

# A HISTORY OF MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 115



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

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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.

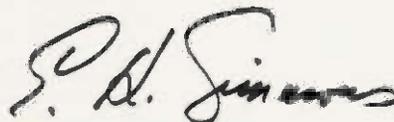
Data for the history were drawn principally from primary sources: command diaries and chronologies; muster rolls; published historical works; and recollections of the Marines involved.

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  
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Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

## PREFACE

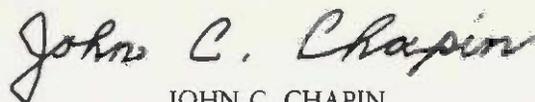
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This volume offers an operational narrative account of one of the Marine Corps' best-known fighter squadrons. Holder of three Presidential Unit Citations and three times awarded the Hanson Trophy, VMFA-115 has built a distinguished career since 1943. 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 PBV rescue plane) escort, bomber escort, and truck



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) F31733

*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

\*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.

\*\*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 righten, 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 1,009.3. There were more personnel shifts, and another

\*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 Dannehl'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.

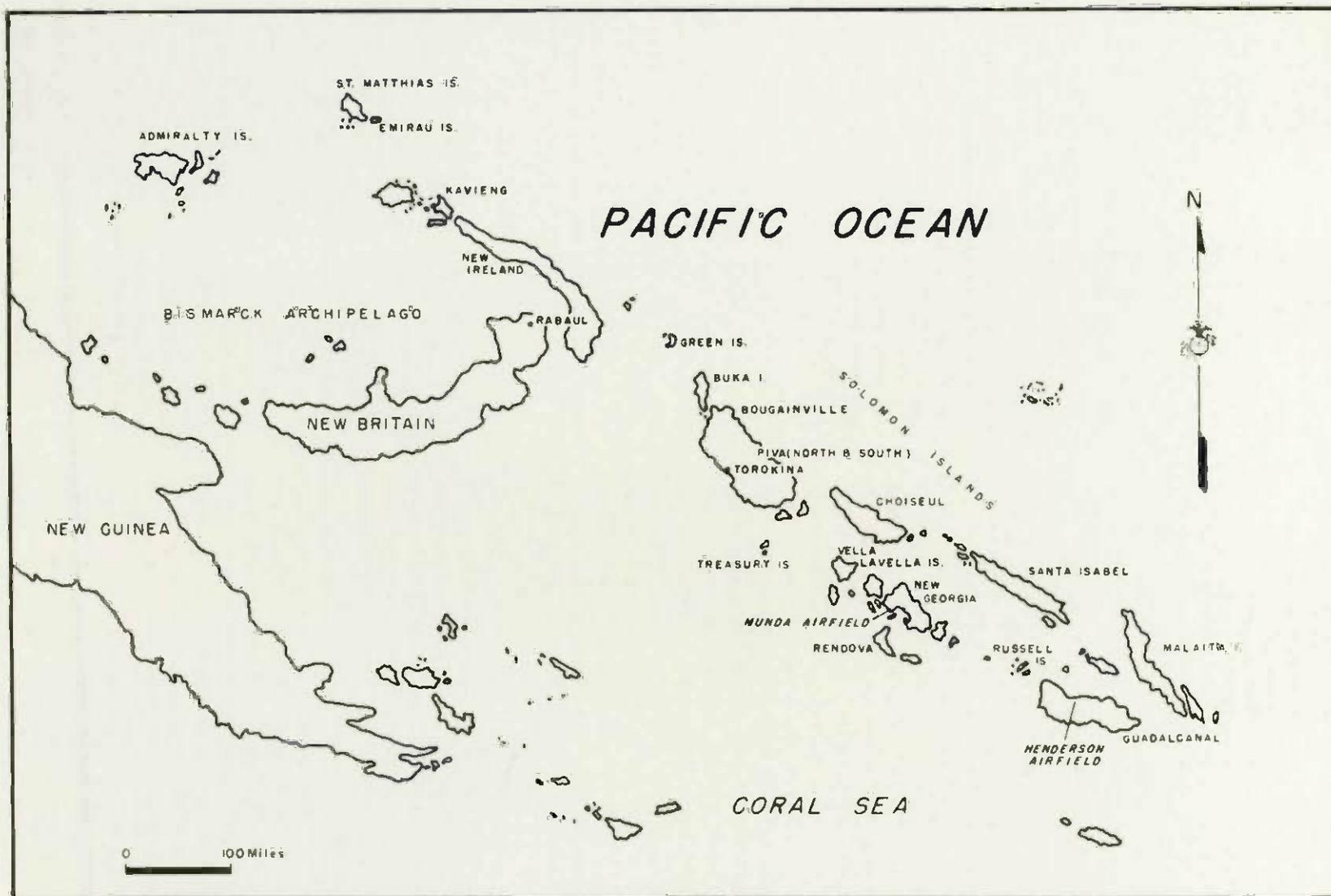
October saw another squadron ferrying operation, as pilots made flights to Guadalcanal to bring back planes with wing tanks. New pilots also joined VMF-115, were put through familiarization training, and were soon carrying their share of sorties.

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.

\*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). . . . \*

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

\*\*\*\*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>9</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.

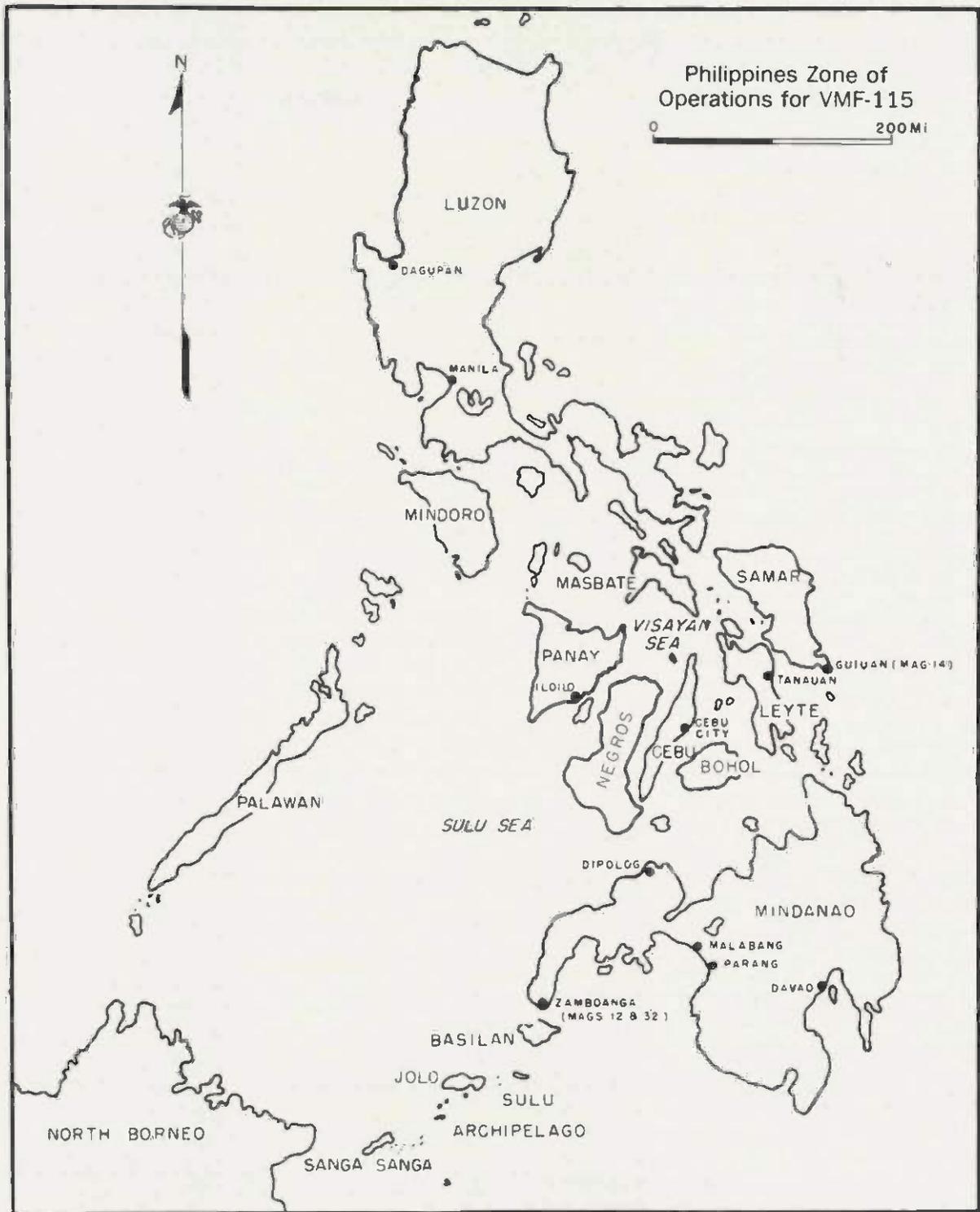
One day, 6 January, was profitable in strafing Angeles Field on Luzon Island. There, a flight from VMF-115 caught seven Japanese planes on the ground and left them all burning.

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 guerilla 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

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

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

\*\*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 anti-aircraft 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

\*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 to 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 I-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 PBY 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 nerve-racking 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.

