

# A HISTORY OF MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 115



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

*An F/A-18 Hornet from VMFA-115 on a training flight at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, South Carolina, in 1986. The squadron's identifying insignia, a Silver Eagle, is clearly visible on the tail. (MCAS Beaufort Photo)*

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by

Captain John C. Chapin  
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (Retired)



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# FOREWORD

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This history traces more than 40 years of active service by Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115. Since its commissioning in July 1943, the squadron has evolved from a group of wartime beginners in SNJ-4 planes to today's front-line professionals in their F/A-18 Hornets. These decades have seen VMFA-115 on active service in the Southwest Pacific, the Philippines, China, Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan, Western Europe, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and on both coasts of the United States.

Data for the history were drawn principally from primary sources: command diaries and chronologies; muster rolls; published historical works; and recollections of the Marines involved.

Captain John C. Chapin earned a bachelor of arts degree with honors in history from Yale University in 1942 and was commissioned later that year. He served as a rifle platoon leader in the 24th Marines, 4th Marine Division, and was wounded in action during assault landings on Roi-Namur and Saipan.

Transferred to duty at the Historical Division, Headquarters, Marine Corps, he wrote the first official histories of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions. Moving to Reserve status at the end of World War II, he earned a master's degree in history at George Washington University with a thesis on "The Marine Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1922."

Now a captain in retired status, he has devoted major portions of three years as a volunteer at the Marine Corps Historical Center to writing this history.

The history provides an informative overview of the development and employment of this squadron over a span of nearly five 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 (Retired)  
Director of Marine Corps History and Museums



# PREFACE

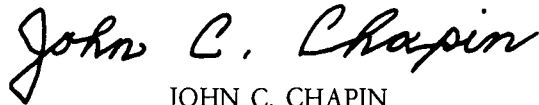
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This volume offers an operational narrative account of one of the Marine Corps' best-known fighter squadrons. Holder of three Presidential Unit Citations and three times awarded the Hanson Trophy, VMFA-115 has built a distinguished career since 1943. It has played a prominent role in every national conflict from World War II to the Vietnam War, and has served in nearly every part of the globe. While this history deals with a particular squadron, it exemplifies the service of many other Marine fighter-attack squadrons.

I must express deep appreciation to many members of the professional staff of the History and Museums Division who were unfailingly helpful in research, editing, and explanation of arcane aviation terminology. In particular, I was greatly helped by Majors Frank M. Batha, Jr., and Arthur F. Elzy; Mr. Jack Shulimson; Mrs. Joyce E. Bonnett, Mrs. Regina H. Strother, and Dr. V. Keith Fleming, Jr.

I also would like to thank those who were so helpful in providing photographs and comments on drafts. A complete list appears in Appendix G.

Finally, I must acknowledge with gratitude the grant from the Marine Corps Historical Foundation towards the writing of this history.



JOHN C. CHAPIN

Captain, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (Retired)





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Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 90918

*Maj Joseph H. Foss, on the left, the commanding officer of VMF-115, escorts Col Charles A. Lindbergh, on the right, during Lindbergh's "combat visit" to fly the Corsair with the squadron at Emirau in May of 1944. Walking just behind them is Maj Marion E. Carl.*

# A History of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115

*Formation and Pacific Action—Philippine Combat—A Move to China—Hawaiian and Stateside Duty  
Korean Combat—Back to the States—Japan-U.S. Shuttle—Vietnam Combat  
Thailand Deployment—Japan Again-U.S. Again*

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## *Formation and Pacific Action*

The first year of World War II in the Pacific Ocean, starting with Pearl Harbor and the intense air battles following the Guadalcanal landing, dramatized the crucial need for additional Marine fighter squadrons. The pilots and planes in these harrowing early days had given a superb account of themselves, but, with a long war against a tenacious enemy in prospect, there simply were not enough air resources in existence. Accordingly, a rapid build-up got underway at Marine air bases in the United States. From this surge came the creation of a squadron that was to have a long and dramatic record in Marine aviation history.

On 29 June 1943, Marine Fleet Air, West Coast, issued General Order Number 29-43, which directed the formation at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS), Santa Barbara, California, of a new fighter squadron, and Marine Fighting Squadron 115 (VMF-115) was born as a component of Marine Base Defense Aircraft Group 42 on 1 July 1943. On that date Major John S. MacLaughlin, Jr., assumed command of seven officers and 127 enlisted men.<sup>1</sup> The aircraft total was four SNJ-4s: simple, low-wing, two-seat trainers. First developed in 1935, they had a Pratt and Whitney 550-horsepower engine that gave them a top speed of 205 miles per hour, a very modest beginning for a squadron which would progress to fighters capable of a record-breaking 750 miles per hour within 13 years.

During the month additional personnel were joined to bring the squadron strength up to 14 officers, 184 enlisted men, and 16 airplanes.\* A moment of great anticipation occurred when the young pilots, new to the Marine Corps, met their next commanding officer on 17 July. He was Major Joseph J. Foss, already a legend as the Marine Corps' leading ace and a recipient of the Medal of Honor for shooting down 26 Japanese planes at Guadalcanal. Now his job was to whip a raw squadron into shape for combat in the Pacific.\*\*

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\*These were a mix of SNJs and 9 FM-1s, the General Motors version of the F4F-4 Wildcat, a real fighter plane with 318 miles-per-hour speed.

\*\*This led to a colloquial title for the squadron, "Joe's Jokers." See Appendix E for a whimsical, unofficial insignia of the period.

On 31 July the squadron acquired its first Corsairs, the gull-wing fighter that was to serve the Marine Corps ably for so many years. Both the F4U-1, built by Vought, and the FG-1, built by Goodyear, were received. These planes had 2,000-horsepower Pratt and Whitney engines that achieved a top speed of 417 miles per hour and reached a ceiling of 36,900 feet. Armament consisted of six .50-caliber machine guns.

For seven months the squadron concentrated on training for overseas combat duty. Although its war diaries repeated over and over the phrase, "routine operations," the training was rigorous, and there were numerous crashes caused by both pilot error and mechanical failure.

On 8 February 1944, flights were secured and final preparations for departure began. All hands moved to Naval Air Station (NAS), San Diego on 12 February and boarded the seaplane tender USS *Pocomoke* (AV-9). The squadron left San Diego on 13 February for overseas duty as part of Marine Aircraft, South Pacific. Arriving at Turtle Bay, Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides Islands, on 4 March, VMF-115 began normal flight training operations soon after debarkation. Again there were crashes on landings and takeoffs, with First Lieutenant Jack W. Aldrich killed on 20 March "from breathing flames and gas fumes."<sup>2</sup>

A month later, it was time to move again. Personnel for the ground echelon left Guadalcanal on 14 and 16 April on board LST-488 and a transport, the USS *George Clymer* (AP-57). They arrived at Emirau, St. Matthias Islands, on 20 April. Meanwhile, after a combat check of its aircraft, the flight echelon departed Espiritu Santo on 18 April en route to Piva Yoke, Bougainville, British Solomon Islands. The next day the squadron was assigned to Marine Aircraft Group 12 (MAG-12). Then on 2 May Major Foss led the flight echelon to Emirau, with operations there beginning the following day.

The squadron's missions were varied: escort for SCAT (South Pacific Combat Air Transport) flights, patrol boat cover, dawn and dusk combat air patrols, visual reconnaissance search for life rafts or distress signals, strafing attacks on Japanese warehouses and barges, strip alert for possible "bogies," "Dumbo" (a PBYP rescue plane) escort, bomber escort, and truck



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 131733

*The Vought F4U-1 Corsair was the pride of the squadron. VMF-115 first received them at MCAS Santa Barbara, California, in July 1943, before entering combat in the Pacific.*

reconnaissance. Missions ranged over many areas: Green Island, New Hanover, Byron Strait, Kavieng, Djual Island, Balgai air strip, Rabaul, and New Ireland.

The perils of low-level strafing were illustrated when, on 20 May, one of the pilots "flew too low and hit an upper limb of a small tree, damaging cowl and flaps . . . plane at this time was hit by light AA [Anti-aircraft fire] just aft of the cockpit." The plane, however, made it safely back to base.\* On 22 May the pilot was not as lucky; AA fire hit the plane of First Lieutenant

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\*The F4U Corsair strafing tactics were to start the runs at 8,000 feet and pull out at 25 feet.

Percy M. Hall, Jr., causing it to crash and explode on New Ireland.

Misfortune continued when two days later the engine of First Lieutenant Kenneth L. Myers' plane failed on a test flight and he drowned after crash landing in the ocean.

During the busy month of May 1944, VMF-115 had a distinguished visitor, Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh, USAAF. He was making a tour of the South Pacific area as a "noncombat" consultant, analyzing the Corsair in action.\*\* However, during the period 26-30 May he flew four missions with the squadron.

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\*\*Colonel Lindbergh assisted greatly in the conversion of the F4U to a fighter-bomber.

Describing one of these flights, he later wrote:

Kavieng looked like an ant hill when I approached in my fighter-bomber . . . . I feel the stick's vibration in my hand, and the pedals against my feet. My thumb has the power of TNT and my finger controls six machine guns . . . . Minute circles on the ground warn of enemy antiaircraft cannon . . . . We have come to toss five-hundred pound bombs at humans down below . . . . We drop our dive brakes, purge our wing tanks, brighten gun sights . . . . I pull into a wing-over putting the sun behind my back, and nose steeply to the dive . . . . My controls tighten, the altimeter needle touches ten thousand feet, air howls, wings tremble . . . . Fifty-five hundred feet. NOW. My thumb presses, my arm pulls back, I kick right rudder toward the sea, reverse bank to throw off enemy ack-ack, reverse again, and look down to check my marksmanship.<sup>3</sup>

On 31 May VMF-115 was relieved from duty at Emirau, having completed 136 combat missions from 471 individual flights during the month. This action was followed by a welcome respite for the flight echelon: "health and recreation" for a week in Sydney, Australia. After that the squadron had a period with no flight operations except the ferrying of 20 FG-1A planes from Espiritu Santo to Bougainville. By 24 July, however, the flight and ground echelons were reunited at Emirau and operations recommenced the next day. The missions concentrated on bombing runs at Kavieng and Rabaul, using both 500- and 1000-pound bombs. Major personnel shifts occurred with new pilots coming in and taking area familiarization flights to replace those who had transferred. At this time VMF-115 had 49 officers and 249 enlisted men, 15 F4Us and 5 FG-1As.

August saw a continuation of the daily bombing runs to Rabaul and Kavieng. Antiaircraft fire varied from light to heavy, and often bombing "results were unobserved." On 12 August AA fire hit the oil line of one plane, forcing a water landing. The pilot was uninjured and was picked up by a "Dumbo" within 10 minutes.

The next month saw a change in command. Major Foss had suffered recurrent attacks of malaria and needed to return to the United States for treatment.\* Therefore, on 21 September, Major John H. King, Jr., the squadron executive officer, took over as commanding officer. Hours flown during the month rose to 1,009.<sup>3</sup> There were more personnel shifts, and another

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\*Moving from active duty to reserve status in December 1945, Major Foss resigned from the Marine Corps in September 1946 and joined the Air National Guard in South Dakota. There he rose to the rank of brigadier general and entered politics, serving as governor from 1954-58. In 1960 he was named Commissioner of the American Football League.

week of health and recreation in Australia for the veterans. This was only a brief interlude, however, and then it was "back to work."

On 12 September the Corsair piloted by First Lieutenant Robert J. Larsen was hit by AA fire during a strafing run. He made a successful water landing and was picked up uninjured by a "Dumbo" in five minutes. Again, on 29 September, a similar rescue took place for First Lieutenant Paul K. McKinney.

There was more the next month. Taking off for a barge strike on 5 October, First Lieutenant August Danneh's plane crashed when a tire blew out. The aircraft was a total wreck, but he was uninjured. Two days later First Lieutenant Donald L. Olson's Corsair was hit over New Ireland. He bailed out and was rescued by PT boats.

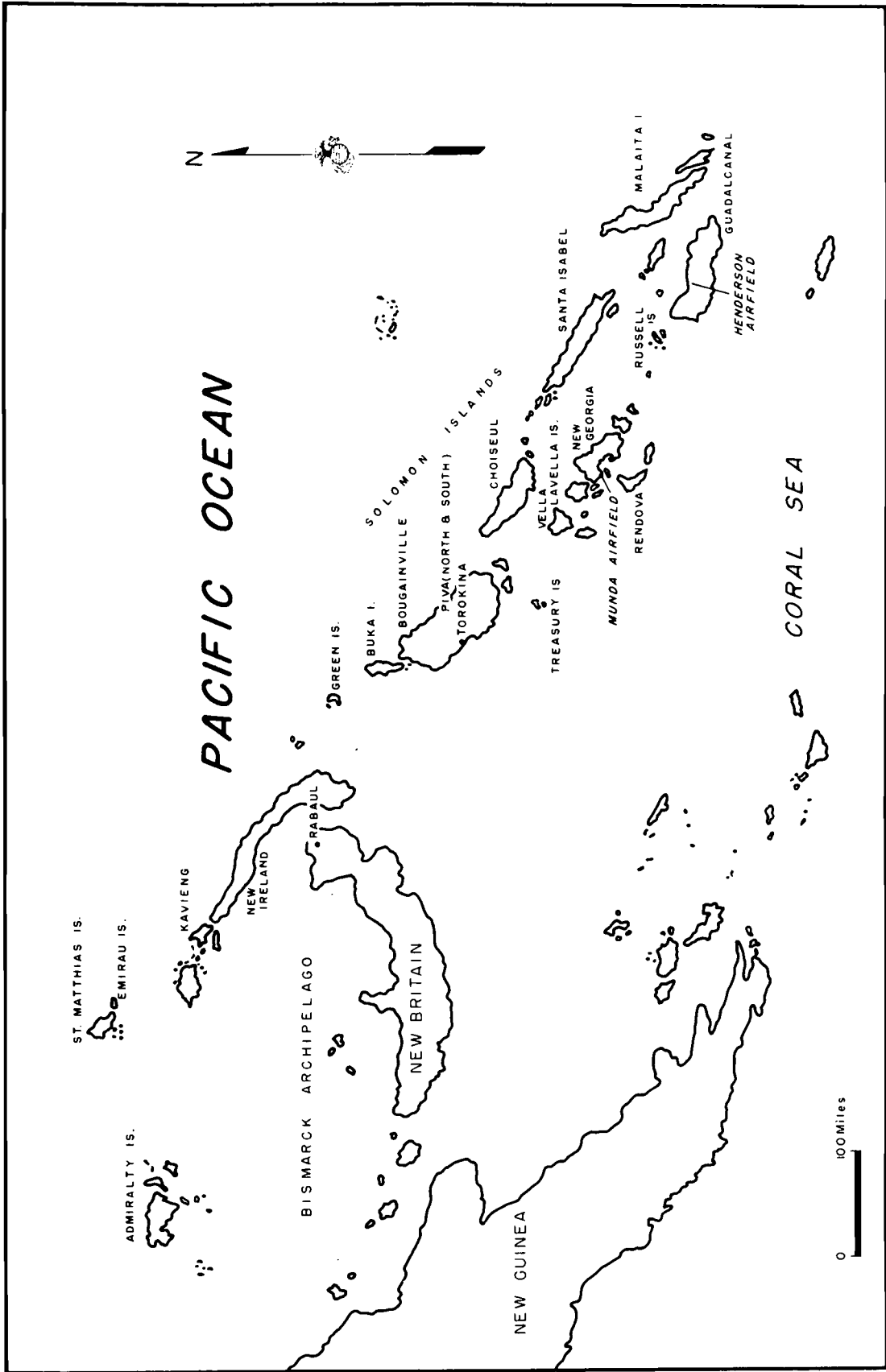
October saw another squadron ferrying operation, as pilots made flights to Guadalcanal to bring back planes with wing tanks. New pilots also joined VMF-115, were put through familiarization training, and were soon carrying their share of sorties.

Daily bombing and strafing missions over Kavieng, "Dumbo" and SCAT escort, and dog-fighting practice continued in November. On 9 November Second Lieutenant Derry W. Ferguson's engine stalled, forcing a water landing in which he drowned. A similar engine failure on 18 November caused Second Lieutenant Theodore E. Crampton to make a crash landing on Emirau, and he died as a result of burns.

### *Philippine Combat*

For some time Major General Ralph J. Mitchell, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (1st MAW), had been pressing hard to get the wing a fighting assignment in the Philippine Islands where, on 20 October 1944, the main landings at Leyte Island had taken place. "The dangerous lack of airpower was felt more and more as the campaign progressed."<sup>1</sup> Naturally the Marine Corps felt it could help meet this need, but the key to Marine air involvement proved to be Admiral William F. Halsey, USN, whose Third Fleet had played a prominent role in the battle for Leyte Gulf on 23-26 October. As he later wrote:

I had under my command in the South Pacific a Marine Air Group which had proved its versatility in everything from fighting to blasting enemy vessels. I knew that the group was now under MacArthur's command, and I knew, too, without understanding why, that when Kenney was not keeping it idle, he was assigning it to missions far below its capacity. Kinkaid's complaint of insufficient air cover



*The zone of operations for VMF-115 during its tour of duty in the Southwest Pacific area in 1944.*

prompted me to take a step which was more than a liberty; to a man of meaner spirit than MacArthur's it would have seemed an impertinence. I called these Marines to his attention. He ordered them forward, and within 24 hours of their arrival, they had justified my recommendation.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in late November, the four squadrons of MAG-12 (VMFs-115, -211, -218, and -313) were alerted to move to Tacloban Airfield on Leyte.<sup>3</sup>

The change from the operations at Emirau started on 2 December when VMF-115 began its move to Leyte, a distance of 1,957 miles from Emirau via Hollandia and Peleliu.<sup>4</sup> Arriving the next day at Tacloban, it found that conditions there were still very primitive. The muddy strip had practically no operative taxiways or parking facilities; it was overcrowded and conducting operations was difficult even in good weather.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the squadron moved seven miles south to the field at Tanauan, where an airstrip of Marston mat had been laid over the sand, and on 5 December it commenced operations. Ordered to cover a naval task group east of Leyte, VMF-115 arrived on station just as several Japanese "Zekes" attacked the ships.\* First Lieutenant Johnny D. Lindley, the flight leader, spotted one "Zeke" that had just finished a run on a ship. Nosing over from about 13,000 feet, he fired on the plane until it began to smoke and went out of control. (The squadron's first kill was later confirmed by an Army P-38.)

Other missions included bombing attacks on the Masbate airfield, on Japanese installations at San Isidro Bay, and on enemy convoys, as well as escort sorties to cover patrol boats, "Dumbos", supply drops, and protection for the U.S. Army landings at Ormoc and Mindoro. There was also a brief stay at the San Jose strip for the missions on Mindoro.

Another squadron air victory came on 20 December when First Lieutenant Norman W. Gourley and Second Lieutenant Marion B. Collin, while on an attack mission against a Japanese bivouac area at San Isidro, shot down a "Dinah".\*\* (This was a memorable month for Lieutenant Gourley, because on 29 December the landing gear of his plane collapsed while he was landing, and, although he was unhurt, his plane was completely destroyed.)\*\*\*

On 11 December the squadron had a busy day. Together with VMF-211, VMF-218, and VMF-313, it was ordered to attack an enemy ship convoy off Panay.

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\*The "Zeke" was a Mitsubishi 1940-type low-wing monoplane fighter, originally called a "Zero."

\*\*The "Dinah" was a very fast, two-engine reconnaissance plane.

\*\*\*Lieutenant Gourley later rose to the rank of major general.

