

Light Photographic Squadron (VFP) 62 CAG Commander English (left) congratulating VFP-62 detachment pilots (left to right) Lieutenant Commander Ward Berkey, Lieutenant Junior Grade Rick Maioriello and Lieutenant Eugene Bezore on return to stateside aboard USS Essex (CVA-9), November 1958. Richard Maioriello collection



# DEDICATION: ONE AVIATOR'S SURPRISE DISCOVERY AND HIS EFFORTS TO SAVE AN OLD WARBIRD

by Mr. Ken Jack

Ernest Hemingway once wrote of fighter pilots and their planes: "You love a lot of things if you live around them. But there isn't any woman and there isn't any horse, nor any before nor any after, that is as lovely as a great airplane. And men who love them are faithful to them even though they leave them for others. Man has one virginity to lose in fighters, and if it is a lovely airplane he loses it to, there is where his heart will be forever." Examples of this love and devotion Hemingway recognized are all around us at the National Naval Aviation Museum and other fine aviation museums throughout the world. And behind each restored aircraft, there is a love story.



Such a story for Colonel Richard “Rick” Maioriello, USAF (Ret.), began when, as a 20-year-old Navy ensign in December 1956, he reported to Light Photographic Squadron (VFP) 62. Rick laughs today recollecting when, after flight training, his training officer told him of his new assignment to the photo recon squadron, and was surprised when Rick responded that he would rather be a fighter pilot. The training officer looked at the just-hatched ensign Naval Aviator, ignored his plea and said he was going to be a photo reconnaissance pilot anyway. Rick answered something like, “In that case, I volunteer.” He did not know what a great opportunity this was; as a photo pilot he could lead flights and complete missions, as opposed to becoming “tail-end Charlie” in a fighter squadron.

In November 1957, after attending the Navy Photographic School in Pensacola, Rick joined VFP-62’s photo detachment aboard USS *Essex* (CVA-9) flying the squadron’s Grumman F9F-8P “Photo” *Cougar* jets. On 6 July 1958, *Essex* was anchored at Athens, Greece, in the eastern Mediterranean when Lebanon was threatened by a civil war between the Maronite Christian and Muslim factions. The Muslims were trying to push Lebanon away from its alignment with the West and towards the United Arab Republic. At 0400 the crew of the ship was awakened to the noise of pulling up the anchor and getting underway. The ship’s helicopters had to ferry stranded enlisted and officers left behind to the carrier headed

full-steam towards Beirut 700-miles away. The Sixth Fleet super carrier USS *Saratoga* (CVA-60) was anchored at Cannes, France, and similarly departed to join *Essex*.

Events heated up quickly as a result of President Eisenhower authorizing Operation *Blue Bat* on 5 July 1958 to bolster Lebanese President Chamoun against the internal opposition. It would become another Cold War test of wills between the United States and the Soviet Union. The U.S. operation, while limited, had the objective to occupy and secure the Beirut International Airport and secure the port of Beirut and approaches to the city. The *Essex* and *Saratoga* air groups were first tasked to provide fighter cover when the Marine assault force went ashore. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened to use nuclear weapons in the case of an American intervention.

Eventually the British carrier HMS *Eagle* (R05) operated between the American carriers and the coast of Israel to provide air cover for the British airlift to Amman, Jordan. While a naval threat was not deemed likely, the antisubmarine warfare carrier USS *Wasp* (CVS-18) joined the 70-ship flotilla. Navy aircraft were tasked with show-of-force flyovers and close-air support. VFP-62’s photographic reconnaissance would play an important role in the operation. “That operation really pulled the men of the ship together with us flying ’round the clock for over 45 days, breaking all kinds of flying and



Rick Maioriello’s VFP-62 F9F-8P “Photo” Cougar, Bureau Number 144402, in 1958. Richard Maioriello collection



Detachment P.I. Lieutenant Junior Grade D.J. Looney, Jr. (middle) briefing a Lebanon mission to (left to right) CAG Commander English, VFP-62 officer-in-charge Lieutenant Commander Ward Berkey and Lieutenant Junior Grade Rick Maioriello. Richard Maioriello collection

mission records,” Rick remembers. In fact, *Essex* and *Saratoga* passed the 3,000 sortie mark by 3 August and accumulated 6,985 sorties for 15 July to 5 September.

