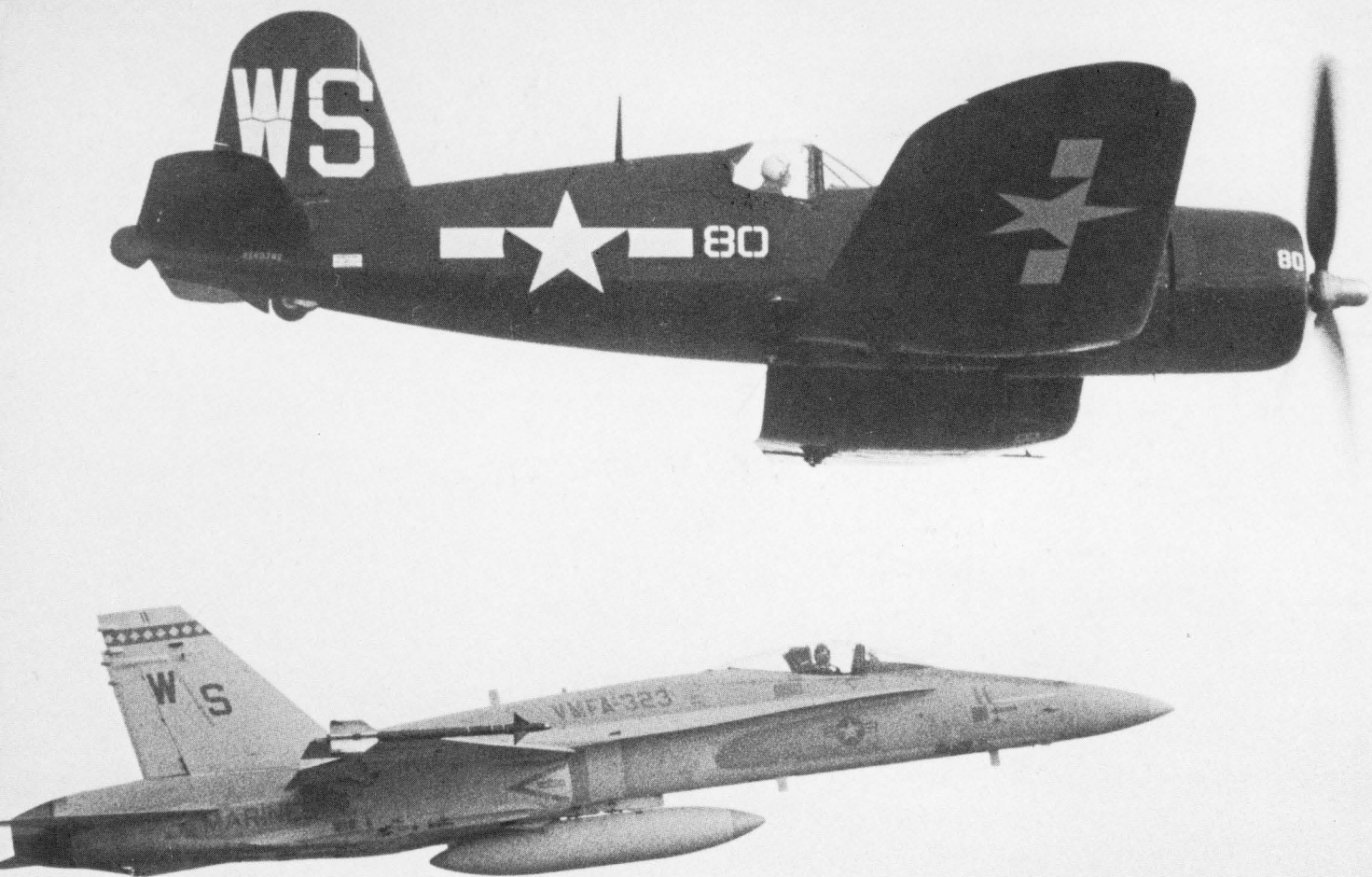


A HISTORY OF MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 323



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

A Vought F4U-1 Corsair, top, from the Planes of Fame Air Museum, similar to those flown by the Death Rattlers in World War II and during combat in Korea, flies formation with a VMFA-323 McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 Hornet over Southern California. (Photograph by Frank B. Mormillo, Covina, California.)

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by
Colonel Gerald R. Pitzl
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve



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Foreword

This publication traces the history of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323 from its commissioning in 1943 through warfare in the Pacific in World War II, three years of combat action in the Korean War, intensive involvement in Vietnam, and a number of significant peacetime accomplishments during the 1980s. The history was prepared from command diaries and chronologies, published works covering the major periods of conflict, and personal papers, letters, and the recollections of Marines who were personally involved. The author, Colonel Gerald R. Pitzl, received his bachelor of science, master of arts, and doctor of philosophy degrees from the University of Minnesota. He has more than 30 years of service in the Marine Corps Reserve, including eight years of extended active duty. Colonel Pitzl has served three tours of duty overseas, including a ten-month assignment to the Force Logistics Command, Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam, during 1969 and 1970.

The History and Museums Division welcomes any comments on the narrative and readers are encouraged to submit additional information or illustrations which might enhance a subsequent edition.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "E. H. Simmons". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

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

Preface

The history of VMFA-323 was written to provide an account of important events covering the more than 40 years of the squadron's continuous active service.

From its commissioning in 1943 through action in the Pacific, the Korean War, Vietnam, and the inter-war periods, the "Death Rattlers" can be seen to have served with distinction.

I wish to extend my appreciation to members of the professional staff of the History and Museums Division whose assistance was instrumental in completing this project. A special thanks must go to Major Frank M. Batha, Jr., for his expert guidance as project director throughout the development of the study and up to the time of his retirement, and to Major Arthur F. Elzy, for pulling everything together for publication.

Expert editorial guidance was received from Mr. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., Chief Historian. Mrs. Joyce E. Bonnett, of the Archives Section, helped in collecting source material, Mrs. Regina H. Strother, of the Reference Section, located and retrieved many of the photographs used in the study. In the Publications Production Section, Mrs. Catherine A. Kerns and Corporal James W. Rodriguez II typeset the final version of the history, and Mr. W. Stephen Hill designed the book and prepared its layout.

I am also deeply grateful for assistance from Lieutenant General George C. Axtell, Jr., USMC (Ret), who provided invaluable first-hand information and comments on an early draft. Thanks also are due to Ms. Barbara Wells-Howe, Ms. Bonnie Alexander, and Ms. Lian Parlew, all of Macalester College, for typing early versions of the draft manuscript.

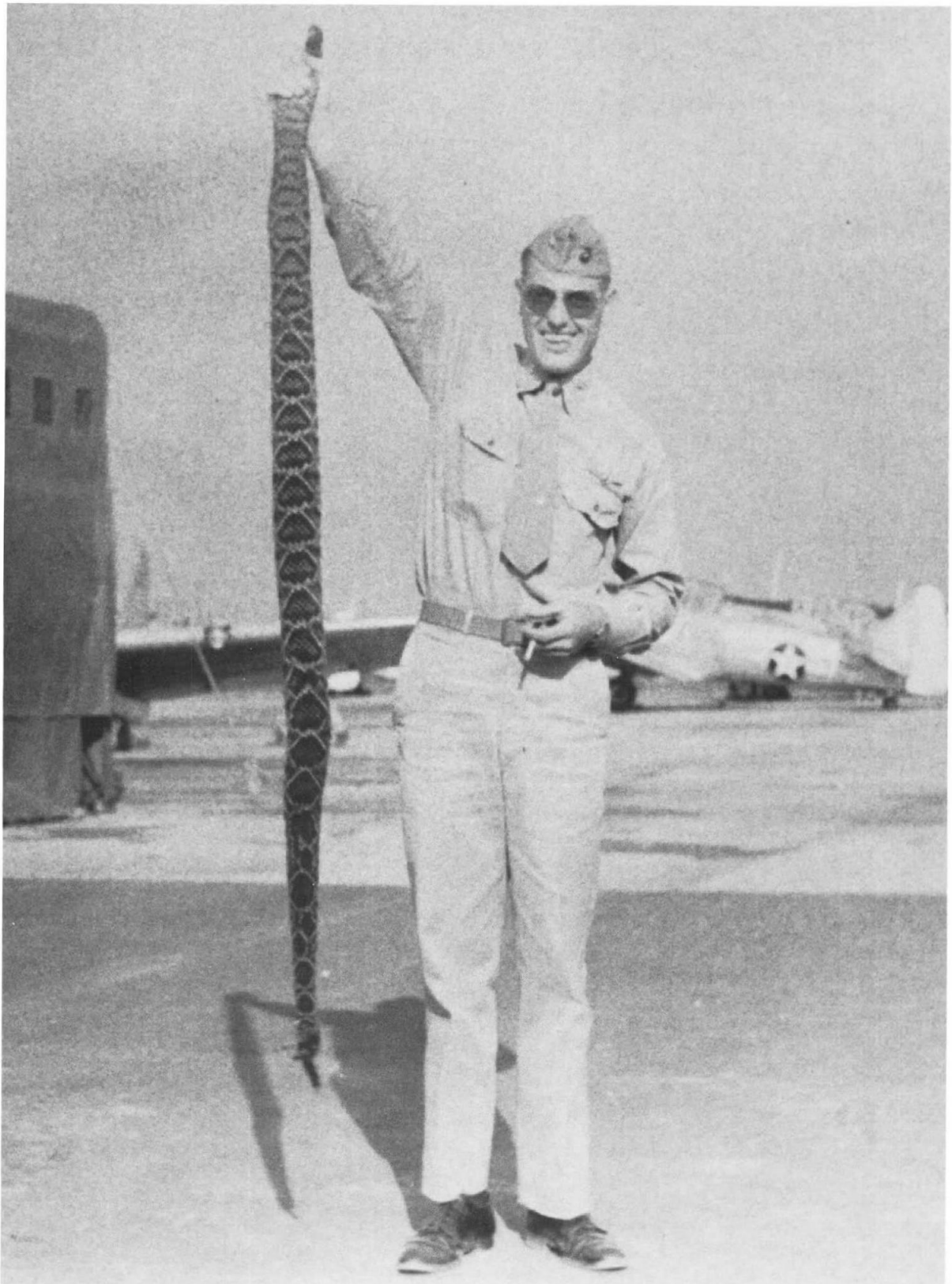
The photographs in the history are from official governmental sources and from squadron members, past and present, who also contributed important criticism of the comment edition.



GERALD R. PITZL
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

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Marine Corps Historical Collection

A proud legend begins. This formidable rattlesnake, the original "Death Rattler," nickname for the squadron, is held aloft by Maj Arthur L. Turner as a warning to adversaries.

A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323

*Commissioning and Preparation for Combat—Combat in the Okinawa Campaign
Post-World War II: 1946-1950—Action in Korea: 1950-1953
El Toro and the Dominican Republic: 1953-1965—The Vietnam Years: 1965-1969—El Toro Again: 1969-1984*

Commissioning and Preparations for Combat

Marine Fighting Squadron 323 (VMF-323) was commissioned on 1 August 1943 at the Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS), Cherry Point, North Carolina. The squadron was assigned to Marine Aircraft Group 32 (MAG-32) within the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing (3d MAW).

The nickname “Death Rattlers” and an appropriately designed squadron patch were adopted by VMF-323 soon after commissioning. Based upon an incident wherein a large rattlesnake fell prey to three VMF-323 lieutenants and wound up adorning the unit’s ready room, both nickname and patch continue in use today.*

Commanded by Major George C. Axtell, Jr., VMF-323 immediately began training for combat duty in the Pacific. In September of 1943 the squadron was transferred to one of MCAS Cherry Point’s outlying fields, Marine Corps Auxiliary Air Facility (MCAAF) Oak Grove near Pollocksville, North Carolina, to continue training. The first aircraft flown by the Death Rattlers was the Vought F4U-1 Corsair. The combat effectiveness of the F4U was quickly recognized and by August 1943 eight Marine fighter squadrons had Corsairs. The Japanese referred to the F4U as “The Whistling Death,” and admitted after the war that they feared it more than any other opposing aircraft.¹

On 12 January 1944, VMF-323 was transferred to the Naval Auxiliary Air Station, El Centro, California. Along with this physical relocation, the squadron was reassigned from MAG-32 to Marine Base Defense Aircraft Group 43 (MBDAG-43).

During their brief stay at El Centro, the Death Rattler pilots concentrated on mastering the skills of instrument flying, gunnery, bomber escort, overland navigation, dogfighting, section tactics, field carrier landings practice (FCLP), and strafing. The FCLP training was in anticipation of qualifying on board an aircraft carrier in February 1944, however, a few days before the scheduled carrier training, 31 of the squadron’s pilots were transferred overseas as replacements

for other squadrons. The squadron soon moved to Camp Joseph H. Pendleton, Oceanside, California, to continue training. Colonel Clarence H. Moore, a squadron member at the time, described the stay at Pendleton as “good field training . . . we mostly lived in and operated from tents.”² While stationed at Camp Pendleton, Major Axtell began the rebuilding task of training new pilots to replace those transferred. Major Axtell had been an instrument flight instructor before taking over the Death Rattlers, and he insisted that all of his pilots become adept at night and all-weather flying. He believed that those skills would build confidence in his pilots, and in the battles to come that belief proved true, he recalls, as his airmen were able to stay on station during inclement weather and consequently were able to get more kills because they had more opportunities.

Training operations were disrupted on 17 March 1944 due to the death of squadron pilot Second Lieutenant Robert M. Bartlett, Jr., when his plane crashed two miles south of the base on a routine night familiarization flight. The cause of the crash was never determined.

During the month of April 1944, VMF-323 continued its intensive training efforts. In addition to the earlier types of training, the squadron took part in two large-scale joint service air interception problems. The first of these was supervised by Assault Air Warning Squadron 10, which vectored four of the squadron’s F4U Corsair aircraft to intercept a flight of eight Douglas SBD dive bombers approximately 10 miles west of Coronado, California. In the second intercept problem, 12 VMF-323 F4U aircraft teamed up with P-38, FM-1, and other fighter aircraft to intercept a flight of 54 B-24s. Both efforts succeeded.

On 25 May 1944, the squadron had its second fatal accident. Second Lieutenant John A. Freshour and his passenger, Lieutenant Commander James J. Bunner, were killed when the SBD they were flying crashed into a power line near the Camp Pendleton airstrip.

Training events during the month of May were expanded to include dive bombing. In addition, an intelligence reading room and a classified material library were used extensively by all the squadron’s officers. The reading room had a catalogued reading list, displays of recognition materials, and a situation

*See Appendix G for a more complete discussion of the squadron’s insignia.

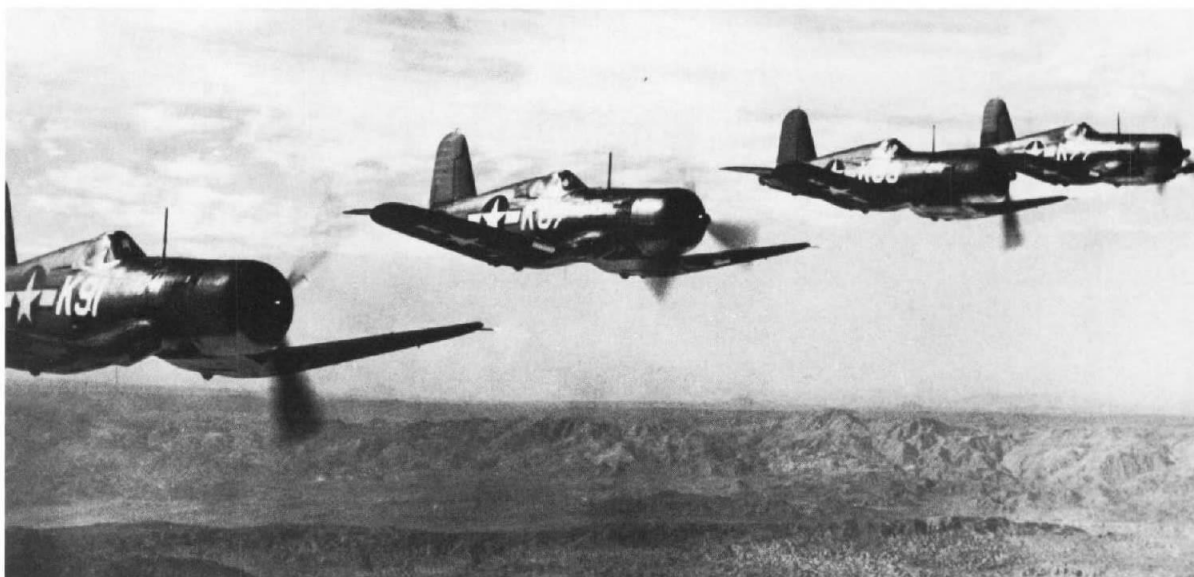


Photo courtesy of Col Clarence H. Moore, USMC (Ret)

Four of VMF-323's F4U-1 Corsairs in an echelon formation over Southern California.

map of the Pacific Theater which was updated daily. The intelligence section of the squadron gave regularly scheduled talks on topics ranging from Pacific Theater indoctrination to the latest trends in Japanese antiaircraft weapons, survival techniques, and other topics of interest to fliers.

On 3 June 1944, 16 F4Us of VMF-323 and another 16 F4Us of VMF-122 provided close air support to ground troops conducting amphibious exercises at San Clemente Island's Pyramid Cove off the California coast. Though it was the squadron's first close air support training mission the brief encounter impressed VMF-323's pilots with the value of close air support, an operational concept which the Marine Corps had been developing since the Nicaragua campaigns of the 1920s.³

Flight training activity was scheduled to end (temporarily) for the squadron on 17 June 1944, two days before the squadron's 25 F4U aircraft were transferred to MBDAG-43 at El Centro. Up to this point, the squadron continued training in dead reckoning, radio navigation, and dive bombing.

On the 17th all flight operations were terminated, and all aircraft were given a thorough pretransfer inspection. VMF-323 was finally ready for its long-awaited deployment overseas.

In preparation for the transfer, the next 10 days found both officers and enlisted Marines busy packing and marking equipment. On 23 June 1944, squadron materiel was transported to Naval Air Station (NAS) North Island in San Diego, California. Pilots continued to receive lectures on communications, in-

telligence, and various aspects of operations during this period.

Pilots, in groups of 10, received additional instrument flying practice at El Centro, until all had absorbed the prescribed instruction. Ground crew training also continued whenever possible. On one occasion, the ordnance section received instruction in bomb and rocket fuzing techniques from personnel at El Centro. Within the squadron, three ground officers provided physical conditioning instructions to all enlisted Marines.

During 1-21 July 1944 the squadron awaited its "execute" orders for movement to the Western Pacific. Flying was secured during this period, except for administrative flights in the squadron's sole aircraft, an SBD-5. Ground school continued for all pilots in engineering, tactics, recognition, communications, and intelligence.

On 21 July, VMF-323 embarked on board the USS *Long Island* (CVE-1) at NAS North Island in San Diego harbor. The squadron was at sea until 28 July, when it arrived at Ford Island, Territory of Hawaii, and proceeded to MCAS Ewa on Oahu. Over the next several days squadron personnel were busy unloading the ship and readying the unit for further training.

The war diary for the month of August 1944 included the word "Routine" to denote squadron flying activities. "Routine" in this context is specified in a war diary footnote as:

The carrying out of the month's flight syllabus which included the following types of training: dummy gunnery runs, division tactics, squadron tactics, radio navigation, [visual] navigation, gunnery firing, night division attacks, dive bomb-

ing (dummy and live runs), instrument flights, link trainer hops, fighter direction problems, escort and interception problems.⁴

In addition to these activities, daily aircraft recognition classes became mandatory for all pilots and lectures were given on a host of technical topics and a number of geographical regions including the Palaus, the Philippines, the Sulu Archipelago, Halmahera, the Bonins, Nansei Shoto, Nanpo Shoto, and Formosa.

On 8 August the squadron lost another of its pilots, Second Lieutenant Glen B. Smith, in an aircraft crash at sea on a routine training flight.

Early in the following month, VMF-323 was readied for its next move. On 6 September, 24 of the squadron's F4U-1D aircraft were ferried from the Ewa Marine Corps Air Station back to Ford Island. The following day, 7 September 1944, 30 pilots, 3 ground officers, 90 enlisted men, 24 aircraft, and limited cargo embarked on board the USS *Breton* (CVE-23). The orders authorizing this movement also specified the reassignment of the squadron to the 2d MAW. The remainder of the squadron was left behind at MCAS, Ewa, temporarily assigned to the 3d MAW.

At 1300 on 8 September, the USS *Breton* left Ford Island for the voyage to Emirau Island in the Bismarck Archipelago. After 10 days at sea the *Breton* arrived at its destination, and began catapulting the squadron's aircraft off to Emirau. During the fly-off, an aircraft piloted by Lieutenant Gerald E. Baker crashed at sea. No cause was ever determined for this fatal accident.

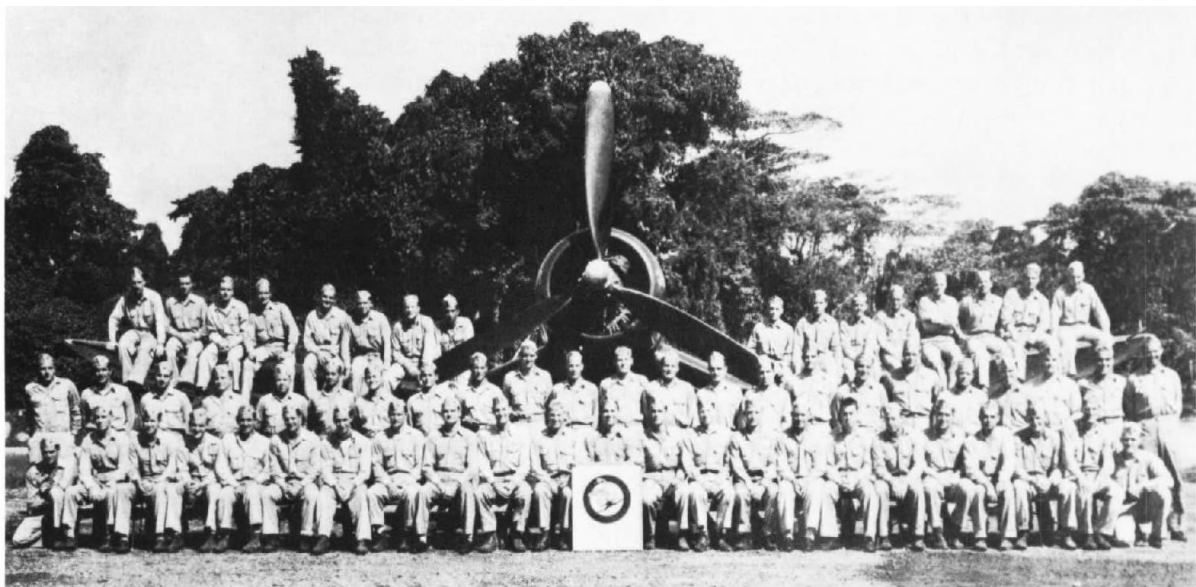
Upon arrival at Emirau the squadron reported to the Commanding General, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing for duty. The remainder of the month featured local flight activity within a 50-mile radius of the field. Dummy gunnery, practice dive bombing, and squadron tactics were emphasized.

At the end of September VMF-323 was still in two elements: one at Emirau Island, the "forward echelon" consisting of 32 officers and 90 enlisted men; and the "rear echelon" at Ewa with 20 officers and 167 enlisted men. It was not until 24 October 1944 that any change in the status of VMF-323 occurred. On that date, a dispatch from Commander Task Group 59.6 ordered the forward echelon of the squadron to proceed south to Espiritu Santo, a rear area supply base in the New Hebrides. Additionally, on the same day a dispatch from the Commanding General, Aircraft, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac), placed VMF-323 under his administrative control.

The first movement of squadron personnel took place on 25 October when one pilot and 25 enlisted men left Emirau on board the aircraft of Marine Transport Squadron 952 (VMR-952) for Luganville Field on Espiritu Santo. This was followed on 28 October with the flight of 24 F4U-1D aircraft escorted by two more transports. The flight headed toward Guadalcanal, on the first leg of the movement to Espiritu Santo. Sixteen of the planes arrived at Luganville Field on 29 October, two arrived the next day, and the remaining six landed on 31 October. The remainder of the forward echelon moved from Emirau Island to Lugan-

Officers of VMF-323 pose with a Corsair and the squadron emblem at Luganville.

Photo courtesy of Col Clarence H. Moore, USMC (Ret)



ville Field in VMR-952 aircraft over the period 29-31 October 1944.

The first few days of November found the forward echelon of VMF-323 busily engaged in setting up squadron offices and readying the aircraft for flight operations. Over the period of 9-28 November, flight activity consisted mainly of familiarization flights, dummy gunnery, dive bombing practice, and squadron tactics.

The two echelons of VMF-323 were united again on 29 November 1944, when personnel and materiel from Ewa arrived aboard the SS *Sea Pike* and the SS *Nava-jo Victory*. On that date the squadron was also placed under administrative control of MAG-33.

In December VMF-323 entered a new phase of its training. Under supervision of ordnance experts from MAG-33, installation of airborne rocket launchers had begun on the squadron's Corsairs, and an initial group of 13 pilots began a training program to learn how to deliver a rocket attack. Training consisted of two days of ground school and four flights of dummy rocket runs. Topics stressed in the classes included tactics, estimation of glide angle, range, proper lead, effectiveness of rockets, safety, and characteristics of different types of rockets. On 14 December, a second group of 13 pilots began a similar training sequence, and on 21 December a third 13-man increment started the course. There was also a three-day course for 12 enlisted Marines of the squadron's ordnance section. Their course stressed proper rocket loading, maintenance, safety measures, types of rocket heads, methods of arming rockets, and rocket installation.

