To Marine Aviation, the Ace of Spades symbolizes some of the greatest exploits and the most outstanding names in the history of Marine Corps Aviation. It is the insignia of VMA-231 whose history virtually epitomizes the story of Marine Aviation. After being re-designated the First Air Squadron, the unit adopted the legendary Ace of Spades Insignia. With the Ace being the first card in a suit, it symbolizes the first Marine Corps squadron. The “A” in the upper left stood for the word “Air” while the “S” in the lower right represented the word “Squadron”.

VMA-231 began as 1st Division, Squadron D, on 8 February 1919 at Marine Flying Field, Miami, FL flying the JN-4D Jenny; a unit that emerged from the Northern Bombing Group of Northern France in 1918. By the end of February, the newly activated squadron arrived in Santo Domingo for duty with the Second Brigade. The unit was re-designated in 1921 as First Air Squadron. In August 1922 it was re-designated Observation Squadron 1 and converted to the DH-4B Liberty.

From Santo Domingo the squadron traveled to San Diego, California as aviation outfit to accompany a Marine Expeditionary Force. During the West Coast interlude, the late Major General Ross E. ROWELL, then a Major and Commanding Officer of VO-IM, and later VO-SM, concentrated on training in dive-bombing tactics. Such tactics were to prove invaluable to the squadron in Nicaragua, during July 1927, where the squadron had been ordered the previous February. On 16 July 1927, at the famous Battle of Octal, ten personnel of VO-8M came to the rescue of the beleaguered Marine garrison at Ocotal and executed the first recorded dive bombing attack against an organized enemy, dispersing the insurgents and saving the garrison. Among the first Marine Aviators ever to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross were Major Rowell and Lieutenant Hayne Boyden, to whom it was awarded for their participation in the battle of Ocotal.

For ten years the squadron carried the designation VO-8M before being decommissioned in July 1933. A year later, it was reactivated and in 1937, re-designated Marine Scouting Squadron 2 which it retained until July 1941, when it became VMSB-231. Whatever its designation, it has always been identified by the Ace of Spades which has appeared on countless aircraft types from Curtiss Jennys and DH-4B Liberty planes in 1920, to Dauntlesses and Corsairs flown in the Marshalls in 1944 as dive bombers.

The Ace of Spades is symbolic of names like A.A. Cunningham , Mulcahy, Wodarzck, Munsch, and Boyden in Nicaragua. It symbolizes the battle of Midway and Lofton R. Henderson who died leading the Aces on the first day of battle. It means Guadalcanal and the Cactus Ail-Force at Henderson Field, suffering nightly shelling from Japanese cruisers operating in The Slot. It recalls a 28-year-old commander Major Elmer Glidden, considered one of the best dive-bombers in the world in 1942. It is reminiscent of Captain Ruben Iden, who lays on far away Rennel Island in a grave prepared and tended by friendly natives.

It stands for an enlisted pilot named Bud Blass. It means flying from tiny Majuro Atoll and months of unheralded dive-bombing during so-called "milk-runs" in the bypassed Marshalls in 1944.

Over the decades, The Ace of Spades has made its mark on Marine Corps history. But on 31 August 1962, after serving in reserve status in Akron, Ohio and Grosse Isle, Michigan, VMA-231 was deactivated and its historic insignia was mothballed.

VMA-231 was reactivated on 15 May 1973, and the Marine Corps' oldest squadron became the Corps' newest, flying the Corps' newest aircraft, the Hawker-Siddeley AV-8A Harrier. The AV-8A was a high performance, high speed jet aircraft that was uniquely capable of vertical and short take off and landing (V/STOL).

Throughout the 1970’s, VMA-231 participated in various deployments aboard U.S. Navy LPH’s, LHA’s and CV’s to the Mediterranean, Africa, Europe and also participated in NATO exercises. The Ace of Spades also captured many other firsts for V/STOL aviation such as in 1977, when VMA-231 was named V/STOL Squadron of the Year; June 1978 when VMA-231 was the first Harrier squadron to operate on an LHA class ship, (LHA-2 USS SAIPAN); and in October 1978 VMA-231 made the first TRANSLANT for an AV-8 unit and was subsequently the first United States AV-8 unit in Europe and the first American AV-8 unit to cross-train with RAF Harrier Squadrons. During the early 1980’s VMA-231 continued its AV-8A deployments to the Mediterranean, Europe, participation in NATO exercise, and support U.S. Navy Carrier Battle Group operations.

But on 2 August 1985, VMA-231 flew the AV-8A for the last time, converting the squadron to the all-new AV-8B Harrier II on 19 September 1985.

Once again the Marine Corps oldest squadron flew the Corps' newest aircraft. Composite materials, more engine performance, new avionics, and the angle rate bombing system gave VMA-231 a new and sharper cutting edge with the AV-8B. For the latter half of the decade, VMA-231 continued its traditional deployments with the AV-8B II to Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean. In May 1987, a 4-plane detachment participated in a practice assault in Honduras from aboard USS SAIPAN.

