



AV-8B Harrier II Units of Operation Iraqi Freedom I-VI (Combat Aircraft)

Lon Nordeen

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The Harrier II jet saw conflict in Operation *Desert Shield/Desert Storm* (Gulf War), Operation *Enduring Freedom* (Afghanistan) and *Iraqi Freedom* (Iraq War). The aircraft has matured into a multi-role platform through the addition of a night vision system, radar, an external targeting pod and new laser-guided weapons.

In the 1970s the USMC bought the AV-8A Harrier from the UK to test V/STOL concepts for close air support. A successful funding battle was subsequently fought in the 1980s to secure military, political and economic support to expand this concept to develop and field the second generation AV-8B Harrier II from the late 1980s onward. The AV-8B was, and still is, the only tactical aircraft that could deploy with Marine forces on amphibious assault ships and provide air cover and close air support separate from large deck aircraft carriers. Having seen action in-theatre during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Harrier II was heavily involved in action once again over Iraq from March 2003 as part of *Operation Iraqi Freedom I/II*. In the initial conflict, some 76 AV-8s were deployed - providing more than 40 per cent of the 3rd Marine Air Wing's fixed-wing offensive firepower. Around 60 of these aircraft were sea-based aboard four 'Harrier carriers', while two units flew from Ahmed al Jaber, in Kuwait. Unlike in 1991, when the Harrier II units employed unguided weapons - dumb bombs, cluster bombs and napalm - in 2003 79 per cent of the ordnance dropped was precision-guided. This was primarily due to the AV-8B's upgrading into Night Attack or radar-equipped configuration, and introduction of the Litening targeting pod. Following the occupation of Iraq by Coalition troops, the Harrier IIs remained in-theatre supporting anti-insurgent operations through to 2008 as part of OIF II. Flying from Al Asad, or 'Harrier carriers' in the Northern Arabian Gulf, these units saw considerable action in southern and western Iraq. This book is the second of three volumes on USMC Harrier IIs in combat, and it will be the first volume in print to cover the whole story of the AV-8B's service employment in Iraq.

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