Photo by PH3 Nathaniel Karl

VFA-15 Commanding Officer Cmdr. Ed Langford *(center)* makes time twice a week to participate in the Valion's command fitness program.

'Valion' CO takes fitness seriously

by Cathy Heimer

Early each Tuesday and Thursday morning, Cmdr. Ed Langford, commanding officer of the VFA-15 "Valions," can be found inside the PRT Center, along with squadron members, doing pushups, jumping jacks and "eight-count body builders," followed by a run along Hornet Drive toward the back gate.

The commanding officer of VFA-15 Valions takes physical fitness very seriously, not just his own but that of his entire squadron. He sees the twice weekly workouts offering a variety of benefits to everybody in the squadron.

Langford said, "It's a real honor" for the squadron to be recognized as one of the top PRT performers at Oceana. "To me, it goes back to the people I have in the command – Chief Miller, who runs the program, and I have a number of first class petty officers who jump in and help out. To me, the recognition is an additional benefit that we're doing things well. But it's a benefit for the individuals within the command, their health and well-being, more than anything else,"said Langford.

There are several reasons Langford cited as what sets VFA-15 apart from other commands. "We emphasize the physical fitness by doing what I call 'mandatory PT' twice a week. I think if people know that I emphasize it and it's important, that carries over into the readiness testing," he explained.

Langford believes the hardest part for many of the remaining eight percent in the squadron who aren't passing the semi-annual test isn't the PRT itself, but being able to pass the body fat measurement. The CO is also realistic about other reasons the remaining Sailors don't pass the PRT. "You're always going to have people in the command who just don't want to do it," he said. Langford explained that often those Sailors have other plans, such as getting out of the Navy, and see no reason to make the effort to pass the test. He said he's working on how to get the remaining few to pass the test.

"The real reason I do it is as a stress management tool. It's not just my stress but stress for everybody. Another part of it is, the better shape you're in when you go on a flight deck and actually get busy or just standing on the flight deck or in the hangar bays, that work environment is very tiring and hard on you. The better shape you're in, the better I think you're going to be able to handle the long hours and the stress," he explained.

Langford is interested in physical fitness because it's a way for him to stay in shape and maintain his own health. He also wants to help those who work for him pass the PRT, especially those he describes as "being on the fence," and are marginally passing the test. Another benefit Langford cites is the improved morale and camaraderie the squadron gains by working out together.

Langford has heard many excuses that other senior leadership make about why they are not involved with the command's PRT program. "As the commanding officer, my time is very difficult to get. There's always something else I could be doing," Langford admits.

"What it comes down to is you have to make the time and put the effort into it. I shouldn't hold my people accountable for failures of the PRT – but I do, on their fitness reports and evaluations – if I'm not willing to go out and do it. I don't believe that as a good leader, you can hold people accountable if you're not willing to go out and do it," he said.

Long before his career in the Navy began, Langford was involved with athletics. After setting high school records in Indiana for pole vaulting, he received a full athletic scholarship for pole vaulting to Purdue University. He was the NCAA championship and the Big 10 champion and tried out for the 1980 Olympics. Before the U.S. boycotted the Olympics that year, he had tied for fifth and was selected as an alternate for the team. He continued to train for the next Olympics while coaching field events for the Florida State University track team. An injury prevented him from trying out for the 1984 Olympics.

Langford credits the previous VFA-15 commanding officer, Capt. A.L. Lewis, with starting the twice weekly PT program. Langford is due to leave the squadron in December and sees the program continuing with Cmdr. Joseph Jerauld, the Valion's executive officer who will relieve him. Jerauld has been an active participant in the squadron's PRT as well. Langford plans to continue his workouts when he reports to *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) as the operations officer and hopes to be able to interest those who will work for him in working out with him.

VFA-15 'Valions' – leading the way in PRT performance at NAS Oceana

by Diana Settles

Strike Fighter Squadron 15 currently holds the highest Physical Readiness Testing score among all commands at NAS Oceana – 91.2 percent of the personnel attached to VFA-15 have scored good or higher on the Physical Fitness Assessment. Navy Environmental Health Center analyzed the PRT data from all commands at NAS Oceana and Dam Neck Annex from Spring 2003 to Spring 2004 to identify command's performances on the Physical Fitness Assessment, including both the Body Composition Assessment and the Physical Readiness Test. Command scores at NAS Oceana and Dam Neck Annex ranged from 67.9 percent to the VFA-15 Valions' highest score of 91.2 percent.

How did VFA-15 become the top PRT performer at NAS Oceana? Leadership support, a structured command fitness leader program, and positive reinforcement of healthy lifestyles led this command to become "the best."

ATC(AW/SW) Phillip Miller, VFA-15's command fitness leader, explained the commanding officer's support has had the most significant impact on the command's physical readiness. "Cmdr. Ed Langford, our commanding officer, works along side us every Tuesday and Thursday, two hours each day. His leadership support and the support of the top leadership in the command – both enlisted and officer – makes a tremendous difference. Sailors are not only getting the message from senior leadership, they are seeing action from leadership. It makes the CFL's job much easier having the support from the upper leadership," said Miller.