During the 1980’s, The Ace of Spades was recognized as the Marine Corps Aviation Association Squadron of the Year in 1981, 1982, and 1984.

In June of 1990, VMA-231 deployed to WESTPAC as a squadron for the first time since World War II. Shortly after December 1990, the squadron received orders extending the deployment and directing it to Southeast Asia for Operation DESERT SHIELD. The move necessitated an unprecedented around-the-world trip as the Ace of Spades flew 18,000 NM in 14 days to join MAG-13 (forward). During the trip the squadron accrued 904 flight hours in December, a record for fleet Harrier squadrons. On the morning of 17 January 1991, DESERT SHIELD became DESERT STORM. Again, VMA-231 was in the forefront, flying combat missions to silence Iraqi artillery batteries, which were indiscriminately shelling the Saudi Arabian border town of Khafji.

The Ace of Spades provided air operations every day of DESERT STORM, providing battlefield air interdiction, deep air support, close air support, helicopter escort, rescue combat air patrol, and reconnaissance missions against the enemy occupation forces in Kuwait. Sorties flown resulted in the destruction of enemy tanks, towed artillery pieces, command posts, armored personnel carriers and utility vehicles, ammunition storage sights, trench lines, FROGS, astro batteries, SA-2 sites, SA-6 sites, a myriad of antiaircraft artillery sights, self-propelled artillery, radar relay sites, fire-trenches, field fortifications, revetments, minefields, and enemy troops.

During February 1991, when the air war intensified and the critical ground campaign began, Marine Attack Squadron 231 out flew all other Harrier squadrons in theater by accumulating 966.2 hours. This monthly total is a Unites States Marine Corps Harrier "gun squadron" record. Marten Attack Squadron 231 had just broken the previous "gun squadron" record of a 904-hour month in December 1990, flying from Iwakuni, Japan eastward to Southwest Asia in support of DESERT SHIELD. The "Ace of Spades" flew a total of 987 combat sorties and 1,195.8 hours during DESERT STORM. In total, 1660 Mk-82s, 62 Mk-83s, 969 Mk-20 Rockeyes, 78 Mk-77 Firebombs, and 22,709 rounds of25MM munitions were expended. A grand total of 1,692,000 pounds of ammunition was delivered with devastating effect against enemy positions and equipment.

After Desert Storm and for the rest of the 1990’s, VMA-231 continued its peacetime mission of training and supporting WESTPAC and Marine Expeditionary Unit deployment commitments. This included one with the 24th MEU(SOC) aboard USS KEARSARGE where VMA-231 Harriers participated in the Tactical Recover of Aircraft & Personnel (TRAP) mission rescuing downed Air Force pilot Captain O'Grady.

VMA-231 also supported Capabilities Exercises (CAPEX), Supporting Arms Training Exercise, and Combined Arms Exercises (CAX) through 1998. In April 1999, the Ace of Spades deployed with the 26th MEU(SOC) aboard the USS KEARSARGE and were involved in the combat operation Allied Force, bombing targets in the former Yugoslavia. The Ace of Spades also participated in Operation Joint Guardian, Shining Hope, Avid Response, and various other exercises.

During the 1990’s, VMA-231 earned the CNO Safety Award for 1991, 1992, 1995 and 1996 and was selected as the Marine Corps Attack Squadron of the Year for 1992.

The new millennium continued to bring training opportunities and MEU deployments to VMA-231. That is, until April 2003, a detachment of VMA-231 Harriers assigned to the 24th MEU flew in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, entering the Ace of Spades into the Global War on Terror and assisted in overthrowing the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. It would be another 4 years, in the spring of 2007, that the Ace of Spades would find themselves back in Iraq supporting OIF 06-08.1 from Al Asad Airbase. The Ace of Spade supported Marine and Coalition forces by flying 1738 combat sorties totaling 5158 flight hours.

After a long hiatus and as a direct result of the hard work and dedication during and after OIF, the Commandant of the Marine Corps selected the Ace of Spades as the Marine Corps’s 2008 Marine Attack Squadron of the year!

On 8 February 2009, The Ace of Spades turned 90 as the Marine Corps’ oldest “Air Squadron”.

With 90 years of experience under its belt, the Ace of Spades continues it long heritage of being on the fore front of Marine Corps history when it deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan in November 2009 in support of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade during Operation Enduring Freedom.

From 1919 to the present, VMA-231 continues to carry on the legacy and very essence of Marine Aviation. From the beginning, the Ace of Spades insignia has flown on planes of the United States Marine Corps and has played a vital role in Marine Corps' history. To honor its proud legacy, today’s command bird (A/C 01) presents a “Since 1919” color scheme with its distinctive blue, white, and red tail with a classic Eagle, Globe and Anchor, and the characteristic black and white Ace of Spade insignia.