TOPGUN ASSOCIATION

SUMMER SITREP

Greetings from the TGA:

We closed out 2023 in a whirlwind of activity, and 2024 to date has been a continuation of that momentum. While this is in no small part related to the preparation for and execution of TOPGUN's 55th anniversary reunion this past May, we continue to press across multiple fronts in a variety of activities supporting the TGA mission. This summer release SITREP provides a recap of recent and current activities. As mentioned in the last SITREP, we intend to provide these updates twice a year. We want to thank each sponsor and member of the association for your contributions and support; we are truly making great progress in accelerating our impact in support of TOPGUN and our mission.

UPDATE FROM THE TGA PRESIDENT

KEVIN "PROTON" McLAUGHLIN

Most of the Board members and volunteers of your TGA staff maintain day jobs to keep food on the table while supporting TOPGUN and the TGA mission. One of the advantages of said occupations is having exposure and insight into the challenges and opportunities that impact naval aviation as a whole, and TOPGUN specifically. It is readily apparent as we watch the progress of the President's budget through the acquisition process that the Navy continues to be pressed to do more with less. That challenge is directly impacting our warfighters and TOPGUN today. I sometimes witness the fiscal challenges in real-time as they unfold in the halls of Congress and the Senate, leaving an indelible impression on me.

In my industry role, I have the great fortune of meeting with our TOPGUN and NAWDC leadership frequently, and the contrast in the needs of our aviators with the harsh realities of today's constrained defense budgets could not be more apparent. This environment inspires frequent TGA Board discussions and gives us clarity on where and how to focus our efforts to do what we can to help ease some of the burdens on today's instructors and students. Our efforts to advance our mission statement are across multiple fronts, but in the final analysis, the overarching objective will always be to support the staff and the students and to inspire potential future leaders to make naval aviation the best it can be.

Shifting gears here, I would like to take this opportunity to formally recognize the following five individuals who have recently been approved by the Board of Directors as TGA Honorary Lifetime Members:

Brad Elward	Author / Historian
Peter Cancro	Jersey Mike's Franchise Systems CEO / Founder
Hoyt Jones	Jersey Mike's Franchise Systems President
Joel Marcus	Alexandria Real Estate Equities Executive Chairman/Founder
Jim Kidrick	President / CEO, San Diego Air & Space Museum

Most of you are already familiar with Brad Elward's book "TOPGUN, The Legacy," which comprehensively covers the first fifty years of the institution in a fashion that no one will duplicate. For our other inductees, their unwavering dedication, support, and personal contributions have allowed us to greatly accelerate the development of the TGA and help us advance the achievement of our goals; it is truly an honor to have you aboard with us.

UPDATE FROM THE TOPGUN C.O.

CDR BLAINE "COCO" FELLONEY

I want to start this off by thanking the TGA, but especially John Ed "Tiger" Kerr, for putting on the 55th anniversary reunion. The 24/7 TOPGUN schedule has not changed from the days you may remember, and not having to put the burden of organizing such an event on our overly taxed JOs is a great relief. The reunion was a terrific affair, and it was a real privilege and treat to be able to meet, face-to-face, with many of the legends that we all grew up reading about and wanting to emulate. Those of us privileged enough to attend the event walked away with an even greater sense of honor to be a part of this elite fraternity.

Proton already said it, but I'll put a punctuation mark on some of his comments – yes, the Bros and students are truly trying to do more with less. We have a decent assortment of adversary aircraft on the flightline, but the numbers bely the challenges to keeping enough mission ready to fight daily. Ditto that condition on the fighter side, it is not easy – or cheap – to maintain a healthy stable of Rhinos and F-35s. Pointing to the aircraft and maintenance side of the house is a simple and obvious starting point. Still, you can extrapolate from there to any of the resources required to run TOPGUN in a fashion consistent with our aspirations.

To their credit, the staff continues to perform extraordinary work despite challenges presented. As you likely are aware, the changing world order continues to introduce more variability in potential threat scenarios, requiring tireless dedication and effort on the part of the staff to devise tactics and solutions to counter the threat, and the effort of students to learn and successfully apply the tactics. The aviator's bag of tricks required to fly, fight, and win has never demanded more tools, and our modern jets' sophistication and complexity requires tremendous intelligence and skill to successfully employ. I could not be prouder of the professionalism and skill of our staff and students, operating in this challenging and oftentimes resource-constrained environment. I want to take the opportunity to pivot on all of this and thank the TGA for what you have done and are doing to help us out at TOPGUN, it is very much appreciated. We will succeed in our mission despite the challenges, but every little bit that helps to reduce the burdens just allows us to expand our success.

