

# A HISTORY OF MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 232



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION  
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

*A Curtiss F6C-4 Hawk belonging to Marine Fighting Squadron 10 (VF-10M), the forerunner of VMFA-232, on the line at NAS North Island in August 1931. The Red Devil insignia which has survived through the years is clearly visible on the vertical stabilizer. (USMC Photo 530812).*

# A HISTORY OF MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 232

By

Major William J. Sambito, USMC



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION  
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

1978

PCN 19000308100

---

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office  
Washington, D.C. 20402

Stock No. 008-055-00134-0

# FOREWORD

---

This history, which traces Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 232 from 1925 to the present, is one in a series of Marine squadron histories in which we hope to bring to light the achievements of individual squadrons and relate them to the general development of Marine aviation.

The author, Major William J. Sambito, earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from Colby College, Maine, and is an experienced helicopter pilot who served with HMM-262 and -165 during the Vietnam War. After attending the Armed Forces Staff College in January 1975, he was assigned to the History and Museums Division.

Major Sambito has been a major contributor to the series of squadron histories. He was also the author of *A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 312* and *A History of Marine Attack Squadron 311* and assisted in the editing of *A History of Marine Attack Squadron 223*.

The History and Museums Division welcomes any comments on the narrative and additional information or illustrations which might enhance a future, much expanded treatment of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 232's history.



E. H. SIMMONS  
Brigadier General, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.)  
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Reviewed and approved:  
15 June 1978



# PREFACE

---

The history of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 232 is a narrative account of the “Red Devil” squadron in action since its beginning in 1925. The brief history shows the early structure of the squadron from its fledgling start as VF-3M when it was flying primitive VE-7s to the present day VMFA-232 flying Phantom F4-Js. It outlines in chronological order the battles undertaken during World War II and Vietnam, and tells briefly of the pilots and crewmen and the hardships they endured to carry out their missions. Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 232 is steeped in tradition and continually holds its standards high. It is hoped that this brief history adequately sketches the story and prompts others to contribute their insights, remembrances, records, photographs, and other memorabilia so that the complete history may someday be written.

The manuscript was typed by Miss Cathy Stoll and prepared for publication by the Production Editor, Mr. Douglas Johnston. Most of the photographs used in this monograph are official Department of Defense (Marine Corps) photographs from the History and Museums Division. Other photographs were provided by Lieutenant General Richard C. Mangrum.



WILLIAM J. SAMBITO  
Major, U. S. Marine Corps





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Foreword .....	iii
Preface .....	v
Table of Contents .....	vii
Early Developments .....	1
World War II .....	5
Reactivation .....	8
The Jet Age .....	10
Combat and the Far East .....	12
Notes .....	17
Appendix A—Chronology .....	19
Appendix B—Commanding Officers .....	21
Appendix C—Streamer Entitlements .....	23



# A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 232

*Early Developments—World War II—Reactivation—The Jet Age—Combat and the Far East*

---

## *Early Developments*

The original “Red Devil” Squadron was activated 1 September 1925 as Division 1, Fighting Plane Squadron 3M (VF-3M), 2d Aviation Group, at Naval Air Station (NAS) San Diego, California. At the time of activation only Division 1 was manned. This element provided the nucleus for the squadron that eventually became VMFA-232.\* The squadron’s first commanding officer, Second Lieutenant Clayton C. Jerome\*\* retained command for only 19 days before relinquishing his position to First Lieutenant William J. Wallace.\*\*\* Lieutenant Wallace’s squadron then consisted of Lieutenant Jerome plus 78 enlisted men.

---

\*The terms “squadron” and “division” as used in the 1920s may be misleading to one familiar with today’s aviation organization. Their meaning at that time, as well as the overall purpose of the organization adopted, was explained in 1926 by Major Edwin H. Brainard.<sup>1</sup> “Marine Corps aviation,” he told students at Quantico, “is organized along Navy lines, with the division as the administrative unit and the squadron as the tactical unit. In order to have an organization capable of large expansion in time of emergency, the peacetime squadrons are only one-third their war strength, i.e., one division active and two inactive. A division consists of 75 enlisted men and 10 commissioned officers. This gives the nucleus around which to recruit the two inactive divisions, and the addition of a squadron commander and staff gives a war strength unit which should be fairly efficient and capable of shortly performing any task. A division consists of six planes active and three in reserve. Therefore, a full strength squadron has eighteen active planes and nine in reserve, and in addition two planes attached to squadron headquarters and one transport.”

