

SCREAMING EAGLES

By Harry Gann

Only a few insignia have met the test of time and have lasted from near the beginning of U.S. Naval aviation heritage. One of these is the Screaming Eagle insignia, currently used by VF-51. VF-51 is a U.S. Navy fighter squadron, part of Carrier Air Wing-15, shore-based at the Naval Air Station at Miramar, California when not deployed on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Coral Sea (CVA-43).

The Screaming Eagle first appeared affixed to the side of a Curtiss F6C-4 of VF-3S (U.S. Navy heavier-than-air vehicle fighting squadron three of the Scouting fleet) in 1927.¹ Shortly afterwards, the squadron shifted to the Battle fleet, thus becoming VF-3B. At that time turned in the Curtiss aircraft for Boeing FB-5 fighters and went aboard the carrier U.S.S. Langley (CV-1).² In late 1929, the squadron shifted to the new carrier U.S.S. Lexington (CV-2) and updated their aircraft to Boeing F3B-1 biplane fighters. They remained on the Lexington until the middle of 1931 when they rejoined the Scouting fleet and the carrier Langley where they remained until late 1934. During this period, Boeing F4B-4 aircraft replaced the F3B-1 Fighters. VF-3 became a member of the carrier U.S.S. Ranger's (CV-4) Air Group in 1934. The F4B-4 fixed landing gear fighters were replaced with squat Grumman F2F-1 Fighters in 1935.

The year 1937 brought more changes. A new air group was formed to go aboard the new carrier U.S.S. Yorktown (CV-5) which was commissioned on 30 September. VF-3B was detached from the Ranger Group, redesignated VF-5B and assigned as the fighter squadron of the Yorktown Air Group.³ Grumman F3F-3 aircraft replaced the F2F-1 biplanes and the squadron remained with the Yorktown until late 1941 when it was detached and replaced with VF-42. With the entry of the U.S. into World War II on December 7, 1941, the Yorktown was reassigned from the Atlantic Fleet to action in the Pacific. VF-5, who had transitioned to the monoplane F4F-3 Grumman Wildcats, did not rejoin the Yorktown Air Group. They went to war with the Ranger, and later with the Saratoga Air Group at Guadalcanal.⁴

On January 7, 1943, VF-5 was decommissioned with most of the aircraft and men being reassigned to the newly commissioned VF-1.⁵ But, on 15 July 1943, VF-1 was redesignated VF-5 and assigned to the newly commissioned Carrier Air Group 5 which was to operate from the new carrier U.S.S. Yorktown (CV-10). The older carrier Yorktown (CV-5) had gallantly met its end at the Battle of Midway during June of 1942 after also being severely wounded at the Battle of the Coral Sea in May of 1942. The Yorktown had played a major part in blunting the Japanese attack at these two battles and the new Yorktown with its Carrier Air Group 5 prepared itself well to carry on the tradition.

On 31 August 1943 while a part of Task Force 15 during the Second Strike on the Marcus Islands, VF-5 initiated the Grumman F6F Hellcat to combat action. VF-5 saw continual action with CVG-5 until May 1944 when the air group was detached



North American FJ-1 Fury showing insignia just below C.O.'s name. Photo taken just before take-off of Jet Bendix Race in 1948.

Photo credit: Harry Gann

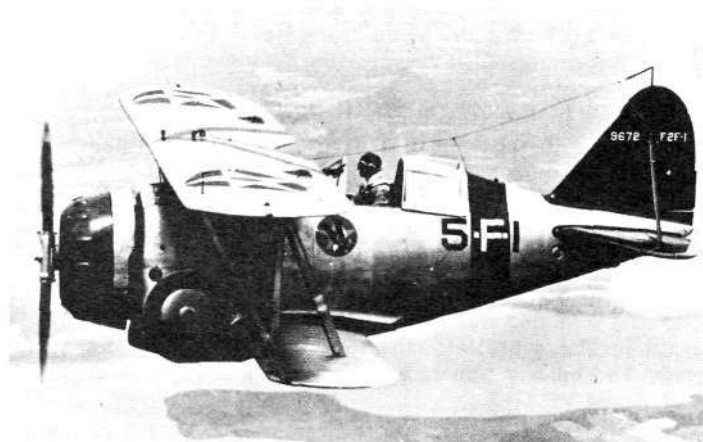


Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat. During this time period the letter S was used to identify aircraft attached to CVG-5.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy

