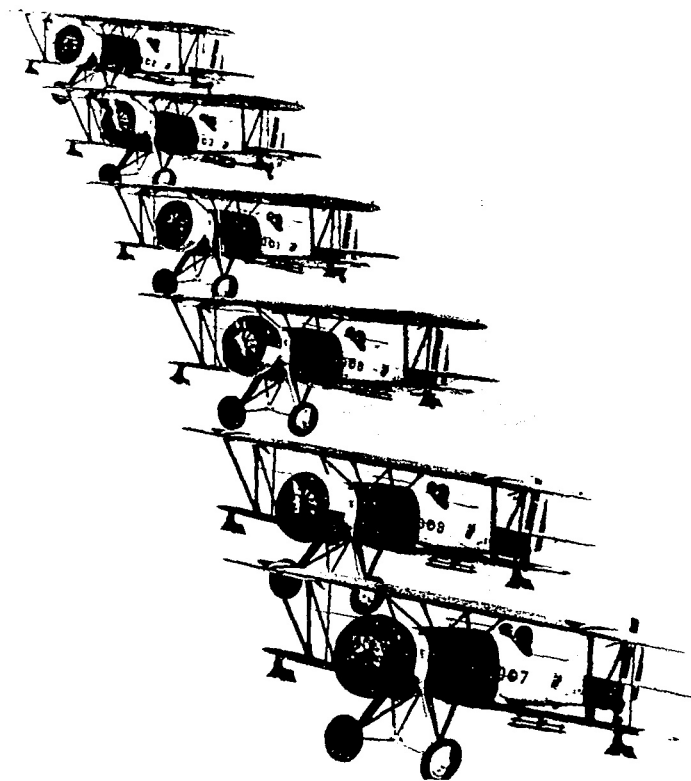


The evolution of a sound tactical structure for Marine Aviation has been a long and slow process.

1912-1941 Squadrons of the Corps

by Gabrielle M. Neufeld and
James S. Santelli



MARINE AVIATORS DURING THE EMBRYONIC state of the naval air service originally had been assigned in 1912 to a Navy organization—the Aviation Camp at Annapolis, Maryland. Few Marines were selected for aviation training in the early years. No real movement toward the establishment of a separate air unit took place until late December 1913. At this time the entire Marine complement at Annapolis, two officers and ten men, moved to Philadelphia where they were attached to Headquarters, of the newly formed 1st Advance Base Brigade. Although a part of headquarters, these twelve men were known as the brigade's aviation detachment and as such participated in brigade maneuvers in Culebra in January 1914. This deployment witnessed the initial cooperative effort between air and ground Marines. In addition, it was the first instance where Marine aviation functioned apart from the Navy. The separation was brief for in mid-February the brigade's air detachment rejoined the Navy's unit which had meanwhile transferred to Pensacola, Florida.

The Marine aviation section in spring 1914 contributed one officer and three enlisted men to the expedition that had been mounted out to Vera Cruz, Mexico. This was the first utilization of Marine air personnel in a combat situation. Another deployment quickly followed when the whole section in August 1914 sailed for the Mediterranean. War had broken out in Europe. The Navy's venture into the Mediterranean was ostensibly to protect Americans in the area and to remind the belligerents that the neutral United States possessed considerable naval strength. Return of Marine aviation took place in January 1915. This small unit was once again established at Pensacola. Eventually, it relocated to the naval air station at Miami. There during the latter months of World War I those Leathernecks assigned to the detachment conducted patrols off southern Florida.

In 1916 tangible efforts had finally been made to form a separate organization for duty exclusively with the Advance Base Force. But because of a lack of trained personnel the unit

which was to bear the designation Aeronatic Company was not activated until 27 April 1917. Pilots and mechanics came from the detachment at Pensacola. The Aeronatic Company since it was intended for a specific role can be considered by today's standards the precursor of tactical Marine air units.

