
“FLYING A FIGHTER JET IS UNLIKE ANYTHING ELSE I HAVE EXPERIENCED IN MY LIFE.”

In a military career spanning over 25 years, now-retired Captain of the US Navy and IWC friend of the brand, Jim DiMatteo*, has amassed over 5,000 hours in five different fighter aircraft. In this interview, DiMatteo talks about the legendary Navy Fighter Weapons School TOPGUN, flying supersonic jets, fear in the cockpit, the importance of time for a fighter jet pilot, and life lessons learned as a Naval Aviator.

What is the significance of TOPGUN in the Naval Aviation community?

Going to the Navy Fighter Weapons School is every young fighter pilot's dream. When you are a junior pilot in your squadron, you want to be the guy that is chosen to go to TOPGUN. Graduating from this prestigious program will not only give you a tremendous tactical and technical skillset as a fighter pilot, but it will also establish your reputation as a Top Tier Aviator, which will benefit your career. When you wear that TOPGUN patch on your shoulder, everybody will immediately know who you are, where you stand compared to the others, and what you have accomplished.

What is it like to attend the TOPGUN course?

It's very challenging and an incredible amount of work. During the three months of the course, you focus exclusively on improving your flying and tactical skills. You are not distracted by anything else. You literally eat, sleep, breathe, and dream TOPGUN. When you graduate, you are the best you have ever been, at the peak of your capabilities and confidence. It is probably similar to the moment when a runner finishes a marathon. You feel a great sense of pride and satisfaction with what you accomplished, but you are also exhausted and ready to go back home or to your squadron.

What elements does the course contain?

The first part of TOPGUN consists of a lot of theoretical training and classwork. You acquire extensive knowledge about your weapon systems and tactics, but also about your adversary's weapon systems and tactics. During the next stage, you take everything you

learned in the classroom to the air and practice all the tactics and maneuvers. Of course, it's a lot harder in the air at supersonic speeds than sitting in the classroom. We have been instructing this way for a long time, and the process is well proven. It ultimately delivers an elite aviator that is at the top of their game, and then they go back to their squadron to teach everybody else.

Why is the concept of “teaching the teachers” so powerful?

It allows the Navy Fighter Weapons School to always stay at the pinnacle of knowledge with respect to the current tactics, strategy and threat analysis. Each TOPGUN course will be different because the tactics and strategy are continuously evolving. The second advantage is the multiplier effect. Even though TOPGUN trains only a select few, their expertise will trickle down to every tactical fighter pilot and aircrew in the US Navy and Marine Corps.

After graduating, you were recruited into the prestigious TOPGUN Adversary squadron. What is this all about?

In a typical TOPGUN dogfight, you basically have three players: the student, the instructor, and the adversary. The adversary pilots are professionally trained to be the “bad guys”. They not only simulate the enemy's aircraft capabilities, but also the adversary pilot's mindset and tactics. As an adversary pilot, your objective is to present scenarios that help the student to improve. For me, seeing them learn and get better every day is an incredibly rewarding part of the job.

What is it like to fly a fighter jet like the F/A-18 Hornet?

Flying a fighter jet is unlike anything else I have experienced in my life. I have heard analogies of a wild roller coaster ride or super challenging race car track, but those don't even come close to it. It is an incredibly physical, analytical, competitive, passionate, and exhilarating experience. The most amazing aspect is that it scores a ten out of ten in each of these categories, simultaneously. When you get out of the cockpit after a dogfight, you not only feel physically tired and emotionally spent but also invigorated, and you can't help but smile. I can't compare it to anything else I experienced, which is why I feel incredibly lucky to have been part of Naval Aviation.

What about flying at supersonic speed?

Flying at supersonic speed at low altitudes is particularly thrilling and challenging as everything is happening so incredibly fast. Your brain has to be one mile in front of the jet. If you get what we call "behind the jet", it can be dangerous, because things are happening extremely quickly and your muscle memory is just reacting to them.

