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From the June 8 edition

REAL WORLD TOP GUN



Matthew Enos, a TOPGUN Navy pilot and commanding officer of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 11, based out of Virginia Beach. At right, he makes an arrested landing on an aircraft carrier — a maneuver Enos has completed more than 1,000 times.



Bracey man wears the TOPGUN patch as elite Naval aviator

By SUSAN KYTE
Sun Staff Writer

There's "Top Gun" and the movie sequel "Top Gun: Maverick," raking in big bucks at a multiplex near you, and then there's the real deal.

Such as locally grown Matthew Enos, Commanding Officer of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 11, a true-to-life Navy TOPGUN pilot who grew up in Bracey and is currently stationed on an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean.

Only the top one percent of naval aviation pilots ever get the chance to wear the TOPGUN patch — a universal symbol of aviation superiority — that

comes with completing the Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program (SFTI program) at the Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center in Fallon, Nevada.

The 13-week program teaches fighter and strike tactics and techniques to selected naval aviators and naval flight officers.

Enos moved to the Bracey area in 1990 with his family, parents David and Arlene Enos. He is a graduate of Brunswick Academy.

Enos' mother Arlene said her son spent much of his youth around "Navy men." His father was a Master Chief

who took his son to aviation shows, offering spectacles such as the Blue Angels, the flight demonstration squadron of the United States Navy. "From a young age he could name the different types of planes," said Arlene Enos.

Matthew's father David retired from the Navy after 30 years of service. He died in 2021.

While she said she can't pinpoint Matthew's reasons, Arlene recalls her son at age 11 announcing his plans to become a Navy flyer.

Communicating by email, Matthew Enos said he knew of the TOPGUN program from the original Tom Cruise blockbuster — it was released in 1986 when he was seven years old — "but I had no idea of how the program really worked until I started flying Super Hornets. Essentially, you learn to become a teacher. It is intense and yes you are at the top of your game when you finish, but the real purpose is to return the favor to the fleet aviators through instruction.

"The real reason I wanted to go to TOPGUN was out of sheer respect for the SFTIs (Strike Fighter Tactics Instructors), or as we call them 'patch wearers' that I met along the way. I wanted to be like them. They were the ultimate professionals in my eyes."

After graduating from Virginia Tech in 2002 with a Bachelor of Science in Industrial and Systems Engineering with a minor in leadership and business, Enos was commissioned in the Navy.

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ENOS

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He began flight training in Pensacola, Fla. in October 2002 and was designated a Naval Aviator less than two years later, in June of 2004.

Enos spent several more months training at Naval Air Station Lemoore as a Super Hornet pilot before being assigned to the Diamondbacks, a strike fighter squadron based in Atsugi, Japan.

It was after this tour, when he was deployed on the USS Kitty Hawk, that he was selected to attend TOPGUN.

The "school," also known as the Navy Fighter Weapons School, has a simple mission: prevail in combat. It was established during the Vietnam War after naval aviators were sustaining high levels of casualties despite superior aircraft and weapons technology. The school brought in experts to train the pilots and naval flight officers on how to take advantage of technological innovations and properly engage enemy targets.

The men and women selected for TOPGUN are not the hot-dog pilots shown in the movies. Enos sheepishly acknowledges, "my [Weapons Systems Officer] WSO Training Officer was in a lot of the flying scenes in the new Top Gun: Maverick movie. He was an instructor at TOPGUN when they filmed it."

According to the Navy's description of the program, "this school doesn't accept aviators with an ego, or those who fly with a death wish. Here, they don't fly to break the rules, but to

define them for the rest of the fleet." In other words, it's a lot different than what you'll see up on the screen with Tom Cruise pushing the limits in a jet aircraft cockpit.

Other parts of the program description, however, more closely match the depiction of the Top Gun program as seen on the big screen: "[Aviators] experiment with new maneuvers in dogfighting and air-to-air combat. They design methods for low-level bombing runs. Instructors fly as adversaries, testing out enemy tactics on their students. Each day, pilots push their aircraft to the limit, just to see what's possible."