Formed at Philadelphia shortly after America's entry into World War I, the Aeronatic Company was assigned to the Advance Base Force with the stipulation that the unit would be trained in both land and sea aircraft. Nearly six months later, on 12 October, it split into two new tactical units: the First Aviation Squadron and the First Marine Aeronatic Company. The latter unit in January 1918 moved to Ponta Delgada in the Azores to carry out anti-submarine patrols. It had the unique distinction of being the first completely trained and fully equipped American aviation unit to deploy overseas during the war.

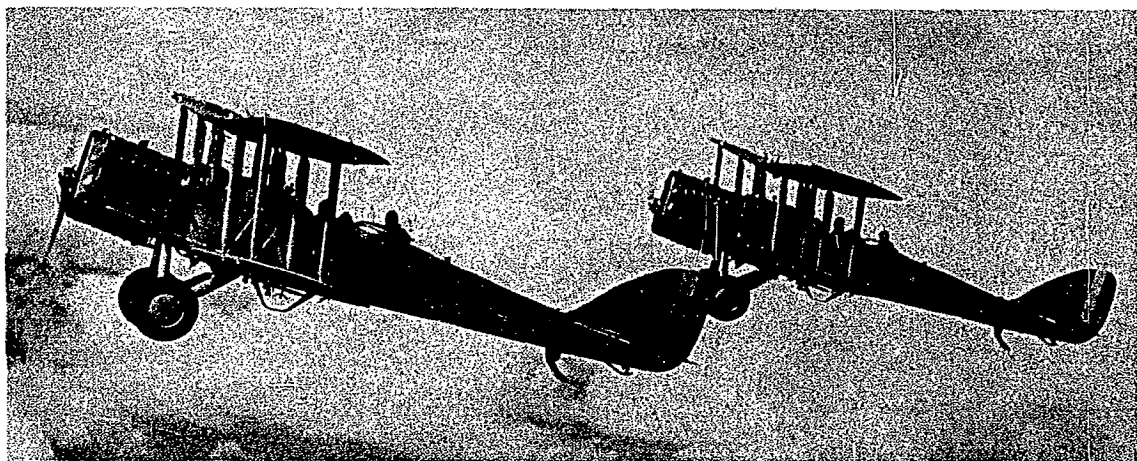
The First Aviation Squadron in April 1918 transferred to the Marine Flying Field at Miami—the Corps' first air station. There it joined an organization bearing the designation of Aeronatic Detachment, Miami which had been activated at Philadelphia on 15 December 1917. A merger of these two occurred on 15 April 1918 which resulted in the creation of the First Marine Aviation Force. This unit, reflecting the rapid expansion of the aviation program in the Marine Corps, was reorganized two months later on 17 June. A headquarters detachment and four separate squadrons bearing the designations 1st, 2nd, 3d, and 4th Squadrons were activated. The First Marine Aviation Force is regarded as the forerunner of today's Marine aircraft group since it contained

subordinate elements.

A unit entitled Balloon Company which came into existence in late June 1918 at Quantico completed the World War I structure of Marine aviation. This unusual organization, later known as Balloon Detachment, was assigned to the Heavy Artillery Force. It had the mission of providing aerial observation of targets for Marine gunners. A permanent aviation establishment at Quantico dates from the activation of Balloon Company.

The First Marine Aviation Force, soon after its reorganization, deployed to France where it became part of the Northern Bombing Group. Its four squadrons, now often referred to as A, B, C, and D, formed the day wing while the night wing was composed of four Navy squadrons. The wing, in this instance, was subordinate to the group; today the reverse is true. The Northern Bombing Group had been organized for the expressed purpose of bombing German submarine bases in Belgium. Plans originally called for the employment of six squadrons in each wing, but a lack of men and equipment precluded this. Marine aviators participated in the Allied war effort until the end of hostilities. On 11 November 1918 when the Armistice went into effect, Marine aviation had expanded to nearly 2,500 officers and men. It had grown in less than 20 months from a total of only 34 Marines.