Since participating in the VFA-15 Command Fitness Program, DK1 Anita Johnson has lost 20 pounds. "This really motivated me, especially seeing our CO working out along side us. I now exercise five times a week, and I feel great!" Johnson said.

Photo by PH3 Danielle Hertlein

Photo by PH3 Nathaniel Karl

VFA-15 Command Fitness Coordinator ATC(AW/SW) Phillip Miller runs along Hornet Drive as part of the Tuesday and Thursday workouts at the PRT Center.

VFA-15's Command Master Chief, CMDCM(AW) Steven Alhouse, further emphasized the importance of leadership support for physical readiness. "Our Sailors have a very busy schedule. The flightline is a quarter of a mile, and they have to walk to jets, at times they have to run. The flight deck is a very high stress environment with lengthy hours when we are deployed. Sailors need to be mentally alert, and their energy levels need to be maintained throughout the workday. The flight deck is the most dangerous work setting in the world. The muscular fitness component is especially important. It's not uncommon for Sailors to have to lift, push, pull or carry 100 pounds of equipment to jets on the flight line. They need both muscular strength and muscular endurance (stamina) to perform work tasks both safely and effectively throughout the day."

Alhouse said, "Due to the importance of physical fitness for operational readiness, all leadership at VFA-15 supports the command's physical fitness program. All chiefs at VFA-15 have passed the PFA. Seeing that the chiefs are physically active can't help but to rub off on the younger Sailors. The VFA-15 Physical Readiness Program is not a 'nice to have' or an 'if we have extra time we may do it' type of program. Physical fitness is critical to the mission of the U.S. Navy."

The Command Physical Fitness Program

VFA-15's CFL team, including Chief Miller, SK2(AW) Conrad Cullen, AZ1(AW) Anthony Hypolite and AEC(AW) Mark Shade, has done a tremendous job in getting VFA-15 physically fit and mission ready. "We've been doing the two day, two hour per week command exercise program for quite at while. It's a part of our regular workweek," said Miller. "We begin the command exercise sessions with a flexibility and calisthenics workout program. The session conditions all parts of the body – it's not just sit-ups and push-ups. For the Sailors that are interested in maintaining their physical fitness level, they are getting a great workout."

There are also exercises for the beginner. "For Sailors just beginning the command, we start them with everyone and they gradually progress based on their individual physical fitness level. I show them how to modify exercises until they are comfortable with performing the exercise sessions to completion. For example, if someone has a difficult time performing the entire set of push-ups, I show them how to gradually work up to performing the number of push-ups we perform in our calisthenics sessions using correct form," said Miller.

"If Sailors are involved with the Fitness Enhancement Program, they are provided with additional specialized attention. The command's PRT failure/probationary category moved from 10 percent last year to six percent this year," he added.

There are also exercises for the physically fit Sailors. "For the super fit Sailor at VFA-15, we allow them an opportunity to exercise at a higher performance level," explained Miller. "For example, I encourage them to add a few extra repetitions of exercises to the calisthenics portion of the command fitness program. For the run, they are able to run at their own pace. We don't want to hold these high performers back. They too need to grow with their personal exercise program."

Getting ready for the PRT

To prepare VFA-15 Sailors for the PRT, occasionally the command will host a "mock PRT." No one from the command knows when the mock PRT will be performed, so it keeps everyone on their toes. This encourages Sailors to maintain general health throughout the year, not just a few weeks before the PRT. The mock PRT also points out potential problems Sailors may have in certain areas of the PFA. That gives them a chance to improve before the next official command PRT. It also provides them with a benchmark so they can perform even better during the official PRT.

Photo by PH3 Nathaniel Karl

Squadron members from VFA-15 work out each Tuesday and Thursday at the Oceana PRT Center, beginning at 7 a.m. Exercise performance includes structured flexibility, calisthenics and running.

Positive reinforcement outside of the PT sessions is another important component of VFA-15's command fitness program. Lifestyle changes don't only occur during command physical training hours. As the command's fitness leader, Miller will comment if he sees a big box of doughnuts at the command a week before the PRT. If people miss a PT session, he will let them know that the command missed them that day.

Miller said most importantly, if Sailors have made great strides with their program, he'll let them know their progress is noteworthy and encourage them to keep up the great work. He said that lets all Sailors in the command know that someone cares and no one is forgotten.

Diana Settles is the Physical Fitness Program Manager for the Navy Environmental Health Center.

Photo by PH3 Nathaniel Karl

Running is an important component of VFA-15's Command Fitness Program as *(l-r)* AD2(AW) Juan Garciagalindo, AEAA Luis Sepulveda, AA David Goble, AA Barry Kimmell demonstrate. The Tuesday and Thursday workouts at the PRT Center are often followed by a run.