The intense flight operations would also bring a tragedy to VFP-62’s small detachment. Rick’s close friend and fellow pilot, Lieutenant Junior Grade Richard L. “Deke” Dieterich, was killed while flying a low-level mission 19 July 1958 over a Lebanese valley taking photos of gun emplacements when he hit the mountain peak coming out of the valley. Later, his body was retrieved and returned to *Essex*. A memorial service was held and the body returned to his family. Curiously, research for this article turned up no mention of this accident and it is apparent that it was scrubbed from available documentation to avoid disclosing U.S. reconnaissance capabilities at the time. This Cold War secrecy happened before the U-2 shutdown over the Soviet Union in May 1960, the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

Three days later, Rick flew the same photo recon mission that killed Deke. He recalls that the mission was to take photos of Muslim leader Walid Jumblatt’s headquarters in the Bekaa Valley. Because reconnaissance aircraft are unarmed, they often are assigned a fighter escort to protect them from hostile fighters. For anti-aircraft fire,

however, they were left to their own devices and Rick recalls, “While our planes on occasion had taken small arms fire, none of us ever knew if we were hit until the aircraft was post-flighted aboard the ship.” VFP-62’s Lieutenant Junior Grade Charlie Counter aboard *Saratoga* found a bullet hole in his *Cougar*’s tail section.

Once over the target, they discovered a partial cloud cover and since the photo pilot was the lead, he instructed the fighter escort to remain at altitude while he went below the clouds to complete the mission. This was not unusual to separate from the escort because their close presence would often interfere with successful mission completion. Rick says:

There were clouds directly over the target which was a house on top of a mountain surrounded by a valley and other similar mountains. I would be unable to take any photos from above and decided to photograph the target from the side, rotating my cameras to the 45-degree oblique position. I needed to fly slow to maneuver in this relatively tight area and also to conserve fuel. Aware that Deke had problems previously, I lowered my flaps to full down position. This would turn out to be a great decision. I was basically in a 45-degree bank turn to the left taking picture after picture, increasing and decreasing the bank as necessary to keep the target in the cameras’ view.

Unlike the aerobatic skills necessary for a fighter pilot, the recon pilot must concentrate



on keeping his aircraft oriented correctly, while operating the cameras and flying the aircraft.

Suddenly he faced the worst of all situations in low-level flight:

I suddenly stalled because of too much bank and started falling into the valley. I reflexively pushed the throttle to the wall and went forward on the stick to regain flying speed. I expected to crash and was too low to eject. I was looking up at the tree tops on both sides of my canopy; as they say, your life flashes before you. For me, I remember seeing a newspaper headline "Second Plane Crashes in Lebanon."

The young aviator's training paid off, however:

Fortunately my plane regained flying speed—still quite slow (around 160 knots)—and began climbing slowly out of the valley. I held my breath and prayed that I would have enough climb speed to clear the mountain in front of me. I barely did and then climbed through the cloud cover to get my wits about me. At altitude I noticed the barrier guard, which is g-force actuated, had come out and was visible through the front windshield like a large middle finger. In addition, the nose of the aircraft was violently yawing back and forth, right-to-left and left-to-right. I turned the yaw damper switch off and on several times said to myself, "what is wrong with this plane?" I looked down at my legs and saw my knees were shaking violently and my feet were moving the rudder causing the plane's movements. I took my feet off the rudder pedals and everything returned to normal and I started to relax.

