

A HISTORY OF MARINE ATTACK SQUADRON 311



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

A flight of A-4Es in formation over San Diego, California. Clearly seen are the VMA-311 matrix letters WL on the vertical stabilizer and the squadron insignia on the fuselage. (USMC Photo A422813)

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By

Major William J. Sambito, USMC



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FOREWORD

In this publication the history of Marine Attack Squadron 311 is traced from its commissioning in December 1942 through three wars and several evolutions during which the unit made the transition from a fighting squadron flying propeller-driven planes to a modern attack squadron equipped with high-performance jet aircraft. The history was prepared principally from primary sources such as command diaries and chronologies, published historical works, and recollections of Marines involved.

Major William J. Sambito, a graduate of Colby College in Waterville, Maine, was commissioned in 1961 and designated a naval aviator in 1965. Between December 1966 and June 1971, he served two tours in the Western Pacific as a transport helicopter pilot. Major Sambito joined the staff of the History and Museums Division in January 1975 after attending the Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, Virginia.

It is hoped that the information contained herein will provide some insight into the development and employment of VMA-311 over the past three decades. The History and Museums Division welcomes any comments on the narrative and additional information or illustrations which might enhance a future edition.



E. H. SIMMONS

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

Reviewed and approved:
15 June 1978

PREFACE

Marine Attack Squadron 311 was conceived as a "Fighting Squadron" during the rapid build up of forces which followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The squadron participated in World War II and was assigned occupational duty in Japan upon cessation of hostilities. During the Korean conflict, the squadron again saw combat, this time as a jet fighter squadron. When Marine air was committed in Vietnam, VMA-311 was one of the first attack squadrons to deploy to Vietnam and one of the last to leave. While this history deals with one particular squadron, it exemplifies the many Marine squadrons whose development and employment parallel that of VMA-311.

A debt of gratitude is owed to those who reviewed the manuscript and provided valuable comments. These include Lieutenant General Thomas H. Miller, USMC; Major General Arthur A. Adams, USMC (Ret); Major General Paul H. Fontana, USMC (Ret); Brigadier General Henry W. Hise, USMC (Ret); Brigadier General Manning T. Jannell, USMC; Colonel James E. Johnson, USMC (Ret); Colonel Neil R. MacIntyre, USMC (Ret); Colonel John H. Miller, USMC; Colonel Michael R. Yunck, USMC (Ret); Lieutenant Colonel Ray D. Rushlow, USMC (Ret); and Lieutenant Colonel Samuel P. Brutcher, USMC, who not only conducted an indepth review of the history, but also provided assistance in understanding some of the technical material.

Without the assistance of the professionals in the Marine Corps Historical Division, the completion of this document would have been impossible. In this regard I extend my appreciation to Miss Gabrielle M. Neufeld and Mrs. Joyce E. Bonnett for their help in collecting source material and to the members of the Historical Branch who edited the manuscript. Thanks are also extended to the manuscript typist, Miss Catherine A. Stoll, and the publication production editor, Mr. Douglas Johnston. The pictures contained in this publication are from the Marine Corps Photo Archives and the personal collections of Brigadier General Hise, Colonel Yunck, and Lieutenant Colonel Brutcher.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	iii
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vii
Introduction	1
From Birth to War: 1941-1945	1
Post-World War II: 1946-1950	10
The Korean Era: 1950-1955	15
The Post-Korean Period: 1955-1965	30
The Vietnam Years: 1965-1973	39
Conclusion	54
Notes	57
Appendix A: Chronology	61
Appendix B: Commanding Officers	63
Appendix C: Streamer Entitlement	65
Appendix D. Squadron Insignia	67

A History of Marine Attack Squadron 311

Introduction—From Birth to War: 1941-1945—Post-World War II: 1946-1950—The Korean Era: 1950-1955—The Post-Korean Period: 1955-1965—The Vietnam Years: 1965-1973—Conclusion

Introduction

On 6 December 1941, Marine Corps aviation consisted of two aircraft wings—the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) commanded by Brigadier General Roy S. Geiger, headquartered at Marine Base, Quantico, Virginia, and Brigadier General Ross E. Rowell's 2d Marine Aircraft Wing with its headquarters at the Naval Air Station, San Diego, California. Although the Marine Corps could boast of two aircraft wings, the total strength of the 1st MAW consisted solely of the six squadrons of Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 11 while the 2d MAW similarly included only one group, MAG-21, located on the island of Oahu in the Territory of Hawaii. Of the six MAG-21 squadrons, four were at bases on Oahu and two were on board carriers, except for a detachment on Wake Island. With the addition of Marine Scouting Squadron 3, stationed at Bourne Field, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, the Marine Corps had a total of 13 aircraft squadrons, 204 aircraft, and 5,866 aviation personnel.¹

On 7 December 1941, disaster struck the Territory of Hawaii when Japanese carrier aircraft attacked the U. S. fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Marine Corps Air Station at Ewa, 10 miles west of Pearl Harbor, received extensive damage and all but one of MAG-21's aircraft were either destroyed or damaged. Six hours later and 1,994 nautical miles to the west, Japanese bombers from Kwajalein struck Wake Island destroying 7 of the 12 Grumman F4F Wildcats assigned to the forward echelon of Marine Fighting Squadron 211.

After one day of war, the entire 2d MAW had been reduced to only 40 operational aircraft. The

Marine Corps began rebuilding immediately. By September 1944, Marine Corps aviation attained its peak strength of 5 aircraft wings, which included 31 aircraft groups and 145 tactical squadrons. By 31 January 1945, Marine aviation personnel reached a peak strength of 125,162.²

Marine Attack Squadron 311 is one of many commands which were established during this rapid expansion in World War II. This squadron, originally commissioned as Marine Fighting Squadron 311, was born of war and baptized in the islands of the Pacific. It later met the challenge of Korea and carried forth its legend to Vietnam.

From Birth to War: 1941-1945

Marine Fighting Squadron 311 (VMF-311) was commissioned on 1 December 1942 with Major Ralph K. Rottet as its first commanding officer. The fledgling squadron was assigned to the newly activated 3d Marine Aircraft Wing (3d MAW) and headquartered at the Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, North Carolina. At the time of commissioning, a total of 2 officers and 64 enlisted men comprised the skeletal organization of the squadron.¹

Major Rottet, who later rose to the rank of lieutenant general, graduated from the Naval Academy in 1934 and completed Basic School at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in 1935. In July 1937 he completed flight school at Pensacola, Florida, and was designated as Naval Aviator. During the next 3 years, then Lieutenant Rottet served at the Naval Air Station, San Diego, California. He then returned to Pensacola where he was assigned as a flight in-



USMC Photo 131733

The F4U-1 Corsair by Vought was the pride of the squadron. VMF-311 first received Corsairs at Page Field, Parris Island, in April of 1943, before being sent to the war in the Pacific.

structor until October 1941. After a 1-year tour with the Bureau of Aeronautics in Washington, D.C., Major Rottet was assigned the task of building VMF-311 into an operational squadron.

The 3d MAW, activated in November 1942, was given the mission of preparing squadrons for deployment and training replacement pilots for combat squadrons. Dozens of returning aviators who had learned their lessons over Guadalcanal were assigned the task of teaching new pilots "how it was on the Canal." To do this 3d MAW acquired 11 additional training fields located throughout North and South Carolina. Even though there were 4,989 Marine pilots by 1 July 1943, the cry was always "more."²

The building of VMF-311 during this period of pell-mell expansion was difficult because the squadron remained in a constant state of flux with Marines continually transferring in and out of the command. Difficulties were accentuated by the frequent change of commanding officers due to the rotation of officers to the Wing Headquarters Squadron and to the headquarters of a new aircraft

group forming, MAG-31. Major Rottet retained command until 31 January 1943, then became the first commanding officer of MAG-31. During the month of February, the squadron had four commanding officers, three second lieutenants and one captain. Nevertheless, in the 4 1/2 months that the squadron remained at Cherry Point, the essentials of organization were completed.³

During this period the squadron was assigned 12 North American SNJ Texans for training in fighter tactics, gunnery, and night flying. The two-seated Texan, an advanced trainer, had two .30 caliber machineguns in the fuselage synchronized to fire through its two-bladed propeller. The aircraft, powered by a 500-horsepower Pratt and Whitney engine, had a maximum airspeed of 205 miles per hour at 5000 feet. Because of its ease of handling and maneuverability, the Texan proved to be an excellent trainer.⁴

On 18 April 1943, under the command of Captain Jack D. Kane, VMF-311 was relocated to Page Field at Parris Island, South Carolina, where the unit started receiving the new Vought F4U-1 Corsair to

replace the SNJs. The single-seated F4U fighter with its 2000-horsepower Pratt and Whitney engine was originally developed as a fleet aircraft, but was initially rejected by the Navy as a carrier plane. The Corsair was capable of speeds up to 400 miles per hour and had excellent maneuverability and handling characteristics. Its armament consisted of six .50 caliber machineguns, three in each wing, with 400 rounds per gun belted in various fashions to utilize the combined effect of tracers, armor piercing, and incendiary bullets. The Corsair also carried one centerline fuel tank or a 1000-pound bomb. This aircraft, dubbed "Whistling Death" by the Japanese, was the beginning of a new era in Marine Corps aviation.⁵ By the end of June 1943, 15 Corsairs were assigned to VMF-311 and all SNJs were transferred from the squadron.

On 1 June, VMF-311 greeted a new commanding officer, Major Harry B. Hooper. This time the squadron had a skipper who would remain in command for an extended period of time and thereby provided the leadership stability the unit had lacked. Major Hooper enlisted in the Marine Corps in March 1940 and was accepted for flight training. In January 1941, he received his naval aviator wings and was commissioned a second lieutenant. He would remain on active duty for 22 years, retiring with the rank of colonel.

The squadron continued training while acquiring more Marines. During August 1943, full strength was finally reached with a total complement of 45 officers and 243 enlisted men including 8 enlisted naval corpsmen.⁶ On 31 August, the squadron, now with 18 F4U-1Cs, began the first leg of a journey that would take it to the homeland of the Imperial Japanese Empire. From 31 August to 8 September, the squadron was en route to the Marine Corps Air Depot (MCAD) Miramar, California. The Corsairs were ferried to the west coast by the squadron pilots and a Douglas R4D Skytrain carried the engineering officer and nine engineering personnel. The remainder of the squadron went by train. The ferry flight began uneventfully, but on 4 September, shortly after takeoff from Shreveport, Louisiana, en route to Midland, Texas, the Corsairs encountered a severe and widespread storm. The flight became scattered and one aviator, Captain Rufus E. Garret, was killed when his plane crashed at Fort Worth, Texas.⁷

The squadron air echelon arrived at MCAD Miramar without further mishap and the squadron

joined Marine Fleet Air, West Coast (MFAWC). Four additional F4Us were transferred to the unit and final preparations were made as VMF-311 awaited the ships that would take it to the Pacific.

Meanwhile, MAG-31 with its three squadrons, VMF-321 and Marine Scout Bombing Squadrons (VMSB) 331 and 334, also had crossed the country and was now awaiting further transportation. On 25 September, the air echelons of MAG-31, including the 21 F4Us of VMF-311, embarked on board the escort carrier USS *Nassau* (CVE 10) and sailed west.

Five days later, the ground echelons followed on board the U. S. Army Transport Ship *Puebla*. On 30 September 1943, VMF-311 was detached from MFAWC and again became part of Colonel Calvin R. Freeman's MAG-31. On 5 October the *Nassau* arrived at Pago Pago, Tutuila, Samoa. The following day as the carrier lay at the dock, the squadron Corsairs were catapulted from the deck and landed at the Samoa Naval Station in what was one of the earliest American catapult operations involving the F4U.

The same day, MAG-31 became a subordinate command of the 4th Marine Base Defense Aircraft Wing (MBDAW) which was activated at MCAS Ewa on 22 August 1942 in recognition of the defensive roles of MAG-13 in Samoa, MAG-21 at Ewa, and MAG-22 on Midway. In August 1943, the headquarters of the 4th MBDAW moved from Ewa to Tutuila; by October the wing consisted of MAG-13, MAG-31, and MAG-24.⁸

On 8 October, the squadron's aircraft were flown to the Seabee-constructed field on Wallis Island and were joined there 11 days later by the ground echelon on board the *Puebla*. Wallis Island, a small French protectorate 186 miles west of Pago Pago, was by no means a Pacific paradise; the volcanic island was small, flat, hot, and damp. The squadron stayed at Wallis until January 1944 with only a 3-week break in December when all planes and pilots went to Samoa for fighter director training conducted by MAG-31.

Marine aviation in Samoa had a purely defensive mission. The pilots of VMF-311 were involved in constant patrols and alerts, chasing unidentified aircraft that inevitably turned out to be friendly.⁹ Although the squadron made no contact with the enemy during the period, one pilot, First Lieutenant William S. Robson, Jr., was killed when his aircraft, after flying into clouds at 6,000 feet, went into a spin and crashed in the ocean.¹⁰

As the Japanese-held islands within striking distance of Samoa fell and the perimeter of the span of Japanese control decreased, the 4th MBDAW, now with MAG-31, -13, and -22, left Wallis Island and moved 2,000 miles northwest to the Marshall Islands.

On 26 January 1944, the squadron, less the air echelon, began loading in the landing ship tank USS *Typhoon* (LST 1118) and the merchant ship USS *Constantine* and sailed 4 days later for Roi-Namur Islands, Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands. The ships arrived at Roi-Namur, the small twin islands on the northern perimeter of the Kwajalein Atoll, on 6 February and on the following day the squadron's advance party went ashore.

Since Roi and Namur are joined by a narrow strip of land, the two islands are often considered as one. A three-runway Japanese airfield was located on Roi while the support and billeting facilities were located on Namur. Because the runway surfaces and airfield facilities were severely damaged during the battle for the island, it was necessary for two Seabee battalions to prepare the area before the Corsairs could land from Wallis.¹¹

The 4th Marine Division had secured Roi-Namur just 5 days before the forward echelon of MAG-31 and VMF-311 arrived. Kwajalein Island, 50 miles to the south, had been secured by the Army's 7th Infantry Division 3 days after Roi-Namur. MAG-13, meanwhile, with the aid of the Seabees, was establishing residency 250 miles away on the island of Majuro. While mopping-up operations were still being conducted on Engebi Island, Eniwetok Atoll, MAG-22 landed its advanced echelon and began preparations for future operations.¹²

The mission for the Marines in the Marshalls now was to isolate the Japanese on the bypassed islands, deny their escape, and prevent them from using any of the airstrips on the numerous islands in the Marshalls. These rearguard Marines would also have to protect the vital lines of communication between the United States and the forward areas.