When sighted, glide bombing attacks were made and serious damage was inflicted on a 10,000-ton Japanese AK with one 1,000-pound bomb. Simultaneously, First Lieutenant William J. Rainalter engaged a covering "Oscar" and shot it down.\*\*\*\* Lieutenant Rainalter's plane was subsequently hit by AA fire and he was forced to bail out over Sambulawan. Fortunately, he was rescued by friendly natives who guided him to a guerilla headquarters.\*\*\*\*\*

In the afternoon, VMF-115 returned to the attack again. Captain Rolfe F. Blanchard, who led the strike, told the story:

... preparations were made, in collaboration with Army Air Force operations, to launch a strike. It was decided that the strike would be composed of about 30 P-40's carrying 500 instantaneous fuzed bombs and 28 F4U's carrying 1000 4-5 second delay bombs. The Army flight was to strike first, by dive bombing, and we were to follow with a masthead attack. A joint briefing was held for all pilots, Army and Marine, and thoroughly briefed by [Captain] Roger Haberman [VMF-211, acting group operations officer]. A second briefing was held for Marine Pilots in which detailed tactics were laid out. The plan was to strike at masthead level in three waves spaced far enough apart to allow the preceding wave's bombs to detonate safely. . . .

When the ships were sighted (there was a broken layer of cumulus between 6-7,000 feet) the Army started peeling off in groups of 2 and 3 planes and dove from 10,000 to about 5,000, released bombs and pulled back through the overcast. They accomplished nothing except to make interesting splashes in the water and wake up the Japs. AA immediately became very intense. As the last Army bombs were falling our Corsairs were in position and coming in fast and low. The Japs never saw us coming until we started to shoot (we received no fire until past the screening destroyers). . . .<sup>6</sup>

A total of six hits were scored in masthead runs on two troop ships which sank, and there was a near miss which slightly damaged one destroyer.\*\*\*\*\* In the attack, Second Lieutenant Michael A. Gudor was jumped by two "Zekes" after he had earlier shot down one. He described the action as follows:

... Two Zekes at the same altitude turned towards me so I turned into them for the book says—"In a head-on run

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\*\*\*\*The squadron's war diary noted that the "Oscar was unable to outmaneuver [our] own aircraft." The "Oscar" was a Nakajima single-engine fighter.

\*\*\*\*\*His trip back to American lines took three days and required a cross-country trek, then a barge trip, followed by a ride in a truck, and concluded with a flight in a light plane back to Tacloban.

\*\*\*\*\*These results are from VMF-115, WWII War Diary, 11Dec44. Since they come from the eyewitness accounts of the pilots who made the attacks, these tallies seem more probable than those listed in *Marine Aviation in the Philippines* (HistDiv, HQMC, Washington, 1951), p. 36. This latter source only lists "a direct hit on a larger freighter" and "two hits on another freighter . . . leaving the ship listing and burning!"

a Jap plane will either turn aside or blow up." Evidently this Jap hadn't read the book for he kept coming. We were closing fast prop to prop. All my six 50 cal. guns were going and pieces were flying off the Zeke's cowling. At the last possible instant I nosed my Corsair violently down. The Zeke passed over and sheared off half of the rudder and left stabilizer. I immediately had my hands full . . . I dove for the ocean but at 400 knots the plane vibrated like it would fall apart. Also, the oil pressure went down to zero and the propeller froze stock still. At 800 feet altitude I leveled the plane and bailed out into the sea. During the night the convoy we had hit was burning and the explosions rent the air about 10 miles to the southeast of me. The next day about 5 p.m. a beautiful Navy PBV set down on the sea and picked me up.<sup>7</sup>

(Lieutenant Gudor had another close call later in the month; while landing on 27 December, his tire blew out and his plane went off the runway and flipped over on its back. It was demolished, but he was unhurt.)

The following day, 12 December, three planes of VMF-115 (along with four from VMF-218) went after two Japanese destroyers and a transport ship off Panay. Three hits were scored by VMF-115 pilots on the lead destroyer, the *Uzuki*, and it exploded and sank.\*

Then on 18 December, while on beachhead patrol at Mindoro, First Lieutenant Edward A. Hammers caught up with an "Oscar" and shot it down. Five days later First Lieutenant Richard W. Cline, coming down from 23,000 feet over Golo Island, attacked a "Zeke" and sent it smoking into the sea.

It had been a busy and difficult, yet fruitful, month for VMF-115. Operating 5 F4U-1s, 4 F4U-1Ds, and 13 FG-1As, the squadron lost 11 planes in December. Total flight hours rose sharply, to 1,810.3, and, for the first time, VMF-115 was credited with destroying enemy planes, chalking up four and one-half kills.\*\* Recognition came in the form of War Department General Order Number 123 (dated 18 October 1946):

The Marine Fighter Squadrons 115, 211, 218 and 313 are cited for outstanding performance of duty in action in the Philippine Islands from 2 to 15 December 1944. During this period, at a critical stage in the operations on Leyte, first battleground in the campaign to liberate the Philippines, these Marines fighter squadrons not only carried out their primary mission of providing aerial cover, but also gave close support to our ground troops and intercepted large and heavily escorted enemy convoys . . . The gallantry and fighting spirit of the Marine pilots and the skill and tireless fidelity to duty of the ground personnel, who so well carried out their arduous task of maintaining and servicing the aircraft

\*The destroyer's name is not given in the VMF-115 war diary and is taken from Sherrod, *History*, p. 280. It was also called the *Yuzuki*.

\*\*October flight hours had totalled only 919.7 and November's total was 1,220.

under the worst possible conditions, constituted a major contribution to the success of the Leyte operations and initial American victory in the Philippines. The achievements of the Marine Fighter Squadrons 115, 211, 218 and 313 are in keeping with the highest traditions of the armed forces of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The year 1945 opened quietly for the squadron. No enemy planes or ships were destroyed, but there were 1,555.2 hours flown and 432 combat missions in January. Missions covered a wide range of assignments: bivouac strafing, patrols, convoy cover, airstrip bombing, reconnaissance of Luzon Island, air cover for U.S. Fleet units, truck and barge attacks, escort for C-47s, and "Dumbos," etc.\*\*\*

Even in a quiet period such as this, there were operational losses and damage to five planes. Two incidents occurred on 3 January. First Lieutenant Glen E. McCall had his engine stall on takeoff and crash at the end of the strip. The plane exploded and he was severely burned. The same day, while covering a convoy southwest of Leyte, a fire broke out in the cockpit of the Corsair piloted by First Lieutenant Ivan Harrison, Jr., and he was forced to bail out. A destroyer picked him up soon after he entered the water.

One day, 6 January, was profitable in strafing Angeles Field on Luzon Island. There, a flight from VMF-115 caught seven Japanese planes on the ground and left them all burning.

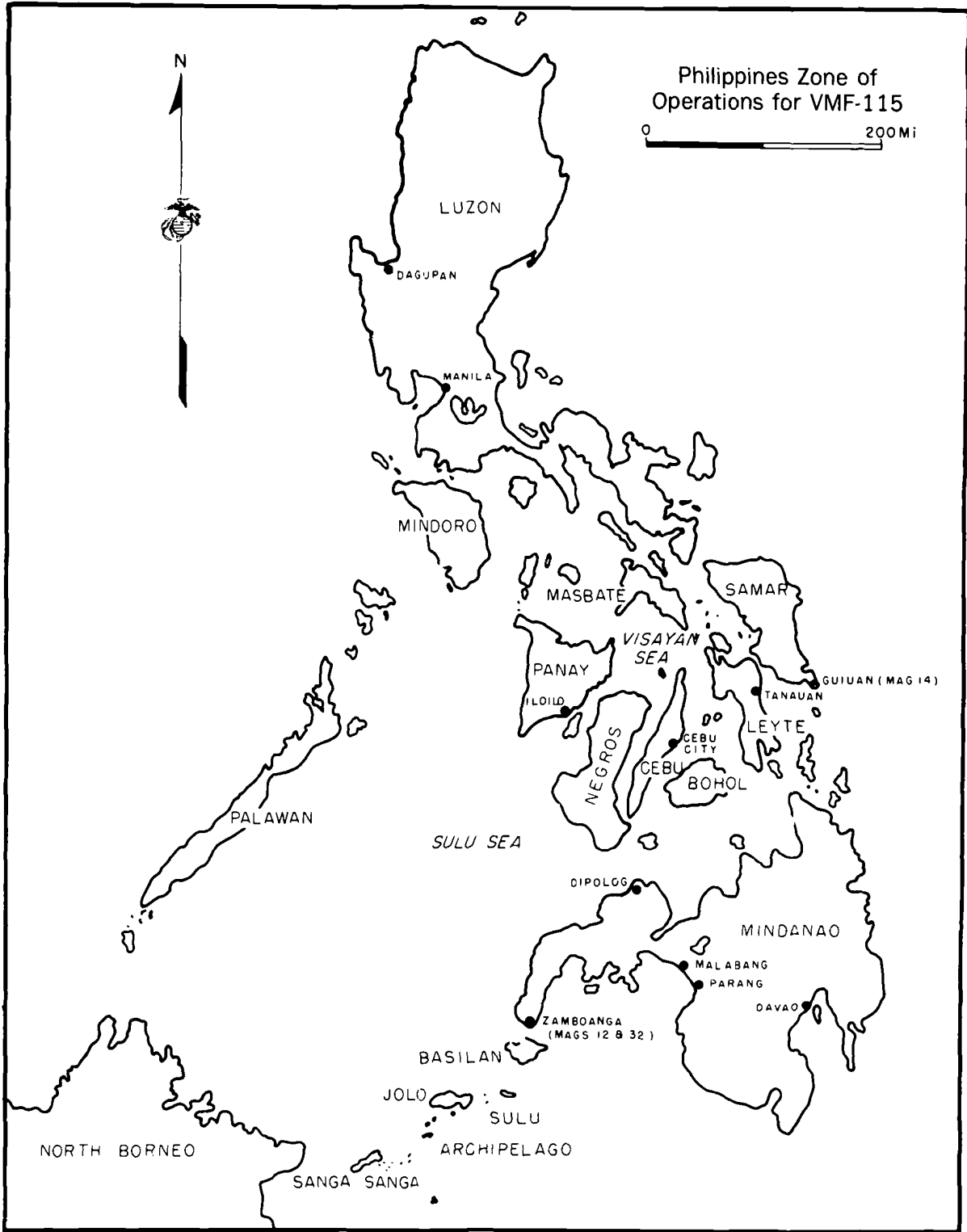
During February, 402 combat missions and 1,116.3 total hours were flown, most of which were for ground support or escort flights over Cebu, with some sorties using napalm bombs. A number of new pilots joined the squadron, as veterans were rotated back to the United States.

On 13 February, the squadron assisted native guerrillas in their battle against the Japanese. Two VMF-115 pilots, on landing at Tuburan, Cebu Island, were asked by a guerrilla leader to strafe targets he would point out from a C-47. Accordingly, the Corsairs hit buildings at Lugo, Llihan, and Tabogon. They left all structures burning, in which a total 600 Japanese soldiers were reportedly quartered.

A unique mission occurred on 23 February. Major Eldon H. Railsback, executive officer of VMF-115; First Lieutenant Paul Chambers; Second Lieutenant Robert O. Bunce; and Second Lieutenant Charles B. Collin spotted two small Japanese submarines on the surface

\*\*\*The squadron's war diary contained an interesting note revealing the primitive methods used for timing bomb releases. Flying between 50 and 100 feet at 300 knots, the pilot would release his napalm bombs "when the bottom side of the cowling passed over the aiming point."





*The Philippines zone of operations for VMF-115 during 1944-1945.*

while on a bombing and strafing mission at Cebu City. Missing the submarines on their first attack, they returned to base and received permission to go back on a second try. Fully rearmed, they attacked in runs at a 20-25 foot altitude, skip-bombing their 1,000-pound bombs. One submarine was hit, "probably [the] first submarine sunk by [a] Corsair", the squadron war diary noted.<sup>9</sup>

The next day, on a sortie to bomb Japanese AA positions near the airstrip at Cebu City, the plane of Second Lieutenant John E. Dixon was hit. His report gave a first hand account:

When advised by a wingman that my Corsair was smoking, I looked at my oil pressure. It read zero. The plane began to stall. I suppose I had been hit somewhere by Jap 12.7's. I ascertained that all switches were on so that the plane would blow up on crashing, and promptly prepared to bail out. To prevent banging my leg on the tail assembly, I grasped the trailing edge of my right wing, suspended myself from there by my hands, and from the cockpit by my toes, and pushed myself down. The tail assembly went a good six feet over my head. I bailed out at 1200 feet, and the chute opened at 500 feet. The wind blew me from my position over Jap lines 100 yards into guerilla territory. I landed among bamboo trees and dangled twelve feet above the ground. The straps unfastened easily, and I dropped to the ground and ran like hell toward the guerilla lines, while the other three Corsairs continued strafing the enemy, keeping them down. Unarmed volunteer guards (guerillas) met me and escorted me to guerilla headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

Lieutenant Dixon returned to the squadron four days later.

The squadron focused its attention in March on covering the landings at Zamboanga, Mindanao. On 7 March the engine stalled on Second Lieutenant William H. Foster's Corsair while he was airborne half way between Cebu and Leyte. He bailed out and was picked up by a native boat in 15 minutes, afterward returning safely to the squadron.

The next day Major Railsback caught a "Tojo" near the San Roque airdrome and shot it down in flames.\*

U.S. Eighth Army headquarters decided that the next use of MAG-12 would be in the far western part of Mindanao Island, as part of the Victor IV operation. Thus, on 10 March, some planes of VMF-115 temporarily operated out of the guerilla-held Dipolog airfield, while a naval bombardment at Zamboanga prepared the way for the Army's 41st Division which was landing there. This same day the assault troops went ashore with the San Roque airfield as a key objective. The next day the advance echelon of VMF-115 began unloading and landing operations. One of their

first acts was to rename the strip Moret Field, in honor of a Marine aviator killed earlier in the South Pacific.\*\*

An important mission at this time was assisting the Filipino guerrillas whenever possible. Thus, on 13-14 March, when the Japanese were advancing on guerilla headquarters at Tuburan, Cebu, squadron strafing attacks were used to delay them for 18 hours, thereby saving the strip for American use.

On 14 March, Major Railsback flew the first Corsair to land at Zamboanga.<sup>11</sup> This same day the squadron lost another pilot. First Lieutenant Jonathon S. Schnorf was on a flight covering a C-47 bound for Peleliu. The two aircraft entered a cloud bank together, but when the C-47 emerged a half hour later, Lieutenant Schnorf's plane was missing. Search planes could find no trace of him. The next day the rear and advance echelons of VMF-115 were reunited at their new base on Zamboanga.

Then, on 22 March, while on a bombing run near Zamboanga, the engine of Second Lieutenant Marion B. Cooper's plane cut out at 150 feet of altitude. The aircraft crashed in the trees, exploded, and burst into flames. He died instantly.

One of the most unusual air-ground tactics used during the entire Zamboanga operation was employed on 27 March near guerilla-held Dipolog airstrip. In answer to a request from the American officer in charge of the guerrillas, Major Donald H. Wills, AUS, a division of four VMF-115 Corsairs (led by Captain Rolfe F. Blanchard) was dispatched to Dipolog. About 150 Japanese troops, armed with knee mortars, a light machine gun, and automatic rifles, had advanced to within 16 kilometers of Dipolog. They were well-seasoned troops who had been moved into the area from Zamboanga about five weeks earlier. Major Wills felt that an air strike might boost the Filipino guerrillas' morale and damage the enemy at the same time. Control of the strike by normal means was impossible because there were no maps or photographs of any kind available, no method for marking targets, and no means of communication with the troops. But VMF-115 ingenuity found a way. Into the cockpit of a Marine Corsair climbed Major Wills, who was thoroughly familiar with the enemy positions; after him climbed the smallest of the Marine pilots in the division, First Lieutenant Winfield S. Sharpe. Both men squeezed into the narrow confines of the cockpit, with Sharpe sitting on Wills' lap. Soon afterward, with the major pointing out targets to the pilot, Lieutenant Sharpe's Corsair led a four-plane division in six

\*A "Tojo" was a Nakajima single-engine fighter.

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Paul Moret had died from a crash at sea near New Caledonia on 8 June 1943.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 117637

*On 27 March 1945, 1stLt Winfield S. Sharpe of VMF-115 sat on the lap of Maj Donald H. Wills to enable a strafing of Japanese positions in the first dual-cockpit Corsair mission.*

strafing passes over the enemy's positions. The enemy area was thoroughly strafed, and the Japanese were compelled to withdraw.<sup>12</sup>

VMF-115 had proved its mettle in a wide range of support missions during the period 3 December 1944 to 9 March 1945. It had been an important part of MAG-12's Philippine operations, and for its participation it shared in the subsequent award of a Presidential Unit Citation to MAG-12. Referring to the accurate antiaircraft fire and intense aerial opposition the Marine squadrons encountered, the citation praised the heroism of the pilots in supporting guerilla units and inflicting severe losses on the Japanese.\*

With the Zamboanga area secured, the 41st Division was ordered to strike deep into the Sulu Archipelago, landing at Sanga Sanga Island and nearby Bongao Island on 2 April, with planes from VMF-115 providing air cover. Second Lieutenant Roy H.

McDonald, Jr., was on combat air patrol over Bongao on 2 April when he was forced to crash land at sea, but after only 35 minutes in his rubber raft he was picked up, unhurt, by a patrol boat.

The next day First Lieutenant Paul Chambers made an emergency landing on the Sanga Sanga airstrip, making his the first U.S. combat plane to arrive there.

On 4 April, four planes of VMF-115, found "one of the lushest targets of the Mindanao campaign to date." First Lieutenant Horace D. Dawson and Second Lieutenant Russell Olsen shot up at least 10 Japanese trucks, cars, and other motorized vehicles near Valencia. Meanwhile, First Lieutenant Dwain A. Hoops and Second Lieutenant Dennis Byrd were knocking out at least 29 more vehicles.

Starting on 9 April the squadron furnished cover for the Jolo landings. The best target came, however, on a flight to cover SBDs attacking Buayan Airfield. There, on 12 April, squadron Corsairs caught five

\*For full text of citation, see Appendix D.

camouflaged Japanese planes on the ground and destroyed them all.

For the second time, the squadron was forced to list one of its pilots as "missing in action." Second Lieutenant George A. Coshal disappeared on a ferrying flight on 15 April from Leyte to Zamboanga, and no trace was found.

During the latter part of April, VMF-115 supported the Dumaguete invasion of Negros Island which had been launched on 29 March by the 40th Division in a shore-to-shore operation from Panay. Also during the month, there were numerous personnel transfers, with old pilots leaving and new ones reporting in for duty. Eight pilots spent 26-30 April at Malabang on Mindanao standing scramble alert, but no enemy contacts were made there. The squadron totaled 1,489.9 flight hours and 472 combat missions in April, using its 14 FG-1As, 4 F4U-1s, and 4 FG-1Ds.\*

Operations in May illustrated the kind of administrative problems that can arise in combat zones. On 4 May the squadron received orders to submit, in the future, two distinct mission reports. The first, with the usual combat information, would go on to higher headquarters. The second, with complaints and recommendations, would go no further than the group operations officer. This order was the result of a sharply worded mission report received the day before, in which one of VMF-115's pilots had noted: "The night fighter relief was late arriving on station, causing Sigma 6 to leave station 25 minutes late, and land at base well after dark without night landing equipment . . . . Pilots recommend that night fighter relief take off earlier and that marker lights be posted on the end of the runway."

One mission (on 7 May) had good, observable results in ground support when napalm bombs knocked out pillboxes and two tanks in the Davao area. This same day, in an attack at Tigatto, napalm bombs were put down directly on top of the Japanese naval headquarters there and blanketed the building in flames.

New ordnance made its appearance in the squadron at this time, and from 10 May onwards there are, for the first time, repeated references in the war diary to practice rocket firing. More of the new Corsairs (Model D) also became available for VMF-115 to use (19 May).

The last important landing in the Philippines was made by the Army's 108th Regimental Combat Team at Macalajar in northern Mindanao on 10 May. The

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\*The D model was modified for use as a fighter-bomber with a long-range tank and two 1,000-pound bombs or eight 5-inch rockets under the wings.

squadron supported it by combat air patrols and convoy escort missions.

