

BOOK REVIEW

the Classic: F/A-18A/B Hornet Aircraft in Australian Service

by John Quaife

*Big Sky Publishing and RAAF History and Heritage, Newport, NSW; 2023; 246 pp;
ISBN 9 781922 896605 (hard cover);RRP \$29.99*

The F/A-18A/B Hornet was introduced into RAAF service in May 1985 to replace the French Mirage IIIIO, a short-range interceptor. The Hornet was a tactical fighter aircraft, designed to fight and survive in the air combat arena, while with the flick of a switch was a very capable ground attack aircraft. It served as Australia's frontline fighter aircraft for over 35 years, becoming known as the "Classic Hornet" when Australia purchased the F/A-18F Super Hornet, a two seat attack aircraft, and the EA-18G Growler, an electronic warfare variant of the Super Hornet.

In *the Classic*, John Quaife as meticulously covered the history of the aircraft and its operations, its development, and the aircrew that flew them and the technical personnel who maintained them. Woven into the history is the story of those people who took the aircraft to war several times at the direction of our government.

John Quaife is a retired Classic Hornet pilot with more than 2,000 hours experience flying fast jet aircraft. He was the Director of Combined Air Operations in the Middle East theatre and served as the Air Commander Australia before retirement. He is the author of *Viking Boys*; *the Battle of the Atlantic*; soon to be joined by a companion title *ANZAC Strike Wing*. He is a contributing author to the RAAF's Australian air campaign series.

It was a case of humble beginnings when 65 personnel were posted to the United States to accept delivery and ferry of the first two Hornets, with little support from the government at home. At the direction of the Chief of Air Staff, the ferry flight to Australia was non-stop from Naval Air Station Lemoor, California, to RAAF Williamtown, New South Wales. It was supported by an Air National Guard KC-10 tanker, organised on the "buddy" system between the Australian Air Force Chief of Staff and his American counterpart. It was a risky, but uneventful, venture.

The reader is provided with an excellent description of the aircraft, its systems and its capabilities in an easy to follow narrative, aligning the reader with a pilot's perspective from the cockpit. As with the rest of the book, the explanations are straight forward, catering for those not familiar with the aircraft or its systems.

An early decision to tie the configuration and operating systems of the Classic Hornet to that of the U.S. Navy was fundamental to the prolonged success of the aircraft in Australian service. Along the way it would be subjected to the largest and most complex upgrade program ever attempted, anywhere. Over three decades the aircraft underwent numerous upgrades to its systems and a progression from dropping unguided "dumb" bombs to launching long range GPS and laser guided air to surface weapons from medium altitude.

Operating an aircraft designed for carrier operations in a land-based environment resulted in an entirely different fatigue spectrum. This required significant support from Australia's Defence Science and Technology Organisation and an innovative approach to aircraft use by the Air Force to enable the aircraft to reach its required life of type.

Following the terrorist strike on the Twin Towers in New York, RAAF Hornets were deployed to Diego Garcia to provide air defence cover for the U.S. Base on the island. The Hornet would also lead the way in two of the most significant applications of combat air power by Australian forces since the Vietnam War.

In 2003 Hornets operated in the Middle East in Operation Falconer during the war in Iraq and later in 2014 in Operation Okra. The objective of the latter was to contribute to international efforts to disrupt and degrade operations of the terrorist group known as Islamic State. The author takes the reader into the cockpit describing the challenges faced by the pilots, the demanding rules of engagement and the difficulties of operating in a foreign environment amongst a multitude of foreign aircraft in a cramped airspace. Doing so, he captures the concerns, tension and excitement experienced by the aircrew in combat.

The book has **an** good index system and a comprehensive set of endnotes. It provides a broad glossary of military terminology and list of interviews conducted by the author. A listing of individual aircraft, involvement in major operations and their disposition is included.

The author has provided an excellent, detailed history of the Classic Hornet while capturing the human endeavour, the professionalism of the people who flew and supported the aircraft, their insights and their personal stories. Sadly, it also recounts the circumstances where aircrew lost their lives while operating the Hornet. The histories of the squadrons and wings that operated the Hornet provide an insight to the Air Force organisation. It is very well written with superb colour plates of the aircraft throughout the book and *the Classic* will stand the test of time as a hallmark publication.

the Classic will appeal to aviation enthusiasts and those with an interest in Air Force operational history and the employment of air power.

859 words

Bob Treloar