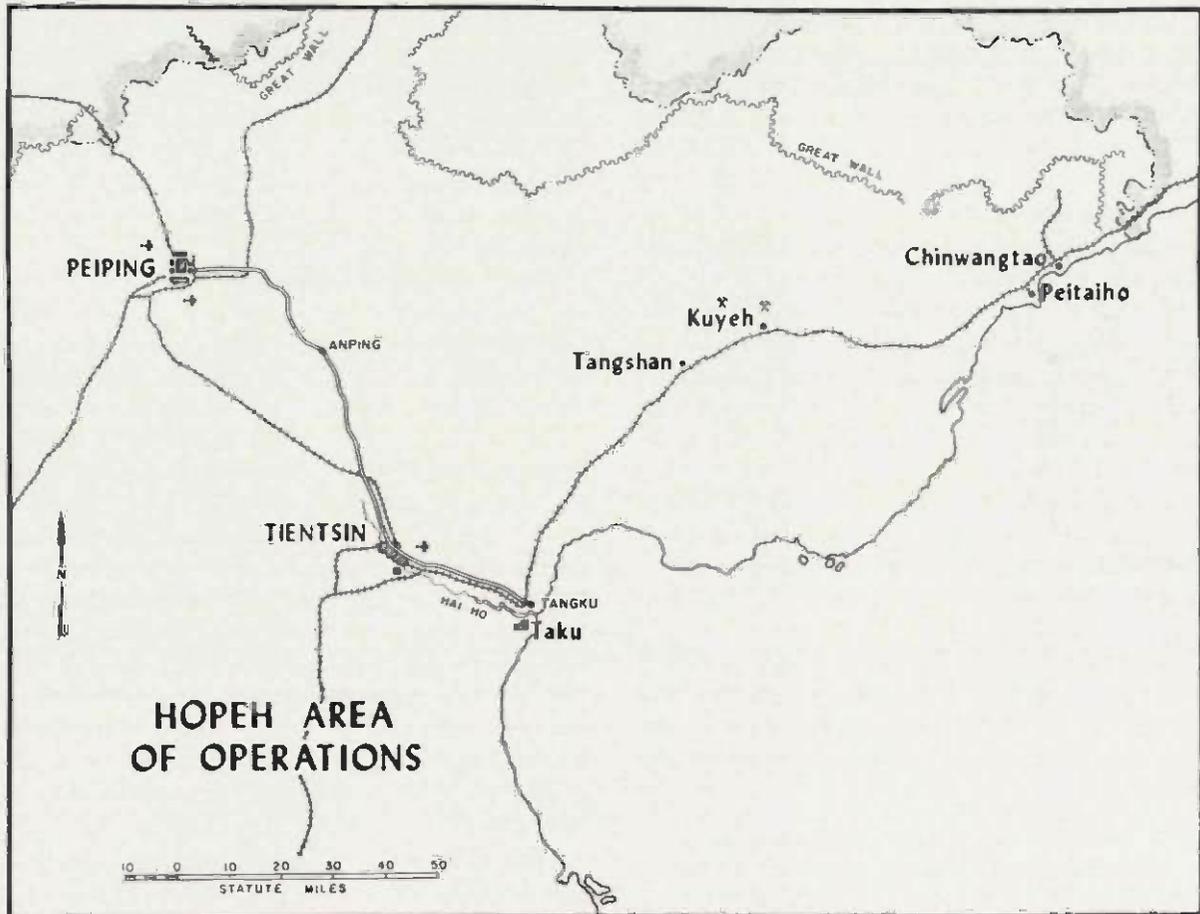
On 14 August Second Lieutenant James L. Glessner, Jr., was airborne as fighter cover when his engine lost power. He ditched the plane at sea about 25 miles from his base, inflated his life-raft, and 20 minutes later a native boat picked him up, uninjured, for return to base. Four days later, 18 August, 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>4</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

\*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

\*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>6</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

\*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

\*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 out-run 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!

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>16</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.

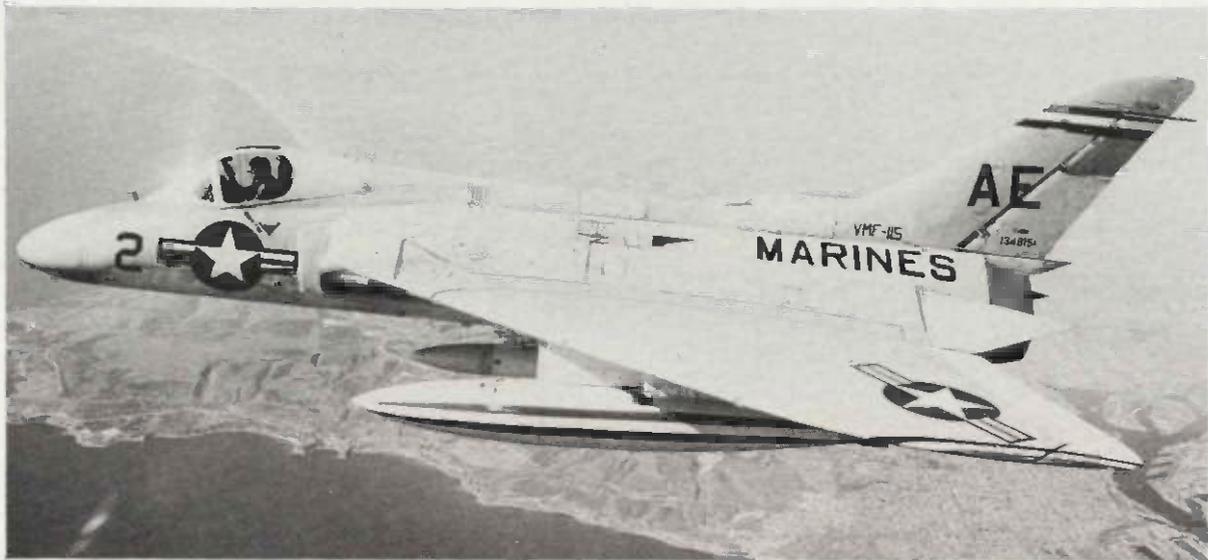
In August, VMF-115 left El Toro for a training period at MCAAS Mojave, California.<sup>5</sup> Problems with the F4D continued and while at Mojave one of the squadron pilots was forced to bail out.<sup>6</sup> These crises led to a unique solution. When Major General Marion L. Dawson, Commanding General, 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 Skyrajs 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 tough 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 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 re-qualification. Good weather, a good ship, good crews, good planes, and good flying, and in six hours all pilots equalled. 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 MAF, 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.<sup>36</sup> Stopping by to observe the squadron at work was Brigadier General George S. Bowman, Jr., commanding general of the 2d MAF.

\*\*VMFA-115 was the last active-duty operational squadron in the naval service to give up its Skyrajs, 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 MAF 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 nonsrop 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>8</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 E. 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.\*\*

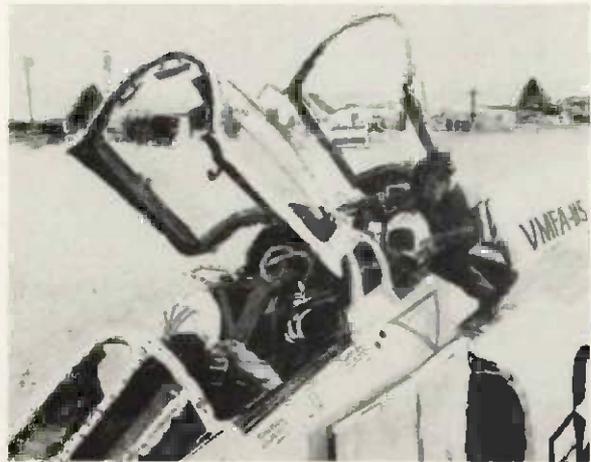
The difficulty of some of the missions was illustrated by a quote from the December command chronology: "The flight, working under a 2,200 foot ceiling in mountainous terrain with friendly troops 150 meters from the target and ground fire in the area, destroyed eight structures in a fortified village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

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 thatch-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.

MARINE FIGHTER/ATTACK SQUADRON 115  
 FLIGHT SCHEDULE FOR 17 SEPTEMBER 1970

000: 0700-1200	LT ZAHN	SR: 0636	A/C AVAILABILITY
1200-1800	LT STACY	SS: 1847	0600 6
1800-0600	LT ZAHN	MR: 2009	2400
		MS: 0806	FORECAST
		IL: 96%	

EVENT	A/C	TIME	CREW	TYPE	BRIEF	TOT	ORDNANCE	REMARKS
250	06	.6	CAPT MILLS/LT MAY	CAS	0800	0930	9D2DC	NOTE #2
6250	03	.7	COL POMMERENK/CAPT HOLMBERG	"	"	"	"	
458	09	1.1	LT RISSSEL/LT DEIVES	CAS	1030	1200	6D2A/3D9	
6458	01	1.1	LT BACON/LT BROWN	"	"	"	"	
460	06	1.1	LT MONESMITH/LT GREEN	CAS	1200	1330	6D2A/3D9	
6460	08	1.1	LT STEVENS/LT WITTER	"	"	"	"	
464	11	.8	MAJ GAGNON/LT SANTONI	CAS	1330	1500	12D2WY	NOTE #3
6464	03	.8	LTCOL MITCHELL/CAPT HOLMBERG	"	"	"	"	
						1800		
466	06	.8	LT ZAHN/LT ROBINSON	CAS	1500	<del>1630</del>	12D2WY	NOTE #4
6466	11	.8	LT DEMPSEY/LT CONNER	"	"	"	"	
212	C N X		LT HUGHES/LT WITTER	TFQ	1600	1700	12D2WY	
6212	C N X							
216	09	1.5	MAJ REESE/LT MAY	TFQ	1900	2000	12D2WY	
6216								

\*\*\*\*\*  
 MORNING PAD: 0700-1200 BRIEF: 0645 2 A/C D16/D17

A. MAJ REESE/LT FUCHS \_\_\_\_\_ B. MAJ BERWALD/LT ROBINSON \_\_\_\_\_  
 LT ZAHN/LT SANTONI \_\_\_\_\_ LT DEMPSEY/LT WITTER \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*  
 AFTERNOON PAD: 1200-1800 BRIEF: 1145 SAME AS MORNING PAD

A. CAPT MILLS/LT STACY \_\_\_\_\_ B. MAJ REESE/LT DEIVES \_\_\_\_\_  
 LT HEELY/CAPT JOHNSON \_\_\_\_\_ LT BACON/LT BROWN \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*  
 EVENING PAD: 1800-0700 BRIEF: 1745 SAME AS MORNING PAD

A. LT ZAHN/LT ECKHARDT \_\_\_\_\_  
 LT CAPITO/LT WITTER \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*

- NOTES: 1. EOD - ENGINE FAILURE DURING TAKE OFF.  
 2. BACK UP AIRCRAFT REQUIRED.  
 3. MAJ GAGNON GIVE INSTRUMENT CHECK TO LTCOL MITCHELL.  
 4. CHECK WITH MAINTENANCE AND IF A/C AREN'T NEEDED FOR TFQ'S, RUN INTERCEPTS.  
 5. INTERCEPT BRIEF FOR ALL AVAILABLE RIO'S IN READY ROOM AT 1600.

G. A. Zahn Jr.  
 G. A. ZAHN JR.  
 FLIGHT OFFICER

Section (1)

Actual flight schedule for the Silver Eagles for operations out of Da Nang. Note the columns "A/C" and "Time" with the aircraft side numbers and flight hours flown, respectively.



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A422879

*A flight of Silver Eagle F-4Bs is airborne on a mission in Vietnam during January 1971. Each is carrying a load of Sparrow and Sidewinder missiles, and laser-guided bombs.*

and 218 enlisted men, and on that day it moved back to Iwakuni, Japan, rejoining MAG-15 there. Arriving with eight F-4Bs, the squadron added seven more to bring its aircraft strength up to 15.

Three days later, on 4 March, Lieutenant Colonel Raymond R. Powell became the new commanding officer of VMFA-115.\* A significant change in the squadron's maintenance procedures occurred as the unit adopted the Visual Information Display System to record its maintenance operations. Tactical flying resumed on 25 March, when two aircraft participated in the Commando Jade exercise.

Spring months were used to concentrate on aircrew training in the area of ACM (air combat maneuvering) and radar practice, anti-submarine warfare, Sidewinder missile firing, and in Okinawan joint air defense exercises.