What are the physical aspects of piloting a fighter jet?

When flying very tight turns or vertical maneuvers during dogfights, for example, a pilot experiences high gravitational forces. The blood gets pushed out of the head and down to your legs. This affects both your vision and your mental capabilities. In the worst case, you black out and become unconscious. We call this G-LOC (G-force induced loss of consciousness). To keep it from happening, we use G-restraining maneuvers in combination with G-suits. This involves tensing up the lower part of your body and abdomen to keep the blood from flowing down to your legs. Trying to withstand extended G-forces can also cause physical pain, mainly a sore neck, spine or back. If you pull 9 G's, then your head will weigh over 100 pounds (45 kg), so you can imagine what that feels like.

Were you ever afraid in the cockpit?

The right amount of fear will keep you sharp, attentive, and respectful of the potential dangers, especially during challenging times of flight. A young pilot typically has more fear. When you become more experienced, you channel that fear into being more focused in difficult moments. However, one has to be careful not to become overconfident at this point. Then, as you become even more senior, you start to be more cautious again. Instead of just jumping into the middle of a multi-plane dogfight, the most experienced pilots

might hesitate because they know they only see 90 per cent of what's going on around them. As the saying goes, there are old pilots, and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots.

Do you recall any particularly dangerous situations?

I have flown tactically for more than 25 years, and there are many situations I can look back on and say that it was a very close call. I remember once I was flying an F-14 Tomcat. I had lost one of my engines and needed to come aboard the carrier at night. Of course, as luck would have it, the weather was terrible. Black night, pitching deck, over 1,000 miles from land, yes I remember that one. Those situations are a testimony to the incredible training we receive. Although my mind was "behind the aircraft" and I was reactively flying the jet, my training took over, and muscle memory flew the approach to a safe landing.

Any other critical event?

There were some situations in combat or during simulated dogfighting that were very close calls as well. I remember one near mid-air in a dogfight where the other pilot didn't see me and at the last second pulled up right in front of me. It was the closest pass I had ever had. I could even hear his engines before I felt a huge thump when I went through his jet wash. At that point, we stopped the dogfight and landed. Then we talked about how and why that had happened so that we would never do that again. That fact that we succeed 99.9 per cent of the time in these critical situations is a real credit to Naval Aviation and how they train fighter pilots.

Are there TOPGUN concepts that apply to other areas of life?

There are numerous life lessons to be learned in the Navy Fighter Weapons School. Of course, there is the pursuit of excellence, which is probably the most fundamental concept. Work hard, be prepared, strive for greatness, debrief and improve. There is also a culture of responsibility. If you tell your commander "I've got it", then you are fully responsible for that task. No need to talk about it again, get it done. TOPGUN also has a reputation for its culture of debriefing your flight, which can be painstakingly long and detailed. You need to be completely honest with yourself and pinpoint the areas that you can improve upon. All great pilots make mistakes, but the best pilots recognize them and fix them. I believe these concepts are very applicable to most other jobs or situations in life.

Are fighter jet pilots lone wolves or team players?

In Naval Aviation, we don't emphasize individual victories. We think of things as a team victory. You strive to do the best you can as an individual, but you always succeed or fail as a team. Think of landing on a carrier. You couldn't do it alone as a pilot, you need thousands of people literally on the ship to do their job as well. It's similar to changing a tire in a Formula 1 car. It doesn't matter how good of a driver you are if everybody else doesn't do their job as well.

How important is trust?

Trust is a vital aspect of being part of this incredible aviation team. For example, you need complete and total trust and faith in your wingman. You both are reliant on each other for your mission's success and ultimately each other's lives. Trust is something one must earn over time. It's not assigned, ordered or associated with rank or experience. It is essential, and yet it can be lost if you don't work on it and earn it daily.

How do you value precision and attention to detail?