All units of the First Marine Aviation Force returned to the United States in December 1918 while the First Marine Aeronatic Company came back the next month. Another reorganization came on the heels of this redeployment. In effect the World War I structure ended, but the changes came about gradually.



2d Air Squadron planes at Quantico, circa 1923, are WWI DeHavilland DH—4B's.

*Pursuit squadron
ready for flight before
deploying to
Caribbean,
circa 1926.*



Over a period of five months, Headquarters Detachment and squadrons of the First Marine Aviation Force, the First Marine Aeronautic Company, the Balloon Detachment, and the Marine Detachment at the Miami Naval Air Station went out of existence. Two other units in the meantime were formed at Miami. On 8 February 1919, 1st Division, Squadron D was activated for eventual expeditionary duty with the 15th Regiment in the Dominican Republic. The need for Marine aviators in nearby Haiti became the justification for the creation of 1st Division, Squadron E two weeks later. It is interesting to note that now two Squadron D's existed simultaneously. This lasted until 1 July 1919 when the original Squadron D, then bearing the title 2d Division, Squadron D was deactivated. The use of the term "division" was an innovation in the early post war period. Occasionally, lettered squadrons appeared during this time having in their title the term preceded by a numeral.

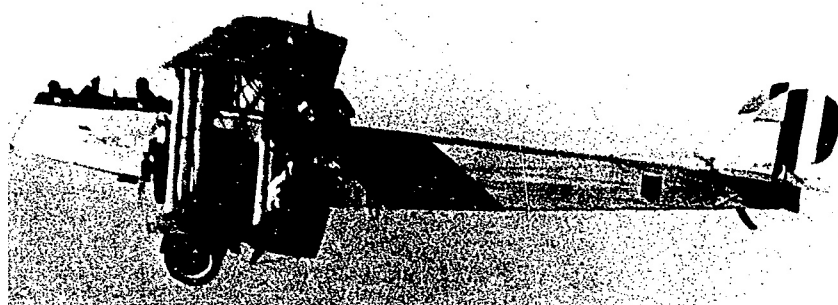
Since Marine Aviation was a part of Naval Aviation, the Marine Corps had to obtain the Navy's approval to deploy units with its expeditionary forces. Major General Commandant George Barnett, seeking to foster the growth of Marine aviation, first proposed sending Marine aviators to the Caribbean shortly before Christmas 1918. The Navy was not adverse to this suggestion. However, some in the office of the Chief of Naval Operations for Aviation strongly recommended that the Marine Corps confine its expeditionary activities to land aircraft only. The employment of seaplanes, according to the argument, would be a duplication of the Navy's efforts. Approval of Marine aviation units for service in the Dominican Republic and Haiti came in early February 1919. Despite the objections of some Navy officers, Marine air units did operate sea planes in the Caribbean and elsewhere.

The year 1919 also witnessed the relocation of the remaining squadrons at Miami.

Squadrons A and C went to Quantico while B moved to Parris Island. The former two disbanded on 1 December 1920. The latter was redesignated as Flight L on the same date and was in turn redesignated on 21 December as Marine Aviation Detachment, Parris Island. Personnel from the deactivated squadrons at Quantico were used to form two new organizations: the 2d and 3d Air Squadrons. Each squadron was composed of two flights—C and D in the 2d Air Squadron, and E and F in the 3d Air Squadron. Initially, neither of the two new squadrons had a headquarters element. The activation of flights within a squadron was an attempt to create an organization comparable to companies within a battalion. Flights, as did companies at this time, reported separate muster rolls.

The constant modification of the aviation structure is the most distinct feature in these formative years. Further alterations came on 1 January 1921. The two units in the Caribbean were reorganized and redesignated, as the 1st Air Squadron in the Dominican Republic and the 4th Air Squadron in Haiti. The former was composed of a Headquarters Detachment, Flights A and B; the latter was composed of Headquarters Detachment, Flights G and H. A new Flight L came into existence at Quantico the very same day. Immediately after its activation, Flight L began preparations for deployment to Guam, and soon became the first Naval Aviation unit to operate in the Pacific.

