

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



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

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

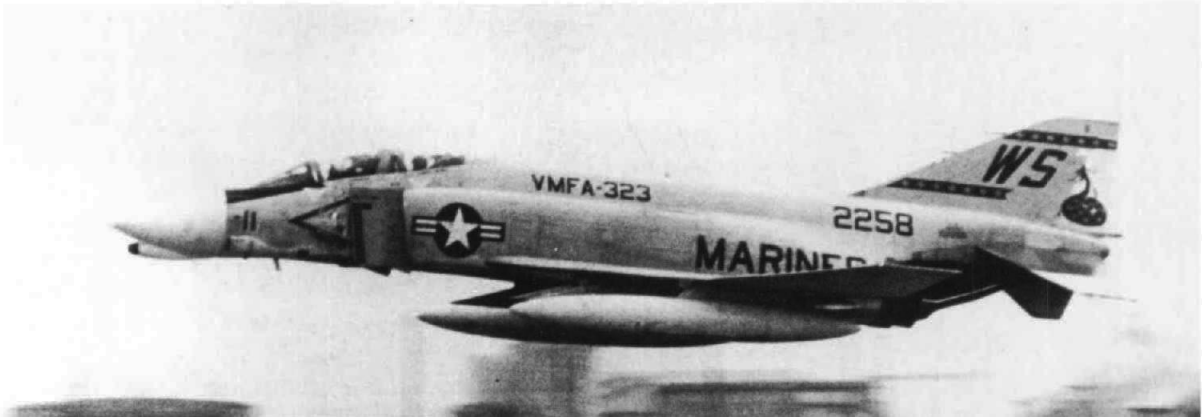
Photo courtesy of LtCol A. W. Talbert, Jr., USMC



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

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

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



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422458

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The transition to combat operations was smooth for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the TAC(A) described as a "suspected" antiaircraft position. The enemy gunners confirmed their presence during the first pass. As Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman's F-4B, armed with napalm and 250-pound Snakeeyes, skimmed low over the treetops, the North Vietnamese cut loose and laced the belly of his plane with a stitch of 50 caliber shells. The aircraft shuddered under the impact and burst into flames. Captain Brandon, a backseat veteran with over 300 combat missions, knew instantly when he heard the series of ominous "thuds" that the Phantom had been mortally wounded; he quickly pulled his face curtain and ejected. Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman stayed with the bucking Phantom momentarily in a vain effort to stabilize the aircraft by using the rudders. The delay almost cost the pilot his life because the F-4B began to tumble end-over-end barely 100 feet above the ground. Suddenly the world outside became a spinning blur of blue and green. The second time that he saw green—indicating that the aircraft was inverted—Lieutenant Colonel Hagaman started to pull his alternate ejection handle which was located between his knees. In the second that it took the escape mechanism to function, the Phantom flipped upright and the ejection cartridges blasted the pilot from the flaming cockpit. Seconds later, the plane cartwheeled into the ground and exploded. The pilot was so low when he "punched out" that the chute had scarcely deployed when his feet touched the ground. Both crewmen hid in the tall elephant grass within earshot of the North Vietnamese who were searching for them. Within minutes, rescue helicopters lumbered on the scene and, while the downed crew's wingman made dummy passes to discourage the enemy soldiers, the choppers darted in and plucked the shaken, but otherwise uninjured, Marines to safety.⁸⁹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Four more Phantoms received battle damage in Au-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

El Toro Again: 1969-1984

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During Lieutenant Colonel Sullivan's tenure as



Photo courtesy of BGen Michael P. Sullivan, USMC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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