



JUNE 24, 2021

# FIVE STAR



**OPERATION  
FREEDOM'S  
SENTINEL**

SPECIAL EDITION



**BEGINNING**

**OF THE**

**END**

**THE END TO A  
CONFLICT LASTING TWO  
DECADES AND HOW  
THE IKE AND BATTLE AXE TEAM  
HELPED TO PROTECT OUR  
FELLOW SERVICE MEMBERS  
ON THE GROUND**

**Story and layout by MCSN ORION SHOTTON**

**Photos by IKE MEDIA DEPARTMENT**

**MAY 4, 2021** Aviation Ordnanceman Airman Ethan Sauer performs pre-flight ordnance checks on a F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet attached to the "Gunslingers" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 105.





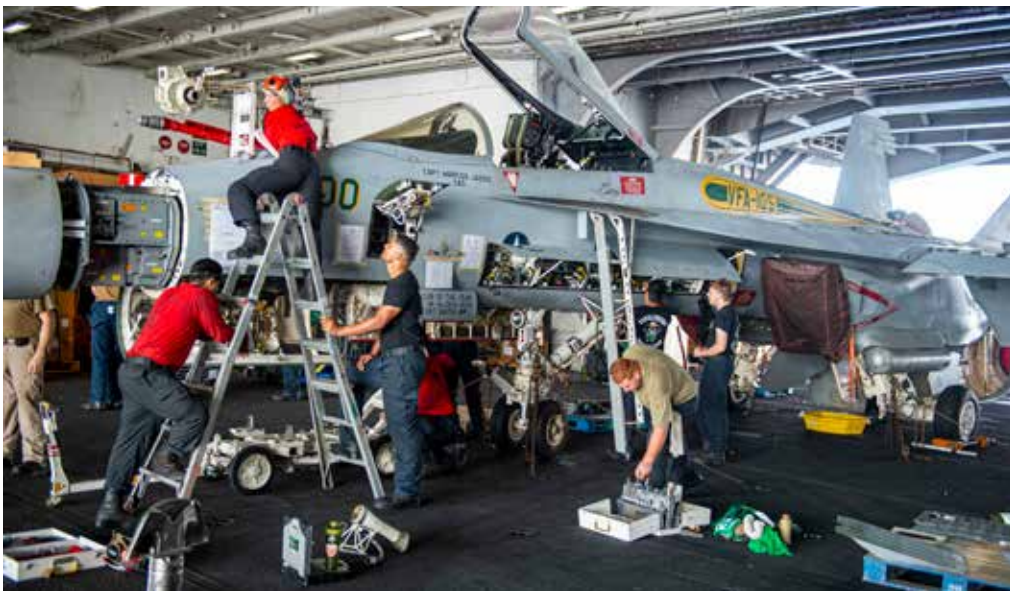
LTJG THOMAS HUDNER  
MEDAL OF HONOR

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**he Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group is charged with the responsibility of providing close air support for our American and coalition forces that are currently on the ground in Afghanistan.**



After two decades of involvement within Afghanistan, President Joseph Biden announced in April that the troops on the ground will be pulled out by September 11 of this year as part of Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

"We take this mission with a sense of real honor, purpose and privilege," said Rear Adm. Scott Robertson, Commander, Carrier Strike Group Two and current Commander, Task Force 58 (TF-58). "We are committed to our troops and the coalition forces to make sure they are able to retrograde out of country safely with our overhead coverage. It should tell you something about American values and commitment to our people and friends."

**MAY 12, 2021** Aviation Electrician's Mate 3rd Class Eudaliz Garcia conducts pre-flight checks on a F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Fighting Swordsmen" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 32.

**MAY 16, 2021** Sailors perform maintenance on an F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Gunslingers" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 105.





**Clockwise from top left**

**MAY 9, 2021** Hull Maintenance Technician 3rd Class Jose Pineda, left, and Hull Maintenance Technician Fireman Bryan Feagin replace a reducer

**JUNE 6, 2021** Sailors learn about P-100 pump operations during a damage control training team exercise.

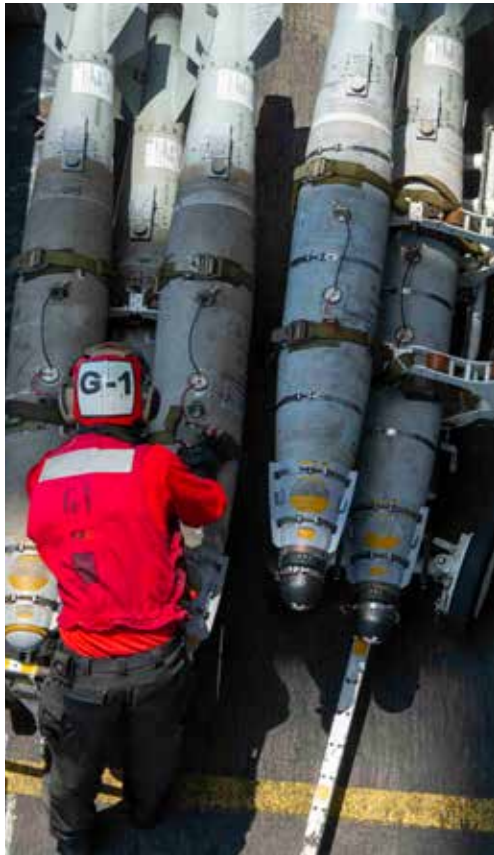
**APRIL 1, 2021** Seaman Cedric Volle stands aft lookout watch while transiting the Suez Canal.