The pilots attending TOPGUN are described as Navy flyers who have shown themselves to be smart and skilled.

Graduating from TOPGUN, Enos said, was the "kick in the pants" he needed at the time. "There is a tremendous amount of confidence that comes from graduating the course, but what people don't realize is that there is an even higher level of humility that you owe to the entire program. You have to be able to assess when you aren't good at something, admit it to yourself and others and show that you too are willing to work hard to fix it."

Some graduates of the program stay at TOPGUN as instructors while others head to Strike Fighter Weapons Schools on the East or West Coasts. Enos stated, "I did the east coast. While there, the job is to train the fleet aviators in

the newest tactics that the instructors at TOPGUN develop. Once done with that tour, we typically go back to a squadron and are Training Officers who are responsible for the overall training for all of the aviators in our squadron."

While attending TOPGUN, Enos was the East Coast's subject matter expert in Laser Guided Weapons and Targeting Pods before becoming a Training Officer for VFA-11, the Red Rippers strike fighter squadron stationed at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia.

In 2010 and 2011, as a member of the Red Rippers for the first time, Enos supported operations Enduring Freedom and New Dawn. He also qualified for Air Wing Strike Lead and Air Interdiction Mission Commander.

He followed that tour as the Administration Officer, Maintenance Officer, and Operations Officer with the VFA-22 Fighting Redcocks, a fighter squadron stationed at Lemoore, California. In 2014 and 2015 he flew from the USS Carl Vinson in support of Operation Inherent Resolve.

In December 2021 Enos returned to the Red Rippers, this time as the Commander of the 275 member squadron that includes 35 aviators and six other TOPGUN graduates, the Executive Officer, three department heads, and two training officers. He brought with him a key lesson he learned from the instructors at TOPGUN. He explained, "The best instructors are



Navy TOPGUN airman Matthew Enos preparing for flight. (Courtesy photo)

the ones that point out their mistakes first before they call you on yours. When those are the folks teaching the fleet aviators, that culture permeates the entire profession. It is not uncommon to hear an aviator point out every one of their mistakes before turning their judgment on someone else's performance."

On May 20, the Navy announced that Commander Enos became the newest member of an even more elite group of aviators after completing his 1,000th arrested landing. This one was aboard USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75), where he is currently assigned with his squadron.

Since naval aviation began in 1911, fewer than 360 pilots have achieved the milestone of 1,000 arrested landings, also known as traps. Arrested landing is used when an aircraft lands on an aircraft carrier, and involves a mechanical

system deployed to rapidly decelerate an aircraft as it lands.

When the squadron announced Enos' accomplishment on its social media page on May 31, more than 100 people shared the news and congratulated Enos, among them were former Red Ripper flyers.

In a statement released by the Navy following his achievement, Enos said, "I had always thought 1,000 was just a number. When I finally got it, I was able to look back on what has been a fruitful career when it comes to all this."

Arlene says she does not know if Enos plans to retire anytime soon. It took Enos 18 years to achieve the first 1,000 traps; his first one was in 2004. She hopes he does not have plans to go for another 1,000.

Instead, Arlene said she'd prefer that her son come home. His wife Donna and two children Emma and Ja-

cob live in Virginia Beach, the home base for his Red Ripper Squadron. She added that now he's achieved 1,000 safe landings on an aircraft carrier, she at least worries a little less.

Enos offers no evidence that he plans to leave the service after 20 years.

When asked the best part of the job he says, "For me the best part, besides the flying during the course, has been the added pressure. There is a level of expectation that once you put on the patch you represent more than just yourself. That pressure causes you to constantly strive to stay sharp. That drive is something that I can't describe, but I have now realized that it gave me a ton of extra motivation."

Enos says he also enjoys "the responsibility of passing on knowledge. In short, I like the culture that the institution of TOPGUN has created in Naval Aviation."



TOPGUN pilot Matthew Enos celebrates his 1,000th "trap" landing

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