The VMF-311 personnel on Roi began setting up large pyramidal tents. The general unloading of supplies and equipment proceeded satisfactorily until about 0230 on 12 February when the island was attacked by enemy bombers. The 12 to 14 Japanese bombers, which had flown approximately 550 miles from Ponape in the Caroline Islands, struck with accuracy and effectiveness. VMF-311 took a heavy pounding, suffering casualties of 14 officers and 99

enlisted men wounded. Warrant Officer John H. Spotanski, the ground defense officer, Corporal Claude S. Gibbs III, and Privates Albert B. Healy and John H. Nancy were hit seriously enough to require evacuation to the *Typhoon*. The enemy attack, which hit a bomb dump and caused numerous secondary explosions and fires, severely damaged a substantial amount of the squadron's equipment and supplies. All tents and personal gear were destroyed, making living conditions quite primitive for the next 10 days.¹³

A decision was then made to move the squadron from Roi to Kwajalein Island. After an uncomfortable stay of 16 days, the personnel on Roi were loaded in an LST and landed at Kwajalein on 24 February. Five days later they were joined by the air echelon which arrived from Wallis Island.

Kwajalein Atoll, the largest coral atoll in the world, forms a lagoon measuring nearly 65 miles in length and reaches a maximum width of 18 miles. The crescent shaped island of Kwajalein, the largest island of the atoll, measures slightly more than 2 miles in length and 400 yards at its widest point. Before the U. S. bombardment and assault of the island, the Japanese had built numerous installations and had an airfield under construction. Now through the efforts of the Seabees, the field became the new home of MAG-31 and VMF-311.

During March the 10 fighter and bomber squadrons of the 4th MBDAW began their long, unrelenting attacks on the bypassed atolls of Wotje, Maloelap, Mille, and Jaluit. Before the arrival of Marine aviation in the Marshalls, the Seventh Air Force had pounded these atolls for 4 months and Navy carrier aircraft had flown 1,671 sorties against them. Although the VMF-311 pilots encountered no aerial opposition, they were surprised to meet accurate and intense antiaircraft fire indicating that the tons of bombs dropped since November 1943 had not eliminated all resistance.¹⁴

The forces attacking the bypassed Japanese positions also had the duty of protecting their own rear areas. Because of the demonstrated use of suicidal tactics by the Japanese, one-way sorties had to be regarded as a possible enemy action.

If a few planes had sneaked into the Marshalls, the Japanese could not have changed the course of the war, but they could have upset plans and timetables and socked the U.S. Fleet with heavy casualties.¹⁵

On 23 March 1944, the squadron made its first strike, a strafing attack against antiaircraft emplacements and a radio station on Wotje Island. The

flight was comprised of five VMSB-231 scout bombers and one VMF-311 Corsair flying escort. As the scout bombers began their dives, the fighter delivered suppressive fires pulling out at approximately 300 feet and 380 knots. Three bombs hit the radio station and one hit an anti-aircraft gun. No enemy fire was encountered and the flight returned home safely. The following day 12 F4Us accompanied five scout bombers for a continuation of the attack on Wotje. This time the enemy responded with small caliber anti-aircraft fire, but no aircraft were hit.¹⁶

Before the squadron could become too comfortable in its new surroundings, word was received to move back to Roi. The move began on 26 March and was completed on 4 April. During this period the Corsairs continued their strikes against Wotje.

On 29 March, the Japanese anti-aircraft gunners scored their first hits; two F4Us received minor damage. The following week the commanding officer, Major Hooper, experienced engine difficulties during a strafing run and was forced to ditch his plane. After about 2 hours in a raft, a destroyer picked him up and returned him to Kwajalein.¹⁷ On 23 April misfortune struck again when First Lieutenant Frederick C. Hawkes, who had just joined the squadron on 1 April, was killed when his plane was observed to lose airspeed in a turn then spin and crash into the ocean off Kwajalein.¹⁸

Until May 1944, the strikes flown were predominantly strafing attacks, but occasionally an aircraft would carry a 1,000-pound general purpose bomb. On 14 May the first squadron bombing mission was flown and from then on the Corsairs' mission was primarily bombing attacks, although strafing runs were frequently made on the targets after the bombs were dropped. The aircraft were loaded with 250-, 500-, or 1,000-pound bombs.

Because of the ineffectiveness of level-flight single-bomb delivery and the lack of documentation or standardization associated with dive bombing in the Corsair, the pilots began developing a technique which would increase the probability of damage with a single bomb:

At first "clean dives" were made with the indicated air speed as high as 380 knots, then for a period of about a month, the diving brakes were used in an attempt to improve accuracy with slower air speed, bomb release at

lower altitudes, and greater aircraft stability. Results, however, did not seem to justify subjecting pilots and aircraft to the increased hazard of anti-aircraft fire experienced when flying low and slow, and this technique was abandoned. All dives were again clean and each pilot, knowing his angle of dive and the direction of the wind, developed his own technique for accuracy.¹⁹

The experimentation and lessons learned would prove very valuable in the future.

On 26 May 1944, First Lieutenant George W. Diemer, Jr., was killed during a takeoff from Kwajalein. Lieutenant Diemer's aircraft settled back onto the runway after the landing gear was retracted and the plane continued into the water off the end of the runway.²⁰

During June and July the squadron attacked Maloelap, Wotje, and Taroa as the campaign to neutralize the Marshalls continued. July brought another loss, the first directly attributable to enemy action. Captain Michael J. Curran, Jr., while engaged in a strike at Wotje on 30 July, was hit by anti-aircraft fire and was seen trailing smoke as he crashed into the sea 500 yards from shore.^{21*}

From August through January 1945, air operations in the Marshalls continued, and VMF-311 expanded its area of operation to include the atolls of Mille and Jaluit. The job was tiresome and monotonous, but the Marines assigned these rear area tasks performed their duties faithfully if not always cheerfully.²²

On 24 October 1944, Major Hooper, who had led the squadron to war in the Pacific, passed command to Major Charles M. Kunz, who all too soon was faced with the unwanted task of having to report another casualty. One week after the change of command, Second Lieutenant Frank T. Sweeney, while flying his first combat mission, was hit by anti-aircraft fire while on a bombing run over Enidj Island. Lieutenant Sweeney was observed bailing out of his Corsair at about 4,000 feet, but he was never found.²³

Major Kunz retained command until he was relieved by Major Perry L. Shuman on 11 February 1945. Soon after this change of command another pilot, Second Lieutenant John H. Newton, was killed when his plane crashed at sea during a routine training flight.²⁴

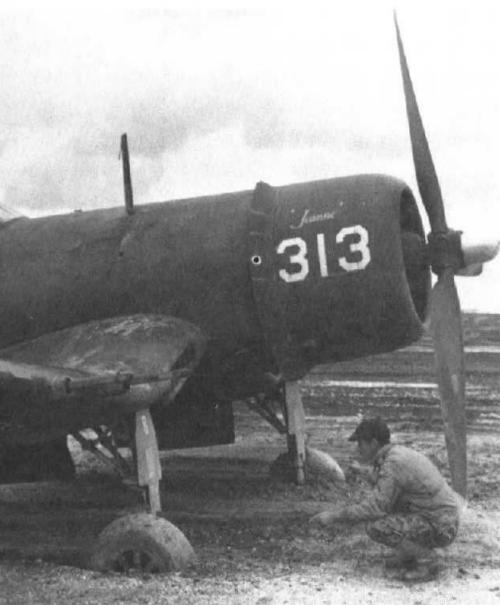
The task of guarding the rear ended in March of

*Clean dive is the aircraft configured for a dive with landing gear up, flaps up, dive brakes up, and canopy closed, thereby reducing drag.

*Curran commanded VMF-311 as a second lieutenant from 16-25 February 1943, during the squadron's initial organizational period.



USMC Photo 117900



USMC Photo 118387

A closeup view of Marine Corsairs parked at Yontan Airfield, Okinawa, (top) and an aerial view of the same field in April 1945 (below). The picture looks northwest with the China Sea in the background. The airfield was either a bowl of black dust or a quagmire of mud, such as that encountered by the Marine Corsair on the left.

USMC Photo 118302



1945, and the personnel of VMF-311 gladly prepared to vacate their home in the Marshalls for the chance to move forward to the Emperor's backyard—Okinawa. The squadron began loading new F4U-1C aircraft on board the escort carriers USS *Sitkoh Bay* (CVE 86) and the USS *Breton* (CVE 23) on 8 March. Three days later the ships sailed and MAG-31 became part of the 2d MAW under the Tenth Army Tactical Air Force (TAF). The F4U-1C, a modification to the basic Corsair, contained four 20 millimeter cannon, two in each wing, and four pairs of small pylons for attaching 5-inch rockets.

It was determined early that the land-based squadrons in Okinawa comprising the TAF would be commanded by a Marine flyer. The job went to Major General Francis P. Mulcahy. The TAF consisted of MAGs-31, -33, -22, and -14 as well as three Army Air Forces fighter groups.²³

The forward echelon of Marine Fighting Squadron 311, on board an LST, arrived off the coast of Okinawa opposite Yontan Airfield on the afternoon of 2 April 1945. On the morning of 4 April, just 3 days after the initial assault landings, Major Shuman, with a detail of 20 officers and men, went ashore to survey the area assigned to the squadron, set up temporary camp facilities, and plan for the disposition of supplies and equipment. Unloading operations started the following morning and continued day and night until the task was completed.²⁶

On 7 April the squadron aircraft flew from the two carriers to the former Japanese airfield at Yontan. During the launch, one division of planes, while flying combat air patrol (CAP) over the carrier group to cover subsequent launching, was vectored toward a possible enemy aircraft. The pilots quickly identified the target as friendly, but at the same time they noticed a Japanese Lil* at 500 feet heading directly toward the carriers. Because of the low altitude of the bomber, it was obvious that the Japanese pilot was not planning any orthodox bomb belivery. His collision course with the *Sitkoh Bay* identified him as a Kamikaze.**

With two divisions now airborne, the Corsairs

immediately attacked the enemy plane. On the first pass, Captain Ralph G. McCormick scored hits in the fuselage and engines, and First Lieutenant Robert T. Vaught with Second Lieutenant James F. Keegan on his wing also hit the fuselage with cannon fire. First Lieutenant John J. Doherty then scored hits in both engines. First Lieutenant Organ E. McCullough, Jr., rolled in next and put several hits in the Lil's nose section. The Kamikaze started to burn, but continued straight for the *Sitkoh Bay*. The carrier began firing, but the Lil was already on its way down and just 50 feet short of the carrier the Lil ended its final flight.²⁷

This was the first time the squadron had engaged enemy aircraft. Captain McCormick and Lieutenant Doherty had the honor of sharing the first kill, as well as the distinction of being the first VMF-311 pilots to use successfully the F4U modified with the 20mm cannon. It was not long before all the pilots had the chance to try the cannons and as expected, were "very enthusiastic about the great destructive power of the armament."²⁸

While the story of the first squadron kill was being retold, the opportunity quickly arose for other pilots to develop their own "sea stories." On 16 April, while flying CAP for two radar picket ships, a flight of four squadron Corsairs discovered aerial engagement was vastly different from the bombing and strafing missions of the Marshalls. An extract from the squadron's war diary describes this aerial encounter:

About 35 miles from the picket ship, Captain Gilman B. Rood and his wingman First Lieutenant Thomas M. Kirby sighted a Val*** flying low toward the picket ship. Kirby led the attack and smoked her. Rood's first run caused no damage. He closed again, shot the right wing off and the Val flamed, disintegrated, and splashed. First Lieutenant Raymond M. Barrett and First Lieutenant Norman A. Turley sighted a Betty**** and seven Vals heading towards a picket ship. Many other friendly aircraft were present and a general melee ensued. Barrett made a run on a Val which disintegrated and splashed. As he recovered, a plane from VMF-441 flashed in front of him from below and Barrett's propeller chewed the tail off. The pilot bailed out and got into his raft. Barrett

*Lil or Lily was an American name for the Japanese twin-engined Kawasaki light bomber. The Lil was equipped with 1,150-hp engines and was capable of flying 233 knots at sea level.

**Kamikaze is Japanese for "divine wind," an action taken by certain Japanese pilots in which they crashed their aircraft against Allied targets. The airplanes were often laden with explosives.

***Val—The Japanese single-engine Aichi carrier bomber with a two-man crew was capable of flying 200 knots at sea level. This plane had two 7.7mm guns and carried one 550-pound bomb.

****Betty—The two-engine Japanese bomber could carry a 2,000-pound bomb payload and had two 20mm guns. This plane had a range of 2,200 miles and a speed of 248 knots at sea level.

waited until the downed pilot had been sighted by rescue vessels. Turley spotted a Val making a dive for a picket ship and made a run on her. The Val, under the impact of four 20 millimeter guns of the F4U-1C, promptly blew up and splashed close by the picket ship.²⁹

Later the same day, a section of two VMF-311 aircraft spotted two Vals and after a brief exchange of fire the score for the day became: VMF-311—5; Japanese—0.

Throughout the month of April the squadron continued flying combat air patrol missions, and on 28 April, 13 more Japanese aircraft were added to 311's growing record. By the end of April, 22 enemy aircraft had been destroyed with the squadron's only loss occurring on 30 April. First Lieutenant William K. Ouellette, while flying near a U. S. destroyer, was mistaken for an enemy pilot and was shot down and killed.³⁰

May proved to be as exciting as the previous month as the determination of the fanatical enemy tested the skill of every pilot. On 4 May a total of 60 enemy aircraft were shot down by Okinawa-based flyers, and VMF-311 got its share as it tallied 17 kills. Second Lieutenant William P. Brown led the squadron with four enemy planes shot down. By the end of the month, the squadron had topped April's score with a total of 37 enemy aircraft destroyed.³¹

By mid-spring, improvements to the Okinawa camp meant a new way of life for the men at Yontan Airfield. Movies were shown periodically and a recreational area was completed, which served as a diversion from the routine of combat operations. Of all the improvements, the construction of cold water shower facilities was regarded as the most significant step in making the existence on Okinawa more civilized.