My escort called me over the radio and said something like, "are we done yet?" I angrily responded "I'll tell you when we're done," and continued to collect myself. After a couple of minutes, I told him that I was going back down to finish and flew back under the clouds and even more carefully completed the mission. When I landed back on *Essex*, I pointed to the barrier guard to Chief Schroeder and he just pushed it back into place mumbling something like "these planes are getting old." Likewise I pushed this memory down into my "denial file" and got officer-in-charge, Lieutenant Commander Ward Berkey, to give me his scheduled next flight so I could get "back on the horse" right away. Ward never asked me why I wanted his flight. I firmly believe that I shared the same experience that Deke had on his fateful flight but, because I was aware of his happenstance, I already had my flaps down and was lucky to get out of there. I never told anybody about this until eight years later when my fellow medical students asked me if I had any close calls.

By the time the Lebanon crisis ended *Essex* lost three pilots and a chief petty officer was killed on the flight deck. Before leaving its deployment to the Sixth Fleet, *Essex* was ordered to pass through the Suez Canal, then to the area of Taiwan in the Formosa Straits to strengthen the Seventh Fleet, heavily involved with action at Quemoy and Matsu (*Saratoga's* draft was three feet deeper than the allowed depth to go through the canal at that time). The extra-long cruise of *Essex* finally ended and returned to the United States in November 1958 with two Armed Forces Expeditionary Medals.

After his naval service was completed, Rick returned to Philadelphia, completed college and entered medical school, while flying with the reserves at Willow Grove. Later, he was approached by the Air Force to re-enlist as part of a pilot-physician program. He would eventually fly F-102s, F-105s and finish with the F-4D *Phantom II*. With his aviation career behind him, he entered private practice as an ear, nose and throat surgeon, but in the years to come, he was to meet his past.

In 2004, on family vacation to the New York Finger Lakes Rick took a side-trip to the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo, New York. While driving through he was surprised to see on a side lot the partially dismembered fuselage of a "Photo" *Cougar* with a nose number "962" vaguely visible. He couldn't believe his eyes; it was "his" F9F-8P (Bureau Number 144402) that had his name painted on the canopy rail while he was in VFP-62. The old jet was patiently waiting for its restoration. Sadly, it was completely covered with graffiti, the refueling probe was missing, the canopy and windshield were cracked, all the glass from the camera bays and their components were missing, the speed brakes were gone and the tailhook was missing. The final insults to this once proud jet was a rod between the main landing gear making the plane look like a tricycle, numerous structural holes, missing access panels, the cockpit instrumentation was destroyed and removed, the trim tab on the flying tail was off and in pieces, as was part of the vertical stabilizer. It was a mess and in fact, the Navy had sold it for scrap.

Rick made his intentions known that he wanted to support the F9F's restoration. When it became clear that the air museum had changed its intentions to restore the aircraft, Rick asked if they would consider letting him restore the plane and take it to Magnolia, Ohio, for display. The



The rediscovered F9F-8P, BuNo 144402, in 2004. Richard Maioriello collection

museum officials were convinced since he had a personal interest in the plane that he would see the restoration through to completion. It took an entire year to submit the proper paperwork, form a foundation to take possession and have their board meet and approve it. Also, because it was apparently sold for scrap, old F9F-8P 144402 would legally be owned by Rick.

It took six months to get the *Cougar* transported to Magnolia. During the first two years quite a bit of progress was made: Rick and

his volunteer crew fixed all the glass, repaired the canopy and fuselage and then all stopped for about two years. The plane was then moved to an auto-repair facility and structural work again resumed. More skin was replaced and a tailhook found and connected. The canopy that Rick repaired was Plexiglas and, unfortunately, found not to fit the aircraft (it was the canopy for an FJ-3). Two months were spent calling countless contacts to find an F9F canopy. Disappointment came with either being too late or the owner not



Maioriello's F9F-8P delivered to its current home with the Military Aviation Preservation Society (MAPS) in Canton, Ohio, 3 November 2012. Matt Oltersdorf, MAPS



willing to part with it. Ready to give up but, with the knowledge that nothing is simple in finding aircraft parts, persistence found a new canopy. After more waiting, installation was completed. The only thing left was to put the wings on.