Starting 30 June, the aircraft of VMFA-115 moved to Cubi Point. There the squadron carried out intensive training, which included providing simulated close air support for the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit's landing exercise until 22 August.

For the remainder of 1971, while primarily based at Iwakuni, the squadron concentrated on pilot training in the areas of air-to-air tactics, gunnery, close air support, long-range bombing missions, etc. The Silver Eagles also made a return visit to Cubi Point during the period 19 October to 18 November.

On 9 December 1971 Lieutenant Colonel Kent A. McFerren took charge of the squadron as command-

\*As a captain. Lieutenant Colonel Powell had been Marine Corps Aviator of the Year in 1965.

ing officer, and the latter part of the month saw extensive preparation for a projected move to Naha, Okinawa.

The superior work of VMFA-115 during 1970-1971 was recognized when it received the prestigious Robert M. Hanson Marine Fighter/Attack Squadron of the Year Trophy. This award recognized the squadron as the "best" VMFA unit in the Marine Corps for the fiscal year. It was also awarded the Navy Unit Commendation as part of MAG-11 for roughly the same time period.\*\*

The move to Naha took place on 7 January 1972, and VMFA-115 remained there for three months of training. The Naha training came to an abrupt end in April, due to the 29 March invasion of three North Vietnamese divisions across the northern border of South Vietnam. This onslaught was known as the "Easter Invasion." The situation along the DMZ deteriorated rapidly, and U.S. reinforcements quickly became necessary. A policy decision was made to limit these to air units. Thus, on 5 April, 1st MAF received a warning order from FMFPac to be prepared to deploy two fixed-wing tactical aircraft squadrons to Vietnam. VMFA-232 and VMFA-115 were selected because of their dual-mission capabilities and interoperability with Air Force aircraft. On the morning of 6 April, the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued an execute order. Immediate action was taken to stage the two squadrons to Cubi Point to await the final execute order from the commander of the Seventh Fleet, and by noon the first aircraft elements were airborne from Iwakuni. At

\*\*See Appendix D for citation.



Marine Corps Historical Collection  
*LtCol Raymond R. Powell, commanding officer of VMFA-115, receives the Hanson Trophy on behalf of the squadron for its performance for Fiscal Year 1971.*

1744 the final execute order was received by 1st MAW, and in four hours and 55 minutes the lead elements of both squadrons were at Da Nang.<sup>17</sup>

The scrambling efforts to accomplish this were revealed in comments made later by Lieutenant Colonel McFerren. He had no word of the decision to move until 0900 on 6 April. He was at Iwakuni, the squadron was at Naha, and the squadron's aircraft needed to be reconfigured with wing tanks for the trip. Yet, in spite of the temporary disorder, the lead elements were in Da Nang by 2200 hours.<sup>18</sup>

In Da Nang the squadron was attached to MAG-15 (Forward), and given a two-day "in-country" indoctrination on the enemy and friendly situation by a Seventh Air Force briefing team. Missions began on 9 April with the primary objective of providing close air support for the South Vietnamese Army. Sorties were concentrated in the areas around Quang Tri, Hue, Pleiku, Kontum, and Phu Cat. The squadron lost its executive officer, Major Thomas K. Duffy, in a midair collision with a South Vietnamese observation plane on 27 April. Amazingly, his RIO, Captain Darryl F.

Dziedzic, was able to eject and escaped the accident with only minor burns.

By the end of May the squadron had flown a total of 504 combat sorties and 593.5 flight hours.

Lieutenant Colonel McFerren, in analyzing the sorties of VMFA-115, later made several interesting points. Electronic counter-measures were not required in MR 2 (Military Region 2) but were necessary in MR 1. Any bombing closer than 1,000 meters to friendly troops had to be specifically authorized (compared to the 50-meter zone the squadron had used with U.S. units on its previous tour).<sup>\*</sup> Still, VMFA-115 had done "as good a job as F-4s have ever done."<sup>19</sup>

### *Thailand Deployment*

On 16 June 1972 the squadron began another move to a new base. The reasons were two-fold. Marine Corps planners were concerned that continued enemy progress would jeopardize the security of the Da Nang Airbase. Further, President Nixon had ordered a reduction in the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam. As a consequence, "out country" locations in Southeast Asia had to be chosen from which American air units could continue flying their support missions. For VMFA-115 and the rest of MAG-15 the Nam Phong Royal Thai Air Base was selected.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, on 16 June VMFA-115 launched combat sorties from Da Nang, and recovered 340 miles west at Nam Phong, Thailand. It was the first combat squadron of the recently established Task Force Delta to arrive there.<sup>\*\*</sup> The air base at Nam Phong was primitive; in May it had been described as little more than a stand-by runway. The runway and four F-111 "nose hangars" were the only facilities in place, and thus the entire squadron had to operate out of one of the "nose hangars."<sup>2</sup> It was facetiously known as the "Rose Garden," a nickname which came from a Marine Corps recruiting slogan that itself had been taken from a popular song of the time. It carried the idea that the Marine Corps didn't promise a luxurious life style! Nevertheless, the men of VMFA-115 were

<sup>\*</sup>The planes used a 10-degree approach angle at 500 feet to drop their 500-pound Snakeye bombs; this meant an error as small as one degree in dive angle would put the bomb 12 to 15 feet off target. This led Lieutenant Colonel McFerren to believe that Marine aircraft could do a better job if they used the laser-guided "smart bomb" the Air Force was using.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Task Force Delta, initially commanded by Brigadier General Andrew W. O'Donnell, was established on 24 May 1972. Its purpose was to "assume operational control of MAG-15 except that the 7th Air Force Headquarters in Saigon would have mission direction authority." It was also to "establish and maintain liaison" with the Seventh Air Force and Royal Thai Air Force.

happy to get away from Da Nang and its constant threat of rocket attacks.<sup>3</sup>

Living conditions at the "Rose Garden" were decidedly uncomfortable in the beginning. There were 10 men to a tent, few fans, summer temperatures over 100 degrees, high humidity, and a shortage of fresh water.<sup>4</sup>

Still attached to MAG-15, the squadron flew its first combat mission on 17 June. Lieutenant Colonel McFerrer felt, however, that the move was made "30 days too soon," since only some of the C-130s needed for logistical support were available, and there was insufficient IMA (Intermediate Maintenance Activity) support for six days due to lack of equipment. This translated into mechanics cannibalizing parts and working at night with flashlights in their teeth.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the distance to target areas in Vietnam, the F-4Bs of the squadron would rendezvous with the KC-130 tankers of VMGR-152 and conduct aerial refueling as standard procedure for their missions, a method which worked well and was much envied by USAF fighter pilots.<sup>6</sup>

Flying interdiction missions in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the squadron's Phantoms took enemy ground fire nearly 70 percent of the time. They would take off from Nam Phong, check in with an orbiting Air Force C-130 control center, and then be passed along to a FAC(A) (Forward Air Controller, Airborne) in an OV-10 who actually pin-pointed the exact targets. Sometimes the Air Force planes would provide LORAN (Long Range Aid to Navigation) bombing fixes when the weather was so bad that targets were obscured and visual bombing was impossible. Since the Marine F-4s did not have LORAN, an Air Force F-4 would fly from its base at Udorn and accompany the planes of VMFA-115 to the target area, providing the necessary radar fix while the Marine pilots dropped their bombs.<sup>7</sup>

After operating out of varied locations during the period 1 January 1972 to 30 June 1972, VMFA-115 had compiled totals of 1,128 combat flight hours; 2,592 total hours flown; and 1,955 sorties.<sup>8</sup>

On 24 June the squadron's executive officer, Major Gerald De Jong, took over for a month as interim commanding officer of the squadron. He resumed the duties of executive officer when Lieutenant Colonel Henry C. Ivy, Jr., took command on 23 July.

During the summer, VMFA-115 altered its operations to begin flying close-air-support missions for friendly forces rather than the direct-air-support missions of previous months. In addition, sorties were substantially increased by a change in operating

procedures. Omitting tanker refueling, the F-4Bs flew an initial mission from Nam Phong, landed at Da Nang to rearm and refuel, and then flew a second mission prior to returning to the "Rose Garden."

At the same time the squadron began to reorient its ground and air training program. The focus turned to air-to-air tactics, with briefings for BARCAP missions, and a review of the advantages and disadvantages of the F-4 and Soviet Bloc aircraft in air-to-air combat.<sup>9</sup>

The field conditions at Nam Phong continued to be an important factor in the life of the squadron. Some years earlier, Marines had helped to establish the air base at Udorn, 52 miles north, but it had been taken over by the Air Force. This town was now regarded as a "class, uptown" spot by Nam Phong Marines who went there for two-day liberties. At Udorn they saw the modular housing, PXs, showers, air-conditioning, and other comforts enjoyed by Air Force personnel. This difference in living conditions was a common subject of discussion among the Marines, something quite understandable when contrasted with the laborious efforts to establish even an officers club at Nam Phong.\*

Commenting on these months, Lieutenant General O'Donnell later stressed that there should be no impression that the Marines were "disgruntled" or "unable to accept living in field conditions." The situation at Nam Phong was "far better than we had at Da Nang in late 1965 and early 1966" in his judgement. He also added that "the reason that there was no 'O' club was [that] no 'E' club or staff club [existed for the enlisted men]. Tenure at Nam Phong was to be only 90-120 days. This period was extended in 30-60 day increments."<sup>10</sup>

September marked another milestone for VMFA-115 operations in Vietnam. The squadron completed its 32,000th combat sortie. Official recognition came the next month when Lieutenant Colonel Ivy published to all hands a message from General Robert E. Cushman, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps. It announced that VMFA-115 had won the Robert M. Hanson Award as the outstanding Marine fighter squadron for the second year in a row. The citation mentioned factors such as superior performance, noteworthy resourcefulness, flexibility, determination, and professionalism.<sup>11</sup>

\*The Nam Phong Officers Club required nine months' continuous paperwork effort and "ended up on the desk of the Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps [sic]" at Headquarters in Washington, D.C. When finished it consisted only of a cement slab with 8-10 poles supporting a thatched roof, with a railing but no walls.



VMFA-115 Command Chronology Photo  
*LtCol Henry C. Ivy, the commanding officer of VMFA-115, at Nam Phong, Thailand, in 1972.*

The changing status of the war was reflected in the termination of BARCAP missions and cessation of strikes above the 20th parallel on 23 October, but support for South Vietnamese forces continued in MRs I and II, as well as the Steel Tiger and Barrel Roll operational areas in Laos.

By November the squadron's command chronology took note that "with a 'cease fire' for Southeast Asia imminent," the squadron still had "its finest operational month since returning to combat." Combat flight hours reached 650.3, and 1,096 tons of ordnance were delivered. The onset of the monsoon season made a significant impact on squadron operations, requiring the extensive use of TACAN (an ultra-high-frequency electronic navigation system) for navigation and radar bomb drops.

