

**MOTOR TREND** [subscribe now](#)  [Search MOTOR TREND](#)

MT Classic | Mobile | Newsletter | MT Radio

HOME NEW CARS USED CARS ROAD TESTS AUTO SHOWS NEWS FUTURE VIDEOS FEATURES BLOGS FORUMS WOT SUBSCRIBE

## Flight Club: The 2005 Ford Mustang, 2005 Dodge Viper, and 2005 Chevy Corvette

**TOPGUN U.S. Navy pilots live for supersonic fighter jets and gut-busting g-forces. But for our high-speed maneuvers, they're grounded.**

From the April, 2005 issue of Motor Trend

The concrete ramp trembles underfoot, even though the [Mustang](#), [Viper](#), and [Corvette](#) lined up in front of us are just sitting there, engines switched off. Milliseconds later, the silence explodes as two jet fighters burst from the burning blue sky and scream into a tight left-hand turn. Twin tail fins identify the leading aircraft as an F-18 Hornet, the U.S. Navy's principal strike fighter. The Hornet's pursuer is drab brown and carries the distinctive red star of the Soviet air force on its single fin.



We brace ourselves for the deadly rattle of 20mm cannon, but the Soviet jet breaks right into a wide sweeping turn and begins its landing approach. What looks like a Russian MiG-21 is actually an old Navy F-5 Tiger in Soviet war paint. Have we stumbled into a scene from the 1980s Tom Cruise flick, "Top Gun"? Nope. This is the real thing.

The Navy Fighter Weapons School, better known as TOPGUN, is an elite department of the Naval Strike and Air Warfare Centre (NSAWC, pronounced "N-sock"), based at the Fallon Naval Air Station in northern Nevada. It's a kind of finishing school where selected U.S. Navy pilots have their skills honed to the highest level. They fly single- and two-seat F-18 Hornets and the single-seat F-16 Viper (though the F-16's official name is "Fighting Falcon," most military pilots prefer the sting of "Viper"). TOPGUN's first jet, the F-5, is used as a stand-in for the MiG-21 that's flown by most potential adversaries throughout the world. Instructors and students fly either "Red Air"--the bad guys--or "Blue Air" during each 10-week course.

We clear security at the base and head to the tower for a better view. The range over which pilots fly their exercises (known variously as "hops," "rides," or "events") covers 13,000 square miles inhabited by just 800 residents. Spot points out an older control tower used in the movie for Maverick's illegal fly-by. In the calm environment of the TOPGUN office building, a poster reads: "Truly superior pilots are those who use their superior judgment to avoid those situations where they might have to use their superior skills."

Students have to be ready to fly at 5 a.m., and most instructors fly at least once a day. "We all work 14 or 16 hours because we're having a blast," says instructor Lt. Rob "Shooter" Simone. And no, TOPGUN pilots don't relax by stripping to the waist and playing oily volleyball as they did in the film. Most prefer skiing or golf. The majority of instructors are in their early 30s, and some have been around long enough to have flown the F-14 Tomcat--the plane "flown" by Cruise and Kilmer. Unlike the modern fly-by-wire jets, the F-14 is largely mechanical and a beast to fly. "It's the muscled," recalls Shooter. "It was great feeling that jet talk to you. The F-18s and F-16s are more refined and agile, more like a [Porsche](#) or [Ferrari](#)--the F-18 in particular is more forgiving."

Shooter drives a Ford Bronco and can take cars or leave them. But there are car freaks on the team. Dave "Poof" Harris, who describes his call sign as "not being ideal, especially when talking to my British or Australian colleagues," races a Birkin 7 (like the British-built Caterham sports car). He, too, once flew the F-14 and liked the feel of the controls. "There's no real feedback on the F-16 or F-18," Poof says. "It's like comparing a Caterham Super 7 to a [Corvette](#)." But can a car ever live up to a fast jet? According to Poof, it can. "The speed is relative," he explains. "After dogfighting a jet for 45 seconds, you're sweating, your arms feel tired, and you feel like you've been for a three-mile run. But when flying at high altitude, there's very little sensation of speed."

TOPGUN's skipper is [Commander](#) Tom "Trim" Downing, a veteran fighter pilot who got his wings in 1986, "when the earth was still cooling and my junior officers were in grade school." Downing looks spookily like his on-screen counterpart, Mike "Viper" Metcalf (played by Tom Skerritt), but he's a lot more fun, with a personality that fills the room. "TOPGUN was formed in 1969," he explains, "because the kill ratio in Vietnam had been so poor, and, frankly, we were getting our asses kicked. My job is to inject some wisdom into the proceedings. If you were to give that SRT-10 outside to a 17-year-old, he'd likely get hurt, and it's a similar thing with jets. I'm here to channel all the talent, passion, and aggression so young fighter pilots can do great things without killing themselves."

Later on the second day, after spending the morning watching F-16s and F-18s blast off the runway in full afterburner, the concrete turning to jelly in their wakes, we catch up with Major Simon "Simple" Doran (of the Marines) in the briefing room. It seems that during the morning's hop he had exceeded the 7.5g rating of his F-18 (later versions were limited to 9 g) and pulled a piece of the wing off. "I got a bit overexcited and broke my jet," he explains. "I got jumped by two students in the mountains to the east. I 'killed' them both, but now I'm in trouble. I broke my toy so now I need to have a shot at your [Viper](#)."