Landing on an aircraft carrier at night, especially in bad weather and rough seas, is one of the most challenging tasks in aviation. The amount of precision this takes is staggering. From the moment you start training as a Navy Pilot, your instructors will hammer this into your head; be precise, pay attention to every small detail. For any mission, we strive to be over-prepared. There's a simple reason for that; if you are over-prepared, you are in a better position to handle something that does not go right.

What is the function of time in the jet cockpit?

On a fighter jet mission, I am not sure there is anything more critical than time. Everything is connected to timing. When we begin a brief, the first thing we do is synchronize our watches. Every task from take-off, to rendezvousing, to time on target (TOT) is coordinated with down-to-the-second accuracy. In a modern fighter jet, of course, we have advanced avionics systems and embedded, GPS-synchronized clocks on our instrument panels. But we do use our wristwatches to coordinate our movements before we get in the jet, to double-check the avionics to make sure the system is working

correctly, and last but not least to make sure we look cool. Every fighter pilot needs an eye-catching watch.

Have you ever had a perfect flight in your career?

With the entire concept of the pursuit of excellence, there is always something you can improve. No matter what you think of your flight, after you do an extensive and honest debrief, you will always find something that you could have done better. Throughout the 25 years of my career, I have had many successful flights, but never a perfect one.

* Disclaimer: CAPT Jim DiMatteo, USN (Ret) statements and opinions are his own and are not on behalf of the United States Navy or its components.

***ABOUT JIM DIMATTEO**

After graduating from the University of California Berkeley (CAL) in 1986, Jim DiMatteo joined the US Navy where he began an unprecedented Naval Aviation career. He retired as a Captain and has amassed over 5,000 hours in five different fighter aircraft (F/A-18, F-16, F-14, F-5, A-4) in over 25 years of service, the only one in Naval Aviation history with this accomplishment. After graduating from the Navy Fighter Weapons School and flying in combat, he was recruited into the prestigious TOPGUN Adversary squadron. He accumulated more TOPGUN Adversary flight time than anyone in the history of the US Navy and Marine Corps, ultimately being named the Commanding Officer of the Adversary squadrons on each coast, VFC-111 and VFC-13. After command of his squadrons, CAPT DiMatteo was asked to join the headquarters of Naval Aviation in San Diego, California, and worked for the Commander, Naval Air Forces (CNAF) overseeing the TOPGUN Adversary program. Jim DiMatteo has amassed an extensive number of awards and accolades, including US Navy F-14 Fighter Pilot of the Year for the RAG, the US Navy Adversary Pilot of the Year, the Top Hook (for the best landing grades on an aircraft carrier) and the esteemed International Britannia Award from the United Kingdom. In 2018, he received his highest honor yet by being inducted into the Aviation Hall of Fame for his Lifetime Achievements in Aviation.

IWC SCHAFFHAUSEN

In 1868, the American watchmaker and entrepreneur Florentine Ariosto Jones travelled from Boston to Switzerland and founded the 'International Watch Company' in Schaffhausen. His visionary dream was to combine advanced American manufacturing methods with the craftsmanship of Swiss watchmakers to make the best pocket watches of his time. In doing so, he not only laid the foundation for IWC's unique engineering approach but also established the centralised production of mechanical watches in Switzerland.

Over its 150 year history, IWC Schaffhausen has developed a reputation for creating functional complications, especially chronographs and calendars, which are ingenious, robust, and easy for customers to use. A pioneer in the use of titanium and ceramics, IWC today specialises in highly engineered technical watch cases manufactured from advanced materials, such as titanium aluminide and Ceratanium®. Preferring the principle of "form follows function" over decoration, the Swiss watch manufacturer's timeless creations embody their owners' dreams and ambitions as they journey through life.

IWC sources materials responsibly and takes action to minimise its impact on the environment, creating intrinsically sustainable timepieces that are built to last for generations. The company prides itself in training its own future watchmakers and engineers, as well as offering an excellent working environment for all employees. IWC also partners with organisations that work globally to support children and young people.

DOWNLOADS

Images of the TOP GUN collection can be obtained at press.iwc.com

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