On 24 May, the Japanese suicidal efforts reached a new level of daring. Immediately following a small-scale bombing attack on the airfield at about 2100, the enemy succeeded in landing one of several twin-engine bombers loaded with heavily armed troops in the middle of the main runway. Before any opposition could be organized, the Japanese, perhaps 15 in number, scattered and started destroying aircraft dispersed on the field. Several of the enemy worked their way into the squadron parking area, but before they could do any serious damage, they were killed by squadron ground personnel who had been preparing for morning operations.³²

Weather conditions throughout the month were the most hazardous ever encountered, even for the most experienced pilots. Ground winds of 30 knots



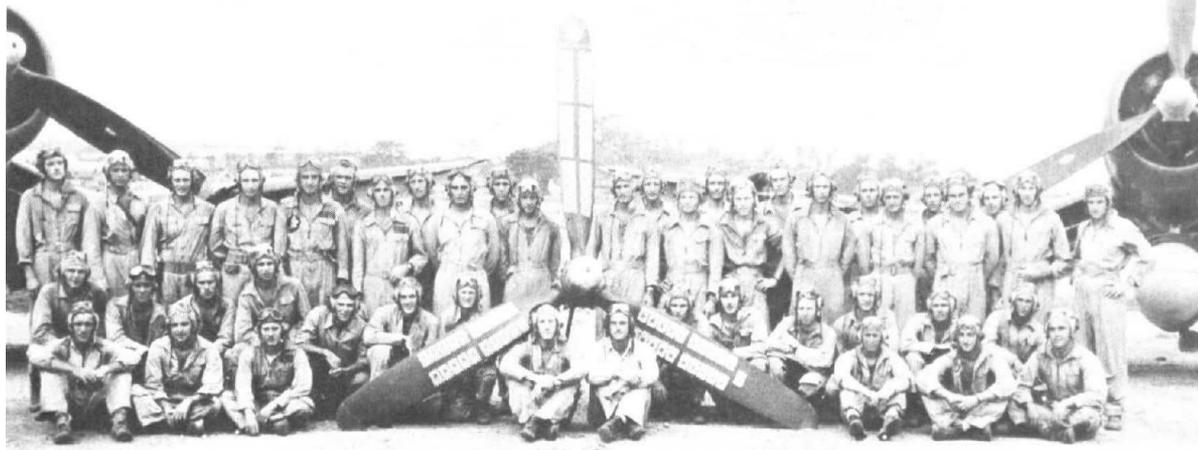
USMC Photo 707811

Major Michael R. Yunck, commanding officer of VMF-311 on Okinawa, 1945. Major Yunck was a World War II ace and the winner of two Silver Stars.

were common, and winds aloft were frequently as high as 80 knots. For almost a quarter of the time ceilings were below 1,000 feet and many landings were made in driving rains with negligible visibility. The last 5 days of the month were filled with a very wet 7 1/2 inches of rain.

Marine Fighting Squadron 311 got off to a good start in June with eight enemy aircraft destroyed in the first 11 days, bringing the squadron total for the Okinawa operation to 67. Good hunting, however, ended abruptly and, to the profound disgust of all hands, not a sign of a Japanese aircraft was seen during the rest of the month. Despite the lull in the fighting, the squadron lost a pilot on 11 June when Second Lieutenant Wilfred W. Wilhide went down at sea after experiencing an engine failure.³³

Four days after Lieutenant Wilhide's accident, the battle-weary pilots of VMF-311 were relieved by replacement pilots from the States, and Major Michael R. Yunck assumed command of VMF-311. Major Yunck, who retired in 1967 as a colonel, was a World War II ace and the winner of two Silver Stars. In 1963 he was selected as the second recipient of the Alfred A. Cunningham trophy as the Marine Aviator of the Year. Among the several achievements cited in the award was the setting of a cross-country speed record in a McDonald F-4B Phantom when he flew, nonstop without refueling,



USMC Photo A332601

VMF-311 pilots at Chimu airfield in Okinawa, July 1945. The squadron had recently moved from Yontan to Chimu across the island.

from El Toro to Quantico in 3 hours and 50 minutes. Colonel Yunck was critically wounded in Vietnam while flying as a co-pilot in a helicopter, and as a result of these wounds his left leg was amputated.³⁴ A year later he returned to full duty and flight status.

Although organized resistance on Okinawa officially ceased on 22 June, sporadic fighting continued. On 28 June, First Lieutenant Eugene B. Reade was on a bombing and strafing run when enemy antiaircraft fire hit his F4U. Colonel Yunck recalls:

Lieutenant Reade managed to get the Corsair out to sea, and made a successful water landing. He got out of the cockpit but was unable to inflate his rubber boat. He disappeared soon after the aircraft sank and was not found.³⁵

The squadron was notified on 20 June that the Marine aviators would move across the island to a new airfield at Chimu, and operations from this base would begin on 1 July. "Scuttlebutt, accepted by the more gullible, pictured a fully equipped and completed camp with not only heads and a messhall, but also decked tents, hot showers, lights, and communications."³⁶ The ugly truth was soon known when working parties were formed and all hands were given the word that they would have the pleasure of building a beautiful camp area on a wooded slope overlooking the airfield. First, however, it would be necessary to clear the jungle from the slope before building could begin. After everyone recovered from this shock, the squadron began work and by the 30th essential facilities for handling and operating aircraft were completed.

On 2 July, the squadron participated in a fighter sweep over the Japanese home island of Kyushu. The flight consisted of eight F4Us, four from VMF-224

and four from VMF-311. The mission became anything but routine as the Corsairs arrived over Japan and passed directly over 40 enemy fighters on an opposite course. The Marine pilots immediately shifted to a defensive formation and fought their way south. Fortunately, the Corsairs managed to avoid the majority of the enemy aircraft; however, as a parting gesture to the Japanese, the flight destroyed eight enemy planes without a single loss. The two squadrons involved in the mission split the kills with four each. Two more runs to Kyushu on the 17th and the 30th failed to catch any more of the enemy in the air.³⁷

On 22 July, morning and afternoon flights totaling 20 planes provided fighter cover for a cruiser task force close to the East China coast. The morning flight, after being relieved on station, flew over Wenchow in what is believed to be the first flight over China by land-based Marine aircraft since 1929.^{38*}

In the slightly more than 4 months of operations on Okinawa, the squadron destroyed 71 Japanese aircraft, the second highest score of any squadron in the Tenth Army Tactical Air Force. VMF-323 took top honors with an impressive 124 kills. VMF-311's outstanding record was all the more noteworthy and gratifying in that only three pilots were lost, and not one was lost in aerial combat with the enemy.

Three pilots of the squadron distinguished themselves as Marine Corps aces: First Lieutenant William P. Brown Jr., with seven kills, Major Perry

*From 1927-1929, Fighting Plane Squadron-3M (M being the designation for Marine) and Observation Squadron-5M were attached to Major General Smedley D. Butler's 3d Brigade in Shanghai and later in Tientsin, China.

L. Shuman with six, and Major Michael R. Yunck with five. Captain Raymond F. Scherer came close with 4½ kills. However, distinction was not limited to these men alone—for it outstanding performance in the Okinawa Campaign, VMF-311, as part of the 2d MAW, was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.³⁹

With 3 weeks of good weather, and more time available, the squadron camp was well established by the end of the month. Facilities included a messhall with a machine which produced ice cream twice a week, showers, an open air theater with movies every night, and a collection of enlisted men's tents with decks and porches.⁴⁰

On 15 August 1945, announcement was made of the cessation of hostilities with Japan. The end came with startling suddenness following the use of the atomic bomb and the entry of Russia into the war with Japan. Pilots had flown the regular schedule of CAP flights each day and as late as the 14th the squadron had provided fighter escort for photographic missions over southern Kyushu. For several days after the 15th there was little change in the daily flight schedule of CAPs, but beginning on 22 August flying was sharply curtailed, and by 26 August all flight activity ceased for the month.⁴¹

Shortly after the conclusion of hostilities, the squadron was alerted to move to Japan as part of the occupation forces. The last 10 days of the month were devoted to intensive overhaul of aircraft and equipment, daily close order drills, personnel inspections, and general preparations in expectation of the word to move. By the end of the month, no definite orders had been received and the unit remained on an alert status. Finally on 9 September 1945, just 7 days after the war officially ended, 24 pilots and the squadron aircraft departed Chimu Airfield for their new base at Yokosuka, Japan.⁴²

The often-used wartime phrase, "I'll see you in Toyko" became a reality for the men of the squadron as MAG-31 became the first land-based air group to operate from the Japanese homeland. The war was over and VMF-311 set about the routine task of occupational duty.⁴³

Post-World War II: 1946-1950

Occupation duty in Japan brought about changes in normal flight operations. The squadron was now flying extensive search and surveillance missions to determine the status of Japanese airfields and other military installations such as POW camps. In spite of



USMC Photo A 332594
VMF-311 pilots at Yokosuka, Japan, 1945. The original nickname adopted by VMF-311 was "Hell's Belles." Although this nickname remained with the squadron throughout WW II, it was used infrequently.

prevailing bad weather throughout October 1945, the squadron continued to operate using repaired Japanese support equipment to supplement its needs. By the end of the month, the pilots had flown 227 search and reconnaissance missions for a total of 434 hours. No Marines of the squadron were killed or injured during this time. The only accident was a wheels up landing on a small Japanese airfield at Koriyama. The pilot, Second Lieutenant Thaddeus Z. Machuderski, had become lost due to the weather and landed when he became low on fuel. The pilot was not injured, and with the exception of a bent prop, there was only slight damage to the plane.¹

The life style of the men changed as recreation facilities were prepared and regular basketball competition was held. The squadron entered an enlisted team and an officers' team in the group basketball league. Old fashioned "beer musters"

became more frequent for the enlisted men and a small club was opened for the officers. A limited number of men were taken to Tokyo for Sunday tours, and the Americans had the opportunity to observe the oriental way of life.²

Although the squadron was destined to remain in Japan, many of its personnel were rotated or replaced. In November the squadron acquired 16 new officers and 82 enlisted men and transferred 7 officers and 115 enlisted men.³ In December the squadron was 3 years old. Flying continued during the month as the pilots logged 433 flight hours of which 111 hours were search and surveillance missions and the remainder were devoted to training in formation and individual combat tactics.

The arrival of the new year brought little change to the squadron's daily routine. Flight operations continued to dominate the squadron's activities. In January 1946, 776 flight hours were accumulated in the most adverse weather yet encountered by the pilots. The weather took its toll on 18 January when a flight of eight Corsairs attempted to penetrate a snow storm on the return leg of a navigation flight. First Lieutenant Leon E. Canon apparently became disoriented while flying under instrument conditions and crashed.⁴

The routine of occupational duty continued until May when MAG-31 was notified to prepare for the termination of its Japanese assignment; VMF-311 was going home.

On 20 June 1946, embarked on board the attack transport USS *San Saba* (APA 232), the Marines of MAG-31 sailed for San Diego, California. Upon their arrival on the west coast on 4 July, the squadron, still assigned to MAG-31, became part of Marine Air West Coast, at MCAS Miramar. Several squadron personnel were transferred or discharged immediately, and by 17 July, when the unit was reassigned to MAG-32, the entire squadron consisted of one officer—First Lieutenant Rupert C. Wesley, Jr., the commanding officer.⁵

On 26 September, Lieutenant Wesley moved his "squadron" to MCAS El Toro, California. The squadron remained at reduced strength until November when Major Francis E. Pierce, Jr., the new commanding officer and again the only officer, received 132 enlisted men and undertook a new mission as a maintenance and training unit. The maintenance was conducted on the Corsairs which were now collecting dust instead of combat hours. The training program established was designed to

A flight of VMF-311 Corsairs flying over Mount Fujiyama, Japan, in January 1946. Leading the flight is the squadron commander, Major Michael R. Yunck.

USMC Photo 140147



acquaint enlisted men with the fundamentals of F4U maintenance and the maintenance of associated aircraft systems. With the redistribution of personnel within Marine aviation, this program became particularly important as squadrons were deactivated and mechanics were transferred to units with different types of aircraft.⁶

Upon the deactivation of MAG-32 on 21 April 1947, the executive officer of the group, Major Otis V. Calhoun, Jr., became the new commanding officer of VMF-311 and the squadron became part of MAG-12. By the end of June, the unit had 22 officers and 123 enlisted men. Although this number remained fairly constant over the next year, the people within the squadron continually changed as new men joined and trained personnel were transferred. The pilots assigned to the squadron followed a training syllabus consisting of ground school as well as flight instruction in formation, instruments, tactics, gunnery, bombing, and night flying.⁷

By the end of December, word was received that VMF-311 would become the first jet squadron on the west coast and the second such squadron in the Marine Corps. The first jet squadron, VMF-122, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Marion E. Carl and located at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, had received its first McDonnell FH-1 Phantoms in March 1947.⁸

In March 1948, Master Sergeant James G. Alleman and seven other staff noncommissioned officers attended a 5-week ground maintenance course for jet aircraft held at March AFB, Riverside, California.⁹ Meanwhile, the pilots were involved with a new development in the field of aerial gunnery; the use of radio-controlled drone aircraft as targets. The Air Force had been using this system for some time, but this was believed to be the first time a drone target was used by any Marine Corps aviation activity.¹⁰

In preparation for assuming the mission of a jet training squadron, on 15 April 1948 the squadron was detached from MAG-12 and made a separate squadron under the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, which until 1 October 1947 had been designated Marine Air West Coast.¹¹ Four days later, Lieutenant Colonel John P. Condon, later Major General Condon, became the squadron's 19th commanding officer.