The 1st Air Squadron in an attempt to develop esprit de corps and foster pride in its new designation took an unprecedented step by adopting a unique unit insignia. The insignia, the famous Ace of Spades, was designed by 2dLt Hayne D. Boyden, a member of the squadron. The distinctive emblem bore the letters "A" and "S." As conceived by Boyden, the ace being the first card in a suit stood for "First" while "A" and "S" represented the words "Air" and "Squadron." This design is



Twin-engine Martin bomber over North Island, San Diego, is being flown by Maj Ross E. Rowell, a pioneer Marine pilot.

the first official unit insignia to appear in Marine Corps aviation. Prior to 1921, however, Leathernecks of the First Marine Aviation Force in France had painted a red, white, and blue emblem on their planes to distinguish their aircraft from others.

It is well known that the fundamentals of such Marine techniques as dive bombing and close air support had their beginnings in this post World War I era. But in discussing the development of tactical organizations it should not be forgotten that the embryo of the present air-ground team emerged as early as 1921. The Wilderness maneuvers in Virginia of that fall witnessed the initial training of air and ground personnel together in a major Marine Corps exercise. Pilots and planes from the 2d and 3d Air Squadrons joined the East Coast Expeditionary Force in these maneuvers. Other joint exercises were held at Gettysburg the following summer and at Antietam in 1924. Joint operations aside, it would be some time before aviation would be regarded as an integral part of the air/ground team and not just a minor supporting arm.

These early years were often marked by periodic attempts by the Navy to induce Marine aviation to conform to its concept of a tactical organization. One example occurred in July 1922 when the Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics requested that flights within a Marine squadron henceforth be called "divisions" to coincide with current Navy terminology. The Marine Corps had briefly experimented with the term before in its lettered squadrons. As defined by the Navy a division was composed of three two-plane sections. A squadron theoretically should have had three divisions, but in reality this became the exception rather than the rule.

The division designation was adopted in August and occurred simultaneously with another reorganization. A new higher echelon unit came into being—the First Aviation Group at Quantico. Its two subordinate organizations

were Fighting Squadron 1 (VF-1) and Observation Squadron 3 (VO-3). They had been redesignated on the 24th from the 3d Air Squadron and 2d Air Squadron respectively. The 1st Air Squadron in the Dominican Republic received the new title Observation Squadron 1 (VO-1), while shortly thereafter the 4th Air Squadron in Haiti became Observation Squadron 2 (VO-2). On Guam, Flight L changed to Scouting Squadron 1 (VS-1). Previously no distinction had been made between types of squadrons other than balloon and heavier than air units. Now for the first time a squadron's designation described its exact mission.

At this time air units acquired abbreviations with a specific combination of letters and numbers. For example, VO-1 indicated the following: "V" denoted heavier than air, "O" stood for observation, and the number 1 signified that it was the first of three observation squadrons formed in 1922. There was for a



while an attempt to number consecutively the new squadrons of each type as they came into existence. Thus, when the next observation unit was organized in 1923 it bore the number 4, indicating that it was the fourth squadron of this type. This procedure was eventually abandoned in the late 1920's. Beginning in May 1927, the letter "M" (for Marine) was placed after the number, making it easier to distinguish between Marine and Navy squadrons.

Three types of tactical squadrons—observation, fighting, and scouting—already existed in the mid 1920's, when two more were added. In August 1924 Kite Balloon Squadron 1 (ZK-1) was activated at Quantico. The "Z" indicated a unit capable of employing a self-propelled lighter-than-air aircraft. The "K," of course, stood for "Kite." This organization's existence terminated before the end of the decade because of the vulnerability of balloons. Originally intended for observation and artillery fire control, balloons were found to be extremely susceptible to machine gun and bombing attacks by hostile aircraft. Their value therefore was considered questionable. The movement toward wider diversification in Marine aviation also can be seen in the formation of a utility squadron, VJ-6M, in July 1927. This is the initial appearance of such an organization. The unit was designed to perform those duties which combat squadrons were ill-equipped to handle. As a result, combat organizations no longer had to provide transportation, rescue, ambulance, and messenger service.