The practice flights by the pilots of VMF-323 introduced them to the intricacies of airborne rocket delivery. Different flight attitudes were dictated by each of the three dive angles used in the rocket runs. On a 20-degree dive the pilot would approach the area at an altitude of 3,000 feet, positioning his aircraft so that the target would appear just over the port wing. He would then make a 90-degree turn toward the target and nose the aircraft over into a 20-degree dive. The procedure was essentially the same for the other two dive angles of 40 degrees and 60 degrees. In a 40-degree dive the approach altitude was 6,000 feet and the 60-degree dive commenced at 9,000 feet.

The MAG-33 ordnance personnel installed a sighting mechanism called a "harp" in a tower near the rocket range to assist pilots in judging dive angles and ranges. In addition to the practice with rocket delivery, training continued in dive bombing, low level bombing, and fixed gunnery firing.

Preparations for combat assignment continued into

January 1945. By the middle of the month all of the 24 F4U-1D aircraft were equipped with the new Zero Length Rocket Launchers, and rocket firing was included in the schedule of flight activity on a daily basis. Three types of rockets were used. Two were Sub Caliber Aircraft Rockets (SCAR) which were 2.25 inches in diameter. The other was an Aerial Rocket (AR) 3.25 inches in diameter.

Colonel Moore recalled another incident as the squadron readied for combat:

Among the preparations for our move to Okinawa, the squadron maintenance personnel scrounged some wax, and they waxed our planes until they had a mirror-like finish. This was to enhance the high-speed capabilities of the aircraft.⁵

Flight training for the Death Rattlers included two close air support missions with elements of the U.S. Army's 27th Infantry Division. This provided invaluable experience, and steps were taken to schedule more joint exercises.

During the month of January, Second Lieutenant Thomas G. Blackwell, Jr., devised a mechanism that would prevent the tail hook of the F4U-1D from descending to the "down" position if hydraulic pressure was lost. The mechanism was installed on all squadron aircraft.

The lecture schedule for pilots reflected a serious-minded approach to the upcoming role the squadron would play. The topics included escape and evasion, Japanese methods of prisoner of war interrogation, Japanese antiaircraft weapons, close air support doctrine, aircraft and ship recognition, and codes and communication. In addition, the rifle range was used to reacquaint all VMF-323 personnel, officer and enlisted, in the use of individual weapons. The squadron ground defense unit began practice firing .50-caliber antiaircraft machine guns at a sleeve towed across the practice range by a squadron Corsair.

The high pace of training continued into February. On 2 February the squadron received eight additional F4U-1D aircraft from MAG-33, and four days later the squadron joined 13 additional pilots, newly arrived from the United States.

The months of preparation for the Death Rattlers would soon be put to the test under combat conditions. On 23 February MAG-33 Secret Order 0304-45 authorized the movement of the squadron from Luganville Field, Espiritu Santo, to Okinawa Shima, Okinawa Gunto, Ryuku Islands.

The movement was made in three echelons. The main ground echelon consisting of 20 pilots, 8 ground officers, 1 Navy officer, 150 enlisted Marines, and 8

Navy enlisted corpsmen boarded LST-774 with associated cargo on 1 March 1945. Departing the next day, they stopped at Florida Island in the Solomon chain and Ulithi before finally arriving off Okinawa on 2 April 1945, D-Day plus one.

The flight echelon of VMF-323 consisted of 32 pilots and 32 F4U-1D aircraft. On 4 March the pilots and aircraft took to the air for the first leg of their journey to Okinawa. The route took them from Luganville Field to Pityilu, Manus Island, via Guadalcanal and Green Island. After landing at Pityilu on 8 March 1945 the flight echelon was delayed for nearly three weeks, awaiting further surface transportation. During this period the pilots flew local flights, attended recognition classes, and worked on the aircraft. Finally, on 26 March, the flight echelon boarded the USS *White Plains* (CVE-66) for the journey from Seeadler Harbor, Manus Island to the combat zone. On 30 March 1945 the ship anchored off Ulithi Island, one of the staging points for the Okinawa campaign.

The ground support echelon, on board LST-774, began disembarking soon after arrival in Okinawa waters. Many Japanese suicide attacks were directed against the ship during the five days of unloading, but the ship was not hit and the men and equipment proceeded on land to their new base, Kadena Airfield (Ruby Base at the time). The flight echelon flew off the *White Plains* and arrived at Kadena on 9 April. A little over a year and nine months after its commissioning, VMF-323 was actively involved in the war.

Combat in the Okinawa Campaign

The Death Rattlers were part of a huge force—the largest of the Pacific campaign—marshalled for the landing known as Operation Iceberg. This operation stemmed from a decision reached by the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 3 October 1944, which directed Admiral Chester W. Nimitz to seize one or more positions in the Ryuku Islands.⁶

As Robert Sherrod reported in his *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II*:

The Ryuku Islands stretch almost 800 miles from southern Japan to Formosa. The largest of these islands, Okinawa, lies about 325 miles south of Kyushu, the southernmost big island of Japan. It was against this island, 60 miles long and from 2 to 18 miles wide, that Admiral Nimitz planned his main assault, which turned out to be his biggest and costliest single operation of World War II.⁷

VMF-323 would play an important role in the effort to wrest this defensive strongpoint from the Japanese.

Operations for VMF-323 from Kadena Airfield were

difficult at best. The shortness of the runway, only 2,600 feet of which was usable because of construction, made take-offs and landings a harrowing chore. The take-off phase was especially hazardous because of the weight of the ordnance carried on the Corsairs. A typical load included eight rockets, two 500-pound bombs or two tanks of napalm, and a full ammunition allotment for the wing-mounted guns.

On the first day of flight operations against the enemy, 10 April, flying conditions were very poor. The dawn combat air patrol (CAP) launched at 0515 hours, but one of the pilots, First Lieutenant James L. Brown, failed to join the flight after take-off and was listed as missing in action.* On 11 April, at 0400, Kadena airfield came under enemy air attack. Several bombs were dropped on the airfield complex, but no casualties were incurred. One bomb hit the runway just as First Lieutenant Vernon E. Ball was getting ready to take off. Lieutenant Ball taxied around the crater and got airborne in order to assist with air defense. Once in the air he saw no further enemy aircraft. Lieutenant Ball noted in his log book that the Japanese plane which had dropped that particular bomb was shot down almost immediately by Lieutenant Al Wells. Lieutenant Wells' aerial victory marked the Death Rattlers' first kill of the war.

On 12 April, the aircraft action report for the 14-plane CAP which took off at 1300 provides a good summary of the afternoon's events. During the flight, enemy aircraft were reported approaching Kadena Airfield from the north. The Death Rattlers then split their 14-plane formation into three elements. Six planes were directed northwest from Ie Shima. This element was led by Major Arthur L. Turner with Second Lieutenant Obie W. Stover, Jr., as his wingman. First Lieutenant Dellwyn L. Davis led the second section, with Second Lieutenant Robert J. Woods on his wing. The third section was led by First Lieutenant Charles E. Spangler with Second Lieutenant Dewey F. Durnford, Jr., as wingman.

Flying at 15,000 feet, 71 miles northwest of Ie Shima, the flight spotted a multi-engine Japanese bomber approximately eight miles distant and 4,000 feet below. The action that followed is graphically described in the squadron's official account:

Spangler and Durnford peeled off, followed by Davis and Woods. Spangler closed from five o'clock and opened fire at 800 feet. First he knocked out the tail gunner and the top of the rudder, and then flamed the port engine.

Durnford was closing from seven o'clock, whereupon the Betty turned toward him, apparently trying to give the side

*Lieutenant Brown was later listed as killed in action.

blister gunner a shot. Durnford opened fire at 200 feet, directing his fire at the cockpit.*

Davis flamed the starboard engine from 100 feet and the Betty spiraled down in flames, exploding when it hit the water.⁸

After that encounter, Major Turner's flight was uneventful.

Meanwhile, a second six-plane element was directed north to Motobu Peninsula. Captain Felix S. Cecot was flight leader with Second Lieutenant Leon A. Reynolds, Jr., on his wing. Captain Joe McPhail led the second section with Second Lieutenant Warren W. Bestwick on his wing. The third section was led by Second Lieutenant Glenn O. Thacker with wingman Second Lieutenant Everett L. Yager. Enemy planes were reported at 18,000 feet. The flight climbed to 23,000 feet to gain the overhead advantage. Captain McPhail described the action that ensued in these words:

I spotted some F4Us chasing Zeke's, and I called out their position and rolled over. Bestwick was on my wing.

On the way down, four Zeke's appeared right under us at 19,000 feet, flying almost abreast in two-plane sections. I started firing at the rear plane on the right, at about 400 yards, above and behind.

My first burst was off, and the Zeke saw the tracers. He made a couple of small turns, and then I started getting hits. Pieces started coming off around the cockpit, and then he blew up. The other three scattered. I then pushed over and came home alone, being unable to find my wingman.⁹

Second Lieutenant Bestwick, Captain McPhail's wingman, related the following:

Captain McPhail shot at the rear plane on the right. His Zeke crossed under the rest of their formation and exploded in flames. I picked the second plane of the first section and fired a long burst and saw it explode. . . .

By that time, the first plane of the second section had broken off to the right and down, so I continued my run and fired a 20-degree deflection shot from behind. This plane also exploded.

While looking for Captain McPhail, I saw my first Zeke spiraling down smoking, but I didn't see my second Zeke after firing on him.¹⁰

Second Lieutenant Thacker had followed Bestwick on the original pass going after the fourth Zeke in the formation. He made an attack run on the Zeke, and his guns knocked pieces from the fuselage, causing it to smoke. The Zeke, however, rolled, pulled up tightly and escaped. Thacker claimed a probable kill as a result of this action.

At the same time the preceding action was underway, Captain Cecot dove his Corsair from 23,000 feet

to 5,000 feet to fire at a Jack. The Jack rolled, and Cecot fired at its belly and saw it smoking. He was unable to observe any further damage to the Japanese plane. He too claimed a probable kill.

Finally, the remaining section, composed of Second Lieutenants John W. Ruhsam and Robert Wade, were returning to Kadena Airfield because Wade's landing gear could not be retracted. Just south of Motobu Peninsula, a Zeke dove out of the sun and made a pass at Wade's plane. Wade lowered his flaps and made a tight turn. The Zeke shot past, rolled, and dove for the ground.

Wade followed him down and was almost in firing position when Ruhsam opened fire with a 30-degree deflection shot, and the Zeke burst into flames and crashed.

During this flight, all of the pilots involved had encountered Japanese planes for the first time. Many more encounters were coming.

On 15 April, First Lieutenant Frederick F. Zehring was lost when he crashed into the side of a mountain while pursuing the attack on a Tony, destroyed just before the crash. This same day, three Death Rattler pilots claimed destruction of a Val during a late afternoon CAP.

In another encounter on 15 April, First Lieutenants John Strickland, Jr., and Charles S. Allen each claimed half-credit for destroying a Zeke over the northern tip of Okinawa Shima. The dusk CAP, taking off at 1730 from Kadena the same day, also found its share of action. The flight was led by Captain McPhail with Second Lieutenant Bestwick on his wing. The second section was led by Second Lieutenant Ruhsam with Second Lieutenant Wade as wingman. Four Tonys were initially spotted 1,000 feet below, but the action got underway when Bestwick pulled up into a flight of three Tojos 1,000 feet above and poured 1,200 rounds into the lead plane in a head-on run. The encounter is described in detail in Aircraft Action Report Number 8:

His tracers were going into the Tojo, and he was forced to nose over violently to avoid a mid-air collision. Bestwick did not see the Tojo crash, but Wade saw a plane hit the water and believes it was the same Tojo.

Meanwhile, Ruhsam hit the tail-end Tony with a long burst from six o'clock at 300 yards. The Tony puffed smoke, exploded, and burned when it hit the ground.

Wade dove away after another fleeing Tony, and exploded him on the third burst from 400 yards. The Tony trailed smoke and burned when it hit land.

Wade could see no more planes so he headed north

*Japanese aircraft were identified by Americans using code names. See appendix D for a glossary of aircraft and code names.

at 5,000 feet trying to find his flight. He spotted a Tony five miles ahead, dropped his centerline tank, and fire-walled (accelerated) the Corsair. Ten minutes later he exploded the Tony with a short burst from 1,000 feet. The Tony dove into the water and burned.¹¹

There was action that day even during the landing at Kadena. The flight made it back after dark, low on gasoline, during a bombing and strafing attack. The Americans were responding with antiaircraft fire.

A variety of close air support and bombing flights took place over the next few days. The seventh and last flight of the day on 22 April, however, was to be a record-breaker for VMF-323. The previous six flights had returned to base with negative results. The seventh, an eight-plane formation led by Major George C. Axtell, Jr., squadron commanding officer, took off from Kadena at 1500 and did not return until 1915. During this flight, the Death Rattlers were credited with downing a record 24 and three-fourths Japanese planes. The action was fast and furious:

Major Jefferson D. Dorroh, Jr., executive officer of VMF-323, burned five planes and exploded a sixth, all within 20 minutes. Major George C. Axtell, Jr., the squadron's skipper, shot down five planes within 15 minutes. Twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant Jeremiah J. O'Keefe also shot down five planes, one of which tried to ram him after it caught fire.¹²

Major Dorroh's six kills were the highest individual score for a Marine pilot in one engagement since 7 April 1943, when Captain James E. Swett of VMF-221 made seven kills over Bougainville. In addition to the 24 and three-fourths confirmed destroyed enemy aircraft, the Death Rattlers reported three probable kills and another six planes with noticeable damage. The flight of Corsairs had caught a pack of Japanese *kamikazes* heading toward friendly shipping in the Okinawa area.*

The action took place 50 miles north of Aguni Shima. The description of this historic engagement in the aircraft action report covers a full four pages and relates each encounter. In less than a half-hour, three of the Death Rattler pilots became aces. The first three hours of the history-making CAP had been uneventful. With slightly over an hour remaining on the mission, Major Axtell's four-plane division received instructions to climb to 25,000 feet to intercept a high-flying Japanese aircraft, but before attaining their assigned altitude, the flight was told to dive after some

newly detected low-flying Japanese planes. At approximately 5,000 feet, the enemy formation of dive bombers was finally spotted just ahead of and on a collision course with Major Axtell's flight. The Marines immediately pressed their attack on the Japanese bombers.

The enemy formation split up and began taking violent evasive action. Some headed for cloud cover at 2,000 feet. In the action that ensued, Major Axtell destroyed five Vals and damaged three. First Lieutenant Edward L. Abner, his wingman, destroyed two Vals and damaged another, all in a single stern run. Lieutenant Abner's Corsair was damaged in a wing tip and in both wing root areas, and several holes were in the fuselage, but he managed to damage the tail of another Val before returning to base.

First Lieutenant O'Keefe, leader of Major Axtell's second section, destroyed five Vals. The account of his exploits follows:

He flamed four of his from six o'clock, and all crashed into the sea. His fifth victim came while scissoring with a Val. Lieutenant O'Keefe made a head-on run, pulled up violently to avoid a collision, and the Val did a wingover and crashed. Lieutenant O'Keefe closed to point-black range on all kills.¹³

His wingman, First Lieutenant William L. Hood, Jr., was given half credit each for kills on two Vals when he teamed with another Corsair in their destruction. In another effort, he received half credit for a third Val killed on a head-on run with another Corsair.

The second flight of the CAP, led by Major Dorroh, hit the enemy formation just a few seconds after Major Axtell's flight. In a matter of minutes, Major Dorroh had downed six Vals. One of his wingmen, Second Lieutenant Normand T. Theriault, received credit for downing two and one-fourth Vals. The other wingman, First Lieutenant Charles S. Allen, received credit for a probable kill of a Val.**

Despite the success of the attack, some concern was expressed by some of the pilots about using up their ammunition too fast. They would have been unable to ward off a determined attack by Japanese fighters if any had appeared later. Five of the pilots released their drop tanks too soon, it was reported, and returned to base low on fuel. Nevertheless, the day clearly belonged to the Death Rattlers, with their record-setting score.

*The word *kamikaze* literally means "divine wind," and it refers to World War II Japanese pilots or aircraft used in suicidal attacks against allied targets, especially shipping.

**The total kill of Japanese planes during that action was 54. Marines shot down 33 and three-fourths, and Navy pilots were credited with the remainder. Pilots of VMF-224 destroyed five enemy planes, while VMF-441 received credit for three kills.¹⁴



Marine Corps Historical Collection

Seven new aces in three weeks of flying over Okinawa is the proud boast of the "Death Rattlers." In the front row from left to right are: 2dLt Robert Wade and 1stLt Jeremiah O'Keefe. Standing in the back row from left to right are: 1stLt William L. Hood; 1stLt Joe V. Dillard; Maj George C. Axtell, Jr.; 2dLt John W. Rusham; and Maj Jefferson D. Dorroh. Each Japanese "meatball" on the mess hall represents, as of 7 May 1945, a kill.

Flights made over the next several days returned without encountering action. On 28 April, however, First Lieutenant Joseph V. Dillard destroyed a torpedo-carrying Kate that was heading toward six radar picket ships. Lieutenant Dillard closed on the Kate from the five o'clock position, and his wingman, Second Lieutenant James J. Bierbower, closed from seven o'clock. The Japanese pilot made a turn in each direction, then straightened, realizing his plane was bracketed. Lieutenant Dillard noted that the Kate had no rear seat gunner as he fired on it from 100 yards. The Kate, hit on Dillard's first burst, went into a diving turn to the left, and crashed.

Throughout the month of April, VMF-323 executed almost daily close air support and CAP missions. The Death Rattlers were credited with 54 and three-fourths enemy aircraft shot down. Action continued through the month of May, during which the squadron shot down 52 and three-fourths Japanese planes. In addition, close air support missions became an important part of their efforts. In one account of Marine

activities in the Pacific, the following commentary on the effectiveness of close air support appeared:

If an infantry commander, no matter what his uniform, wanted a cave sealed up or an artillery piece knocked out, he was grateful to get either a Marine "Corsair". . . or an Army "Thunderbolt" (P-47). Here was merely another case of practical working unity between services.¹⁵

On 5 May, eight Corsairs participated in a close air support mission on a Japanese regimental headquarters and several antiaircraft emplacements. The target area was left in flames. Bomb hits shattered the area, and the antiaircraft emplacements were hit with rockets. The squadron lost Major Arthur L. Turner when he bailed out of his flaming Corsair and was lost near enemy lines. Another casualty, First Lieutenant Edward F. Murray, was killed during a close air support strike on radio towers near Shuri on 13 May 1945, when his Corsair exploded in the air. Three days later, Second Lieutenant Leon A. Reynolds crashed while making a forced landing on Yontan Airfield and sustained fatal injuries.

Another largely successful action against the enemy occurred on 4 May. Incredibly, the Death Rattlers again scored a total of 24 and three-fourths kills, equalling the record-breaking feat of 22 April. Sixteen pilots shared in the impressive tabulation. One section of Corsairs led by Second Lieutenant John W. Ruhsam was especially successful. Lieutenant Ruhsam was credited with four Vals killed and three damaged. His wingman, Second Lieutenant Robert Wade, destroyed two Vals and two Nates, and damaged three more Nates. Wade chased his last victim into the water, and both pilots believed they would have destroyed several more enemy planes if they had been more conservative with their ammunition.

On 11 May 1945, the USS *Hugh W. Hadley* (DD-774), a radar picket ship, was under direct attack from *kamikazes*. Protection overhead was afforded by a two-plane CAP of VMF-323 pilots. The ship's action report described the heroism of the Marine pilots:

One very outstanding feat by one of these two planes . . . was that, though out of ammunition, he twice forced a suicide plane out of his dive on the ship, and the third time forced him into such a poor position that the plane crashed through the rigging but missed the ship, going into the water close aboard. This was done while all guns on the ship were firing at the enemy plane. . . . His wingman also stayed at masthead height in the flak and assisted in driving planes away from the ship.¹⁶

The pilots described in the *Hadley* incident were probably Lieutenants Edward C. Keeley and Lawrence N. Crawley.¹⁷ Earlier in the day, these two had shot down four planes each.

During the month of June 1945, flight activity consisted of CAPs, radar picket ship patrols, close air support strikes, and air strikes against enemy strongpoints in lower Sakishima Gunto. The Death Rattlers had a complete turnover in flight personnel during this month. In addition, it was established—through research conducted by the public relations section of the 2d MAW—that VMF-323 had established a number of records during the Okinawa campaign.

First, a new high for the number of aces in one squadron, 12, exceeded the previous record of 10. Second, when Majors Axtell and Dorroh and Lieutenant O'Keefe became aces on 22 April 1945, it marked the first time that three Marine pilots went from no planes destroyed to five or more in one action. Third, Major Axtell and Lieutenant O'Keefe getting five kills each in the same action equalled a record established on 14 January 1944. Finally, the 24 and three-fourths kills on 22 April 1945 was the highest recorded score for a single Marine squadron in one aerial battle. To dupli-

cate this feat on 4 May 1945 by downing another 24 and three-fourths planes was truly remarkable.

The Death Rattlers' fame extended beyond their recordbreaking kills, according to Colonel Moore. He recalls that First Lieutenant Sol B. Mayer, Jr., set up probably the finest officers' mess in Okinawa. He scrounged table linen, dishes, and silverware from Navy ships as well as steaks and many other fine foods. The mess had a sign on the entrance: "Where the Aces Meet to Eat!" The fame of this mess brought many high-ranking officers there for dinner.

The squadron also took part in the first Marine fighter sweep of the Japanese homeland by land-based planes on 10 June when 24 Corsairs of VMF-323 joined with four similar aircraft of VMF-312 to strike three airfields on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's home islands.

During the flight, led by Major Axtell, one Judy was shot down over Kitiyara Airfield, and several planes were destroyed on the ground. At Kokubu Airfield, five aircraft were destroyed in strafing runs on the parking area. The last stop was Kanoya Airfield, where two bombers were destroyed and three more severely damaged.

Several close air support missions rounded out the squadron's flight activities in the remaining days of June. On 16 June Major Martin E. W. Oelrich assumed command of the squadron. News of the Death Rattlers' accomplishments appeared in tabloids throughout the United States. A Los Angeles newspaper quoted Major Axtell: "It was like a dream. . . . We trained all that time to shoot down planes and then we found so many that we just sprayed them." In reference to the record-breaking 22 April 1945 shoot-out, Major Axtell stated:

We just tore them wide open. Man, you never saw such a rat race. We made pass after pass on them and we were shooting so much lead I was afraid we'd start shooting each other up.¹⁸

Major Axtell was equally enthusiastic in describing the Corsair:

It's the best fighter there is. It's rugged. It's a workhorse. You can use it for anything, including dive bombing, and it's effective. You can shoot anything off or out of that plane and it still goes.¹⁹

In mid-June 1945, however, the war in the Pacific was still not over. Second Lieutenant William O. Baker was killed on 17 June during an attack on enemy shipping at Amami Gunto. It was presumed that he was lost to enemy antiaircraft fire. Another fatality occurred on 10 July when First Lieutenant Walter K.

Paarmenter was also lost to antiaircraft fire, over Wan Airfield on Kikai Shima.

On 15 July VMF-323's base of operations on Okinawa was changed from Kadena Airfield to Awase Airfield. The move caused no curtailment in flight activity, and full operations resumed the next day. Although operations continued at a high tempo, the VMF-323 CAP missions produced no results because no more aerial contacts were made. This was true even though the squadron's aircraft ranged as far west as the China coast, while providing cover for American shipping.

August brought the end of World War II. VMF-323 could look with pride at its accomplishments. The squadron's total of 124½ Japanese planes shot down over the course of the operation was clearly the highest scored by any squadron in the Okinawa campaign, and in recognition it was awarded both a Presidential Unit Citation and a Navy Unit Commendation.

In the following months, the squadron established a regular schedule of training flights, CAPs, and observation runs. Operations were interrupted by a hurricane which struck on 8 October 1945. Though excessive damage to aircraft was prevented by securely tying them in place, some of the billeting tents for the officers and men were damaged.

During January 1946, the squadron provided training for Marine pilots of multi-engine aircraft in fighters. The syllabus consisted of formation flying, instrument flying, and dummy gunnery.

Flight operations for the month were highlighted by a ground control intercept problem, worked in conjunction with the U.S. Army. The problem involved defending the island against a simulated eight-plane B-29 attack. VMF-323 furnished 12 planes for the defense, organizing them into three CAPs of four planes each. The planes were located to protect the western approaches to the island. The directions received from the ground control unit were accurate, and the B-29s were intercepted and attacked twice by one of the four-plane flights. At that point, all 24 of the escorting P-47s attacked one four-plane flight, leaving the B-29s open to unimpeded attacks by a second four-plane element.

The latter part of January was devoted mainly to packing and crating essential squadron equipment in preparation for the move to the United States.

Post-World War II: 1946-1950

VMF-323 sailed for the United States in February 1946 aboard the USS *Cape Gloucester* (CVE-109). The

returning squadron numbered 21 officers, 110 enlisted Marines, and 3 Navy enlisted men. The unit arrived at San Diego harbor on 28 February 1946 and debarkation at NAS North Island began the next day.

By 6 March 1946, 19 officers and 94 enlisted men had been transferred from VMF-323 to Personnel Group, Marine Corps Air Depot, Miramar, San Diego, California, but these losses were made up for within the month when the Death Rattlers absorbed all available personnel from three recently decommissioned squadrons.

