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APR 18, 2016
Release #028-16



VFA 115 Hones Close Air Support Skills with Australian Defence Force

By Lt. j.g. Chris Pagenkopf, Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 115 Public Affairs

TOWNSVILLE, Australia (April 14, 2016) -- The “Eagles” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 115 participated in three weeks of close air support exercises with the Australian Defence Force from March 26 - April 15.

The squadron’s detachment of eight F/A-18E Super Hornets operated from Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Townsville, Queensland for the training evolutions.

During the first week of the detachment, VFA-115 flew in support of Exercise Nigrum Pugio. Nigrum Pugio is a one-week Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) qualification event conducted by the Australian Army that focused on coordinated battlefield close air support in a variety of threat environments.

The following two weeks of operations supported Exercise Black Dagger, the culminating event for the JTAC qualification course conducted by No. 4 Squadron of the RAAF. In this exercise, VFA-115 flew battlefield and urban close air support missions with both ground and airborne terminal attack control. The airborne terminal attack control incorporated RAAF aircrews using PC-9/A aircraft.

The exercises resulted in the qualification of 52 Australian JTACs.

The multinational nature of Nigrum Pugio and Black Dagger enhances interoperability and reinforces the valuable strategic partnership between U.S. and Australian forces, who continue to serve together in worldwide operations.

“Integration with the Australian JTACs was a very important aspect of the exercises for us,” said Cmdr. Doug Gray, commanding officer of the Eagles. “Realistic, cooperative training like this ensures that we can be effective at conducting operations with our allies anywhere around the world.”

In addition to producing well-trained JTACs, the exercises allowed VFA-115 ordnance personnel to gain proficiency at handling a variety of air-to-ground munitions and gave the Eagles’ pilots valuable training with significant relevance to real-world combat operations.

“Close air support is one of the most important missions a naval aviator can ever be called upon to execute,” said Lt. Cmdr. Clifton Lennon, training officer and detachment officer-in-charge of the Eagles. “It is a challenging mission set that requires the employment of weapons against time sensitive targets in close proximity to friendly positions. Our participation in Nigrum Pugio

and Black Dagger allows us to hone our skills so that when we are tasked to perform these missions in combat, we'll be ready to execute with speed and precision in order to protect our coalition partners on the ground.”

Over the course of the exercises, the Eagles expended over 47,000 pounds of ordnance that included MK-76 practice bombs, Laser Guided Training Rounds, MK-83 general purpose bombs, GBU-12 laser guided bombs, and 11,104 rounds of 20mm ammunition.

Additionally, Eagles maintenance exhibited superb performance by achieving a 100% mission availability rate for the squadron's aircraft, directly enabling the completion of all required training objectives during the exercises.

VFA 115 is forward-deployed to Naval Air Facility (NAF) Atsugi, Japan as a component of Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 5 and regularly embarks USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76) to support security and stability in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

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