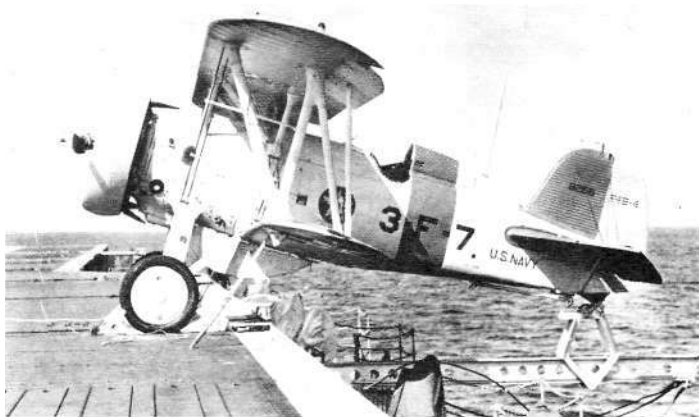


Grumman F6F Hellcat. Marked as VF-5 C.O.'s aircraft.
Photo credit: U.S. Navy



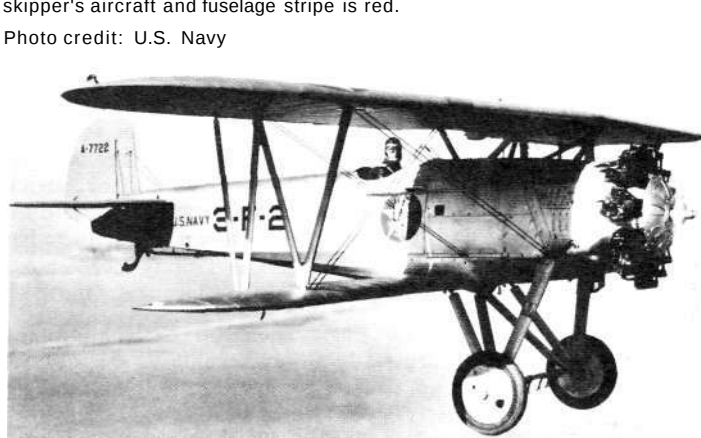
Grumman F2F-1. Assignment to the Yorktown Air Group brought about a change to Red tail from the previous green as well as a change in the squadron designation from VF-3B to VF-7B to VF-5. 5-F-1 is squadron skipper's aircraft and fuselage stripe is red.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy



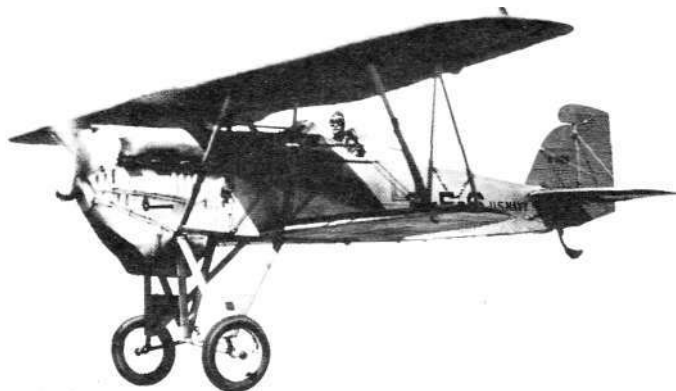
Boeing F4B-4 aboard carrier Ranger. Outrigger boom solved the deck shortage problem. Tail color was green and fuselage stripe was blue.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy



Boeing F3D-1 with the Screaming Eagle insignia. They were operating from the carrier Lexington at this time.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy



Boeing FB-5 of VF-3B. The entire tail was painted green as a spotting aid when two or more squadrons were operating in the same area.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy



LTV F-8J. The Screaming Eagles of VF-51 are a recognized professional outfit as indicated by the Adm. Joseph Clifton Award for 1969 as the outstanding U.S. Navy fighting squadron.

Photo credit: Tim Gann



LTV F-8E shown during carrier qualification aboard carrier U.S.S. Ticonderoga.

Photo credit: Harry Gann



The LTV F-8 Crusader provided the mount for VF-51 for some 12 years. This F-8E is shown on the deck of the U.S.S. Ticonderoga. The double zeros or "Double nuts" are symbolic of the Air Wing Commander while the tail letters NF indicated Air Wing 5.

Photo credit: Harry Gann

from the Yorktown and based at the Naval Air Station at Alameda for reforming and training. After extensive training exercises, the Air Group embarked aboard the carrier U.S.S. Franklin (CV-13) for more action in February 1945. VF-5, meanwhile, had transitioned to the Vought Corsair F4U. (Records indicate the squadron's complement at this time consisted of two Grumman F6F-5P, four F6F-5N, two Goodyear FG-1D Corsairs and 30 Vought F4U-1D Corsair aircraft.)⁶ During this period of action, the Franklin's aircraft were marked with a large white diamond to help in identifying the aircraft attached to the carrier.⁷

The tour of action was to be short lived, for during strikes against Japan in March of 1945, the carrier was hit by a Kamikazi aircraft. The hit was almost a mortal one and the war ended for CVG-5 and VF-5.

CVG-5 was then shore-based at various West Coast naval air stations, training crew men until the end of the war. The Squadron was selected to remain a part of the peace-time U.S. Naval structure and CVG-5 with VF-5 continued their training cycles. On 15 November 1946 in a redesignation exercise, VF-5 became VF-5A and shortly afterwards made a short cruise to Australia with their new Grumman F8F-1 Bearcats.