In a few days the squadron departed for MCAS El Toro, Santa Ana, California, where it was assigned to the operational control of MAG-33. Under the command of Major Stanley R. Bailey, VMF-323 began training pilots for duty on board aircraft carriers with a specific emphasis on close air support operations. Flights regularly scheduled for the daily operational routine included: field carrier landing practice (FCLP), division tactics, cross-country flying, dummy gunnery, and aerial photographic missions. Due to a severe shortage of aircraft mechanics, all pilots were required to help the maintenance department when they were not flying. This practice was followed for several months with the double benefit of more planes being kept in a flying status and greater familiarization of pilots with their aircraft.

In late May 1946 VMF-323 devoted its efforts toward preparing for an air show in Los Angeles, and the following month the squadron took part in another air show at Torrance, California.

In October 1946 the squadron resumed a program to qualify pilots for landing on board an aircraft carrier. In all, 11 VMF-323 pilots successfully qualified by making the necessary number of landings on the USS *Rendova* (CVE-114), underway off the California coast.

The squadron's emphasis on carrier operations continued through 1947. In keeping with MAG-33 policy, each Death Rattler pilot also strove to attain 30 hours of flight time each month, including four hours of night flying and two hours of instrument flying. A number of officers were also sent to the naval gunfire school in San Diego for a two-week course in naval gunfire spotting procedures.

On 28 October 1947, VMF-323, as part of MAG-33 and the 1st MAW, was directed to participate in amphibious training exercises conducted by Commander, Amphibious Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet. The exercise took place in the vicinity of San Clemente Island and Aliso Canyon, from 20 October to 13 November. The exercise involved VMF-323 in a number of multiplane

flights which included bombing, strafing, and close air support missions.

In December the squadron added a new element to the training syllabus. On 8 December the Death Rattlers operated from tents erected northwest of the squadron area. The aim of the move, called Operation Tent, was to give MAG-33 squadrons an opportunity to work under expeditionary field conditions. The operation ran successfully until 16 December.

Maneuvers in the field near the airstrip at Camp Pendleton, California, occupied the Death Rattlers in February and March 1948. A surface echelon of five officers and 49 enlisted men with squadron gear proceeded by ship for Camp Pendleton on 13 February. The flight echelon consisting of 24 Corsairs followed on 17 February.

Flight operations in the attack on mythical "Pendleton Island" included close air support, bombing, and strafing. At the end of four days' operations the "island" objective was declared to be secured.

Early in June 1948 the squadron claimed another record when First Lieutenant Dale M. Molsberry, the fourth pilot in a flight of eight Corsairs, shot down a radio-controlled drone less than 10 minutes after launch. He used only 40 rounds of ammunition in the effort.²⁰

On 28 October 1948, 24 of the squadron's Corsairs

flew on board the USS *Rendova* for fleet exercises in waters near Seattle, Washington. The Death Rattlers were employed to intercept enemy air strikes and to serve as a picket unit warning of approaching enemy forces.

A joint Marine Corps and Navy exercise in Alaskan waters engaged the squadron early in 1949. The exercise, named Micowex-49A, began for VMF-323 when 22 officers and 121 enlisted men embarked on 1 February on board the USS *Bairoko* (CVE 115) for the 10-day journey to Kodiak Island, a defensive base established during World War II. Aircraft assets of the squadron included 16 F4U-4Bs and two F4U-4Ps. While the operation demonstrated that the Corsair aircraft suffered no significant reduction in flying efficiency from cold weather, it also reconfirmed the danger to personnel caused by the chill factor, i.e., the combination of wind and low temperature.²¹

In July 1949 the squadron received a unique assignment when it was authorized by the Navy Department to participate in the filming of the movie, *Sands of Iwo Jima*.

In the fall of 1949, VMF-323 was involved in Exercise Miki which ran from 6 October to 14 November. The squadron was one of four operating under the control of MAG-12 on board the USS *Boxer* (CV-21). The *Boxer* was part of a covering force for seaborne

VMF-323 Corsairs participated in a California Air Show in Torrance during June 1946.

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

The USS Badoeng Strait (CVE-116) was the carrier home from which the "Death Rattlers" of VMF-323 launched their initial combat operations in Korea in August 1950.

troop movements. The Death Rattlers' mission was to assist in covering the movement, to prevent submarine and air attacks, and to support the eventual amphibious landing on the beaches of Oahu, in the Hawaiian Islands. Over 50,000 officers and men and 500 exercise umpires were engaged in these Hawaiian war games.

The training and exercise experiences of the years which followed World War II added to the squadron's corporate experience, and proved valuable when the Death Rattlers again found themselves involved in combat, in 1950.

Action in Korea: 1950-1953

Early in July 1950, VMF-323 received movement orders to the Western Pacific, as a consequence of the North Korean invasion of South Korea. On 7 July Major Arnold A. Lund assumed duties as commanding officer of the squadron, relieving Major Robert E. Johnson, who was then assigned as squadron executive officer. The officers and enlisted men of VMF-323 worked hard to prepare for embarkation.

On 16 July four officers and 104 enlisted Marines boarded the *General A. E. Anderson* (AP-111) at Long Beach, California. Three days later, 26 officers and 49 enlisted men boarded the USS *Badoeng Strait* (CVE-116) at San Diego, California. Both ships departed the United States on 14 July for the voyage to Japan.

The *Anderson* and the *Badoeng Strait* arrived at Kobe, Japan, on 31 July. Because harbor equipment at Kobe was unsuitable for unloading aircraft, the *Ba-*

doeng Strait stood out to sea on 1 August for the catapult launching of the Marine Corsairs, which then flew into Itami Air Force Base near Osaka, Japan. After a quick check by pilots and ground crew the aircraft flew on to Kobe.

Within a day of their arrival at Kobe, squadron members were informed that their base of operations would be the *Badoeng Strait*.²² On 2 August VMF-323 personnel on board the *Anderson* were transferred to the *Badoeng Strait*, but the administration section of the squadron was temporarily stationed at the Itami Air Force Base. FCLP training was conducted at Itami from 2-4 August in preparation for the coming carrier-based offensive against the North Koreans. On 5 August Major Lund led his Death Rattlers back to the *Badoeng Strait*, which had departed Kobe harbor two days earlier.²³

Fixed-wing combat operations of the 1st MAW in Korea had begun on 3 August when Corsairs of VMF-214, operating from the USS *Sicily* (CVE-118) in the Tsushima Strait, began a rocket and bomb attack on Chinju.²⁴ The Death Rattlers joined the fray on 6 August, flying close air support missions and CAPs from the *Badoeng Strait*, which was on station in the Strait of Korea.

Operations on 6 August began at 0645 when two divisions of Corsairs made their first strike in the area west of Chinju along the Nam River.²⁵ Rockets and 500-pound general purpose bombs (GPs) were used against large buildings and railroad lines. An uniden-

tified vehicle camouflaged with straw was strafed and put out of commission. Enemy troops were sighted, but they quickly dispersed when the Corsairs flew low over their positions.

A second two-division flight took off at 0935 to attack the area. Two bridges were hit with 500-pound GPs, and several strikes with 5-inch high velocity aerial rockets (HVARs) were made on a railroad roundhouse near Chinju. Several other buildings were hit, and strafing runs were made on what appeared to be camouflaged supply stores near Sachon.

The third and final strike launched from the *Badoeng Strait* at 1235 to attack targets in the town of Singom-ni. Two trucks were destroyed with strafing runs at Woryangchon, and various targets in the towns of Murim-ni and Namkae were strafed and hit with rockets. A two-plane CAP over the ship was maintained at 8,000 feet throughout the day.

On 11 August, VMF-323 Corsairs and F-51 aircraft of the U.S. Air Force combined in what became known as the "Kosong Turkey Shoot." An estimated 100 vehicles of the 83d *Motorcycle Regiment* of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA), including jeeps, motorcycles, and troop-carrying trucks, were spotted and attacked. The Corsairs approached the target in low-level strafing runs along the length of the motorized column. The scene on the ground was chaotic; vehicles were seen crashing into one another and piling up in the ditches while troops scrambled for

cover.²⁶ Although the enemy retaliated with small-arms and automatic-weapons fire against the attacking aircraft, virtually all the vehicles were destroyed or damaged.

The excitement of this effort was dampened considerably, however, with the loss on the same day of Captain Vivian M. Moses, whose plane was shot down by small-arms fire. Captain Moses became the first combat fatality of the Korean War for the Death Rattlers. Ironically, Captain Moses had been shot down the day before, picked up by a Marine helicopter, and returned to the *Badoeng Strait* only that morning.

On 13 August the *Badoeng Strait* pulled into the harbor at Sasebo, Japan, for replenishment. There was no time available for liberty, however. The ship headed back to the operation area on the afternoon of 14 August 1950.

Throughout the following week, the squadron flew missions against military targets along the Nakdong River perimeter. During 17-19 August the Death Rattlers, along with pilots from VMF-214, flew a total of 135 sorties, 129 of which were directed by Marine tactical air control parties. The remaining six were flown in support of the U.S. Army's 24th Division.²⁷

After a two-day deployment in the Yellow Sea off the southwest tip of Korea, the *Badoeng Strait* returned to its original operating area in the Korea Strait. Strikes against the enemy continued through 28 August. Upon completing combat operations on

Maj Arnold A. Lund is strapped into a Corsair by SSgt Chuck Demko on the hangar deck of the USS Badoeng Strait, offshore of Korea, prior to a combat mission.

Photo courtesy of LtCol Leo J. Ihli, USMC (Ret)



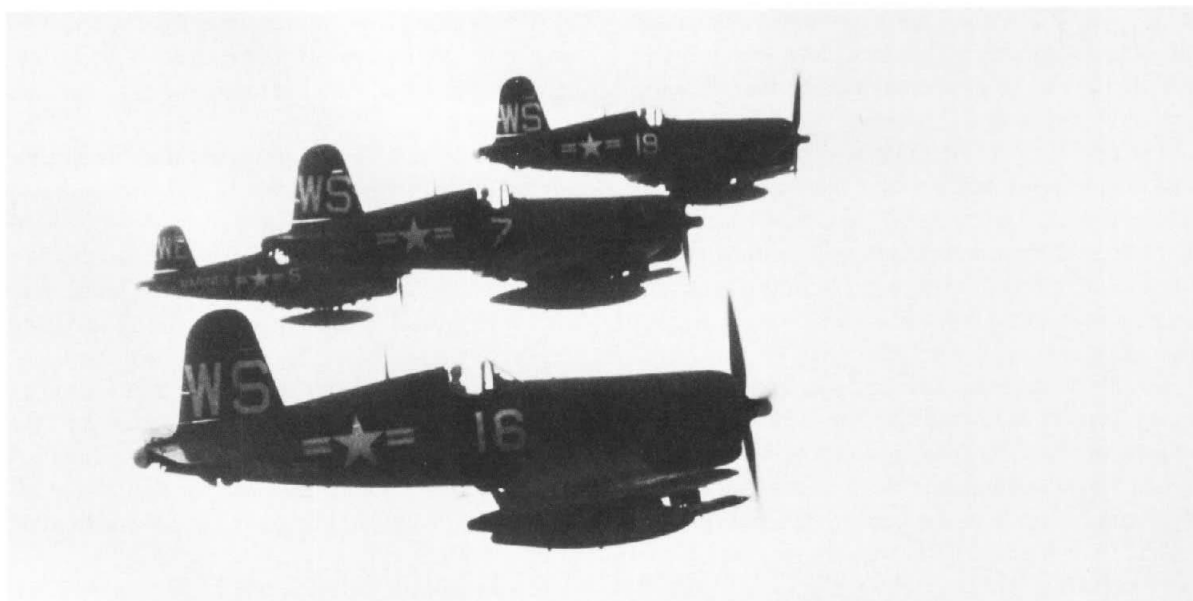


Photo courtesy of LtCol Leo J. Ihli, USMC (Ret)

A Corsair division, launched from the USS Badoeng Strait, on a close air support mission.

that date, 22 aircraft flew to Itami Air Force Base. While approaching the field for landing, First Lieutenant Robert F. Scott was killed when his plane crashed into Osaka Bay.

The *Badoeng Strait*, meanwhile, headed for Sasebo, docking on 29 August. Most of the squadron officers and enlisted men were immediately given liberty, but a concentrated enemy drive against the Nakdong River perimeter brought a quick cancellation. On 2 September all planes and personnel of VMF-323 were moved to Ashiya Air Force Base on northern Kyushu. By that afternoon, nine sorties were flown from Ashiya against the enemy forces. Two days later, all squadron personnel except for 23 pilots departed Ashiya by train for Sasebo, where they again boarded the *Badoeng Strait*. The carrier put to sea on 5 September and 23 squadron Corsairs flew on board at noon.

In a month of operations during the defense of the Pusan area, Marine aviation support was highly regarded. Brigadier General Edward A. Craig, Commanding General of the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade (Reinforced), said of the Marine squadrons: "Close air support furnished by Marine airmen was a marvel to everybody concerned, including the Marines. We had never seen anything like it even in our practice. . . ."²⁸

On the morning of 6 September 1950, the *Badoeng Strait* was stationed approximately 70 miles west of Inchon. Flight operations began in earnest. Bridges, boxcars, tunnels, airfields, vehicles, artillery installations, and supply depots were among the targets struck by the Corsairs that day. The next day's targets were

similar, but napalm runs were added to the arsenal of air delivery operations to burn trees that were screening enemy artillery pieces.

On 10 September the *Badoeng Strait* put into Sasebo for a brief period to replenish its stores. The ship departed two days later. The next day while maintaining a routine CAP over the ship as it proceeded to the operating area off Inchon, the squadron learned that United Nations forces were scheduled to make an amphibious landing near Inchon on 15 September.

On D-Day minus 1, the proposed landing areas, suspected troop concentrations, and installations on Wolmi-do Island were bombarded by continuous naval gunfire.

On D-Day, 15 September, planes of VMF-323 was airborne at dawn. They attacked in the Inchon area, integrating their strikes with naval gunfire for three hours prior to the landing.²⁹ At 0950, a flight of Death Rattlers was given the first close air support mission of the Inchon operation. They made two runs on an enemy position near a lighthouse on Sowolmi-do, a dot of land connected to Wolmi-do by a causeway. A contingent of North Korean troops had been holding up the advance at that point. After the air attack, with four 500-pound GPs and napalm, the advance resumed, unimpeded.³⁰

The support given by VMF-323 continued all through the day, starting with the first wave of landing craft and continuing until the X Corps, spearheaded by Major General Oliver P. Smith's 1st Marine Division, had secured the beachhead and begun the move inland. During the first day, the squadron to-

taled 137.2 hours of combat flight. Within two days of the landing, Kimpo Airfield was captured, but it would take an additional 10 days to liberate Seoul.

On 21 September the squadron was reassigned to MAG-12. VMF-323 continued to support the advance of the 1st Marine Division and other United Nations forces. The squadron pointed with pride to the 2,507.9 hours of flight time logged during 2-22 September. Of this total, 974.9 hours were flown from 15 September to 22 September 1950 in support of the Inchon operation, and during the critical period the squadron suffered neither fatalities nor serious accidents.

During the first two days of October the squadron conducted extensive flight operations, providing close air support in the Seoul area. On 2 October a four-plane close air support mission attacked an enemy position on Hill 228, just 200 yards ahead of friendly lines. Guided by forward air controllers, the Death Rattlers used 500-hundred pound GPs, rockets, and 20mm cannon against the position, until the controller radioed, "You have neutralized the ridge and our troops are moving in."³¹

The *Badoeng Strait* set out for Sasebo on 3 October, arriving the next day. The ship remained there until 16 October taking on provisions, rearming, and undergoing repairs. The Marines of VMF-323 were finally free to rest and enjoy recreational pursuits in the Itami area after their strenuous period of combat.

While the *Badoeng Strait* was in Sasebo, VMF-323 was administratively transferred from MAG-12 back to MAG-33. This occurred on 14 October. Two days later, the *Badoeng Strait* proceeded out of Sasebo with the Death Rattlers on board to a new operating area near Wonsan off the east coast of Korea. The administrative section, which had been stationed at Itami, rejoined the squadron on board the ship.

During the next three days, CAPs were flown from the ship as it proceeded toward its area of operations. Included in these flights was a four-plane CAP led by Major Lund to cover minesweeping operations and shipping in Wonsan Harbor. On 20 October flying was suspended because of inclement weather. The following day, the flight schedule was resumed, and CAPs were continued daily through 27 October. The Death Rattlers flew in support of the 1st Marine Division

An F4U-4B of VMF-323 taxis to catapult off the USS Badoeng Strait. Ordnance load is 5-inch rockets, one napalm bomb, and a full load of 20mm ammunition. Note the replacement starboard wing, not yet painted to match the squadron's tail letters.

Photo courtesy of LtCol Leo J. Ihli, USMC (Ret)



landing at Wonsan, on 26 October. The Division had sailed into the Wonsan area after the close of the Inchon-Seoul operation. First Lieutenant John L. Greene made the 11,000th recorded landing aboard the *Badoeng Strait* on 2 November.

All flight operations were suspended on 13 November, when the ship encountered a storm that left three inches of snow on the flight decks. All hands had to pitch in to clear the deck and the catapult apparatus of ice and snow. The next day, 14 flights were launched.

Flight operations during the first half of November consisted mainly of close air support missions in the northeast and north central areas of Korea, in support of the advancing Republic of Korea (ROK) Capital Division and the U.S. Army's 7th Infantry Division. In addition, the Death Rattlers flew armed reconnaissance missions along the main transportation routes in northeast Korea.

On 16 November, two Corsairs launched from the flight deck for Itami as the *Badoeng Strait* left the area of operations, heading for Sasebo and replenishment. The ship again put out to sea a week later, returning to its previous location off Wonsan. Flight operations resumed on 24 November.

Three days later, forces of the People's Republic of China attacked the 1st Marine Division near the Chosin Reservoir. Although the Chinese came in large numbers, the attack was eventually blunted and much of the credit for this was given to Marine air power:

This was the supreme test for the Marine doctrine of close air support, for the ferocity of the enemy assault and the hazards of winter operations in mountain country required not only maximum effort but constant improvisation.³²

The Chinese forces encircled the 1st Marine Division and elements of the Army's 7th Infantry Division, but the Marines were able to fight their way out, through the mountains and along the narrow winding road back to the port of Hungnam.

On 7 December 1950, Technical Sergeant Hugh F. Newell, one of the squadron's Naval Aviation Pilots (NAP), was killed during a strafing run against enemy emplacements near Hagaru-ri, when his Corsair was hit by antiaircraft fire. "Whiskey" Newell, as his fellow squadron members called him, was considered to be one of the best fighter and acrobatic pilots in the Marine Corps. Earlier in the month another NAP, Technical Sergeant George J. Welker, was forced to make a wheels-up landing at Hagaru-ri airstrip after his plane was struck by antiaircraft fire.³³

On 13 December, the last element of the 1st Ma-

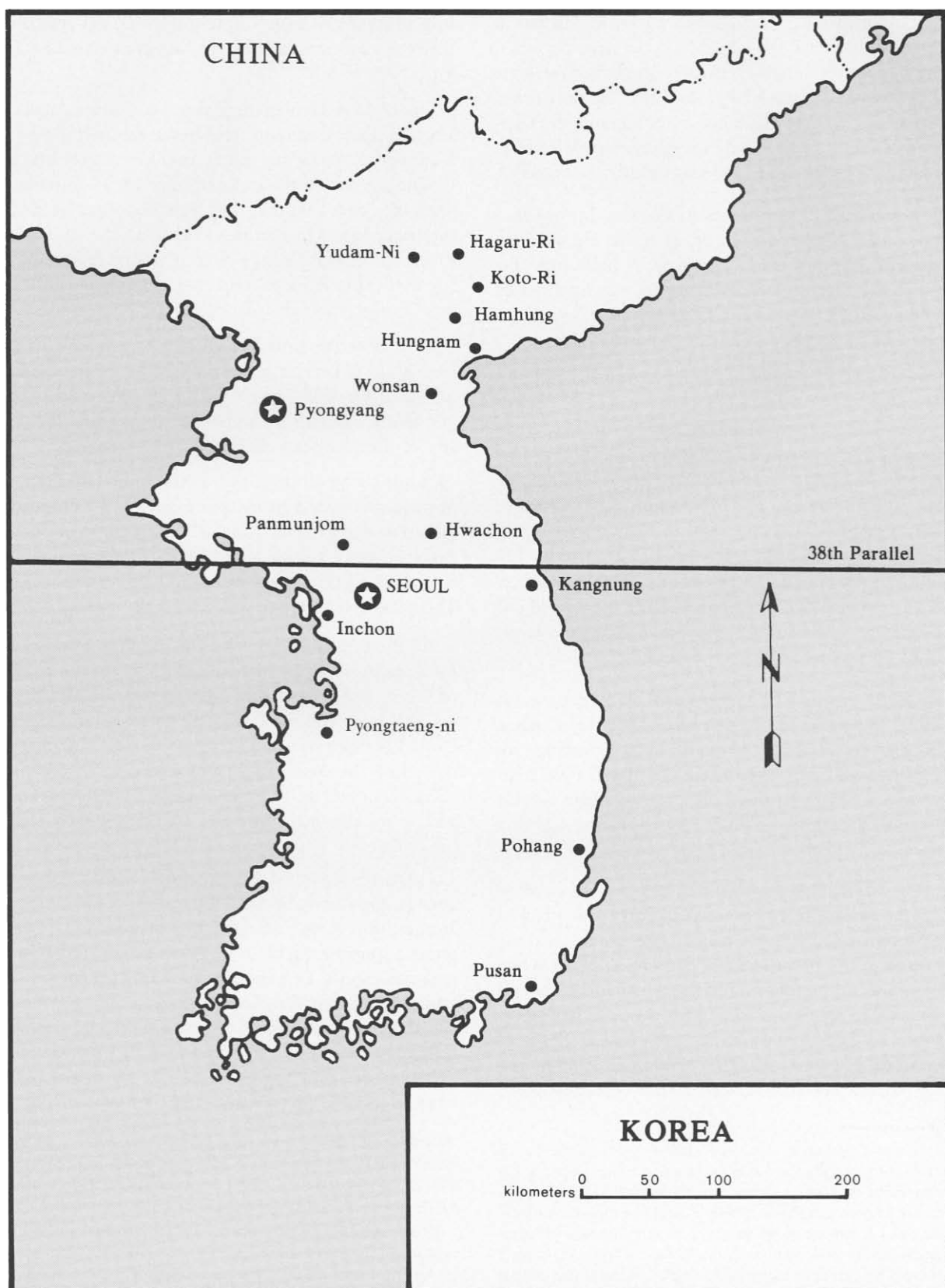
rine Division arrived at Hungnam and the fighting withdrawal was complete. The part played by Marine aviation in the breakout was crucial. In one instance during the withdrawal, two Marine regimental commanders decided to redeploy during daylight, in order to have Corsairs overhead.³⁴ But perhaps no testimonial to the effectiveness of Marine aviation during the Chosin breakout could surpass that given by Major General Oliver P. Smith, Commanding General of the 1st Marine Division:

During the long reaches of the night and in the snow storms many a Marine prayed for the coming of day or clearing weather, when he knew he would again hear the welcome roar of your planes as they dealt out destruction to the enemy. . . . Never in its history has Marine aviation given more convincing proof of its indispensable value to the ground Marine. A bond of understanding has been established that will never be broken.³⁵

On 26 December 1950, the *Badoeng Strait* was again heading for waters west of Inchon. The Death Rattlers conducted flight operations in the form of armed reconnaissance, CAPs, and close air support for units of the U.S. Eighth Army, positioned north of Seoul. In addition, armed reconnaissance missions were flown along the west coast of Korea, along roads leading south of Chinnampo and Pyongyang, and to points as far north as the Yalu River, in support of United Nations forces in Korea. These missions continued through the first week of January 1951. By the middle of the month, VMF-323 was operating from a land base. The squadron moved with MAG-33 to the Bofu Airbase on the Japanese island of Honshu to fly combat missions for the next few weeks.

Just prior to the move to Bofu, Major Stanley S. Nicolay relieved Major Arnold A. Lund as commanding officer of the squadron. On 8 February the squadron began its move from Bofu to K-1, an airfield near Pusan, Korea. Flight operations continued on that date despite the move, with 16 missions flown in support of the U.S. Eighth Army. Ever since the move to Bofu, VMF-323 had continued under the administrative control of MAG-33, while flying under operational control of MAG-12. In March, the squadron was officially transferred to MAG-12.

During the month of March 1951, the squadron flew mostly armed reconnaissance flights. On 1 March, First Lieutenant Raleigh E. Barton was killed when his plane was shot down while he orbited and waited for his flight leader, Captain William E. Brown, to complete a strafing run on a group of buildings. Second Lieutenant John T. Fitzgerald was killed on 14 March when his Corsair was shot down by enemy small arms fire near Chun-Chon.³⁶



Captain Paul L. Martelli was forced to bail out of his stricken aircraft on 3 April.* On the same day, Technical Sergeant Robert H. Bentley also bailed out after his Corsair was struck by ground fire. He was picked up by a helicopter which had been searching for Captain Martelli. On 9 April First Lieutenant Lilburn L. Harpe was shot down and successfully recovered.³⁷

Second Lieutenant James A. Gleaves, Jr., was shot down over Kwangdong-ni on 14 April. He was seen parachuting into enemy territory. A helicopter dispatched to rescue the downed pilot was repulsed by enemy fire.³⁹ Lieutenant Gleaves' status was later changed from MIA to KIA.

VMF-323 continued to operate out of K-1 through May, but on 20 April, the Death Rattlers also began to use K-16, an airfield on the bank of the Han River near Seoul, as a rearming and refueling point. This allowed the pilots to remain closer to the front lines throughout the day, making possible a greater number of combat missions. Most of the Corsairs would remain overnight, flying from K-16 until they had to return to K-1 for repair or scheduled maintenance. K-16 created a lot of problems because the airfield did not have a hard surface and heavily loaded aircraft would often get stuck in the sand.⁴⁰

On 27 April, First Lieutenant Earl F. Patrick was killed during an armed reconnaissance flight, when his plane crashed after being hit in the left wing root area by small arms fire. Three days later, First Lieutenant James L. Frazier died after his plane was hit by enemy ground fire and crashed on the top of a mountain ridge.

