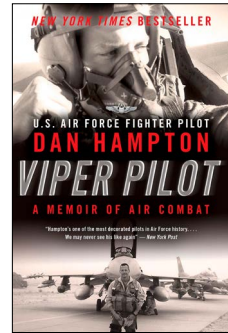


## Book Review

# Viper Pilot: A Memoir of Air Combat



Author: Dan Hampton

Publisher: William Morrow (2013) (ISBN-13: 978-0062130341), 336 pages

Reviewed by Lieutenant Commander Andrew 'Sharkey' Ward

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### Introduction

**V***iper Pilot: A Memoir of Air Combat* is a highly readable aircrew account, but this book is more relevant and operationally-focussed than the traditional 'there I was, inverted' type. Along the way we find out more about the sacred United States Air Force (USAF) ritual of assigning aircrew their call signs. Lt Col Dan 'Two Dogs' Hampton (USAF Ret) flew the highly versatile F-16 in both Iraq conflicts and the Balkans, all recollected in high G-force detail in *Viper Pilot*. Hampton's discussion of tactical flying as a 'Wild Weasel' is relevant to the mission sets we train for in today's air forces. A suppression of enemy air defence (SEAD) mission will likely be air's contribution to a joint campaign on 'day one of the war'. The former Soviet Union surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems Hampton flew against in Iraq are still a clear and present threat in many areas of operations.

The F-16 proved to be a remarkably versatile platform. Conceived as a highly manoeuvrable fighter aircraft of the third generation incorporating dogfighting lessons from Korea and Vietnam, as a SEAD platform its manoeuvrability and speed proved invaluable. A Wild Weasel deliberately provokes radar emissions from hostile SAM sites, then uses its electronic warfare pod to produce a target solution for other aircraft. As such, coalition air planning often put the F-16CJs in the first wave, closest to the threat, flying *into* rather than around the missile engagement zones plotted by intelligence staffs. Few living flyers have seen first-hand what an incoming SA-2 or SA-3 SAM looks like. This situation is vividly brought to life by Hampton as he explains: 'You didn't really start worrying until you saw the flaming doughnut – a red-orange ring of fire with a dark hole in the middle. This was the SAM and it was pointed right

at you.' His flying experiences are explained with a refreshingly cynical candour, for example whilst training Egyptian F-16 pilots he ignored cockpit warnings to safely bring an aircraft back to base: 'if I was truly on fire, I would have to either shut the engine down or eject. Neither option appealed to me.'

After a first Gulf War spent attacking SA-2 and SA-3 sites, Hampton returned to Iraq for air policing the no-fly zone over the south of the country. He was billeted at the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia when it was attacked with a suicide truck bomb which killed 19 US servicemen in June 1996. There is more traditional close-air support flying in *Viper Pilot*, particularly in support of the 1st Marine Division in the opening stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. All tactical aircraft operating over Iraq were technically 'CAS capable'. In practice this meant Hampton flying in very close to strafe Iraqi troops in contact with US Marines on the Baghdad to Nasariyah highway.

Hampton describes in detail the main weapon system used in the SEAD role, the high-speed anti-radiation missile (HARM), brevity codeword 'Magnum'. Expanding on the weapon's ability to home in on radiation from an enemy target acquisition radar, Hampton explains how the weapon benefits from range advantage; an enemy radar needs to send and receive energy from the target, whereas the HARM need only receive. Hampton's F-16CJ was also equipped with a capable active towed radar decoy, helping to discount the drawback of using HARM; the firing aircraft had to remain pointed at the target until the time of impact.

*Viper Pilot* is a highly relevant read for all those involved in SEAD planning and execution, as well as an entertaining insight into the culture of our allies in the United States Air Force. Electronic warfare (EW) remains vitally important today, despite the competition for attention from newer capabilities in the space and cyber domains. Reading Hampton's book during my air electronic warfare training proved to be complementary; the principles of EW underpin the tactics employed by the Wild Weasel community from Vietnam through to the present day.

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