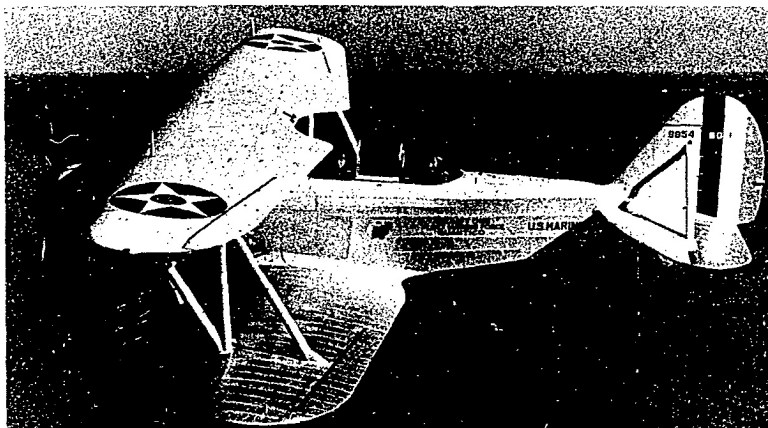
The multiplicity of different kinds of squadrons indicated a more sophisticated view of aviation. No single type of air organization could effectively perform the various roles that Marine aviation took upon itself. Although proliferation of squadrons occurred in the

1920's, there continued to be an absence of a heavy bombardment unit until shortly before the establishment of the Fleet Marine Force. Emphasis had been placed on mobility with the necessity of quickly responding to emergencies. A squadron devoted solely to heavy bombing required larger aircraft which would unfortunately reduce mobility. Should the need arise for bombers in a combat situation, the Army or Navy theoretically would provide them.

Marine aviation in the United States had always been located on the East Coast. Following the formation of the First Aviation Group there was a movement to activate a similar organization on the West Coast. The end of the American occupation of the Dominican Republic in 1924 freed VO-1 from its expeditionary duties. The squadron subsequently transferred to San Diego in August. It then became the nucleus for an organization comparable to the First Aviation Group. This new unit, the Second Aviation Group, was activated on 1 September 1925. Its other subordinate tactical unit, Fighting Squadron 1, also came into existence on that day.

Both groups underwent a major change of designations exactly one year later. The directive ordering the redesignation had originally been issued by the Chief of Naval operations in summer 1926. Once more the Navy had insisted that the Marine Corps conform to its concept of the organization of naval air forces. The Navy disliked the Marine Corps' term "group," since it had no such organization in its structure for either administrative or tactical purposes. Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune concurred and on 1 September 1926 the First Aviation Group became Aircraft Squadrons, East Coast Expeditionary Force

BC-1 biplane, flying over the Potomac River, bears newly-created FMF designation.



while the Second Aviation Group received the title of Aircraft Squadrons, West Coast Expeditionary Force.