On 2 May, Captain Byron H. Beswick was downed by small arms fire while leading a flight that attacked a concentration of 500 enemy troops. He was making a strafing run on an unexploded napalm tank when his plane was hit and caught fire. He managed to bail out of the stricken Corsair, but a rescue helicopter could not be sent for him because of the intensity of ground fire in the area. First Lieutenant Neal R. Ewing remained on station overhead until darkness forced

him to return to base. Captain Beswick was initially listed as missing in action, but was later classified as a prisoner of war.**

On 18 May, Lieutenant Ewing became a casualty, after his close air support mission was diverted to cover a downed pilot. Ewing and Second Lieutenant Bruce E. Clingan circled the downed pilot for 15 minutes, until they were told that they were no longer needed overhead. Later, proceeding west along the Choyang River, Lieutenant Ewing's aircraft was hit by ground fire that exploded a napalm tank. His plane crashed into a ridge and burned on impact.

On 2 June the squadron moved its base of operations from K-1 to Itami, to prepare for embarkation on board the USS *Sicily****. The Death Rattlers began flying missions in support of an ongoing blockade of the northeast coast of Korea.

While flying off the *Sicily*, VMF-323 had four types of missions: naval gunfire spotting; close air support; armed reconnaissance; and CAP. On 17 June Captain Bigelow Watts, Jr., was killed when his plane crashed into the sea during his attempt to land on the *Sicily*. The plane broke apart and sank immediately.

For the next three months, the primary mission of the squadron was the blockade of the northwest coast of Korea, which was maintained by two aircraft carriers, the *Sicily* and the British HMS *Glory*, and other United Nations warships. The two carriers took turns patrolling the coast. Flight operations were severely curtailed in July by inclement weather, but not in August, when the squadron flew a total of 1,452.2 hours in combat.

The CAPs flown by the squadron consisted of two aircraft, each loaded with 2,400 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition. Close air support missions and naval gunfire spotting flights were flown on request from higher authority. Because the squadron's primary mission was to enforce the blockade, at least one and often two daily reconnaissance flights sought out enemy

*Captain Martelli's experiences following this incident are noteworthy. Initially listed as killed in action he was, in fact, taken prisoner by the North Koreans. Captain Martelli was the first Marine to be processed through "Paks Palace," the most notorious of the many transit camps where prisoners were interrogated before assignment to permanent facilities. In September 1952, Captain Martelli escaped from Camp No. 2 only to be recaptured 10 days later. Captain Martelli was eventually freed during Operation Big Switch.³⁸

**An official Marine Corps history notes the following information about the downed pilot: "Captain Byron H. Beswick, VMF-323, was a member of a large POW column being marched north. Although still suffering severe burns on his face, hands, and leg incurred while bailing out of his plane that caught fire, Beswick and four others attempted to outwit their guards while on the march. All the would-be escapees were placed in solitary confinement."⁴¹

***The squadron replaced its F4U-4Bs with the F4U-4 when it went aboard. Due to limited magazine space on the *Sicily* only fighters equipped with .50-caliber machine guns were operated from it. When the squadron was relieved from carrier duty another aircraft exchange was made.⁴²

shipping along the coast. Land reconnaissance missions also were flown which searched main routes of supply and communications in the northwestern region of Korea.

On 20 September the Death Rattlers left the *Sicily* for a short stay at Itami and a change to F4U-4Bs, before setting up a new base of operations at Bradshaw Airfield, K-1, near Pusan. The first month of operations out of Bradshaw Airfield was record breaking. The Death Rattlers flew 2,767.3 hours of combat time, in close air support missions and strikes against enemy installations. On 10 October, they flew two 20-plane strikes against vital equipment depots in Mulgae-ri. The following day, the squadron flew close air support missions, for the first time since it left the *Sicily*.

On 30 October VMF-323 began its move to K-18, near Kangnung, MAG-12's new airfield. One of the ships carrying squadron materiel ran aground on a sand bar and remained immobilized for six days, but only one day of air operations was lost during the move, and that loss came from inclement weather.

Aircrew losses had been high during October. Captain Emanuel R. Amann was lost following an attack on an enemy rail line on 4 October. Three days later, Second Lieutenant Arthur D. DeLacy was reported missing in action after he bailed out of his Corsair after it took an antiaircraft hit. The attempt to rescue him by helicopter failed because of intense ground fire. Lieutenant Delacy was confirmed as a prisoner of war by the 1st MAW intelligence section on 11 October.

Captain Cornelius T. Montgomery was killed on 10 October, when his aircraft was hit by antiaircraft fire as he dove on a target in Mulgae-ri. He radioed that he would bail out, but no parachute was seen. And on 30 October First Lieutenant Herman F. Stanfill was listed as missing in action after his plane was hit by ground fire during a close air support mission. He bailed out and landed behind enemy lines. An attempted rescue by helicopter was repulsed by ground fire. Later reports listed Stanfill as a prisoner of war.

During November and December 1951, close air support missions declined as interdiction missions aimed at the destruction of railroad operations increased. On these interdiction flights, commonly known as "rail cut" missions, each Corsair usually carried a 1,000-pound GP and six 100-pound GPs equipped with variable time fuzes to be used for flak suppression. Each plane also carried an external fuel tank that allowed for longer time over target.

In December the squadron devised a new tech-

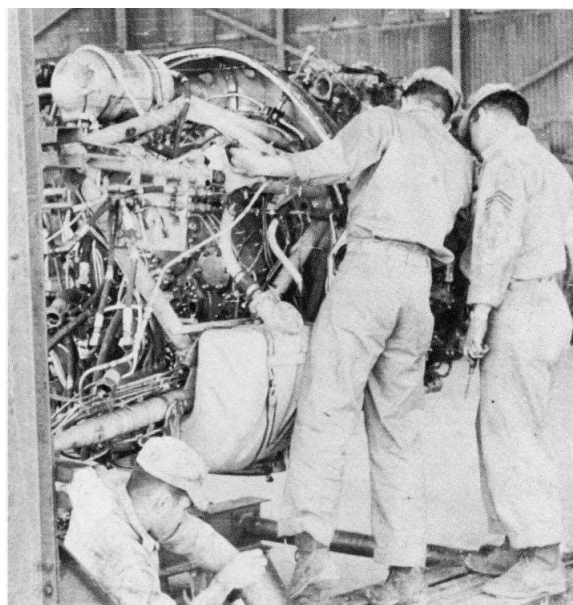


Photo courtesy of Maj James W. Kirk, USMCR (Ret)

An engine change is being conducted for a Corsair at K-6, Pyong-Taek, Korea, in the summer of 1952.

nique. An additional Corsair was added to each rail-cutting mission. The extra aircraft carried a drop tank that contained survival equipment, which could be dropped to any pilot forced down in enemy territory. During December, the Death Rattlers lost Captain Herbert D. Smith, last seen after his plane was hit by a 90mm projectile during the attack on a rail line. His last radio transmission indicated he was hit and was heading west. He bailed out and was visible on the ground for 90 minutes, but no signs of life were seen by the time the survival gear tank was dropped. Later, Captain Smith was officially declared dead.

During the first four months of 1952, VMF-323 continued its rail cutting and close air support missions, flying from K-18. On 21 April the squadron began another move to a new base of operations. This time, it was K-6, an airfield near Pyongtaeng-ni. This move was completed in 10 days.

On 30 June the squadron was redesignated Marine Attack Squadron 323 (VMA-323), reflecting its change in mission. The Death Rattlers continued operations from K-6 until 2 July 1953, their last day of combat flying in Korea. It should be noted, the squadron was commanded by Marine Corps Reserve officers twice during 1952. Lieutenant Colonel Richard L. Blume led the squadron from 16 January to 25 April and Lieutenant Colonel Henry S. Miller commanded the Death Rattlers from 1 June to 31 August.

Colonel Miller, in recalling his period of duty at K-6, provided an excellent example of the kind of rap-

port that exists between pilots and maintenance personnel in Marine Corps aviation:

In my Organized Reserve days in VMF-451 in Willow Grove, we had a superb enlisted engineering chief named Andrew Marushok. Andy and I always had a firm and clear understanding: he was to maintain aircraft availability at the highest possible percentage, and I was to see that every airplane was flown as much as possible. When I reported to 323 in 1952, who should be the engineering officer but Lt Andrew Marushok! We were delighted to see each other, and it was pure joy to work with him during the period he remained assigned to 323.⁴³

Lieutenant Colonel Willard C. Lemke, Death Rattler commanding officer from 20 November 1952 to 12 January 1953, also provided an informative summary of the squadron's role while stationed at K-6:

Sometime in 1952, probably about the time the squadron was redesignated from VMF to VMA, the 24 aircraft complement was changed to include approximately half F4U-4Bs and half AU-1s. The AU-1 was similar to the F4Us but optimised for the attack role. It was strictly a low altitude aircraft with a two-speed supercharger, versus the two-stage, two-speed supercharger in the F4U. As a result, it had more power at the lower altitudes but was a "dog" up high. We routinely carried an extra 500 lbs of ordnance on the AU-1. . . .

Flight operations fell into four primary categories. The most unique, and disliked, missions were the RESCAPS. Whenever there were large-scale combined strikes, or any significant air activity north of the bomb line it was customary for the Fifth Air Force to assign a four-plane "Rescue" Combat Air Patrol (RESCAP)

on station near the activity, but orbiting off the coast. In the event an aircraft was downed and the pilot believed to be alive, the RESCAP was vectored to the scene and would attempt to locate the pilot and hold off enemy troops or boats until a rescue helicopter could reach the scene. The F4Us of VMA-323 were the prime recipients of this mission because they had four 20mm cannons for strafing, long endurance, and maneuverability best suited for the task. They were usually long, dull flights boring holes in the sky around an orbit point while the pilots tried to ignore their frozen feet, because the F4Us did not have cockpit heaters. Infrequently, fortunately, the blissful boredom would be exchanged for an overabundance of excitement dodging enemy flak in case of a downed pilot. While that usually defrosted the toes, it was not a satisfactory solution. The 1st Marine Division provided a better solution when they donated some good old "cruncher" thermoboots. They were a little large and awkward on the rudder pedals, and although many a Corsair may have been noted fishtailing down the runway, they kept the toes warm.

Another type of mission was MPQ radar bombing. If cloud cover precluded direct air support when needed by friendly troops, flights would be dispatched to the Marine Corps or Air Force radar controller, who would vector the aircraft on a prescribed course and direct triggering of the bombs at the correct release point. This system was also used as a secondary alternative whenever weather inadvertently prevented successful attack on a primary target.

Vought AU-1s of VMA-323 at K-6, Pyong-Taek, Korea, in the fall of 1952 are lined up in the foreground. VMA-212's line, consisting also of AU-1s is in the left background.

Photo courtesy of Maj James W. Kirk, USMCR (Ret)





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A131264

VMA-323 ordnance crews loading bombs and rockets by hand at K-6 airfield in Korea.

The majority of missions at K-6 were in providing close air support, with primary effort in support of the 1st Marine Division. However, frequent missions were also flown in support of the U.S. Army and ROK divisions. The other major activity included regular squadron size attack missions against enemy supply dumps, troop concentrations, storage areas, etc., which were generally located well north of the bombline.⁴⁴

Colonel Miller added to the story as he related information about raids on North Korean power stations during June 1952:

Those raids represented a change in strategy, which as I recall required the personal approval of President Truman. There was no briefing or any other information about the raids until the last minute, so that we got only one or two hours of sleep before the first raid. About a dozen of our squadron's planes, which led the flight, were loaded with "Tiny Tim" torpedoes, which no one in the air group had ever used, and which I suppose operations thought we might as well get rid of.⁴⁵

Colonel William M. Frash, commanding officer of the squadron from 13 January to 10 April 1953 also provided valuable insights into the Death Rattlers'

Korean operations. He recalled that during the Korean Defense and Winter Campaigns of 1952-53:

The squadron was flying daily in physically difficult (cold) conditions, carrying bomb loads of 6,200 pounds . . . off a 4,200[-foot] strip of PSP [pierced steel planking] against well dug-in and prepared enemy positions.⁴⁶

Much of the flight activity Colonel Frash described involved interdiction operations carried deep into North Korea.

The airfield which the squadron operated from during this period did little to relieve the hardship of the situation. Colonel Frash describes it as "living on a little island amid rice paddies. . . . K-6 was probably a smaller island than any used in World War II. True, not all surrounded by water, but isolated."⁴⁷

Colonel Moore summarizes, the squadron's K-6 activity best when he reflects, "These were not dramatic operations but were just hard slugging flying against intense antiaircraft fire most of the time."⁴⁸

The squadron left Korea for a brief stay at Itami in July 1953, before moving to the Atsugi Naval Air Station, near Tokyo, for transportation back to the United States. The arduous commitment in Korea had

ended, with the Death Rattlers again serving with honor in combat. VMA-323 was the Marine fixed-wing attack squadron with longest overseas service during the Korean War. By July 1953, the Death Rattlers had accumulated a total of 48,677.2 hours of flight time since their August 1950 arrival in Korea.⁴⁹

*El Toro and the Dominican Republic Episode:
1953-1965*

Before it left Korea, VMA-323 distributed its aircraft and material allowance to other units of the 1st MAW remaining in the Far East. Most of the VMA-323 personnel were sent on leave, with orders reassigning them to a variety of duty stations upon their return.

When VMA-323 left Korea it was represented by only one officer and five enlisted men, who, under the command of Captain Ted J. Foster, travelled by air to Itami for a one-day stay, then on to Atsugi for further air transportation to Naval Air Station Barbers Point, Hawaii.

On 13 July 1953 the six-man squadron arrived at NAS Moffett Field, California, and later that day proceeded by air to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, its home base prior to the Korean war. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Watkins relieved Captain Foster as commanding officer and VMA-323 became a part of MAG-15. The squadron accepted 16 F9F-2 Panther jets. Flight testing and familiarization began within two days.

The new VMA-323 was composed primarily of Marines who had joined the unit at El Toro. The material allowance had been left at El Toro by VMA-251 when it left for Korea to relieve VMA-323.

The F9F-2 Panther was the first Navy jet fighter ever used in combat. In July 1950, Navy pilots had put the Panther into action in Korea, flying off the USS *Valley Forge* (CV-45). Within days, a Navy pilot became the first to shoot down a MiG-15. The Death Rattlers were one of many Marine squadrons to use the reliable Grumman aircraft during the mid-1950s. By 1956, the squadron was flying the F9F-8 Cougar, a swept-wing version of the original Panther aircraft.

Training problems mounted as the squadron entered the jet era. Less than half the enlisted men had any experience in squadron duty and less than half the assigned pilots had flown jets. To complicate matters further, the squadron had to move to a Marine Corps Auxiliary Landing Field (MCALF) in the Mojave Desert, to make room for a Marine Corps Reserve squadron coming to El Toro for annual two-week training duty.

The move from El Toro to MCALF Mojave took two

days and was completed by 23 July. Flight time during the rest of the month was devoted to familiarization flights, section and division tactics, and extensive ordnance delivery.⁵⁰ Still designated as an attack squadron (VMA), the squadron was operating under a table of organization for a "Marine Fighter Squadron, Single Engine (Jet)."⁵¹

The unit returned to El Toro on 8 August 1953 and resumed its flight training operations. During the fall of 1953 the squadron began planning for a six-month deployment to Hawaii. All squadron aircraft were transferred to VMF-235 during the week of 15 October. Full scale packing began on 19 October, and no flying took place during the last two weeks of the month.

On 4 November 1953 the squadron embarked on board the USS *Ft. Marion* (LSD-22) in San Diego. On 10 November while still on board the *Ft. Marion*, the Death Rattlers celebrated the 178th birthday of the Marine Corps. The squadron commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Watkins, gave a talk on the history and traditions of the Corps, after a turkey dinner hosted in the general mess by the officers and crew of the *Ft. Marion*. The festivities were topped off by the traditional cake-cutting ceremony.

On 11 November VMA-323 arrived at Pearl Harbor. Squadron personnel departed by bus for the Marine Corps Air Station at Kaneohe, where the squadron moved into permanent office and hangar facilities and began administrative operations as a part of MAG-13. By the end of the month flying was underway. The early schedules of air operations stressed tactical training flights.

The Command Diary for December 1953 stated:

The squadron's assigned activities were severely hampered by other commitments, such as regimental parades and personnel inspections, weapons qualifications firing, and basic training.⁵²

This reflected a familiar complaint in Marine aviation, that ceremonial and administrative commitments result in undermanned maintenance sections, with adverse affects on a squadron's primary mission.

During January, February, and the first part of March 1954, VMA-323 remained at MCAS Kaneohe. In addition to tactical flight training, the Death Rattlers engaged in aerial gunnery and close air support missions.

The otherwise successful deployment to Hawaii was marred by the death of the squadron's operations officer, Major Roy J. Irwin, during a training flight.⁵³ On 16-17 March personnel and equipment were loaded aboard LST-742 and LST-802 for transport back to the



Marine Corps Historical Collection

A flight of VMA-323 Grumman F9F-2 Panthers displays an echelon formation in 1955.

West Coast and a return to MCAS El Toro.* By 27 March the squadron had again become a part of MAG-15.

Except for temporary training deployments, the Death Rattlers remained at El Toro until June 1957, carrying out a variety of assignments. In February 1955 the squadron, led by its new skipper, Major Richard Hey, Jr., deployed to MCALF Mojave where the pilots received training in airborne rocket firing, bombing, strafing, and section and division tactics.

On 15 September 1955 the Death Rattlers' parent unit, MAG-15, became a part of the 3d MAW, which had moved on 1 September 1953 to El Toro from MCAS, Miami, Florida. Shortly thereafter, the squadron supported the 1st Marine Division and several Canadian armed forces units in Pacific Training Exercises (PacTraEx). These exercises took place between 7 and 18 November 1955 in the Camp Pendleton-San Clemente-San Diego area. VMA-323 also engaged in air tactical training in the Mojave desert and at the Naval Auxiliary Air Station, El Centro, California.

An interesting diversion from the flight training

schedule occurred in August 1956 when Major Summerfield M. Taylor, squadron executive officer, led 100 planes in a flyover of the Los Angeles Coliseum for the American Legion Convention gathered there. VMA-323 aircraft led the way, and the flight was augmented by planes from VMF-224 as well as from other services.⁵⁴

Later in August 1956 the squadron began a three-week deployment in which 12 F9F-8 Cougars spent the first week on board the USS *Shangri-la* (CVS-38), the second on board the USS *Bennington* (CV-20), and the third at NAS El Centro.⁵⁵ This assignment marked the last significant use of the F9Fs. In September the Death Rattlers received their first FJ-4 Fury, a supersonic, single-engine, single-place fighter.⁵⁶

The FJ-4 Fury had first appeared in February 1955, and this version of the fighter retained the four-cannon armament used in earlier models. All four wing pylons could carry the Sidewinder missile. The FJ-4 was used almost exclusively by Marine aviation units.⁵⁷

On 31 December 1956, VMA-323 was redesignated VMF-323 once again to reflect its primary fighter mission. Three days later, 3 January 1957, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel L. Cummings relieved Lieutenant

*On 1 July 1955, these ships were renamed *Dunn County* and *Hamilton County* respectively.

Colonel Warren H. McPherson as commanding officer. Preparations began in earnest for a deployment to Japan later in the year.

VMF-323 was the first Marine squadron on the west coast to receive the FJ-4. Because of this a great deal of emphasis was placed on maintenance routines and the understanding of all aircraft systems. Classes were held for pilots to give them solid background on all aspects of the new aircraft.⁵⁸

Simulated carrier qualifications were accomplished on a runway at MCAS El Toro. A mirror landing system was installed and a portion of the runway was painted to represent a carrier deck. In addition, Side-winder training, instrument flying, and a deployment to MCAS Mojave in May for air-to-air gunnery rounded out the preparations.⁵⁹

The departure of the squadron from MCAS El Toro began on 30 June 1957. By 5 July, 40 officers and 152 enlisted men had arrived at NAS Atsugi, Japan. They were joined by eight officers and 59 enlisted men transferred to the Death Rattlers from VMF-451, the squadron being relieved. Since VMF-323 received the aircraft used by VMF-451, the first job was to remove

the old squadron markings and replace them with those of the Death Rattlers.⁶⁰

Flight operations were conducted over the next few months and the pilots became especially proficient in instrument flying. By February 1958 the squadron had reached 10,000 accident free hours in the FJ-4. "Both the wing and group commanders gave the Death Rattlers a well received 'Atta Boy!'" as Colonel Cummings recalls.⁶¹

While stationed in Japan the squadron participated in several training exercises. These included Phiblink, at the Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Republic of the Philippines from 28 November to 18 December 1957, and Strongback, 22 February to 4 March 1958, also in the Philippines.

Following the completion of Operation Phiblink squadron pilots and aircraft took part in a historic non-stop flight from NAS Cubi Point to NAS Atsugi. Colonel Cummings' account of the accomplishment related the details:

For the return flight to Atsugi, Japan, permission was requested to attempt a non-stop, non-air refueling flight to home base. Permission was granted by the Group and Wing

Ten of the 11 pilots who completed the non-stop, non-air refueling flight in FJ-4s on 17 December 1957 from NAS Cubi Point, Philippine Islands, to NAS Atsugi, Japan. Standing fourth from the left is the Commanding Officer, LtCol Daniel L. Cummings.

Photo courtesy of LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, USMC (Ret)





Photo courtesy of LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, USMC (Ret)

FJ-4s conduct air refueling from a AJ-2 Savage near NAS Atsugi, Japan, in July 1958.

commanders, and the flight was flown on 17 December 1957. A great deal of planning had been expended in preparation of this flight starting with the extended range tanks around northern Japan. Secondly, the flight plan was worked out every day according to the aerologist winds aloft chart, destination weather, etc. It was determined that the flight was indeed well within the capability of the FJ-4. As it turned out, only eleven of the sixteen pilots landed non-stop to Atsugi. Five of the ships experienced external fuel tank drop problems and elected to land at Iwakuni. The flight was planned for 1687 nautical miles (1940 statute miles) with an elapsed time of 3 hours and 14 minutes with 1265 lbs. of fuel remaining over the high key. The flight was accomplished in 3 hours 17 minutes and 110 lbs. of fuel over high key. The flight was to be flown in division (4 aircraft) ten minutes between each division, cruise climb to 37,000 feet until drop tanks were empty, drop tanks and climb to 42,000 feet and cruise at mach 8.6 to destination. It worked out well.

At the time, it is certain that this flight set an FJ-4 record for a mass, long distance flight, point to point over the open ocean area.⁶²

Beginning in June 1958 the flying duties of the squadron included assignment to daylight strip alert in defense of northern Japanese air space. During the following month all pilots qualified in air-to-air refueling. The Navy used a converted AJ aircraft as the tanker.⁶³

On 31 August, Death Rattler flight elements departed NAS Atsugi destined for Ping Tung, North Taiwan. The squadron as a part of MAG-11 was used to cover the naval resupply of Chinese Nationalist forces on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu located between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.* Previous

attempts to resupply the position by Chinese Nationalist forces were thwarted by coast artillery barrages from Communist forces on the mainland. As Seventh Fleet LSTs steamed toward the islands, Death Rattler Furies armed with Sidewinders and a full load of 20mm ammunition circled above. Fortunately, the supply effort was not challenged and the tense situation eased. Colonel Cummings later remarked that he "wondered if this was to be the first day of World War III."⁶⁴

The squadron remained at Ping Tung, North Taiwan, flying routine patrols until 15 September when it was relieved in place by VMF-451. Squadron personnel departed Taiwan by air on 18 September bound for the United States via NAS Atsugi. Returning once more to MCAS El Toro, the Death Rattlers were then assigned to MAG-33.

In September 1959 the squadron spent a two-week training period at NAS Whidbey Island, Washington. It was the first time in five years that Marine squadrons from El Toro had deployed there. By then, the Death Rattlers were flying the F8U-1 Crusader aircraft. The Whidbey Island training exercise emphasized advanced weapons missions and instrument flying.⁶⁵

The single-place, single-engine, supersonic F8U-1 Crusader was a fighter aircraft with a variable incidence wing to give greater angle of attack during landing and take-off.**

*VMF(AW)-115 and VMF(AW)-314 were also assigned to MAG-11 and participated in the Taiwan Straights crisis.

**The F8U-1 was redesignated the F-8A in 1962 due to a decision by the Secretary of Defense to identify all Air Force and Navy aircraft using the existing Air Force designation system.

On 21 February 1960, 21 VMF-323 pilots brought their Crusaders on board the USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34) for a week of carrier qualification flying.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, insufficient winds during the period kept the pilots from getting the required number of landings for full carrier qualification.

In July 1961 the squadron was informed that it would become a part of Carrier Air Group 14 (CAG-14) on a six-months' long western Pacific (WestPac) cruise on board the USS *Lexington* (CVA-16). The attachment to a CAG was a first for a Marine Corps Crusader squadron. In preparation for this deployment, the Death Rattlers flew weapons training missions and took part in a 10-day carrier strike exercise, flying against "aggressor" aircraft from other west coast installations.⁶⁷

During the WestPac cruise VMF-323 pilots flew combat air patrol and escort missions from the *Lexington* as part of the U.S. Seventh Fleet's Task Force 77. Lieutenant Colonel Frederic T. Watts, Jr., recalled that the squadron gained the respect of its Navy counterparts due to the high degree of professionalism demonstrated by Death Rattler personnel. Of the five squadrons on board the carrier, VMFA-323 achieved the second highest grade in the operational readiness inspection held early in the cruise.⁶⁸

The squadron returned to MCAS El Toro in May 1962, and redeployed to NAS Dallas shortly thereafter. At Dallas the unit accepted new, improved F8U-2NE Crusaders, and Death Rattler personnel were given technical training by the aircraft manufacturer, the Ling-Temco-Vought Corporation.⁶⁹ In July the squadron was redesignated Marine Fighter Squadron (All

Weather) 323 (VMF(AW)-323) in order to depict the enhanced all weather fighting capabilities which the F8U-2NE afforded, and the fast pace of training continued.