Major General Condon was commissioned a second lieutenant upon graduation from the Naval Academy in 1934. He entered flight training at Pensacola in 1936 and was designated a naval aviator

the following year. During World War II, General Condon served on Guadalcanal, the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and Okinawa. In Korea he commanded both MAG-33 and MAG-12. He was promoted to major general in 1961 and retired the following year.¹²

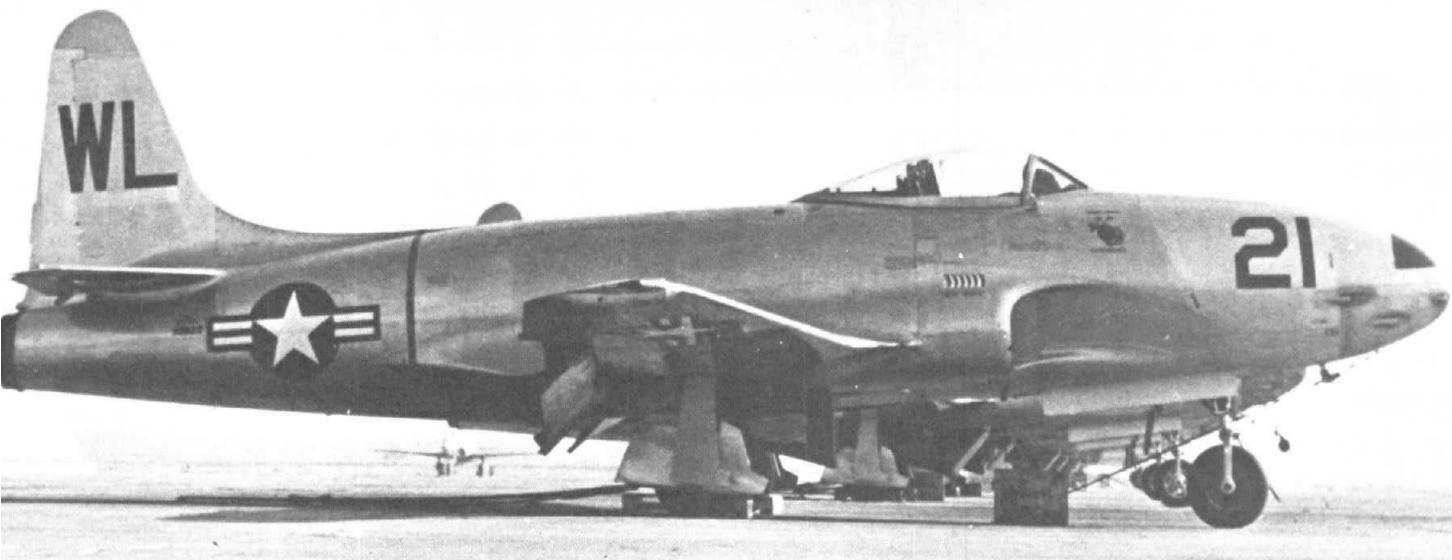
In preparation for the transition to jets, VMF-311 mechanics attended Air Force schools at Chanute AFB in Rantoul, Illinois, and March AFB, while several pilots received jet aircraft flight training at Williams AFB in Chandler, Arizona. Immediately after Lieutenant Colonel Condon assumed command, he and three other squadron pilots attended the 3-week course at Williams AFB and became the first Marine jet instructors on the west coast. During May and June, 23 mechanics attended a jet engine course conducted by the Allison Division of General Motors Corporation in Indianapolis, Indiana.¹³

With the necessary schooling completed, the squadron lacked just one thing—jets. Finally on 20 July 1948, two Lockheed Shooting Stars, designated the F-80B by the Air Force and TO-1 by the Navy and Marine Corps, were received, and the unit became a combination jet and propeller squadron.¹⁴

The TO-1 was adopted by the Navy as a single-seat jet trainer, although it was designed and built for the Air Force as an operational fighter. The aircraft, with its Allison J-33 jet engine, could accelerate to speeds up to 558 miles per hour at sea level and had a service ceiling of over 45,000 feet. An electric gyro, lead-computing gunsight with a reflex optical system* was used with the six .50 caliber nose-mounted machineguns. The TO-1 could also carry two bombs mounted on wingtip shackles in place of long-range fuel tanks.¹⁵

During July the unit designation was changed from "Marine Fighting Squadron" to the new designation, "Marine Fighter Squadron." In July and August additional aircraft were delivered until the squadron possessed 12 TO-1s which the pilots referred to as "slick chicks." The squadron was now ready to begin training Marine mechanics in the rudiments of jet propulsion and jet engine maintenance while the west coast pilots were all looking for the chance to attend VMF-311's ground school and flight program.¹⁶

*This gunsight automatically computed the aiming point for moving targets.



USMC Photo A700414

A Lockheed TO-1 Shooting Star, the first jet aircraft to be assigned to the Marine Corps. VMF-311 was the second Marine Corps squadron to receive the TO-1s.

In a 1970 interview with Major General Condon, the following comments were made regarding the operation and maintenance of the TO-1:

We relied very heavily on the most welcome support of the F-80 outfit at March Air Force Base which was just over the hill from El Toro.

We had some Corsairs left in the squadron and we kept one of them circling up above the saddleback. If we needed parts that we didn't have, we had an arrangement where we'd call the Corsair and he'd call March, give the part number and say, "I'm coming in." By the time he landed—he wouldn't even cut the engine—they'd have the part there to him and he'd have it back over to us in about 10 minutes. In that way we were able to keep the few F-80s we had in commission almost all the time. . . .

We also worked all night to do our routine checks or repairs so we could fly every day.

When asked what the pilots thought of this new aircraft, General Condon replied: "They were so thrilled to be in a propellerless aircraft—they just thought it was the greatest thing going. It was like a change from a bow to a rifle—one of the best aircraft this country has ever built." The squadron not only trained its own pilots, but also trained Marine pilots from other west coast units. In recalling this period as an instructor, General Condon stated:

It was a single place aircraft, so when you turned a new pilot loose in it you wanted to be sure. We only had 15 of them and we wanted to be damn sure that he knew the difference between what he had flown and this particular machine, because it really was quite different. If you tried to stretch a glide into a field and then overcome that by advancing the throttle, you'd wind up in the boonocks because it wouldn't take power as fast as a Corsair—and any delayed action could be pretty crucial.

We had very detailed instructions, so that our student pilots would know exactly what to expect. We would go

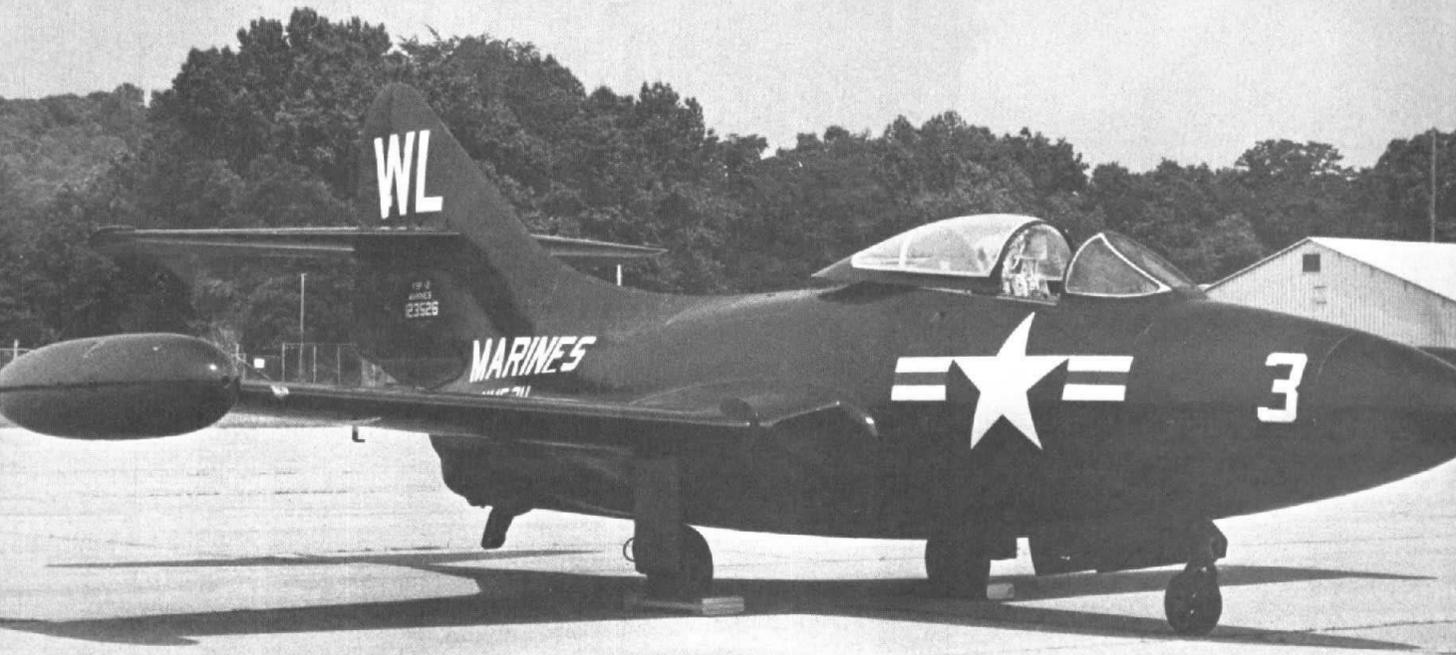
over and over these instructions. It was sort of a mechanical thing, but it was the only way we could run the program with such a limited number of machines.

That was just for the first three or four flights because once these experienced pilots who were our "students" had half a dozen hours under their belt, their own innate ability took over, and they were tremendous. The syllabus varied depending on how much operating money we had, but they were generally short—15-25 hours per pilot. We also trained jet mechanics in VMF-311. I think that helped really spread the knowledge of jet aircraft operations right down through the support categories as well as the pilot echelon; and that's very essential.¹⁷

On 27 July, Lieutenant Colonel Condon turned the leadership of VMF-311 over to Lieutenant Colonel Paul J. Fontana,* later Major General Fontana, and within 2 months he was leading flights of TO-1s over NAS El Centro, California, for gunnery evaluation at 15,000 and 35,000 feet.¹⁸

The 1st of October 1949 brought to a close VMF-311's role as an independent, jet training squadron. The unit was reassigned again to MAG-12 as an operational tactical squadron.²⁰ By February 1950, the reason for the reassignment of the squadron as a tactical unit became apparent, the new Grumman F9F Panther, a first-line jet fighter, was forthcoming

*As a major in World War II, Fontana distinguished himself by downing five enemy aircraft in 4 days over Guadalcanal and was awarded the Navy Cross and earned the designation of Marine Corps Ace. Later in his career, he served as the commanding officer of MAG-33 in Korea. In 1965, as the commanding general of the 1st MAW, Major General Fontana brought Marine fixed-winged aviation to Vietnam.¹⁹



USMC Photo A332599

A restored F9F-2 Panther jet on display at the Marine Corps Aviation Museum, located at Quantico, Virginia. The tail still shows VMF-311 markings (WL).

to replace the squadron's Shooting Stars.²¹ The TO-1 had served the squadron well. Over 300 pilots were trained with only one minor accident, which occurred when a pilot landed short of the runway following an engine failure.²²

The F9F-2, first flown in November 1948, had a Pratt and Whitney J-42 engine which produced 5,570 pounds of thrust, 1,150 pounds more than the TO-1 engine. The Panther was armed with four 20mm nose-mounted cannon and could carry external ordnance in the form of 5-inch rockets, 500-pound bombs, and napalm pods. With a speed of 600 miles per hour and a service ceiling of over 50,000 feet, this single-placed fighter was capable of functioning both as a carrier and land-based aircraft.²³

On 22 March the first F9F-2B was delivered from the factory at Bethpage, Long Island, to NAS San Diego. Lieutenant Colonel Fontana then flew the aircraft to its new home in El Toro.²⁴

During these years, the squadron acquired the letters "WL" as its tail designator. It was an event of some significance in squadron history. In the Korean War era, these letters were spoken phonetically as "William Love" from which came a new squadron nickname of "Willy Lovers." Historical records do not indicate the full array of misperceptions believed to have been inspired by this name. The evidence suggests, however, that this nickname, led to the adoption of the heart as part of the squadron insignia.

On 25 July 1950, just 5 years after World War II ended, the United States again was involved in a war

and the Marines of VMF-311 realized it would not be long before they would find themselves in Korea. In the months that followed the squadron was alerted for deployment several times, but each time the order was canceled prior to the movement date.

November found VMF-311 involved with training in close air support at Camp Pendleton, rocket firing, night flying, and instrument procedures. The routine was interrupted on 7 November by a Chief of Naval operations dispatch authorizing deployment of the squadron to the Western Pacific on 14 November. Operational flying was immediately halted and preparations for deployment were begun. The men of the squadron worked nights crating and staging material and performing the necessary aircraft maintenance. Since the aircraft were to be shipped on the flight deck of a carrier, extensive measures had to be taken to protect the jets against the destructive salt air. The Fleet Air Service Squadron (FASRON), located at NAS San Diego, prepared 19 planes for the exposed trip. The remaining five aircraft were preserved by the Overhaul and Repair Facility (O&R) also at San Diego. The squadron preserved all the aircraft guns by applying a heavy coat of grease over each weapon.

On 14 November the 55 officers, 247 enlisted men, and 24 F9F-2B aircraft of VMF-311, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Neil R. MacIntyre, departed San Diego on board the carrier USS *Bairoko* (CVE 115). The first day at sea, the seals blew off the aircraft engine air-intake ducts, and the engine doors



USMC Photo A130467

Marine Panther jets from VMF-311 at Yonp'o Airfield, Korea. VMF-311 was the first land-based Marine jet unit in Korea.

blew off and had to be replaced under the most adverse conditions. It was quickly learned that the preservation performed by FASRON was most inadequate. By the time the ship was off Japan, the leading edges of the wings had oxidized and had become pitted, especially on those aircraft stored forward on the deck where they were more exposed to the salt spray. The five aircraft prepared by O&R made the crossing without damage and the guns escaped with only slight traces of rust in some bores.²⁶

On 30 November 1950, Marine Fighter Squadron 311 was again at Yokosuka, Japan, and was ready to resume its role in combat.