\*\*Clayton C. Jerome graduated from the Naval Academy in 1922 and completed his flight training at Pensacola, Florida, in 1925. Later as a major general and veteran of five World War II campaigns, he commanded the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing in Korea from April 1952 to January 1953. Upon his retirement in 1958, he was promoted to lieutenant general. He died 13 February 1978 in Washington, D.C.<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*William J. Wallace was commissioned a second

The first aircraft assigned to the new squadron was the Vought VE-7SF. This single-seater fighter-trainer was first received in the Marine Corps inventory in 1921. Powered by a single 180-horsepower engine, this biplane had a maximum speed of approximately 150 miles per hour. During 1926, the unit began replacing the VE-7SFs with Boeing FB-1 fighters. The Boeing biplane was equipped with a Curtiss 410-horsepower engine, was capable of a speed of 167 miles per hour, and had a service ceiling of 21,200 feet.

The squadron remained at NAS San Diego until 7 April 1927. Then, embarked on board the naval transport USS *Henderson*, the unit, now boasting of five aviators, sailed for China as part of Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler’s 3d Brigade. The mission of this force was to protect the lives and property of the U.S. nationals in China during a period of civil turmoil. The *Henderson* arrived in Shanghai on 3 May, only to find that arrangements with the Chinese Government for the use of a landing field had not been completed. The aviation component, consisting of Marine Observation Squadron 5 (VO-5M) and VF-3M, both under the command of Major Francis T. Evans and later Lieutenant Colonel Thomas C. Turner, proceeded to the Naval Station, Olongapo, Philippine Islands, where it remained until returning to Shanghai on 13 June 1927.<sup>3</sup>

The squadrons stayed in the Shanghai area on board the *Henderson* until 25 June and then began

---

lieutenant in 1918. As a lieutenant colonel, he was executive officer of Marine Aircraft Group 21 on Hawaii when the Japanese attacked. Later, as a colonel, he commanded Marine Aircraft Group 23 at Guadalcanal and, as a brigadier general, commanded the Air Defense and Fighter Command in Okinawa in 1945. From 1945 to 1950, Major General Wallace was the director of Marine Corps aviation. In 1952, after 34 years of service, he retired with the rank of lieutenant general. He died 7 July 1977.



USMC Photo 516113

*The FB-1 fighter built by Boeing eventually replaced the VE-7. This Boeing biplane equipped with a Curtiss 410-horsepower engine was capable of a speed of 167 miles an hour. This fighter is on the Marine landing strip at Tientsin, China in 1927.*

the voyage north to Tientsin. On 30 June, the units arrived at Camp MacMurray, Hsin-Ho, where they were joined by the ground element of the 3d Brigade. Twelve days after arriving in China, VF-3M was redesignated VF-10M, and on 1 July 1928 the squadron designation was changed to VF-6M. During its stay in China, the squadron engaged in training, aerial photography, mapping, and reconnaissance missions around Tientsin.<sup>4</sup>

On 3 October 1928, its mission in China completed, the squadron sailed for California, again on board the USS *Henderson*. After stops en route at Guam on 10 October and Honolulu on the 21st, the ship arrived at San Diego on 31 October. The unit was reassigned to Aircraft Squadrons, West Coast Expeditionary Force, NAS San Diego. The squadron, now reduced to 2 officers and 68 enlisted men, began the process of rebuilding and training newly designated aviators. Training consisted of familiarization, basic instruments, combat maneuvering, and gunnery proficiency flights.