Along the way, Rick had a lot of help from volunteers and aviation restoration experts from all over the country. He found that restoring an aircraft tests one's tenacity. Amazingly, there are parts available *somewhere* but it takes a lot of help from aviation enthusiasts nationwide. About the time Rick was realizing that some of the work required the help of expert craftsmen and along came the opportunity he was hoping for: the Military Aviation Preservation Society (MAPS) at nearby Canton, Ohio, expressed interest in completing the restoration. A decade after first finding the F9F-8P, the restoration is reaching completion. With the love of a Naval Aviator and the help of many aviation enthusiasts, this beautiful aircraft will soon stand at attention welcoming the adoration of the public. For Navy ensign, to doctor, to Air Force Colonel Rick Maioriello, a man whose first love is of a durable Grumman F9F-8P in 1956, he savors this beautiful restoration and says, "when I see

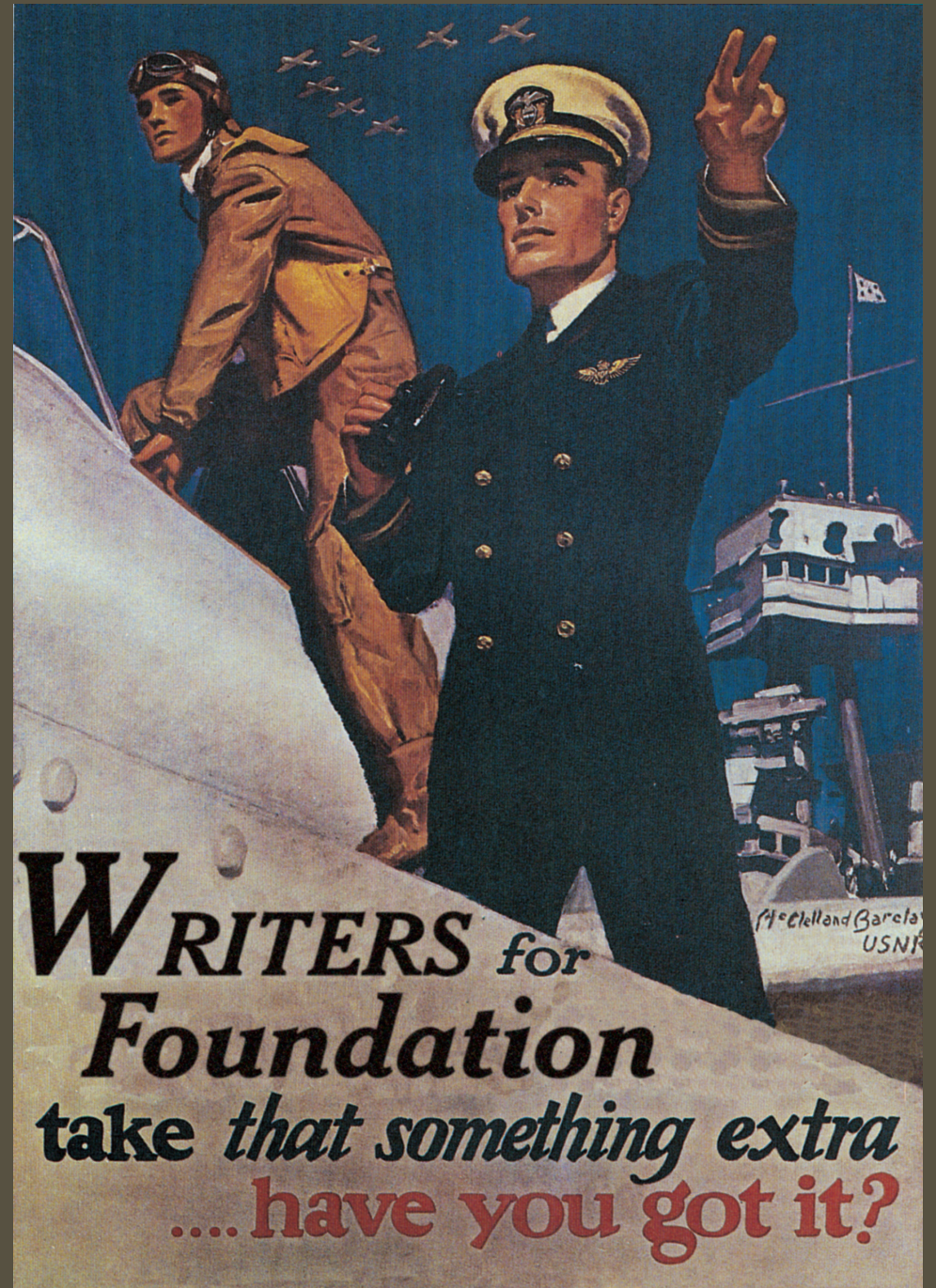


Bureau Number 144402 on display at the MAPS Air Museum. MAPS

young men and women look at the plane and hear their questions, I believe that if at least one of them will step forward when the need arises to defend our country, then the project is a success and was well worth everything." ✪



*Mr. Ken Jack enlisted in the Navy in July 1959 after graduating from New Kensington High School near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, determined to be a Navy photographer. He graduated from the Navy's Photographic School at NAS Pensacola, first in his class. In April 1960 he headed to his first duty station, VFP-62 at Cecil Field, Florida, to work with the sophisticated camera systems in the RF-8A Crusader. After a short Mediterranean cruise, he was sent to photographic-electronics school to learn how to repair the state-of-the-art electronics controlling the camera systems. In early 1962, VFP-62 was developing a new forward-firing camera (the KA-45) capability for the RF-8A. Jack was assigned to the photo maintenance shop, where Photo Chief Frank Wolle and Commander Robert Koch (VFP-62's