

RF-8G CRUSADER

BuNo 145607

The Vought F-8 Crusader (originally F8U) is a single-engine, supersonic, carrier-based air superiority jet aircraft built by Vought for the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps. The first F-8 prototype was ready for flight in February 1955 and served primarily in the Vietnam War. The Crusader was the last American fighter with guns as the main weapon, earning it the title "The Last of the Gunfighters".

The RF-8 Crusader is an unarmed photo-reconnaissance version of the F8U-1E, 144 built, and operated longer in U.S. service than any of the fighter versions. RF-8s played a critical role in the Cuban Missile Crisis, providing essential low-level photographs impractical to acquire by other means. United States Navy Reserve units continued to operate the RF-8 until 1987.

The Crusader was powered by a Pratt and Whitney J57 turbojet engine. The engine was equipped with an afterburner which, on the initial production F8U-1 aircraft, increased the thrust of the engine from 10,200 lb. to 16,000 lb., but, unlike later engines, had no intermediate thrust settings. The Crusader was the first jet fighter in US service to reach 1,000 mph.

The unarmed RF-8A proved excellent at obtaining low-altitude detailed photographs, leading to carrier deployments as detachments from the Navy's VFP-62 and VFP-63 squadrons and the Marines' VMCJ-2. Beginning on 23 October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, RF-8As, including our Crusader BuNo 145607, flew extremely hazardous low-level, 500 ft., photo reconnaissance missions over Cuba. Two-ship flights of RF-8As left Key West twice each day, to fly over Cuba then return to Jacksonville, where the film was offloaded and developed, to be rushed north to the Pentagon.

These flights confirmed that the Soviet Union was setting up MRBMs in Cuba. The RF-8As also monitored the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles. After each overflight, the aircraft was given a stencil of a dead chicken. The overflights went on for about six weeks and returned a total of 160,000 images. The pilots who flew the missions received Distinguished Flying Crosses, while VFP-62 and VMCJ-2 received the prestigious U.S. Navy Unit Commendation.

Castle Air Museums Crusader Bu No 145607 served in the Vietnam War as a Photo Crusader, "The Eyes of the Fleet" with VFP-63 on the aircraft carrier *USS Oriskany*. That unit lost 32 Crusaders due to operational causes or enemy action.

The last active duty Navy Crusader fighter variants were retired from VF-191 and VF-194 aboard *Oriskany* in 1976 after almost two decades of service, setting a first for a Navy fighter.

The photo reconnaissance variant continued to serve in the active duty Navy for yet another 11 years, with VFP-63 flying RF-8Gs, including our BuNo 145607, up to 1982, and

with the Naval Reserve flying their RF-8Gs in two squadrons (VFP-206 and VFP-306) at Naval Air Facility Washington / Andrews AFB until the disestablishment of VFP-306 in 1984 and VFP-206 on 29 March 1987 when the last operational Crusader was turned over to the National Air and Space Museum.

The last Crusader ever flown was Castle Air Museums 145607 as a chase for the X-31 project.

Photo Crusader 145607 came to Castle Air Museum in 2009, restoration was completed in 2011 and it is displayed in its VFP-63 Photo Crusader colors.