At Naval Air Stations, an interesting, and not uncommon, sight on the ramp is a variety of camouflage, foreign fighter planes. They may be Israeli-made Kfirs, British Hawker Hunters, or the ground attack version of the Czech L-39. Emblazoned on their respective tails is the Airborne Tactical Advantage Company (ATAC) logo. ATAC is contracted by the Navy to support USN/USMC warfighter training.

The organization began as Vortex Inc. in May 1995, flying two, ex-Danish F-35 Drakens for research and development missions. In late 1997, the Drakens were used for military training missions, flying profiles for joint task force exercises, including flights at 100-200 feet over the water at 600 knots, attempting to “take out” an aircraft carrier. Previously, the Navy had used slower Learjets for this task. Unlike the Learjet, the Draken was able to get through defenses with a 1 out of 3 “kill ratio.”

Senior officers realized that training with faster jets was required. Vortex first flew routine missile simulations and exercises. The Drakens were reliable and also performed air-to-air, “red” (enemy) sorties and Electronic Warfare (EW) attack profiles.

Vortex Inc. changed its name to ATAC in February 2000. As its tasking increased and more flight hours were required, acquiring aircraft parts became problematic. The Drakens were phased out in favor of F-21 Kfirs and Hawker Hunters. The first Kfir arrived in 2002. The first four Hunters arrived in 2003. The Draken left ATAC service in June 2004.

ATAC has surpassed 19 years in the military training business. In recent years, the company leased A-4L and A-4N Skyhawks from the A4LLC Company and ATSI (American Technology Solutions International). The Skyhawks proved more efficient to operate than the Hunter Mk.58, however, while performing the same missions at subsonic speeds. It was also more efficient to operate one type of aircraft rather than to split the fleet between Skyhawks and the more-reliable Hunters. Consequently, the Skyhawks were phased out in May 2010.

Today, ATAC has three primary workhorses. The first is the Kfir C.2, powered by the General Electric J79-J1E engine. Six are in the ATAC fleet. The C.2 variant is an ex-Israeli Air Force jet, not to be confused with the former USN and USMC adversary F-21As, which were older C.1 models.

The Kfirs wear a grey camouflage and are ATAC’s speed machines, capable of Mach 2.2. ATAC flyers have taken the Kfir up to 1.8 Mach with external tanks carried on the wings. Recently, a CATM-9M air-to-air training missile has been added to the Kfir’s capabilities.

The Hawker Hunters are F.Mk.58 and F.Mk.58As, the most numerous aircraft in ATAC. They are flown at subsonic speeds, up to about 450 kts. Hunters are powered by a Rolls-Royce Avon 207 engine which produces 10,150 pounds of static thrust. Less expensive to operate than Kfirs, these aircraft were previously assigned to the Swiss Air Force. ATAC has a single, side-by-side, ex-Swiss Hunter Mk.68 trainer, plus 15 Hunters in the inventory, and a couple more on the way. Five are based on the west coast, six on the east coast, two in Hawaii, and two in Japan. Some are in modification and eventually both the west and east coast will have six each.

ATAC’s newest aircraft is the L-39ZA Albatros. These are ex-Romanian Air Force ground-attack versions. They are used for their slower 250-300-knot airspeeds in close air support training. Also, they are the most cost-effective asset on hand. L-39ZAs are equipped with heavy-duty landing gear, struts and brakes. They have underwing hard-points for external stores. The L-39ZAs are powered by the original Ukrainian-made Motorisch Ivchenko AI-25TL engine. Currently, ATAC has four L-39Zs, two based in Germany, supporting U.S. Air Forces, Europe (USAFE) Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) training. The other two are stationed at NAS Point Mugu, CA, supporting mountain warfare training for JTAC.

The Kfirs and Hunters are undergoing extensive cockpit upgrades at this writing, including new navigation suites with real-time weather data, glass instrumentation, and mission awareness systems.

Importantly, saving money without compromising training is essential. For a military unit to equip and fly operational aircraft is expensive compared to ATAC costs, which are much less than USN operational costs.