head photo officer) were resolving the camera's numerous problems. The camera was scheduled for carrier testing aboard USS Forrestal (CVA-59) in late summer. Jack was promoted to a photomate second class and assigned the position of lead photomate with Forrestal's VFP-62 detachment. The KA-45 camera was tested for the rough carrier environment and for the first time, night photography, using the carrier and its escorts as targets. Just in time, the KA-45 was ready for the October photo missions over Cuba. When his enlistment ended, Jack obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics Education from Penn State University and taught high school mathematics for 13 years. During that time, he received a Master's degree in mathematics education and post-graduate credits in Computer Science from the University of Pittsburgh. He joined Westinghouse Electric Corporation as a Computer Software Engineer in 1980 designing and developing computer code for nuclear reactor safety monitoring systems. Mr. Jack and his wife of 42 years, Darlene, built their retirement home in the mountains of north-central Pennsylvania and both retired in 2002. In retirement, he reads, writes, enjoys fishing and in 2006 became the webmaster for the VFP-62 website [www.vfp62.com](http://www.vfp62.com). He and his fellow squadron members consulted with the producers of the History Channel's documentary Man, Moment, Machine ("JFK, Cuban Missile Crisis, RF-8A Crusader"). In 2007, he and his squadronmates again provided technical support for the restoration of the RF-8A (flown by Lieutenant Jim Curry over Gtmo during the Cuban crisis) at Battleship Park, Mobile, Alabama. Mr. Jack is co-author with the late Captain William B. Ecker, USN, of the book Blue Moon Over Cuba: Aerial Reconnaissance During the Cuban Missile Crisis. In October 2012, Mr. Jack delivered a presentation on VFP-62 and the Cuban Missile Crisis at the National Naval Aviation Museum's "Discovery Saturday" program and previously wrote an article "VFP-62 Supersonic Hooligans" for the Fall 2011 edition of Foundation.*



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