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Newsday.com

An F-14 Tomcat's final trip - to Bethpage by road

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June 2, 2008

If you happened to be out and about in Farmingdale or Bethpage in the wee hours of the morning May 6 and saw a Navy F-14 Tomcat fighter jet on the roadway, you do not need an eye exam, and you were not hallucinating.

The plane was being towed from the Airpower Museum at Republic Airport in East Farmingdale to the Northrop Grumman Corp. plant in Bethpage, where it is now on permanent display outside the main gates on Grumman Road West.

The trip took about three hours, according to Barbara Nilsen, president of the Grumman Club, a retirees group that played a major role in getting the F-14 to Bethpage, where it was originally built by the former Grumman Corp. The plane is on permanent loan from the Navy to the club.

Nilsen, who retired from Grumman in 1993 after a 36-year career in quality control, said the F-14 was towed in the early-morning hours to avoid startling drivers and creating traffic jams.

"It's been years since anything like this went down the road," she said.

When Grumman was building planes on Long Island, they were assembled in Bethpage and trucked to Calverton, where final assembly and flight tests were done.

The F-14 now outside the Northrop Grumman plant was the 711th of the 712 Tomcats Grumman built during the 1980s and 1990s.

The F-14, the Navy's premier air-to-air fighter in those decades, was retired from active service in 2006.

Pat McMahon, a Northrop Grumman vice president and deputy regional head of the company unit that oversees Long Island operations, said employees arriving for work May 6 were taken aback when they saw the plane.

"We couldn't tell anyone [it was coming] because of safety issues in bringing it in," McMahon said recently.

The idea of getting an F-14 placed outside the main gates was first advanced by Gerard A. "Duke" Dufresne, who, until he was reassigned by the company to the West Coast last year, was Northrop Grumman's highest-ranking executive on the Island.

Nilsen said it took about two years of negotiations with the Navy before the plane was released to the

Grumman Club.

"The F-14 is a tribute to all of the men and women at Grumman who developed it," McMahon said. "Long Island is the home of the F-14. To me, this is the right place for it."

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