**MAY 3, 2021** Operations Specialist 2nd Class Jacqueline Gonzalez stands watch in the combat direction center.





**MAY 14, 2021** Aviation Structural Mechanic  
Airman Amanda Lasky cleans the canopy of a  
F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet attached to the  
"Rampagers" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 83.



**MAY 2, 2021** Aviation Ordnanceman 3rd Class Aaron-james Clark stands bomb farm watch.

IKE provides a presence with F-18s flying overhead and Robertson believes it is an important responsibility, because it reassures the troops that we are here and they have our support. That support entails having aircraft being able to deter, possibly with force, enemy forces from attacking our countrymen and allies.

When the drawdown began there were more than 4,000 American and coalition forces stationed across Afghanistan. As of early- June, U.S. Central Command estimates that we have completed greater than 50% of the entire retrograde process.

“It makes me happy knowing that we are able to ensure that the troops get home,” said Aviation Structural Mechanic (Equipment) 3rd Class Drew Dunn. “My own family has been involved with the conflict in the past.”

For many people, not just Sailors, Soldiers or Marines, the end of the drawdown are the last pages of the final chapter of the air in Afghanistan.



**MAY 25, 2021** Lt. Cmdr. Kevin Pitcock, left, Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Equipment) Airman Shantell Santiago, center, and Lt. Nicholas Macklin, back, watch an F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Wildcats" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 131.



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**APRIL 29, 2021** Two F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter jets attached to the “Fighting Swordsmen” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 32, prepare to take off from the flight deck.

**APRIL 29, 2021** Aviation Ordnanceman 3rd Class Jose Valdez makes preflight adjustments to ordnance.





“This is really, for me personally, incredibly significant to have a small part in the drawdown of our forces on the ground,” said Robertson. “The whole reason I’m back in uniform was because 9/11. I had served from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s on active duty, but got out for a couple years. Right after the attacks, I asked the Navy to put me back on active duty the next day.”

Directly after the attacks nearly 80,000 people joined during the first full recruitment year. Around that same time, TF-58, formerly under General James Mattis, was ordered to deploy Marines into Afghanistan as the initial springboard to launch our counterterrorism mission.

“  
**FOR ME, IT'S THE EXCLAMATION POINT  
ON THE CONCLUSION OF MY LAST SEA  
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”



**MAY 25, 2021** A F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Rampagers" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 83, flies over IKE.

Robertson wasn't the only American motivated by the events of 9/11. Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class Matthew Knox was 18 years old at the time and remembers where he was when the tragic event happened. He joined the Navy immediately after we went into Iraq. Knox has since been to the central command area-of-responsibility five times in his career, involved with operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

"It's not often you get to see something historic from start to finish," said Knox. "For me, it's the exclamation point on the conclusion of my last sea tour and final deployment."

Along with the drawdown, U.S. Naval

Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) will dissolve TF-58, which was established to demonstrate the ability of the Navy and Marine Corps to staff and combine the efforts of two Amphibious Ready Groups/Marine Expeditionary Units. These amphibious operations led by General James Mattis aimed at disrupting Taliban command and control in south Afghanistan. TF-58 executed the longest range assault from the sea in U.S. naval history, navigating some 400 nautical miles from the ships to seize a remote desert airstrip, later known as Forward Operating Base Rhino, the initial footprint for all U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan.

"The challenges TF-58 had 20 years ago

to get boots on the ground from the sea is similar to the challenge we have today with providing persistent close air support – it is a long way to send forces," said Robertson.

"And we're the only force in the world that can provide this level of combat air power – for this length of time – and with the precision that we do. Right now the IKE Carrier Strike Group, with our seasoned crew, is the best in the world, and it takes all of us!"

The IKE Carrier Strike Group's flagship, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69) left Norfolk, Va. in February and has been supporting operations in 5th Fleet since March.

“I’m proud of all the Sailors on IKE safely executing complex operations every day,” said Captain Paul Campagna, commanding officer of USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69). “We wouldn’t have a single aircraft leaving our flight deck if it wasn’t for the hard work of our crew. Everyone embarked on IKE from the Sailors in the plant who provide propulsion and electricity so we can maneuver IKE to the flight deck teams of Air department and Battle-Axe working the dangerous task of starting, troubleshooting, launching and recovering aircraft going to and from Afghanistan, it takes all 4,500 of us on board to accomplish our mission.”

Campagna was assigned to the “Warhawks” of VFA-97 deployed on USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) on September 11, 2001 where he flew some of the first combat sorties in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Now a new generation is coming that will never be a part of or know the struggle of being part of the Afghanistan engagement.

“This has defined my career – I was in these waters at the beginning of this conflict,” said Captain Paul Campagna, commanding officer of USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69). “I’m humbled to be back here at the end to ensure the safety of withdrawing forces on the ground.”

As this part of American history comes to a close, the IKE CSG and TF-58 continue to complete the mission with a sense of honor and purpose.

“For our friends out there, to quote General [James] Mattis, there is no worst enemy and no better friend,” said Robertson.





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**JUNE 4, 2021** An F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Wildcats" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 131 flies.

**Front Cover | MAY 26, 2021**

Aviation Electronics Technician 3rd Class Bryan Minneman, center, performs prelaunch checks on a F/A-18F Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Fighting Swordsmen" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 32, during flight operations.

**Back Cover | MAY 13, 2021**

Aviation Boatswain's Mate 1st Class Nicole Banks signals for a F/A-18E Super Hornet fighter jet, attached to the "Gunslingers" of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 105, to launch.

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