Continued success under these difficult conditions brought a message of congratulations to VMFA-115 from Major General Leslie E. Brown, Commanding General, 1st MAW, and a former commanding officer of the squadron. His message cited the sharp improvement in aircraft availability, as indications of the unit's skilled management and professional dedication. On a similar high note, the Marine Corps' Birthday was celebrated with T-bone steaks and free beer.

The month of December closed out 1972 with a variety of events for VMFA-115. Close and directed air sup-

port were provided to the South Vietnamese and Royal Laotian forces, and BARCAP missions in support of air operations against North Vietnam were resumed. This latter situation reflected the suspension of the Paris peace talks to end the war. Yet, while combat requirements had intensified, the final week of the year ended with two relaxing events: a live entertainment show featuring Bob Hope and a day off for all hands to mark a Christmas 24-hour ceasefire.

In summarizing the last six months of 1972, 1st MAW noted that VMFA-115, along with VMFA-232, "had the highest daily sortie rate of all F-4 units in Southeast Asia."<sup>12</sup>

The squadron continued to demonstrate its effectiveness during the first six months of 1973, even though its personnel strength had been reduced to less than 200 men. On 14 January, combat sorties into North Vietnam were suspended, and on 27 January air operations in all of Vietnam halted. At the time, VMFA-115 had amassed a total of 33,553 combat sorties in Southeast Asia. Because of the ceasefire in Vietnam, the first three weeks in February saw all missions being devoted to operations in Laos, the most significant of which was Black Lion IV. A happy note in interservice relations during the operation occurred when an Air Force forward air controller sent a plaque and Laotian flag to the squadron with the following comments:

These tokens only partly reflect how much you did to help us during the Black Lion operation around Pakse. When you guys say that close air support is your business, you don't kid around . . . I know it, the ground-pounders know it, and the NVA know it . . ."<sup>13</sup>

On 22 February a ceasefire for Laos went into effect, and the squadron, for the first time in almost a year, exclusively launched training sorties. These flights centered on day- and night-intercept training, ACM tactics, and aerial refueling. Practice continued into March. Meanwhile, the command chronology revealed the squadron's main expectation when it stated that the "Silver Eagles prepared for possible redeployment to Iwakuni, Japan."

That was not to be the case. On 30 March, VMFA-115 again commenced combat operations, this time in support of the Cambodian government.\*\* Training sorties also continued to be flown; briefings were given on F-4B vs. MiG series aircraft; the squa-

\*VMFA-115 participated in the award of a Navy Unit Commendation to Task Force Delta for the period 23 May-31 December 1972. See Appendix D.

\*\*These were long missions requiring air-to-air refueling from KC-130s enroute and often on return.



Marine Corps Art Collection by Maj John T. Dyer, USMCR, "Clean Up," Nam Phong, Thailand  
*Thai workers clean a Silver Eagle Phantom at the "Rose Garden" during July 1973.*

dron participated in Air Force exercises simulating MIGCAP and BARCAP; and from 28 May to 8 June, a partial deployment was made to Cubi Point to conduct a missile FirEx (fire exercise).

The last half of 1973 brought some major changes for VMFA-115. A new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles V. V. Smillie, Jr., took over on 2 July, and of 32 squadron officers present, 18 were replaced with new personnel. Air operations in Cambodia were halted after 15 August, the last of all U.S. operations in Southeast Asia. VMFA-115 had flown a total of 693 combat sorties from Nam Phong, and 34,010 sorties during its entire Southeast Asian tour, figures that were higher than any other Marine F-4 squadron. At long last, preparations began for a departure from the "Rose Garden."

On 31 August, VMFA-115 left Nam Phong and, after making a refueling stop at Cubi Point, arrived at Naha the same day. At Naha the squadron undertook an extended training program in ACM, radar intercept tactics, gunnery, air-to-ground ordnance delivery, and close-air-support exercises with the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines. On 17 December 1973, after a 20-month absence, VMFA-115 returned to its old home base at Iwakuni, still part of MAG-15.

#### *Japan Again - U.S. Again*

Back in Japan again, VMFA-115 launched a series of training programs. During January 1974 the squadron concentrated on dissimilar air-to-air tactics.\* These involved two-on-one engagements using H&MS-12 TA-4s as adversaries. There were also operations in support of Navy ships.

Similar missions were conducted throughout the first half of the year, as VMFA-115 continued its pattern of constant deployment, working from Iwakuni, then Cubi Point (9 February-27 March), and finally Naha (starting on 12 June).

Major Alec Gillespie acted as squadron commander from 20 June until 16 July, when Lieutenant Colonel Harvey D. Bradshaw took charge.\*\* The squadron continued commuting between Iwakuni (19 August-21 October), Naha (leaving there 18 August and returning 22 October), and Cubi Point (3-9 December). Time on Okinawa was spent in air-to-ground ordnance delivery (including TPQ-10 control), aerial refueling practice, and ACM sorties against dissimilar aircraft

\*Dissimilar training allows practice against planes different from the F-4, which can demonstrate characteristics like those of potential hostile aircraft.

\*\*In 1977, as now-Colonel Bradshaw, he received the Alfred A. Cunningham Award as Marine Aviator of the Year.



VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo

*Aerial refueling of a VMFA-115 Silver Eagle is accomplished during a training flight in 1975.*

(TA-4s and AV-8s). In addition, VMFA-115 participated in several joint service exercises. In one of these, the squadron's F-4Bs simulated the Soviet SSN3 missile. During this deployment, on 19 October, the squadron lost an aircraft when a plane caught fire on takeoff and crashed into the ocean. The crew, however, safely ejected.

The hard work and superior achievements of VMFA-115 were recognized when it was notified that it had received both the Marine Corps Aviation Efficiency Trophy for 1973-74, as well as the Chief of Naval Operations Safety Award. These were notable accomplishments, since the Aviation Efficiency Trophy was intended to signify the "best" squadron in all of Marine aviation. The CNO Award was also highly regarded, since only three or four Marine squadrons would qualify to receive it each year.

With the start of 1975 all hands packed up for a return from Naha to Iwakuni. There the squadron began intensive training in field carrier-landing practice in preparation for carrier qualifications.

On 1 March Major General Norman W. Gourley, Commanding General, 1st MAW (and a second lieutenant in the squadron 32 years earlier), presented the CNO Safety Award to VMFA-115. Two days later the unit was off to Cubi Point again in order to conduct carrier-landing qualifications on the carrier USS *Enterprise* (CVA[N] 65) on 12-13 March. After the carrier qualifications, it returned to practicing ACM sorties against A-4s, A-7s, F-4s, and F-14s, supplemented with TPQ-controlled missions and missile-firing exercises.

On 10 May all of the squadron was back at Iwakuni, where it concentrated on preparing for transition to the F-4J model aircraft. On 5 August the squadron received a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Donald D. Wilson.\* Four days later 14 F-4Js were delivered to the squadron, and VMFA-115's first flight in the new plane took place on 19 August.\*\*

The changeover to the F-4J brought the squadron a plane with many improvements: the AJB-7 bombing system, the AWG-10 pulse Doppler radar fire control, a data-link system, and a J79-GE-10 engine with 17,900 pounds of thrust in afterburner.

The new era for the Silver Eagles was marked by a visit from Lieutenant General John N. McLaughlin, Commanding General, FMFPac, on 21 August.

A two-month deployment to Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, began on 9 September. There the squadron flew close-air-support sorties in conjunction with the 3d Marine Division, conducted a missile-firing exercise, and participated in a joint exercise with units of the Fifth Air Force. In addition, there was intensive air-combat training against the AV-8s of VMF-513.

Leaving Kadena on 14 November, VMFA-115 moved to Cubi Point, basking in the glow of commendatory letters for its performance on Okinawa. In the Philippines, the squadron flew close-air-support missions for the 4th Marines, practiced dissimilar sorties against

\*As a brand-new second lieutenant, he had first joined VMF(AW)-115 in February 1957, some 18 years earlier.

\*\*VMFA-115 was the last active-duty F-4B squadron.

Navy F-8s, and carried out more training with air-to-air missiles.

The beginning of 1976 (2 January) found the squadron returning once more to its base at Iwakuni. Back in Japan VMFA-115 continued with its normal training activities, and during February it sent a deployment to Kwang-Ju Air Base, Korea, for 12 days of joint operations with Republic of Korea forces. Another move to Cubi Point occurred in March, where the unit took part in a combined U.S. Marine-Philippine Marine exercise. This activity was followed by a return for two months to Kadena Air Base on Okinawa (22 March-19 May), and then a month at Misawa Air Base in northern Japan (19 May-24 June) for practice in air-to-air tactics, inflight refueling, and night air-to-ground ordnance delivery. This series of events brought another message of commendation, this time from the commander of the Seventh Fleet. The message praised the VMFA-115 personnel for their professional military approach to unusual and different training problems, and applauded the squadron's rapid response to a change in the training cycle and location.<sup>1</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Richard H. Glass became VMFA-115's newest commanding officer on 17 June. As Lieutenant Colonel Glass later recalled the day:

I assumed command of the squadron at Misawa Air Base. The ceremony consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Wilson, whom I relieved, and myself flying over the field in forma-

tion, then landing and taxiing to our flight line to conduct the remaining formal activities with all hands and guests in attendance. That was the last "fly-over" change of command of that era.<sup>2</sup>

The second half of 1976 saw a continuation of deployments and training, with the squadron operating in Korea (1-5 July), Japan (5-28 July), and the Philippines (28 July-19 September), before returning to Iwakuni for the remainder of the year. Lieutenant Colonel Glass remembered this busy period:

Our departure from Misawa took us to Kwang-Ju Air Base, Korea, where we were hosted by the ROKAF Fighter Squadron 115. They flew F-5s and treated us in a most hospitable manner. Our operations in Korea were in support of the 3d Marine Division. We next deployed to our "home base," Iwakuni. After consolidating our supply support we deployed to Cubi Point, where we conducted weapons delivery training.

One additional major event occurred during the last three weeks of October, when six of the squadron's planes and 121 of its men took part in a combined operation with Australian and New Zealander air units at the Royal Australian Air Force Base, Amberley, Australia. Lieutenant Colonel Glass commented:

We shared the KC-130 assets with 6 A-4Ms of VMA-311 and 6 A-V8s of VMA-513 . . . . The squadron's mission was to participate in "Kangaroo Two," a combined operation . . . . The mission, as I see it today, was to "show the flag." The energies and assets expended were considerable, and

*A VMFA-115 F-4J successfully launches a Sparrow missile during a training mission.*

Photo courtesy of LtCol Richard H. Glass





Photo courtesy of Maj Nicholas P. Mammarella

*An F-4J is painted with the stars and stripes to commemorate the nation's Bicentennial.*

I am confident that the Australian people who met and welcomed us carry positive memories of our Marines.

