The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1YbIWoK

MIDDLE EAST

For U.S. Pilots, the Real War on ISIS Is a Far Cry From 'Top Gun'

By HELENE COOPER SEPT. 16, 2015

ABOARD THE U.S.S. THEODORE ROOSEVELT, in the Persian Gulf — Soon after this aircraft carrier arrived here for its Middle East deployment, two F/A-18 Super Hornets catapulted off its deck for a six-and-a-half-hour bombing run toward Islamic State targets in Iraq. In one of the fighter jets was Navy Lt. Michael Smallwood, 28, call sign Bones, and in the other was his friend and roommate, Navy Lt. Nick Smith, also 28, call sign Yip Yip.

For a minute or two that day in May, the Hornets were right next to each other in the sky, but then Lieutenant Smith's plane had engine trouble and began to lose altitude. Over the radio, Lieutenant Smallwood could hear his friend turn around, try to land back on the carrier and then eject into the Persian Gulf. The $60 million Hornet crashed into the sea.

Lieutenant Smallwood found himself fighting to keep his mind off the fate of his friend, but his orders were to continue climbing and fly on to Iraq. On many such missions, he simply loitered in the skies, dropped no munitions and headed back to the carrier.

This is the life of the modern day American fighter pilot — long periods of monotony, combat missions that end with bombs still intact to avoid hitting civilians, occasional moments of fear. It is a long way from "Top Gun," the iconic 1986 Hollywood blockbuster that made Tom Cruise a household name and Navy fighter pilots the heroes of adolescent boys everywhere.

But these real-life pilots — the elite of the elite, trained to routinely land on moving aircraft carriers and to refuel in midair, two of the most difficult maneuvers in aviation — are some of America's main warriors against the Islamic State. In the year since airstrikes against Islamic State militants began, American pilots have assumed a huge bulk of the war effort. They have conducted more than 4,700 airstrikes since August 2014 — 87 percent of the manned flights by the American-led coalition — and provided air support for Iraqi security forces and Kurdish pesh merga fighters on the ground.

The Islamic State may have shoulder-fired, heat-seeking missiles, commonly known as Manpads for Man-Portable Air Defense Systems. But at the moment, the militant Sunni group does not appear to have the capability to bring down American fighter jets. A Jordanian plane that crashed in Syria in December, leading to the capture of the pilot and his eventual immolation by the Islamic State, is widely believed to have gone down because of mechanical failure or pilot error, and not because it was shot down.

"Quite honestly, the U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marines own the skies," said Maj. Anthony Bourke, a former Air Force fighter pilot. "So even though pilots dream of dogfights, the biggest risk now is small-arms fire, and if you stay above 10,000 feet, you're not going to be hit."

The risks are different. As Lieutenant Smallwood's plane flew toward Iraq in May after his friend had ejected from his own jet, he could hear from the chatter on the radio that a recovery effort was underway. But Lieutenant Smallwood knew better than to clog up the frequency asking if Lieutenant Smith and his weapons officer on the plane had been found alive.

Five more hours to go. Arriving in the skies over Iraq, Lieutenant Smallwood's Super Hornet connected with a refueling tanker to get gas, then continued with the task at hand. But whenever there was a lull in the flight, "all I could think about was my roommate and his W.S.O.," Lieutenant Smallwood said, using the military term for weapons officer.

Engine troubles are not the only risk at 25,000 feet. The F/A-18s today require more G-forces than the planes of the "Top Gun" era, and pilots today pull nine G's

instead of four and five G's. It is the difference, they say, between feeling that your head weighs 90 pounds instead of 40 pounds. (Most people's heads weigh around 10 pounds.) So pilots have to be physically fit — not dehydrated or hungover from drinking and crooning the Righteous Brothers to Kelly McGillis at a bar the night before.

Beyond that, Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria are often in heavily populated civilian areas, which limits the air war to small, remote targets: single trucks, weapons caches and even individual machine guns.

Despite the precautions the pilots say they take, there are civilian casualties from airstrikes, although the number is in deep dispute. Officials with United States Central Command, which overseas American military operations in the Middle East, recently said that they had received reports of 31 episodes involving civilian casualties since the airstrikes began, and had dismissed 17 as not credible, with six still under investigation. One report, investigated for more than six months, led Centcom officials to conclude that two children were probably killed by a coalition airstrike.

Monitoring groups say the command's figures are a gross understatement.

"When you're called in to deliver a weapon, general world opinion swings very violently against you when you start killing the wrong people," said Capt. Benjamin Hewlett, 46, call sign Pizza, who is the commander of air wing aboard the Roosevelt. He said that in the war against the Islamic State, bombs hit their intended targets almost all of the time. A big part of the reason, Captain Hewlett said, is that there are no American troops on the ground.

"So we don't feel that we have to rush in," he said. "The natural tendency is, our guys are under fire, I've got to get in there. But when you rush a bad delivery, people get hurt."

Pilots and weapons officers spend a lot of their time in the air watching patterns of civilian life, to determine whether a movement on a road just outside of Ramadi is a truck full of Islamic State fighters or a pickup with civilians. They fly over designated grid areas, typically 60 square miles, searching for fighters, artillery and

other signs of the enemy. They very often return to the Roosevelt with all of their bombs still strapped to the planes.

Certainly there are no Mavericks in the sky conducting barrel rolls over suspicious-looking enemy pilots in MiG fighters. "That is not tactically viable," said Capt. Kyle Wilson, 29, call sign Betty, a Marine pilot on the Roosevelt.

It was late at night, and he and other members of his squadron were in the "ready room," an eight-floors-deep clubroom/classroom that fighter pilots use when they are not in the air. The men — there is only one female pilot aboard the Roosevelt for this deployment — had been up at least since the shipwide reveille at dawn.

"If you do that, I'm just going to shoot you," Captain Wilson said about the barrel rolls. The Pentagon in fact condemns them. When a Chinese fighter jet did one last August over an American Navy spy plane near Hainan Island, China, the Pentagon called it "unsafe and unprofessional" and the Obama administration issued a stern protest to the Chinese authorities.

Still, there was a lot of machismo on display. There is plenty of drinking at bars (although no alcohol is allowed on the Roosevelt), and plenty of attitude. Many of the men sport Breitling watches, the go-to expensive accessory of pilots around the world.

The big question in the ready room was the rumor that Hollywood was making "Top Gun 2." So what would take the place of the beach volleyball scene with all the "Top Gun" pilots sweating under the California sun?

"Crud," said Capt. Lanier Bishop, 31, call sign Pope. He flashed a quick look at his commanding officer and fellow pilot, Maj. William Mitchell, 39, call sign Skull. "It's got to be Crud, right?"

Crud, the two said, is a combination of pool and rugby that fighter pilots play. At pool tables in officers' clubs across the world, pilots use their hands, instead of pool cues, to whip the ball across the table, and then bodily tackle each other for some reason. One pilot said he had broken someone's ribs playing Crud.

There remains a lot of camaraderie. Back in May, Lieutenant Smallwood did not

know the fate of his roommate when he finally landed back on the Roosevelt just after 11 p.m., after his six-and-a-half-hour strike mission.

As he bolted out of his plane, Lieutenant Smallwood was told that his friend had survived, fished out of the water by rescuers.

"But I still had to run down to the room to see for myself," Lieutenant Smallwood recalled. "First thing I did was hug him."
