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# VF-11/111 'Sundowners' 1942-95 (Aviation Elite Units)



## Synopsis

Fighting Squadron 11 was established at San Diego in August 1943, beginning a half-century record that spanned aerial combat in three wars from the piston to the jet age. First deployed to Guadalcanal, the 'Sundowners' flew Grumman Wildcats and completed its tour as the Navy's third-ranking F4F squadron in terms of aerial victories. Upon returning home, the 'Sundowners' transitioned to Hellcats in preparation for a second combat deployment. In 1944-45 the squadron flew from USS Hornet (CV-12), participating in the fast carrier strikes against the Philippines, Formosa and the Asian mainland. It finished the war as the Navy's 11th ranking fighter squadron with 158 credited victories. Redesignated VF-111 in 1948, the 'Sundowners' converted to F9F Panthers and scored history's first jet-versus-jet victory over Korea in 1950. After the armistice, the squadron flew FJ-3 Furies and F11F Tigers, before receiving the world-class F8U Crusader in 1961. During the long Vietnam War, the 'Sundowners' logged six deployments, scoring MiG kills in both F-8s and F-4 Phantom IIs. From 1978 to disestablishment in 1995, the 'Sundowners' flew F-14 Tomcats from USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63) and Carl Vinson (CVN-70), completing a record of 37 deployments from 17 flattops in its 52-year career. From World War 2 until after the Cold War, the 'Sundowners' established an unsurpassed record 'at the tip of the spear' in naval aviation history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is probably the best book yet in what is already a pretty good series. The reason is that this is not just a one-war history of a squadron like most of the other books, but the full story from

formation to dissolution (and even beyond!). The story begins in 1942 with F4F Wildcats and ends, officially at least, in 1995 with F-14 Tomcats. But an adversary squadron called VFC-111, using the Sundowners name and logo, did form in 2006 at NAS Key West, flying F-5s, and they are illustrated here as well. Thanks to this long history, the 10 pages of color side views do not have only one or two aircraft types, as with most of the other titles in this series, but 11! There are also a larger number of photos in color scattered throughout the text, and a fair number of patches shown, also in color. For the first book in the series on a U.S. Navy squadron, Osprey picked a fine pair of authors. Tillman is, of course, one of the best-known and most-respected writers on U.S. Naval aviation, and van der Lugt is the official historian of the Sundowners, so it would be hard for this book to have been any better than it is. Hopefully, Osprey will follow up with similar books on other well-known Navy and Marine squadrons, such as VF-17, VF-84 and VMF-214.

Hard on the heels of his excellent WHIRLWIND book for Simon & Schuster comes Barrett Tillman's latest, a comprehensive history of the Navy's legendary 'Sundowners' fighter squadron. Boasting a half-century of service, VF-11/-111 saw combat in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. One of only two USN fighter squadrons credited with kills in three wars, Sundowner pilots/crews notched up a total of 161 kills. The Sundowners' lengthy naval aviation career is nicely covered in this well-written and well-illustrated release from Osprey Publishing, #36 in their 'Aviation Elite Units' series. Established in August 1942, VF-11 pilots, flying land-based Grumman Wildcats and later carrier-based Hellcats, racked up a score of 157 kills by war's end. The squadron boasted such aces as 'Skull' Stimpson, Jimmie Savage, 'Rabbit' Moranville and Vern Graham. Part of the postwar Navy, VF-111 Panthers downed a lone MiG-15 during the Korean War. Two more MiGs - in this case, MiG-17s - were downed by Sundowner fighters during the Vietnam War. The unit was disestablished in 1995. Tillman and his collaborator, Henk van der Lugt, do a fine job of recreating the life and times of this top-notch unit. While much of the book is concerned with the Pacific War, the authors do not slight the Sundowners' peacetime activities nor its service in Korea and Vietnam. Numerous first-person reminiscences from former Sundowners are used throughout the book, a definite plus. The book is well-supplied with dozens of b&w and color photographs of aircraft and aircrew along with 10 pages of superb Tom Tullis' artwork. The Sundowners flew a variety of aircraft other than F4Fs/F6Fs such as F9F Panthers, F11F Tigers, FJ Furies, F-8 Crusaders, F-4 Phantoms and F-14 Tomcats and they're all on display in glorious color. In short, VF-11/-111 SUNDOWNERS, 1942-95 is a marvelous tribute to an outstanding unit. And it's a great read to boot. Definitely an OK-3 wire effort!

On page 99 of the book, I actually work with Bill Freckleton at Edwards Air Force Base. I had been shown this book by another person and when I saw the photo with Bill I had to get the book. I got him to autograph the book and we talked about his experiences with the Sundowner's and it was cool to see his eyes brighten reliving his time and the fact someone appreciated what he did and what he does now with flight test of the new fighters.

A nice look into one of the US Navy's most famous fighter squadrons. Few squadron if any squadrons in the American armed services can lay claim to serving in the three of America's most important wars. I like the detail put into VF-11/-111's missions, a few standing out more than others. The description of the new tactics and procedures used for jet aircraft on carriers was interesting to read. I recognize many of the names in this book: Charlie "Skull" Stimpson, Joseph "Roadrunner" Satrapa, Tooter Teague, to name a few. There is a very slight hiccup in the WWII incarnation's aerial losses and victories. It is mentioned that the Sundowners lost 12 Wildcats and 7 Hellcats to enemy fighters, but a page later the total lost is said to be 17. Maybe it was a mistake on the editors part, but it was something I caught. Again nothing too major. I have to admit it was kind of sad, seeing various squadrons with long distinguished histories get knocked off near the end including the Sundowners, but at least the legacy does live on in sense with VFC-111.

Having spent 10 years in this squadron, I found the book a great read. It is very well written and as much as I already knew about the squadron I learned a lot. A must read for anyone who has an interest in naval aviation. A lot of nostalgia for me.

If you are an admirer of Naval Aviation, Sundowners is a must have and must read! Barrett Tillman, a great historian and terrific writer with co-author Henk vander Lugt bring alive this storied squadron from F4F to F14 and beyond; basically the history of Naval Aviation and Grumman from the Wildcat of 1942 to retirement of the Tomcat. The photos and plates are breathtaking in themselves and bring alive a very colorful, descriptive text. Words and photos drive home the debt we owe to so many who sacrificed their lives, often without any trace, to give our wonderful country and the world the freedoms we enjoy today.

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