A napalm bombing mission to Kibawe, Mindanao, on 12 May brought a happy report from the local controller: "Very good job . . . all bombs on dug-in positions . . . the Japs were sizzling . . . hope you can come back again."

There were of course, many difficulties in operations. A mission was sent out on 13 May to bomb near Davao, but the pilots had no maps of the target area and therefore had to make a switch in targets on the spot. Another continuing problem was the frequent number of dud bombs delivered on target that failed to explode. There were also repeated reports of bombs that "hung" or "delayed in releasing," or "would not release," causing them to miss the target.

On a mission to bomb the Kibawe area on 23 May, the Corsair of Second Lieutenant Daniel Bradley was seen trailing smoke, possibly from AA fire. He headed for the Libby airstrip on Mindanao, but his plane burst into flames at 1,000 feet of altitude. Pulling up, Lieutenant Bradley started to bail out. His parachute hung up briefly on the vertical stabilizer, but came loose finally between 150 and 500 feet. When he hit the ground, the airdrome ambulances raced up the assist him. They found him with second degree burns, but he recovered from his injuries and returned to duty with the squadron.

During the last week of May, VMF-115 encountered problems with the local Army fighter directors. Poor radio communications and lack of target assignments from the directors caused the squadron's pilots to waste their fuel and jettison their bombs at sea. The difficulties in coordination were graphically illustrated in one report:

. . . airborne to strike Japanese targets around Davao. The Army SAP [Supervisory Airplane Pilot] again failed assignment of a definite target, although pilots had been briefed to drop their bombs on a storage area on the Davao River. Pilots prepared to strike this target. The artillery directing plane, an L-5, was called and asked to order artillery fire to cease, so the bombing run could be made. The pilots then attempted to make the bombing run, but artillery fire began blossoming below very suddenly; so planes headed for Davao Gulf. After orbiting for over an hour and vainly attempting to have the Army SAP assign a target, the pilots went low on fuel and had to jettison all their bombs . . . .<sup>13</sup>

On 26 May the squadron suffered another pilot missing in action. Major Richard F. Harrison's plane, while on a ground attack mission near Mintal, started to smoke, possibly from AA fire, at 100 feet of altitude, and then struck the trees. At this point the other pilots in the flight lost sight of him and could



Photo courtesy of LtCol Thomas M. Coles

*A captured Japanese soldier directs a U.S. B-25 bombing attack on enemy positions in the Philippines during 1945. Fighter cover was provided by the Corsairs from VMF-115.*

find no trace while circling the area, which was in Japanese hands.\*

A change of command took place on 30 May when Major King was succeeded by Major John S. Payne as commanding officer. As the month ended, the squadron totaled its work: 1,586.3 hours flown and 486 combat missions.

Air control problems continued in June, with various missions aborted when Army fighter directors were unable to designate targets or could not be contacted. These were, however, minor irritations compared to the jinx-filled mission on 14 June. On that day 11 pilots were scheduled to take off for a strike at Guadalupe, Mindanao. The problems began even before takeoff. There were no belly tanks, and the weather was bad; then Major Payne briefed all pilots on fuel conservation after finding the planes' gas tanks had not been topped off. Also, there were numerous delays on take-off, as other planes circled, landed, and

parked on the field. Finally, more rockets had to be brought so that the planes were fully armed.

Once airborne, there was difficulty in contacting the L-5 for target directions. Next, First Lieutenant Victor D. Butts' engine began to run rough and eat up fuel. Then it quit entirely. With no power, he went for a wheels-up landing in a field. Barely clearing the surrounding trees, he came in at 80 knots and, about 50 miles from Malabang, skidded safely to a stop. Forty-five minutes later, a band of eight guerrillas emerged from the trees. They then escorted him on a six-hour march through knee-deep mud to Sugud. From there he travelled by Army truck and a Cub plane to Malabang, finally flying back to Zamboanga the next day.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Butts' wingmen were encountering a series of problems. They were running on reserve gas tanks; there was a solid overcast that prevented identification of ground position; differing vectors (or none) were given on their radios; when they

\*Major Harrison's body was recovered at Tagakpan in August 1946.

found a landing strip they were not sure if it was in Japanese hands.

By now, gas tanks were down to the final few gallons. Second Lieutenant Lawrence W. Lawson, Jr., picked out a narrow, winding road near Buge as his best chance. Four hours and 15 minutes after takeoff he came in with flaps down full and wheels up, skidding until his right wing hit a tree. Happily, he got out of the plane with no injuries.

The same circumstance befell First Lieutenant John D. Stith. Out of gas, he came in for a belly landing at Bugos, hit a ridge in the ground and his plane went over on its nose. The location happened to be an Army supply dump, so he was given first aid for a cut on his forehead. It was then that he found out that a short but serviceable strip had been completed the day before just a few hundred yards from his crash landing. The following day a PBV brought him back to Zamboanga.

Second Lieutenant Bernard Kramer was also in trouble. Thick clouds separated him from the rest of the flight; poorly charted mountains (rising to 9,200 feet) were all around him; the terrain below was blotted out; his fuel was now very low; and he could not turn on his emergency IFF. Finally he sighted a ship near Dipolog and headed for it. Rocking his wings violently, he circled the ship and put down in the water 100 yards from it. He immediately climbed out from the cockpit and inflated his Mae West. A small boat from the ship brought him aboard unhurt. It was the USS *Bootes* (AK-99), an ammunition cargo ship, and the crew, including the captain, welcomed him by stripping him of all his flight gear for souvenirs. After this reception, he was passed on to a PC (submarine chaser), then to a LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry), and finally to a R4D (the Douglas Skytrain version of the civilian DC-3). This flight took him first to Peleliu, then to Tacloban, and back to Zamboanga at last.

While all of these crash landings were taking place, Major Payne had radioed the remaining pilots who were in contact with him to "Stick with me and I'll get you there." Only one plane was able to stay with him as he found the way to the strip at Malabang. Slowly, other planes staggered in, one with 11 gallons of gas left, having flown the last 55 minutes on 39 gallons. It had been a nervewracking day!

The rest of June was quieter. Bombing and strafing runs, using 1,000-pound bombs, napalm, and rockets, hit a wide variety of targets on Mindanao. VMF-115 totaled 937.9 hours flown and 353 combat missions for the month. For the first time the squadron's war diary listed individual air-to-ground kill to-

als: 3 for Major Payne, 1 for Lieutenant Gudor, and 12 for Captain Harold E. Segal.

Again, VMF-115 was included in a citation. For the period 10 March to 30 June 1945 MAGs-12, -24 and -32 and all assigned squadrons received a Navy Unit Commendation.\* There was also an award of the Army's Distinguished Unit Badge to MAG-12, as well as a Philippine Republic Presidential Unit Citation which included VMF-115.

July was a busy month. Even though effective Japanese resistance in the Philippines was at an end, VMF-115 flew a total of 1,136.8 hours and 393 combat missions. The principal focus was a series of preinvasion sorties over Sarangani. Bad weather grounded or aborted in the air several days worth of missions.

Lieutenant Lawson, after his difficult experiences in June, died from burns in a crash on 17 July. His wingman, Lieutenant Kramer, did not see his plane go down but observed a tower of smoke near the Del Monte airstrip. Landing there, Lieutenant Kramer went to the crash site. The plane had been completely demolished, and its parts were strewn for a distance of a half-mile. The body was returned to Zamboanga and buried there.

Squadron activity subsided in August. While hostilities ceased on 16 August, fighter cover and scramble alert missions were flown up to the end of the month. Total hours flown fell to 863.3 with 264 combat missions.

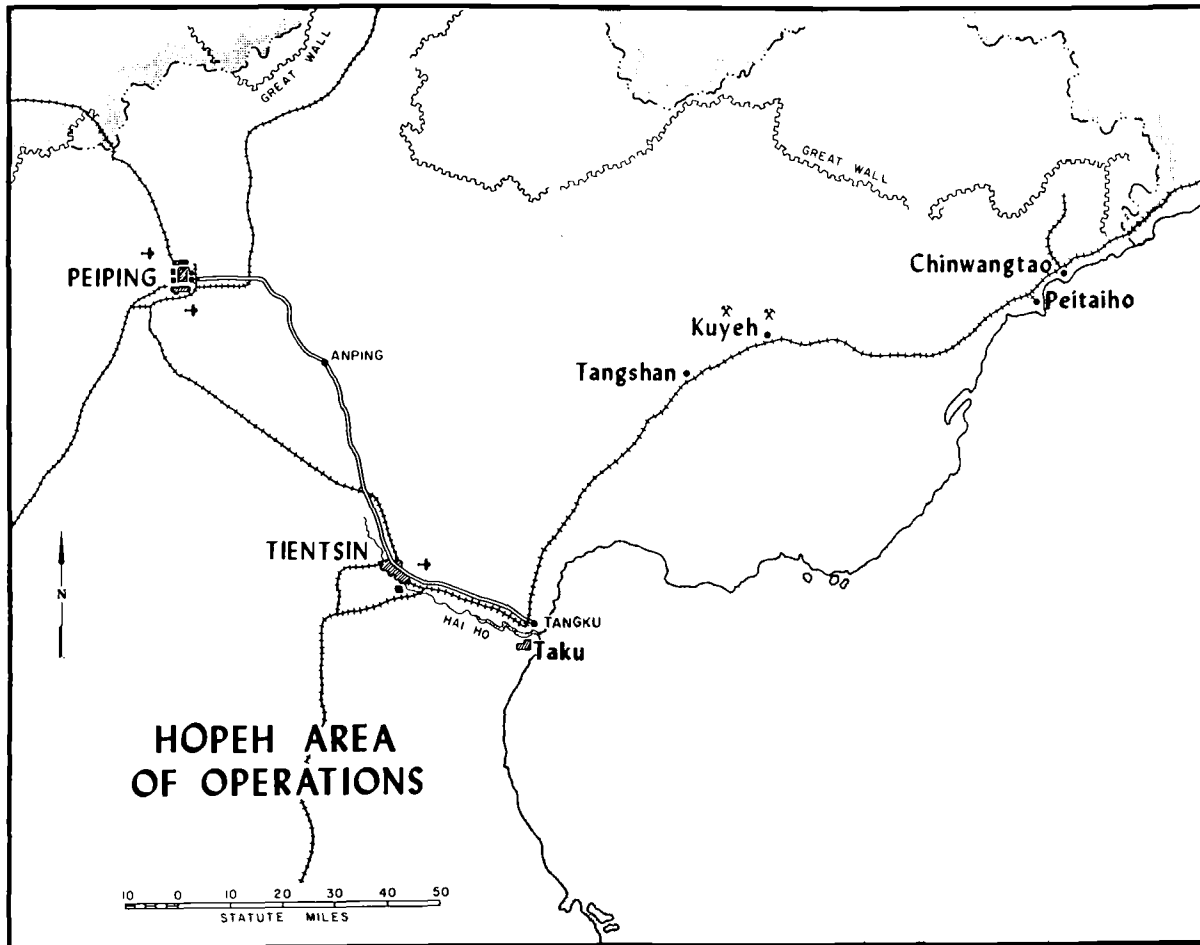
On 14 August Second Lieutenant James L. Glessner, Jr., was airborne as fighter cover when his engine lost power. He ditched the plane at sea about 25 miles from his base, inflated his life-raft, and 20 minutes later a native boat picked him up, uninjured, for return to base. Four days later, 18 August, the squadron received a new commanding officer, Major Thomas M. Coles.\*\*

With the war over, VMF-115 remained at Zamboanga. September and the first three weeks of October saw a spate of major personnel transfers, practice in acrobatics and low-altitude dummy gunnery runs, health and recreation trips to New Guinea, fuel consumption tests, and familiarization flights for new pilots. On 8 September the squadron traded in its FG-1Ds for F4U-4s, and all pilots made test flights in their new planes.\*\*\*

\*For full text of citation, see Appendix D.

\*\*Strangely, there is no mention of this change of command (nor of the end of hostilities) in the VMF-115 war diary, but it is noted in the VMF-115 muster rolls (RefSec, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC).

\*\*\*The new R2800-18W engine with 100 more horsepower gave this model a top speed of 446 miles per hour and a ceiling of 41,500 feet.



*The North China area of operations for VMF-115 during 1945-1946.*

#### *A Move to China*

A whole new chapter for VMF-115 opened on 21 October. On this day 26 officers and 19 enlisted men, comprising the forward echelon, left for North China via the Laoag Airfield on Luzon. The next day they staged out of Chimu Field on Okinawa. While at Laoag, Second Lieutenant Robert W. Colbert landed his plane, and as it was still rolling out on the runway, it burst into flames. He jumped out, escaping with minor burns, but the plane was totally destroyed.

The same day, 22 October, First Lieutenant Charles M. Jackson became separated from the rest of his flight during heavy weather enroute to Okinawa. Two destroyers on the route were notified and began a search. No trace of him was found.\*

The next stage of the squadron's movement came on 24 October with a flight to Tsingtao, China. The following day 22 aircraft arrived at their final destination, West Field, Peiping. On 30-31 October the

\*There was an official finding of death by the Secretary of the Navy on 23 October 1946.

rear echelon sailed from Zamboanga aboard the attack cargo ship USS *Hydrus* (AKA-29) and the attack transport ship USS *Sheridan* (APA-51). A lengthy voyage took it to Samar Island, then to Manila Bay, then to Buckner Bay, Okinawa, and finally to Ta-Ku Bar in the Gulf of Chihli, Hopeh Province, North China. Upon arrival there, after some delays, they moved by train to Peiping. Thus, by 21 November, the entire squadron was reunited: 63 officers, 247 enlisted men, and 22 F4U-4s.

The setting into which they moved was confusing and dangerous, for the Nationalist and Communist armies were locked in a struggle for the future control of China. MAG-12 was sent in as part of the III Marine Amphibious Corps whose primary mission was to supervise the surrender and repatriation of the 630,000 Japanese troops and civilians in North China.<sup>1</sup> This assignment was quickly complicated when Communist troops began an irregular pattern of ambushes, small firefights, and harassment along the vital railroad running from Taku to Tientsin to Peiping.

Such were the circumstances in which VMF-115 began operations at Peiping on 1 November. The squadron war diary called this first mission "the initial Chin Huang Tao [Chinwangtao] Show of Strength Patrol." These patrols continued throughout November, and the squadron also participated in a celebration of the 170th anniversary of the Marine Corps on 10 November. MAG-12 staged an air show over Tientsin, and 16 planes from VMF-115 took part in it.

On 8 December there was a similar "sky parade" over Peiping, Tientsin, and Ta-Ku. The rest of the month saw a continuation of patrols to Chinwangtao and the Peiping "25 mile area," all uneventful. For the month the squadron totaled 269 flight hours and 157 individual flights.\*

In January 1946 flight activity increased, although the patrols were routinely the same. One exception occurred on 5 January when a Peiping reconnaissance patrol was believed to have been fired on by small arms near Liang-Hsiang.

Major Coles' tour of duty as commanding officer came to an end on 8 March, and for the next two months Captain Fred J. Gilhuly served as acting commanding officer. Colonel Gilhuly later recalled this period:

I remember how difficult it was to keep the planes in commission. Early in 1946 cold weather caused problems in starting the engines. We had to drain the oil and heat the oil before putting it back in the engine. Engine heaters alone didn't do the job. In the spring of 1946 dust was a problem. I think we changed engines with less than 100 hours. "Tech reps" from Pratt-Whitney and Chance Vought were helpful in that they came up with an air filter for the engines.

Maintenance was further complicated by the lack of trained personnel. Everyone was demobilized and sent home.

. . . our main mission was keeping two to four planes each up on the Peiping and Tientsin recon as well as the railroad on Chinwangtao patrol.\*\*2

On 1 April VMF-115 was reassigned to MAG-24, and Major John E. Reynolds took over as commanding officer on 15 May.

During this time the squadron flew regular reconnaissance and "show of strength" patrols to keep check on Chinese troop movements and to discourage attacks on American lives and property.

When an emergency situation arose in Tsingtao in early June 1946, the squadron was ordered there on

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\*These figures were reconstructed as well as possible after a disastrous fire on 9 December destroyed all operation records.

\*\*In Colonel Gilhuly's comments he notes the death (not recorded in the squadron's war diary) of Second Lieutenant Arthur A. Roark, whose plane crashed and burned on 23 April 1946 near the airfield.

a standby alert to protect United States interests in the event of an attack by Chinese Communist forces.

After three weeks of this duty, the squadron was relieved by VMF-218 on 2 July. The 1st Marine Division put on an Independence Day celebration featuring three formation passes over Tientsin on 4 July, and 11 planes from VMF-115 participated with two other squadrons.

From 13 August to 4 September, there was another tour of standby alert in Tientsin for six planes and eight pilots from the squadron, but no hostile action was encountered. Then, on 17 August, Major Harry B. Hooper came on board as commanding officer.

On 10 October, 23 planes from VMF-115 left Nan Yuan Airfield, Peiping, to participate in a fleet problem at Tsingtao in Shantung Province. The exercise consisted of numerous interceptions of opposing aircraft and simulated strikes on opposing fleets for five days. One of these was a single strike led by Major Hooper on 14 October, which "even the air operation people of the fleet admitted was a very successful one. We evaded their combat air patrol, arrived directly over the fleet unopposed, and made simulated bombing and strafing runs on the ships that caused them much confusion and havoc among their personnel with low-level attacks."<sup>3</sup>

Inspections of VMF-115 were conducted 19-20 October by Major General Field Harris and General A. A. Vandegrift, Commandant of the Marine Corps. November saw the completion of the squadron's Tsingtao alerts, and still another commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Gordon H. Knott, reported on 7 November. December brought good news on Christmas Eve: the squadron was moving to Hawaii.

In evaluating the China deployment of VMF-115, Colonel Hooper later made this comparison between the relative personnel stability of wartime and the frequent turnovers in peacetime:

From May 1943 until October 1944 I was fortunate in being able to form, train, and take [a] squadron overseas as its CO, an association with basically the same enlisted men and officers that lasted 18 months. We all knew each other and the capabilities of everyone. We were a well coordinated and highly efficient team. . . .

During the China tour, VMF-115 was trying to operate with about 20 experienced NCOs and about 90 two-year new enlistees. This was brought about by the post-World War II discharge point system and could not be blamed on anyone. But to say that the squadron was at that time a fighting team would be stretching things. In November 1946 the Table of Organization for a VMF was changed and called for a lieutenant colonel as CO. Lieutenant Colonel Knott was assigned to the squadron as CO, and I moved back to become XO. The squadron went through another shuffle



in the next month, and many of us with short China tours were transferred into . . . other units in the MAG, so that those with longer China tours could go back to the States with VMF-115. We were fortunate in that the tense situation in China at that time did not develop into a shooting situation, because our squadrons were not really ready in my opinion.<sup>3</sup>

### *Hawaiian and Stateside Duty*

During the last week of December 1946 the first and second flight echelons of the squadron left for Shanghai, and on 30 December VMF-115 was reassigned to MAG-15. Starting 1 January 1947, the third flight echelon and ground echelon also moved by stages to Hawaii, where they arrived over the period 23 January to 8 February.

After settling in at MCAS Ewa, the squadron began a normal peacetime training routine, a principal focus of which was participation in Pacific Fleet problems. Describing one such exercise which took place on 10 March, Colonel Knott later recalled:

VMF-115 was assigned to the Air Force for island defense. We decided to hit the "enemy" task force at dawn. By having two flights, each consisting of two divisions of Corsairs led by one F7F night-fighter, we felt the two night fighters could lead 16 Corsairs to the carrier by radar. The first division's night-fighter made radar contact with the "enemy" carrier about 45 minutes before dawn, which gave the Corsairs time to attack as planned. They arrived over the "enemy" carrier just in time to "shoot down" the "enemy" planes taking off.

Later, at the critique of the exercise, the carrier air group commander publicly stated: "The Marines really caught us with our pants down."