In 1929 the squadron acquired a new aircraft. The plane which replaced the FB-1 was the newer Boeing FB-5. The FB-5 was similar in appearance to the earlier model, but had a slightly larger Packard 475-horsepower engine which increased the airspeed to 170 miles per hour. Shortly after receiving the new planes, the squadron officially adopted the "Red

Devil" insignia. Lieutenant General Richard C. Mangrum,\* however, remembers that, "The Red Devil insignia certainly antedated 1930. It was on the FB-1s and FB-5s in 1929 and my impression is that it dated back at least to the mid-1920s." According to a Chief of Naval Operations letter to the commanding officer of Marine Torpedo Bombing Squadron 232 on 30 August 1944, the Red Devil design, "submitted in 1930, has a white field, a black border and a bright-red flying devil. The Field is diamond-shaped, measures 12" on each side and is superimposed on aluminum-enameled airplane fabric." The letter went on to say, "The origin and

\*Lieutenant General Mangrum has had a distinguished career in Marine aviation. He was designated a naval aviator on 20 August 1929 and for the next 12 years served in a variety of Marine aviation billets on the West Coast, and was a member of VF-6M in 1930. In 1942, as a major, he commanded VMSB-232 against the Japanese, and was awarded the Navy Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Later during the Korean War, as a colonel, he commanded MAG-12. As a major general he commanded both the 1st and 2d MAWs. On 1 October 1965, he succeeded to the title "Grey Eagle" of naval aviation, and was the first Marine aviator to attain this distinction. The "Grey Eagle" is the earliest designated aviator on active duty in the Navy and Marine Corps. His final assignment in the Marine Corps was as Assistant Commandant from 1965-1967. Lieutenant General Mangrum retired 30 June 1967.



Photo courtesy of Lieutenant General R. C. Mangrum, USMC  
*F6C-4 aircraft of Fighting Plane Squadron 10M (VF-10M) on line at San Diego in 1930. Although the Red Devils are not distinguishable, the diamond-shape fields clearly show on the vertical fins.*

significance of 'Red Devils' is not recorded."<sup>6</sup> So the reason for adoption of this particular motif remains a mystery. Although the squadron's designation changed several times in the years to follow, the insignia had survived in its original form throughout the unit's history.<sup>7</sup>

On 1 July 1930, the squadron underwent another change in designation, this time reverting to Marine Fighting Plane Squadron 10M (VF-10M), the designation it had used during its first year in China.

Also in July of 1930, the squadron received Curtiss F6C-4 Hawks which replaced the FB-5s. Lieutenant General Mangrum recalls the event:

We got nine of them, second-hand from the Navy, in bad shape and all needing overhaul. Six were put into overhaul immediately by the engineering unit, and three were retained as flyable while the first six were overhauled.<sup>8</sup>

This single-seat fighter, powered by a 410-horsepower radial engine, was not appreciably different than the FB-1s and the FB-5s. The pilots quickly adjusted to the F6C-4, and by September VF-10M, with six freshly reconditioned F6C-4s, was attached to the Army's 95th Pursuit Group, commanded by Major Carl "Tooy" Spaatz, to help in the defense of the San Francisco area against attacking Navy carriers, the *Lexington* and *Saratoga*. General Mangrum recalling the event states:

The six were under the command of Bill McKittrick, and included Paul Putnam and Mike Wodarczyk and me.\* We based at Crissy Field at the Presidio in San

Francisco, and later at the Curtiss-Wright field on San Francisco Bay, later to become the present San Francisco airport. Fog was over the Bay the day we arrived; ceiling about 400 feet. As we passed San Francisco waterfront heading for Crissy Field, Gunner Mike Wodarczyk had an engine failure, landed in the water off one of the piers. Fortunately, a freighter just backing out for departure put a sling on the tail of Mike's plane, hoisted him aboard, and dropped him off at the Army's Fort Mason en route out the Golden Gate. Why and how VF-10M got mixed up with the Army in this exercise I don't remember. . . .<sup>9</sup>

After the exercise with the Army the squadron returned to San Diego.

By the end of June 1932, the Red Devils logged nearly 2,000 hours of accident-free flying. For this accomplishment, the Major General Commandant, Ben H. Fuller, awarded the unit the Herbert H. Schiff Memorial Cup\*\* for fiscal year 1932.<sup>10</sup> During late 1932, the squadron began receiving its first F4B-4 fighters. The Red Devils became the second Marine Corps unit to be equipped with this single-engine biplane. The plane could take off in 440 feet, land at 63 miles per hour, and had a top speed of 184 miles per hour.