For some reason traveling longitudinally across the earth doesn't generate the same respect for distance that traveling laterally across the earth does. We flew, and were supported by our own Marines, on a 12,000-nautical-mile round trip from Iwakuni. We aerial refueled over Okinawa and landed at Cubi Point, then aerial refueled over Zamboanga, and landed at Darwin, Australia.

Lieutenant Colonel Glass continued his account:

The people of Darwin were very friendly, climbing over the canopy rail before I could deplane, and invited us into their homes. We next aerial refueled over the subcontinent's northern coast, then flew south to RAAF Amberley. There is no doubt that the highlight of the entire operation was the transit to and from Australia.

The flight operations from Amberley were three hour missions up over the Great Barrier Reef, during which time I had occasion to intercept only one section of Mirages, the RAAF fighter aircraft of that day.

The favorable public impact of this long-distance deployment stood in sharp contrast to the critical operational evaluation in the squadron's command chronology. The latter pointed out that effective utilization of the squadron's F-4J assets was considered virtually nonexistent, because realistic fighter-attack training was not accomplished at the most elementary level. This was due to a variety of factors: lack of knowledge of proper tactical employment of the F-4Js, incorrect assignment of vectors, no use of Marine Corps GCI controllers, failure to assign aircraft to FAC control, and unsatisfactory radio communications.\*<sup>3</sup>

\*Lieutenant Colonel Glass commented: "Those observations are rather narrow in light of a ten year perspective."

The quality of VMFA-115's work was once more recognized when it was again nominated by the 1st MAW Awards Board for the Hanson Award as Marine Fighter Squadron of the Year for 1975-76.\*\* In addition, there were messages of commendation from the commanders of Carrier Task Force 77 and Carrier Task Force 75.

The squadron's 1976 pattern of "base hopping" re-occurred in 1977. The first six months found VMFA-115 alternating between Iwakuni (1-8 January and 8 April-30 June) and Kadena (8 January-8 April), with smaller detachments spending time at Cubi Point and Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. There were also ground attack and close-air-support missions near Seoul, Korea, 18-27 April.

Lieutenant Colonel Glass recalled some details:

In 1977 our three month deployment to Kadena Air Base was really noteworthy to me in only two respects. The first was that we were able to conduct a missile shoot [when] missiles were in short supply . . . . The second noteworthy event was the realization I shared with my squadron that, after spending an extended period with the U.S. Air Force, we all felt very fortunate to be a part of Naval Aviation.

Our next Cubi Point deployment was in support of 7th Fleet operations and rather uneventful; however, our deployment to Clark Air Base was to participate in a Cope Thunder exercise which involved most of the U.S. Air Force's tactical assets in that theatre of operations. The training was unique, as were the insights gained of Air Force operations.

In a final observation, Lieutenant Colonel Glass noted:

\*\*VMFA-115 did not receive the award this time, but took consolation in the fact it was still considered the "best" fighter-attack squadron in the 1st MAW.

Our final period at Iwakuni prior to the squadron returning to CONUS again consisted of only two operationally noteworthy events. The first consisted of our close air support sorties in support of the U.S. Army near the Korean DMZ. These flights were all supported with VMGR-152's KC-130 tankers. The second event was a 1st MAW Operational Readiness Inspection. I remember that Colonel Michael P. Sullivan, of the wing G-3, and Brigadier General Keith A. Smith, the AWC [Air Wing Commander] were favorably impressed at the debrief.

Major Patrick J. Jones took over as interim commanding officer on 3 June, serving until 30 August, when he was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert S. Morris, Jr.

July began with preparations for deployment to MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina. After more than 12 years in the Far East, the squadron was to be relieved by VMFA-251. All aircraft were thoroughly checked out, and reconfigured to ferry profiles. Pilots prepared for the transit by carrying out refueling exercises.

On 22 July the main body of enlisted personnel left Iwakuni in Air Force C-141s. Then, during the period 30-31 July, nine of the squadron's F-4Js flew to Wake Island. By 11 August the full squadron was at Beaufort, assigned to MAG-31. The arrival of the Silver Eagles at Beaufort marked a big change in squadron routine from duty in the Far East. Beaufort had been chosen as a single site for Marine Corps east coast F-4 opera-

tions, and VMFA-115 joined five other F-4 squadrons already stationed there. Working into the 2d MAW scheme of operations at "Fighter Town East," as Beaufort was called, was a real challenge for the squadron.

Barely settled in at its new base, VMFA-115 had to "repack" for a deployment to MCAS Yuma, Arizona.<sup>4</sup> Arriving at Yuma on 7 October, the Silver Eagles went through a series of air-to-air and air-to-ground training exercises. Additionally, the squadron spent two days at the Naval Weapons Center Electronic Warfare Range at China Lake, California. On 27 October, VMFA-115 returned to Beaufort.

The following two months were focused on day and night fighter interceptor sorties and training in DACT (Dissimilar Air Combat Tactics) against USAF F-15s.

One happy statistic was noted as 1977 ended: VMFA-115 had run up a total of 10,162.9 accident-free hours through the years since October 1974.<sup>5</sup>

The first half of 1978 saw a continuation of DACT training against a variety of planes: F-15s, A-4Fs, A-4Ms, AV-8As, F-5Fs, F-5Es, and F-100s. This training took elements of the squadron to Florida, California, and Virginia, and opponents included Air Force, Navy, and Air National Guard units.

The continuing evolution of aircraft was symbolized by the receipt, on 7 February, of the squadron's first

*A flight of 10 VMFA-115 Silver Eagle F-4Js appears in wedge formation in 1977.*

VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo



plane equipped with the improved Westinghouse 1590 AWG-10A fire-control radar. The continuously displayed impact mode of its computer was a great improvement over manual modes, for it provided a method for accurate target attack, regardless of dive angle.

Two exercises were planned and coordinated by VMFA-115 during this period: a missile-firing exercise for MAG-31 at NAS Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, in March, and AvElEx 2-78, an aviation electronic warfare exercise in June. This latter operation was the first major aviation exercise to be held at Beaufort, one which involved the whole of the 2d MAW, as well as sister service units from all parts of the United States.<sup>6</sup>

The last half of 1978 saw VMFA-115 continue a program of ECM (Electronic Counter-Measures) and DACT training; gunnery range practice at Yuma and China Lake; and a variety of joint exercises such as ComputEx 4-78, AvElEx 3-78, and Red Flag 78-9.

On 15 December, Lieutenant Colonel Larry B. Hannah took command of VMFA-115 from Lieutenant Colonel Morris.<sup>7</sup>

The pattern of activities undertaken in 1978 carried over into 1979. There were four major exercises in the first six months. One innovation for VMFA-115 at the time was the introduction of SCAR (Strike Control and Reconnaissance) missions.<sup>8</sup> Sorties were flown in conjunction with RF-4Cs to provide close-air-support training in a simulated high-threat, fluid, tactical-air environment.

During the first half of 1979 the squadron marked three milestones in flight safety: 15,000 accident-free hours and receipt of both the 1978 FMFLant and CNO Annual Aviation Safety Awards.<sup>9</sup>

The final six months of 1979 were highlighted by a deployment during the period 30 August-16 September to USNS Keflavik, Iceland. Staging through Goose Bay, Labrador, the squadron used six F-4Js in the operation. Flying all-weather missions in a cold-weather environment in support of Commander, Iceland Defense Force, squadron aircrews made intercepts of Soviet Bear aircraft on 7, 12, and 14 September.\*

Upon its return to Beaufort the squadron began field carrier-landing practice, and on the 14th and 15th of November actual carrier qualifications were made on the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69).

Lieutenant Colonel Jack B. Hammond took over as

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\*"Bear" was the NATO code name for the Russian Tupolev TU-95 long-range strategic attack bomber. It was also extensively used for maritime reconnaissance. Powered by four turbo-propeller engines, it was a swept-back mid-wing monoplane using X-band radar for target location. (*Janes' Aircraft, 1978-79*, pp. 198-99)

commanding officer of the Silver Eagles on 15 December, and led the squadron into its 1980 training cycle. DACT missions in January were followed by deployment to Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, where, from 26 January to 9 February, VMFA-115 participated in Red Flag 80-2. Next the squadron went to MCAS Yuma, and from 28 March to 18 April expended its entire year's allowance of live ordnance within that three-week span.

Upon returning to its home base, VMFA-115 began preparations for deployment on an aircraft carrier. Training in May was concentrated on intercept work and air-to-air weapons delivery. This was augmented by a deployment during most of the June timeframe to NAS Oceana, Virginia, as the first Marine fighter participant in the Navy Fleet Fighter ACM Readiness Program. At Oceana the Silver Eagles became the first east coast Marine squadron to use the AIM-9L Sidewinder missile on the Air Combat Maneuvering Range.<sup>10</sup>

VMFA-115 was again nominated for the Hanson Award, this time by 2d MAW for 1979-80. Although the squadron did not get the award, its executive officer, Major "T" D. Seder, received the Marine Corps Aviation Association's Cunningham Award as Marine Aviator of the Year.

In August the squadron was back at Oceana for touch-and-go and arrested-landing practice on the carrier USS *Nimitz* (CVN 68). Ten F-4Js and 26 officers had been sent to train for the upcoming cruise with the Sixth Fleet, an operational plum which was eagerly sought after by all Marine fighter squadrons.

On 25 October the Silver Eagles came on board the carrier USS *Forrestal* (CV 59) with 30 officers and 9 F-4Js.

The course of operations took the ship to NAS Roosevelt Roads and NAS Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. During the cruise VMFA-115 amassed 521.8 flight hours, made 328 sorties, and achieved 246 day- and 112-night arrested landings. All its aircrews became day and night qualified in the use of both A-6 and A-7 aircraft for aerial refueling, and, if carrier duty wasn't exciting enough in its own right, an extra spark was added when squadron aircrews intercepted two Soviet TU-95 Bears on 5 December. As a result of this deployment, which ended on 16 December, Lieutenant Colonel Hammond was able to report that the squadron's "operating savvy and experience had taken a quantum jump."<sup>11</sup>

One sad note on the cruise was an accident at Guantanamo Bay which broke the Silver Eagles' impressive six-year safety record (beginning in October 1974) of



VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo

*VMFA-115 F-4Js conduct carrier qualifications on the USS Eisenhower in November 1979.*

20,488 accident-free hours. Captain Travis D. Holland's F-4J suffered a utility hydraulic failure, and the plane crashed. However, he and his RIO, First Lieutenant Eugene E. Shoults, Jr., escaped unhurt.