The second flight never reached the carrier as they hit a freak frontal action which blew the formation apart.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, First Lieutenant Evan L. Selsor disappeared at sea during this flight. An extensive search revealed no trace of him. Other training consisted of tactics, gunnery, instrument and night flying, with some air spotting for naval gunfire support.

There was a "surprising" increase in the availability of both planes and pilots during May. This enabled the squadron to run up a total of 1,120 flight hours that month, more than 500 hours higher than its best month in North China. The highlight of operations for the month occurred when, on 26 May, VMF-115 took part in a three-squadron, 44-plane aerial parade over Honolulu.

Flight hours in June remained high, and the pilots were able to gain extensive experience with SCAR (sub-caliber aircraft rocket) and HVAR (high-velocity aerial rocket) ordnance delivery. Also during the

month the squadron received a new commanding officer, when, on 9 June, Major Thomas O. Bales relieved Lieutenant Colonel Knott. His tour of duty was short, however, for he was relieved on 1 August by Lieutenant Colonel Monfurd K. Peyton.

For the next two years, VMF-115 remained at Ewa, and the squadron's workdays were filled with intensive training. Added to previously described operations were flights emphasizing group tactics, all-weather training, search and rescue, GCI (ground-controlled interception), "combat" air patrols, night strikes, carrier qualifications, navigation, and a continuing series of joint exercises with Army, Navy, and Air Force units.

The squadron's war diary provided an excellent example of how the unit conducted close-air-support training while in Hawaii. The tactical air control center (TACC) was simulated by group operations, using a VHF radio set up for communications, and an R4D transport plane orbiting in the target area simulated the tactical air direction center (TADC). A pilot in an F4U-4 Corsair orbiting near the target acted as the tactical air controller (TAC).\*

After a thorough briefing by the intelligence officer on the target area, which was the island of Kahoolawe for all Marine close-air-support missions in Hawaii, the flight leader briefed the flight on tactics to be employed, ordnance loads, and communications procedure. After the briefing, the flight would take off, and the leader would check in with the TACC, giving pertinent information such as the number of planes, ordnance being carried by the flight, etc. Arriving in the target area the flight leader would come up on the TADC net, reporting the number of aircraft, ammunition loads, and the flight's position (normally an assigned orbit point). The TADC would call the TAC and assign a mission for the flight, giving grid coordinates, type of target, ammunition to be used, and the target priority. The TAC repeated the information back to the TADC to ensure no errors had been made, and the flight leader would "Roger" for the transmission, indicating that he also understood the mission assigned. After locating the target by referring to his grid map, the flight leader carried out the prescribed attack on order from the TAC. In many cases the TAC would mark the target with a rocket or a miniature smoke bomb. The flight normally carried out six to

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\*The TACC was the principal air operations center for controlling all aircraft in tactical air operations. The TADC was an air operations center under the TACC which directed aircraft functions of the tactical air center. The TAC was an officer in an airplane who coordinated close air support.

eight close-air-support missions within an hour, after which they were cleared by the TADC to return to base. Enroute to home the flight leader reported to the TACC before landing, and immediately after landing the flight was debriefed by the intelligence officer.

The policy of the squadron for most close-air-support flights called for a lead change after each mission was completed. This afforded most of the pilots an opportunity to develop their map reading, radio procedures, and tactical leadership skills in a very realistic combat simulation exercise.

Occasionally there were accidents and casualties. On 16 February 1948, First Lieutenant George L. Westerman was killed while participating in a practice dive bombing attack, when he failed to pull out of a dive and his plane struck the water and disintegrated. On 15 April, First Lieutenant Parks J. Stallings experienced total engine failure on a routine training flight and he was forced to ditch his Corsair 12 miles at sea. Fortunately, he escaped injury and was picked up 35 minutes later by a Navy crash boat. Another engine failure occurred on 18 May, while First Lieutenant Robert R. Van Dalsem was practicing simulated carrier landings. He crashed in the trees at the edge of the field. Although the plane was demolished, he escaped with minor lacerations and burned legs. The squadron was not so lucky in another major accident. On 7 July, First Lieutenant John D. Petterborg lost his life in a crash while attempting a carrier landing.

Major James A. Feeley took over as commanding officer on 11 May.\* He prepared VMF-115 for its next training exercise, which began when the flight echelon embarked on the escort carrier USS *Rendova* (CVE-114) on 7 August and sailed for the Midway Islands. Upon arrival there, 24 squadron aircraft were catapulted from the *Rendova* for a month's training stint on the island, and then recovered by the *Rendova* for their return to Ewa.\*\*

A big shift in the life of VMF-115 occurred on 20 February 1949 when preparations began for a change of station. Aircraft preservation work to prevent salt-water corrosion was the order of the day. Then on 28 February a new commanding officer, Major Richard R. Amerine, took charge. On 12 March all of the squadron's planes were flown to Ford Island in Pearl Harbor and loaded on the carrier USS *Boxer* (CV-21) the next day. The squadron sailed on 15 March and arrived at North Island, San Diego, California, on 22

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\*Major Feeley was later a brigadier general and assistant wing commander, 3d MAW.

\*\*While F4Us do not need catapults, they were used in this instance.

March. A little over a week later, on 30 March, VMF-115 began an air and ground movement of the squadron to the Marine Corps Air Station at Edenton, North Carolina. By 1 April the flight echelon, consisting of pilots and 24 Corsairs, had arrived, and it was joined three days later by the ground echelon which came by train.

At MCAS Edenton the squadron remained assigned to MAG-15, although part of the 2d Marine Air Wing now rather than under Air FMFPac. Training was started at the new base, but there were difficulties with maintenance due to shortages of spare parts. When such problems arose, it brought into sharp focus the crucial role that the ground crews played in the effective functioning of the squadron.

The squadron was redesignated Marine Fighter Squadron 115 on 1 August 1949, and a dramatic new chapter opened on 16 September when its full complement of F9F-2 Panther jets was delivered. The Grumman Panther had a Pratt and Whitney J-42 engine which produced 5,570 pounds of thrust. It was armed with four 20mm nose-mounted cannons and could carry external ordnance in the form of 5-inch rockets, 500-pound bombs, and napalm pods. With a top speed of 600 miles per hour and a service ceiling of over 50,000 feet, this single-place fighter was capable of functioning both as a carrier and as a land-based aircraft.<sup>2</sup> This acquisition made VMF-115 the first fully jet-equipped squadron in the Marine Corps.

The transition to jets was not easy. This was dramatically illustrated when the very first F9F-2 arrived earlier (22 July). As Colonel John B. Mass, Jr., later recalled:

[It] was flown in by a Navy ferry pilot. He delivered the aircraft to the squadron, along with the operating handbooks, and he was picked up about thirty minutes later by a SNB. None of the pilots in 115 had ever flown a jet. The squadron had no flight equipment, such as jet hard hats, and there was no simulator for the Panther at Edenton.

The squadron commander, Major Amerine, checked out a football helmet from Special Services and had the squadron avionics section fashion it with a head set and fittings for an oxygen mask. Then the pilots read the pilot's handbook pertaining to flight operations of the aircraft, and we were ready to fly. The MAG-15 executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Boyd O. Whitney, flew the aircraft first. He was followed by Major Amerine and then I, as executive officer of the squadron, flew the aircraft. Then the squadron operations officer, Major Herbert Gomes, flew the plane.

On his landing approach, the aircraft had excessive speed on the downwind leg of the pattern, so Major Gomes pulled the throttle back to idle. Turning onto the base leg and into the final, his speed was still too fast and the throttle remained at idle. At between four or five hundred feet above the ground, and in a nose high attitude, the aircraft began to

settle a little so Major Gomes added some power. The plane continued to settle and full power was added, and the engine finally wound up to full power about the time the aircraft settled into the ground, about three hundred feet short of the runway. The plane was badly damaged but Major Gomes was unhurt.

Having never flown jets, Major Gomes, as well as the other pilots in the squadron, were not aware of the time required to get power on a jet engine after the throttle was advanced. Most of us thought power would be instantaneous as it was with a reciprocating engine.

From then on all pilots at Edenton assigned to a jet squadron had to go to Cherry Point for check-out sessions with the jet squadrons based at that air station.<sup>3</sup>

Thus several detachments of pilots were sent to MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, for transitional familiarization flights with VMF-122 in the FH Phantom, the Marine Corps' first operational jet aircraft, and then the new Panthers.

The vital part ground crews played in a squadron's operations was again underscored when the Panthers experienced a series of unexpected maintenance difficulties. The problems stemmed mainly from shortages of spare parts, lack of proper ground support equipment, and the malfunctioning of equipment which was on hand. However, through dint of many hours of extra work by the squadron's engineering department, VMF-115 managed to do "a certain amount of flying."<sup>4</sup>

Due to a delay in the arrival of critical spare parts, all flying was secured in the last week of January 1950. In order to get the needed parts in time for the squadron's imminent departure for a major training exercise in the Caribbean, Operation Portrex, a plane was flown to the Grumman aircraft plant at Long Island, New York, to pick them up.

On 31 January the advance echelon of VMF-115 left Naval Operating Base, Norfolk, Virginia, on the USS *Clarke County* (LST-601) to assist Marine Service Squadron 15 in preparing a camp site at the Naval Station, Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico. They were followed on 9 February by the flight echelon. The flight echelon's intermediate stop was Miami, Florida, but that night found 16 of the 24 planes in Jacksonville, Florida, while the other eight made it to Miami.

The second leg of the trip was from Miami to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, aided by the homing signal from a Consolidated flying boat PBY stationed midway along the route. The last leg was to Roosevelt Roads, where, after arrival, the squadron embarked on an intense ordnance and fighter tactics training period.

During these exercises the F9F-2 proved to be "a very rugged aircraft and could out-maneuver all the opposing aircraft."<sup>5</sup> This evaluation was well demonstrat-

ed when a flight of F-84s attacked the field and were in turn attacked by two of the squadron's F9Fs.\* As the F-84s formed a Lufberry circle, one of the VMF-115 pilots flew into its center and proceeded "to shoot them down one by one."<sup>5</sup> Simulated attacks by jets against Ramey AFB were never intercepted, and GCI-directed attacks by the Panthers against propeller-driven fleet aircraft caused more "planes shot down" than the umpires' tables had space for.

After this successful exercise, the flight echelon left Puerto Rico on 8 March. It was followed by the ground echelon which sailed for Norfolk on 15 March aboard the USS *Whitley* (AKA-91), an attack cargo ship; the transport USS *Butner* (AP-113); and the USS *Cheboygan County* (LST-533).

On its return to North Carolina, VMF-115 was transferred from MCAS Edenton to MCAS Cherry Point on 1 April. Three days later the squadron temporarily deployed once again to NAS Patuxent River, Maryland, in order to put on an air show for the Sixth Joint Civilian Orientation Conference at Quantico, Virginia. During the show, 90 percent of the rockets fired were on target, as the new jets demonstrated their proficiency as close-air-support planes.

An operational readiness inspection on 17 May again produced 90 percent hits, and the squadron's overall readiness to perform any mission was rated "Excellent."

There were other shows and demonstrations in various southern cities during May, and while returning from one of these, First Lieutenant William E. Register was killed on 21 May, when his plane went down from unknown causes. The grand finale to the squadron's air show activity occurred when it gave a demonstration on 17 June of close air support on fortified positions for the President and Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The second half of 1950 saw a continuation of widely varied activities for VMF-115. These were designed to increase the squadron's skills in support of its primary missions which were formally defined as:

- (1) Establish and maintain local air superiority by destroying enemy aircraft threatening our forces.
- (2) Interdict enemy air bases and surface communications.
- (3) Provide air support for amphibious or land operations.

A secondary mission of the squadron was to augment or replace naval air units aboard aircraft carriers.<sup>6</sup>

A change of command echelon took place on 14 August when VMF-115 was reassigned from MAG-15

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\*The F-84 was powered by the Wright J-65 engine with 7,200 pounds thrust, giving it a speed of 650 miles per hour and a 45,000 foot ceiling.



VMF-115 Historical Diary Photo

*An F9F of VMF-115 approaches for a landing on the USS Roosevelt in November 1950.*

(which was transferring to El Toro) to MAG-11. On 11 October, 23 planes took off for Miami, while the remainder of the squadron was airlifted in transports from VMR-153 and VMR-252. From there the entire squadron moved by air to NAS Guantanamo. At Guantanamo a severe tropical storm damaged the strip, requiring that the planes be secured. This forced cancellation of the scheduled carrier landing practice. On 23 October the runway was partially repaired and the squadron returned to Cherry Point, where on 27 October Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Owens, Jr., assumed command of the unit.\*

The next month marked a historic moment for VMF-115 when it became the first Marine jet fighter squadron to qualify onboard a carrier. On 20 November, the carrier USS *Roosevelt* (CV-42) was 50 miles off the coast of Norfolk, Virginia, and 18 pilots qualified without incident. This was followed by the entire squadron embarking for a six-day cruise on the carrier, another first for a Marine jet squadron.

While on the *Roosevelt*, the squadron practiced additional landings, flew daily tactical exercises with the three Navy jet squadrons on board, and stood CAP

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Owens later served as a major general, commanding the 3d MAW and then the 1st MAW.

over the ship. These flights were often made in winds of gale force with low ceilings.

Returning to Cherry Point on 30 November, the squadron secured all flying in preparation for the 11 December visit of the Inspector General of the Marine Corps.

The last half of 1950 saw a 75 percent turnover in the squadron's pilots. At the close of the year the unit's strength stood at 28 officers (including one from the U.S. Air Force) and 210 enlisted men, with 23 F9F-2Bs assigned. Flight hours for the six months totaled 1,979.0.

The year 1951 began with a combined air-defense—close-air-support exercise with the 2d MAW at Brown's Island, a target area east of Jacksonville, North Carolina. Later that month, on 25 January, a ferrying flight to Rhode Island for new fuel cells resulted in the crash and death of Second Lieutenant Carl W. Seppala.

During the following months, the squadron continued its pattern of training and demonstrations. Pilots went to the Naval Gunfire Spotter's School and the Close Air Support School; there was practice in a low-pressure chamber; test firing of 20mm guns to improve output; and participation in amphibious exercises, aerial parades, and "static displays" of the F9F.

On 28 May the squadron shipped out again for Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, where, during the month of June, it carried out training in simulated instrument flying, aerial gunnery, bombing, strafing, rocket firing (HVARs and SCARs), close air support, and combat air patrols. This intensive activity resulted in the squadron breaking the record of flight hours logged in a single month by any Navy or Marine Corps jet squadron, when 2,308 flight hours were chalked up in 1,305 flights.

Departing from Roosevelt Roads on 3 July, the planes returned to Cherry Point and immediately began field carrier landing practice. This was followed by a move on 27 July to Quonset Point, Rhode Island, to participate in carrier qualification and fleet exercises aboard the U.S. carrier *Tarawa* (CV-40).

As operations got underway on 31 July, the squadron lost Captain Raymond E. Gorton when his plane hit the water after being catapulted off the flight deck. The exercise ended on 10 August and all hands returned to Cherry Point, where VMF-115 received the first of the new F9F-4s. The increased performance of this model over the earlier Panthers was attributable to the Allison J33-AC6 engine. On 18 August, the squadron participated in a ground parade and review in honor of Major General Thomas J. Cushman, who, during the ceremony, presented a letter of commendation to VMF-115 for efficiency during the first half of the calendar year 1951.

On 24 August Lieutenant Colonel Thomas M. Coles moved up from executive officer to commanding officer. This was his second such tour; he had commanded the squadron six years earlier in China.

The pattern of close-air-support exercises, aerial parades, demonstrations, rocket and gunnery qualifications, and dive-bombing practice continued into the fall. Although VMF-115 was not committed as a squadron to participate in the Puerto Rican exercises during September-November, six of its pilots were assigned to VMF-223 on temporary orders to accompany that unit to the Caribbean for the duration of the maneuvers.

Representatives of the Bureau of Ordnance and Aeronautics visited the squadron on 7-8 September to experiment with a new type of aircraft gun lubricant. High-altitude gunnery flights were flown and it was found that the new type lubricant did not congeal as rapidly as the one formerly used. As a result of this finding, the new lubricant was immediately dispatched to Korea for use in combat by aircraft assigned to that theater of operations.

During the early part of November, the squadron

took part in the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference. Besides various static displays, two close-air-support demonstrations were conducted on separate target areas. The first consisted of an amphibious assault of company strength against a fortified position, coordinated with squadron aircraft making simulated bombing and strafing runs on the landing beach, pill boxes, and ridgeline. The second was conducted at the Quantico impact area where live ordnance was used. For its role in the demonstrations, the squadron received a letter of commendation from Lieutenant General Franklin A. Hart, Commandant of the Marine Corps Schools.

Then on 23 November, the squadron was alerted to prepare for overseas movement in January. The war in Korea, which had finally called VMF-115, had begun a year and a half earlier.

On 27 June 1950, eight divisions of the North Korean People's Army had invaded South Korea. This was answered in part by the mobilizations of the 1st Marine Division (1st MarDiv) and the 1st MAW. By 3 August Marine air had made its first strike against the enemy with eight carrier Corsairs. Gradually, the 1st MAW built up to full operational strength, but it became obvious that additional squadrons would be needed. With its training now completed and the Korean front stabilized, VMF-115 was ready for its forthcoming combat assignment.

Just at this crucial time, the squadron was forced to curtail sharply its flight operations. Mechanical problems had surfaced in the Allison engines of the F9F-4s, and they had to be grounded in December. Six F9F-2s from the 2d MAW were used until 29 December when the reworked engines were delivered back to VMF-115.

#### *Korean Combat*

All hands went on a seven-day work schedule, and, on 15 January 1952, the squadron was detached from MAG-11 and left by train for the West Coast. It arrived at NAS San Diego, California, on 19 January. Fortified for the rigors of the Korean winter by a brief period of cold-weather survival training at Camp Pickel Meadows, California, VMF-115 sailed from San Diego aboard the carrier USS *Bataan* (CVL-29) on 27 January.

For the period 15 January to 10 February, while enroute to Japan, the squadron was attached to Air FMFPac, but on 11 February it became part of the 1st MAW when it docked at Yokosuka Naval Base. On 20 February, with its ground equipment enroute to Korea on LSTs and its planes at Itami Air Base in Japan, VMF-115 was transferred to MAG-33.

On 15 February an advance echelon was sent to K-3 Airfield, near Pohang, Korea, to begin camp construction, and on 26 February the squadron's first eight planes made the flight to K-3. After combat familiarization flights with VMF-311, a squadron well drilled on missions there, VMF-115 sorties began on 29 February.

The month of March found the squadron gaining rapidly in expertise as the sortie totals rose, and on 18 March its last echelon of pilots and men arrived at K-3 from Itami. During this period missions were flown under the umbrella of VMF-311 operations, and by the end of the month, VMF-115 was flying about 50 percent of the sorties assigned to both units.

There were, however, numerous ordnance problems in firing ammunition. A field-fix was devised to drain the hydraulic fluid from the gun-chargers into a reservoir and this solved that problem. Bomb loads increased from six 250-pound bombs to 500-pound and 1,000-pound bombs, fuzed for detonation from instantaneous to six-hour delay.

There was also a problem in maintaining 10 aircraft for the advance echelon in Korea while aircraft and engine checks were made by the rear echelon in Japan. This was solved by having pilots in Japan fly aircraft just out of check to Korea to replace aircraft ready to go into check.

The daily sorties concentrated on interdiction bombing and strafing of rail cuts, road cuts, trucks, bunkers, bridges, boats, and railroad cars. On 3 March the first series of flights to test and evaluate the new Navy 2.75-inch "Mighty Mouse" rocket under actual combat conditions began.

