

A HISTORY OF MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 323



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
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WASHINGTON, D.C.

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

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by
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1987

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A History of Marine Attack Squadron 311, 1978
A History of Marine Attack Squadron 312, 1978
A History of Marine Observation Squadron 6, 1982
A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115, in preparation

USMC PCN 19000309900

Foreword

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

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



E. H. SIMMONS
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Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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



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Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323

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

Commissioning and Preparations for Combat

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

telligence, and various aspects of operations during this period.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

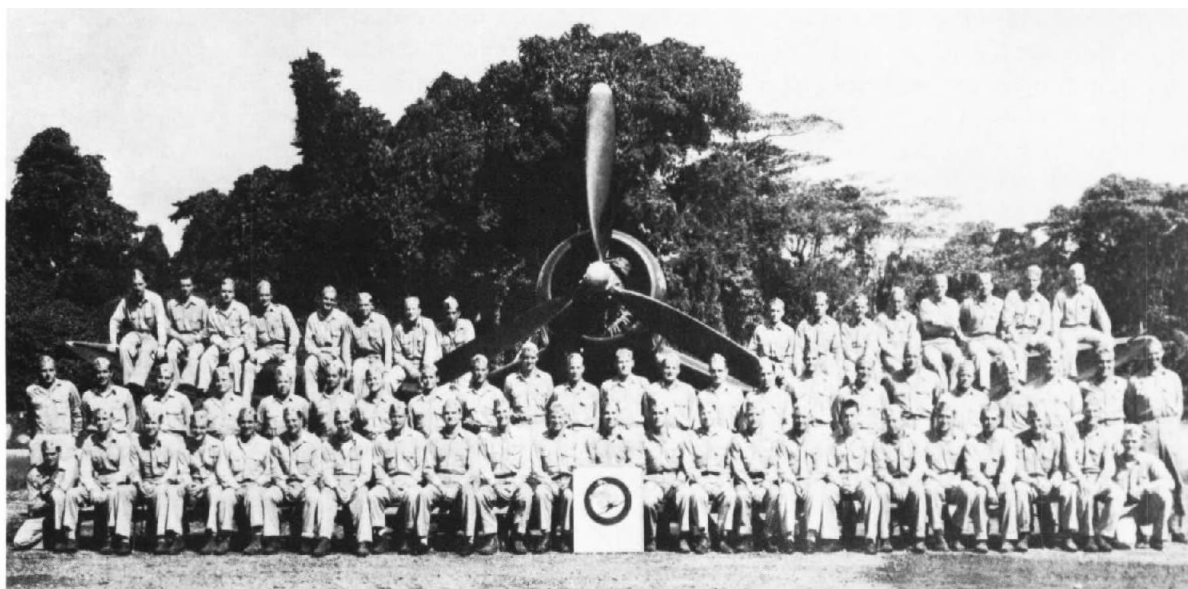
Upon arrival at Emirau the squadron reported to the Commanding General, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing for duty. The remainder of the month featured local flight activity within a 50-mile radius of the field. Dummy gunnery, practice dive bombing, and squadron tactics were emphasized.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Preparations for combat assignment continued into

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Combat in the Okinawa Campaign

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

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

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

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

Operations for VMF-323 from Kadena Airfield were

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Lieutenant Brown was later listed as killed in action.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wade could see no more planes so he headed north

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Major Axtell was equally enthusiastic in describing the Corsair:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Post-World War II: 1946-1950

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Marine Corps Historical Collection





Marine Corps Historical Collection

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

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

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

Action in Korea: 1950-1953

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

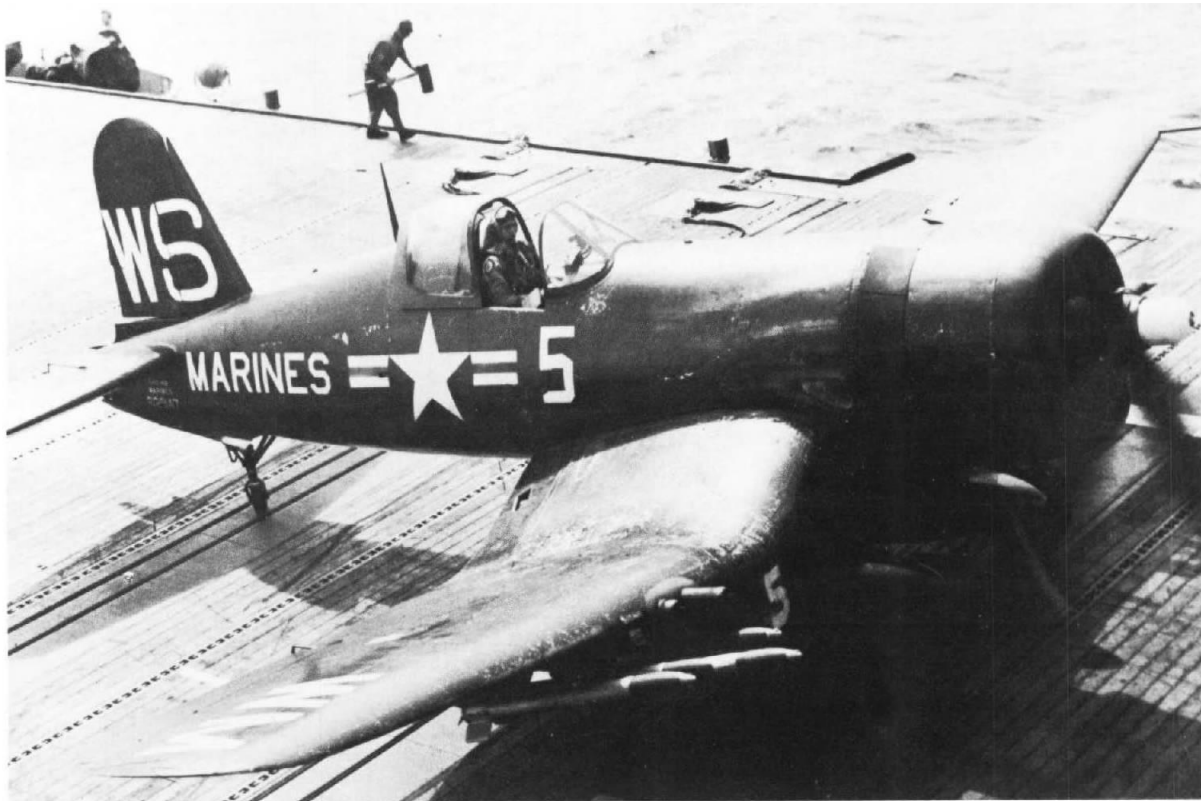
The *Badoeng Strait* set out for Sasebo on 3 October, arriving the next day. The ship remained there until 16 October taking on provisions, rearming, and undergoing repairs. The Marines of VMF-323 were finally free to rest and enjoy recreational pursuits in the Itami area after their strenuous period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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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