The year 1981 got off to a fast start. On 8-10 January, 10 of the squadron's F-4Js went back on board the *Forrestal*. The dangers of carrier operations were vividly shown in the following days. On 12 January Captain Holland was lost at sea after his plane suffered a ramp strike on a night recovery.\*

An Operational Readiness Evaluation (ORE) in the Jacksonville, Florida, operating area during the period 19-21 January did not go well. In the words of Lieutenant Colonel Hammond:

The ORE proved to be more of an exercise in gamesmanship than an evaluation of the squadron's readiness to go to war. This was probably the result of two separate factors: first of all, the exercise was condensed from the normal 4 1/2 days to 2 1/2 days. Secondly, the ranges in the Jax Op Area are inadequate to handle air wing size alpha strikes on meaningful targets. The ORE was supposed to be a molding of the Air Wing into a fighting team, yet I felt as though the fierce competition among the squadrons fostered exactly the opposite of a team concept. One concept was preached and an entirely different one practiced.<sup>12</sup>

Returning briefly to Beaufort on 1 March, VMFA-115 took off for the main event for which it had prepared so intensively, a Mediterranean cruise on board the *For-*

\*His RIO, Captain Charles E. Toler III, was fortunate to survive the accident.

*restal*. On 16 March, the squadron made an interception of a Soviet TU-95 Bear plane west of Gibraltar. Passing through the Straits, the aircraft of the *Forrestal* conducted operations in the western Mediterranean.

The realities of international tension were dramatically illustrated to the squadron when it began taking part in a "peacetime aerial reconnaissance protection mission" along the Libyan coastline.\*\* On 25 April, VMFA-115 planes successfully intercepted four sections of Libyan Air Force MiG-23 aircraft. Similar intercepts also occurred on 1 May and 20 June.

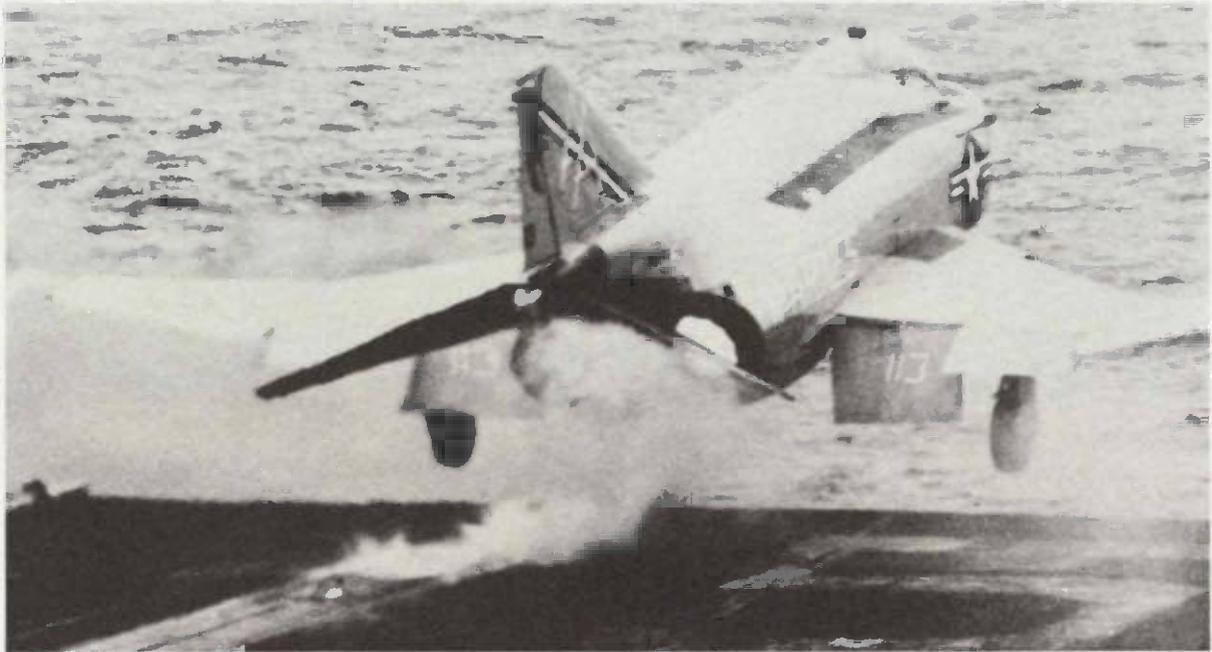
May also found the Silver Eagles busy with DACT practice in Exercise Daily Double against U.S., Italian, and Greek G-91, F-104, and Mirage F-1 planes. This was followed by Exercise Dual Dagger with more DACT—this time against French Navy F-8s and Super Entendards.

Moving to a new hot spot, VMFA-115, as part of the fighter contingent on board the *Forrestal*, stood by in the eastern Mediterranean during May and June, ready to support a Lebanon Evacuation Contingency Plan.

The squadron's continuing high level of performance was reflected by a 2d MAW nomination of it, for the second consecutive year, for the 1980-81 Hanson Trophy.

The Silver Eagles continued operations from the

\*\*These missions escorted the carrier's reconnaissance aircraft while they flew in international airspace near the northern coast of Libya.



VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo

A VMFA-115 F-4J is airborne after a successful "cat shot" from the USS *Forrestal* in 1981.

*Forrestal* throughout the summer, and in mid-August another moment of high tension occurred:

On 18 and 19 August 1981 the squadron was part of a Battle Force which was assigned two missions. First, conduct operations in the international waters of the Gulf of Sidra to emphasize freedom of navigation; and, second, conduct an open ocean missile firing exercise. USS *Forrestal* fighters were tasked to provide barrier combat air patrols (BARCAP) in the event that Libyan aircraft challenged the Battle Force. In the course of the two day operation, squadron aircraft intercepted and turned back 22 sections of Libyan MiG-23 (Flogger) aircraft who approached the Force. In the course of the exercise, USS *Nimitz* F-14 aircraft were fired upon by Libyan SU-22 aircraft. During the ensuing engagement, 2 SU-22 aircraft were shot down without the loss of a naval aircraft.

VMFA-115 fighters were engaged several times after the F-14/SU-22 engagement by Libyan MiG-23s with unknown intentions. Squadron aircrews maintained offensive advantage during their engagement until ordered to disengage. Squadron crews, knowing that hostile acts had occurred, exercised extraordinary restraint during the period of heightened international tensions. Each crew in the squadron had the opportunity to intercept Floggers, testing their skills in a unique operational environment. The squadron amassed over 100 flight hours during the two days of Battle Force Operations.<sup>13</sup>

The shooting down of the Libyan jets caused an international furor. The situation had developed because of Libyan claims to a 200-mile territorial limit from their coast, while the United States recognized just the 12 mile limit established by international law. Only

a quirk of fate precluded VMFA-115's aircraft from being involved in the incident.

Leaving the Mediterranean, VMFA-115 continued training, and participated in Portuguese PassEx and EncounterEx with the USS *Eisenhower* and in Ocean Venture 81, the largest peacetime naval warfare exercise since World War II.

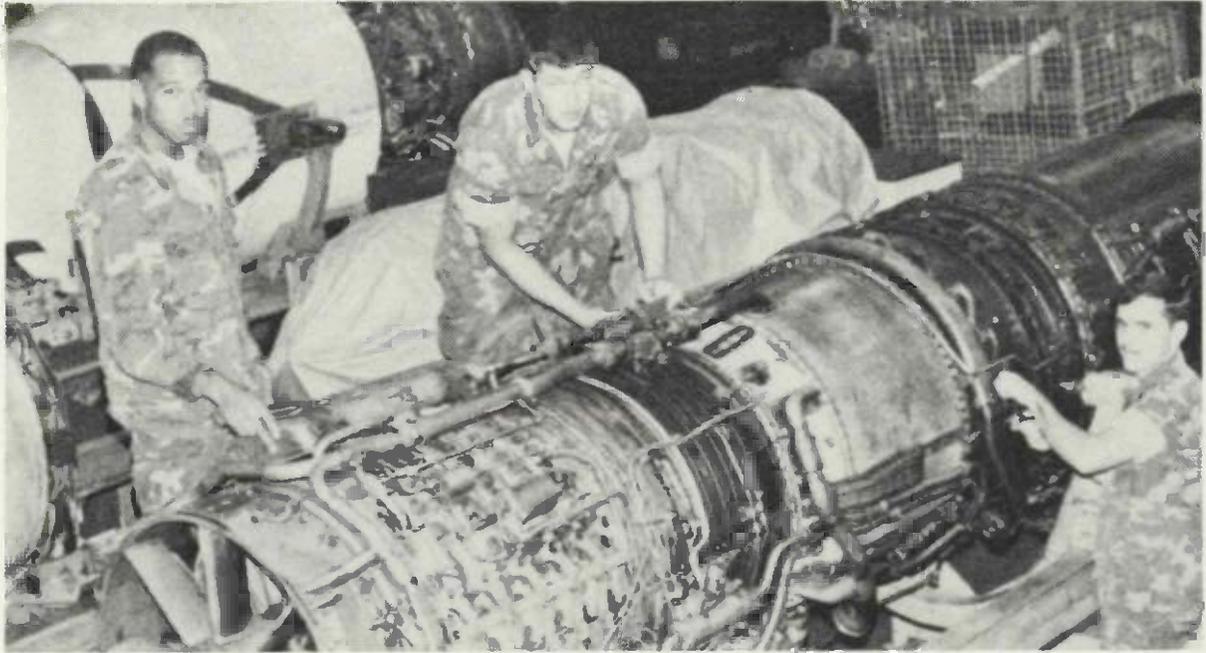
Colonel Hammond described VMFA-115's activities during the Ocean Venture exercise:\*

In September, the squadron was involved in a series of exercises that demanded operations in the North Atlantic Ocean, North Sea, and Norwegian Sea. Together with the carrier USS *Eisenhower*, the USS *Forrestal* operated as part of a Battle Force within the range of the Naval Air of Soviet Aviation. The squadron was on constant alert to intercept Soviet aircraft from 29 August to 10 September 1981. On almost a daily basis, F-4's intercepted TU-95 (Bear D) reconnaissance aircraft. When operating near/above the Arctic Circle within range of the Soviet TU-16 (Badger) aircraft, squadron F-4's intercepted, escorted, and observed numerous divisions of Badgers which conducted mass simulated raids against the Battle Force.\*\*

At the completion of this last major exercise, flight operations on board ship drew to a close. On 13 September, after an Atlantic crossing, VMFA-115 flew off its planes, returning to Beaufort two days later. It had been an exciting tour of duty!

\*Colonel Hammond was promoted from Lieutenant Colonel on 1 August 1981.

\*\*For these operations above the Arctic Circle, the squadron earned the coveted "Blue Nose Award."



VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo

*Maintenance goes on behind the scenes to keep the planes of VMFA-115 ready to fly.*

Colonel Hammond later submitted a voluminous and detailed report. In it he bluntly listed some crucial problems that the squadron had encountered:

It would appear that we have deployed a sufficient number of F-4 squadrons aboard carriers in the last 15 years to have the procedure down pat by now, but I assure you this is not the case . . . . The most serious mistake that was made was one that caused the squadron two major accidents and the life of one of our pilots. First, and most important, is that a squadron must be fully day and night carrier qualified prior to the commencement of **Type Training**. Once Type Training commences, the Air Wing by necessity gets into Cyclic Ops. Once this starts, there is no time to go slow and allow the Marines to carrier qual. This then requires that you fly those who are qualified and not fly those who are not.

Instead of a short intensive period of day and night Quals, where the pilot can learn from his mistakes, he only gets one landing at a time. The learning process is slowed considerably, and he tends to make the same mistakes over and over again. The Carrier Qual Phase that this squadron went through was totally unsat in every aspect. Not one pilot was qualified prior to commencing Cyclic Ops. The last pilot was not night qualified until late in December, after starting in October . . . .

Colonel Hammond then went on to analyze critically the problem of pilot selection:

It is my firm belief that Senior Marine Officers, who are required to plan and execute these deployments, do not really understand the degree of difficulty of night Carrier Ops in the F-4. As Marine Aviators we have all Carrier Qualified at some time, but we are not by any definition knowledgeable of Carrier Ops. The valuable Marine tradition of "Strong Leadership" and "Can Do" spirit have very limited use when

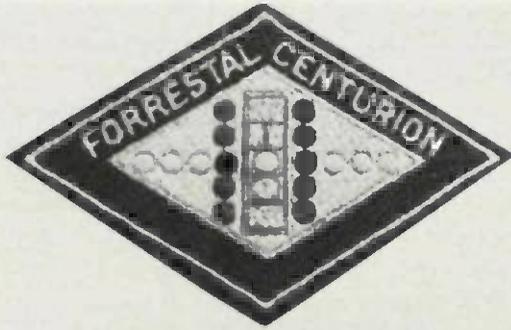
flying the Ball on a dark night. I can only speak for one senior LtCol when I say that night Carrier Ops are by far the most difficult flying—mentally and physically—that I have ever done. It does not get easier with experience, rather it maintains its incredible level of difficulty.

The Phantom is not an A-4, A-6, or F4U. The max trap weight of 5.8 gives you two looks at the deck before bingo or tanking.\* Divert fields in the Med are nearly non-existent today, so you have to be able to get aboard. In order to put together a competent carrier capable squadron, you must start the Qual evolution with more pilots than you require for deployment, by at least 3. Day Quals are by themselves a waste of time. Any pilot, given an adequate number of FCLP periods, can safely get aboard in the day. This is not the case at night. The ability to succeed at night is not in any way related to a pilot's basic flying skills. In this squadron the best and most experienced pilots often had the most problems at night. These people must be identified early, before it is too late in the evolution to replace them.

Colonel Hammond's report concluded with some comments on the sensitive relationship between a squadron commander and a carrier captain:

There is an old adage about carrier aviation that says you can only survive if you approach it with the attitude that everyone is trying to kill you. The Commanding Officer must be prepared to spend every moment he is not flying in CATCC or Primary. The Captain of a carrier enjoys a unique position in that he, and he alone, directs the operations of the aircraft on the ship. Only he can direct an aircraft to divert or to try one more approach. The C.O. must be pre-

\*The "weight of 5.8" refers to 5,800 pounds of fuel remaining, and "bingo" is the term used to divert to another landing location (On a carrier this is only a land base—if available.).



VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo

*Each Silver Eagle aircrewman qualified for Centurion status by attaining at least 100 arrested landings. This milestone was accomplished with two months still remaining in the cruise. The final average was 138 traps.*

pared to advise, request, plead, insist, and in general stand absolutely firm in decisions which affect the safety of his aircraft and crews. This is often a difficult and bitter task.<sup>14</sup>

Back at Beaufort, once again under the operational control of MAG-31, the Silver Eagles returned to a more normal training pattern. A new commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel James A. Davis, took over on 17 October, and the squadron filled the remaining months of 1981 with a variety of exercises: MAG-31's AAWEx 7-81, 2d MAW's AvEIEx 1-28, USAF's Sentry GB XII, and Joint Services' Seabat 1-82.

It had been a busy year. The squadron had amassed a total of 3,385.1 flight hours and 1,839 sorties, with 1,375 carrier arrested landings.

The advent of 1982 brought more challenges. On 18-19 January VMFA-115 participated in a MAG-31 missile exercise. After tanking twice from VMGR-252's C-130s enroute to the Roosevelt Roads missile range, the squadron fired AIM-7E-3 Sparrow and AIM-9G/H Sidewinder missiles. The squadron next deployed to Cherry Point from 16 to 19 March for AvEIEx 2-82, operating in an expeditionary field environment. Finally, it carried out an air-to-ground block training period, deploying to Patrick AFB, Florida, from 10-17 April. During this deployment the squadron was controlled by Air Force airborne FACs on close air support missions. The period 12-14 May found the Silver Eagles again simulating an expeditionary environment during AAWEx 2-82 at Beaufort. Additionally, an experimental, all-purpose, canvas-and-steel maintenance hangar was used successfully for the first time. A little over a week later, VMFA-115 was back at Cherry Point with five aircraft and 40 squadron personnel participating in a "Fighter Derby." Using the Tactical Air Combat Training System, dissimilar air combat was

flown against F-15, AV-8, A-6 and TA-4 adversaries. Seabat, a joint-service electronic counter-measures exercise, concluded operations for the first half of the year.

Amid all the training, there was a gratifying moment of recognition. On 21 April, the Commanding General, 2d MAW, presented VMFA-115 with a Meritorious Unit Commendation from the Secretary of the Navy for the squadron's superb work on the *Forrestal*.\*

The squadron continued to work hard in the second half of 1982, with its first F-4S arriving on 2 August. This new model incorporated important improvements, such as structural strengthening, leading-edge maneuvering slats, air-to-air IFF, a modified J79-GE-10B engine, and an improved AN/AWG-10A weapon control system.<sup>15</sup> The latter part of the year saw the completion of the squadron's air-to-air block training, with a deployment to Oceana from 26 November to 17 December, and participation in the Fleet Fighter ACM Readiness Program. During the Fighter exercises VMFA-115 flew 136 sorties of DACT against F-5s and A-4s.

The highlight of the period, however, was VMFA-115's receipt of its third Hanson Trophy (for 1981-2) on 2 October. Only one other squadron, VMFA-323, had been so honored.

By January 1983 the changeover to a 12-plane F-4S squadron was complete, and the Silver Eagles launched into a series of programs to polish their aircrew skills. On 29 January the squadron deployed to MCAS Yuma for air-to-ground training and completion of a Marine Corps Readiness Evaluation.

Returning to Beaufort on 19 February, VMFA-115 began to get ready for its next assignment: carrier qualifications. A change in command took place at this stage, as Lieutenant Colonel John C. Church took over from Lieutenant Colonel Davis on 19 April.\*\*

The next month, during the period 5-14 May, the entire squadron moved to Oceana for touch-and-go and arrested-landing qualification aboard the carrier USS *John F. Kennedy* (CVA-67). The training went smoothly: VMFA-115 met all its overhead times on schedule and with the required number of aircraft, a feat not accomplished by any of the other participating units.<sup>16</sup>

Three weeks later, VMFA-115 was off again, this time to Patrick AFB, Florida, for close-air-support training with Air Force airborne forward air controllers. All

\*See Appendix D for the full citation.

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Church was the first NFO (Naval Flight Officer) to command VMFA-115.

went well, and Lieutenant Colonel Church, in evaluating the deployment, noted the intangible benefits gained by all concerned when different services have a chance to work together in a tactical scenario.<sup>17</sup>

During the last half of 1983 the squadron deployed six planes to Cherry Point for DACT against F-14s, A-4s, and F-15s (14-19 August and 2-7 October), and it also sent three planes to Yuma for a weapons tactics instructors course. Sadly, on 4 November, VMFA-115 experienced two fatalities when Major David G. Buell, the squadron's executive officer, and Captain Donald W. Spearel, an Air Force exchange officer, were killed when their plane crashed into the sea while orbiting in bad weather. They were participating in a flyover as part of a memorial service at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for the Marines who had been killed in the Beirut bombing.

The last major exercise of the year for the squadron occurred during the period 21 November-12 December when VMFA-115 flew its entire complement of 11 aircraft to NAS Fallon, Nevada, for an air-to-ground weapons deployment. At Fallon it participated in operations with aircraft and crews from VMO-2 and HMA-169, simulating close-air-support operations in a rescue combat-air-patrol situation. This mission exposed 80 percent of the squadron's aircrews to combined arms operations in support of a ground element. Additionally, conventional low-altitude bombing flights and loft bombing flights were flown by first-tour aircrews. The deployment provided live air-to-ground ordnance practice, as well as exposure to

"threat" electronic equipment. H&MS-31 TA-4s, and OV-10s from VMO-2 provided airborne control during simulated close-air-support missions.

During the Fallon deployment, the squadron's intelligence section was deeply involved in the mission briefings and debriefings. Using a continuing, mission-oriented intelligence program, the intelligence section was able to achieve its primary objective of acquainting the squadron's aircrews with a realistic, steadily developing "combat" scenario.

Support provided by VMGR-252 during the 12 December retrograde from NAS Fallon to MCAS Beaufort also provided aircrew familiarization and requalification in aerial refueling.