There were, of course, the usual dangers of war. Lieutenant Colonel Coles took off on 12 March on a solo strike. Later he remembered the flight:

Our mission was to bomb a rail line and continue in a high speed strafing run straight ahead on a highly concentrated anti-aircraft position. The shell I took in the nose of my aircraft, from the curvature of the souvenir pieces of that shell that I still have, was more like an 80 to 90mm size and did more damage than a 37mm shell could have done. It blew off the nose section of the plane back to the firewall. The four guns were shaped like pretzels. One moment I was traveling in excess of 500 mph and the next I was going 180 mph as if I had hit a brick wall. It took me about 3 hours (seemed like) to make a 180 degree turn for home and outrun the mass of tracers and big, black, and horrible fiery red exploding fireworks . . . . Not too much later, I landed on a mud front line supply strip about 3 miles inside our own lines. As I turned off the runway I ran out of fuel.<sup>1</sup>

On 26 March, Second Lieutenant Gordon M. Hughes was killed in a midair collision, the squadron's

first loss in Korea. Additionally, Captain Harry O. Taylor, also involved in the collision, lost control of his plane and was forced to eject. He fell into friendly hands on the ground and was able to return to the squadron.

On 1 April, the Commanding General, Fifth Air Force, declared the squadron fully operational, and it commenced independent operations. Interdiction, reconnaissance, search-and-rescue, close-air-support, combat air patrol, photo-escort, and ferry flights filled the month. Tactics in bombing runs on rail cuts were altered by having each pilot "shallow out" his dive to about 20 degrees just before reaching the release point. This precluded a high "G" pullout and prevented mashing into a bomb blast while improving accuracy. These missions gave the squadron a real sense of confidence and, on 14 April, it voted to adopt the nickname "The Able Eagles."

The squadron suffered its second combat casualty on 20 April, when the plane of Second Lieutenant John S. Morgan was shot down while conducting a napalm attack. This tragedy was followed on 23 April by the death of Captain Robert W. Shirley. Just after takeoff he reported an explosion in his cockpit and complete power failure at 2,500 feet. Attempting to make a dead stick landing at the field, he crashed short of the runway. The cause was determined to be a failure of the engine compressor. Since this was the fourth instance of such a malfunction within two months, all squadron F9F4s were grounded by MAG-33 on 23 April.

This pause in activity allowed the squadron to hold intelligence briefings, improve its living area, and organize a ground defense. It also received visits by Brigadier General Clayton C. Jerome, Commanding General, 1st MAW; Lieutenant General Franklin A. Hart, Commanding General, FMFPac; and General Holland M. Smith (Retired).

With the engine problem still unresolved, VMF-115 began exchanging its F9F-4s for F9F-2s on 12 May by ferrying planes to and from NAS Atsugi, Japan. This permitted the resumption of combat operations on 21 May, and for the first time the squadron began using the ATAR (Antitank Aircraft Rocket) ordnance.

The squadron's engineering department had its hands full, because the 16 F9F-2s were received in "exceptionally poor" shape: they found tools in the plenum chambers, air lines missing, seats improperly adjusted so emergency ejection would have been impossible, etc. However, on 11 June eight more F9F-2s were received in excellent condition from VF-52 and VF-111, which were returning to the United States.

The squadron executive officer, Major John W. Zuber, served a two-week stint as acting commanding officer from 20 May until succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Armstead on 6 June.

Another fatality occurred on 14 June. The plane of Captain Howard D. Campbell, Jr., blew up shortly after takeoff when the VT- [variable timed] fused 260-pound fragmentation bombs he carried exploded. Damage from the blast caused his wingman to bail out.

This tragic event was the subject of widely divergent opinions as to the causes. The VMF-115 command diary reported that, following an investigation by MAG-33, "the decision was made that VT-fused bombs would not be hung on the Mark 55 bomb racks due to an unsatisfactory forward arming wire solenoid. Further use of this type fuse was also decided against until a more positive system is devised to prevent the arming of the bomb while on the aircraft during flight."<sup>2</sup>

The command diary of MAG-33 gives a somewhat different impression. It notes that "the other ten aircraft [of VMF-115] were forced to jettison their 260 pound fragmentation bombs when they became armed in flight. One bomb exploded 500 feet below the aircraft." It then goes on to say: "VMF-115 ran into some ordnance difficulties with VT's. After thorough investigations, it was found that proper safety precautions were not being followed, which has been corrected."

There were strong emotions among the pilots of VMF-311, which accompanied VMF-115 on this flak suppression mission against the airfields east of Pyongyang. Recalling this mission afterwards, Brigadier General Henry W. Hise dated the flight 15 June and judged it the "hairiest flight that we flew during the period". He went on to give these details:

We were carrying VT-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 [he] was forced to bail out. [Soon] the news sunk in on me that Campbell's VT fuses had malfunctioned and killed him. . . .

We then went on to Pyongyang. All 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. . . .

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.<sup>3</sup>

Another member of VMF-311 on this tragic mission also has vivid memories of that day. Based on notes made at the time, Colonel John M. Verdi wrote:

Twenty-seven minutes after Lead was airborne, a transmission came over the air . . . .

"Easter fifteen-one, this is sixteen-two . . . . Sixteen-one just blew up."

Riding wing on eleven-one (Hise), I felt a moment of unbelief, then a cold grip at the heart. I began to sweat. So did many others.

"Sixteen-three, following the wreckage down . . . ."

"Sixteen-two, this is fifteen-one. Is your airplane OK?"

"I may have picked up fragments . . . engine's running rough."

"Roger, go back to K-3. Get rid of your ordnance in the jettison area."

"Let's get rid of these damned things NOW!"

"All my division, jettison bombs and return to base!"

Back at K-3, debriefing was a subdued affair. An undercurrent of questions and answers among the assembled pilots received priority of attention.

"H.D. Campbell? Is that right?"

"500-pounder . . . not a chance!"

"Biggest piece was a wing panel."

"Just a big flash . . . ."

"What about his wingman?"

"Couldn't control the aircraft after he got feet wet."

"What did he do?"

"Ejected over the bay. Fishing boat picked him up."

"Chopper brought him in . . . he's OK, injured but OK."

"Two airplanes and a pilot . . . ."

"They were using one wire and no retainer plate."

"What?"<sup>4</sup>

Two more planes were lost in June, although no casualties resulted, and during the period 23-24 June, VMF-115 joined VMF-311 in a major fire attack on a power complex at the Chosin Reservoir. Although anti-aircraft fire on the missions was intense, the intended targets were thoroughly destroyed. This was the first time F9Fs had been massed for a strike of this type. Although the Panthers carried smaller payloads than the Corsairs and Skyraiders of MAG-12, their superb bombing results put to rest the doubts, held by some in the 1st MAW, about the jet's attack capability.<sup>5</sup>

A maximum surge effort of strike sorties on 11 July produced "the most outstanding day of operations" since VMF-115 had arrived in Korea.<sup>6</sup> In three successive raids on the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, the squadron dropped 124 bombs totalling 54,000 pounds, and 3,817 rounds of 20mm ammunition were expended in strafing attacks. On 16 July, Major Wallace G. Wethe assumed temporary command of the squadron for a month.

An additional capability for the F9F-2 was devised by VMF-115 while in the field: the use of wing-mounted tanks for laying smoke screens.

The VMF-115 command diary for August provided a comprehensive listing of its missions:

The tasks of the squadron are to be prepared to provide adequate close air support through ability to deliver accurate dive bombing attacks, accurate glide bombing attacks, accurate rocket attacks and accurate strafing attacks; to be prepared to provide adequate air defense by ability to intercept and destroy all attacking enemy aircraft; to be prepared to assist in defending against enemy surface attack; to be prepared to operate from either a land base or carrier base; to be prepared to support offensive action by delivery of coordinated attacks against ship and land targets and delivery of attacks against the enemy's air forces; . . . to be prepared to provide anti-submarine defense as directed; to be prepared to provide spotting for naval gunfire and shore artillery as directed; and to be prepared to furnish visual aerial reconnaissance.

A strike on 4 August brought the war home in a personal way to the enemy's hierarchy. Four squadron F9Fs napalmed and strafed the private quarters of the Chinese Communist Force's general officers, resulting in its complete destruction with 10 or more other buildings left burning.

On 17 August, Hurricane Condition One went into effect as 100-knot winds threatened. All planes and gear were secured in preparation. After experiencing some 40- to 50-knot gusts, however, flights were resumed two days later.

The squadron received a new commanding officer on 18 August when Lieutenant Colonel Royce W. Coln relieved Major Wethe.

VMF-115 bombing missions during August were in support of the 1st Marine Division; the 2d, 3d, 7th, and 25th Army Divisions; the U.S. IX and X Corps; the 2d ROK Corps; the 6th, 7th, and 9th ROK Divisions; and the 1st British Commonwealth Division.

Another major strike against Pyongyang took place on 29 August. Three successive missions (with VMF-311 and MAG-33) plastered the Munitions Bureau, the Ministry of Finance, and a locomotive repair shop with 73,000 pounds of bombs despite intense antiaircraft fire.

August also had squadron personnel preparing F9F-4 planes in Japan to replace the F9F-2s being used in Korea. In spite of diversions from equipment shortages and adverse weather, the squadron broke all of its previous Korean monthly operational records, running up a total of 705 combat sorties and 1,256 combat hours.

The following month saw a continuation of bombing and strafing missions in support of various Unit-

ed Nations ground units, but 10 September marked a black day for the squadron. A sortie of 22 planes hit enemy troop concentrations near Sariwon. Completing the strike, the flight was redirected to K-2 airfield at Taegu because of bad weather at the K-3 home base. Suddenly, fog enveloped K-2, reducing visibility to zero. Accordingly, 16 of the Panthers headed for K-3 and made safe landings there, but the remaining six planes, flying in formation in poor weather, crashed into the side of a 4,000-foot mountain while descending towards K-2. Killed were Majors Raymond E. Demers and Donald F. Givens, First Lieutenant Alvin R. Bourgeois, and Second Lieutenants John W. Hill, Jr., Carl R. Lafleur, and Richard L. Roth.<sup>7</sup>

On 28 September, Lieutenant Colonel John B. Maas, Jr. (who had served as squadron executive officer two years earlier in Edenton), relieved Lieutenant Colonel Coln as commanding officer. In the following months VMF-115 continued flying daily combat missions as well as familiarization flights for newly arrived replacement pilots. The typical mix of squadron aircraft was 9 F9F-2s and 15 F9F-4s during this period.

Then the cold, harsh Korean winter set in. All hands were issued thermal boots and other cold-weather gear, and special lubricants were used to winterize the guns and feeders.

On 3 December, VMF-115 lost another pilot. Second Lieutenant Donald F. Cottle, Sr., was last seen in a steep dive at low altitude over a target near Saigon (Korea), but a later search of the area revealed nothing. The rest of the squadron pilots maintained a heavy operational tempo, resulting in a new squadron monthly record of 726 sorties.

The beginning of 1953 brought two more casualties to the squadron. On 15 January, Captain William A. Higgins' plane was hit by antiaircraft fire over Sinanju, and he crashed in the water. His body was never found. Four days later, Captain Hershel F. Herbert, Jr., lost part of the right wing from his F9F-4 while in a diving attack run. His aircraft exploded on impact with the ground, and a visual reconnaissance of the area by other planes in the flight failed to turn up any further information.

On 1 February, VMF-115 received another new commanding officer with the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Stoddard G. Cortelyou. During the month, installation of new bomb racks (Aero 14Bs) was begun, which increased significantly the ordnance loads that could be carried. The new racks allowed a plane to carry either six 500-pound bombs, or two 1000-pound bombs combined with two 500-pound bombs, or four 90-gallon napalm tanks.





Photo courtesy of LtCol Lynn H. Stewart

*A flight of VMF-115 Panther jets is inbound to the squadron's K-3 home field in 1953.*

A flight on 26 March encountered two MiG-15s. One of the MiGs made a single pass at the Panthers, but no damage was inflicted.

On 27-28 March, VMF-115 launched a series of sorties with VMF-311 in support of the 5th Marines as they struggled up the muddy slopes in their fight for Outpost Vegas. By the end of the second day, with this intensive direct support, the 5th Marines had captured Vegas. The air-ground team had knocked out the 358th CCF Regiment without any loss of aircraft.\*<sup>8</sup>

The busy month ended with a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Joe L. Warren, coming on board on 31 March.

April found the Able Eagles with more commitments than ever. Following a series of strikes in direct support of the 1st Marine Division in the Carson-Elko area, the squadron undertook a variety of interdiction missions on enemy supplies and shelters. On 17 April, there was maximum surge effort by MAG-33 and MAG-12 in support of the U.S. Army's 7th and 3d Infantry Divisions. While VMF-311 pounded one flank of the attacking enemy, VMF-115 poured its firepower

\*This brought a message of commendation from the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division to the 1st MAW and its six participating squadrons.

into the other flank. From 0455 to 1835 hours, mission after mission was constantly flown. During this long day, "the jet squadron sorties record was broken [114] and 127.2 tons of bombs were expended."<sup>9</sup>

On 18 April the squadron was visited by the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air, Daniel Floberg, who was escorted by Major General Vernon E. Megee, commanding general of the 1st MAW.

On 28 April, VMF-115 received 18 new F9F-5 Panther jets. The F9F-5s were powered by the Pratt and Whitney J48-P engine with 6,250 pounds of thrust. They had a top speed of 579 miles per hour, and a ceiling of 42,800 feet.

VMF-115's flight activity for the month of April had been heavy, and both the 1,392.2 combat hours and 839 combat sorties were new records for the squadron.

A change of pace from the daily close-air-support and interdiction missions occurred on 13 May, when the squadron joined VMF-311 in providing air defense for a practice landing exercise of RCT-5.<sup>10</sup>

Fierce ground battles again flared up in the Elko-Carson-Vegas area, and VMF-115 and VMF-311 once more teamed up for heavy joint strikes on 29-30 May in support of the U.S. Army's 25th Division.<sup>11</sup> The traditional "fog of war" was well illustrated by repeat-



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 348322  
*Maj John F. Bolt of VMF-115 became the first Marine Corps jet ace with his fifth and sixth kills in July 1953, while serving with the USAF 51st Fighter Interception Wing. He also had six kills in World War II.*

ed evaluations in the squadron command diary, such as: "unassessed damage due to smoke" and "enemy position located at unknown coordinates."

The squadron continued its aircraft turnover during May, as all of its F9F-2s and most of its F9F-4s were replaced by F9F-5s.

On 5 June Lieutenant Colonel Lynn H. Stewart joined the squadron as commanding officer. His tour of duty got off to a lively start when, less than two weeks later, his Panther crashed due to a flameout while landing at K-3. Fortunately, he emerged unhurt.

The squadron, although busy with combat missions,

was proud to share in the honor when South Korean President Rhee presented the 1st MAW its second Korean Presidential Unit Citation on 12 June.\*

At this time of the war, some of the pilots from VMF-115 were on temporary exchange duty with the Fifth Air Force. One such Marine was Major John F. Bolt, who had six "Zeroes" to his credit from World War II, and had already logged 89 Panther missions in Korea. Assigned to the 51st Fighter Interception Wing with its F86s, he shot down, in less than two months, his fifth and sixth MiG-15s on 11 July, to become the war's only Marine jet ace.<sup>12</sup> His achievement was the highlight in a series of MiG-15 kills recorded by VMF-115 pilots while on exchange duty. Starting with Major Roy L. Reed on 7 and 12 April, there then had been a score by Major Bolt on 16 May; another by Captain Harvey L. Jensen on 18 May; others by Major Bolt on 22, 24, and 30 June; and finally on 20 July, two for Major Thomas M. Sellers (who was killed when later shot down in the same dogfight).<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile the squadron continued with its daily routine of bombing missions in June, giving close air support to a variety of U.S. Army and ROK divisions. Antiaircraft fire was often reported as "intense and accurate", and 10 of the squadron's planes were damaged by enemy fire during the month.

During this period, the Fifth Air Force freed VMF-115 from its normal missions on the central and eastern fronts, in order to permit the squadron to support the 1st Marine Division. Accordingly, combined strikes with VMF-311 were launched on 14 July in support of the 7th Marines. A total of 20 Panthers unloaded 34 tons of bombs and rockets from dawn to sunset.<sup>14</sup> The same scenario was repeated during the period 21-25 July as the Chinese mounted strong attacks against the 1st and 7th Marines in the Boulder City sector.<sup>15</sup> Because of bad weather, many of these were MPQ (ground radar-controlled bombing) flights.\*\*

The squadron also regularly undertook reconnaissance, interdiction, close-air-support, and combat-air-patrol missions. For interdiction sorties, VMF-115 was using 500-lb. General purpose bombs fuzed for instantaneous nose and non-delay tail release at 19-20,000 foot altitudes. These were unusually high altitudes for ordnance delivery, but were flown to avoid the intense enemy antiaircraft fire.

\*See Appendix D for full citation.

\*\*The MPQ-2 and MPQ-14 in use represented a crucial technological advance in permitting all-weather bombing. It was the predecessor of the TPQ-10 that would later see heavy service in Vietnam.

When Korean operations ended for the squadron on 27 July, the Able Eagles had rung up a total of 9,250 combat sorties and logged more than 15,350 combat hours.\*

With the end of the war, VMF-115 began a training program to keep its pilots and ground crews in a high state of combat readiness. Throughout the fall and into the winter months, on a daily basis, VMF-115 scheduled bombing runs using miniature MK-23 practice bombs, combat air patrols, reconnaissance, familiarization, and instrument flights. In addition, there were flights scheduled by the Joint Operations Command for practice fighter-escort and close-air-support missions, as well as night searchlight bombing and offensive-defensive air-to-air tactics.

A major rotation of personnel took place, with experienced pilots and senior NCOs leaving and regular enlisted replacement drafts coming on board. Lieutenant Colonel James E. Johnson served as acting commanding officer for Lieutenant Colonel Stewart during the period 1-28 September, and then took command in his own right on 5 October.

The start of 1954 brought many alerts for the squadron due to increased tensions associated with North Korean prisoner of war releases in the Pohang area. On 20 and 22 January, all available aircraft were deployed temporarily to NAS Atsugi, Japan, and there the pilots stood by in a severe snowstorm on one-hour alert in case hostilities broke out again. On 26 and 27 January the planes were sent back to K-3, but flying was held to a minimum so that all aircraft would be in a ready material condition. The tedium of the times was reflected by command diary entries like, "Another month had gone by in DEAR OLD HAPPY KOREA", or "Another month closer to home."

On 8 February, the squadron lost one of its new pilots when Second Lieutenant Stephen T. Ford crashed into the side of a mountain near Andong, while on a search mission for a missing Marine pilot.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert O. White assumed the duties of commanding officer on 1 March. During the month, a high level of aircraft availability enabled the squadron to fly more than at any time since the end of hostilities: 1,295.5 hours with 880 individual sorties.

On 29 March MAG-33 took part in an air defense problem, and VMF-115 launched 28 combat air patrols, intercepting "everything from light monoplanes to F-84s".

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\*The crucial role that 1st MAW had played in Korea was recognized when it was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation. As one of the wing's most active squadrons, VMF-115 shared in this honor. See Appendix D for the full citation.

The squadron began a new mission in April: fighter escort for F2H Banshees flying photographic missions north of the demarcation line. (These flights were restricted to an area at least three miles out to sea so as to avoid breaking the truce agreement.)

On 22 April Lieutenant Colonel White's F9F-5 ran out of fuel as he was about to land, and he crashed a half mile short of K-3. The plane was totally destroyed, but he temporarily resumed his duties after only six days in the hospital. On 23 May Lieutenant Colonel White had to return to the hospital, and on 6 June, Lieutenant Colonel Dean S. Hartley, Jr., moved up from his assignment as squadron executive officer to take command for a month.

Bad weather in June and July cut heavily into flight operations. It caused the cancellation of air missions planned for MarLEx IV, an amphibious training exercise scheduled for 16 June, and for a fire power demonstration at K-13 slated for 27 July.

Squadron strength during this period stood at 40 officers and 183 enlisted with 23 F9F-5s assigned.

