Experiences from the Vietnam, Iraq Conflicts Shape How Naval Aviation Will Fight Next



SPARKS, Nevada (Aug. 24, 2023) Commander, Naval Air Forces Vice Adm. Kenneth Whitesell speaks at the Naval Aviation Enterprise (NAE) Update to Industry Partners alongside Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Aviation Lt. Gen. Michael Cederholm (behind left) and Commander, Naval Air Systems Command Vice Adm. Carl Chebi during Tailhook 2023.

[Release from Naval Air Systems Command]

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Sparks, Nev.—The Tailhook Association's 2023 symposium—Hook '23—took place August 24- 26, 2023, ending with a banquet keynoted by the Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Adm. John Aquilino, and Commander, Naval Air Forces (CNAF), Vice Adm. Kenneth Whitesell. The three-day event featured dialogue from across carrier aviation, providing opportunities for naval aviators to honor their past as well as to discuss the requirements for current readiness and the future force.

As senior leaders and senior naval aviators, Aquilino and Whitesell participated in multiple events throughout the three-day symposium, listening to the needs of the fleet and sharing with them high-level perspectives.

Aquilino emphasized that Naval Aviation members have to "be ready … We are doing everything, every day, to prevent conflict. That's what we do." He added that a war in the Pacific would be detrimental to every nation on earth. The United States doesn't want that but would win if necessary. "The integrated joint force of the United States is not something you're ready to take on today, tomorrow or any day," Aquilino stated.

The camaraderie and unmatched abilities of Naval Aviation were common threads throughout Hook '23. Whitesell stated, "It is up to us, every person in this room, to make the Navy and Naval Aviation an elite culture that America's brightest, toughest and most innovative youth choose to join … it relies on us to maintain the mindset of duty, preparedness and sacrifice—a culture evidenced in past heroes, who have truly set the example."

This year's theme focused on Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), with two panels exploring how Naval Aviation has progressed in

the two decades since that conflict began, the lessons learned from those who flew operations and how the experiences of that generation form the new generation of warfighters. One panel featured speakers who were junior officers during the conflict while the other featured senior leaders from the conflict.

Naval Aviation played a pivotal role in OIF's success and in supporting joint and coalition forces on the ground. "There's a constant steady push for integration across the force from seabed to space," said Naval Air Warfare Development Center, Deputy Commanding Officer, Capt. Michael "Snap" Langbehn. Operating from aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships, pilots and aircrew provided crucial air support, reconnaissance and strike capabilities that significantly contributed to the campaign's achievements.

For many of the people involved in OIF, the confidence in them to execute combat operations safely showcased the level of training and skill needed to be an immediate asset. "There was an amazing amount of trust that was put into us; we went from flight school to flying combat missions in a short amount of time," said the Commander of Carrier Air Wing One, Capt. Brad "Keds" Converse.

During the most emotionally powerful panel, four Vietnam Prisoners of War (POWs) shared stories and lessons from captivity. In a large ballroom filled to standing room only, attendees listened to the compelling narratives of Capt. Rod Knutson, Capt. Irv Williams, Mr. Dave Everett and Capt. Jack Ensch as they described how they endured as POWs in the infamous Hanoi Hilton and came back to live meaningful, productive lives of contribution.

"We didn't stop fighting when we were captured," Williams said. "We were proud to serve. We are proud of this country."

Another cornerstone of the symposium was the Aviation Flag Panel. In addition to Aqulino and Whitesell, panelists were:

U.S. Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Aviation Lt. Gen. Michael Cederholm; Commander, Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR), Vice Adm. Carl Chebi; Commander, Naval Air Force Atlantic, Rear Adm. Douglas Verissimo; the Navy's N98, Rear Adm. Michael Donnelly; Deputy Chief of Naval Personnel, Rear Adm. Michael Baze; and Chief of Naval Air Training, Rear Adm. Richard Brophy. They answered questions from the crowd and provided updates to a number of projects and initiatives.

Donnelly spoke about how carriers are a lynchpin in Naval Aviation. The ability to get the carriers in the new Ford-class delivered on-time is essential, and the Navy is working closely with industry to optimize the process.

Other topics touched included the Air Wing of the Future including the incorporation of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, an improved pipeline for new students training to be naval aviators and the continued press for improving quality of life/quality of service.

Chebi encouraged aviators to come to his command, NAVAIR, as part of the test community. They need the best and the brightest, he said, to test the future capabilities of Naval Aviation.

Other programming from the symposium included panels about resourcing, the Naval Safety Command, careers and industry as well as a winging ceremony in which several new aviators pinned on their wings of gold—a meaningful experience for everyone in the community. For additional information from Hook '23 and pictures from the winging, POW panel and more, visit then follow the NAE on LinkedIn at https://www.linkedin.com/company/naval-aviation-enterprise, on Facebook @NAEready and on X @NAE_Readiness.