In 1933, the squadron participated in the Los Angeles National Air Races held 1-4 July. By the time the races took place, the Red Devils were thoroughly familiar with the new machine. A six-man aeronautical team consisting of Captain Vernon

\*William L. McKittrick was promoted to major general upon retiring on 1 October 1951. Paul A. Putnam stayed on active duty until June 1956 rising to the rank of colonel; promoted to brigadier general on the retired list. Michael Wodarczyk was appointed as a captain in February 1942. He was placed on the retired list as a colonel in June 1946. All three had highly successful careers in Marine Corps aviation.

\*\*The Schiff Memorial Cup was established in memory of Lieutenant Herbert H. Schiff, USN, who served as an aviator in World War I and was killed in an aircraft accident on 11 July 1924. This award was presented annually to a naval aviation squadron for outstanding performance in the area of aviation safety.



USMC Photo 530812

*The F6C-4 Curtiss Hawk replaced the Marine FB-5s. The Hawk was powered by a single 410-horsepower radial engine which was not appreciably different from the engines in the FB predecessors.*

M. Guymon,\* the commanding officer, Second Lieutenant Samuel S. Jack,\*\* Marine Gunners Michael Wodarczyk and Albert S. Munsch, Gunnery Sergeant Kenneth A. Woolsey, and Staff Sergeant William E. Ward demonstrated to the Services and the nation the daring and skill of Marine aviators. The first day of the races also marked the beginning of a new mission for the Red Devils. "Fighting Ten" was redesignated as Bombing Plane Squadron 4M (VB-4M) on that date.

The squadron continued its normal training and familiarization routine until 14 February 1935 when the Commander in Chief, United States Fleet assigned Aircraft Two, of which VB-4M was a part, to Aircraft, Battle Force, United States Fleet for operations. From 29 April to 12 June, the Red Devils participated in fleet training and United States Fleet Problem XIV. During June, upon return from fleet training, the squadron received 16 Great Lake BG-1 bombers as replacements for its F4Bs. The single-engine biplane was powered by a Pratt & Whitney 750 horsepower engine which enabled it to reach a

speed of 206 miles per hour. The "Bee-Gee" carried a two-man crew, a pilot and a bombardier/gunner.

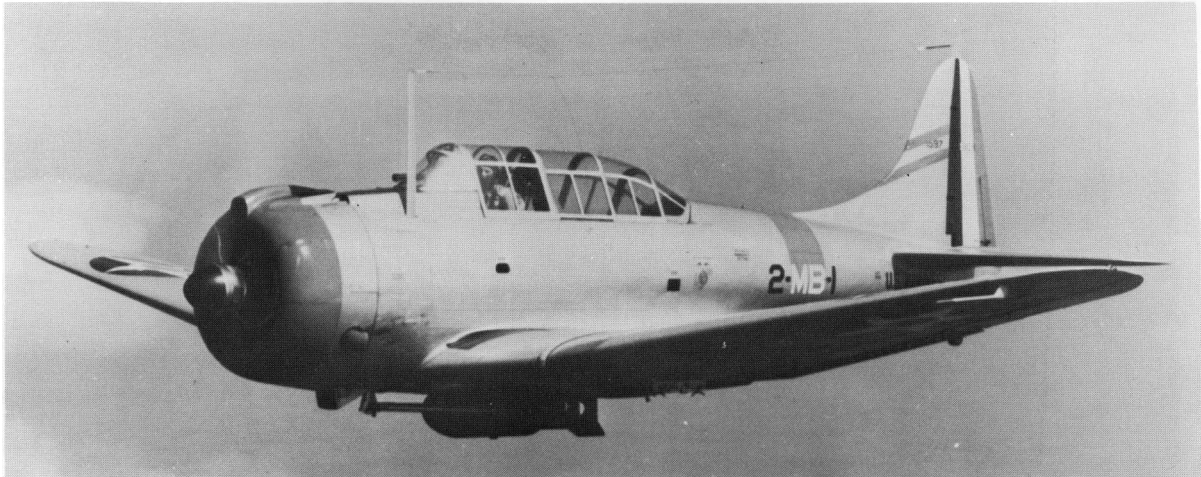
In 1936, after becoming familiar with the BG-1, the squadron conducted flight operations on board the carriers USS *Lexington* and *Saratoga*. On 1 July 1937, the unit was redesignated as Marine Bombing Squadron 2 (VMB-2). In 1938, while embarked on board the *Lexington* for Fleet Problem XIX, VMB-2 made 187 accident-free landings. During the week of 23-28 May 1938, the Red Devils were again at sea, this time on board the USS *Ranger* for training and carrier operations. Between cruises the squadron returned to its home base, San Diego. During late