On 14 July, Major William I. Taylor became the newest VMF-115 commanding officer. The routine of flight checks and familiarization flights for new pilots, combat air patrols, and training sorties continued, and on 26 August the Able Eagles were honored by a visit from General Lemuel C. Sheppard, Commandant of the Marine Corps.

The latter part of 1954 brought extremely cold weather and a series of accidents as new pilots continued to join the squadron. Second Lieutenant Eugene R. LaPreese was killed on 19 October during a close-air-support mission, and on 27 December First Lieutenant John M. Pels was lost on a routine instrument flight.

Winter weather continued to be a severe problem as 1955 began, and only about half of the 28 aircraft assigned to the squadron were "up" for flying. When tactics-training flights were not possible due to the weather, pilots maintained their proficiency with instrument flying. On 30 January, during one of these foul-weather flights, First Lieutenant Jimmie D. Lester failed to return to base during a heavy snowstorm. No trace was found of him.\*\*

As spring 1955 finally arrived, preparations began for the squadron's long-awaited move out of Korea. Flight operations ended on 11 April, and on 17 April an advance echelon of the squadron left their old familiar base at K-3 for USNS Iwakuni, Japan. The main body of the squadron embarked on transport

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\*\*On 28 March Lieutenant Lester was declared dead.

planes at Yongil-man airfield (K-3) on 27 April. The Korean tour of the Able Eagles had ended.

Looking at the frequent rotation of commanding officers during these years, Colonel Harry B. Hooper later observed:

Squadrons make up a fighting team, and, without some stability at the top, I do not believe that it can become an efficient team getting the most out of the assigned personnel and equipment. The record of VMF-115 shows that, in the 39-month period from 20 May 1952 to 31 August 1955, there were 13 COs plus two more that were "acting" COs. Not counting the "actings" this meant that the average tour of the CO was three months. This was during a wartime setting . . . I realize that there are many factors that come into play in the assignment of COs and personnel to squadrons. But in hindsight it seems that more consideration should have been given to providing greater stability in the squadron leadership.<sup>10</sup>

### *Back to the States*

Most of VMF-115 boarded the carrier USS *Princeton* (CVS-37) on 13 May 1955 for return to the United States. They were followed by a rear echelon on 24 May on board the attack transport USS *Shelby* (APA-105). Arriving at San Diego on 21 May, the squadron moved immediately to MCAS El Toro, Santa Ana, California, and operational control of the unit was changed to MAG-33, AirFMFPac.

There were many turnovers in personnel as the squadron began peacetime training. On 17 July Major James T. Pearce took over as the interim commanding officer, and served until 31 August. He was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel John S. Flickinger on 1 September.

The squadron's echelon attachment was changed again on 15 September when it became part of the 3d MAW. Training continued at a steady pace into 1956, with gunnery contests designed to create a healthy intersquadron rivalry.

Much excitement was generated on 20 April when Lieutenant Colonel Flickinger flew in the first Douglas F4D Skyray (not to be confused with the McDonnell F4B Phantom II) from the Naval Air Test Center, Patuxent River, Maryland. VMF-115 was the first Marine squadron to receive the new plane called "the hottest thing on wheels." The F4D was indeed a big step forward in performance. Its J-57 engine, with a new type of afterburner and a modified delta wing, enabled it to get airborne quicker than other jets and operate at extremely high altitudes (55,000 feet ceiling). It was, in fact, the first carrier aircraft in its normal combat configuration to hold the world's speed

record.\*<sup>1</sup> In addition, the radar in the new plane was a major improvement over the F9F-5s. It provided a certain amount of all-weather capability, as well as enabling the pilot to conduct air-to-air intercepts from the cockpit while relying less on GCI (Ground Control Intercept).

Unfortunately, as is common with a new plane, there were problems with the F4D—the most significant of which were a balky fuel transfer system, compressor stalls, and structural weaknesses in the wing stores.<sup>2</sup> A crash caused by an engine flameout during a landing approach killed Lieutenant Colonel Flickinger on 8 May.<sup>3</sup> The squadron's executive officer, Major Leslie E. Brown, took charge until 18 June, when Lieutenant Colonel Ralph H. Spanjer became commanding officer.\*\*

On 18 July, while at 40,000 feet, the engine in Major Joseph O. Lynch's F4D began to run extremely rough. When the fire warning light came on, he secured the engine and was left to choose either an ejection or a "dead stick" landing. Picking the latter option, he was able to get the plane safely back to base—the first time this had been done by a F4D pilot in an operational squadron.<sup>4</sup> With severe maintenance problems such as these, the structural faults led to periods in the latter half of 1956 when all F4Ds (nicknamed "Fords") were grounded.

In August, VMF-115 left El Toro for a training period at MCAAS Mojave, California.<sup>5</sup> Problems with the F4D continued and while at Mojave one of the squadron pilots was forced to bail out.<sup>6</sup> These crises led to a unique solution. When Major General Marion L. Dawson, Commanding General, 3d MAW, flew in to Mojave on 7 September to see what VMF-115 was doing about the F4D, he found a lineup of Skyrajs torn down to their basic structure with crews of mechanics working on them. Some 150 modifications were found to be necessary, a precedent-setting field overhaul for a squadron to make on a new plane.<sup>7</sup>

Commenting later on this, Lieutenant General Leslie E. Brown noted:

The field modification project at Mojave turned out to be, I think, the largest such project ever to be undertaken by a Marine squadron before or since. Actually, the planes should have been returned to the factory for a job of that size. But—what a great tribute to 115's engineering crew. Of course, we had lots of factory help.<sup>8</sup>

\*This was 752.9 miles per hour over a three-kilometer course on 3 October 1953.

\*\*Major Brown, while in Korea, was the first Marine to fly a jet in combat, and later became a lieutenant general. Lieutenant Colonel Spanjer later became a major general.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A145366

*F4D Skyray, with drop tanks, flies over the Pacific, 1956. Note modified delta wing.*

Problems continued, however, with the J-57 engine, and Lieutenant Colonel Spanjer had a close call in early November, when his engine fire indicator light came on, and the cockpit was filled with smoke at 15,000 feet. Seeing jet fuel spraying over the side of his plane, he shut down the engine and made a deadstick landing.\*<sup>9</sup>

On 20 November, after three months at Mojave, the squadron returned to El Toro with the nickname "Desert Rats". Greeted by General Dawson, the squadron's maintenance personnel were presented a certificate of appreciation from the Douglas Aircraft Company for their "outstanding record" in accomplishing the many field modifications ahead of schedule.<sup>10</sup>

On 31 December 1956 the squadron's designation was changed to VMF(AW)-115, marking its capability to carry out its missions in all weather conditions.<sup>11</sup> Analyzing the development of the aircraft which led up to the all-weather designation, Colonel Stoddard G. Cortelyou later commented:

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\*Lieutenant Colonel Spanjer's nickname was "Smoke," and Lieutenant General Brown later recalled the humorous side of this emergency:

As a matter of fact, when "Smoke" Spanjer called into the base (ready room) radio to report trouble (several of us were listening), the squadron duty officer (and the squadron LSO) asked what the problem was. Spanjer replied that he "had smoke in the cockpit." The duty officer . . . said "We know who's flying the plane—what's the problem?" It was good for many good laughs.

There was an interesting difference of opinion on the design of the all-weather fighter within the Navy/Marine Corps family during the early 1950s. The Marine position . . . was that it should be twin-engine and two-place so that it could operate over hostile areas and beyond effective surface radar coverage with high survivability. The Navy view . . . was that it should be lightweight and controlled by surface radar to reduce complexity and give high performance. This was a natural development, due to the difference in characteristics of the critical area of the Navy Task Force and the Marine Corps beach-head which had to be defended. The results were the F3D-1 and the F4H-1 (F-4B) in the Marine concept, and the F3H-1 and the F4D-1 (F-6A) in the Navy concept. When the F-6As did not work out too well as a carrier aircraft, they were given to the Marine squadrons—like the early Corsairs of World War II.<sup>12</sup>

The end of the year also brought the squadron an AirFMFPac Safety Award for the fourth quarter of 1956 for completing 405 flight hours without an accident.<sup>13</sup>

VMF(AW)-115 went on another deployment to Mojave on 23 January 1957. There, in "sunny California," temperatures dropped to 12 degrees and snow fell. Nevertheless, pilots and crews followed an intensive schedule, racking up a total of 1,028.8 flight hours in only 22 flying days with an average of 13 planes available—a new record for the F4D.\*\* All pilots qualified in flight under instrument conditions and mastered the techniques for flameout approaches. (The F4D was, however, restricted from flameout approaches when it first went to the Fleet because of the

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\*\*This achievement brought a message of congratulations from the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

stall/drag characteristics of its delta wing.)<sup>14</sup> On 14 February the squadron returned to El Toro.<sup>15</sup>

A new commanding officer took charge on 1 June, Lieutenant Colonel Harold A. Langstaff, Jr.<sup>16</sup>

During the Mojave deployment and after its return to El Toro, VMF(AW)-115 continued to suffer additional crashes. As a result of the high rate of aircraft accidents in early F4D-1 squadrons, the Skyrajs were once again grounded in December 1957 for further modifications to the pylons, fuel cells, and afterburners.<sup>17</sup>

From November 1957 through January 1958 the squadron deployed 32 men to NAS El Centro, California, to experiment with high-altitude, radar-controlled, air-to-air rocket firing. They worked in conjunction with the ground intercept facilities at Vincent AFB, Yuma, Arizona.\* Large metal darts were towed as dummy targets on an 8,000-foot cable, and the Skyrajs made attacks with live rockets.

At the same time, squadron pilots began testing a new type of partial-pressure flight suit for the high altitude mission of the F4D. Skin-tight, with a "space-man helmet," it was designed to inflate automatically between 40,000 and 45,000 feet.\*\* When tests proved successful, the new suit was issued as regulation gear, making VMF(AW)-115 the only Navy or Marine squadron on the West Coast so equipped.<sup>18</sup>

The squadron then began standing down from its tour at El Toro and preparing for new duty overseas. On 11 February 1958 all hands deployed to NAS North Island, San Diego, where they embarked on the utility aircraft carrier USS *Windham Bay* (CVU92), bound for Japan. At the same time, operational control shifted from MAG-33, 3d MAW, to MAG-11, 1st MAW.\*\*\*

#### *Japan-U.S. Shuttle*

The squadron arrived at NAS Atsugi, Japan, on 1 March 1958 and disembarked with 27 officers and 174 enlisted men.<sup>1</sup> Replacing VMF-334, all hands began training once more. At this time VMF(AW)-115 was assigned an all-weather fighter intercept task in the Japanese Defense Organization. All its pilots had to

\*This is the present site of MCAS Yuma.

\*\*Two of the pilots doing the testing, First Lieutenant Michael Mura and First Lieutenant Henry C. Ivy, Jr., would later return to VMF(AW)-115 as commanding officers in 1970 and 1972, respectively.

\*\*\*Although VMF(AW)-115 took its own F4Ds with it on this particular deployment, it should be noted that Marine Corps aviation was often using at this time a "transplacement" system. This allowed the personnel of a squadron to move quickly to a new base and simply pick up the planes of a squadron that had previously been there. It was a good system for guaranteeing combat readiness through equipment stability, a forerunner of the Unit Deployment Program of today.



Photo courtesy of Douglas Aircraft Co.

*LtCol Harold A. Langstaff, commanding officer of VMF(AW)-115, mans his F4D just prior to flying a sonic boom test in the Mojave Desert in 1957.*

undergo a four-day ground school in the Air Defense Program at Tachikawa AFB. In the air the F4D fulfilled its role during night and all-weather patrols by intercepting a number of Russian aircraft.<sup>2</sup>

In the late summer of 1958, tensions in the Far East increased greatly. On 28 August, Communist Chinese shore batteries in Amoy Bay opened up on the Kinmen (Big and Little Quemoy) Islands. As the daily volume of shelling rose to 50,000 rounds and Communist fighter planes attacked Nationalist planes over the Formosa Strait, it appeared that an attempt to seize the islands was imminent. This would have been the logical prelude to full-scale attacks on Taiwan.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with this possibility, the commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet ordered MAG-11 to move from NAS Atsugi to Taiwan on 29 August.<sup>4</sup> Its missions were to provide land-based air defense for the Seventh Fleet's Attack Carrier Striking Force and to augment the air defense forces of Taiwan. Demonstrating the mobility and readiness for which they were trained, the three fighter squadrons of MAG-11 moved out immediately. On 31 August VMF-323 had 12 of its 18 FJ-4s on Taiwan. On 2 September the ground echelon of VMF(AW)-115 departed NAS Atsugi and sailed from USNB Yokosuka on board the USS *Windham County* (LST-1170). Flying out its planes from Atsugi on 5 September, the squadron had its F4Ds at their destination by 6 September.<sup>5</sup>

The planes were based at Pingtung North Airfield, a site arrived at only after arduous negotiations with Chinese and U.S. Air Force senior officers.\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*The F4Ds required a minimum of 8,000 feet of runway, and the U.S. Air Force liaison officers appear to have tried to force MAG-11 to use fields with runways that were too short.



Marine Corps Historical Collection

*An F4D Skyray of VMF(AW)-115 is given an inspection by Gen Randolph McC. Pate, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, at Pingtung, Taiwan, during October 1958.*

MAG-11 air operations began on 4 September, less than a week after receiving the order to mount out. The *Windham County* arrived on 8 September with the rest of VMF(AW)-115, and by 11 September (after two days lost due to a typhoon) MAG-11, more than 1,000 miles from its home base, was fully operational. Marines saw this as a glaring contrast to U.S. Air Force readiness capabilities; the Air Force F86 squadron arrived at a completely equipped field eight days before the Marine F4Ds, and it was not ready for full operations until 12 days after the F4Ds were.<sup>6</sup>

Upon arrival at Pingtung, squadron personnel had to erect tents for living and working facilities, while trying to maintain flight operations. Morale of all personnel was a major problem, due to what were perceived as unsatisfactory living and working conditions. Weather conditions resulted in regular use of the portable arresting gear on the runway. There were daily incidents occurring between the Marines and the civilian population surrounding the base. Supplies, such as liquid oxygen, had to be flown in by MAG-11 twice a week from the Philippines. Competition between the two F4D squadrons, however, was a real driver in maintaining operational performance.<sup>7</sup>

VMF(AW)-115 immediately began night cover flights to support the supply of the off-shore islands. On numerous occasions squadron pilots had Chinese Communist aircraft close enough to permit a lock-on with their airborne fire control radar, but standing ord-

ers were, "Do not engage."\* A Marine author later described a typical mission:

Two F4Ds were airborne over Taiwan at dawn on one occasion, having scrambled to a threat call of thirty-two MiGs orbiting Quemoy Island. Reaching their "perch" altitude of 50,000 feet, the Skyray pilots knew it would certainly be a one-sided fight, but their mixed bag of four 20-mm cannon and two Sidewinder missiles apiece gave them some measure of confidence. Flying to within twenty-five miles of Quemoy, the Marine aviators spotted the MiGs' contrails but, to their consternation and disappointment, the quarry turned back towards the mainland, the chance of a kill immediately gone.<sup>8</sup>

The squadron also participated in MAG-11's 24-hour air-defense alert, furnishing planes and pilots for two aircraft on five-minute standby, two on 15-minute, and all others on one-hour notice. For September the squadron posted a total of 524.6 flight hours, with 116 percent utilization of available aircraft.<sup>9</sup>

On 6 October a ceasefire was declared and the barrier patrols ended. VMF(AW)-115 had helped the group provide half of the American air defense of Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> It had carried out these night- and all-weather-patrol missions off the China coast in such a skillful way that it continuously earned plaudits from some of the most experienced air-defense controllers in the world, those operators at the GCI station on Makung in the Pescadores Islands.<sup>11</sup>

\*As the official report said: "It took a lot of self-discipline on the part of the pilots not to squeeze off those Sidewinders."

Standing by in case the crisis flared up again, the squadron carried on a normal flight training syllabus while remaining at Pingtung North through early 1959, but by late February it began packing up its gear in preparation for departure. Breaking into two groups, on 5 and 14 March the unit's F4Ds were flown from Pingtung North to Atsugi.<sup>12</sup> On 14 March, the remainder of the squadron moved to Kaohsiung where it embarked on the USS *Plumas County* (LST-1083), arriving back at Atsugi via Yokosuka, Japan, on 22 March 1959.<sup>13</sup> It was not to be a long stay.

The "Silver Eagles" (as the men now called themselves) of VMF(AW)-115 ended their 14-month tour in the Far East in May 1959, when the squadron was "cadred" as part of a "transplacement." Nearly all the personnel were reassigned to other units, and a small nucleus of officers and men took the squadron records to MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, to flesh out VMF(AW)-115 once again into a full-scale squadron. Their Skyrays remained at Atsugi and were taken over by the replacement squadron, VMF(AW)-531.<sup>14</sup>

So it was that on 4 May 1959 the squadron was once more reassigned, this time to MAG-24, 2d MAW, AirFMFLant, and a new commanding officer took charge at the start of this tour of duty: Lieutenant Colonel Howard J. Finn, who had taken over on 3 May.\* Once at Cherry Point, the small cadre of VMF(AW)-115 personnel "reactivated" the squadron, forming it around a sub-unit of VMF(AW)-114.

By mid-May the squadron was well settled at its new base. A new commanding officer, Major Robert S. Hemstad, formerly executive officer, took charge on 9 August, but, amidst the training, the problem of flameouts continued. In September one pilot had to eject (safely), and again in October another engine quit cold at 12,000 feet over the base. The pilot, Second Lieutenant Conrad Heinzerling, was just able to bring his F4D in for a dead-stick landing.<sup>15</sup>

A much lighter side of a pilot's life was illustrated in November. Four of the squadron's pilots had to make a navigational training flight to Floyd Bennett Field, Long Island, New York. While there they were "asked" by the group commander, responding to a request from New York, to escort four young ladies visiting from abroad for an evening on the town.<sup>16</sup>

A much more typical assignment came in February 1960. The squadron—207 strong—moved to NAS Key West, Florida, and was in full operation in less than four days. At Key West the work day began at 0330 when "night owl" flight line crews started preflight

\*Lieutenant Colonel Finn was an ace in World War II with six confirmed kills.

maintenance on all aircraft. Flight operations began at 0600 and ran continuously until 1800. It was a month of air-to-air weapons training, which included practice with 2.75-inch rockets, Sidewinders, radar-controlled intercepts, and target-tow missions. In 24 flying days the Silver Eagles logged 926.2 hours in the air.<sup>17</sup>

Returning to Cherry Point on 3 March, the squadron began in April still another phase of its training: the annual carrier and short field landing exercise.\*\* This featured practice in bringing in the 20,000-pound F4Ds at 130 knots and hooking onto an arresting cable for a stop.<sup>18</sup>

As a harbinger of the forthcoming deployment to Japan, Lieutenant Colonel Hemstad was detached to the 1st MAW, and Major George J. Collins became acting commanding officer of the squadron on 29 April. He served at Cherry Point as preparations for departure were made, with Lieutenant Colonel Hemstad resuming command on 18 June in Japan.<sup>19</sup>

All of the unit's hard work paid off in May in a surprise ceremony honoring VMF(AW)-115. The squadron was presented a Navy "E" award for excellence in a Competitive Evaluation Exercise, using air-to-air weapons during its Florida tour in February.