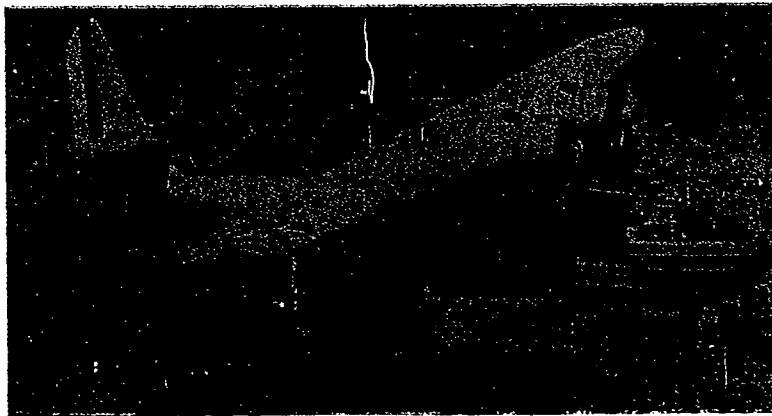
The outbreak of internal disorders in Nicaragua and China in early 1927 led to sending Marine expeditionary forces to the two countries. Air units accompanied the ground forces in both instances. By spring those squadrons in Nicaragua had been grouped into Aircraft Squadrons, Second Brigade. The squadrons in China meanwhile came under Aircraft Squadrons, Third Brigade. The latter organization had been redesignated from Aircraft Squadrons, West Coast Expeditionary Force upon its arrival in China in May 1927. All elements had moved from San Diego to the Far East except for VO-1 which had deployed earlier to Nicaragua. The aforementioned squadron returned to San Diego in late June 1927 where it formed the nucleus for the reestablishment of Aircraft Squadrons, West Coast Expeditionary Force. Two years before it had been used in a similar fashion in building the Second Aviation Group.

Over the next seven years all air units stationed abroad returned to Quantico and San Diego and no further overseas expeditions occurred. Although the need for squadrons for expeditionary duty diminished in the early 1930's, the Marine Corps was aware of potential crises that could again necessitate the deployment of aviation units. Thus, after much discussion, two Marine squadrons were organized at San Diego, specifically for carrier duty. This was a unique event as no other Marine Squadron had ever been assigned to a Navy carrier. Scouting Squadron 14M (VS-14M) was formed on 5 October 1931 and within a short time began operations from *USS Saratoga*. Scouting Squadron 15M (VS-15M), on the other hand, was activated on 2 November 1931

and soon thereafter transferred to *USS Lexington*. The deployment on board the two ships lasted until summer 1934 when they were then assigned to *USS Langley*. (This was not the only time Leathernecks had embarked on this ship. Prior to its conversion to the Navy's first true aircraft carrier, the vessel had been known as *Jupiter* and had in spring 1914 carried elements of the 4th Regiment to the west coast of Mexico in connection with the landings at Vera Cruz.) Deactivation of VS-14M and VS-15M followed in mid November 1934. Despite their relatively brief existence their significance in aviation history should not be underestimated. They set a precedent which paved the way for the future employment of other Marine squadrons on board carriers.

In conjunction with the creation of the Fleet Marine Force the two parent organizations of Marine squadrons were redesignated in January 1934. Aviation units at San Diego officially became a part of Aircraft Two. A few days later, the organization at Quantico changed to Aircraft One. Both were assigned to FMF with the understanding that their subordinate units would support tactical and strategical operations in the field by gaining and maintaining control of the air. Hence, the assignment of aviation units to FMF was but more step leading to the eventual establishment of the air/ground team.

Although the Marine Corps did not mount out any expeditionary force following the creation of FMF, one squadron, VO-9M, saw overseas service. The squadron which had been deployed for 15 years in Haiti transferred from Quantico in September 1935 to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Until shortly before the outbreak of World War II it had the unequivocal honor of being the only Marine air unit to be permanently stationed outside the United



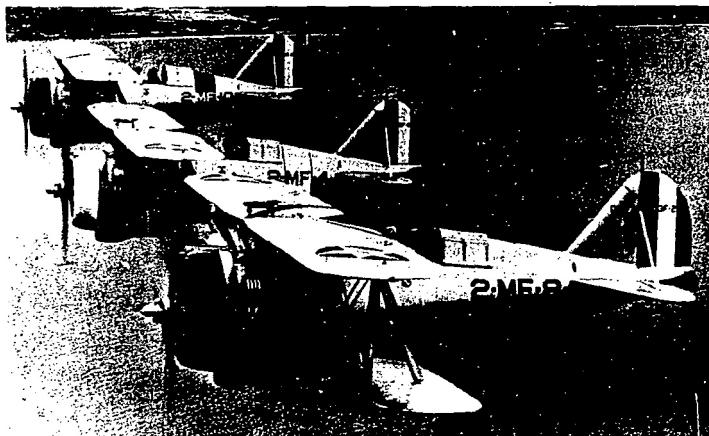
JRS-1, flying over San Diego, bears the insignia of Marine Utility Squadron (VMJ-2).

