

## FIGHTER SQUADRON VF-661 Is Recalled after the Pueblo Incident

by Buz Warfield<sup>1</sup>

### IMPOSSIBLE- I WOULD BE THE FIRST TO KNOW

When the North Vietnam seized the USS *Pueblo* in February 1968, VF-661, a reserve Fighter Squadron stationed at Andrews AFB was recalled to active duty. I was the Commanding Officer at the time.

A limited number of the officers were aware of a few of the trials and tribulations that followed; no one was aware of all of them.

There were many – the following comments cover a few I feel may help put in things prospective (i.e. like the civilian world, too few in the Navy make things happen and too many have limited vision).



I was sitting at my desk at work, trying to look busy, when I received a telephone call from a squadron mate asking if we had been recalled to active duty. I told him definitely not as I would be the first to know. He advised he had heard it on the radio. I assured him it was a false rumor. A few minutes later I received a second call asking the same question. Again, I replied, absolutely not as I would be the first to know, but to insure I was correct, I called NARTU (Naval Air Reserve Training Unit) at Andrews AFB to confirm it. They admitted they too had received several telephone calls and advised everyone, absolutely not, they would be the

first to know!

But to insure they were right, they had called OP-05R (Naval Air Operations Office- Reserve) at the Pentagon and were told, absolutely not, they would be the first to know.

Relieved, I went to lunch, but when I returned my secretary advised me to immediately call NARTU at Andrews AFB. They confirmed we were indeed recalled and were to report by 8 AM the next day, less than a 24 hours notice. Four VF squadrons (two on the East Coast and two on the West Coast) and two VA squadrons had been recalled (one on the East Coast and one on the West Coast). About 1,000 total Navy personnel. Although I do not know the number, several Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard units were also recalled.

Before proceeding, it may help to understand effective 1 February 1968, due to severe under-manning of both enlisted personnel and pilots, VF-661 and VF-662 were merged to increase paper readiness. We had drilled as a unit on one weekend before the recall. Half of the squadron did know the other half.

Almost immediately, Captain Armistead, CO of NARTU Andrews, met with me, the XO (CDR Keith Jefferts), and our wives to wish us luck. He also briefed our wives in detail concerning their duties and responsibilities. Both Keith and I had married after we were released from active duty, therefore our wives were taken a little off guard when they learned they were not along just for the ride.

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As we left, Captain Armistead called me aside for some friendly advice. He reminded me I was a reserve back on active duty and did not have a career to protect. If the occasion and/or circumstances justified extending a reasonable discussion; I should use my best judgment.

Several days later I was ordered to meet with OP-05 (the overseer for Naval Air) in the Pentagon. There was a problem. The aircraft we flew on weekends were owned by the Marine Corps. They permitted the Navy to use them on the weekends their Marine reserve squadrons did not drill. If we were relocated with the A/C, the Marine Corp. did not have the A/C they owned to train their reserve units. We were a recalled Fighter Squadron without any airplanes. After this discussion, the Admiral asked, if necessary, what would the squadron's attitude be if we were assigned to replace the VU squadron at Gitmo. I assumed the personnel in the VU would have been transferred to various fleet units.

While at the Pentagon, I stopped at OP-05R (overseer for Naval Air Reserve) to find out why we first heard of the recall via the radio and were not given the opportunity to advise and discuss it with our families first. I was informed the Secretary of Defense's Office had called OP-05R late the night before the recall. Only the duty officer, Captain Francis X. Sullivan was on board. He was informed Mr. MacNamara (Secretary of Defense) was scheduled to meet with the President in the morning to determine what response should be made to the seizure of the *Pueblo*. "IF" a recall was decided, he wanted to know in advance what Navy air units should be recalled that totaled about 1,000 personnel. (I understood more than 1,000 personnel may have overstrained the defense budget, supported with subsequent information.)

Captain Sullivan's recommendation to Mr. MacNamara was based on the four VF and the two VA reserve squadrons with the highest combat readiness as of February 1, 1968. Captain Sullivan was not aware that the Marine Corp. owned the aircraft we used for training or the recent merger of the two squadrons at NARTU Andrews. The following morning the decision was made for a recall and the news media was notified well in advance of the Pentagon, and/or the people involved.

The lack of A/C problem was resolved when the Marine Corp. agreed to let us borrow their airplanes until the new F8-H aircraft would be available in July. We were transferred to NAS Cecil Field, Florida in May 1968, still training in the F8-1A, assigned to Air Group 8 and scheduled to board the USS *Shangri-La* in January.