*Along with its new designation, Bombing Plane Squadron 4M (VB-4M) received BG-1 bombers. The BG-1 was built by Great Lakes and carried a pilot and a bombardier/gunner. It was known throughout Marine aviation as the "Bee-Gee."* USMC Photo 514904

\*Vernon M. Guymon served as Assistant Wing Commander, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing during World War II and retired in 1949 with the rank of brigadier general.

\*\*Samuel S. Jack served during World War II on Guadalcanal, New Caledonia, and in the New Hebrides. During the Korean Conflict he served as chief of staff, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and later as commanding general. In 1961 he retired with the rank of major general.





USMC Photo A402819

*The Douglas SBD-1 Dauntless scout bomber. VMB-2 first received the two-seat monoplane late in 1940.*

1940, the squadron turned in its BG-1s and replaced them with the new Douglas SBD-1 Dauntless scout bombers. The two-seat monoplane was equipped with two .50 caliber machineguns in the nose and two .30 caliber guns on a flexible mount in the rear cockpit. For dive bombing, one 1,000-pound bomb could be carried beneath the fuselage, and two 100-pound bombs were mounted under the wings.

### *World War II*

On 11 January 1941, in response to the ever-mounting tension in the Pacific, the squadron moved from San Diego to Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Ewa, Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, on board the USS *Enterprise*. On 21 January VMB-2, with 21 officers, 116 enlisted men, and 20 Dauntless scout-bombers, arrived in Hawaii and was assigned to the 2d Marine Aircraft Group (MAG-2), Fleet Marine Force. The unit immediately began flight operations as part of the islands' defensive air patrol system. On 1 July 1941, the squadron was redesignated Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron 232 (VMSB-232) and on 1 August the 2d Marine Aircraft Group became Marine Aircraft Group 21 (MAG-21), 2d Marine Aircraft Wing (2d MAW), FMF.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December, the Red Devils' 20 SBDs were lined up on the field at MCAS, Ewa. Twenty-five minutes later, 9 were completely destroyed and 10 were so badly damaged that they required major overhaul. Only one plane escaped with minor damage. Fortunately,

only one squadron member was killed during the attack. On Wake Island, however, where the Red Devils had a detachment of 25 enlisted Marines, the men were not as lucky. Eight were killed before the Japanese landed, and the remainder were either killed or captured while assisting in the defense of the doomed island.<sup>11</sup>

For the next 8 months, VMSB-232 remained at Ewa where it received 12 new SBD-3 Dauntlesses powered by a larger 1,100-horsepower engine.

In August 1942, the opportunity came to avenge the attacks on Pearl Harbor and Wake Island. Assigned to MAG-23, the squadron embarked on board the escort carrier USS *Long Island* (CVE 1), and on 20 August landed on Guadalcanal's 3,000-foot dirt runway called Henderson Field. The first combat missions were flown on 23 August. Although several Japanese ships were sighted, it was not until the 25th that the squadron, now assigned to the 1st MAW, scored any confirmed hits. Second Lieutenant Lawrence Baldinus seriously damaged an enemy cruiser, when he dropped a bomb on the ship just forward of the bridge. Two transports and a destroyer were also hit that day. Under the leadership of Major Richard C. Mangrum, the Red Devils were in almost daily action against the Japanese. When the squadron left Guadalcanal on 13 October 1942, Mangrum, newly promoted to lieutenant colonel, was the only pilot of the original 15 Guadalcanal Red Devils able to walk away from Henderson Field. Seven pilots had been killed, four wounded the rest evacuated.<sup>12</sup> For his actions at Guadalcanal,