States. An unusual feature of its early deployment in the Virgin Islands was that it performed a number of tasks not included in its normal aviation duties. For a while it was the only military organization on St. Thomas and therefore assumed those responsibilities associated with a typical garrison force.

A major and significant realignment within the aviation structure went into effect on 1 July 1937. Squadron designations were entirely changed. All tactical units now bore titles that would readily identify their higher echelon and location. The squadron's number became the same as the parent organization's number. And the title for the first time was preceded by the word "Marine." Thus, the new designation Marine Utility Squadron 1 (VMJ-1) meant that it was attached to Aircraft One at Quantico. The 1937 modification also restored a unit which had been absent from Marine Corps' rolls since 1934: the scouting squadron. The three observation squadrons in service in mid-1937 were redesignated as scouting squadrons. As a result of the realignment, both Aircraft One and Aircraft Two had four tactical squadrons of the following types: scouting, bombing, fighting, and utility. The only squadron not having a parent organization and the only squadron to bear a number higher than 2 in its designation was Marine Scouting Squadron 3 (VMS-3) in the Virgin Islands.

Aircraft One and Aircraft Two retained their current designations in spite of the redesignation of subordinate tactical units. Change however did come in 1939. As of 1 May, both units were redesignated as the 1st Marine Aircraft Group and 2d Marine Aircraft Group respectively. The term "Group" re-emerged in the organizational structure after almost 13 years. The adaptation of this concept which had been borrowed from the Army Air Corps finally met with the Navy's approval. Theoretically, the group was equated with a regiment in importance. It still preserved its status as the highest echelon in Marine aviation; yet, on the other hand, a number of proposals had also been put forth to create a higher administrative and tactical organization.

The wing had existed at least in theory since World War I; so for that matter had the group. Over the years the definitions ascribed to the two terms had been interchanged. By the late 1930's, a wing although not yet in existence had taken precedence over a group. The latter, technically, did not come into being until 1939. Prior higher echelon organizations, however, did in effect function and act as a group. While



F3F fighters of the 2d Marine Aircraft Group.

a group organization existed in one fashion or another, consideration was given to the formation of a unit that would be higher in ascendancy. Subsequently, attempts were made to bring a wing into reality and to place all tactical aviation under it. Borrowing still another idea from the Army Air Corps, the wing, as envisioned, would be composed of two or more groups and would correspond to an infantry brigade. Since Marine aviation had for the most part patterned itself after the ground structure, the permanent establishment of the 1st and 2d Brigades, in the mid 1930's, proved to be a major catalyst toward activating a wing. But nothing tangible resulted until 1938.

Major General Commandant Thomas Holcomb had expressed a desire in October 1938 for the creation of a wing headquarters in San Diego, effective 1 July 1939. It would bear the designation Headquarters, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and would be responsible for the coordination, standardization and regulation of training for Aircraft One and Aircraft Two. It would be the command unit for all aviation assigned to FMF. July came but no such unit was organized. Budgetary difficulties and the lack of a trained staff precluded such a step at this time. Nonetheless, Gen Holcomb's proposal had not disappeared; it had in fact gained support from the Navy in fall 1939. Authority to establish a wing headquarters finally came in December of that year. Activation occurred at San Diego on 1 July 1940. The unit was designated Headquarters Squadron, Marine Aircraft Wing. This was an administrative unit only since, in essence, no wing had been created. It was just a preliminary move toward the formation of a wing.