The Screaming Eagles entered the jet era on 18 November 1947 when North American FJ-1 Fury were delivered to the squadron. VF-5A had been selected to evaluate the aircraft and in doing so became the first fleet squadron to operate jets aboard carriers when their Skipper, Cdr. E.P. Aurand, landed on FJ-1 aboard the U.S.S. Boxer (CVL-21).⁸ Just previous to this, the squadron had completed in the jet category of the Bendix Trophy race, a cross-country race from Long Beach, California to Cleveland, Ohio.⁹

Once again the Screaming Eagle squadron designation was changed when, on 16 August 1948, they became VF-51. Concurrent with the designation shift, Grumman F9F-2 Panthers replaced the FJ-1 Furies. On 28 April 1950 VF-51 embarked aboard the U.S.S. Valley Forge (CVA-45) for a peace-time cruise to the Far East. However, peace was only temporary when the North Korean forces invaded the Republic of South Korea on 25 June. VF-51 was to make three cruises to the Far East in support of the Korean War, the second cruise aboard the U.S.S. Essex (CVA-9) and the third cruise again on the Valley Forge with F9F-5 Panthers.

Returning to peace-time operations, VF-51 deployed in March 1954 aboard the U.S.S. Philippine Sea (CVA-47) with F9F-6 Cougars, returning Stateside in November. In the ensuing training cycle, the Cougars were exchanged for North American FJ-3 Fury aircraft. They deployed aboard the U.S.S. Bon Homme Richard (CVA-31) in 1957 with their swept-wing jet fighters.

The year 1958 brought about more changes when the FJ-3 aircraft were exchanged for Grumman F11F-1 Tigers. However, before another Far East deployment could be made, Douglas F4D-1 Skyrays replaced the Tigers. The Skyrays were received in January 1954 and on March 1960 VF-51 with Carrier Air Group 5 left San Diego aboard the U.S.S. Ticonderoga (CVA-15) and returned in October from the West Pacific Cruise.

During the 1960-61 retraining cycle, VF-51 again changed to an aircraft that would serve them well for the next 12 years — the F8U Crusader manufactured by LTV. During this time period, VF-51 deployed aboard the U.S.S. Ticonderoga, U.S.S. Hancock (CVA-19) and the Bon Homme Richard, advancing from F 8A (F8U-1) aircraft to F-8E to F-8H and finally F-8J Crusader.

Once again, progress played its part with the Screaming Eagles when they switched both their aircraft and airwings (the title airwing having replaced air group). McDonnell F-4B Phantom II aircraft became the bearer of the Screaming Eagle insignia during the 1971-72 retraining cycle and the squadron reported to Carrier



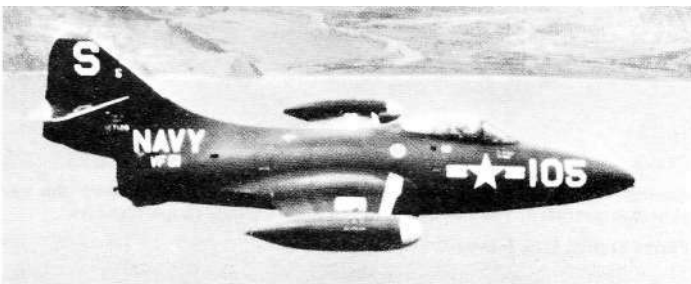
The Douglas F4D-1 Skyrays, or "Fords" as they were labeled, were operational with VF-51 for two years.

Photo credit: William Swisher



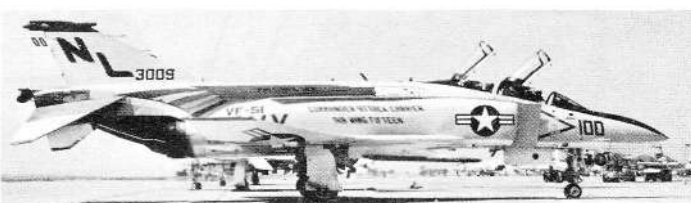
Grumman F11F-1 Tiger retiring the North American FJ-3 Fury in February 1959. The Tigers were only with VF-51 for 10 months and then were replaced with Douglas F4D-1 Skyrays.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy



Grumman F9F-2B Panther. At this time, the squadron and air group were deployed aboard the carrier U.S.S. Essex for a Korean combat tour.

Photo credit: U.S. Navy



McDonnell F4B. Is there any doubt that this Phantom II is from the Screaming Eagles of VF-51? VF-51 had switched from Air Wing 5 to Air Wing 15 as indicated by the tail letters NL.

Photo credit: Duane Kasulka



McDonnell F4N. Now operating from the carrier U.S.S. Cora! Sea. VF-51's Phantoms now have a black painted tail.

Photo credit: Tim Gann

Air Wing 15 for duty aboard the U.S.S. Coral Sea (CVA-43). In early 1974, F-4N Phantoms replaced the F-4B aircraft as they prepared for their third WestPac cruise aboard the Coral Sea.

Perhaps we may see the Screaming Eagles return to Grumman aircraft in the future. The variable wing sweep F-14 would be a suitable bearer of the insignia.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harry Gann joined Douglas in 1954 participating in the design of mechanical control systems for Naval aircraft. In 1959, he became responsible for the operation of the Market Data Center, and in 1971 he assumed his present position as Manager of Aircraft Information at Douglas Aircraft Company. He has written extensively on the history of aviation, and has flown in various aircraft, acquiring in-flight photographic coverage.