In January 1963, VMF(AW)-323 took part in the largest peacetime exercise ever conducted by MAG-33, at MCAS Yuma. In the first two days of the exercise a total of 302 sorties were flown. The squadron took part in familiarization flights, tactics, instrument flying, gunnery runs, aerial photography runs, early warning alerts, and practice in delivering the "Sidewinder" missile.⁷⁰ The group flew 565 sorties during the first week of the exercise, despite record breaking cold temperatures and high winds. The final flight tally for the exercise was 1,508 sorties for a total of 2,343 hours in the air.⁷¹

A month later the Death Rattlers took part in the first phase of Operation Steel Gate, providing air support as a part of MAG-33 for an amphibious landing exercise held at Camp Pendleton.⁷² The second phase of Steel Gate, called Desert Winds, found the squadron operating from a Short Airfield for Tactical Support (SATS) site, providing strafing and bombing runs in support of a three-pronged attack by Pendleton-based 1st Marine Division forces against "aggressors" from the Hawaii-based 4th Marines.⁷³

In the summer of 1963 the squadron engaged in Operation Green Wave, a trans-Pacific flight of 18 Crusaders from El Toro to NAS Atsugi, with mid-air refueling from Marine Corps KC-130 transport aircraft. The exercise, which coincided with the squadron's scheduled transfer to Atsugi, began on schedule on 18 June 1963, but two of the first six F-8s launched,

A F8U-2 Crusader, over Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, in October 1962.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A146379





Photo courtesy of Maj Donald K. Tooker, USMC (Ret)

The rescue of Maj Donald K. Tooker on 18 June 1963 was a "one in a million chance" in the shark-infested waters. The seas were so rough with 12-foot swells that the ship's other whale boat had sank earlier in the day during a practice man-overboard drill.

had to abort their flights. The remaining four, led by squadron commander Lieutenant Colonel Claude O. Barnhill proceeded without incident to MCAS, Kaneohe, Hawaii. The leader of the second group of six aircraft, Major Donald K. Tooker, was forced to eject from his Crusader when it caught fire after the main fuel cell ruptured from overfilling during in-flight refueling. The F-8 exploded only seconds after Major Tooker ejected. Rescue operations were severely hampered because of poor weather, high seas, and low visibility in the region of the mishap, but were dramatically successful.

The only surface vessel within 300 miles was the USS *Koiner* (DE-331), which was unaware of the incident. "By supreme good luck," as Major Tooker put it, the *Koiner* cruised precisely over his position and effected a much welcomed rescue from the shark-infested waters. The element of luck was indeed "supreme," as Major Tooker related:

The destroyer was monitoring emergency channel as required, but the rescue was being carried out on the refueler's discrete channel—hence the element of luck prevailed.⁷⁴

The remaining five aircraft flew on to Kaneohe, but the third six-plane flight was aborted to El Toro.

Further problems experienced on the following day led to the eventual cancellation of Operation Green Wave. First Lieutenant Cliff J. Judkins III, a member of the third six-plane flight of Crusaders, was refueling in the same location at sea where Major Tooker's accident occurred. Following the precedent set the day before, the fuel cell on Lieutenant Judkins' plane burst during the refueling operation. Lieutenant Judkins chose to eject immediately because of the rapidity with which Major Tooker's plane caught fire and exploded the day before.

The lieutenant's problems were only beginning, however. The aircraft's ejection mechanism failed, and he was forced to "bail out." His problems continued when his parachute failed to open, and he plummeted 10,000 feet into the sea. Hitting the water at approximately 120 miles per hour, Lieutenant Judkins miraculously survived with two broken ankles, a fractured pelvis, and severe facial injuries.

One of the K-130 tankers successfully dropped a life raft within 10 feet of the injured pilot, whose survival equipment had been torn from his body on impact with the water.⁷⁵ Lieutenant Judkins was rescued by

the USS *Embattle* (AM-434) and was later transferred to the USS *Los Angeles* (CA-135). A rescue helicopter later transported him to a naval hospital in Long Beach, California.

On 22 June the trans-Pacific exercise was cancelled. Squadron personnel and equipment were airlifted by 3d MAW and Military Air Transport Service (MATs) aircraft, and arrangements were made to ship the squadron aircraft to Atsugi from Kaneohe and El Toro.

On 30 June the main body of VMF(AW)-323 personnel arrived in Atsugi, and on 2 July 1963, the USS *Core* (CVE-13) departed Hawaii with nine F-8s, two officers, and 18 enlisted men. Seven Crusaders were flown from El Toro to NAS Alameda on 5 July 1963 for subsequent surface shipment to the squadron in Atsugi.⁷⁶

VMF(AW)-323 operated for one year from Atsugi, as part of the 1st MAW. Operational readiness was the main goal of the squadron during its overseas assignment. The Death Rattlers deployed twice on board aircraft carriers and took part in operations in Okinawa, the Philippines, and Taiwan. During these operations the squadron flew 1,600 hours in one month, an accomplishment which Major Tooker credits to dedicated maintenance personnel and to two full years of hard work and training.⁷⁷

On 1 July 1964 the unit was redesignated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323 (VMFA-323), a designation it retains to the present day. Shortly after being redesignated the squadron was transferred to MCAS, Cherry Point, North Carolina, the first time the Death Rattlers had been based on the East Coast since their commissioning and initial training 21 years earlier.

In August 1964, the squadron began operating the F-4B Phantom II aircraft. This plane had a second seat for a radar intercept officer. On 17 August 1964, First Lieutenant Raymond R. Dunlevy, a newly designated naval flight officer reported on board as the Death Rattlers' first "back seat" Phantom flyer. Lieutenant Dunlevy described the F-4B weapons system as "fantastic . . . , an entirely new concept in aerial warfare."⁷⁸ The primary role for which the F-4B had been developed was interception and air superiority. But upcoming employment of the aircraft in Vietnam would place emphasis on the aircraft's attack role.

The squadron deployed to NAS Key West for the period 15 December 1964-15 January 1965 to stand the Cuban missile crisis fighter alert on an around-the-clock basis.

Major General Norman W. Gourley, Death Rattler commanding officer at the time, recalled that although only an eight-plane detachment was required

for the alert, the entire squadron deployed to Key West and received invaluable air-to-air training.⁷⁹

On 13 March 1965, the squadron moved to Naval Air Station Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, for training. The next day the squadron relieved VMA-324 and training began. This included conventional weapons training, rocket and bomb runs, and practice using the Sparrow III missile. VMFA-323 was now part of MAG-24, 2d MAW.

On 27 April 1965, the squadron was placed in readiness for possible operations in the Dominican Republic. The next day it was alerted by Commander, Caribbean Sea Frontier, to prepare four aircraft with air-to-air and air-to-ground ordnance for missions over the Dominican Republic. That evening, the alert status was modified. Four unarmed aircraft were to be on 30-minute alert for possible use as a show of force until sunrise on 29 April. In addition, eight aircraft were to be available for launch at first light, armed with mixed air-to-air and air-to-ground ordnance.

On 1 May the squadron was directed to discontinue CAP missions and to commence low level armed reconnaissance flights over the Dominican Republic. These flights were aimed at gathering intelligence relating to any surface movements of a military or quasi-military nature; restrictions to movement of civilian and military personnel along road networks; unusual movements of large groups of civilians; activity at aircraft facilities; the location and movement of aircraft; and small craft activity.⁸⁰

During their deployment to NAS Roosevelt Roads, the Death Rattlers became the first Marine Phantom II squadron to operate in Puerto Rico. They set a new Navy-Marine missile firing record by successfully launching eight consecutive Sparrow missiles against supersonic airborne targets, and they logged a record-setting number of close air support missions during Operation Quick Kick VII.⁸¹ Further, the squadron's ground crews kept the Phantom IIs at nearly full availability during the demanding deployment period.⁸²

On 2 September 1965, Major General George S. Bowman, Commanding General, 2d MAW, presented a Wing Competitive Evaluation Exercise (CompEx) trophy to Lieutenant Colonel Norman W. Gourley, commanding officer of the squadron during the period of the competition.

The capabilities that the squadron demonstrated during its Caribbean deployment would soon be tested in combat. The Death Rattlers were headed for war in the Pacific area for the third time in their history. This time the scene would be the Republic of Vietnam.

The Vietnam Years: 1965-1969

During the period from 10 September to 13 September 1965, VMFA-323 transferred its 20 F-4B aircraft in preparation for deployment to the Western Pacific.⁸³ On 25 October the squadron departed MCAS Cherry Point for MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. During a brief stop there the squadron picked up the aircraft and the material it would take to combat in Vietnam. The squadron subsequently arrived at Da Nang Airbase, Republic of Vietnam on 1 December.⁸⁴

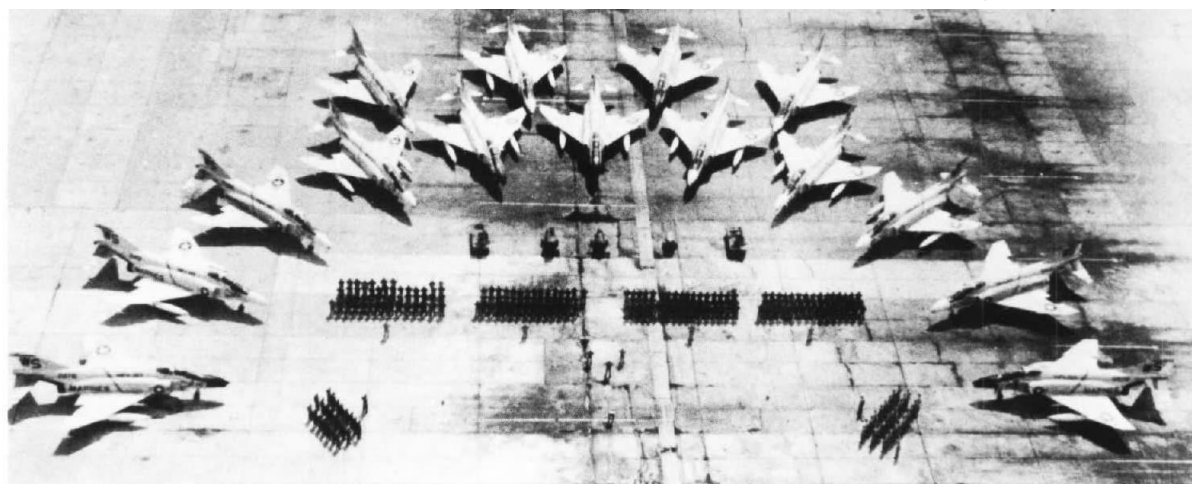
VMFA-323 began combat operations the following day, and on 7 December the Death Rattlers suffered their first personnel losses. Major John H. Dunn, squadron executive officer, was shot down by a surface-to-air missile over North Vietnam. Major Dunn survived in a North Vietnamese prison camp for over seven years. His radar intercept officer (RIO), Chief Warrant Officer John W. Frederick, died after five years in a prison camp.

By the end of December the squadron had flown 407 sorties for a total of 520 hours in the air. During that period the Death Rattlers participated in Operations Harvest Moon and Steel Tiger, flying combat air patrol missions in support of Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 1 (VMCJ-1). These flights were named "Firecracker CAPS."

The Firecracker CAPs in support of VMCJ-1 continued through February 1966. During that month the Death Rattlers were also flying support missions for the Marine KC-130 Hercules transport aircraft of Marine Refueler Transport Squadron 152 (VMGR-152). During the period between 2 December 1965 through 28 February 1966, the squadron flew 1,567 combat sorties for a total of 2,131.6 hours.

The 15 F-4B Phantoms of VMFA-323 surround a squadron formation in 1965.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



From March to June 1966, the squadron stood air defense alert on Taiwan. In addition to a normal routine which emphasized air-to-ground weapons delivery, air-to-air tactics, and inflight refueling, the Death Rattlers flew in support of the Nationalist Chinese Army on Exercise Li Ming. On 23 June the squadron was relieved of its air alert duties by VMFA-314, and it returned to MCAS Iwakuni the following day.

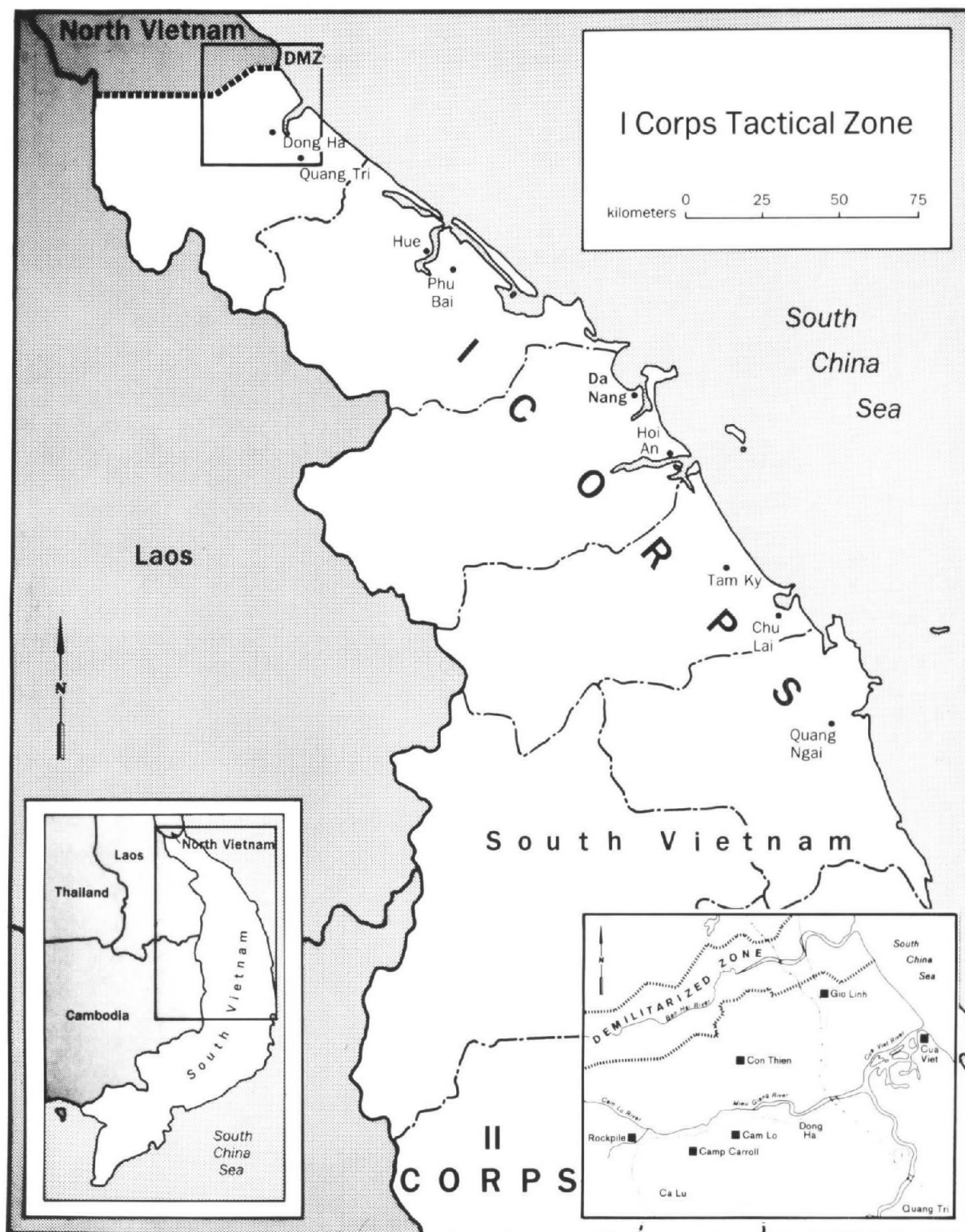
The stay at Iwakuni would be brief, for the squadron was almost immediately ordered to deploy to Da Nang. An advance party departed Iwakuni on 1 July to establish liaison with MAG-11 Headquarters so that flight operations could begin immediately upon arrival of the lead element of the flight echelon.

On 5 July four of the squadron's F-4B Phantoms arrived in Da Nang. The following day, combat operations began with an morning takeoff by four Phantoms for a road reconnaissance mission. Later in the day, a second four-plane flight launched into haze and rain. Neither flight on this opening day of combat operations saw significant action.

Late in September 1966, the squadron participated in Operation Prairie with significant results. On 19 September eight structures and four dams were destroyed. Two days later squadron aircraft delivered 4.5 tons of ordnance to destroy six more structures. Finally, on 27 September, a total of 62.5 tons of ordnance was expended in leveling 20 structures. One secondary explosion was also observed.

Combat operations continued through the fall of 1966 with the squadron operating out of Da Nang and Chu Lai.* On 6 October VMFA-323 was reassigned from MAG-11 to MAG-13 and relocated to the Chu

*A detachment of 90 Marines and six F-4Bs from VMFA-323 operated from the Chu Lai airfield as early as 31 July 1966.



Inset, bottom left, locates in Southeast Asia the Republic of Vietnam's I Corps area, shown in enlargement in the basic map. Inset, bottom right, enlarges the boxed area, upper left, to show Marine combat bases below the Demilitarized Zone subject to fire from rocket, mortar, and artillery positions within and above the DMZ. Many of these positions were silenced by VMFA-323 aircraft, despite intense antiaircraft fire, in the late summer 1967.



Photo courtesy of LtCol A. W. Talbert, Jr., USMC
LtCol Aubrey W. Talbert, Jr., conducts the ribbon cutting ceremony held in 1966 for the bridge built by Sgt Foote which linked the "Death Rattlers" with the rest of MAG-11 at Da Nang, South Vietnam.

The hand-crafted "Foote Bridge," which traversed a swampy area, is shown being utilized by personnel of MAG-11 during a period of heightened combat operations in I Corps.

Photo courtesy of LtCol A. W. Talbert, Jr., USMC



Lai airbase, located on the coast 45 miles south of Da Nang. On 9 December Lieutenant General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps, and U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond paid a brief visit to the squadron flight line. Although the rate of operations was reduced because of poor weather and the limited scope of Marine ground operations, the Death Rattlers still flew 421 combat missions for 546.2 hours in support of III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, during the month.

In January 1967 the tempo of air operations increased with better weather conditions and the end of the New Year's truce period. On 29 January Major General Louis B. Robertshaw, Commanding General, 1st MAF, was present for the change of command ceremony in which Lieutenant Colonel Gordon H. Keller, Jr., relieved Lieutenant Colonel Aubrey W. "Tal" Talbert, Jr., as commanding officer of VMFA-323. In the month of January the Death Rattlers flew 516 combat missions for 653.4 flight hours, again in support of III MAF and the Seventh Air Force.

VMFA-323 continued flying combat missions out of Chu Lai through 16 May 1967, when the unit was transferred back to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan, for a three-month rest and refurbishment period. The squadron had flown combat missions against a variety of targets prior to its transfer. The following excerpt from the command chronology for February 1967 listed the number and types of targets destroyed or damaged during the month representative of the squadron's Vietnam flight activities:



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422458

An F4-B taxis for takeoff out of Da Nang with a full load of napalm during 1966.

Structures	179 destroyed, 87 damaged
Trench line	330 meters destroyed
Gun (AA)	1 destroyed
Weapons positions	11 destroyed, 3 damaged
Bunkers	13 destroyed, 1 damaged
Road cuts	17
Trucks	2 damaged
Bridge	1 destroyed
KBA	19 confirmed, 18 probable
Secondary Explosions	9
Elephants	1 KBA (con), 3 (prob)

The item "KBA" refers to enemy personnel "killed by air." Elephants and water buffalo were frequently targets when they were suspected of being used by the enemy as pack animals.⁸⁵

Operations were somewhat limited in February 1967 by poor weather and the Tet truce period, but on 13 February a flight led by Captain Thomas Williams, Jr., in support of an amphibious landing in Operation Deckhouse IV resulted in the destruction of 10 meters of Viet Cong trenchline. The following day, Major Ronald C. Andreas led a flight through foul weather to cover the successful extraction of a Marine reconnaissance team which had been pinned down by enemy fire in hilly terrain.

On 28 March one of the largest strikes by Marine aircraft into North Vietnam was led by Lieutenant Colonel Keller. The flight consisting of eight F-4s and eight A-4s attacked an emplacement of enemy 57mm antiaircraft guns and a truck park, encountering intense antiaircraft fire.

During April flight activity quickened. On 3 April a flight led by Major John Hubner destroyed 40 structures on one mission. Three days later, Lieutenant Colonel Keller led a flight that claimed six KBAs in

an open area south of Hoi An. A week later another flight attacked a concentration of enemy troops, resulting in 35 confirmed KBAs and 45 probables.

On 18 April Lieutenant Colonel Keller was leading a two-plane section on the initial climb to altitude for a routine mission. At 28,000 feet in heavy rain and clouds his plane's electrical system failed totally. Lieutenant Colonel Keller used hand signals to instruct his RIO, Captain Hugh L. Julian, to eject. He did so immediately. Lieutenant Colonel Keller's ejection was not so easily accomplished. With the F-4 plummeting toward the ground the ejection mechanism did not fire on the first two attempts, but on a third try it successfully ejected the distraught pilot. Lieutenant Colonel Keller landed in the South China Sea, where he was soon spotted and rescued.

Captain Julian, however, was not located for nine hours. He had suffered a broken arm, lost his raft and emergency light, and was without a survival radio. Fortunately, that night he was picked up by a shrimp fisherman and later transferred to a hospital for treatment and a well deserved rest.⁸⁶

On 27 April Captain Raymond H. Bednarsky, a squadron naval flight officer (NFO), flew his 300th combat mission in the F-4B Phantom, believed to be an all-Marine record. The last day of April the Death Rattlers launched 20 sorties from strip alert in support of Marines under attack in a large battle four miles south of Khe Sanh.

The battle for Khe Sanh continued into the first week of May 1967, with VMFA-323 providing close air support missions to the Marines fighting for hills 861 and 881, six miles northwest of the main combat base. The Death Rattlers flew more than 200 sorties in the four-day period from 30 April to 4 May. Some of the close air support missions and a number of reconnaissance flights were conducted at night. On 2 May, Cap-

tain George T. Schmidt's flight was reassigned to close air support after completing a helicopter escort mission. Although low on fuel and experiencing heavy ground fire, the flight chalked up 25 probable KBAs, seven destroyed structures, and three destroyed bunkers in an enemy held area south of Da Nang. In May, 750-pound bombs were used by the Death Rattlers for the first time in several months. They were judged to be quite effective against fortified positions. The support of Khe Sanh turned out to be the last big effort for the Death Rattlers before departing for Japan.

On 15 May 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Keller led nine of the Death Rattlers' Phantoms out of Chu Lai for Iwakuni. Five of the aircraft flew non-stop to Iwakuni with mid-air refueling provided by VMGR-152 tanker near Okinawa. The Death Rattlers could look forward to a three-month respite from combat.

While based at Iwakuni the squadron was attached to MAG-15. Significant regrouping and training of new and replacement aircrews were undertaken. On 4 June 1967 training began with a deployment to Naha airbase on Okinawa for conventional weapons training. This training segment lasted five weeks and used six Phantoms. Aircrews were rotated to Naha from Iwakuni as necessary. In addition to weapons training, the pilots engaged in the "Shoehorn Program," involving the ferrying of aircraft between Chu Lai and Atsugi.* A total of 16 aircraft were relocated during the month.

The squadron completed the conventional weapons training schedule on 7 July 1967, and the Naha detachment returned to Iwakuni that date. On 15 July Lieutenant Colonel Edison W. Miller relieved Lieutenant Colonel Keller as commanding officer. During 17-20 July, the Death Rattlers conducted a firing exercise, using Sidewinder missiles. All 14 of the missiles fired successfully. In addition, several aerial combat maneuvering missions were flown. This activity was in preparation for the squadron's third deployment to Vietnam which would begin in August 1967.

On 16 August the VMFA-323 colors left Iwakuni for Chu Lai on board U.S. Air Force transport aircraft. All the squadron's Phantoms and most of its equipment were left in place at Iwakuni for use by VMFA-314, with whom the squadron was trading places. Combat operations had, in fact, begun the day before when the squadron used aircrews and enlisted men from an advance party that had arrived in Chu Lai a few days earlier.

The transition to combat operations was smooth for

*"Shoehorn" was the code name of a surface-to-air missile warning system which was eventually installed in Marine Corps aircraft.⁸⁷

the Death Rattlers on this third tour, because most of the aircrew members already had combat experience in Vietnam. The Death Rattlers, once again assigned to MAG-13, began to fly combat missions in support of III MAF and MACV once more. By the end of the month, strikes had been flown against enemy artillery positions in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and north of it, as well. From these positions the enemy had been firing on forces in the Dong Ha-Con Thien area. Once again, the flights encountered intense antiaircraft fire.

September found the Death Rattlers expending a squadron record 1,343.8 tons of ordnance. Fair weather for the first three weeks of the month allowed for maximum flight time, but when the winter monsoon finally arrived late in the month, poor flying weather followed. Even so, every major Marine Corps ground operation in I Corps had received support from the Death Rattlers.

During the late summer of 1967, enemy antiaircraft fire was again reported to be particularly strong. This was especially true near the DMZ where Operation Kingfisher was being conducted. This was an effort to destroy enemy rocket, mortar, and artillery positions which were bombarding the Con Thien-Gio Linh-Dong Ha-Cam Lo quadrangle, commonly known as "Leatherneck Square."