The awards ceremony represented a sort of "graduation" event for the squadron at Cherry Point, because shortly thereafter its deployment to Japan began. Starting on 9 June squadron personnel began a series of individual transfers which moved them to NAS Atsugi, Japan, from Travis Air Force Base, California, via Hickham Air Force Base, Hawaii. As pilots and enlisted men arrived at Atsugi during the period of 9-25 June, some were assigned to VMF(AW)-531, the companion all-weather fighter squadron there, while others formed the nucleus for a rebuilt VMF(AW)-115. On 18 June the squadron was reassigned to MAG-11, 1st MAW, and between 30 June and 21 July personnel strength escalated from 43 to 203.<sup>20</sup>

During the following year of duty at Atsugi, VMF(AW)-115 maintained its combat readiness through an ongoing training schedule. This included field carrier landing practice (FCLP) in September, a deployment to Naha, Okinawa, and carrier qualifications on the carrier USS *Hancock* (CVA-19). An infor-

\*\*This kind of exercise was a prelude that led to Marine Corps experimentation with SATS (Short Airfield for Tactical Support). The first operational test of a complete expeditionary jet airstrip had been made in March 1960 by 1st MAW on Taiwan. A test site was later opened at Bogue Field near MCAS Cherry Point in January 1962. The training and equipment from this series of tests were to serve Marine squadrons well in the Vietnam War.



mal account of the remainder of the squadron's stay in the Far East is provided by the Silver Eagles' Cruise Book:

The hot pad and more training filled October, then suddenly we were off again in November. Half of the squadron moved to Ping Tung, Taiwan, where we helped the Chinese Nationalists in an exercise by being "the bad guys." For some, it was the first tactical operation in the field complete with pup tents, C rations, and the daily water wagon. But life "in the field" improved as we moved into big tents and the mess hall. The nightly hot shower, movies, cold beer, and the daily supply of watermelon, all added up to make things more pleasant. The Chinese, too, added to the enjoyment of our stay with demonstrations by the Thunder Tigers flight demonstration team, a truckload of watermelon, and finally a professional stage show.

Back to Atsugi for the remainder of our stay, [and] the training continued. Small deployments became monthly occurrences as detachments went to Naha, Iwakuni, and Itazuki for demonstrations and training.

Christmas away from home and family was rough for most, but the spirit of Christmas did not escape the squadron. An orphanage was found in need of many things that we were fortunate to have and could provide. A party for the children complete with Santa, presents, hot dogs, and ice cream brightened the season for all of us. The relationship did not end with the party, but continued throughout the remainder of our tour, and it is hoped that it will continue for many in the years to come.

With the arrival of 1961 the training of VMF(AW)-115 continued apace. The Cruise Book describes its activities:

February found the *Hancock* up in Japanese waters, so the squadron had more FCLP and out to the boat for requalification. Good weather, a good ship, good crews, good planes, and good flying, and in six hours all pilots requalified. Another "Well done" to all hands.

March and April were months of tension as all eyes were on Southeast Asia. VMFA(AW)-115 was ready and able, but the training continued as usual.\* New twists here and there to further our readiness and abilities were tried, tested, and some adopted right up to the time of our relief and return to CONUS.

In looking back, the squadron has come a long way from that 128 hours in May 1959 to our final 600 hours plus, every month. The pilots and maintenance crews are a highly trained and efficient team which has performed any and all assigned tasks well, as the record so proudly shows.

On 30 June 1961 the squadron was transferred out of MAG-11, marking a return to Cherry Point. After arriving at Cherry Point on 1 July 1961, VMF(AW)-115 was reassigned to MAG-24, 2d MAW, AirFMFLant, and, on 5 July, it received a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel John N. Swart-

\*Even routine training had its price. On 24 April 1961 First Lieutenant John L. H. Mason, Jr., was killed when his plane crashed on a practice field.

ley.<sup>21\*\*</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Swartley's job was to take the squadron's "flag" and rebuild it, because only three pilots and 26 enlisted men were assigned to the Silver Eagles upon their return to their former home base.

A flow of new personnel soon enabled the squadron to begin its training for all-weather, high-altitude interception and close-air-support missions in their Skyrays—now called the F-6A. Another commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William L. Atwater, took over on 1 September.<sup>22</sup> As a change from routine training, the squadron participated in the Aerospace Exposition in St. Joseph, Missouri, 14-15 October.<sup>23</sup>

On 19 February 1962, 28 officers and 144 enlisted men went on board the carrier USS *Independence* (CVA 62) for two weeks of carrier landing qualifications in preparation for an aircraft carrier deployment to the Mediterranean area in April. During 103 flight hours, 20 pilots logged 246 day and 114 night landings.<sup>24</sup>

It was back to the *Independence* again on 19 April. Boarding the carrier at Norfolk, the squadron began a five-month tour of duty providing air support missions for the Sixth Fleet. Sorties were flown off the coasts of Libya, France, Italy, and Greece, where, in 56 operating days, VMF(AW)-115 made a total of 905 landings and set two records. The first record set was for the number of arrested landings made by a jet squadron in a one-month period (300 in June), and the second record was for the lowest percentage of "bolters" (planes missing the arresting gear upon landing) of any jet squadron during the cruise. On 27 August VMF(AW)-115's deployment ended, and it returned home to Cherry Point.<sup>25</sup>

On 8 September, a change in command took place, with Lieutenant Colonel Jerry B. Smith taking charge.<sup>26</sup> This was soon followed by the eruption of the October Cuban missile crisis. The United States had photographed Russian and Cuban attempts to install ballistic missiles on the island, and President Kennedy ordered an alert for the military, with the threat of a full blockade. Lieutenant Colonel Smith brought the Silver Eagles to a high state of readiness, and on 5 December the squadron pilots flew to NAS Leeward Point, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, followed by most of the ground personnel in transport planes. There they remained on alert to ensure that the agreement to dismantle the missile sites was carried out.<sup>27</sup>

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Hemstad, who had been promoted on 1 March 1960, had equalled the record of Lieutenant Colonel Langstaff for longest tenure as squadron commanding officer, almost two years.

Colonel Charles V. V. Smillie, Jr., remembered those days well:

When VMF(AW)-115 returned to Cherry Point from the *Independence* cruise, large scale transfers greatly reduced the squadron's combat capability. This has long been a normal procedure for squadrons returning from a Mediterranean/Far East deployment.

At the time 115 was designated to deploy to NAS Leeward Point, only a small percentage of assigned pilots were combat qualified, with many new "nuggets" waiting for their FAM-1 in the Skyray. The problem was resolved by reassignments of pilots returning to CONUS from a Far East tour with VMF(AW)-531 in early November. When 115 arrived at Leeward Point it had essentially three groups of pilots: The "old 115" pilots from the "Med Cruise," "531" pilots recently returned from Atsugi, Japan, and the "new heads," just starting to FAM the F-6A. However, 115 quickly melded into an effective force with an extremely successful deployment.

All aircraft arrived in Cuba by 6 December and first CAPs were flown 7 December. While in Cuba the vast majority of the squadron's efforts were directed in support of the "Missile Crisis"; nevertheless, limited training of new pilots continued in an effort to bring them up to combat-ready status.<sup>28</sup>

The advent of 1963 found the squadron involved in a new endeavor. An amphibious exercise, Phibulex 1-63, got underway on 8 January, and VMF(AW)-115 was directed to furnish simulated ground support for participating units from the 2d Marine Division.<sup>29</sup> Landings for the exercise took place at Vieques, Puerto Rico, on 17 January, and a week later the squadron began its return to Cherry Point by air.<sup>30</sup>

Colonel Smillie commented again:

Phibulex 1-63 was an interesting exercise in that 115 deployed a part of its force to Puerto Rico—in effect a deployment within a deployment. It was a welcome relief to the Cuban routine and provided an excellent training opportunity.

The return from Roosevelt Roads to Leeward Point was marred when a Skyray was lost due to an engine fire on take-off. The F-6A crashed in a sugarcane field while its pilot, Captain Charles V. V. Smillie, Jr., ejected safely and landed nearby.<sup>31</sup>

On 10 May, the squadron welcomed a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Don W. Galbreath.<sup>32</sup> Under Lieutenant Colonel Galbreath the squadron began accepting the McDonnell F-4B Phantom II in September.\* This represented the dawn of an era for the squadron which would last more than 20 years. The new Phantom was a fighter-attack air-

\*Pursuant to a Bureau of Weapons instruction of 18Sep62, a major redesignation of U.S. military aircraft took place. The F4H-1, for example, became the F-4B.

craft with the capability to fly twice the speed of sound. Powered by two J79-GE-8B turbojets with 17,000 pounds of thrust each, the F-4B had a speed of 1,485 miles per hour and a ceiling of 62,000 feet. It could carry 16,000 pounds of ordnance.

The Phantom also brought something else wholly new to the pilots of VMF(AW)-115: another man on board the plane. This was an NFO (Naval Flight Officer) who served as a bombardier-navigator and radar intercept officer (RIO). He had a critical role to play, for the air-to-air radar of the F-4Bs enabled them to locate, track, and destroy an enemy plane without even seeing it visually, using their Sidewinder missiles and 20mm cannons.

To reflect its new dual capabilities, the squadron was redesignated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 (VMFA-115) on 1 January 1964.\*\* As the second Phantom unit in 2d MAW, the Silver Eagles continued a regular pattern of training during 1964, familiarizing themselves with their new aircraft.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to phasing out the F-4Ds (which had been redesignated F-6As) and transitioning to the F-4Bs, the squadron was required to train for, and adopt, a new computerized maintenance management program. This was the Naval/Marine aviation adaptation of the Air Force 66-1 program which had been developed by the Strategic Air Command.<sup>34</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Clement T. Corcoran became commanding officer of VMFA-115 on 22 May and served until 20 December, when he was relieved by Lieutenant Colonel Clyde R. Jarrett.\*\*\*<sup>35</sup>

The beginning of 1965 saw VMFA-115 undertaking another new training experience. Departing Cherry Point on 16 January, the squadron made a 2,000-mile deployment to MCAS Yuma, Arizona. On the way to Yuma it conducted a 400-mile low-level navigation exercise and a mid-air refueling evolution. Once at Yuma, the focus shifted to rocket, strafing, and bombing practice on the station's gunnery ranges, where VMFA-115 became the first East Coast Marine F-4B squadron to complete this air-to-ground ordnance training.\*\*\*\* Stopping by to observe the squadron at work was Brigadier General George S. Bowman, Jr., commanding general of the 2d MAW.

\*\*VMFA-115 was the last active-duty operational squadron in the naval service to give up its Skyrays, when its last F-6A was flown to Arizona for storage in March 1964.

\*\*\*As a captain in Korea in June 1952, he had parachuted from his stricken plane on his 59th mission.

\*\*\*\*VMFA-115 pioneered the Yuma deployment for 2d MAW squadrons, a training opportunity which the wing has since honed to a precise art and made an indispensable part of its unit readiness training.

On 12 February the squadron returned to Cherry Point, putting a final polish on its operational skills for four more months.<sup>36</sup> Starting with the departure of 26 officers on 12 May, the squadron began another deployment to the Far East. Reassembling at El Toro, the main body was flown out on 30 June 1965, once again bound for Japan.<sup>37</sup>

### *Vietnam Combat*

On 5 July 1965, VMFA-115 relieved VMFA-531, taking over its equipment and aircraft following the latter's return from a deployment in Vietnam.\* At NAS Atsugi, the Silver Eagles were assigned on 7 July as part of MAG-13. The month was spent flying familiarization hops in the Phantom II planes. In mid-July the unit moved to MCAS Iwakuni, with a squadron strength of 45 officers and 254 enlisted men. At Iwakuni, ground training, air operations, and a physical fitness program were instituted with an eye toward the squadron's expected movement to combat in Vietnam.

For the next two months intensive training was conducted in jungle and sea survival, night radar intercept flights, advanced tactics and inflight refueling. Ground defense tactics and intelligence briefings on Vietnam were also included.

Earlier in 1965 President Johnson had made the decision to commit a Marine brigade to protect the air base at Da Nang, Vietnam, from Communist attack, and on 8 March the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) was ordered to land. In order to provide the 9th MEB with the airpower normally integral to a Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF), VMFA-531 was ordered to Vietnam on 11 April.<sup>1</sup>

As the scale of combat grew steadily larger in Vietnam, the buildup of Marine air continued, and by fall it became time for the Silver Eagles to take their turn.

On 30 September an advance echelon departed by air for Da Nang, in accordance with Squadron Operation Plan 1-65. In this movement the squadron was supported by VMFA-531 and by Marine Aerial Transport Refueler Squadron 152 (VMGR-152). On 8 October, VMFA-115 began moving its air elements to Da Nang via NAS Cubi Point, Republic of the Philippines, and on 10 October it was transferred to MAG-11. Following its arrival at Da Nang Air Base on 14 October, it replaced VMFA-513 the next day in MAG-11's line-up of squadrons. The first three days were spent mainly on indoctrination briefings to prepare for combat missions in Vietnam. Then, in tandem with

\*There were only seven VMFA squadrons deployed by the Marine Corps in 1965.

VMFA-542, the Silver Eagles began a variety of daily sorties. These were marred by a tragic accident on 26 October when two of the squadron's F-4Bs crashed into the side of Monkey Mountain near Da Nang. Captain William J. Tebow, First Lieutenants John B. McHale and William R. Gendebien, and Chief Warrant Officer John R. Petty, Jr., were all killed.<sup>2</sup>

In November the squadron flew, with VMFA-542, missions such as interdiction, landing zone preparation, helo escort, and close air support for the III Marine Amphibious Force around Da Nang. For 12 days in December VMFA-115 focused on close air support for Operation Harvest Moon.\*\* For another two weeks VMFA-115 aircraft and crews manned the Da Nang "hot pad" on a 24-hour basis, with a five-minute reaction time.

Late in December, in accordance with a 1st MAW policy in force at the time which called for rotating squadrons approximately every three months, preparations began for returning VMFA-115 to MCAS Iwakuni. The advance echelon left on 31 December 1965, and the remainder of the squadron moved during the first half of January 1966.\*\*\* In a period of less than three months, the squadron had flown 1,690 hours during 1,413 sorties, and had used more than 1,300 tons of ordnance against the Viet Cong.<sup>3</sup>

On 23 February 1966 Lieutenant Colonel Dean C. Macho assumed command of the recently returned squadron, and activities in February and March concentrated on tactical training. The squadron's average monthly strength was 312, including 46 officers. On 28 February an advance echelon of the squadron left Iwakuni for a four-week deployment to Naha, Okinawa. The actual Naha training period began on 6 March, and included day and night delivery of conventional ordnance, helicopter and reconnaissance escort, day and night air-to-air refueling, advanced fighter tactics, and a Sparrow III missile shoot.

As April opened the squadron prepared to return to Vietnam. In accordance with Squadron Operation Order 2-66, an advance echelon left Iwakuni for Da Nang on 4 April 1966, and a week later the remainder of the unit followed.

Some idea of the complexity of these rotational transfers may be gained from the fact that the operation order, with annexes, required 37 pages and in-

\*\*Harvest Moon was the operation name for a thrust into the Phouc Ha Valley by ARVN and Marine units. VMFA-115 and VMFA-323 together logged 227 flight hours in 205 sorties, unloading 215 tons of bombs and 628 rockets.

\*\*\*Operational control of VMFA-115 reverted to MAG-13 on 1 January 1966.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) 188211

*An aerial photograph shows the airstrip at Chu Lai, Vietnam, in the early part of 1967.*

volved coordination with VMFA-314, VMGR-152, Naha Airbase, MAG-11, and VMFA-323. The order covered such diverse items as snake bites, enemy capabilities, air refueling, radio frequencies, motor scooters, tobacco supplies, religious services, and a wide variety of other subjects.

The movement took 10 days, beginning on 4 April and ending with VMFA-115's formal relief of VMFA-314 on 14 April. The next day the squadron reported operational control to MAG-11, and by the end of April it had flown 434.9 hours of combat missions.

The squadron experienced more losses in May. First Lieutenant Richard H. Royer and Second Lieutenant John D. Kramer were killed in an aircraft accident while returning from a combat mission. By the end of the month a heavy series of mission requests had resulted in 603.3 hours of combat missions and the destruction or damaging of a large number of enemy structures, bridges, trucks, and boats.

In May a series of Vietnamese governmental crises created a situation that stunted American combat activities. Starting with the relief of the Vietnamese commander in the Marine's I Corps area, there had been a near-total breakdown in the stability of the RVN government. The so-called "Struggle Movement" had erupted, and confrontations between it and the government severely challenged the security of Marine

bases, with Da Nang itself threatened by civil war. The effect of all this turmoil on the squadron was that, in order to protect its aircraft, the unit was forced to deploy them to Ubon Airbase, Thailand, for a few days.

The crisis passed, and in June combat hours rose to 654.7. Missions included flight support in the Steel Tiger, Blue Blazer, and Tiger Hound zones.\*

Action became more intense in July, and combat hours reached 990.5. The squadron's command chronology listed two major achievements: "total flight hours in a month for the F-4B in a combat zone", 1,001.7; and a "Marine F-4B" total "ordnance dropped" of 935.78 tons. (An individual F-4B carried about 5000 pounds of bombs.)<sup>4</sup>

On 8 August Major Larry R. VanDeusen, former executive officer of VMFA-314, took command of the squadron. A Silver Eagles highlight in August's operations was a count of 242 Viet Cong confirmed "kills." The squadron's command chronology recorded this as "easily the highest figure attained by this unit in either of its two combat tours."

Combat hours declined from the July highs, but

\*Steel Tiger was a program started early in 1965 to reduce the flow of enemy men and material through southern Laos. Tiger Hound, similarly, comprised airstrikes in Laos directed by USAF small observation aircraft.

in the last four months of 1966 the squadron still carried out a very wide range of missions. Using TPQ radar course direction frequently, VMFA-115 struck in the Tally Ho, Tiger Hound, Red Blazer, Steel Tiger, and Fire Cracker Zones. The TPQ missions were vital to American air tactics for they permitted strikes against the enemy on a continuing basis, regardless of weather or time of day. Thus a very high percentage of ordnance delivered by fixed-wing aircraft in Vietnam was under TPQ control.\*

The squadron also continued helo escort, close air support, landing zone preparation, interdiction, reconnaissance, and rescue Combined Action Platoon. Careful tallies were recorded each month for results, known as bomb damage assessments (BDAs), in terms of the destruction of structures, roads, bridges, sampans, caves, motor vehicles, and troops. At the end of 10 months of operations, the Silver Eagles had logged over 6,000 flight hours.<sup>5</sup>

The start of 1967 saw a new commanding officer for VMFA-115 when Major Guy R. Campo took charge on 24 January. The following month the squadron began practice in aerial refueling, in preparation for its departure from Vietnam. The practice was necessary because the unit planned to make a nonstop flight back to MCAS Iwakuni. On 15 February the long flight commenced, and the refueling evolution took place over Okinawa using Marine KC-130 tankers. Upon arriving in Japan VMFA-115 was assigned to MAG-15, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade (9th MAB), Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPac).\*\* The unit's ground elements came by Air Force transport and the entire squadron was at MCAS Iwakuni on 21 February.

Throughout the next three months a series of indoctrination meetings for officers and staff NCOs were held by MAG-15. Familiarization flights were completed by new pilots and technical training for maintenance crews was continuous, except for frequent periods of bad weather and some parts shortages. Aircraft assigned at this time totaled 15. As part of its preparation for the next combat tour, the squadron deployed nine aircraft to Naha, Okinawa, on 18 March. VMGR-152 ferried in 10 officers and 120 enlisted men to take advantage of the Okinawan bombing range facilities and to conduct missile shoots. While on

\*The TPQ 10, Radar Course Direction Central, provided radar/computer guidance of attack aircraft to an ordnance drop point at which bombs could be released "automatically," though they usually were released by the pilot on command of the Air Support Radar Team (ASRT) controller. In Korea the MPQ was used.

\*\*In 1966 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (Rear) had been disestablished, and MAG-15 took over responsibility for all Marine aviation assets in the Western Pacific not actually operating in Vietnam.

Okinawa VMFA-115 also supported two ground exercises, Beach Baron I and Hill Top VII.