The Korean Era: 1950-1955

On 30 November 1950, VMF-311 began unloading its aircraft from the USS *Bairoko*. Depreservation was accomplished at Kizarazu AFB, then the aircraft were ferried to the 1st MAW Headquarters at Itami AFB. In addition to the ferrying of squadron aircraft, VMF-311 pilots were used to ferry F4U-4s from Kizarazu to Itami. During one of these flights, Captain John Strickland, Jr., was killed when the Corsair he was flying developed engine trouble and crashed 7 miles outside of Itami. On the same flight, Captain Richard A. Flanagan was forced to bail out over Kobe Bay when his plane also had an engine failure. It was later determined that both accidents were caused by a malfunction of the engine fuel metering system.

After this ill-fated beginning, the unit was ready to head for Korea. On 7 December the forward echelon, consisting of 2 officers and 48 enlisted men, departed Japan for Yonp'o (K-27) Airfield in North Korea approximately 160 miles northeast of Seoul. They were followed 3 days later by the remainder of the squadron, including the pilots with the squadron's

aircraft. VMF-311 had become the first land-based Marine air jet unit in Korea.

At 1640, 10 December 1950, VMF-311, now assigned to MAG-12, 1st MAW, flew its first combat strike. The first mission, a two-plane section led by Lieutenant Colonel MacIntyre with Major William E. Crowe flying his wing, provided close air support for Eighth Army units approximately 10 miles southwest of the Chosin Reservoir. Although the bomb damage was only one truck and one bulldozer damaged, this mission marked the first time Marine Corps jet aircraft had been used in combat.

Colonel MacIntyre, now retired, in recalling this first mission from Yonp'o writes:

Earl Crowe and I finally got airborne on 10 December 1950. What a relief. At least we were in our element. . . . We finally found target and started to work. As I recall, on one run I had reached my pullout and was watching Earl's run when I noticed something strange. His tracers weren't quite right. I called, Earl, did you fire on that last run? Pretty soon Earl comes back, no. The light dawns—the tracers were going the wrong way. Earl, I guess someone's shooting at us then—that's the way it goes.¹

After a few days in Yonp'o, VMF-311 was reassigned to the U. S. Air Force field (K-9) seven miles northeast of Pusan. The Fifth Air Force (FAF) made space for the Marines and assumed operational control of the squadron on 15 December. All land-based 1st MAW pilots and planes came under the direct control of FAF while Marine ground units were under the command of the Eighth U. S. Army in Korea (EUSAK). The FAF-EUSAK Joint Operations Center (JOC) coordinated and controlled all Allied air operations in Korea. Marine fighter and attack squadrons were employed by FAF to:

- Maintain air superiority.
- Furnish close air support for infantry forces threatened by enemy penetration.
- Conduct day and night reconnaissance.

—Conduct interdiction and general support sorties outside the bomblines* to harass and destroy Communist forces and other military targets which had an immediate effect upon the current tactical situation.²

Colonel MacIntyre describes the field at Pusan (K-9) and the conduct of missions flown in the following way:

The strip at K-9 was laid out in an old river bed with Marston matting for a surface. The Air Force tried to keep the river bed (compacted dust) firm with asphalt sprays etc. but nothing could really hold it down for any length of time. We had to make our takeoffs in two plane sections. The dust cloud raised by our tail pipes was so thick that after one takeoff we had to wait several minutes before the next takeoff could be attempted. Even the Air Force P-51s were having their problems from this dust cloud situation. So we became experts in section takeoffs and four plane division joinups en route. We continued to operate under these conditions until the dust took its toll. We knew we were having troubles; the cockpit warning lights told us that. After a while it seemed like the cockpits were more like Christmas tree decorations. The immediately problem was fuel pump breakdown along with fuel control malfunctions. The bird had a dual pump system which provided for a backup pump in the event one of them broke down, which provided a margin of safety. But who wants to take off with that situation already in existence. A warning light doesn't lend itself to peace of mind especially in the middle of a mission over enemy territory.

Under the Fifth Air Force we had our missions assigned on a daily op order. For example, it may be an armed recon mission near Wonsan on the East Coast. That's where we would start, however, as frequently happened we would get diverted to a CAS mission over on the West Coast. To be prepared for such possibilities, each of us had quite a library of maps all carefully indexed with a master chart on top for the immediately problem of getting into the general operating area. Once in the general area, all one had to do was select the map for the target by grid coordinate, identify it, make a descent through the nearest cloud hole, fold the map back up, and reinsert it in its proper niche under your leg, check the fuel state, monitor the warning lights, smile at your wingmen and go to work either on your own or under a forward controller either airborne or on the ground.

By the end of December, the pilots had rocketed and strafed barracks and storage buildings northwest of Yonp'o; attacked rail bridges, tunnels, and rail cars from Yonp'o west to Pyongyang; and flown reconnaissance and CAS in support of the U. S. 25th Infantry Division and the Army of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the area north of Seoul. The CAS

missions were often controlled in the target area by Air Force special airborne coordinators who controlled the flights from small observation aircraft known as "Mosquitoes."

A most unusual event was recorded on 21 December when, on a reconnaissance mission, First Lieutenant Weldon R. Mitchell sighted an enemy supply caravan which included some animals used to pack supplies. When rolling in on target, Lieutenant Mitchell, expecting to see a shaggy Mongolian horse appear in his gunsight, was astonished when he identified his target as a two-humped camel. He hit the target with his guns and, as he suspected, the caravan contained ammunition and the camel was all but vaporized in the ensuing explosion. Naturally when the pilot reported he had sighted and destroyed an enemy camel caravan, the squadron became the object of many Air Force jokes. However, it was not long before the Air Force also spotted other camels and apologies were in order.³

The day after Christmas the squadron suffered its first Korean War casualty. While leading a two-plane armed reconnaissance flight, Captain Jerry E. A. Miller attacked a highway bridge and as he was pulling out, his Panther hit the top of a hill and exploded.⁴ During the short period in December that the squadron operated in Korea, the unit accumulated a total of 424 hours of combat flying.

The squadron continued close air support for Eighth Army units into January 1951, as the winter cold, mud, and rain added to the squadron's difficulties. Colonel MacIntyre explained some of the difficulties:

Hot tailpipe runups not only melted and blew away snow but also melted the frozen ground and created monstrous ruts in the ground making taxiing and parking extremely difficult. That beautiful snow covered cow pasture became a nightmare and a big mud hole.

These factors greatly affected the operation of the F9F which had not been previously tested under combat conditions.

During this period the squadron joined other 1st MAF units for a series of interdiction raids against the Communist supply net located in the Korean waist between the 38th and 39th parallels to disrupt the Communist Chinese Forces' transport truck system.⁵

By mid-January, mechanical difficulties progressively curtailed tactical operations to a point below normal combat requirements. In response to the squadron's request for technical assistance, Pratt and Whitney and Grumman sent representatives to

*Bomblines — an imaginary line prescribed by the troop commander and coordinated with the air force commander, forward of which air forces are free to attack targets without danger to or coordination with the ground units.

Pusan and on 16 January all 311's jets were grounded. Because of the crowded conditions at Pusan and the extensive maintenance required, on 25 January the squadron was ordered back to Itami AFB in Japan until the aircraft could be overhauled. Unfortunately, the grounding came too late to save Captain Richard A. Flanagan. He was killed on 8 January when his jet lost power and crashed off the end of the Pusan airstrip.⁷

On 5 February, although still in Japan, VMF-311 was reassigned to MAG-33 which was located at Yongil-man Airfield (K-3) in Pohang, Korea. Two days later the squadron's equipment accompanied by 6 officers and 27 enlisted men, sailed by LST for Korea. By 17 February the planes were finally ready and 22 Panthers took off for K-3 while the remainder of the personnel departed Japan on air transports. Two days later the squadron was back in action and throughout the remainder of the month flew CAS and armed reconnaissance missions resulting in the destruction of 39 buildings, 4 warehouses, and 1 railroad car, while killing an estimated 16 enemy troops as the pilots hit the area north of Seoul along the 38th parallel.

In March, MAG-33 consisted of VMF-311 and VMF-212 while MAG-12, at Bradshaw Airfield (K-1) near Pusan, was composed of VMF-214, -312, and -323, and VMF (N) -513.

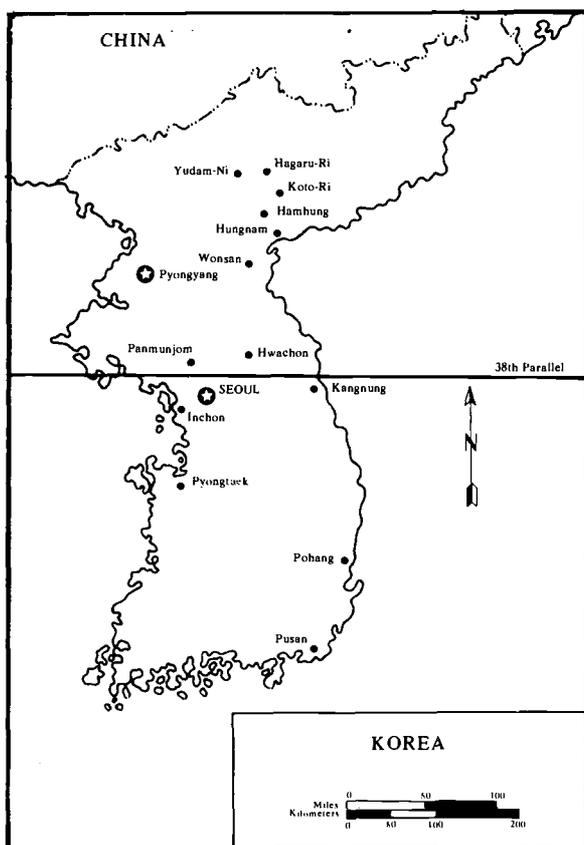
On 11 March, Lieutenant Colonel John F. Kinney became the new commanding officer of VMF-311. The final recollection by Colonel MacIntyre was not of the combat missions flown, but of the men of the squadron. Of them he wrote: "They were the greatest bunch of men I have ever known. They took their losses, their heartbreaks, adversity and setbacks and all they asked was a chance to do their jobs. They were real pros."⁸

As had happened in the past, the change of command was closely followed by the loss of a pilot. On 18 March, Captain Robert D. Hayes failed to return from a close air support mission and was declared missing in action. Four days later the wreckage of his aircraft was found and his status was changed to killed in action.

Major General Paul J. Fontana, in recalling this period, writes:

When the squadron returned to Korea in 1951, I was the commanding officer of MAG-33 at K-3 (Pohang). By this time VMF-311 had remedied the fuel control difficulties. Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Kinney, the squadron compiled an impressive combat sortie rate. John Kinney applied his ingenious mechanical ability, which had maintained the F4F Wildcats' flying on Wake Island almost 10 years previously, to make this squadron an effective operational unit. The squadron's performance from then on was outstanding.⁹

During April, the squadron on two separate occasions was scrambled to provide air support for units in contact with strong enemy forces and each time the speedy jets arrived on station in time to influence the outcome of the engagement. As a result of these two scrambles, the squadron's operational flight procedures were changed for experimental purposes. The practice of sending out flights of scheduled armed reconnaissance or close air support was terminated and a scramble alert system was placed in effect. Under this program four aircraft were maintained on a 10-minute standby. The pilots were required to remain in the cockpit ready for immediate takeoff on call from the tactical air control center (TACC). VMF-311, with its 24 aircraft, was the only unit in Korea to operate on this basis. Nearly 500 other aircraft continued to fly on a regularly scheduled basis. The squadron also maintained two aircraft on CAP alert with pilots in the cockpit. This scramble procedure, however, proved less effective than the FAF schedule system and, with the ex-



ception of the CAP mission, these standbys were discontinued.

Under the FAF system, fighter-bomber aircraft in Korea were scheduled at regular intervals for close air support, special targets, or armed reconnaissance. Four aircraft reported in to the TACC at intervals of approximately 5 minutes on prescheduled missions. As these aircraft were already airborne, they could arrive over the target within 10 to 15 minutes. Those planes which proceeded on a prebriefed mission were given secondary targets and each flight was available for contact by any airborne tactical air controller for other target assignments. This system proved to be highly effective. Each squadron was given its daily commitments and, therefore, could schedule its maintenance around these requirements. VMF-311 found that with this system it could sustain, with no difficulty, a schedule of four aircraft during every daylight hour with the squadron flying as many as 42 sorties in addition to maintaining two aircraft on CAP. Considering the shortage of spare parts which existed during April, this was no simple accomplishment.¹⁰

The lack of enemy opposition and the good weather in April unfortunately did not carry over into May. There was, instead, an average of 1½ days of bad weather per week, and the pilots encountered intensive AA fire throughout the month resulting in 12 planes damaged and 1 destroyed. One pilot, Captain Mercer R. Smith, was captured when his jet was hit and he was forced to bail out over enemy territory on 1 May. Captain Smith remained a prisoner of war until 5 September 1953.¹¹

On 9 May 1951, 75 1st MAW Corsairs and Panther jets were part of a 300-plane raid staged by the FAF against Communist airfields at Sinuiju, on the Korean side of the Yalu River. VMA-311's contribution to this largest raid to date was 20 aircraft. The squadron pilots were among the first to arrive on station and immediately began striking at the targets on the enemy airfields. After 18 minutes, fuel consumption required that the VMA-311 flight return to base. While over the target, several MIG-15s were sighted on the Manchurian side of the Yalu River, but they did not attempt to engage the U. S. armada, nor were the U. S. planes cleared to cross the Yalu. The only squadron incident which occurred during the mission was when one Panther flamed out while on station, but a normal air start was accomplished at 26,000 feet and the jet rejoined the flight and returned safely.



USMC Photo A347877

A Marine Panther jet has just released three napalm bombs on a run against Communist forces in Korea. The napalm bombs can be seen at the bottom of the picture.

Operation Strangle, a FAF all-out interdiction effort to cripple the enemy supply line, was undertaken on 20 May. This operation against vital road and rail networks severely restricted the flow of supplies to the enemy units advancing south.