For 18 days during the month the main 10,000-foot runway at Chu Lai was closed to install centerline lighting and for needed repairs. During that period the squadron used 7,000 feet of taxiway for takeoffs, and recovered into SATS arresting gear on runway 03. This was believed to be the first extended use of a SATS field in a combat zone by F-4 Phantoms.

To maintain its proficiency in air interception, the squadron began scrambling the Phantoms assigned to the air-to-air alert pad against flights returning from missions. This practice provided the radar intercept officers (RIOs) with much needed practice and the effort was judged to achieve realism. This added element to squadron operations was deemed to be necessary because the main flight effort had been ground attack and very few intercept missions had been made.

On 13 October 1967, the squadron lost its skipper, Lieutenant Colonel Miller and his RIO, First Lieutenant James H. Warner. Miller was leading a support mission near the DMZ when his flight was diverted to attack two large tracked vehicles. While pulling up from his first pass, Miller's aircraft was hit by at least one 37mm antiaircraft round. He reported being hit and unable to control his stricken Phantom. Both men ejected near a village 1.5 miles southwest of Cape Mui Lay. Miller's parachute was seen to enter a tree line

near the village. No further sighting was made of him. Lieutenant Warner landed near a gully just south of the village. He reported on his URT-10 emergency radio that he was all right, and he gave directions to his position. But within minutes three North Vietnamese soldiers with rifles approached him as he was rolling his parachute and marched him off toward the village. Both men were declared missing in action.* That evening the executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harry T. Hagaman, was appointed to succeed Miller as commanding officer.

Close air support missions continued for the remainder of the month in the I Corps area. In another incident during the month an aircraft flown by Major Daniel I. Carroll and Captain James J. Hare III was hit by several rounds of heavy automatic-weapons fire while on a close air support mission just north of Con Thien. The men were forced to eject over water near Da Nang when their Phantom flamed out. Both men were recovered, Captain Hare suffered moderate injuries during the ejection.

During November and December 1967 the Death Rattlers continued to fly the same type of missions in support of operations in I Corps. The squadron supported Operations Foster, Wheeler, Lancaster, and Kentucky. In addition, interdiction missions were flown in the A Shau Valley and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Late in December a new form of mission emerged. The squadron began providing fighter cover for Marine electronic countermeasures (ECM) operations at night in the "Route Package IV" area of North Vietnam as well as for Barrier Combat Air Patrol (BARCAP) missions.

Construction of facilities at Chu Lai continued. By the end of December the airbase had three large hangars and several half-clamshell portable canvas tents for aircraft maintenance. A year before, only a single tent was available for aircraft maintenance.

On 7 January 1968, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., now Commandant of the Marine Corps, visited MAG-13 to view the operational areas of all squadrons, including VMFA-323. A decidedly unique and harrowing event occurred on 22 January during a flight led by Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman. The following report describes the incident:

In late January, Lieutenant Colonel Harry T. Hagaman, Commanding Officer of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323, and his Radar Intercept Officer, Captain Dennis F. Brandon, were leading a flight of F-4B Phantoms against what

the TAC(A) described as a "suspected" antiaircraft position. The enemy gunners confirmed their presence during the first pass. As Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman's F-4B, armed with napalm and 250-pound Snakeyes, skimmed low over the treetops, the North Vietnamese cut loose and laced the belly of his plane with a stitch of 50 caliber shells. The aircraft shuddered under the impact and burst into flames. Captain Brandon, a backseat veteran with over 300 combat missions, knew instantly when he heard the series of ominous "thuds" that the Phantom had been mortally wounded; he quickly pulled his face curtain and ejected. Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman stayed with the bucking Phantom momentarily in a vain effort to stabilize the aircraft by using the rudders. The delay almost cost the pilot his life because the F-4B began to tumble end-over-end barely 100 feet above the ground. Suddenly the world outside became a spinning blur of blue and green. The second time that he saw green—indicating that the aircraft was inverted—Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman started to pull his alternate ejection handle which was located between his knees. In the second that it took the escape mechanism to function, the Phantom flipped upright and the ejection cartridges blasted the pilot from the flaming cockpit. Seconds later, the plane cartwheeled into the ground and exploded. The pilot was so low when he "punched out" that the chute had scarcely deployed when his feet touched the ground. Both crewmen hid in the tall elephant grass within earshot of the North Vietnamese who were searching for them. Within minutes, rescue helicopters lumbered on the scene and, while the downed crew's wingman made dummy passes to discourage the enemy soldiers, the choppers darted in and plucked the shaken, but otherwise uninjured, Marines to safety.⁸⁸

As the month ended, enemy activity increased dramatically. At 0400 on 31 January an intense rocket and mortar attack hit the Chu Lai compound. The MAG-13 area received 48 rounds of 122mm rocket fire. During the attack Captain Arthur J. J. Delahoussaye was killed. First Lieutenant Richard A. Kerr was seriously wounded and died later on board the hospital ship USS *Sanctuary* (AH-17). The attack did extensive damage to the flight line and VMFA-314, another MAG-13 squadron, lost two aircraft to rocket hits. The air base bomb dump exploded during the attack creating a small lake. The concussion from the bomb dump explosion caused damage to a number of buildings and hangars. The Death Rattlers were very proud of the fact that they launched the first aircraft on a mission within just a few hours of the attack.⁸⁹

The base remained under constant threat of attack during the month of February 1968, during the enemy's spring offensive. Body armor was worn to and from work areas during the hours of darkness.

During March 1968 the squadron became heavily involved in supporting the effort to relieve the embattled Marines at Khe Sanh. The Death Rattlers also flew in support of actions in the A Shau Valley. The

*Lieutenant Colonel Miller and Lieutenant Warner remained prisoners of war for more than five years and were finally repatriated during Operation Homecoming in 1973.

month was also highlighted by the squadron's receipt of the Commanding General, 1st MAW Aviation Safety/Efficiency Award for the first and second quarters of fiscal year 1968.

In April the squadron flew 575 sorties for 640.9 hours, totals which were representative of the preceding months. Attacks against the base at Chu Lai continued as well. On 23 April the MAG-13 compound received 18 hits by 122mm rockets. Fortunately, little damage was done in this attack.

In May enemy rockets hit the base on the 5th, 14th, and 23rd, with hits on the last date causing damage to four Phantoms. A notation in the Command Chronology reported:

One round impacted roughly 51 yards from the squadron ready room but caused only an increased interest in secure bunkers.⁹⁰

On 16 May, Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman relinquished command of the squadron to Lieutenant Colonel Don J. Slee.

The Death Rattlers flew in support of 13 different ground operations during May. On 29 May a two-plane close air support mission led by Major Edward R. Bailey elicited a congratulatory message for its efficient work. The flight was in support of the 5th Marines, operating in the vicinity of the Truoi River. Following the action, Brigadier General George D. Webster, Assistant Division Commander, 1st Marine Division, and Commanding General, Task Force X-Ray, sent the following message to Major General Norman J. Anderson, Commanding General, 1st MAW:

Examination of the battlefield following the action resulted in visual testimonial to the precision with which CAS was delivered. The area occupied by the enemy was completely devastated while the surrounding populated area was untouched. Responsive close air and helo support directly contributed to 58 enemy KIA, 38 weapons captured, essential resupply and timely, lifesaving med-evacs.⁹¹

In July six Phantoms received battle damage; five of them were hit during the first 12 days of the month. During this period the Death Rattlers supported the withdrawal of Marines from Khe Sanh. To achieve the best results possible the pilots had to fly low angle ordnance deliveries, a tactic which necessarily exposed the Phantoms to an extra measure of ground fire.

Later in the month the squadron began flying an increased number of missions north of the DMZ (one of the byproducts of MACV's recent incorporation of a single management control system for tactical fixed-wing aircraft). In July the Death Rattlers flew 592 sorties for 659.4 hours.

Four more Phantoms received battle damage in Au-

gust. One went down at sea after the pilot was unsuccessful in his attempt to land the aircraft without benefit of landing gear. Both crewmembers ejected and were recovered with minor injuries.

From September to December 1968, VMFA-323 kept up the high tempo of CAS missions. In addition, the squadron continued to fly missions against enemy lines of communication north of the DMZ. During this period the Death Rattlers averaged 468 flights and 557 hours per month in combat flying.

Support missions continued into the early months of 1969, but the period from 1-25 March found the Death Rattlers preparing for transfer from Vietnam to the 3d MAW at El Toro. The squadron aircraft departed Chu Lai for Cubi Point in the Philippines in mid-March 1969, and from Cubi Point the planes were loaded on ships for surface transport to the United States.

Except for two brief deployments out of Vietnam the squadron had served in the combat zone from December 1965 until its departure in March 1969. VMFA-323 was the first F4 squadron to be stationed at Chu Lai. During its tenure in Vietnam the squadron flew over 17,000 combat sorties in support of ground operations in I Corps and against targets north of the DMZ. The squadron's pride in its accomplishments is reflected in the following entry in the Command Chronology for March 1969:

When the "Death Rattlers" return to combat, they will have much to live up to if they are to match the record they have set during this combat tour.⁹²

On 30 March 1969, VMFA-323 was transferred from the operational command of the 1st MAW to that of the 3d MAW. The squadron colors were escorted to El Toro by First Lieutenant Cecil Netherly and presented to Major General Arthur H. Adams, Commanding General, 3d MAW, on 1 April.

A switch of squadrons had taken place in which VMFA-323 returned to El Toro and VMFA-232 relieved the Death Rattlers in Vietnam. The squadron, now a part of MAG-33, operated with a reduced manning level for several months after returning to El Toro. On 30 June 1969 the Death Rattlers were represented by just two officers and 22 enlisted men. The situation of reduced levels of personnel and material continued through December 1969, and a short entry in the semi-annual Command Chronology reflected the feelings of all squadron members at the time:

It is hopefully anticipated that the Death Rattlers will once again become airborne in the not too distant future.⁹³

They would not have to wait long to realize the hopes expressed in this entry. The Death Rattlers were soon

to be fully operational again in the familiar environs of MCAS El Toro. A memorable chapter in the history of VMFA-323 had just ended, and another was about to begin.

El Toro Again: 1969-1984

VMFA-323 began rebuilding to a fully operational status on 10 February 1970, with the acceptance of aircraft and personnel from VMFA-542, and by 30 June 1970 its total strength stood at 30 officers and 202 enlisted men. The squadron was still short in the staff noncommissioned officer ranks, but the flight schedule continued to expand daily with an emphasis on aircrew training. The squadron went from zero flight hours to 250 hours per month soon after the rebuilding period began.

By December 1970, the squadron's personnel strength stood at 57 officers and 210 enlisted men. Aircrew training was still the main focus, with VMFA-323 making maximum use of its 15 F4-B Phantoms. During the 1-20 November 1970 period, the squadron had deployed with 11 Phantoms to MCAS Yuma for training. In the three-week period which followed, the Death Rattlers chalked up 433 sorties and 422 hours, and by the end of December, VMFA-323 could boast of having flown 2,479 accident-free hours since returning from Vietnam.

The rebuilding process continued into 1971, as the squadron worked toward achieving a fully operational status. From 10 May to 28 May the Death Rattlers deployed to the Naval Auxiliary Air Station (NAAS), Fallon, Nevada, where they flew 283 sorties for 291.5 hours. In July, another change occurred when VMFA-323 was reassigned to MAG-11. It is noteworthy that over the two-day period, 19-20 November, squadron skipper Major Thomas G. Leach became the first carrier-qualified Death Rattler pilot since 1962 with landings aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63).⁹⁴ Another deployment took the squadron to MCAS Yuma from 28 November to 10 December. It was reported in the Command Chronology for that period that fully operational status had been achieved, but that the squadron had a limited combat capability because of a shortage of maintenance personnel.⁹⁵

Throughout 1972, the situation was unchanged: the squadron was fully operational but still experienced a critical shortage of maintenance personnel. In addition to this problem, a shortage of qualified pilots and naval flight officers (NFOs) developed during the first half of 1972, as a result of the overall Marine Corps readjustment to a peacetime environment in which end strength was reduced by roughly one-third. There

was a declining need for aircrews in the Western Pacific, and many Reserve pilots and NFOs were given early releases from active duty. As a result of these personnel and aircraft shortages, a planned deployment to NAAS Fallon for conventional ordnance training in May was cancelled.

The shortages persisted into the second half of 1972, but aircrew training continued. From 23 October to 7 November the squadron deployed to MCAS Yuma for conventional weapons training. A month before, the Death Rattlers had taken part in the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD) exercises.

The operational status of the squadron remained the same in early 1973. On 10 January the Death Rattlers participated in another NORAD exercise, this time as part of the aggressor force, and a deployment was made to MCAS Yuma with 10 Phantoms during the first half of March for conventional weapons training. On 1 March, Lieutenant Colonel Michael P. Sullivan took command of the squadron from Lieutenant Colonel Albert E. Brewster, Jr.

The Death Rattlers celebrated their 30th anniversary as a Marine Corps squadron on 10 August 1973, and on 11 September 1973, the unit participated in another NORAD exercise. A 12-day deployment to MCAS Yuma with 12 Phantoms occurred in October, and yet another NORAD exercise took place on 30 October 1973. The pace of training continued to be brisk as the Death Rattlers participated in the "College Dart" deployment to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida during 16-26 November 1973. This exercise pitted six of the squadron's F-4N Phantoms in intercept operations against USAF F-106s which were used to simulate Russian MiG-21s. The aircrews flew well against the F-106s. The exercise problem started with the NFO controlling the intercept and the pilot taking over aircraft maneuvering once the F-106 was engaged. The teamwork displayed by VMFA-323's Phantoms resulted in their consistently gaining the advantage against the F-106s.

The F-4N version of the Phantom II was an improvement over the earlier Phantom model, because of new avionics equipment and structural strengthening.

The main emphasis in early 1974 was F-4N weapons system training. Another NORAD operation took place on 29 and 30 January. In March, the Death Rattlers returned to Yuma for a 12-day training session in conventional weapons. The fast pace of operations continued with two more NORAD exercises on 1-21 May, and a four-day deployment in June to NAS, Dallas, Texas.

During Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's tenure as



Photo courtesy of BGen Michael P. Sullivan, USMC

LtCol Michael P. Sullivan is receiving the Alfred J. Cunningham Award as the Marine Corps Aviator of the Year in 1974. Pictured on the left is Mr. James E. Nicholson. To the right of LtCol Sullivan are MajGen Paul J. Fontana and Gen Earl E. Anderson.

squadron skipper bold new achievements were made in Marine Corps fighter tactics, and VMFA-323 was sought by many other organizations to practice aerial tactics. The Death Rattlers had become one of the most respected Phantom squadrons of all three Services.⁹⁶

The squadron was further distinguished in 1974 when Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan received the coveted Alfred A. Cunningham Award in recognition of being named the Marine Aviator of the Year. The award was based in large part on his accomplishments as Commanding Officer of VMFA-323. The citation, reproduced here in part, attested not only to Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's personal skills as a pilot but to his leadership and training accomplishments as well:

While serving as Commanding Officer of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron Three Two Three, Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan was directly responsible for the squadron's achievements in fighter tactics development and aircraft utilization. Under his leadership, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron Three Two Three flew 5,500 hours and 4,700 sorties during the fiscal year with ten aircraft. . . . Under his guidance, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron Three Two Three aircrews flew

1,348 dissimilar ACM sorties against such Navy, Air Force, and Marine adversaries as the F-14, F-106, F-8, T-38, A-4, A-6, and A-7 aircraft, earning an enviable reputation in Marine Fighter Aviation. . . . Creating an atmosphere of dynamic development, he took new and inexperienced aircrews and made them acknowledged masters of their trade. . . .⁹⁷

The Death Rattlers were steadily gaining in operational proficiency as the time neared for another change of command. Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan turned over VMFA-323 to Lieutenant Colonel Don K. Hanna on 3 July 1974. Under Lieutenant Colonel Hanna, aircrew tactical proficiency continued to improve through an aggressive air combat maneuvering program, intensive air-to-ground ordnance delivery training sessions, and continued participation in exercises. In the latter category, VMFA-323 was unique; it was the only west coast Marine F4 unit to participate on a regular basis in NORAD exercises.

In one of the NORAD engagements, squadron aircrews stood five-minute and 15-minute alerts and scrambled to intercept "bogies" in the form of B-52s, F-102s, T-33s, A-4s, and F-106s at ranges exceeding 150 nautical miles from the western coast of the United

States. These experiences added greatly to the squadron's proficiency in air intercept tactics.

September 1974 brought another "first" for the Death Rattlers. The squadron operated as a fixed-wing aggressor element in Phiblex/Maulex 1974 (Exercise Bead Ring). Lieutenant Colonel Hanna, was designated as the aggressor air force's commander. VMFA-323 was augmented with detachments from Marine Air Control Squadron 7 (MACS-7), Marine Air Support Squadron 3 (MASS-3), 2d Light Anti Aircraft Missile Battalion (2d LAAM Bn), Marine Light Helicopter Squadron 267 (HML-267), and Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 361 (HMM-361). A wide variety of missions were flown during this exercise.

In October 1974, the squadron had a split deployment, in which eight Phantoms went to NAAS Fallon for air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons training and three Phantoms took part in the "Have Idea Project" at Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, Nevada. This project was a joint Marine Corps/Navy evaluation of the F-4N weapons system and of Marine Corps and Navy fighter tactics. The Death Rattlers were chosen for this important project because of their air-to-air combat proficiency.

During this period, the Death Rattlers hosted a detachment of F-106 aircraft from the 84th Fighter Interceptor Squadron for one week. The F-106s simulated the MiG-21 in "dissimilar" aircraft combat maneuvering. At the end of calendar year 1974, the squadron boasted of having achieved 2,800 accident-free hours of flying.

In March 1975, the squadron again deployed to Yuma for weapons delivery training. The high tempo of training continued through May, when VMFA-323 was selected to form the nucleus of Composite Squadron 50 and deploy to San Clemente Island for participation in Phiblex/Mablex-75, Exercise Bell Buster.

Lieutenant Colonel Hanna was designated Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 50 Composite Fixed Wing Squadron Commander for the exercise in which realistic training in air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons delivery tactics were practiced. The highlight of the operation was a 15-plane mission "Alpha Strike" featuring E-2C airborne control, air combat maneuvering with dissimilar aggressor aircraft, aerial refueling, and attack on a simulated SAM missile site following an extended flight over water. During the exercise, the Death Rattlers flew 133 sorties for 157 hours with only six Phantoms. Also during this period of time, the squadron continued to hold the dis-

tinction of being the only west coast Marine Phantom squadron routinely assigned to NORAD exercises. In three NORAD engagements that took place between January and June 1975, Death Rattler Phantoms successfully intercepted B-52, EB-47, A-6, F-106, RB-57, and T-33 aircraft during night operations.

On 4 July 1975, Lieutenant Colonel Michael R. McDonough relieved Lieutenant Colonel Hanna as commanding officer of VMFA-323. In August, the squadron provided flight escort support to eight F-100 aircraft from the 162nd Tactical Fighter Training Group, Tucson, Arizona. The 162nd was an Air National Guard unit, and the joint operation, known as Road Runner No. 1, established a precedent. Never before had a Marine Phantom squadron worked with the Air National Guard in an operation.

On 13 August 1975, VMFA-323 participated in its 26th NORAD exercise, involving air intercept operations at night. Four squadron aircraft were used on this training mission, called Falling Brave. The following month, the squadron again deployed to NAAS Fallon for training in ground attack, electronic warfare, and fighter escort procedures.

The highlight of 1975 however, came on 2 August when a letter arrived from Lieutenant General Frank C. Tharin, USMC (Retired), National Commander of the Marine Corps Aviation Association. The letter contained a message of congratulations to VMFA-323 on winning the Robert M. Hanson Award as the outstanding Marine fighter squadron of 1975. This was a proud moment for the Death Rattlers, who had set record after record in 32 years of flying.

The Death Rattlers took part in Operation Rattler from 27 January to 5 February 1976. This operation was unique because full ground control intercept (GCI) support for the scheduled air-to-air training was provided by MACS-7. Refueling was set up by Marine Air Base Squadron 16 (MABS-16), using the Tactical Airfield Dispensing System (TAFDS) to support the operation. The Death Rattlers flew weapons sorties and night intercept missions against aircraft assigned as adversaries from Marine Attack Training Squadron 102 (VMAT-102), VMA-223, Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron 13 (H&MS-13), and the Navy Fighter Weapons School. The squadron participated in another NORAD exercise called Operation Vigilant Overview, and for two days in May 1976 flew support missions in Operation Palm Tree.

The Death Rattlers hosted Composite Squadron 13 (VC-13), a Naval Reserve squadron based at NAS Miramar, from 6 to 8 July, for dissimilar air combat tactics training. This experience prepared the squadron for

Operation Falcon II, an air-to-air warfare training deployment to McChord Air Force Base, Tacoma, Washington, from 10 to 17 July. In this operation, the "Snakes" flew extensive dissimilar air combat training missions against F-106s flown by aircrews of the 318th Fighter Interceptor Squadron.* The deployment contributed significantly to the combat readiness of both squadrons. Later in July a detachment of the squadron deployed to Nellis Air Force Base for dissimilar air combat training with the 64th Aggressor Squadron. On 23 July, the squadron received a new commanding officer when Lieutenant Colonel William W. Mackey relieved Lieutenant Colonel McDonough. The month ended with yet another NORAD exercise on 28 July.

August found the Snakes flying coordinated air strikes against targets located in the Electronic Warfare Range at China Lake, California, along with other squadrons from El Toro. On 17 and 18 August, the squadron took part in a missile firing exercise using Sidewinder (AIM-9) and Sparrow (AIM-7) missiles. Six of each of the missiles were launched during the exercise. Four target drones were brought down, and near misses were recorded on two others, both of which were well within the missile's "lethal envelope" had warheads been installed.

Several other deployments and exercises took place during the latter months of 1976 as the Death Rattlers continued to hone their already sharp air combat skills. In December, the Snakes provided close air support for elements of the 1st Marine Division in an exercise at Camp Pendleton.

The intensity of training did not let up for the Death Rattlers in the first few months of 1977. From January to June, the squadron participated in 14 operations and exercises at its home base of MCAS El Toro and in a variety of deployments to six other bases. One of the highlights in this period was Operation Bald Eagle in which VMFA-323 was tasked with providing adversary air support to the 555th Tactical Fighter Training Squadron at Luke Air Force Base, Phoenix, Arizona. In this effort, the Snakes were to fight a new aircraft, the F-15, which had been designed specifically to achieve and maintain air superiority. The results of the engagements, however, proved that properly operated F-4s can survive against a superior aircraft. In fact, the F-4-N Phantom II not only survived against the F-15, but in many cases got the first kills. As the Command Chronology reported, "Again

the 'Death Rattlers' had fought as they trained and the tremendous results spoke for themselves."⁹⁸ On 27 May 1977, Lieutenant Colonel Hardy A. Slone became the squadron skipper, relieving Lieutenant Colonel Mackey.

The second half of 1977 also found the squadron heavily engaged in operations and exercises. Emphasis was placed on upgrading the unit's proficiency in air-to-ground ordnance delivery techniques and defensive electronic countermeasures (DECM).

For three weeks in July, the squadron underwent an integrated weapons system review. This effort culminated in a missile firing exercise scheduled for the period 2 to 5 August 1977. Instead of using the entire allotment of four days, the Snakes fired all 13 of their missiles within a record 26 hours. Of the nine Sidewinders fired, there were six kills. For the Sparrow firing, aircrews were placed on night strip alert and scrambled after the drones were launched. Of the four Sparrows fired, three recorded kills.

Lieutenant Colonel Slone led a detachment of four F-4Ns to Cold Lake, Canada, in late August 1977 at the request of the Canadian Air Force, to engage in combined exercises. That experience led to the participation of the 419th Squadron, Canadian Air Force, in a Death Rattler exercise the following April. It also resulted in the deployment of Canadian CF-5s and CF-104s to participate in dissimilar aircraft exercises with VMFA-323 in February 1978.⁹⁹

In October, the squadron received a request from the 508th Tactical Fighter Squadron, an F-105 unit from Hill Air Force Base, Ogden, Utah, to participate as adversaries in an operational readiness inspection. In this exercise, the Phantoms were tasked with defending targets on the ranges next to Nellis Air Force Base against a coordinated air strike composed of 16 F-105s. Both squadrons gained a great deal of experience in this interesting mission.

On 31 October, VMFA-323 deployed to Nellis Air Force Base to take part in a Red Flag exercise.** The squadron F-4s made intercepts as low as 50 feet at speeds of 600 knots against a variety of adversary aircraft including the CF-104, A-7, B-52, and FB-111. The Death Rattlers were also tactically successful against the technologically superior F-15 Eagle. The Red Flag exercises were successful in part due to the fine cooperation of the KC-130 tankers on assignment for inflight

*More recent command chronologies reflect the fact that in addition to their "Death Rattlers" nickname, VMFA-323 began using the nickname "Snakes."

**The Tactical Fighter Weapons Center (TFWC) at Nellis AFB supplies the facilities and much of the support for the Red Flag operations. These exercises provide aircrews a chance to practice realistic combat tactics in an air environment involving composite forces and typical "threat" weapons systems and tactics.

refueling. As Lieutenant Colonel Slone recalls, "the good coordination between tanker crews and fighter crews allowed the F-4s to be off CAP station only 10 to 15 minutes. The additional on-station time added to the realism of the exercise since it effectively added more fighters to the Red forces."¹⁰⁰

During the first few months of 1978, the Death Rattlers concentrated on night ground attack training and night all-weather intercepts. In April 1978, the squadron sent a detachment of four Phantoms to Twentynine Palms, California, in support of Operation Palm Tree. All missions were flown from the expeditionary airfield at Twentynine Palms. The results of the operation were highly successful, and the four-plane detachment expended four Sparrows and four Sidewinders.

