

WATERWORLD

Two F-14A Tomcat fighter-interceptors catapult out over the open sea, blasting the flight deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* with jet wash as they scream into the sky laden with bombs and missiles. Although this time the weapons are dummies, in a month the ordnance will be real, the waters will be those of the Arabian Gulf instead of the seas off the California coast, and Saddam Hussein's jet fighters and surface-to-air missile batteries will be only miles away. The nuclear-powered *Nimitz* is part of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the backbone of which are six aircraft carriers. The carriers are "cities at sea" with crews of more than 5,000 each, carrying the most sophisticated aircraft in the world.

At 1630 hours the arresting wire snags the tailhook of Vice Admiral Robert J. ("Rocky") Spane's sleek black F/A-18D Hornet. "War is not that much different now than it was during World War II or even Napoleonic times," says Spane, commander, Naval Air Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet and a member of the **Lakeview Club** in Oakland, California. "You have to find the right target, you have to hit that target, and you have to stay alive." Spane has hit many targets during his distinguished career, which spans Vietnam to Desert Storm.

In the aftermath of the Cold War many relatively unstable countries possess high-tech weapons, providing a higher threat potential to American interests. "It's very important that nuclear weapons don't proliferate," says Spane. "Countries



"It's wonderful to fly a high-performance plane like the F/A-18," says Spane, landing on the *Nimitz* (above). "It's the best ride I've ever had."



Vice Admiral Spane (above) is commander of more than 2,000 aircraft, 12 naval air stations, and more than 60,000 personnel.

that don't have nuclear capability should not be allowed to acquire it. We never want to go through another world war, and we never want to live through a nuclear holocaust."

For all the talk of war, Spane's navy is a kinder, gentler one. He cares most about the young men and women under his command. "If we take care of our people," he says, "the navy will prosper and the nation will prosper." Many of Spane's people are women, the result of navy integration during the past 20 years. In 1993 the navy lifted the ban on women in combat, opening the door for them to serve on forward-deployed combatants such as *Nimitz*, which now has 400 women on board. "If you believe *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, you believe that the sexes are in fact different," says Spane. "But the problems with integrating women into combat are social in nature, not operational."

One operational change affects men and women: The "drawdown," as it is called, which began in 1989. "The navy is smaller today than it was at the beginning of World War II," says Spane. "We now have two carriers in the Arabian Gulf. We also have two carriers off Bosnia, and this is after we've reduced the carrier force by 30 percent and shortened the cruises from nine months long to six months. This drawdown has gotten us to the point to where there's no excess."

Regardless of the logistic difficulties, Spane says the navy has a duty to provide stability in an often chaotic world. "We've been doing that for hundreds of years, and we should continue to do so," says Spane. "The U.S. Navy will always be an integral part of that."