

Alumnus at the helm of the 'River Rattlers'

September 15, 2015 8:45 AM Faith Dawson

fdawson@tulane.edu



Rigel Pirrone took over the U.S. Navy's last Reserve Strike Fighter Squadron, which flies the F/A-18 out of the Naval Air Station in Belle Chasse. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

In New Orleans, a city long on traditions, it's sort of fitting we play host to the last U.S. Navy Reserve Strike Fighter Squadron in this country.

[VFA-204](#), the "River Rattlers," are a group of pilots and personnel based out of the [Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base New Orleans](#) in Belle Chasse, Louisiana.

Tulane alumnus Cmdr. Rigel Pirrone, who graduated with a [civil engineering degree](#) in 1999, took over the unit in July. (His wife, Annie, is also a Tulane graduate.)

A Buffalo, New York, native, Pirrone had previously served as the unit's executive officer.

As commander, he oversees 14 combat jet fighters and 225 personnel, including the "Ready Room," the nickname for the unit's pilots, who have logged thousands of hours of flight time and earned awards for their collective safety record.

The Ready Room may go into active duty if and when called up for service, so they are prepared to mobilize at any moment. Another mission is to provide opposition support ? in other words, play the bad guy ? for other units that are training before deployment.

"Fifteen months from now, I'd like to be able to say that I did some things to make life better for the people that work there and to ensure mission success in supporting the Constitution," Pirrone says. For VFA-204's personnel, that means "knowing how your role ties into the bigger picture in the overall mission of the command."

It's enough of a challenge to practice on both sides of an imagined conflict. But the squadron regularly flies F/A-18 Hornet aircraft, which is outdated by some standards, because the Navy has since moved on to flying the Super Hornet.

Even though VFA-204 has outlasted similar squadrons, "We're just happy that we have," Pirrone says, "and it's because we have the finest group of sailors anywhere in the Navy."