It seems only polite that we grant Simple his wish, so later that day we head to a remote area called Sand Mountain for a muscled party. The fun kicks off, and it's a scramble to get in the cars first. Trim heads off in the [Corvette](#) with the deputy commander of NSAWC, Captain Jim "Gyro" Knight. Others pile into the remaining cars, and 26 cylinders hit the road at full throttle. For the next hour, the three cars work hard. We hear the howling of a V-8 and spot the [Mustang](#) doing doughnuts. Simple heads off in the Viper on a pictures mission with photographer Lee Brimble, who later confirms seeing 170 mph on the airspeed indicator.

So what's the verdict? Trim is the first to debrief. "The Mustang is the F-14 of the bunch," he reports. "Though not in the same class as the other two, it's a good American muscled. The Vette's the F-18. It's got a better cockpit than the Viper's, a more comfortable seat, and still has great acceleration and handling." But it's the Viper that takes Trim's top spot. "This is the F-16. Best looks, the most power, and second-best cockpit."

Gyro rates the Corvette number one for its combination of refinement and performance. The Viper comes second. "It's the closest thing to flying on the ground," he gushes. "Incredible torque, fantastic acceleration, just a great, fun car." The Mustang hits the spot, too, but Gyro wants more power and wonders whether there might be a Shelby version on the way. More good news for GM is that Gyro, along with Trim and several of the other pilots, really loves the Vette's head-up display. "It's not as sophisticated as the HUDs we have in the jets," says Gyro, "but it works really well, and it's definitely the way to go."

Shooter likes the [Corvette](#) best. "The [Viper](#)'s powerful and feels rigid, but I felt I was sitting too high. The Vette hasn't got the torque of the Viper, but its steering felt better at higher speed. I love the retro look of the [Mustang](#), and it would be my choice for A-to-B driving." Race driver Poof prefers the Viper, saying, "It's the closest to a race car; you could just fit slicks on it and have a ball." Poof finds the Corvette a bit too sanitized but thinks the Mustang is "as much car as you could get for the money and a great way to get groceries in a hurry." Neut chooses the Corvette, saying, "Nice handling, like the HUD and the styling, seats are comfortable, and the engine sounds great. It also feels smaller and more nimble than the Viper. The Mustang doesn't feel as sharp but it's still a great American muscled."

The best of the best? Well, the Viper steals the day on points, with the Corvette second and the Mustang third (all the pilots applaud the [Ford](#) for its terrific sound, authentic looks, and fantastic value for money). Surprisingly, fighter pilots don't always go for the hardest, meanest ride, which is possibly why the user-friendly F-18 is the TOPGUN instructors' favorite aircraft.

So, yes, TOPGUN's pilots certainly live up to their reputation of having an insatiable appetite for living life on the edge--albeit tempered by a large helping of discipline. We also confirmed that boys will be boys: Whether you're flying the ultimate military jet or driving one of the world's great sports cars, you're always jealous of the other guy's toy. n

Special thanks to Lt. Terrance "Spot" O'Neill for the great organization and even better hospitality.

TOPGUN HOT SHOTS

<a href="http://www.motortrend.com/cars/2010/dodge/viper/index.html">http://www.motortrend.com/cars/2010/dodge/viper/index.html</a>	>Viper</a>	<a href="http://www.motortrend.com/cars/2010/chevrolet/corvet">http://www.motortrend.com/cars/2010/chevrolet/corvet</a>
---	------------	---

<b>Looks</b>	9.6	7.6
<b>Engine note</b>	9.3	7.4
<b>Comfort</b>		
<b>Driving position</b>	8.4	8
<b>Cockpit layout</b>	7.9	7.9
<b>Visibility</b>	7.7	7.4
<b>ICE</b>	7.3	8.3
<b>Road noise</b>	8.4	8
<b>Performance</b>		
<b>Acceleration</b>	10	9
<b>Grip/steering</b>	8.6	8
<b>Brakes</b>	8.8	7.9
<b>Overall</b>	86	79.5

Search MOTOR TREND

[Home](#) | 
 [New Cars](#) | 
 [Used Cars](#) | 
 [Car Reviews](#) | 
 [Auto Shows](#) | 
 [Future Cars](#) | 
 [Car Prices](#) | 
 [Car Pictures](#) | 
 [Auto Rebates](#) | 
 [Site Map](#)

**SOURCE** © 2010 MotorTrend Magazine.  
**INTERLINK** Source Interlink Media  
ALTERNATIVE DIGITAL All rights reserved. WEB-044

[Dealer](#) | 
 [Car Dealers](#) | 
 [Car Insurance](#) | 
 [Used Car Dealers](#) | 
 [MT Classic](#) | 
 [Subscribe](#) | 
 [Give a Gift](#) | 
 [Subscriber Services](#)  
[Espanol](#) | 
 [RSS](#) | 
 [Partners](#) | 
 [Licensing](#) | 
 [Reprints](#) | 
 [User Submitted Content](#) | 
 [Privacy Policy](#) | 
 [Terms of Use](#) | 
 [Contact Us](#)