By 3 May all hands were back at Iwakuni and squadron personnel strength was up to 362, including 46 officers. Immediately, the now-familiar steps got underway for redeployment, and on 14 and 15 May the flight echelon of VMFA-115 moved to Chu Lai, Vietnam. The flight was staged through Cubi Point, with air-to-air refueling from Marine KC-130 tankers over Okinawa. The remainder of the squadron was delayed when its airlift was cancelled by the U.S. Air Force, and it was not until 22 May that the entire squadron reassembled. Nevertheless, operational control was assumed by MAG-13 on 15 May, and the squadron commenced combat missions that same day. By the end of the month, 369.5 flight hours had been recorded.\*\*\*

The rest of 1967 found the squadron heavily engaged in carrying out air support missions for ground forces. The squadron's command chronologies for the months August through December showed it provided support for an impressive list of operations: Kingfisher, Benton, Cumberland, Cochise, Beacon Guide, Beacon Torch, Ardmore, Freemont, Dragon Head, Stockton, Neutralize, Fortress Sentry, Shelbyville, Wheeler, Ballistic Charge, Dragon Fire, Swift, Formation Leader, Osceola, Wallowa, the A Shau Valley winter campaign, Kentucky, Lancaster, Essex, Foster, Knox, Granite, Fortress Ridge, Citrus, Kent, Headshed, Lamson, and Shock Four—a total of 33 operations in all.

Two changes in command took place during the period. Lieutenant Colonel Kenny C. Palmer relieved Lieutenant Colonel Campo on 28 July, and Lieutenant Colonel Palmer was in turn relieved on 5 October 1967 by Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Carey.\*\*\*\*

Operational hazards were illustrated by the loss in September of two aircraft at sea, one as a result of enemy ground fire and the other as a result of mechanical malfunction.\*\*\*\*\* While there were two major

\*\*\*VMFA-115 was awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the Commanding General, 1st MAW, for its accomplishments during the period 15 May 1967-1 June 1967. It was also included in the award of a Presidential Unit Citation to 1st MAW for the period May 1965-September 1967. See Appendix D for details.

\*\*\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Carey later attained the grade of lieutenant general.

\*\*\*\*\*One of the aircraft lost at sea was piloted by Lieutenant Colonel Palmer and was hit by ground fire in North Vietnam. He and his RIO ejected at sea just below the DMZ. He was taken by the "Jolly Green Giant" rescue helicopter to 1st MAW headquarters at Da Nang and created quite a stir when he walked through the door there, soaking wet. His RIO, Major Charles Cohaskie, had been lifted on board a Navy frigate because of back injuries.

injuries during the ejections, no deaths resulted from these incidents. Three other planes received extensive battle damage.

Sorties ranged from the I Corps area through the DMZ into the southern panhandle of North Vietnam. By now some of the officers had passed the 200-mission mark. Combat hours per month for the squadron reached a high of 721.3 during August, and, despite the monsoon weather which occurs in the late fall, never fell below 500 hours per month. This level of activity was only possible because of the utilization of the ASRT and the TPQ-10.

The squadron celebrated Christmas Day by scrambling two aircraft from the "hot pad" on a priority close-air-support mission northwest of Dong Ha. The flight dropped fragmentation bombs and napalm within 50 meters of friendly troops during marginal weather, and as a result of the flight's accurate ordnance delivery, a beleaguered reconnaissance team was successfully extracted.<sup>6</sup>

January of 1968 saw another change of command, when Lieutenant Colonel Gerald W. Vaughan took charge on 17 January. This month also brought a visit by General Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the

Marine Corps, and Major General Norman G. Anderson, Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.

January was also the month the Viet Cong launched their devastating Tet Offensive, and on 31 January about 25 122mm rockets hit Chu Lai.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, only one Marine in VMFA-115 was wounded.

The squadron's Command Chronology described a typical sortie during this period:

Fingerprint 25 [a Marine forward air controller in an O1 Bird Dog] directed the flight against a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) command post and antiaircraft site. The flight encountered intense .50-cal machine gun and 12.75mm/37mm fire. The flight delivered their MK-117s on target and destroyed two antiaircraft positions, a probable three .50-cal machine gun positions, and had three KBA confirmed . . . .<sup>8</sup>

Details of other missions during January included the usual listing of damage to enemy personnel and installations, plus "one pig destroyed."

The following month saw the inauguration of a squadron civil affairs program in a hamlet about four miles from Chu Lai. The squadron's goals were to upgrade the hamlet sanitary facilities, improve roads, clean out wells, install water pumps, partition a new

*1stLt Berry C. Bunch and his RIO take off in an F-4B Phantom on his first combat mission with a load of air-to-ground ordnance and external wing tanks during May 1967.*

Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A421698



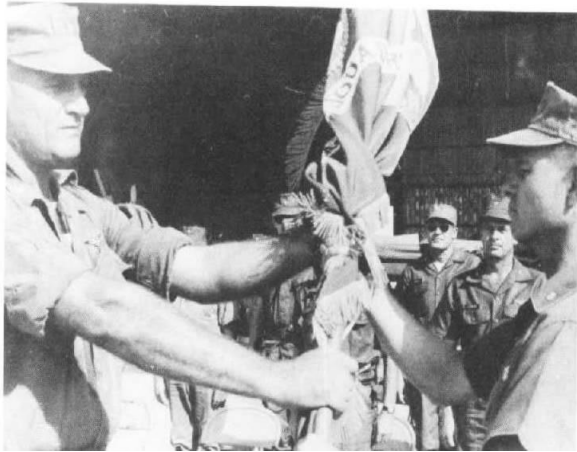


Photo courtesy of LtCol Kenny C. Palmer  
*LtCol Kenny C. Palmer, on the right, relieves LtCol Guy R. Campo as the commanding officer of the Silver Eagles, at Chu Lai, Vietnam, on 28 July 1967.*

dispensary, and conduct medical civic action patrols (Med Caps) which often treated over 100 patients.

By this time several pilots in the Silver Eagles were passing the 300-mission mark, and the squadron's monthly reports showed numerous Air Medals being awarded, as well as recommendations to higher authorities for Bronze Stars, Navy Commendation Medals, Vietnamese Crosses of Galantry, Distinguished Flying Crosses, Single Mission Air Medals, Navy Achievement Medals, and Purple Hearts.

Throughout the spring and summer, squadron efforts continued at a high level, with monthly operations averaging 600-700 combat flight hours.\* The command chronologies for these months covered a wide range of activities that characterized the life of 300 diverse men responsible for maintaining and operating complex, multimillion dollar machines in a combat zone far from home.

To ensure the effective functioning of the squadron, the commanding officer used a staff made up of an executive officer, an operations officer, an administrative officer, an intelligence officer, a logistics officer, an aviation safety officer, and two maintenance officers. This staff and some 250 enlisted Marines were all directed towards meeting the squadron's basic mission: put a pilot in the air for whatever sortie was needed in support of the ground troops.

The squadron continued to pile up very impressive mission totals, but at a price. On 13 July, Captain John C. Hurst and First Lieutenant Leonard A. Bird were killed in action when their aircraft was observed burst-

\*VMFA-115 participated in the award of a Navy Unit Commendation to MAG-13 for the period September 1967 to April 1968. See Appendix D for citation.

ing into fire and crashing while flying a close-air-support mission near Khe Sanh.<sup>9</sup>

The next month saw a variety of events. On 13 August, Major John I. Hudson, squadron executive officer, moved up to become VMFA-115's commanding officer.\*\* Soon after, the squadron was visited by Major General Paul J. Fontana, Deputy Commanding General, FMFPac. On 22 August two men were wounded as a result of an enemy rocket attack. A briefing team from the Marine Tactical Air Direction Center (TADC) also visited the squadron in August to discuss the inherent dangers involved in the control of aircraft in I Corps airspace by two separate controlling agencies, the Marines' TADC (call sign "Vice Squad") and the Air Force's Control and Reporting Center at Da Nang (call sign "Panama").<sup>10</sup> This was a grassroots example of problems associated with the ongoing debate in higher echelons regarding the "single management" issue relating to command and control of Marine fixed-wing aircraft.\*\*\*

Even during combat, ground training was an ongoing requirement, and squadron personnel were sent to such locations as the Jungle Escape and Survival Training Course in the Philippines; Sea Survival School in Japan (later moved to Okinawa); Forward Air Controller School at Okinawa; Noncommissioned Officer Leadership School; Corrosion Control Course; Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Warfare School; KY 28 (secure voice radio equipment) School; and the H-7 Rocket Ejection Seat School.

Along with the serious business of war, there were also some diversions for the men of the squadron. Rest and recreation (R&R) leave permitted personnel to visit Australia, Malaysia, Thailand, Formosa, Hong Kong, and Hawaii, and the new MAG-13 post exchange (replacing the old one destroyed in a rocket attack) featured good buys on eagerly sought stereo equipment. Red Cross workers came for visits, and an Enlisted Mens' Club was available for use at the end of the day.

On 21 September, Captain Robert F. Conley, Jr., and First Lieutenant Steven R. Major were killed when their aircraft crashed, apparently hit by enemy fire while flying on a close-air-support mission near Phu Bai.\*\*\*\*

A listing in the squadron's command chronology of the ground units that were supported in October shows the effect even one Marine air unit can have on

\*\*Major Hudson attained the rank of lieutenant general in 1988.

\*\*\*"Single management" referred to the delegation of ultimate mission control to the Fifth Air Force.

\*\*\*\*Captain Conley was the son of Brigadier General Robert F. Conley.

the overall ground effort. For example, the units supported by VMFA-115 during October included: 1st Reconnaissance Battalion; 7th Marines; 11th Marines; 24th Marines; 26th Marines; Task Force Hotel; Americal Division; ROK Marines; and the 51st ARVN Regiment.

On 8 October Captain Joseph W. Jones III and Captain Daniel J. Coonon were killed in a crash as a result of enemy action while on a close-air-support mission near Da Nang.\*

During October the squadron's on-hand aircraft strength rose to 16 with the return of planes that had been undergoing modifications in Japan. These improvements included the new H-7 rocket seat with ground ejection capability, and the incorporation of utility hydraulics for the flight control system. New survival radios for aircrewmembers were also distributed.

Later in the month VMFA-115 was visited by Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps; Lieutenant General Herman Nickerson, Jr., Deputy Chief of Staff, HQMC; Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., CG, III Marine Amphibious Force; and Major General Charles J. Quilter, CG, 1st MAW.

The latter part of 1968 saw Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Norton assume command of the squadron on 28 November. Combat flight hours rose dramatically from 411.0 in November to 739.7 in December, and close air support continued for a variety of Marine, Army, and ARVN ground forces.\*\*

The difficulty of some of the missions was illustrated by a quote from the December command chronology: "The flight, working under a 2,200 foot ceiling in mountainous terrain with friendly troops 150 meters from the target and ground fire in the area, destroyed eight structures in a fortified village . . . ."

Hazardous duty such as this brought casualties. On 17 November 1968, Captain Paul D. Derby and First Lieutenant Thomas A. Reich were killed while on a close-air-support mission southwest of Chu Lai, and on 21 December, Lance Corporal Thomas E. Novak was killed during an enemy rocket attack which caused many casualties among MAG-13 personnel.

The variety of VMFA-115 missions continued into the early months of 1969. There were B-52 escort missions, BARCAPs (Barrier Combat Air Patrol) off the

\*Captain Coonon had been shot down earlier near Khe Sanh and successfully ejected along with his pilot, Major Jay N. Bibler.

\*\*These missions included support for the 1st Marines (Reinforced) in Operation Meade River, 20 November - 9 December 1968, and VMFA-115 was included in the Presidential Unit Citation later awarded. See Appendix D.



Marine Corps Art Collection by Maj John T. Dyer, USMCR, "Ready to Launch," November 1969

*A VMFA-115 F-4B Phantom is shown just prior to take off at Da Nang, Vietnam. While the RIO is strapping in, the plane captain holds his helmet for him.*

coast of North Vietnam, Commando Hunt and Steel Tiger sorties, and multiple operations in which ground forces were provided close air support. (For example, 15 operations were supported in March and 16 in April). First Lieutenant Daniel J. Minahan was killed during an air strike southwest of the Hue-Phu Bai area on 22 January.

Typical of the close air support being furnished to ground forces was an attack mission on an enemy-controlled hill that friendly troops were preparing to assault. With the friendly troops in close contact (50 meters), the VMFA-115 flight accurately delivered 12 500-pound bombs, 3 500-pound fire bombs, and 20mm rounds on the target, forcing the NVA to flee their dug-in positions.<sup>11</sup>

On 11 May, First Lieutenant William C. Ryan, Jr., a RIO, was killed during an airstrike in support of Task Force Alpha, when his F-4B was hit by ground fire, went out of control, and crashed. His pilot, Captain Gary L. Bain, was rescued despite suffering a broken arm and leg.

Lieutenant Colonel Edwin C. Paige, Jr., newly promoted from major and previously serving as executive officer, took over as commanding officer of the squadron on 2 July. Through the summer the combat flight hours remained high, and several officers passed the 400-mission mark. A close-in bombing mission in support of Operation Idaho Canyon brought a commendation from the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division. Precision strikes became the pattern as targets were called in as close as 30 meters to friendly troops.

Casualties continued to occur. On 19 August First





VMFA-115 Command Chronology Photo

*On 23 February 1970, MajGen George S. Bowman, Jr., second from left, Deputy Commanding General, III MAF, and Col Thomas E. Murphree, left, Commanding Officer, MAG-13, congratulate LtCol Donald P. Bowen, second from right, Commanding Officer, VMFA-115, and his RIO, CWO-2 John C. Bardon, on 10,000 accident-free combat hours.*

Lieutenant James R. Bohlig and Captain Richard T. Morrissey were lost at sea while returning from a night bombing mission.

Air operations were severely curtailed during the first two weeks of October as record amounts of rain fell throughout I Corps. At the same time, the inter-service support and geographical range of Marine air operations were well illustrated by the squadron's 29 BARCAP (Barrier Combat Air Patrol) missions over the Gulf of Tonkin in support of the Seventh Fleet, and its 17 bomber-escort missions over Laos in support of the Seventh Air Force.

On 1 January 1970, Lieutenant Colonel Paige completed his tour of duty in West Pac, and Lieutenant Colonel Donald P. Bowen, who had been executive officer, took command of VMFA-115. Moving quickly into combat, Lieutenant Colonel Bowen, together with his RIO, Chief Warrant Officer-2 John C. Bardon, flew a total of 55 sorties during the first month of his command. Confirmed damage and enemy casualties for these flights alone included 23 KBMA (Killed by Marine Air). Another officer, Captain "T" J. Stanford,

was noted for "flying his 1,000th hour in the back seat of the F-4 aircraft."

Illustrating the pressures of this period, Lieutenant Colonel Bowen commented:

This pace of operations reflected the overall level of combat action engaged in by VMFA-115 and other MAG-11 units and personnel at Chu Lai. The maintenance and support Marines, the ordnance and fuel handlers, the messmen, the postal clerks, the chaplains and medics, and the aircrews worked around the clock, seven days a week. It was routine for F-4s to return from BARCAP missions over "Yankee Station" in the South China Sea to make arrested landings just before dawn (usually in rain), to be followed shortly thereafter by other F-4s launching from the Alert Pad for interdiction missions or close air support of ground forces.

This intensive rate often continued through the day and night under primitive conditions. There were insufficient hangars for the aircraft, the roads on the base were largely unpaved and all logistics resupply was by air or ship, since the land routes to Da Nang were not sufficiently secure to permit vehicle traffic, even in convoys. Additionally, there was the ever-present threat (often carried out) of enemy mortar and rocket attacks. Fortunately, there was respite in the form of good "chow" served in the screened and tin-roofed mess hall, and beer and movies at the bamboo and thatched-roofed officer, NCO, and enlisted clubs. Also, every six

months or so, squadron Marines could expect to be granted leave in the form of a short R&R in Hong Kong, the Philippines, or even Hawaii.<sup>12</sup>

The following month the important topic of aviation safety was given full recognition. Major General George S. Bowman, Jr., Deputy Commanding General, III MAF, and Colonel Thomas E. Murphree, Commanding Officer of MAG-13, were on hand on 23 February when VMFA-115 completed 10,000 accident-free flight hours, all of which had been achieved while deployed in Vietnam. The squadron's command chronology noted that the unit was on its third tour of duty in Vietnam, which included more than 45 months in country. This marked the Silver Eagles as the longest-tenured Marine fighter squadron in the Republic of Vietnam. The squadron had amassed 8,133 combat sorties and had delivered 15,782 tons of ordnance.<sup>13</sup> In 1969 alone, it had supported over 40 major ground operations.

Early March saw Lieutenant Colonel Bowen complete his tour of duty. After two months at the helm, he turned command of the squadron over to Lieutenant Colonel John V. Cox on 2 March.\*

In April VMFA-115 established a new squadron record for Vietnam of 721 sorties. This translated into a daily average of 44 tons of ordnance expended, a month's total of 733.2 combat flight hours, involvement in six major ground operations, and support for 14 different units.

On 21 May, VMFA-115 flew its 30,000th combat hour in Vietnam, and Major Ronald E. Heald, squadron executive officer, passed the 900-mission mark. (A Meritorious Unit Citation was later awarded to VMFA-115 for its outstanding performance during the period 10 November 1968 to 20 May 1970. It was also included, for the period 21 May—1 June 1970, in a Navy Unit Commendation awarded to MAG-13.)\*\*

A change in commanding officers occurred on 22 July, when Lieutenant Colonel Michael Mura took charge. Major changes were also the pattern among the other officers, with numerous departures of "old hands" and arrivals of replacements, as the squadron prepared to leave Chu Lai, and reductions began in Marine aviation in Vietnam.

The following month VMFA-115 closed a chapter in its history when it flew its last mission for MAG-13 on 23 August 1970. As an integral part of the group, it had achieved impressive operational totals: 28,118 total sorties, 31,549.6 combat hours, and 33,238.7 total hours.<sup>14</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Cox was promoted to major general in 1981.

\*\*See Appendix D.

The next day Lieutenant Colonel Mura led the first echelon of the squadron to Da Nang, where it joined MAG-11, and, in just the last week of August, supported 11 different ground operations.

While the combat hours for VMFA-115 dropped to 330 in September, the squadron again supported 11 different ground operations, and personnel strength was up to 51 officers and 300 enlisted men. The inclusion of daily flight schedules in the squadron's command chronology gave some additional insights into the enormous range of details that must be covered in the combat operations of a Marine fighter attack squadron. (See adjoining illustration.)

An unfortunate accident occurred on 2 September to mar the squadron's safety record. An F-4B was destroyed by a fire that became uncontrollable when the available fire extinguisher did not work. The fire caused an explosion which resulted in the deaths of three men and the wounding of numerous others.

In October there was a significant increase in the number of air-to-air missions. A total of 83 were flown, of which 43 were MIGCAP (MiG Combat Air Patrols), while the remainder were BARCAPs. This comprised 35 percent of the combat sorties for the month. The total for VMFA-115 air intercept missions more than doubled the following month to 177, while only two ground operations were supported.

The squadron lost another plane on 17 December. While flying with VMFA-115, Colonel Albert C. Pommerenk, the commanding officer of MAG-11, and his RIO, Major Noel E. Douglas, S-4 of the squadron, ran into serious trouble.\*\*\* The official report gave some details that illustrated the emergencies which could occur on any sortie:

At 0900H pilot pulled off target in known high threat area . . . . At 0903H port fire warning light illuminated. Pilot retarded throttle to idle, but light remained on. Pilot reported . . . oil low light on. Engine was then secured. Two muffled explosions were heard. At 0904H the flight controls froze and aircraft began uncontrollable roll to the left. Crew ejected successfully. Suspect aircraft hit by ground fire. Loss due to direct enemy action.<sup>15</sup>

With the start of 1971, planning in the squadron began to focus on the conclusion of its third tour of Vietnam duty, and on 22 February the Silver Eagles stood down from combat operations. The VMFA-115 command chronology listed with some pride its Vietnam totals since October 1965: 34,468 combat hours; 30,086 combat sorties; and 58,310 tons of ordnance delivered.<sup>16</sup>

By 1 March the squadron was reduced to 31 officers

\*\*\*Colonel Pommerenk was later promoted to brigadier general.