Early in March 1968, CDR Hogan, Commanding Officer of VF-931, the Commanding Officer of VA-831 and the XOs of the three squadrons were invited to meet with ADM Booth (COMAIRLANT) and his staff in Norfolk, Va. We were updated on current Navy issues and programs that may involve us. (We were informed during the medical briefings that Navy pilots in some of the current flying billets were permitted to wear glasses. The policy was changed because the Navy was short of pilots.) The briefings were informative and thorough. At the close of the meeting ADM Booth stressed if he could be of any help, feel free to call him. I know what you are thinking, but the comment did help resolve a serious problem that surfaced few months later.

Shortly after we arrived at NAS Cecil Field I was informed I had been selected for Captain by the USN Selection Board that had recently met. Almost immediately I received a call from BuPers. as they had several problems. I was senior to the air group commander, however, they could live with that, but more important there is only ONE captain aboard a carrier. Two was completely unacceptable. They asked where I would like to be transferred. I suggested this may not be too popular and I preferred to stay with the squadron. BuPers. admitted they also had some concerns. Several days later I was informed of their decision. I would stay with the squadron, when aboard I must wear

the Commander silver oak-leaves, when ashore I could wear the Captain eagles and would be paid as a Captain. I accepted but I am not sure I had a choice.

We were on a short fuse. We were training in the F8-1A. It was not equipped with the APC system (automatic power control) used during a carrier landing approach, it was not capable of carrier landings because the landing gear could no longer take the stress of carrier landings and it had a very obsolete weapon system. Add to this, the delivery of the F8-H aircraft was considerably behind schedule. We would not have them in time to transition into the F8-H, qualify in both day and night FCLP (Field Carrier Landing Practice) with an aircraft that was equipped with the APC system.

This problem was partially solved when the Commanding Officer of VF-13 (a USN Fighter Squadron) volunteered to loan us his model F8-Cs (equipped the APC units) for night FCLP training. We used his aircraft, his line and maintenance personnel. A decision was made by the Commanding Officer of a USN squadron to help a reserve squadron in trouble disregarding how it may affect his career. Consider the risk, if we had an accident, it was his aircraft, and the accident went in his squadron record. Although we did not know or consider it at the time, it was truly a one Navy concept in action.

When the first F8-H aircraft arrived, a decision had to be made how we would paint the squadron identification on the rudder. The crew requested if they could submit various recommendations and have some input in the decision. Seemed fair and reasonable, but when the vote was counted, their choice required the entire rudder be painted and that was a serious violation of the Navy's guidelines. When I questioned the decision, it became obvious this was one of the ways the crew was seeking to relieve their frustrations involving the recall. The A/C were painted as the crew had voted.

About four A/C had been painted when COMFAIRJAX scheduled the squadron for a pre-deployment inspection. The inspection went well until the inspection party was about to leave. The inspection party informed me the A/C rudders were completely out of line and it was strongly suggested they should be repainted. If not, they would have to "officially report" it. I suggested they look at the other USN squadron's A/C in the hanger. They may have barely exceeded the guidelines, but they did in fact, exceed them. I strongly suggested that if we were "officially reported", that they would be wise to "officially report" all the squadrons in the hanger, USN or USNR. After a few words they left and I never heard another word about how our planes were painted until CAG called and asked if he could use one of our "fancy painted airplanes" to fly to a meeting in Norfolk.

As we received the new F8-H, we would transfer an F8-1A back to NARTU Andrews AFB. Permission had to be given by ComAirLant to make the transfer. If an A/C needed a major check, because of the time and manpower involved, COMAIRLANT had a reasonable policy that one could not transfer it to another unit until the major check was completed. We had several A/C we wanted to transfer but they were due for a major check. Our maintenance department advised COMAIRLANT they did not have the personnel or the time to make the acceptance checks on the F8-Hs and major checks on the F8-1A with the limited time before our scheduled deployment. Their request to transfer these A/C without performing the major checks was adamantly denied stating only a reserve squadron would ask for such a waiver.

To resolve this problem, I called the headquarters for the Naval Air Reserve. Captain Korecki, USNR (TAR) who was the head all Marine and Naval Air Reserve A/C maintenance, and I advised him of our problem. He replied he would accept the A/C at Andrews AFB if all the parts were on a truck, forget about the major checks. Armed with this information I called COMAIRLANT confident they would approve our request. I was told COMAIRLANT was not interested in what Captain Korecki would or would not

accept, we were under COMAIRLANT's command and would do the major checks, period, end of discussion.

At this point I felt common sense and logic should be involved in the decision, but in my opinion it was not. I called the Commander, who was refusing our request and suggested he be in front of ADM Booth's office about 1 PM the next day as I intended fly to Norfolk and ask the Admiral to keep the commitment he had previously made. I would brief the Admiral about my problem and he could justify his decision to the Admiral. Let the chips fall where they may. The USN Commander (a former Flying Midshipman) was in the earlier meeting with ADM Booth and he was aware of the commitment. I was then advised the dispatch for approving the transfers would be sent immediately. I asked if he would like a call or dispatch from Captain Korecki to support his decision only to hear the reply – "no, I guess you are an officer and gentleman and your word is good". The few minutes of conversation that followed was X-rated.