Said Jeff “JD” Parker, founder and CEO of ATAC, “We have 30 pilots, a mixture comprised primarily of former USN and a few USMC aviators. The majority of them are full-time with several part-timers who give us a surge capability, when needed.

We have 55-60 maintainers at various locations and are continuing to grow. My goal is to provide the USN/USMC warfighter the best training possible for the money.”

Parker is a USAF Academy graduate, a Desert Storm veteran and has flown the T-37B, T-38A, C-21A, and the F-16C in addition to the F-35XD Draken and the Kfir.

ATAC logs more than 4,700 flight hours annually. The tasking can be sporadic, depending on the needs of the fleet. Typically, ATAC flies six-to-eight sorties per day, occasionally up to 20, while lulls may result in minimum flying for a week at a time.

Added Parker, “ATAC operates from five key base locations. They are NAS Point Mugu, where ATAC provides shore-based training with detachments for Fleet Replacement Squadrons (FRS); NASs Lemoore and Miramar, CA, and Fallon, NV. At Fallon, Kfirs and Hunters participate in air wing pre-deployment training evolutions. The Kfirs augment the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Center (NSAWC) adversaries at Fallon, and also USMC VMFT-401 F-5s during Weapons Training Instructor (WTI) classes at MCAS Yuma, AZ.

Point Mugu’s ATAC operations involve Research, Test, and Evaluation flights for Boeing and other companies. ATAC L-39Zs also support civilian flight tests and blue-air, close air support for JTAC, mountain-related training with the USMC at Twentynine Palms and Bridgeport airfield, in California.
ATAC is headquartered at Newport News, VA, with three Kfirks and six Hunters on hand. Spare aircraft are kept there as well. They operate from the Newport News/Williamsburg International Airport, supporting NAS Oceana units and Norfolk-based ships, plus Wallops Island (NASA) testing. There are detachments at NAS Jacksonville, Tyndall AFB, and NAS Key West, FL.

At MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, ATAC primarily supports ship-based training. Two Hunters conduct target-towing for the Navy ships and air intercept control scenarios for the ship-borne controllers. They fly missile profiles at ships and conduct air-to-air training for the Hawaii Air National Guard’s F-22s.

They also fly close air support training missions for the Marines and USAF JTAC controllers.

NAF Atsugi, Japan, has two Hunters, but no ground personnel permanently stationed there. The jets are dispatched on an as-needed basis. They support ships and Carrier Air Wing Five (CVW-5) squadrons based at Atsugi. During exercises, they detach to Kunsan, Korea; Kadena, Okinawa, and Iwakuni, Japan; the Philippine Islands; Thailand; and Andersen AFB, Guam.

Interestingly, ATAC flew its most hours ever during the sequester in 2013, primarily because the service they provide is less expensive than typical fleet operations. Some of the USN military units were shut down, or had flight hours reduced, meaning they could not supply their own red-air. ATAC had a record year in 2013.

Noted Rich “Miggs” Zins, Director of ATAC’s Business Development, “In the infancy of the company, it was a cultural challenge for the Navy until the Navy got to know us better. ATAC has saved the Navy hundreds of years of life on the FA-18C/D/E/F airframes, and over the life of our company, we have saved the military a huge amount in training costs.”

Zins is a 22-year Navy veteran and test pilot. He commanded VFA-87, flew all versions of the FA-18, has made 1,000 traps and graduated from TOPGUN.

Parker said, “We have also enhanced the quality of life for U.S. military personnel by saving them from deploying for routine training of their sister squadrons.”

In order to fly ATAC aircraft 200-300 hours per year, they must be reliable and backed by a strong logistical system, plus an Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) level of support and access to engines, ejection seats and other critical items. There is an FAA-sanctioned Hunter repair facility in Canada that acquired all of the RAF and Swiss inventory of Hunter parts, engine test cells, manuals, drawings, books, etc. They can manufacture any parts to spec for ATAC when needed.

