

N Northwest Neighbors

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Fun on
the farm
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John Kill/Neighbors

Friendly escort

Northwest Fresnan Bo Boehringer flies in some pretty fast company while at the controls of a "bandit" Learjet serving as a mock enemy intruder for Air National Guard jets to pursue and intercept. The two Fresno-based F-4D Phantoms outside the cockpit window high over the Sierra prove that he was caught on this mission. See story below.

'Hide-and-seek' at 38,000 feet Fresnan plays cat and mouse with fighter pilots

By SCOTT TIMMONS

Neighbors staff writer

Two Northwest Fresnans are playing military tag in the skies off the Central California coast.

Michael Budd, a stockbroker, is flying an F-4D Phantom and hunting for a "bandit." Bo Boehringer, a retired Air Force colonel, is flying a "bandit," a Learjet, at 1,000 feet over the coast about 15 miles west of Monterey.

In this exercise, pilots of Fresno's Air National Guard unit are practicing intercepting enemy aircraft.

"OK, dump some chaff," Boehringer says in radio to Dave Schofield, the electronic-countermeasures (ECM) operator seated about eight feet behind him in the Learjet's cramped interior. Chaff is bits of fine metal

wire used to confuse radar.

Budd, in the Phantom cockpit, is watching his radar scope and listening to the radar ground controller's messages to him on the bandit's position.

"Bandit. Three-five-zero. Twenty-five." That means the Learjet is on a compass bearing of 350 degrees relative to Budd's jet fighter and 25 nautical miles away from it.

Boehringer banks the jet sharply to the right, and the ocean's blue horizon swings into a vertical line before he levels out.

"Dump," he says, and again he banks sharply.

"Bandit. Three-five-five. Twenty," says the ground control radar operator. The Phantom is closing in.

"Intermittent contact," Budd says.

Boehringer repeats the dump-and-bank

maneuver.

"Bogey dope," Budd says. That means he wants more information about the "bogey" or target.

Bo cackles. "I think we lost him."

And indeed he had.

The Learjet is owned by Flight International, a private company that provides aircraft and pilots for this kind of interceptortraining. Robert "Bo" Boehringer, 55, is one of the company's two Fresno pilots.

Budd, a stockbroker with Bateman, Eichler, Hill, Richards, is one of several Northwest Fresno Air Guard pilots.

"It can be difficult to find if it's a small target at low altitudes," Budd said after the flight. An Air Guard pilot for 15 years, he holds the rank of major.

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"There are some combinations of events that can make it hard to find," he said, but added that security considerations prevent him from being more precise.

The afternoon's flight was not a complete loss for him. One of his two "passes" at the Learjet was successful.

Amos Bagdasarian, another Northwest Fresno Air Guard pilot with the rank of major, had good luck earlier this afternoon with his high-altitude passes.

Boehringer had just cleared the coast and was flying the Learjet at about 38,000 feet when the ground radar operator told him:

"Three F-4s about 10 miles east of you at 25,000 feet. They'll set up first on each other then one will come after you."

Boehringer leaned forward and flicked a switch, turning off the IFF (or Identification Friend or Foe) radar. "This'll make them find us."

"Three-one-zero, left-hand race track," said ground control.

Bo banked the Learjet one way, then another.

"I'm just trying to make them work. Since we can't use ECM we gotta do something," he said. Boehringer explained that the Goldstone satellite tracking station east of Edwards Air Force Base forbade the use of ECM because of the scheduled launch of the Space Shuttle Atlantis.

Bagdasarian, piloting the first Phantom, made his pass from ahead, approaching from below and the right.

His Phantom wasn't visible until a contrail began forming, looking like a white cloud elongating itself against the Big Sur coastline.

At first the contrail seemed to be creating itself. Then the tiny

Phantom became visible at its leading edge.

"Simulated Fox One," Bagdasarian said, meaning a simulated missile firing. Going on the assumption that a real missile would have been on target, Bagdasarian bagged the bandit.

Boehringer knows what he's putting these Air Guard pilots through. A 33-year veteran of the Air Force and Air National Guard, he is an accomplished pilot.

He won the Air Force's "Top Gun" award in 1982 as the best F-106 pilot in the 1982 William Tell competition. The Air Force holds the event every other year to test its fighter pilots' air combat skill.

He retired from the Fresno Air Guard unit a year ago and joined Flight International.

A native of Long Island, N.Y., he earned a master's degree in business administration from Columbia University. His son recently graduated from Bullard High School, and his daughter is in the Coast Guard.

The Navy, Air Force and Air National Guard contract with Flight International to provide aircraft for interception training. Military planners believe it's cheaper than having the military operate and maintain them, he said.

At least half of the company's 100 aircraft are Learjets, he said.

"In fact, we're probably the biggest operator of Learjets outside the Gates Learjet Corp. The Learjet is used because it can pull up to three Gs (three times the force of gravity), and it's small so it's harder to see on radar and fast enough that it's a reasonable target. And it's got enough range to stay out there a while."