

Jim Larsen's dramatic photograph of the VF-101 F-14A tackling a Reno pylon.



CAT ON THE COURSE!

DURING THE 2000 RENO NATIONAL AIR RACES, A MOST UNIQUE EVENT TOOK PLACE. THOSE THAT STAYED LATE WERE ABLE TO WITNESS THE SIGHT OF A GRUMMAN F-14A TOMCAT ROARING AROUND THE RENO UNLIMITED PYLONS. WITH BOTH RENO AND THE TOMCAT NOW GONE, WE RECALL THAT MOST UNUSUAL FLIGHT

ARTICLE AND PAINTING BY STEVE COX

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM LARSEN

After having attended about a half-dozen Reno National Air Races, I decided to head to Reno 2000 with a few preconceived ideas about what I would experience. However, one event would considerably raise my excitement level. Well before owning a smart phone, I thought I had budgeted the supply of 35mm film for my trusty Canon camera but by late Sunday afternoon I was out of film

and my camera now had all the use of a small boat anchor. I wasn't too concerned because by friend Jim Larsen was always generous about sharing his top-quality photos and, as usual, Jim was on top of everything happening at the race.

Sunday afternoon brought about all the usual exciting expectations for the Gold races. Having seen several F-14 demonstrations at different venues,

I was very excited to see another dynamic, thrilling, and LOUD display by that beast of a naval fighter. The airshow routine did not disappoint and it was as thrilling as ever.

I was intending to walk around the pit area for another look at the racers when the airshow announcer stated the F-14 demo crew would attempt a lap around the Unlimited course. Did the term Unlimited ever take on a new

meaning that day!

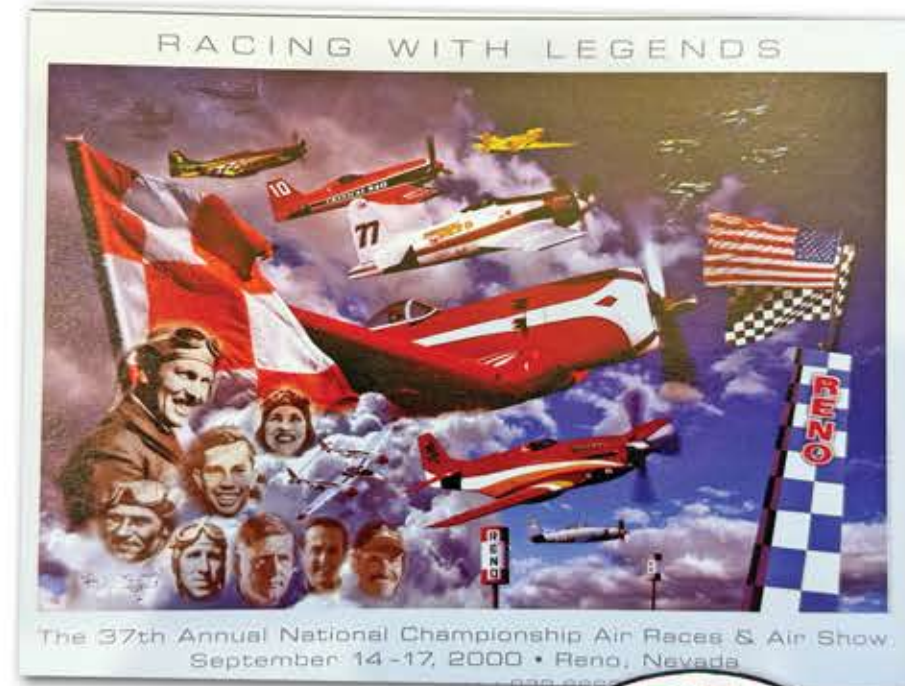
The crowd line was suddenly again packed as the Tomcat took off and headed to the course. That monster looked like it was on rails and seemed to fly most of the demo lap as low as if it had been Lefty Gardner in the cockpit. I knew those guys were punishing themselves with the high G banks. After being used to the roar of the Unlimiteds on the back side of the course, the sound of those massive turbofans echoing off the hills was just awesome.

As you can see, Jim was able to get some great shots. I had thought about doing a painting of the event for years, but somehow never pulled the trigger. Finally, I related the story to a friend and those exciting memories got the juices flowing again. Weirdly, in this age of the internet, there was not much about the event online. In fact, Jim and I had to do some thinking in order to recall the exact year of the Tomcat lap. Then, we realized it was the same year (2000) as the first jet exhibition race and Jim was able to pull more photos from the files.

I was now committed to do the painting you see on the next spread. I needed to find the crews that did the alternating demo flights. I was able to locate Mark Burgess after Tom Paulk (a member of the American Society of Aviation Artists and an ex-F-4 and F-14 RIO) was able to come up with a few possible leads. I then began exchanging emails with F-14 pilot Mark "Crunchy" Burgess and RIO Bill "Libby" Lind who had flown the Saturday show and remembered the weekend well.

It turns out that pilot Richard "Popeye" Doyle and RIO John "Roll" Keiser had flown the demo on Sunday with the F-14A from VF-101 "The Grim Reapers." When asked to do a completely unplanned circuit of the course, they answered in the affirmative and air race — and Tomcat — history was made.

I decided to base my painting on Jim's photos, which we think were near the beginning of the lap before they lit the burners and swept the wings. I felt that having the wings extended and the large heat plume from the turbofans at



The poster for Reno 2000.

convey the size, mass, and energy of the Tomcat.

After getting a thumbs up from Mark on my proposal drawing, I got started on the painting. Of course, life happened and it was nearly a year before I could complete the painting. I asked Tom Paulk to critique the work for technical issues and subsequently made a few changes that saved me from what would have been some embarrassing reviews. Finally, I was able to present an image of which I was proud of to Mark and his fellow aviators.

John "Roll" Keiser took some time to describe the unique event: "The F-14 Demonstration Team was made up of two crews [four instructors] selected from the F-14 Training Squadron [RAG]. So, in addition to instructing new students in the Tomcat, the four of us would divvy up all the shows the Navy signed us up for around the country. We would fly out to them every weekend or so. I was a newish back seat instructor [RIO] and I think this was my first year getting to do the demo work. And somehow, I'd scored going to Reno with Popeye, who was pretty experienced.

"I was pumped. We had trained on the updated demonstration in the simulator and then live at El Centro for a week earlier in the year. The demo ran



Flight jacket insignia for VF-101.

20/25 minutes. It was a fast, high G, low altitude [targeting 200-feet above the ground] routine that burned an average of 11,000 to 12,000 pounds of fuel. [We carried 16,000 pounds without external tanks]. As a backseater, I was focused on feeding the pilot information needed to keep his eyes up and not looking down, maneuver order, airspeed/altitude callouts, in headings, out headings, pitch attitude, altitude checkpoints, etc.

"The demo started with a low transition off the runway at about ten feet in full afterburner [sometimes lower], hit about 300/400 knots [well past the runway], and a 6.5G pull vertical into the show-left corner to start the demo.

"From that point, it did not stop — 20 minutes of afterburner and high

OVERLEAF: Steve Cox's masterful painting of Popeye and Roll preparing to enter the Reno Unlimited race course.