Continued next page.
“Flying the Kfir is a blast,” said Matt ‘Race’ Bannon, ATAC’s Director of Strategy and Marketing. He has 6,000 hours in his log book flying multiple aircraft in the Navy, including F-14s, “I describe it as one of the last jets made prior to fly-by-wire, and it is a very pitch-sensitive aircraft. You are constantly flying on the head of a pin. The Kfir is fast and comparatively small. For example, the landing approach speed for a Kfir is 190 knots with touchdown at 165 knots. It’s great pairing a Kfir with a Super Hornet, and since we are small we are a hard target to see, but can carry robust EW equipment to the merge.”

“Our maintenance is efficient for three reasons,” said ATAC’s COO, CAPT Mark “Mutha” Hubbard, USN (Ret.) former Commodore, Strike Fighter Wing Pacific. “As a business, we do not need the larger amount of personnel to service aircraft since we do not have to plan for combat contingencies, and we select aircraft that are relatively efficient to maintain. We can also grow or shrink our force as the contract requires, within reason, providing a more flexible and responsive structure than the long lead times required by government-owned aircraft.”

“The experience we bring to the table is outstanding,” added Hubbard. All pilots are former instructor pilots, and the majority are TOPGUN Fighter Weapons School (FWS) graduates, and/or former adversary pilots.”

The primary challenge ATAC faces is logistical. ATAC is a global organization with less than 90 people in the ranks, operating on three continents across 14 time zones, with the five permanent locations. Including detachment locations, ATAC has frequently operated from ten different locations at one time. Establishing a global supply chain running from Europe to Japan, scheduling different events for the right mission, right place, and right time, plus ensuring that high-quality and safety are maintained, all without cutting any corners during high op tempos, is a diverse and complicated task.

ATAC continues to expand. New types of aircraft and business opportunities are continually being explored. ATAC monitors and reviews every worldwide type tactical aircraft which could be procured for ATAC use. The organization is driven by the needs of the fleet and the warfighter.


Opposite page: top, left, a Kfir C.2, Hawker Hunter Mk.58 and an L-39ZA Albatros in tight formation; top, right, L-39ZA on takeoff roll; middle, Kfir over Catalina Island, and last, a Kfir C.2 leads a Hawker Hunter and an L-39ZA, also over Catalina Island. All ATAC pilots have been instructor pilots on active duty and the majority are TOPGUN and Fighter Weapons School graduates.
Wings of Gold

Kfir C.2 on final approach at NAS Point Mugu.

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“As for possible expansion of ATAC,” said Parker, “When the USAF hits the go button, we could provide 4th generation fighters. There are all kinds of reasons that make sense for outsourcing 5th generation training, particularly with a shrinking active duty Air Force. We could easily double or triple what we do now, and still not meet the demand for this type of support, globally. A number of countries recognize they cannot do business as they’re used to, due to funding, and the cost of operating military aircraft being expensive to operate.”

Noted Rich Zins, “About 40 percent of what we do is fleet integrated training, where we provide scenario-based, adversary services designed to train and test integration of ships, aircraft, and command and control agencies during large pre-deployment exercises. Another 40 percent involves air-to-air, red-air adversary work. Ten percent is dedicated to close air support, five percent for ship work (target towing or flying missile profiles), and five percent for research, development, test, and evaluation flights.”

Said Matt Bannon, “We have a five-year contract with the Navy. All of our jets are FAA certified. We maintain them at OEM standards and maintenance schedules, as if they were still in military service. All of our aircraft have been outfitted with newer VHF/UHF radios, GPS moving map navigation systems with contemporary displays that give the pilots tactical situational awareness, and have been wired to carry a variety of EW, tracking, and threat-emitter pods. I had the privilege of being on the very first L-39 flight we did for the USAF in Germany. During sequestration, the USS John C. Stennis was ordered to deploy earlier than planned. There were no military air assets available for training, so ATAC did the entire training for the air wing.”

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For almost 20 years, the Department of Defense has relied on ATAC’s professional and dedicated training support. From the current support operating subsonic and supersonic tactical aircraft to the emerging requirements for augmented, 4th generation adversary training, ATAC will be there. FIGHT’S ON!