Beginning on 15 April 1978, the squadron hosted the 419th Squadron of the Canadian Air Force for a joint exercise which involved fixed-wing and helicopter squadrons from the 3d MAW as well as two companies of infantry with Redeye support. In Operation Mojave Green, the Death Rattlers and the Canadians flew in a coordinated low-level strike mission against an airfield in the China Lake area. An interesting feature of this exercise was that it was planned and conducted by the weapons tactics instructors from VMFA-323 and S-3 (operations) personnel from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division.*

On 2 August 1978, Lieutenant Colonel David V. Denton took over as commanding officer from Lieutenant Colonel Slone. According to the command chronology the highlight of the period was the deployment of eight aircraft and 115 personnel to Nellis Air Force Base for the annual Red Flag operation during the period from 8 to 23 September 1978.

A total of 193 hours and 107 sorties were flown in the most realistic air war exercise conducted in CONUS. As many as 68 aircraft of 13 different types frequently participated in a single strike. Intensive planning and coordination was necessary for each mission and resulted in a combat environment for the aircrew. The primary role of the "Snakes" was Combat Air Patrol (CAP) in support of the tactical plans of individual mission commanders.¹⁰¹

During 1978, the squadron was involved in 16 operations and exercises, in addition to making several deployments to nearby bases for weapons training.

The focus of training changed abruptly in the early months of 1979. In January of that year, VMFA-323

*Weapons tactics instructors (WTIs) are relatively junior officers who have been given an intense training course in threat awareness and tactics. Upon course completion the WTI returns to his unit and administers various tactics programs.

began an extensive period of FCLP training at MCAS El Toro and NAF El Centro in preparation for an upcoming deployment on board the USS *Coral Sea* (CV-43) later in the year. El Centro was chosen for FCLP flights because the conditions for night carrier landing could best be duplicated at that site, and for a taste of what was to come, several Phantoms went on board the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) during the period from 19 to 21 February.

On 11 March, the preparations for carrier operations continued when the Death Rattlers deployed to NAS Lemoore for two weeks as part of Carrier Air Wing 14. While at Lemoore, the Snakes flew with highly experienced Navy fighter pilots from VA-127. During the final debriefings, the Navy pilots were highly complimentary of the Death Rattlers' air combat tactics.

The emphasis on carrier qualifications continued through April, May, and June 1979.

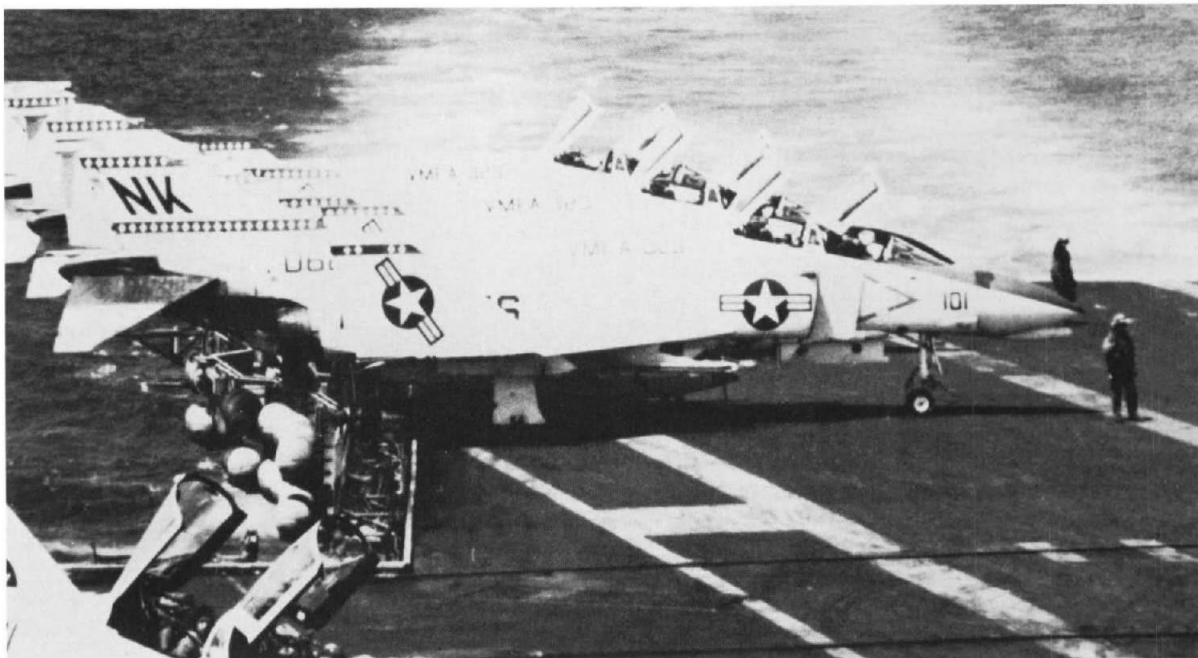
On 29-30 June, the squadron hosted a reunion for all pilots and NFOs who had ever flown with VMFA-323. More than 100 former squadron members attended the high-spirited gathering.

Following a brief rest at the beginning of July, 10 squadron F-4Ns departed El Toro for five days of intensive FCLP operations at Lemoore. Later in July the Death Rattlers flew refresher carrier controlled approaches at NAF San Clemente in final preparation for their deployment on board the *Coral Sea*. A two-week weapons training period began on 15 July, when eight Phantoms landed on the carrier.

Flight operations on the *Coral Sea* continued until 2 August. Two weeks later, the Snakes enjoyed another stay on board the *Coral Sea*, this time for six days, during which 53 arrested landings were made, 40 percent at night. On 22 August, the flight echelon returned to El Toro.

Another one-week deployment on board the *Coral Sea* occurred during the period 20-27 September, when 10 Phantoms flew from the carrier for additional training. The pace of operations was particularly intense on this occasion, for the squadron was tested in a demanding operational readiness evaluation on a number of phases in carrier operations. The Death Rattlers passed with flying colors. The commander of Carrier Group One commented favorably on the squadron's professionalism and high degree of skill in accomplishing its mission. In addition, Major General Leo J. LeBlanc, Jr., Commanding General, 3d MAW, commended the Snakes on their outstanding performance.

Preparations for carrier deployment continued into the fall of 1979. On 7 November, the squadron's 12



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Three F-4Ns of VMFA-323 are lined up on the flight deck of the USS Coral Sea (CV-43) in the waters of Southwest Asia during the Iran hostage crisis of 1980. Note the F-4N Phantom of VMFA-531, the sister squadron on board ship, in the left foreground.

Phantoms departed El Toro for NAS Alameda for eventual loading on board the *Coral Sea*. The Command Chronology for the July-December 1979 period included a statement heralding the beginning of the long-awaited carrier deployment:

After eleven months of hard work, hundreds of FCLP sorties, thousands of landings, four deployments to shore bases and seven deployments aboard ship, VMFA-323 sailed on 13 November from Alameda to begin its first overseas deployment in ten years.¹⁰²

The months on board the *Coral Sea* were busy and exciting for the Death Rattlers.

The squadron was scheduled to participate in an exercise with other units of the *Coral Sea's* battle group, but crucial events in Iran and Korea required its cancellation. The battle group set out at high speed toward South Korea. While cruising near Guam on 28 November 1979, two squadron Phantoms intercepted Soviet Tu-95 Bear bombers as they flew near the *Coral Sea*.

On 9 December, the *Coral Sea* steamed in waters near Okinawa and one of the squadron's Phantoms landed at Kadena, the Death Rattlers' old home field of World War II. One day later, the *Coral Sea* dropped anchor at Pusan, where the squadron had begun operations during the Korean War. The *Coral Sea*, as part of the Seventh Fleet, was standing by for any contingency which might arise following the assassination

of South Korean President Chung Hee Park. Later in the month, the squadron operated from NAS Cubi Point while the *Coral Sea* put in at the Subic Bay Naval Station for replenishment. The Snakes flew training flights at Cubi Point until 8 January 1980, when they rejoined the *Coral Sea* as she departed Philippine waters for the 10-day voyage to Pattaya, Thailand.

On 30 January, the *Coral Sea* began its passage through the Strait of Malacca following a four-day respite in Singapore. During the voyage around the southern tip of India, the squadron was on alert status 24 hours a day, and during that time, several Phantoms were launched to intercept and escort Soviet Il-38 May reconnaissance aircraft as they flew over the battle group. On 7 February 1980, the *Coral Sea* relieved the USS *Midway* and arrived on station in the Gulf of Oman. Soviet reconnaissance of the battle group increased in March 1980, and seven of their aircraft were intercepted and escorted by VMFA-323 Phantoms.

Air operations intensified for the Death Rattlers while the *Coral Sea* steamed in the waters of Southwest Asia. Aerial refueling flights with USAF KC-135s were conducted during April as part of the joint operation to rescue the American hostages held in Iran. In May, the *Coral Sea* headed east toward Subic Bay. During a port period from 9 to 21 May 1980, squadron activities centered on maintenance for the air-

craft and liberty for all hands, their first in over 100 days.

The battle group departed Subic Bay on 21 May, expecting to reach Hawaii within two weeks. Riots broke out in South Korea, however, and the battle group was diverted back to that region. While in Korean waters, the squadron flew 19 CAP missions. After the USS *Midway* (CV-41) relieved the *Coral Sea* on 31 May, the Death Rattlers were once again homeward bound.

The earlier course to Hawaii was dropped in favor of a great circle route to the west coast of the United States. The new course brought the battle group within the range of Soviet aircraft based near the port city of Vladivostok. As a consequence, the Snakes remained on 24-hour alert until 8 June 1980.

Two days later, the Death Rattler Phantoms launched from the deck of the *Coral Sea* for the last time. As the command chronology recorded:

On 10 June the squadron recorded its last arrested landing aboard the USS *Coral Sea* and flew 8 aircraft to MCAS El Toro and a long-awaited homecoming for the 16 aircrew. That scene was repeated several times the next day as VMFA-323 enlisted personnel met family and friends at NAS Alameda and at MCAS El Toro. The embark [debark] was effected with few flaws and after several days of well-deserved rest, VMFA-323 returned to shore-based duties as a member of MAG-11.¹⁰³

The *Coral Sea* deployment was clearly the highlight of the post-Vietnam era for the Death Rattlers of VMFA-323. It was, as well, the first time since World War II that two Marine fighter squadrons, VMFA-323 and VMFA-531, deployed together on board a Pacific Fleet carrier.¹⁰⁴ As Lieutenant (jg) John W. Dickson, Public Affairs Officer on board the *Coral Sea*, stated:

Whenever a carrier like this deploys, there are several attack and fighter squadrons aboard, but this is the first time two fighter squadrons have been Marines It's a prime example of the Navy-Marine Corps team.¹⁰⁵

With the Death Rattlers back at El Toro, the flight training emphasis in July 1980 shifted to ground attack missions. There was also a return to air combat tactics in July 1980 when the squadron provided adversary aircraft support to the 162nd Tactical Fighter Squadron, an Air National Guard unit in Tucson, Arizona.

On 14 August, Lieutenant Colonel Denton was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Christian F. DeFries, Jr., as commanding officer. The pace of operations continued to be high as the Death Rattlers concentrated on a variety of training tasks. Among these was a deployment to Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, on 17 August to further hone their fighter skills. This time

the adversaries were F-15 Eagles from Bitburg, Germany, and Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico.¹⁰⁶

In October, another squadron reunion was held, and one of the dignitaries in attendance was Lieutenant General George C. Axtell, Jr., the squadron's first skipper. The Snakes also proudly displayed the Hansen Award designating them as Fighter Squadron of the Year.

The entire month of January 1981 was spent at Nellis Air Force Base, two weeks working as fighter adversaries for the Air Force Fighter Weapons School and two weeks as part of the Red Forces in a Red Flag exercise.¹⁰⁷

In April, the Snakes suffered a severe loss when Major John C. McAnnally, squadron executive officer, crashed while flying a fighter attack escort mission in the Leach Lake tactics range. The squadron continued to fly numerous dissimilar aircraft sorties with VMA-311 in order to enhance its skills in aerial combat.

In May, the squadron deployed four aircraft to NAS Fallon for dissimilar aircraft operations against F-5s. During the third week of June, the squadron skipper, Lieutenant Colonel DeFries, had the honor of giving Mr. John C. Severino, president of ABC Television, a ride in the back seat of a Phantom. Mr. Severino emerged from the aircraft after the flight thoroughly delighted and ready to fly again.

August 1981 began with preparations for deployment of a contingent from the squadron to MCAS Kaneohe Bay, scheduled for the end of the month. USAF KC-135 tankers were scheduled to provide refueling support for the operation. On 28 August Lieutenant Colonel DeFries with four Phantoms, four Intruders from VMA(AW)-242, and four KC-135 aircraft deployed as planned. Upon their return on 31 August, the aircrews reported that the exercise had been a complete success. It was noted as well that never before had KC-135s been used as tanker support for Marine squadrons on a trans-Pacific deployment.¹⁰⁸

On 4 September, the squadron received a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Jerry R. Cadick. In October, the Death Rattlers again worked with a fighter squadron at Nellis Air Force Base. The aircrews gained valuable experience as they engaged the adversarial F-5s of the 64th Fighter Weapons Squadron.

The first few months of 1982 found the Death Rattlers engaged in a missile firing exercise and flying in support of two operations in the Twentynine Palms region. In March and April, the squadron took part in Operation Gallant Eagle 82 which involved 25,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines. Death Rattler

Phantoms were used in the delivery of live ordnance at one point in the exercise.¹⁰⁹ In May, aircrews from VMFA-323 took part in two air shows, one at El Toro and the other at McChord Air Force Base.

In July, the squadron made its final deployment with the F-4N Phantom II when it flew in support of an exercise at Nellis Air Force Base. Following this assignment, the Death Rattlers began transferring their aircraft to other units, in preparation for receiving the F/A-18 Hornet. One of the Phantoms was transferred to NAS, Norfolk, Virginia, to be part of a static display. Five others shared a less appealing fate; they were sent to the Naval Weapons Center at China Lake to be used as drones. By 14 September 1982, all Phantoms had been transferred.

September brought new aircraft and a new commanding officer. On 10 September 1983, Lieutenant Colonel Gary R. VanGysel relieved Lieutenant Colonel Cadick as skipper of the Snakes. Later in the month the first group of eight pilots reported to NAS Lemoore, California, to begin transition training in the Hornet. The pilots received their training in Fighter Attack Squadron 125 (VFA-125), a unique squadron because of its composition of both Navy and Marine personnel.

The F/A-18 Hornet came highly recommended. In December 1981, Brigadier General Harry T. Hagaman, a Death Rattler skipper during the Vietnam era, judged the Hornet to be unequalled by any other Navy aircraft for maneuverability in the fighter mode. He considered the Hornet to be ideally suited to the air-to-air mission as well as air-to-ground operations.¹¹⁰ Lieutenant General William J. White, Deputy Chief of Staff (Aviation), was equally optimistic about the Hornet. He stated that the F/A-18 will "clearly pro-

vide Marine Aviation with significantly enhanced combat superiority, both as a fighter and attack aircraft, over the F-4 that it replaces." Lieutenant General White added that the Hornet was already exceeding the established specifications for reliability and maintainability.¹¹¹

On 29 September 1982, Lieutenant Colonel VanGysel became the first member of VMFA-323 to fly the F/A-18. A second group of eight pilots began the Hornet transition course at Lemoore in November. On 25 February 1983, the first group of pilots assigned to the transition course completed their work and reported back to MCAS El Toro.

Less than one month later, on 21 March 1983, Lieutenant Colonel Van Gysel flew the first squadron Hornet to its new home at El Toro. Major General Clayton L. Comfort, Commanding General, 3d MAW, and Colonel Donald D. Bergman, Commanding Officer, MAG-11, were on hand as the Death Rattlers' first F/A-18 made its way down the flight line. Lieutenant Colonel Van Gysel spoke highly of the Hornet during a brief ceremony:

Possessing this aircraft allows us to use the knowledge we've learned and the training we've received in the last seven months. We've put together a practically new squadron but couldn't do any work without the aircraft. It's great to be back in business!¹¹²

A second F/A-18 arrived two days later.

During April 1983, the squadron began limited operations in proficiency flying, area familiarization, and two-plane tactics. On 25 April, the second group of eight pilots returned to El Toro from Hornet transition training. During 27-28 April, elements of the squadron participated in the 3d MAW exercise, Comfort Level V. These exercises, named after Major Gener-

Two VMFA-323 F/A-18 "Hornets" in flight formation off the California coast.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



al Comfort, were operational readiness inspections designed to maintain peak squadron performance. As part of the exercise the Death Rattlers maintained a continuous hot pad alert and flew both day and night operations, using the four Hornets in their possession.

In May, the Snakes deployed for the first time with Hornets to Luke Air Force Base and operated against both F-15 and F-16 aircraft. The four-day effort was devoted to pilot training with the Hornet's advanced weapons systems against the Air Force aircraft. Following the exercise the Hornet was judged to have held a slight edge over the Air Force planes because of its weapons system and avionics. Snake pilot First Lieutenant Dale A. Homire concluded that "a big advantage for us was the ability to fight in a wide envelope at high and low speeds."¹¹³

By 6 May 1983, the inventory of Hornets had grown to eight, and operations were aimed at certifying pilots in air-to-air and air-to-ground tactics. In addition to regular training, one of the Hornets was flown in the annual El Toro Air Show.

Flight operations intensified the following month. During 20-24 June the squadron completed its first extended session of air-to-air gunnery. The Snakes also provided two aircraft and one pilot for carrier qualification on board the USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63). During 27-28 June, Captain James F. Flock became the first Death Rattler to carrier qualify in the F/A-18.

Training in air-to-air operations continued in July with a 12-day deployment of six Hornets to Luke Air Force Base. The pilots gained valuable knowledge in hot weather operations and in air-to-air operations against F-15 and F-16 aircraft. In August 1983, the squadron began air-to-air gunnery practice firing at a towed banner. It was the first aerial gunnery work since the days of the Crusader, the last plane with internal guns flown by the Snakes.

During 12-16 September, the squadron completed its first live missile firing. Low altitude tactics training rounded out flight operations for the month. On 28 September, the squadron took delivery on its twelfth Hornet.

The first 13 days of October found the Snakes deployed to NAS, Fallon, Nevada, for work on low altitude tactics and air-to-ground bombing. Following this deployment, all squadron members met the training and readiness syllabus criteria for being combat ready. In November, the Death Rattlers took part in exercise Red Flag at Nellis Air Force Base. The VMFA-323 Hornets flew as aggressors during the first week against a variety of opposing aircraft. Roles were reversed during the second week and the squadron's combat readiness posture was further enhanced. The

squadron completed Red Flag on 23 November and returned to El Toro. First Lieutenant Nathan R. Hines, USAF air controller during the exercise, had high praise for the flying ability of the Snake pilots:

Overall we all are extremely impressed with the way they flew. The F/A-18 and Marine pilots are an awesome team. I'm glad they're on our side.¹¹⁴

The Death Rattlers began 1984 with comprehensive preparation for a Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation (MCCRES), a rigorous examination of all aspects of the squadron's proficiency. By that time VMFA-323 had completed all the necessary F/A-18 transition milestones, and the squadron personnel, both pilots and maintenance technicians, had achieved high levels of expertise with the Hornet.

When the MCCRES finally concluded in February 1984 there was no doubt of the squadron's readiness for combat. As the command chronology related, all phases of the testing were passed with flying colors:

When MCCRES was over, the squadron had demonstrated that it was truly combat ready. It achieved a grade of 98 percent. Of the 1100 academic questions tested, only one was missed. Pilots surpassed all previous records in air-to-air gunnery. Not a single evaluated all-weather intercept (AWI) was missed. Scored bombing, both day and night, achieved a better than 50' Circular Error Probable (CEP). Air-to-air combat maneuvering against sophisticated Air Force F-15 adversaries, resulted in successful engagement scores.¹¹⁵

Within hours of completing the MCCRES the squadron was evaluated in an Inspector General's visit. All functional areas were graded either "excellent" or "outstanding." Soon after the completion of this inspection the squadron skipper, Lieutenant Colonel Van Gysel, departed for the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, California, to assume the duty as Commanding Officer, Aviation Combat Element (ACE) for Combined Action Exercise 5-84 (CAX 5-84).

Late in March 1984, the Snakes flew several days of FCLPs in preparation for deployment on board the USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN-70), and four of the Death Rattler pilots earned both day and night carrier qualifications during this deployment. March also found the squadron hosting elements of the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron from Luke Air Force Base for dissimilar air combat maneuvering training. In addition, the Snakes conducted electronic countermeasures work with Marine Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron 2 (VMAQ-2) from MCAS, Cherry Point, North Carolina, and they participated in Comfort Level IX. On 30 March, the squadron was honored to host the Secretary of the Navy, John F. Lehman, Jr., for an air com-

bat maneuvering exercise pitting two Hornets against two F-14As.

April found the Death Rattlers continuing weapons and tactics training in deployments to MCAS Yuma, NAS Lemoore, and NAS China Lake. The month closed out with FCLP training for five pilots in preparation for day and night aircraft carrier qualifications on board the USS *Constellation* (CV-64) in May.

On 1 June 1984, Lieutenant Colonel Donald A. Beaufait relieved Lieutenant Colonel Van Gysel as Commanding Officer. Later in the month the Snakes took part in dissimilar air-to-air training with the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing at Nellis Air Force Base.

Today the squadron exhibits the same spirit and zeal it has shown for more than 40 years of continuous operations. From the record-breaking events of 1945 when its pilots flew against the Japanese in the battle for Okinawa, through three hard years in Korea and three demanding tours of duty in Vietnam, as well as the many years of strenuous training, the Death Rattlers have always given their best for Corps and country. Their high state of readiness with the first-line F/A-18 Hornet signals a bright future and the continuation of a tradition of excellence. They remain ready to live by their motto: "Come to Fight—Come to Win!"

Marine Corps Historical Collection



NOTES

The primary source materials used in the preparation of this history are held by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C., hereafter Hist&MusDiv. These materials may be reviewed at the Marine Corps Historical Center (MCHC), Building 58, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C.

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3. Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), p. 263.
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13. Ibid.
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18. "Death Rattlers' on Way Home: Bag 124½ Jap Planes in 2 Months at Okinawa," *Los Angeles Star-News and Post*, 28Jun45, p. 16.

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27. Ernest H. Giusti, "Marine Air Over the Pusan Perimeter," *Marine Corps Gazette*, May52, p. 25.

28. Ibid., p. 27.
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31. VMF-323, HistD, Oct50.
32. Kenneth W. Condit and Ernest H. Giusti, "Marine Air at the Chosin Reservoir," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Jul52, p. 19.
33. LtCol Leo J. Ihli, Comments on draft ms, 13Aug85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Ihli comments.
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35. Ibid., p. 27.
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38. LtCol Pat Meid, USMCR, and Maj James M. Yingling, USMC, *Operations in West Korea: U.S. Marine Operations in Korea 1950-1953*, vol. 5 (Washington: HistBr, G-3 Div, HQMC, 1972), pp. 403, 420, 439, hereafter Meid and Yingling, *Operations in West Korea*.
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44. LtCol Willard C. Lemke, Comments on draft ms, 28Jul85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Lemke comments.
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51. VMA-323 ComdD, Jul53.
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55. "Third Wing Planes Amass 5000 Hours in Deployment," *Flight Jacket*, 7Sep56, p. 1.
56. "'Fury' and 'Skyhawk' Join Toro Fighter Units," *Flight Jacket*, 28Sep56, p. 1.
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58. Lt Daniel L. Cummings, Comments on draft ms, 23Jul85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Cummings comments.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. "VMF-323 Returns from Whidby Island Maneuvers," *Flight Jacket*, 4Sep59, p. 3.
66. "VMF-323 Pilots to Train Aboard Aircraft Carrier," *Flight Jacket*, 19Feb60, p. 13.
67. "VMF-323 Going to Pacific Area," *Flight Jacket*, 20Oct61, p. 2.
68. "323 Back from Overseas After Six-month Cruise in Western Pacific," *Flight Jacket*, 18May62, p. 5.
69. "323 Return from Dallas Deployment," *Flight Jacket*, 29Jun62, p. 6.
70. "MAG-33 on Heavy Schedule at Yuma," *Flight Jacket*, 11Jan63, p. 5.
71. "323 Yuma Trip Successful," *Flight Jacket*, 1Feb63, p. 1.
72. "Wing Units in 'Steel Gate' Action," *Flight Jacket*, 8Mar63, p. 1.
73. "'Desert Winds' Begins at 29 Palms," *Flight Jacket*, 15Mar63, p. 1. "'Desert Winds' Ends," *Flight Jacket*, 22Mar63, p. 1.
74. Maj Donald K. Tooker, Comments on draft ms, 4Aug85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Tooker comments.
75. Tooker comments. It is noteworthy that Lt Judkins subsequently recovered and flew one more flight in the F-8. He then resigned his commission and became a pilot for Delta Airlines where he is a captain today, according to Maj Tooker. Lt Judkins' experience

was indeed remarkable. He is reported to be one of only two known pilots who have fallen more than 10,000 feet and lived to tell the story. His exploits, and more of Maj Tooker's, were recorded in articles in *True Magazine* (March 1964) and *Readers' Digest* (October 1967).

76. Special Report 304-63, 3d MAW, "Green Wave," Jul63.

77. Tooker comments.

78. "First NAO Reports for VMFA-323 Duty," *The Windsock*, 21Aug64, p. 1.