When the Chinese Communist spring offensive began, MAG-12 Corsairs and MAG-33 Panther jets delivered maximum support to the 1st and 7th Marines as well as keeping the pressure on the enemy through Operation Strangle.¹²

June found VMF-311 supporting elements of the 1st Marine Division south of the "Punch Bowl" where the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 5th Marines were preparing to assault Hill 729. As the fog lifted on 6 June, close air support was delivered with such deadly effectiveness that the assault battalions were able to take the first ridge by nightfall. For the next 9 days the 5th Marines fought to secure the objective

while the F9Fs continued to pound the enemy until Hill 729 was firmly in Marine hands.¹³

Antiaircraft fire continued to plague the squadron throughout the month. On 18 June, Captain Jack E. Perry was hit and forced to bail out of his crippled Panther over enemy territory. His wingman saw him run for cover, but, by the time a rescue helicopter arrived on the scene, Captain Perry could not be located and the helicopter was forced to abandon the search when it began taking intense small arms fire. Captain Perry was later confirmed as a POW and was held in captivity until 1 September 1953.¹⁴

The effect of Operation Strangle on the enemy must be left largely to conjecture. There can be no doubt that it added enormously to the Communists' logistical problems. It is equally certain that they solved these problems to such an extent that their combat units were never at a decisive handicap for lack of ammunition and other supplies. Operation Strangle, in short, merely added to the evidence that interdictory air was not enough to knock a determined adversary out of the war.¹⁵

New tactical developments pioneered by the 1st MAW during the Korean War advanced the United Nations Command (UNC) air effort and added to the 1st MAW reputation for versatility. In order to achieve Marine aviation's primary goal of providing 24-hour close air support, regardless of weather conditions, the new MPQ-14 radar-controlled bombing equipment, developed between 1946 and 1950, was employed by a Marine Air Support Radar Team (MASRT) to control Marine attack sorties. By means of height finding and directional radars, a pilot was able to take off, fly to the target, drop his ordnance, and return to base without ever having seen the ground.¹⁶

During June the squadron flew an astounding total of 2,241 flight hours of which only 107 were non-combat flights. Throughout the month the pilots flew numerous close air support and interdictory missions in an area 75 miles north of Seoul, ranging eastward to the Sea of Japan. However, the accumulation of this flight time did not come without cost. In addition to the loss of Captain Perry's aircraft, another F9F was severely damaged when an engine failure necessitated a wheels-up landing, and 11 others received damage from enemy fire.

As operations in 1951 continued, the true value of the jet fighter was recognized. The superior speed of the jets became a significant element of effective air support. Time after time the Panthers were on target

delivering ordnance before the Corsairs arrived in the area. The jets were also a more stable firing platform offering better gunnery, bombing, and rocket accuracy.¹⁷ Additionally the jet was less vulnerable to enemy ground fire due to its speed and was more capable of protecting itself from enemy fighters than were the prop aircraft. Because of the greater visibility in the jet, it was easier for pilots to pick out targets. The jet could be rearmed and turned around for another flight in less time than the prop aircraft, and maintenance on the jet was deemed easier, particularly engine replacements which could be accomplished on the F9F in 2 hours.¹⁸

The squadron continued its high tempo of operations on into July as it provided support to Eighth Army units with armed reconnaissance, CAS, and bomber escort missions. A practice of maintaining 300 knots speed and 1,000 feet minimum altitude was adopted in the entire reconnaissance area because of the increase in enemy antiaircraft fire.

To counter this fire, fast, hard-hitting attacks were made on antiaircraft positions. A VMF-311 flight consisting of 16 jets made one such attack on positions in a heavily defended town during which the pilots dropped all their bombs during a single run. So successful was the use of surprise and speed that several gun positions were destroyed before any accurate antiaircraft fire could be delivered.

Again in July the squadron was heavily tasked, but the poor flying weather both at home base and in the target area restricted flight operations. During the month the unit lost another F9F-2B and its pilot. First Lieutenant Robert W. Bell was part of a division of 3 aircraft on 21 July when they were jumped by a flight of 15 MIG-15s while the division was returning from a combat patrol. Lieutenant Bell was last seen on the wing of the leader as the Panthers made a run for cloud cover. Communications with escaped American POWs at a later time revealed that Lieutenant Bell was a POW in North Korea and remained as such until his release on 23 September 1953.¹⁹

During this encounter, the MIG pilots exhibited a high degree of airmanship, but showed little enthusiasm for pressing an attack on an equal basis. They seemed to prefer, instead, to use their advantage in speed and rate of climb to pick their own time for engagement and to break away when conditions became unfavorable. In actual fact the F9F was no match for the MIG in overall performance.



USMC Photo A130478

Marine Panther jets from VMF-311 being refueled at Pohang (K-3) Airfield in Korea. The aircraft are already rearmed for their next mission against the Communists.

The best defense was to use the smaller turning radius of the F9F to maneuver into a position where the MIGs could not fire on the Panthers.²⁰

In August inclement weather continued to restrict flight operations, although the squadron did manage to accumulate 1,363 flight hours. Maintenance problems experienced during the month were routine with the exception of three incidents of 20mm high explosive rounds exploding in the mouth of the feed mechanism causing major damage to two aircraft and minor damage to a third. A change in the feeder alignment was made and the malfunctions were eliminated.²¹

On the majority of missions flown during this period, no antiaircraft fire was received, but when it was encountered it was heavy and accurate. During a 10-plane armed reconnaissance mission on 6 August, one aircraft was hit and the pilot was forced to ditch his plane. A helicopter picked up the uninjured pilot and returned him to Pohang. Four days later, while leading an attack on a supply area and a vehicle convoy, Major Frank S. Hoffecker's aircraft took a hit while on a napalm run, burst into flames and exploded as it hit the ground. No one in the flight saw the pilot eject; Major Hoffecker was listed as killed in action.

On 26 August 1951, the squadron received a letter of commendation from Major General Claude B. Ferenbaugh, USA, the Commanding General, U. S. Army 7th Infantry Division for missions flown in support of elements of the division on 16 August.

The 7th Division was in the vicinity of Hills 851 and 820 when it began receiving heavy fire and encountering the enemy in several positions along the front. A call for close air support was answered by four F9Fs piloted by Captain Johnny D. Lindley, Captain Mont L. Beamon, Second Lieutenant "L" "G" Linman, and Technical Sergeant Lyle A. Watts. They napalmed, strafed, and rocketed fortified positions with such "deadly accuracy" that the Army division was able to counter the enemy thrust. The commanding general also congratulated the squadron skipper on the "splendid cooperation and the fighting efficiency of these pilots."²²

The only noteworthy incident in September occurred on the 25th when a flight of eight Panthers, on a rail-cutting mission 35 miles north of Pyongyang on the west coast of North Korea, were jumped by 8 to 12 MIG-15s. The F9Fs jettisoned their bombs and turned towards the MIGs. The Panther pilots managed to get off a few extreme range bursts, but no hits were apparent. After a few passes, the enemy aircraft pulled away and broke contact with no hits taken by either side.

Throughout October and November the Panther jets hammered away at vital rail points and supply convoys on the highways of North Korea. The heaviest concentration of missions were on the road and rail networks just north of Pyongyang extending east to the Sea of Japan on a line about 20 miles north of the 39th parallel.

On several occasions, MIGs made passes on the Panther flights, with as many as 32 enemy aircraft being observed in one formation, but the enemy kept their distance and avoided decisive air-to-air engagements.

One pilot, Second Lieutenant Edward L. Frakes, was lost on 3 October when his aircraft was shot down over enemy territory 35 miles north of Pyongyang. A flight of three F9Fs again was attacking rail targets when Lieutenant Frakes radioed that he was hit and was bailing out. The other planes in the flight spotted the crippled jet diving toward the ground, and watched the plane hit the ground and explode. Since no one saw the pilot eject, he was reported as killed in action.²³

With the cold weather of the Korean winter approaching, all squadron members drew protective clothing and prepared themselves for the months ahead. The weather became unfavorable as rain and reduced visibility hampered the operations but did not reduce the requirements levied on the squadron.

As the year came to a close, enemy antiaircraft fire downed another F9F. On 18 December, First Lieutenant Charles A. Sewell was flying in an eight-plane formation on a rail cutting mission in the area north of Pyongyang which had become all too familiar to the squadron pilots. When his aircraft was hit, Lieutenant Sewell managed to keep the jet flying long enough to get out to sea where he ejected after giving a position report. After a brief but cold ride in his raft, the pilot was picked up about 3 miles at sea by a helicopter which brought him to a destroyer in the area. After 5 days as a guest of the Navy, Lieutenant Sewell was back at Pohang ready to resume flying.

During the 845 flights flown in December, the squadron expended 62,179 rounds of 20mm, 167 general purpose (GP) 500-pound bombs, 1,860 250-pound GP bombs, 16 260-pound fragmentation bombs, and 90 5-inch rockets while attaining a total of 1,353 flight hours.

The new year brought little change for VMF-311 as it continued to support Eighth Army operations. Unfortunately, the loss of pilots also continued. On 3 January 1952, Major George N. Major was flying in a three-plane division on an armed reconnaissance mission along Highway 41 approximately 50 miles north of Seoul. When all the jets began receiving automatic weapons fire at 2,000 feet, Major called the flight leader reporting that he had been hit and, although he did not think it was serious, he said he was returning to base. The other aircraft turned to

join on his wing when the flight leader saw the damaged jet suddenly noseover and dive straight into the ground about 10 miles from where it had been hit. A search was conducted of the crash area, but there was no sign of the pilot or any indication that he survived the crash.²⁴

Combat operations during February were directed primarily against the enemy railroad system and the jets made 161 rail cuts as the squadron continued its participation in Operation Strangle. Although antiaircraft fire was encountered on 65 percent of the missions, only three aircraft received hits and none were lost. The toughest enemy during this period was not the Communists but the bitter cold.

MAG-33, which had been operating with just two aircraft squadrons, suddenly doubled in size as VMF-115, also equipped with the F9F, arrived in February, and in March the newly formed Marine Photographic Squadron 1 (VMJ-1) was assigned to the group. As these new squadrons were undergoing their initial familiarization flights in Korea, Captain Frank J. Hubka flew VMF-311's 10,000th sortie on 28 March 1952.²⁵

Unfortunately, this milestone was preceded by the loss of another pilot when, on 4 March, Captain Roy C. Gray, Jr., was shot down and captured. Captain Gray was leading a flight on a rail-cutting mission about 40 miles south of Pyongyang and as he was pulling out of a run he was hit by intensive ground fire. Because of the damage to the aircraft and the low altitude at which he was hit, the pilot was forced to put the aircraft down in enemy territory and was captured immediately. Captain Gray remained a POW until released on 5 September 1953.²⁶

April was devoted to combat operations, on-the-job training of new personnel, and familiarization instruction for newly arrived pilots. All the jets were beginning to show signs of corrosion, and all F9F were grounded for one day for inspection and replacement of corroded cannon-plugs. While the planes were grounded, the squadron Marines used this opportunity to survey their assigned sector of the airfield defense perimeter and to review the unit's ground defense procedures.

Combat operations continued without any significant change until the last day of April 1952 when the elusive MIG-15s again came on the scene. At 1130, a flight of seven Panthers took off on a prebriefed mission to strike a supply route 35 miles directly north of Pyongyang. The aircraft approached the target at 25,000 feet without incident and as the

formation was about to begin a high speed run on the target, they were jumped by eight MIGs. The Panther flight, led by Major Louis H. Steman, continued its run on the target. The MIGs jettisoned their external fuel tanks and followed the Marines down, firing at the last aircraft piloted by Captain John E. McVey. After pulling out from the run and holding approximately 450 knots, the F9F turned into the MIGs. After a brief exchange of fire, the MIGs holding true to form, broke off the engagement. Before the enemy departed, Captain Walter E. Daniel managed to put a few hits into the nose section of one of the MIGs, but the score ended in a tie as one of the F9Fs also was hit in the tail section. The flight then returned home without further incident.

If there was such a thing as a "routine day" in a combat environment, it can probably best be described by the following extract taken from the VMF-311 Historical Diary of April 1952.

Example of a Routine Day

Due to the operations [in which] the squadron is now engaged, the following schedule is to serve as an example only. This routine is variable to meet existing weather and operational conditions:

0500—Combat Air Patrol aircraft are manned.

0600—Reveille for normal working day.

0630—Breakfast.

0730—Muster of all personnel in respective working areas.

1100—Personnel not engaged in immediate work on aircraft relieved for dinner.

1130—Dinner.

1230—Personnel are mustered in the working areas.

1630—Personnel not engaged in immediate work on aircraft relieved for supper.

1700—Supper.

1800—Personnel needed for loading, gassing, or maintenance of aircraft not in commission or not combat ready, return to work until such time as the work is completed.

1945—Combat Air Patrol aircraft are secured.

CAP aircraft are on alert scramble from one-half hour before until one-half hour after sunset. Pilots, working two hour shifts, remain in the cockpit of the aircraft ready for immediate takeoff until scrambled or relieved.

(1) Pilots of the squadron report for briefing approximately one hour prior to takeoff.

(2) Plane captains, ordnance and line personnel are at their respective jobs prior to one hour before takeoff and remain there until their jobs are secured in the evening.

(3) Engineering personnel average 3 to 4 days a week of night work from 1730 to 2230 placing aircraft in commission.

(4) One operations clerk reports for duty at 0415, prior to the first CAP and first briefing.

(5) One intelligence clerk reports for duty at 0415 to annotate the Flak Situation Map for the immediate target that is to be hit that day.²⁷

One item which was not addressed in this schedule was that of normal flight operations which were conducted throughout the day from sunrise to sunset.

The warm weather of May was a welcome relief to the officers and men who had just endured the severe Korean winter. However, spring weather was the only good thing about May for VMF-311. On 10 May, four Panthers led by Captain William Regas were directed to attack enemy supply dumps and artillery pieces about 40 miles south of the 39th parallel, north of Seoul. On the second pass at the target, Captain John S. Bostwick delivered his ordnance, made a left climbing pullout, rolled over on his back, and dove straight into the ground 150 meters behind enemy lines. Although the other members of the flight did not observe any ground fire while they were over the target area, they did come under intense machinegun fire as they circled over the wreckage of the F9F. The cause of the crash remained undetermined, but enemy ground fire was listed as a possible factor.