When my Mother-in-Law visited us, she asked if she could see the *Shangri-La*. When we asked the JOD for permission to come aboard, after identifying myself, he stated he had orders to have us escorted to the wardroom. The XO of the *Shangri-La* was in the wardroom to meet us. After exchanging greetings he said he had two questions: was I truly a captain selectee and was I really going to make the cruise as they had heard I may be transferred out of the squadron. When I replied yes, yes, he commented this was a cruise he had to make. It was apparently a hot item on the ship's current scuttlebutt. At that time no one ever heard of or imagined a Super CAG with the rank of captain, much less a squadron C.O.

Although not discussed with ship's XO at that time, the scuttlebutt may have been intensified because of the strong position I had taken with CAG. concerning the living quarters the ship would assign our squadron personnel. Because of the shortage of Navy pilots being released to inactive duty during the sixties, it was impossible to man a reserve squadron with the same rank structure as a USN squadron. Therefore, reserve squadrons were permitted to keep pilots that were over-ranked for their billet compared to our USN counter- part. Because of the merger of the two squadrons, we had an exceedingly high number of CDRS, LCDRs, a few LTs. In fact, several commanders were transferred out of the squadron immediately after the recall to bring the squadron a little more in balance.) Previously I had asked CAG to advise the ship when we came aboard I assumed staterooms etc. would be assigned by rank and a ship's company LT would not be assigned better quarters than a squadron's LCDR. As anticipated from past experience, CAG reminded me this would be a problem. I suggested if the Navy sought fit to recall us, the officers in the squadron were entitled to all the privileges of their rank. A ship's LT should not have better living quarters than a squadron LCDR. If necessary I would present my argument to BuPers. One can only guess what would have occurred if we had not been released from active duty before the problem had to be resolved, which led to the most frustrating and unbelievable chain of events during the entire recall.

It started in October 1968. I was told to muster the entire squadron at exactly 1 PM, the exact date I cannot recall, but it was a Friday. All of the recalled squadrons received the same call, the east coast to meet at exactly 1 PM, the west coast to meet at exactly at 11 AM to simultaneously announce we were to be released from active duty in November. This time the troops would not be notified via the radio. When I questioned why the sudden change in heart, I was told Congress had cut the Navy's budget by X millions of dollars in May 1968. Because of budget restraints, the Navy had the option to release us from active duty or unilaterally terminate some USN personnel. The choice was obvious.

BUT, the same Friday evening I received a call at home advising me the decision may be reversed. If it was reversed, would it cause a serious problem with moral and

readiness? You can decide what response was appropriate. Mine was not what they wanted to hear.

The problem was the Air Force already had personnel in Vietnam and were concerned about the impact on their personnel if they heard the Navy recalled reservists were released from active duty. I was then told to have the squadron ready to go aboard as previously scheduled – end of conversation. Needless to say my weekend was ruined!

I cannot remember the exact timing, but a call on Sunday morning failed to confirm we were or were not going to be released from active duty. Fortunately late Sunday or early Monday morning it was confirmed we would be released from active duty in November. No one in the squadron, not even the XO were told of the possible change in our orders. Never before or since have I spent two or three days at a complete loss as to exactly what I would do and how I would do it.

By the way, we had no problem securing AIRLANT's approval to transfer and fly all the A/C back to NARTU at Andrews AFB without performing the major checks.

The officers and crew kept the commitment they made when they become "weekend warriors". As a result of their loyalty and dedication, when we were released from active duty, CAG rated the squadron's performance and level of readiness, in writing, on par with our USN counterparts.

Time does not permit me to dwell on numerous incidents that were a direct result of a reserve squadron back on active duty, or others that merely resulted doing things the Navy way. Some were humorous and others a little tragic. Unfortunately many of them are still a way of life in the Navy.

For months, squadron members debated why a nine month recall. Careers and families were needlessly interrupted. Apparently these questions worked their way back to the top Navy brass. About six months after we were released from active duty, Admiral Moorer, CNO at the time, invited the Commanding Officers and the Leading Chiefs from each squadron to a luncheon at the Pentagon. He commented that we may feel that we were needlessly recalled, but that was just not true. North Vietnam and the world fully understand that any recall of reserve units is as politically damaging to the President as a major recall. This point was stressed in the negotiations to release the *Pueblo* crew (i.e. the President had already paid any political cost involved). Since the crew was released we could decide for ourselves.

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