spending 15 months with the First Battalion, Third Marine Regiment. Then, in January 1990, with orders for the F/A-18D in hand, I left the regiment, vowing I would never be tired, hungry, dirty, cold, and wet again.

In September 1990, after eight months in the F/A-18 training squadron, I reported to VMFA(AW)-121, which had 12 brand spankin' new two-seat F/A-18Ds. I was given a fancy-schmancy new designation: weapons and sensors operator. I had gone from rubbing two sticks together in the F-4S to having a flame thrower in the F/A-18D. As for the pilots, they boasted about having evolved from F-4 cavemen to Luke Skywalkers.

That was 22 years ago. Maybe my beloved F/A-18D was going down the same road as the F-4S. Suddenly, my lower back hurt a little.

And now -121 is retiring the F/A-18D? And replacing it with the F-35 Lightning II? I felt a twinge of arthritis in my knees. But if -121 is indeed getting the F-35, it raises some perplexing questions.

Just like the situation back in 1988, there's no place in the single-seat Joint Strike Fighter for an F/A-18D weapons and sensors operator. And since there's no two-seat F-35 on the drawing board, the Marine Corps has no carrot to dangle. So will F/A-18D WSOs behave like rats on a sinking ship even more so than the radar intercept officers of the late '80s? Second, if the F/A-18D pilot of 1990 was Luke Skywalker, who is the F-35 pilot of 2013? God in a flightsuit? He would have to be: I can't imagine the technological advances made in the past 22 years that would make Luke Skywalker look Neanderthal.

Last, back in the old Corps—wait a second. I always swore I would never say that. Elderly pilots used to look down their noses and joke about "Hornet Babies," the young, spoiled pilots who came straight into the F/A-18 from flight school, and never knew the frustrations of flying an earlier, archaic aircraft like the F-4.

So will elderly Hornet Babies now be joking about a whole new generation of "Lightning Babies"? It's hard for me to imagine young, spoiled pilots who know only the F-35, and it's even harder to call the F/A-18 an archaic aircraft.

Pardon me. I feel a sudden urge to move to Florida.

A 1983 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, John Scanlan retired from the Marine Corps as a lieutenant colonel. He is pursuing a second career as a writer while living in Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.