The following day, a four-plane division was on a close air support mission, just 15 miles east of where Captain Bostwick went down, when misfortune once again claimed a squadron pilot. The planes were orbiting at 6,000 feet, waiting for the airborne controller to mark the target with rockets, when Captain Malcom C. Hagan flew into a small cloud. Just as he emerged from the cloud, he collided with a small observation plane, causing the right wing of the jet to be torn from the fuselage. The aircraft then went into a violent, nosedown roll and exploded as it struck the ground. The pilot of the observation plane was also killed as the initial collision completely destroyed the small craft before he could bail out.²⁸

Two days later, seven aircraft were on a rail-cutting mission approximately 25 miles north of Pyongyang, when First Lieutenant Milton H. Baugh transmitted a "Mayday," stating his plane had been hit and he had lost power. The pilot, rather than bailing out, elected to make a forced landing on the salt flats just to the west along the coast. Lieutenant Baugh landed the aircraft with what appeared to be little damage to the jet, but by the time the flight arrived over the downed plane, the canopy was observed open and there was no sign of the pilot. Lieutenant Baugh was later reported as captured and remained a POW until 30 August 1953.²⁹



USMC Photo A332600

F9Fs from VMF-311 and VMF-115 destroyed the hydroelectric plant at Chosin Reservoir on 24 June 1952 in the first massed strike by the Panther jets. Photographs show the target before and after the strike.

Whoever made the statement, “We had lots of luck and all of it bad” must have been with VMF-311 during this period. Five days after the loss of Lieutenant Baugh, the commanding officer of MAG-33, Colonel Martin A. Severson, logged the squadron’s fourth mishap of the month. During a takeoff, Colonel Severson, flying a 311 plane, was unable to gain sufficient speed to become airborne. As the jet was running out of runway, Colonel Severson realized he was committed to getting the plane off the deck. Holding the jet on the runway until the last possible moment, he lifted off just long enough to raise the gear before the plane settled back on the runway skidding about 300 yards beyond the overrun, causing serious back injuries to Colonel Severson and major damage to the Panther.³⁰

On 3 June 1952, Major Henry W. Hise, who later retired as a brigadier general, assumed command of the squadron. In recalling that period, General Hise writes:

We frequently flew as many as 20 aircraft stacked down in formation through several thousand feet of clouds and sometimes all the way to the target. On arriving at the initial point in the clouds, the let-down would be started and if we did not break out, the flight would climb and drop all ordnance under the guidance of radar. The normal altitude of approach was 25,000 feet with a ground speed of 270 knots [then we would make a] high speed approach to 14,000 feet. [We would then begin] a dive at a 45 degree angle to 3,000 feet, drop the bombs, and pull out in level flight by 1,000 feet.

General Hise also described what he considers to have been “hairiest flight that we flew during the period”:

On 15 June 1952, we flew a flak suppression mission on the airfields east of Pyongyang. . . . We were carrying VT [variable timed] fused bombs for the first time in Korea. VMF-311 was the lead element of the flight and VMF-115 had the last 12 to 16 aircraft. Each of us was armed with four bombs. You could look out at the wing and see each bomb’s nose and fuse. We had the flight joined and were just passing through about 8,000 feet when I heard someone in the VMF-115 sections state that [Captain Howard D. Campbell] had just blown up. His wingman’s jet received major damage from the blast and was forced to bail out. After the news sunk in on me that Campbell’s VT fuses had malfunctioned and killed him, I had to decide what to do. Since we were the opening squadron of a major attack on Pyongyang, it was very desirable that we go through with the mission. I called the flight and told them that if the prop on their bomb fuses started to spin to jettison immediately. Then I directed the flight to open up so that one plane blowing up would not get his wingman and also suggested that anyone with doubt about his ordnance go out over the ocean, drop, and abort. We then went on to Pyongyang. All of the 311 planes made the trip OK. Some of the 115 pilots who had seen Campbell explode went out to sea and jettisoned. It was about a 45 minute ride to Pyongyang and they were long minutes. We made an approach above broken clouds and encountered some radar directed heavy AAA breaking just below the formation. I broke up the flight and got rid of the bombs on the airfield. It was a great relief. We had one pilot with a hung bomb but he managed to shake it off. We did not lose anyone to AAA and made it home without further incident.

Investigation revealed that the 311 pilots were not in any danger. Our bombs and fuses had been properly installed. The ordnance crew of 115 had improperly installed the arming wires. The mission was a real exercise in decision making and tension.³¹

The next massing of airpower in which the squadron was involved came on 23-24 June when MAG-33, now under the command of Colonel Condon, put VMF-311 and -115 into the air for a 2-day mission to destroy a power complex at the Chosin Reservoir. On the 23d, 22 aircraft from VMF-311 and 18 from VMF-115 took off from Pohang and arrived over the target at 1559. The attack, which continued until 1612, completely demolished the power station except for one wall left standing. The flight received intense anti-aircraft fire, but no planes were hit. The following day 20 jets from 311 and 15 from 115 attacked the complex a second time. In 22 minutes a multistory building, a barracks complex, and a large reinforced concrete building were destroyed. Again enemy fire was encountered, but resulted in only minor damage to one plane. This was the first time F9Fs had ever been massed for a strike of this type. Although the jets carried a smaller payload than the Corsairs and Douglas AD-6 Skyraiders of MAG-12, the extremely precise bombing record made by the Panther jet pilots put to rest the doubts about jet accuracy that had been held by some in the 1st MAW.³²

From July to September 1952, the squadron enjoyed a period free from combat losses, operational accidents, and MIG encounters. In September, however, a landing accident occurred when the nose gear of a F9F collapsed. Investigation of the accident revealed that this aircraft as well as 16 other squadron planes had cracks in the nose wheel struts. This caused the majority of the aircraft to remain inoperative until repairs could be made. The required repairs hampered the unit's combat effectiveness and monthly combat sorties were limited to 733 for a total of 888 flight hours.

On 19 September, a flight of eight Panthers, attacking a supply area about 45 miles northeast of Seoul, came under intense machinegun fire which hit the aircraft piloted by Captain Edward H. P. Lynk. Fortunately, the pilot was able to get the crippled plane over friendly territory before he ejected. Captain Lynk was quickly picked up by a helicopter which returned him to home base.

On the last day of the month, a flame-out during the landing approach resulted in the death of Second

Lieutenant Odyce W. Livingston when his jet crashed 2 miles short of the runway at K-3.

Although misfortune plagued the squadron, Major Alexander J. "Rocky" Gillis, a VMF-311 pilot assigned as an exchange pilot to the Air Force's 335th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, distinguished himself by becoming not only the first naval aviator to destroy three enemy aircraft in Korea, but also the second to score a multiple kill in a single day.^{33*} On 15 September, Major Gillis, flying the Air Force's North American F-86 Sabre, downed his first MIG-15. Then on 28 September, while flying in a four-plane formation in the vicinity of the mouth of the Yalu River, Major Gillis brought down two more MIGs before having to eject from his disabled aircraft. After nearly 4 hours in the Yellow Sea, a rescue helicopter picked him up and returned him to safety.³⁴

By the fall of 1952, the situation in Korea changed to a type of position warfare that enabled the enemy to increase their radar and anti-aircraft installations. To counter this, passive electronics countermeasures (ECM) were instituted by FAF. This program was enhanced in September 1952 by the commissioning of VMC-1 (Marine Composite Squadron 1), administratively assigned to MACG-2 (Marine Air Control Group 2). The squadron possessed the only FAF ECM capability to locate enemy radars and was the primary source of ECM intercept equipment in FAF squadrons for early warning and radar control monitoring.³⁵

As VMF-311 ended its second year in Korea, another pilot was lost. On 5 December the squadron launched an 18-plane attack on an enemy supply concentration just 18 miles south of where Captain Lynk had been hit. Each plane was loaded with two 500-pound and six 250-pound bombs. The attack proceeded as briefed, and upon completion of the mission the flight leader called for all aircraft to check in by radio. Captain Donald H. Clark failed to answer the call and did not rendezvous with the rest of the flight. The pilots conducted a search but could not find any evidence of a crash. After being carried as missing in action for a year, Captain Clark's status was changed to killed in action.³⁶

The same day, the squadron dropped a record of 47.9 tons of ordnance on enemy positions. By the end

*The first naval aviator to achieve a multiple kill in Korea in a single day was Captain Phillip C. DeLong, a F4U-4 pilot from VMF-312, who shot down two enemy planes on 21 April 1951.

of the month the squadron had exceeded 15,000 combat sorties and accumulated nearly 30,000 combat flight hours since arriving in Korea.

Aside from collecting combat sorties, flight hours, and operational statistics, it seemed that VMF-311 was collecting something else—commanding officers. During 1952, the squadron had the unusual distinction of having seven commanding officers. It seemed that every jet-qualified major and lieutenant colonel in Korea was to be given a turn at commanding 311.³⁷

It was during these years that the VMF-311 squadron insignia started appearing on its aircraft. Just as the squadron insignia became a noticeable identification for VMA-311 aircraft, the pilots became readily identifiable by the scarves they purchased to go along with the squadron insignia. These were a soft baby blue overprinted with pink hearts and the squadron name. Needless to say they became highly prized items particularly in infantry circles during the war. (One of the scarves has survived the ravages of time and can be seen at the Marine Corps Aviation Museum in Quantico, Virginia).

Shortly after the 44 officers and 172 enlisted men of VMF-311 had welcomed in the new year as appropriately as the combat situation would allow, 2 officers and 12 enlisted men left for Oppama, Japan, to perform the acceptance checks* on six new F9F-5 aircraft. The new aircraft, first assigned to the Marine Corps in 1952, had a larger engine that developed an additional 500 pounds of thrust. The F9F-5 appearance changed only slightly in that the fuselage was now 2 feet longer and the tail section was slightly higher.³⁸

The new Panther jets were flown to Korea and on 14 January 1953 the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur H. Adams,** led the first Marine F9F-5 combat mission. Flying close air support for

*Acceptance checks consisting of an inspection of the aircraft, examination of the maintenance logs and the engine log book, as well as a test flight of each new aircraft are completed before a unit receipts for an aircraft.

**During World War II, then Captain Adams served two tours with the 1st MAW in the Northern Solomons area where he earned 3 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 13 Air Medals. In Korea he was awarded his fourth and fifth Distinguished Flying Crosses and three more Air Medals. He was promoted to brigadier general in July 1964 and to major general in November 1967. After serving as Deputy Chief of Staff, Commander in Chief, Atlantic, General Adams retired in Norfolk, Virginia.

the 40th U.S. Army Infantry Division and the 12th ROK Infantry Division, the flight received a bomb damage assessment crediting them with two personnel shelters destroyed, five automatic weapons positions heavily damaged, and one secondary explosion observed. The pilots encountered no enemy opposition and the flight returned safely.

Large flights consisting of F9Fs from VMF-311 and -115 continued with great success as no aerial opposition was encountered and antiaircraft fire against the jets became less accurate. On 16 February, 16 aircraft from VMF-311 joined with 19 planes from VMF-115 for an interdiction strike against an enemy supply buildup along Highway 1 south of Pyongyang in North Korea. The flight met only meager small arms fire, however, one VMF-311 jet was hit and was on fire by the time it landed. The pilot, baseball's famous Captain Theodore "Ted" S. Williams, escaped uninjured although the aircraft was a total loss.

With Captain Williams, who was in the squadron from February to July 1953, the unit also had an officer who was destined to become one of the most famous of Marine aviators, Major John H. Glenn, Jr. Major Glenn joined VMF-311 in February 1953 and in July, after 63 missions with the squadron, was assigned to the Air Force's 25th Fighter Squadron equipped with North American Sabres. That same month, Major Glenn showed the Air Force what a Marine could do as he shot down three MIGs in 9 days and earned his fifth DFC.***

As the end of March 1953 approached, the squadron was busy supporting the 5th Marines which was struggling through rain-swollen rice paddies and up muddy slopes in the fight for Outpost Vegas. With the 5th Marines was the 1st Marine Division reserve, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, and in support was the artillery of the 11th Marines. On 27 March, VMF-311 alone flew 19 interdiction missions and 26 close air support sorties as the 5th Marines pushed forward. The pilots dropped 55 tons

***Later as an astronaut, Glenn made the first orbital flight of the earth in February 1962 and became the first recipient of the Alfred A. Cunningham award. (This award is named for the first Marine aviator and presented annually to the outstanding Marine aviator of the year.) He retired from the Marine Corps with the rank of colonel and later was elected U. S. Senator from Ohio.³⁹

of ordnance on enemy positions, topping the previous squadron high of 47.9 tons set on 5 December 1952. Joined by other squadrons, as well as some Air Force jets, the pilots hit target after target destroying bridges, supply dumps, bunkers, mortar emplacements, and trenches and raking troop positions with 20mm fire. After patching those planes which were hit by small arms fire, the pilots were back on the following day, joined by VMF-115 for a continuation of the mission. By nightfall the 5th Marines owned Vegas. The air-ground team had knocked out the 358th CCF Regiment without any squadron losses ending the month with an air of success.⁴⁰

Along the division front, the war in April was still a daily survival contest despite the promising outlook at Panmunjom. On 10 April, the pilots of VMF-311 were again called for support, this time to thwart a Communist attempt to retake outpost Carson. Two flights of Panthers, totaling 16 F9Fs, quickly discouraged any serious attacks by the Communists and the hill position remained firmly in Marine Corps hands.⁴¹

For the two MAG-33 fighter squadrons, 17 April was recorded as a "maximum effort day." From 0410 until 2030 that evening, VMF-311 flew continuous missions in support of the 7th Infantry Division which had met stiff resistance while operating on the extreme right flank of the I Corps sector. While VMF-311 was working to prevent a penetration on the one flank, VMF-115 was faced with the identical situation on the opposite flank. Again the teamwork paid off as the Communists

were forced to abandon their attempts to penetrate the American lines.⁴²

Although nine aircraft received battle damage during April and one plane was damaged as the result of an operational accident, no pilots were injured or wounded and the squadron enjoyed its second straight month with aircraft availability averaging over 94 percent. Much of the credit for the success of the squadron went to the maintenance personnel, who in the unit's command diary of April 1953, were described as "miracle workers." Considering that the unit had flown 741 combat sorties plus the fact the squadron was also transferring the remaining F9F-2Cs and accepting new F9F-5s, the title appears well deserved.