TOPGUN 55TH ANNIVERSARY REUNION RECAP

JOHN ED "TIGER" KERR

We had a great turnout for the 55th anniversary event in San Diego, where it is always sunny and 72 degrees. What's not to like about that? The feedback from the attendees has been overwhelmingly positive as it was a great opportunity to see a lot of fellow Patch wearers, new and old, and rekindle those friendships that bond us. This year's anniversary was open to all former TOPGUN instructors and all TGA members.





Among those who attended this year's event were TOPGUN's founder and first OIC, Dan Pedersen; first CO, Roger Box; featured speaker, William McRaven; Air Boss, VADM Dan Cheever; Navy ace, Willy Driscoll; and four of the original nine founders. But that is just a start, as we truly had a broad representation from the list of "who's who" in Naval Aviation. The best part of these reunions is always the opportunity to see old friends who impacted each of our lives.





Thursday night started with a packed house for a casual outdoor patio reception at our hotel with good food, an open bar, and time to relax.





Friday featured the Staff Forum from 1200 to 1600. Proton, as TGA president, moderated the discussion, with current CO Coco and previous COs Pops and Vespa.

Topics were wide-ranging, most notably including discussions about China and the current state of TOPGUN. This was followed by a very enlightening and emotional discussion of the complex subject of suicide. As a community of hard-charging Naval Aviators, we have seen the devastating loss to two of our own in the last year alone. Awareness is paramount, as we are not immune to this issue, and this was a very thoughtfully presented discussion.



Also on Friday, a separate luncheon was orchestrated for the spouses of those attending the closed forums.





Saturday started early for the 44 “elite” golfers at the Riverwalk Golf Club. The culmination of this multi-day event was the Saturday evening banquet, with over 300 in attendance and ADM (ret) Bill McRaven as our guest speaker. As expected, ADM McRaven gave a passionate and inspiring address that was capped by a sustained standing ovation from the appreciative audience.











It is worth noting that, despite his demanding schedule, the Admiral also carved out some dedicated time earlier in the day to meet directly with the current TOPGUN staff.





If you have never attended a reunion, it is worth making a mental note now to do so in the future. So, we will see you again in 2029!

NAVAL AVIATION MUSEUM EXHIBIT UPDATE: PRESERVING THE LEGACY

RON "RHINO" UNTERREINER

In 2023, the TGA Board of Directors authorized the development of a dedicated TOPGUN Exhibit (TGX) at the National Naval Aviation Museum (NNAM) aboard NAS Pensacola. This effort has enjoyed being the first of its kind in many respects. This project is not a one-time donation of a completed exhibit to the museum, as digital content, a tech refresh plan, and associated artifact displays ensure exhibit future relevance. We are currently refining the digital content comprised of video and other presentation details for the exhibit.

Through the NNAM, Naval Aviation Schools Command has provided volunteer stash ensigns going through various elements of pre-flight training who are helping develop some of the media using their unique technical skills learned in college and elsewhere. Mikal "Butch" Kissick, F-14 RIO, Grad, TGA member, local businessman and our TGX Digital Content Team Lead, has dedicated hundreds of hours of time and IT/AV expertise to fine-tune the production efforts. We have been very fortunate with the great support of NNAM, Schools Command, and Pensacola local and visiting Bros and Grads volunteering their time.

The museum exhibit's three displays leverage our mission statement objectives of "remember," "educate," and "inspire" around TOPGUN history. Continuous audio-visual digital content review by TGA History with feedback incorporation and updates is a significant part of the long-term sustainment plan.



The TOPGUN Exhibit (TGX) structure has been installed at the National Naval Aviation Museum at NAS Pensacola. After ensuring all the touch screen audio-visual displays are fully functional, and with the addition of just obtained leadership addresses, there will be a "soft opening" to assess how museum visitors are interacting with the functional screens. There is a planned AV refresh within the following weeks to fine-tune the AV before the exhibit is considered to be FMC.

CALL FOR ARTIFACTS! What is really needed now (beyond monetary donations) are the physical items that make a museum exhibit more engaging: Helmets, flight jackets, stick models, photos, hard copy foundational documents, orders, flight schedules, or other items that are suitable for public display and directly related to TOPGUN. High quality digital copies of photographs are also welcome. Please do not hesitate to engage with TGA History (**history@topgunassociation.org** or Rhino Unterreiner at 808-371-8701) if there is something that can illuminate your part of the TOPGUN legacy and may be preserved at the Naval Aviation Museum. Artifact inclusion is an ongoing mission that will not only populate the exhibit but help preserve what TOPGUN has represented over the last 55 years while providing for exhibit growth in the future.

