



Six of the original 1969 TOPGUN flight instructors were aboard the USS Midway Museum yesterday for a "ready room" dedication and panel discussion. Darrell Gary (right) unveiled an honorary plaque. *Crissy Pascual / Union-Tribune*

SAN DIEGO

TOPGUN dogfight school had bare-bones beginning

By John Wilkens
STAFF WRITER

Before it was "Top Gun," the movie, it was TOPGUN, the fighter-pilot school — one word, all caps, all business. Deadly business.

Six flight instructors who were there in the beginning, 40 years ago at Miramar Naval Air Station, were the guests of honor last night at a members-only event at the USS Midway Mu-

seum, sharing the story of how they started the legendary aerial-combat program from almost nothing.

All were aviators who had done multiple tours in Vietnam, where things weren't going well. For every two enemy planes the Americans shot down, one of theirs was lost.

"We thought that was an unacceptable exchange," said

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Mock dogfights were conducted over the desert

Darrell Gary, one of the instructors.

They wanted better planes, better missiles, better training. Especially training. The art of dogfighting had been largely lost during the Cold War, when the priority was training pilots how to intercept lumbering, long-distance bombers, Gary said.

Eventually, in early 1969, word came down from Navy bosses to the grumblers at Miramar: If you guys are so smart, you fix it.

They had three months.

"Somehow we had to put it together, and somehow we did," said Dan Pedersen, the school's first commander.

The classroom was an empty trailer that instructor Steve

Smith found in a distant corner of the base. Smith said he paid a crane operator in beer to move it, then had it painted before anyone noticed it was missing.

The squad's official patch — a drawing of a Soviet MiG in a gunner's cross hairs — was penned on a napkin at a bar.

Nine instructors cobbled together a curriculum with pieces from aerial tactics used in World Wars I and II, then adapted it all to the F-4 Phantom. The students — about 10 in the first class — flew mock dogfights against the instructors out in the desert.

It worked. By the end of the Vietnam War, the Americans shot down 13 enemy planes for every one they lost, Gary said.

Dan Cheever, the current commander of TOPGUN, now based in Fallon, Nev., attended the event at the Midway museum and said much of what was created in 1969 is still in use.

"They got it right, and they did it for the right reasons," Cheever said.

As museum members arrived last night — about 400 RSVP'd for the event — the 1986 movie "Top Gun," starring Tom Cruise, was playing on a large screen. The film, a huge box-office hit, made famous a program that before had been known only in military circles.

Now, on the Internet, you can find Top Gun Realty, Top Gun Kennels, Top Gun Raceway, Top Gun Lacrosse, Top Gun Cheerleading — even a Top Gun flight school for hot-air balloons.

The original TOPGUN instructors didn't pay much attention to the "Top Gun" movie last night. In addition to Gary, Pedersen and Smith, Mel Holmes, John Nash and Jim Laing were on hand for the festivities. They said the film was worthwhile largely as a recruiting tool for new fighter pilots.

The combat scenes were fairly accurate, they said. But a lot of it was, well, Hollywood.

"We didn't have Kelly McGillis," Gary said.