April also brought some happiness and a glimmer of hope as the enemy released 684 captives of whom 149 were Americans. Of those freed 15 were Marines, though none were aviators. This release, which took place between 20 and 26 April 1953, was part of Operation Switch during which the United Nations Command (UNC) released a total of 6,670 Communist prisoners.⁴³

During May the squadron continued close air support, interdiction, and combat air patrol missions as assigned by the FAF and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. In the execution of these missions, only six squadron aircraft received battle damage, but two aircraft were lost on 6 May as the unit sustained its first pilot casualty of 1953.

A flight of four F9Fs was returning from a close air support mission after working with the 7th ROK



USMC Photo A132958

A combat veteran of the Korean War. This F9F Panther jet from VMF-311 was one of the oldest combat planes of its kind in Korea. It had accumulated 445 combat missions and flown over 1,000 hours in Korea.

Infantry Division, when the flight ran into bad weather. By the time the planes arrived in the Pohang (K-3) area, the field was almost completely obscured by low clouds. The first two planes sighted the field and landed but the second section became lost while orbiting the field trying to spot the runway. Because of the limited fuel remaining, the jets were unable to divert so the alternatives were land, ditch, or bail out. One pilot, Captain Joseph N. Carruthers ditched his aircraft at sea and was rescued by a helicopter about an hour later. The other pilot, Captain Joe D. Bailes, continued descending, expecting to spot the field through the overcast, when his plane struck the top of a small mountain. The crash was observed by some Korean police who reported the accident and confirmed that the pilot had been killed.⁴⁴

Bad weather continued to hamper flight operations, but the time was well utilized by the maintenance section to pull acceptance checks on replacement aircraft and to perform the necessary maintenance to keep the aircraft availability above 90 percent. During the entire month of May, there were only seven aircraft which aborted missions due to maintenance problems. The squadron was rightfully proud of its ability to respond to a mission, and the pilots attributed this capability to the men of the maintenance section.

In addition to combat operations in May, the squadron also provided air defense for a 1st Marine Division amphibious training exercise at the Yongjong-ni beaches on the west coast near Kunsan. The 1st Marine Division in April, after 20 months on the line, had been relieved by the Army's 25th Infantry Division and became the I Corps reserve. The 1st Marine Division effectively used this time for "continued improvement of amphibious and ground offensive combat capabilities," anticipating the return to the front which would come in June.⁴⁵

Enemy anti-aircraft fire kept the maintenance section jumping during June as 15 of the jets returned from missions with battle damage. This damage was readily accepted, however, by squadron personnel since no planes were lost and no pilots were missing or injured.

"If the monsoon rains of July hung like a shroud over the infantryman, they were an even more serious impediment to the air operations of MAG-12 and -33." There were 24 days of restricted flying and 12 full days during which air operations were canceled entirely.⁴⁶

When nearly a week of inclement weather finally lifted, the squadron welcomed a brisk change in the tempo of operations. The 1st Marine Division had moved back on line. On 11 July, the Chinese fortifications north of the 7th Marines' sector were attacked. Combined flights with VMF-115 were again utilized on 14 July. Twenty Panther jets swooped over enemy territory from sunrise to sunset, unleashing 25 tons of rocket and bombs north of the troubled 7th Marines and an additional 9 tons on hostile emplacements near the western end of the division line.⁴⁷

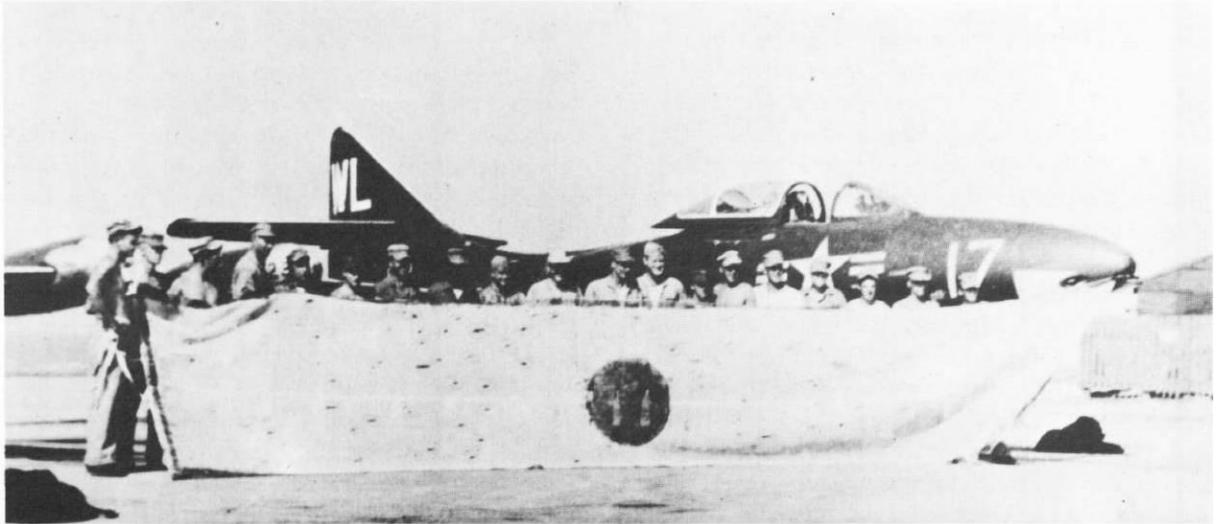
On 17 July, Captain Robert I. Nordell, flying his third mission that day, and his wingman, First Lieutenant Frank L. Keck, Jr., were hit by intense automatic weapons fire while on an interdiction flight. Their planes reportedly went down at 2000 over the Sea of Japan. After a 4-day search they were declared missing and subsequently reclassified as killed in action.⁴⁸

Also on the 17th, Captain Harold F. Hagans was forced to ditch his aircraft after it was set afire by small arms fire. Captain Hagans received only minor injuries and was promptly rescued and returned to Pohang, but the squadron had lost its third aircraft of the day. An additional plane had been lost earlier in the month when the jet blast from one F9F ignited 20mm ammunition on the plane manned by Captain William B. Clem. The pilot got safely out of the aircraft, but the jet was destroyed.⁴⁹

On the morning of 25 July, the Chinese again assaulted elements of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines from positions in the vicinity of Marine-held Hills 119 and 111. Air support was requested and F9Fs from VMF-311 and -115 responded. Between 0616 and 1036, they bombarded the enemy with more than 32 tons of explosives as the 7th Marines stubbornly held its ground. The enemy's attack on the Marine positions constituted the major action in the I Corps during what was to be the final 10 days of the war. The Communists had gained a few miles of territory, but at the cost of an estimated 72,000 casualties including more than 25,000 killed.⁵⁰

After 3 years, 1 month, and 2 days, the so-called "police action" in Korea ended on 27 July 1953 with the signing of an armistice agreement at Panmunjom.

For the 7,035 Marine officers and men on duty with Major General Vernon E. Megee's 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, the final day of the war was an active one. Corsairs, Skyraiders, and Panther jets mounted



USMC Photo A332596

Victorious pilots and crewmen hold the gunnery sleeve, which had been riddled with hits by VMF-311 pilots during a gunnery meet in Korea. VMF-311 pilots captured first through fourth places in the individual competition as well as placing first in overall squadron standings.

222 sorties and blasted the enemy with 354 tons of high explosives along the front. The last Marine jet pilot in action was Captain William I. Armagost of VMF-311. He smashed a Communist supply point with four 500-pounders, at 1835, declaring his flight felt "just like the last winning play of a football game."³¹ The wing closed out its part in the Korean War just 35 minutes before the cease-fire.

In the 2½ years that VMF-311 spent in Korea, it amassed a total of 18,851 combat sorties. Now it was time to slow down the pace. Instead of combat missions the pilots were now flying training flights in order to maintain a high level of readiness in the event hostilities were resumed. Time, however, was available for both the officers and the men to participate in recreational activities and to enjoy the postwar calm.

In September the unit's strength was reduced slightly to 39 officers and 174 enlisted men, yet 741 hours were flown as the pilots continued their training flights. Until 22 December, the squadron flew without an accident, but on that day Second Lieutenant Charles H. Bishop experienced an engine flame-out and although he safely ejected, the plane was lost at sea.

By the end of the year, the squadron's men had improved the working spaces to allow themselves a little more comfort. The pilots made themselves a new briefing room as their contribution to the effort.

Most men participated in group athletic tournaments during their off-duty time, but the one event in which all Marines actively participated was prophesying the squadron's fate for the coming year.

The new year brought little change for the 33 officers and 165 enlisted men who now made up VMF-311. The only excitement to break the monotony occurred on 16 January 1954 when the squadron was placed on a 30-minute alert beginning an hour prior to sunrise and ending an hour after sunset. This alert, caused by South Korea's release of nonrepatriated prisoners of war, was finally canceled by the Joint Operations Center on 23 January.

During February, in order that all units were prepared for further combat in the event the current armistice was not honored by the Communists, specific tasks were assigned for each unit. VMF-311 was assigned tasks both as a Marine unit and as element of Task Force 91, commanded by the Commanding General, Fifth Air Force. The tasks assigned as a Marine fighter squadron were:

1. To intercept and destroy enemy aircraft in conjunction with ground and airborne fighter direction, during daylight hours.
2. Within the capability of the assigned aircraft, to intercept and destroy enemy aircraft in conjunction with ground fighter direction, during the hours of darkness and foul weather conditions.
3. To conduct offensive operations against enemy aircraft, airborne and on the ground.
4. To provide fighter escort of friendly aircraft.

5. Within the capability of the assigned aircraft, perform strikes against enemy installations, close air support missions, interdiction missions, and to perform operations against enemy surface targets.

6. To perform visual reconnaissance missions.

7. Have the capability to operate from aircraft carriers.

8. Have the capability to depart from and return to their base during the hours of darkness and during foul weather conditions.

As an element of Task Force 91, the following tasks were assigned:

A. Destruction of enemy aircraft.

B. Perform close air support missions in support of the United Nations ground forces.

C. Perform interdiction of enemy ground lines of communication.

D. Perform armed reconnaissance missions and offensive strikes against the enemy.

E. Escort and provide cover for United Nations forces on land, sea, and in the air.

F. Provide air defense of military installations.

G. To maintain aircraft on alert status as prescribed by the Commanding General, Fifth Air Force.

H. To be able to deploy as directed.

I. To be ready to operate Fifth Air Force installations when ordered to by and in accordance with directives from the Commanding General, Fifth Air Force.²²

Since most of the experienced combat pilots had rotated back to the United States, the squadron continued to fly in excess of 1,000 hours a month in order to achieve maximum readiness.

On 17 May 1954, tragedy interrupted the placid squadron routine. Second Lieutenant Willard E. Miller, while on a routine training flight, experienced aircraft difficulties and was forced to ditch his F9F off the east coast of Korea. The landing was good, but Miller drowned before a helicopter arrived on the scene. The cause of the accident and the subsequent drowning remained undetermined.

With combat readiness as the primary concern throughout Korea, two major exercises were conducted in which the squadron participated. The first was Marine Landing Exercise (MarLEX) VI, an amphibious landing by the 5th Marines with the air cover supplied by MAG-33. Bad weather prevailed during most of the exercise, and the squadron was able to provide little air support.

Later, on 28 June, VMF-311 participated in the Air Force's Operation Homeplate, designed to test the defenses of the U. S. airbases in Korea. The squadron was employed as part of the defending forces, while several Air Force units assumed the enemy's role and attempted to penetrate the airfields' defenses.

On 21 June 1954, Lieutenant Colonel Michael R.

Yunck assumed command of the squadron for the third time. Lieutenant Colonel Yunck remained in this position for 4 tranquil months. From 7 to 10 September, the 1st MAW held an air-to-air and an air-to-ground gunnery meet with MAGs -11, -12, and -33 competing. Not only did the squadron team, led by Lieutenant Colonel Yunck, score a decisive victory in the meet, but VMF-311 pilots also captured first through fourth places in the individual competition. In addition to the skipper, the squadron's "big guns" were Major James J. Larkin, First Lieutenant Robert J. Fagot, and First Lieutenant James F. Browne.

During the period of 1 October through 31 December 1954, the squadron maintained an average aircraft availability of 86.9 percent while flying a total of 3,118 flight hours. Aside from the normal training, the pilots participated in four more MarLEX operations providing simulated close air support for the Marine ground forces. On 26 November, the squadron experienced its first operational accident since May. While on a routine cross-country flight, Second Lieutenant John F. Watson, Jr., was killed when his plane crashed as a result of a midair collision in the vicinity of Pyongtaek (K-6), Korea.

With the arrival of a new year, the squadron continued to busy itself by maintaining the 1,000 flight hours per month average. Despite the cold and snow, the VMF-311 jets accumulated 3,181 flight hours during the first quarter of 1955.

By 1 April 1955 the word was out that it would not be much longer before MAG-33 would be heading home. All routine periodic inspections were performed on the jets, aircraft maintenance was completed, and test hops were flown in order to ready the aircraft for their final flight before being shipped to the United States. Finally, on 18 April 1955, the last of the squadron's planes were ferried from K-3 to the Naval Air Station at Iwakuni, Japan. Also on the 18th, the forward echelon of the unit was airlifted to Iwakuni while the rear echelon completed the final packing and crating of the shop equipment. On 27 April the squadron command moved to Iwakuni. By the end of April, Marine Air Repair Squadron 17 had all the aircraft preserved for the voyage home.

The aircraft were barged from Iwakuni to the carrier USS *Princeton* (CVS 37) on 12 May and were lifted on board without mishap. The following day, the squadron under the command of Major Manning T. Jannell, later a brigadier general, sailed on board the *Princeton* for California. Meanwhile, the