With the expansion of the war in Europe the

United States embarked on a program of military preparedness. An outgrowth of this was Congressional authorization permitting the Navy to acquire 10,000 planes. Marine aviation was allotted a little over 10 per cent of this figure. It had been foreseen that it would soon be necessary to expand and restructure Marine Aviation. Accordingly, there began a slow but inexorable increase in personnel strength. This was reflected in the reorganization of Base Air Detachment 1, located at Quantico, and two others—one at St. Thomas and one at San Diego. The change first appeared on the rolls in December 1938. Their mission was similar to a service squadron. In March 1941, BAD-1 was expanded to include a headquarters squadron, two training squadrons, and most interestingly two engineering squadrons. The primary responsibilities of these units were the training of pilots and crews and the testing of equipment.

The increased threat of war had a profound effect on the structure of Marine organizations both ground and air. In February 1941, the 1st and 2d Marine Divisions were brought into existence by the redesignations of the 1st and 2d Marine Brigades. Movement toward the formation of a wing gained momentum in mid-April when Headquarters Squadron, Marine Aircraft Wing changed its designation to Headquarters Squadron, 2d Marine Aircraft Wing. As had been the case in July 1940 no wing structure was created. There is no specific reason why the number "2" was inserted in the designation. One plausible explanation lies with the divisions themselves. To carry out landing operations effectively it had been theorized that a division would require the air support of a wing-size organization composed of at least two groups. Therefore plans were put forth for the eventual establishment of not one but two wings—one to operate in conjunction with the 1st Division on the East Coast and one to operate in conjunction with the 2d Division on the West Coast. Since there already existed a wing headquarters at San Diego, it would seem logical to label this unit as the headquarters squadron of the 2d Wing in anticipation of the actual formation of that wing. It should be noted that no comparable headquarters existed at Quantico.

Although the decision to form two wings had been definitely agreed upon, there had been as early as December 1940 a tentative proposal to activate at least three wings. The Marine Corps Division of Aviation, which had made the sug-

gestion, envisioned the establishment of homogeneous groups of like squadrons within the wing rather than the placement of squadrons in composite groups. A wing, therefore, might be composed of the following organizations: a fighting group, a light bombing group, a heavy bombing group, an observation group, and a utility group. In other words, all squadrons of the same class within the wing would be assigned to one group. Practicality, however, overruled this proposal and it never left the drawing boards.

Final approval for the creation of the two wings came rather quickly. Activation occurred in July 1941. The 1st Marine Aircraft Wing was formed on 7 July and used the 1st Marine Aircraft Group as its nucleus. The 2d Marine Aircraft Wing was commissioned three days later and was built around Headquarters Squadron, Marine Aircraft Wing and the 2d Marine Aircraft Group. Other significant organizational changes took place at approximately the same time. All squadrons other than VMS-3 at St. Thomas acquired a numerical designation of three digits. Although the squadrons would undergo further redesignations, the three digit number, with few exceptions, was permanently retained. The two groups also obtained new designations: the 1st Marine Aircraft Group became Marine Aircraft Group 11 while the 2d Marine Aircraft Group became Marine Aircraft Group 21. All squadrons in MAG-11 had numerical designation beginning with number 1 to denote parent organization. Those in MAG-21 began with number 2 for the same reason.

After the outbreak of hostilities, a rapid expansion took place in Marine aviation. The 1941 structure changed drastically. The number of groups within a wing varied considerably as did the number of squadrons within a group. Three more wings were created and altogether 38 different types of groups saw active duty in World War II. Finally, there was also a great multiplicity in the number and types of squadrons.

The 1941 reorganization created a structure that is basically, though in a modified version, still in use today. Marine Aviation in that year witnessed a new beginning; organizationally speaking, it had reached maturity. Evolution of a sound tactical structure had been a long and slow process, but with its development Marine Aviation was firmly established as an equal partner with the Marine ground component.

USMC