The TOPGUN History Office is in discussions for a NFWS support mission to photographically capture many of the currently displayed wall photos at TOPGUN for historical archives and use in TGX. As this archival process will be a significant project, we continue to look for local volunteers to assist us in supporting the TOPGUN Staff and other TGA mission objectives. Unlike other projects where donor funding was secured prior to starting, the TGA Board of Directors authorized direct payment from current TGA funds for the Exhibit. We hope to recoup funding to support sustainment of this project, and spur potential future exhibits in other high-profile locations. Donations can be made at **TGX | TOPGUN Association**.

Every donation is gratefully accepted. Donors at the Bronze level or above will have their names added to a periodic scrolling list displayed on the main “Inspire” screen. Donors at the Silver level may establish a memorial page on the “Remember” display for Patch wearers who have flown west. Please contact Ron “Rhino” Unterreiner (contact information above) if you have questions, comments, or input.

EVENTS UPDATE

DARRELL “CONDOR” GARY

You may have previously seen social media posts about some of our recent visits to NAS Fallon. We had a dozen TGA members covering the spectrum of TOPGUN’s existence, from 1969 to today, in attendance at the Grad 1v1 event. It is a great opportunity for grads and old Bros to get back in touch with our roots, for current Bros and students to meet legacy representatives, and for us as TGA members to get a first-hand sense of what the TOPGUN experience means today. Similarly, the legacy panel allows current students and staff to directly conduct candid conversations with a small old Bro contingent, allowing current aviators to better understand the context and history of TOPGUN and naval aviation as we grew up with it. Both of these events also provide us with greater insight into current challenges and opportunities in naval aviation, and what small contributions we can offer to help our current warfighters maintain the necessary edge to dominate tomorrow’s battlefield. Several more events are anticipated later in the year, although dates currently are TBD. The sponsored Grad 1v1 events are open to TGA members, so it is something to consider, especially if you have not been back since the days you went through the course or were on staff.





If you still need to mark them on your calendars, both Miramar and Oceana are hosting air shows in September. While we plan to host chalets at both air shows from time to time in the future, Miramar taxiway construction precludes doing so this year, and we ultimately determined to defer chalet hosting activities at both events to next year.

For those planning to attend Tailhook this year, we will have representation there and a booth to support membership sign-ups. If you are already a member, by all means stop by and say hello.

Finally, in collaboration with the Blue Angels Foundation, we are co-hosting a **Veteran's Day dinner on 09 Nov** in Dallas, Texas. Proceeds from the dinner benefit Gold Star families, and the families of wounded warriors. Last year's event was highly successful, and this year's is already shaping up to be even more spectacular and fruitful. In addition to attending, there are opportunities to sponsor tables and bring additional guests.

Additional information about these and future events can be found on the **Events page** on the TGA website. Most of the posted events present opportunities for TGA members to attend – simply follow the associated links to sign up, or if you have questions, **email the TGA Admin Coordinator**.

Membership and Volunteer Options

If you are not already enrolled as a TGA member, we highly encourage you to **join the association**. Please also help us by spreading the word to fellow TOPGUN grads. If you want to make a difference and learn more about volunteer opportunities with the TGA, please **contact the TGA Admin Coordinator**.

Farewells

We wish to recognize our recently fallen Bros, Steve "Rebel" Smith and Pete "Viper" Pettigrew. Rebel was one of the founding instructors hand-picked by "Yank" Pedersen, and Viper's technical acumen was given a nod with both a cameo role and a namesake playing the role of "Viper" in the original TOPGUN movie. While both have legacies that far exceed what is acknowledged herein, we are forever grateful to them and to their families for supporting them in naval aviation, in the TOPGUN mission, and during active duty and following their dedicated Navy service. We extend our deepest sympathies to their families.

In Conclusion

As you can see, it has been a busy year so far, and we have plenty of activities planned in the near future to keep us occupied. We are always impressed with the caliber of today's naval aviators and, while we would all like to think we could still prevail at the merge today, we know better – we have the finest men and women serving in uniform today, we are proud of our heritage and legacy, and it is a real privilege to maintain this affiliation with an institution that has served our country so well.

To the Patch!

Respectfully Submitted,

The TGA Staff