79. MajGen Norman W. Gourley, Comments on draft ms, nd (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Gourley comments.

80. VMFA-323, ComdD, 13Mar-10May65.

81. "VMFA-323 Scores Records At P.R.," *The Windsock*, 23Apr65, p. 8; Gourley comments.

82. "Blistering Pace Set By Death Rattlers In P.R.," *The Windsock*, 28May65, p. 16.

The Vietnam Years: 1965-1969

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section was derived exclusively from VMFA-323 Command Chronologies, hereafter VMFA-323 ComdC.

83. 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec65.

84. Marine Aircraft Group 24, ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec65.

85. VMFA-323 ComdC, Feb67.

86. Col Gordon H. Keller, Jr., Comments on draft ms, nd (Comment File, MCHC) "The Death Rattlers," *Torii Teller*, 17Jul67, pp. 7-8, hereafter "The Death Rattlers."

87. VMFA-323 ComdC, Jun67.

88. Capt Moyers S. Shore II, *The Battle for Khe Sanh* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1969), pp. 100-101.

89. BGen Harry T. Hagaman, Comments on draft ms, 22Jul85 (Comment File, MCHC).

90. Ibid., May68.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid., Mar69.

93. Ibid., Jul-Dec69.

94. LtCol Thomas G. Leach, Comments on draft ms, 29Jul85 (Comment File, MCHC).

El Toro Again: 1969-1984

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95. VMFA-323 ComdC, Jul-Dec71.

96. BGen Michael P. Sullivan, Comments on draft ms, 15Jul85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Sullivan comments.

97. Sullivan comments.

98. VMFA-323 ComdC, Jan-Jun77.

99. LtCol Hardy A. Slone, Comments on draft ms, 28Jul85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter Slone comments.

100. Slone comments.

101. VMFA-323 ComdC, Jul-Dec78.

102. VMFA-323 ComdC, Jul-Dec79.

103. VMFA-323 ComdC, Jan-Jun80.

104. "Historic First for *Coral Sea* and Air Wing Fourteen" (VMFA-323 Unit File, RefSec, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

105. "Marine Carrier Squadron Serving 162 Days at Sea" (VMFA-323 Unit File, RefSec, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

106. Col Christian F. DeFries, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 1Aug85 (Comment File, MCHC), hereafter DeFries comments.

107. DeFries comments.

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109. "Gallant Eagle 82: 'Quite a Show and a Whole Lot More,'" *HQMC Hotline*, vol. 11, May82, p. 6.

110. BGen H. T. Hagaman, "A Marine Reports on the F/A-18," *Marine Corps Gazette*, vol. 65, Dec81, p. 28.

111. LtGen William J. White, "Status of Marine Aviation," *Marine Corps Gazette*, vol. 66, May82, p. 20.

112. "Death Rattlers' Welcome Arrival of Their First F/A-18 Hornet Jet," *Flight Jacket*, 25Mar83, p. 1.

113. "VMFA-323 Takes Hornets to Desert for Joint Training," *Flight Jacket*, 13May83, p. 10.

114. "Red Flag Pits Marines Against Air Force in Tough Air Training," *Flight Jacket*, 2Dec83, p. 4.

115. VMFA-323 ComdC, 1Jan-31Jul84.

Appendix A

CHRONOLOGY

- 1 August 1943 Commissioned as Marine Fighting Squadron 323 (VMF-323) at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina, and assigned to Marine Aircraft Group 32, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing; trained at Marine Corps Auxiliary Air Facility, Oak Grove, Pollocksville, North Carolina.
- 12 January 1944 Relocated to Naval Auxiliary Air Station, El Centro, California, and reassigned to Marine Base Defense Aircraft Group 43, Marine Fleet Air, West Coast.
- 21 July 1944 Deployed to Marine Corps Air Station, Ewa, Oahu, Territory of Hawaii, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 32, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing.
- August 1944 Redeployed to Emirau Island, Bismarck Archipelago.
- 24 October 1944 Redeployed to Luganville Field, Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides.
- March 1945 On board the USS *White Plains* (CVE-66) enroute to Okinawa.
- 9 April 1945 Relocated to Kadena airbase, Okinawa.
- April - July 1945 Participated in the Okinawa Campaign operating from Kadena airbase, Okinawa.
- 15 July 1945 Relocated to Awase airbase, Okinawa.
- 6 February 1946 Boarded the USS *Cape Gloucester* (CVE-109) returning to the United States.
- 15 March 1946 Relocated to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 33, Marine Fleet Air, West Coast.
- October 1947 Reassigned to 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.
- 16 July 1950 Participated in the Korean War, operating from the USS *Badoeng Strait* (CVE-116); Bofu; Pusan; the USS *Sicily* (CVE-118); Kangnung; and Pyongtaeng-ni.
- 30 June 1952 Redesignated Marine Attack Squadron 323 (VMA-323).
- 6 July 1953 Redeployed to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 15, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.
- 15 September 1955 Reassigned, as a unit in Marine Aircraft Group 15, to 3d Marine Aircraft Wing.
- 31 December 1956 Redesignated Marine Fighter Squadron 323 (VMF-323).
- 30 June 1957 Redeployed to Naval Air Station, Atsugi, Japan, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 11, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.
- September 1958 Redeployed to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 33, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing.
- 19 July 1962 Redesignated Marine All Weather Fighter Squadron 323 (VMF(AW)-323).
- June 1963 Redeployed to Naval Air Station, Atsugi, Japan, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 11, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.
- 1 July 1964 Redesignated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323 (VMFA-323).
- July 1964 Redeployed to Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 24, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing.
- April-May 1965 Participated in the Dominican Republic intervention, operating from Naval Air Station, Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico.

October - December 1965	Deployed to Da Nang, Republic of Vietnam, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 11, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.
December 1965 - February 1966	Participated in the Vietnam War, operating from Da Nang.
March - June 1966	Redeployed to Tainan Air Base, Taiwan.
June - July 1966	Redeployed to Iwakuni, Japan.
July 1966 - May 1967	Redeployed to Da Nang.
May - August 1967	Redeployed to Iwakuni.
August 1967 - March 1969	Redeployed to Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam, for continued participation in the Vietnam War.
March 1969	Redeployed to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, and reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 33, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing.
November 1970	Reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 13.
July 1971	Reassigned to Marine Aircraft Group 11.
November 1979 - June 1980	Participated in the Iranian crisis, operating from the USS <i>Coral Sea</i> (CV-43).
October 1985 - May 1986	Deployed for naval operations off the Libyan coast, operating from the USS <i>Coral Sea</i> (CV-43).

Appendix B

COMMANDING OFFICERS

Maj George C. Axtell, Jr.	1 Aug 1943 - 15 Jun 1945
Maj Martin E. W. Oelrich	16 Jun 1945 - 30 Sep 1945
Maj Lowell D. Grow	1 Oct 1945 - 31 Jan 1946
Maj William G. Voss	1 Feb 1946 - 9 Mar 1946
Maj Stanley R. Bailey	10 Mar 1946 - 8 Jan 1947
Maj John S. Payne	9 Jan 1947 - 25 Aug 1947
Maj William C. Humbert	26 Aug 1947 - 7 Mar 1948
LtCol William C. Humbert	8 Mar 1948 - 6 May 1948
Maj Robert C. Armstead	7 May 1948 - 30 Jun 1948
Maj Honore G. Dalton	1 Jul 1948 - 31 Mar 1949
Maj Elmer G. Glidden, Jr.	1 Apr 1949 - 6 Mar 1950
Maj Robert E. Johnson	7 Mar 1950 - 6 Jul 1950
Maj Arnold A. Lund	7 Jul 1950 - 24 Jan 1951
Maj Stanley S. Nicolay	25 Jan 1951 - 23 Mar 1951
Maj Donald L. Clark	24 Mar 1951 - 2 May 1951
Maj Charles M. Kunz	3 May 1951 - 24 Sep 1951
LtCol George F. Vaughan	25 Sep 1951 - 24 Oct 1951
Maj John L. Dexter	25 Oct 1951 - 15 Jan 1952
LtCol Richard L. Blume	16 Jan 1952 - 25 Apr 1952
Maj William A. Weir	26 Apr 1952 - 31 May 1952
LtCol Henry S. Miller	1 Jun 1952 - 31 Aug 1952
LtCol Kenneth R. Chamberlain	1 Sep 1952 - 19 Nov 1952
LtCol Willard C. Lemke	20 Nov 1952 - 12 Jan 1953
LtCol William M. Frash	13 Jan 1953 - 10 Apr 1953
LtCol Clarence H. Moore	11 Apr 1953 - 26 Jun 1953
Maj Robert C. Woten	27 Jun 1953 - 5 Jul 1953
Capt Ted J. Foster	6 Jul 1953 - 13 Jul 1953
LtCol William M. Watkins	14 Jul 1953 - 16 Mar 1954
Maj William D. Armstrong	17 Mar 1954 - 29 Mar 1954
LtCol Robert G. Owens, Jr.	30 Mar 1954 - 9 Aug 1954
LtCol Douglas A. Bangert	10 Aug 1954 - 23 Dec 1954
Maj Richard Hey, Jr.	24 Dec 1954 - 10 Mar 1955
Maj Clyde H. Davis, Jr.	11 Mar 1955 - 30 Mar 1955
LtCol Clyde H. Davis, Jr.	1 Apr 1955 - 3 Aug 1955
LtCol Kenneth D. Frazier	4 Aug 1955 - 1 Oct 1956
LtCol Warren H. McPherson	2 Oct 1956 - 2 Jan 1957
LtCol Daniel L. Cummings	3 Jan 1957 - 18 Sep 1958
LtCol Floyd C. Haxton	19 Sep 1958 - 28 Jan 1959
LtCol Dwain L. Engel	29 Jan 1959 - 1 Dec 1959

LtCol Frank E. Wilson 2 Dec 1959 - 10 Jun 1960

 LtCol Robert E. Johnson 11 Jun 1960 - 1 Jun 1961
 LtCol Frederic T. Watts, Jr. 2 Jun 1961 - 15 Jul 1962
 LtCol Claude O. Barnhill, Jr. 16 Jul 1962 - 4 May 1964
 Maj Donald K. Tooker 5 May 1964 - 30 Jun 1964
 LtCol Norman W. Gourley 1 Jul 1964 - 30 Jun 1965

 LtCol Andrew W. O'Donnell 1 Jul 1965 - 20 Jul 1966
 LtCol A.W. Talbert 21 Jul 1966 - 29 Jan 1967
 LtCol Gordon H. Keller, Jr. 30 Jan 1967 - 15 Jul 1967
 LtCol Edison W. Miller 16 Jul 1967 - 13 Oct 1967
 LtCol Harry T. Hagaman 14 Oct 1967 - 16 May 1968

 LtCol Don J. Slee 17 May 1968 - 11 Dec 1968
 LtCol Ira L. Morgan, Jr. 12 Dec 1968 - 25 Mar 1969
 Maj Robert L. Bainbridge 1 Apr 1969 - 31 Jul 1969
 Maj Karl A. Zimmerman II 1 Aug 1969 - 9 Aug 1970
 LtCol Keith A. Smith 10 Mar 1970 - 6 May 1970

 LtCol Donald L. Waldvogel 7 May 1970 - 31 May 1971
 Maj Thomas G. Leach 1 Jun 1971 - 30 Apr 1972
 LtCol Thomas G. Leach 1 May 1972 - 8 Jun 1972
 LtCol Albert E. Brewster 9 Jun 1972 - 28 Feb 1973
 LtCol Michael P. Sullivan 1 Mar 1973 - 2 Jul 1974

 LtCol Don K. Hanna 3 Jul 1974 - 3 Jul 1975
 LtCol Michael R. McDonough 4 Jul 1975 - 22 Jul 1976
 LtCol William W. Mackey 23 Jul 1976 - 26 May 1977
 LtCol Hardy A. Slone 27 May 1977 - 1 Aug 1978
 LtCol David V. Denton 2 Aug 1978 - 13 Aug 1980

 LtCol Christian F. DeFries, Jr. 14 Aug 1980 - 3 Sep 1981
 LtCol Jerry R. Cadick 4 Sep 1981 - 10 Sep 1982
 LtCol Gary R. Van Gysel 11 Sep 1982 - 1 Jun 1984
 LtCol Donald A. Beaufait 2 Jun 1984 - 20 June 1986
 LtCol Dennis T. Krupp 21 Jun 1986 -

Appendix C:

HONORS

PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION (NAVY) STREAMER WITH ONE SILVER STAR

Okinawa, 4 April-14 July 1945
Korea, 7 August-7 September 1950
Korea, 15 September-11 October 1950
Korea, 3-6 August 1950, 8-14 September 1950, 12 October-26 November 1950, and 15 December 1950-1 August 1951
Korea, 3 August-29 September 1951
Vietnam, 2 December 1965-28 February 1966 and 5 July 1966-15 September 1967

PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION (ARMY) STREAMER

Korea, 22 November-14 December 1950

NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION STREAMER WITH TWO BRONZE STARS

Korea, 1 August 1952-6 July 1953
Dominican Republic, 26-30 April 1965
Vietnam, 15 September 1967-30 April 1968

ASIATIC-PACIFIC CAMPAIGN STREAMER WITH TWO BRONZE STARS

Okinawa Gunto, 2 April-14 July 1945
3d Fleet Operations Against Japan, 15 July-15 August 1945

WORLD WAR II VICTORY STREAMER

1 August 1943-31 December 1946

NAVY OCCUPATION SERVICE STREAMER WITH "ASIA"

2 September 1945-6 February 1946

NATIONAL DEFENSE SERVICE STREAMER WITH ONE BRONZE STAR

27 June 1950-27 July 1954
1 January 1961-15 August 1974

KOREAN SERVICE STREAMER WITH TWO SILVER STARS

North Korean Aggression, 5 August-2 November 1950
Communist China Aggression, 3 November 1950-24 January 1951
Inchon Landing, 13-17 September 1950
First U. N. Counteroffensive, 25 January-21 April 1951
Communist China Spring Offensive, 22 April-8 July 1951
U. N. Summer-Fall Offensive, 9 July-27 November 1951
Second Korean Winter, 28 November 1951-30 April 1952
Korean Defense, Summer-Fall 1952, 1 May-30 November 1952

Third Korean Winter, 1 December 1952-30 April 1953
Korea, Summer-Fall 1953, 1 May-6 July 1953

ARMED FORCES EXPEDITIONARY STREAMER

Taiwan Straits, 31 August-12 September 1958

VIETNAM SERVICE STREAMER WITH ONE SILVER STAR AND FOUR BRONZE STARS

Vietnam Defense Campaign, 2 December-24 December 1965
Vietnamese Counteroffensive Campaign, 25 December 1965-1 March 1966
Vietnamese Counteroffensive Phase II, 6 July 1966-31 May 1967
Vietnamese Counteroffensive Phase III, 1 June 1967-29 January 1968
Tet Counteroffensive, 30 January-1 April 1968
Vietnamese Counteroffensive Phase IV, 2 April-30 June 1968
Vietnamese Counteroffensive Phase V, 1 July-1 November 1968
Vietnamese Counteroffensive Phase VI, 2 November 1968-22 February 1969
Tet 69/Counteroffensive, 23 February-25 March 1969

KOREAN PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION STREAMER

3 August 1950-26 February 1951; 27 February 1951-11 June 1953

VIETNAM CROSS OF GALLANTRY STREAMER WITH PALM

2 December 1965-25 March 1969

Appendix D

GLOSSARY OF JAPANESE AIRCRAFT CODE NAMES AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION

In 1942 a member of the Directorate of Intelligence, Allied Air Forces, Southwest Pacific Area, Captain Frank T. McCoy, Jr., USAAF, devised a code name system for identifying Japanese aircraft. The names were selected on the following basis:

Male first names: Fighters (Army and Navy, single- and twin-engined). Reconnaissance seaplanes.

Female first names: Bombers, attack bombers, and dive-bombers. Reconnaissance aircraft (land- or carrier-based). Flying-boats. Transports (names beginning with the letter T).

Tree names: Trainers.

Bird names: Gliders.

Aircraft specifically mentioned in this squadron history*

Betty—A twin-engined, all-metal construction aircraft with fabric-covered control surfaces built by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Company. It was used in various versions as a land-based bomber (G4M), heavy escort fighter (G6M1), bomber crew trainer (G6M1-K), and transport (G6M1-L2).

Zeke—A single-engine, low-wing, carrier-capable fighter which featured all-metal construction with fabric covered control surfaces. The A6M Reisen (Zero Fighter), as it was known to the Japanese, was designed by Mitsubishi, and built by both Mitsubishi and the Nakajima Airplane Company.

Jack—A single-engine, low-wing, land-based interceptor fighter which featured all-metal construction with fabric-covered control surfaces. It was designed by Mitsubishi as the J2M Raiden (Thunderbolt).

Tony—A liquid-cooled, single-engine, low-wing, land-based fighter which featured all-metal construction with fabric-covered control surfaces. Designated as the Ki-61 Hien (Swallow) by the Japanese, it was designed and built by the Kawasaki Aircraft Engineering Company.

Val—A single-engine, low-wing, fixed-gear, carrier-based dive-bomber which featured all-metal construction with fabric-covered control surfaces. The aircraft, designated the D3A

by the Japanese, was designed by the Aichi Aircraft Company and built by Aichi and the Showa Airplane Company.

Tojo—A single-engine, low-wing, land-based, interceptor fighter which featured all-metal construction with fabric-covered control surfaces. The aircraft, designated the Ki-44 Shoki (Devil-Queller) by the Japanese, was designed and built by the Nakajima Airplane Company. (It should also be noted that the Allied code name of Tojo which was used for this aircraft was one of several exceptions to the normal naming pattern).

Kate—A single-engine, low-wing, carrier-based torpedo-bomber which featured all-metal construction with fabric covered control surfaces. The Allies designated the B5N produced by Nakajima as the Kate, and the B5M1 produced by Mitsubishi as the Kate 61 (formerly the Mabel).

Nate—A single-engine, low-wing, fixed-gear, cantilever monoplane which featured all-metal construction with fabric-covered control surfaces. Designed and built by Nakajima as the Ki-27 for use as a fighter, by the end of the war this plane was being used primarily as a trainer or as a *kamikaze* attack aircraft.

Judy—A single-engine, carrier-capable monoplane which featured all metal construction with fabric-covered control surfaces. Designed by Naval engineers at Yokosuka, the D4Y Suisei (Comet), as it was designated by the Japanese, had various versions built at the Naval Air Arsenals in Yokosuka and Hiro, as well as by the Aichi Aircraft Company. Extremely versatile, this aircraft was used as a dive-bomber, reconnaissance plane, land-based night fighter, and *kamikaze* aircraft.

*Information for this glossary was obtained from Rene J. Francillon, *Japanese Aircraft of the Pacific War*, 2nd ed. (London: Putnam & Company, 1979).

Appendix E

ACES OF VMF-323

During the Okinawa Campaign of 1945 VMF-323 saw 12 of its pilots gain the distinction of being known as an "Ace."* In the order of their aerial victories, they are:

Ace	Kills
1stLt Jeremiah J. O'Keefe	7
1stLt John W. Ruhsam	7
1stLt Robert Wade	7
1stLt Joseph V. Dillard	6 ½
1stLt Dewey F. Durnford	6 ½
Maj George C. Axtell, Jr.	6
Maj Jefferson D. Dorrah, Jr.	6
1stLt William L. Hood	5 ½
1stLt Stuart C. Alley, Jr.	5
1stLt Charles W. Drake	5
1stLt Albert P. Wells	5

*An "Ace" is generally recognized as a pilot who achieves five aerial victories in combat. Although the Marine Corps does not maintain an official list of aces, there is official documentation which identifies Marine aviators with the count of their aerial victories.

Appendix F

VMF-323's SONG

Although the tune for this song is sometimes claimed for the Army Air Corps, the origins of the lyrics are in the the U.S. Marine Corps and VMF-323 in particular.

HINKY DI

Up in Korea midst high rocks and snow,
The poor Chinese Commie is feeling quite low.
For as the Corsairs roar by overhead,
He knows that his buddies all soon will be dead.

CHORUS (repeat after each verse)

Hinky di Dinky Dinky di

Hinky di Dinky Dinky di

Lin Pao went way up to cold Kato Ri,
His prize Chinese army in action to see.
He got there a half hour after the "U's,"
And all that he found was their hats and their shoes.

Run, little chink men, save your ass, run,
For 323 is out looking for fun.
As the big white-nosed Corsairs come down in their dives,
You'll know the Death Rattlers are after your lives.

Uncle Joe Stalin, your stooges have found,
It just doesn't pay to invade foreign ground.
For when they disturbed the serene morning calm,
They brought on the rockets, bombs and napalm.

Here's to the 2-C, the Vought people too,
And their well-known product, the blue F4U.
To all gyrene pilots and carriers at sea,
And to the Death Rattlers Squadron, ol' 323.

We fought at Pyongyang and Hagaru,
At Kumbawa and Kaesand and Oyangbu.
So here's to our pilots, and here's to our crew,
The target, the snake and the blue F4U.

Appendix G

SQUADRON INSIGNIA

Marine Fighting Squadron 323 picked up its “Death Rattlers” nickname soon after commissioning in 1943, and the rattlesnake has been a major element in the unit’s insignia designs ever since.

In the squadron’s 1943 request for approval of the original insignia, the thought behind the design was explained in the following fashion:

The circle is for the solidarity of the Squadron, a compact, well rounded-out unit. The rattle-snake represents the vicious striking power of the airplane we will fly into combat [the Vought F4U Corsair]. The most distinctive feature of that airplane [its inverted gull wing silhouette] is shown in the lower right section of the insignia.

In the ensuing 40 years the “basic” Death Rattlers design has been adhered to with one significant exception. In 1959 a redesigned insignia reflecting VMF-323’s use of the Vought F8U Crusader was submitted to the Chief of Naval Operations and duly authorized.

Use of the “Crusader motif” was short-lived, however. In 1962 the squadron returned to the basic design because of a desire for “restoring historical continuity.”

The Death Rattlers coiled-snake design has seen use in more than merely its official insignia. As the following photographs show, aircraft have been adorned with Death Rattlers stencils, squadron duty officers have worn Death Rattlers armbands, and a Death Rattler pennant was flown at the squadron’s field headquarters during the Korean War.

Although difficult to put into words, expressions of unit identification such as these define a sense of esprit de corps and are hallmarks of the best combat units.



Photo courtesy of LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, USMC (Ret)



Photo courtesy of Maj James W. Kirk, USMC (Ret)

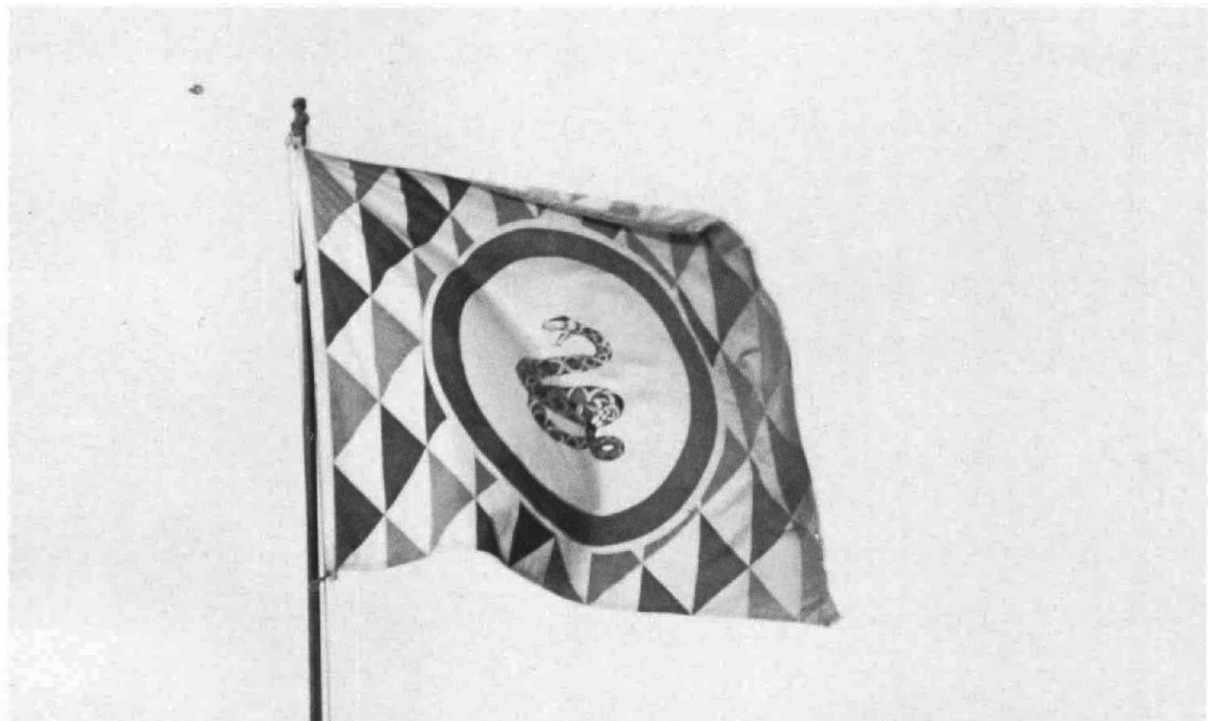


Photo courtesy of LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, USMC (Ret)

LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, top left, VMFA-323 commanding officer, poses in January 1958 with Death Rattler-stencilled aircraft at NAS Atsugi, Japan. LtCol Cummings, top right, briefs squadron duty officer wearing a Death Rattler armband. The Death Rattler also appears at center of a pennant, above, flown at squadron headquarters during the Korean War.

A squadron insignia of VMFA-323 is shown on the back cover. For a history of the insignia and other illustrations see Appendix G.