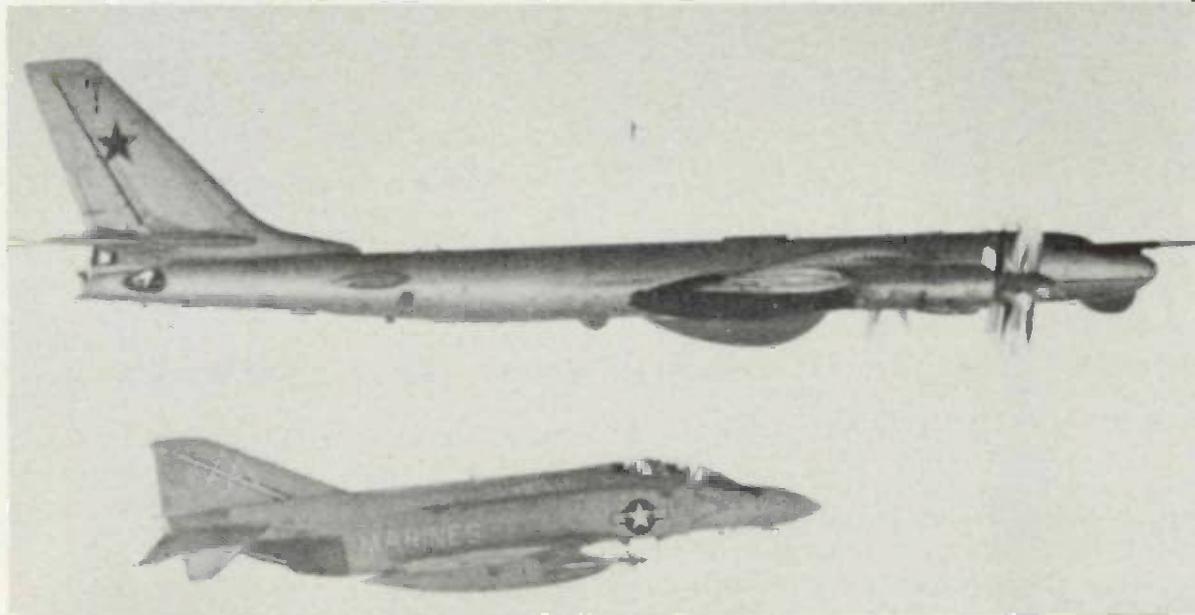
The tempo of training continued at a fast pace for VMFA-115 as it moved into 1984. There were exercises and deployments to Roosevelt Roads for missile firings (17-21 January); Nellis AFB, Nevada, for Red Flag 84-2 (4-18 February); NAS Lemoore, California, for ACM (17-24 March); Cherry Point for DACT (1-7 April); Patrick AFB for close air support (28 April-11 May); and an antiaircraft warfare exercise at Beaufort.

At the end of this hectic period, on 27 June, Lieutenant Colonel James D. Wojtasek took over as the new commanding officer of the Silver Eagles.

The latter half of 1984 was spent in preparation for a change-over to a dramatic new aircraft, the F/A-18 Hornet. This meant a transition from a combat-ready F-4S squadron to a squadron with no aircraft, as VMFA-115 transferred its F-4S planes to VMFA-122 and VMFA-251. Yet, while the squadron still had a few air-

*A Silver Eagle F-4J "escorts" a Soviet TU-95 Bear as it approaches the carrier task force.*

VMFA-115 Cruise Book Photo.



craft, there were mini-deployments for DACT to Tyn-dall AFB, Florida; a hurricane evacuation to NAS Dallas, Texas; DACT training at Eglin AFB, Florida; and low-altitude tactics training at Yuma. Finally, on 14 December, after 21 years, VMFA-115 flew its last F-4 Phantom II.

With the arrival of 1985 and no aircraft assigned, the squadron prepared for the eventual receipt of its F/A-18s. Pilots and maintenance personnel were sent to NAS Lemoore, California, for six months of training with the Navy's VFA-125, the first F/A-18 squadron.

The F/A-18 was a major technological advancement over the F-4 in terms of capability in the fighter attack mission. It could carry 17,000 pounds of ordnance, including conventional or laser-guided bombs, rockets (Walleye, Harm, and Maverick), and AIM-9L/M Sidewinder missiles, and it had an internal 20mm cannon. Able to attain a Mach 1.8 speed, it was effective at altitudes over 50,000 feet.<sup>18</sup> Further, in the words of Major General Richard M. Cooke, Commanding General, 2d MAW:

The guy who can turn best wins, and the F/A-18 turns best. It has great maneuver capabilities with very impressive navigation and ordnance delivery systems . . . . Pilots just becoming acquainted with the system consistently deliver their ordnance within six feet of a given target. Now, before the advent of the F/A-18, we have had aircraft that were capable of flying in either the attack or fighter mode, but making the transition was never that simple. In the F/A-18 all you have to do, literally, is flip a switch to convert from one role to another.<sup>19</sup>

As Marine pilots had hoped, the Hornet proved easier to fly and maintain than the F-4. Maintenance crews were enthusiastic: "It accepts repair parts easier . . . . The aircraft troubleshoots itself . . . it will tell you what's wrong with it."<sup>20</sup>

A transition as dramatic as this required long and extensive preparation. Major Douglas D. Tyler had arrived at Beaufort in the fall of 1982 to head up a "Hornet Introduction Team." It quickly became apparent that the hangars and the supply and maintenance facilities at Beaufort needed to be modernized. This led the group commander to set up a courier run to the contractor facilities on the west coast. Meanwhile, VMFA-115 was put in an old hangar while the structure was in the process of being converted.<sup>21</sup> Major Tyler also had to coordinate with the personnel monitors at Headquarters Marine Corps, in order to get the right ranks and grades trained at the proper time for starting up the reequipped squadron.<sup>22</sup>

Oplan 1-84, published in March 1984, covered all details of the transition, which was planned to last from July 1984 until September 1986. Finally, the



MCAS Beaufort Photo

*The first two F/A-18 Hornets were flown in for VMFA-115 by LtCol James D. Wojtasek, commanding officer of the squadron, left, and Col Robert L. Pappas, commanding officer of MAG-31, right. They were welcomed by MajGen Richard M. Cooke, Commanding General, 2d MAW, center, on 3 July 1985.*

preparation came to fruition. The first two F/A-18s reached VMFA-115 on 1 July, and additional shipments trickled in until the squadron had received its full complement of 14 by 9 September, the first east coast Marine squadron to be so equipped.\* A ceremony was held on 16 August to mark the official inauguration of the Hornet into the 2d MAW. Among those present were Lieutenant General Alfred M. Grey, Jr., Commanding General, FMFLant, and Major General Richard M. Cooke, Commanding General, 2d MAW.

Meanwhile the squadron, using six planes it had on hand, had already taken part in AAWEx 5-85 at Beaufort and some air combat training at Cherry Point. This deployment was a valuable experience, since it was conducted away from base.

September was spent in further air combat training in preparation for a full-scale deployment to Tyn-dall AFB, Panama City, Florida, which took place between 7 October and 18 October. A total of 12 Hornets, 18 officers, and 118 enlisted men moved there from Beaufort for DACT operations against F-15 and F-16 aircraft. It was an intensive program: 224 sorties and a total of 270 hours were flown in the equivalent of nine full working days. Commenting on the help-

\*Other squadrons' records show 3 July as the initial delivery date.



MCAS Beaufort Photo

*An inauguration ceremony for the new F/A-18 Hornets was held at MCAS Beaufort on 16 August 1985 featuring the Silver Eagles' complement of six of the new aircraft.*

fulness of his Air Force hosts, Lieutenant Colonel Wojtasek stated, "I flew more four-versus-four sorties on this deployment than I have flown in my previous 17 years of fighter-attack experience. Both the F-15 and F-16 pilots were more than willing to debrief and explain new tactics peculiar to single seat fighters."<sup>23</sup>

The remainder of 1985 saw continuing air-to-air and air-to-ground training, including a "Landing Zone Bluebird" demonstration of Marine firepower for the Honorable John H. Lehman, Jr., Secretary of the Navy.\* The year concluded with the squadron having successfully completed 1,416 flight hours during the final three months. The VMFA-115 command chronology noted, "The tempo of operations has been the highest recorded in recent times, and this with a brand new aircraft."<sup>24</sup>

As the year 1986 began, this heavy training schedule paid off: on 28 January the squadron was declared fully combat ready (C1 status). Personnel strength at this time stood at 30 officers and 319 enlisted men, with 14 Hornet aircraft. The level of excellence in the Silver Eagles was confirmed by an Inspector General team from Headquarters Marine Corps, during a visit 18-20 February, when VMFA-115 received the only grade of "Outstanding" in MAG-31.

During the period 28 April to 1 May the squadron took part in a Ninth Air Force exercise (Quick Thrust), training in both air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. This was immediately followed by an 11-aircraft deployment for 27 officers on 4 May to MCAS Yuma, Arizona. For two weeks there, VMFA-115 focused on

\*This demonstration consisted of air-to-ground simulated ordnance deliveries under a simulated high-threat environment in support of Camp Lejeune ground units.

low-altitude tactics, close air support, and deep air support during 268 sorties.

The next step for the squadron was to concentrate on air-to-air skills. Accordingly, eight aircraft and 14 pilots spent the period 11-23 June at NAS Oceana, Virginia. There they flew with Navy F-14s and Air Force F-15s on Fleet Air Defense missions.

A change of command took place soon after the Silver Eagles' return to Beaufort; Lieutenant Colonel Horace L. Logan III relieved Lieutenant Colonel Wojtasek on 1 July.\*\*

July and August saw the squadron busy with an air-to-air missile exercise, night flying, and air refueling practice.

As fall approached, VMFA-115 began gearing up for the high point of the year: a NATO deployment.<sup>25</sup> Planning and liaison with the 10th Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB) was limited to only the three weeks prior to departure, but the squadron was able to take off on schedule. Thus 12 of its Hornets (and two loaned from VMFA-251) left MCAS Beaufort on 2 September, refueled over the Atlantic from USAF KC-10 tankers, and landed in two cells: one at RAF Turnhouse, Edinburgh, Scotland, and one at Vandel AB, Denmark. When reunited two days later in Denmark, the squadron participated for three weeks in Exercise Northern Wedding/Bold Guard 86 with the 10th MAB. Missions included both air-to-air and air-to-ground sorties.

While there were some problems (such as communications with FACs), this period "provided an unparalleled opportunity to exercise the capabilities of

\*\*Lieutenant Colonel Logan had previously served with the squadron as a first lieutenant in Vietnam in 1970.



Photo courtesy of LtCol Horace L. Logan, III

*A Silver Eagle F/A-18 Hornet prepares for aerial refueling from a USAF KC-10 tanker during the squadron's trans-Atlantic deployment to Denmark in September of 1986.*

the F/A-18 aircraft as an Air Combat Element component of a Marine Amphibious Brigade engaged in large scale joint/combined operations." The Hornet "performed flawlessly" and demonstrated its "exceptional turning performance, low corner velocity, and the remarkable efficiency of its radar." These characteristics resulted in a low fuel consumption which enabled "three hour plus missions."

The Silver Eagles left Denmark on 26 September for NAS Sigonella, Italy, to take part in Exercise Display Determination 86. Leaving there on 6 October, the squadron flew to Ahkisar AB, Turkey. There they engaged in DACT with a Turkish fighter squadron. Rating the opposing pilots "very competent and aggressive," VMFA-115's report recommended: "Keep these guys on our side."

On 14 October the squadron left Turkey, stopped at Sigonella, and then, on 20 October, made the return flight across the Atlantic from NAS Rota, Spain.

It had been a demanding deployment. On the home front, MAG-31 and its other squadrons had

given the Silver Eagles maximum logistical support. The ground crews had worked long shifts, devoting 12-15 man hours per flight hour. VMFA-115's Logistics Department had planned and executed the embarkation of more than 300 Marines and 330,000 pounds of equipment. This necessitated 45 air-cargo movements to eight airfields in five countries, and was achieved "with zero user delay."<sup>26</sup>

This was an impressive performance by all hands. The Silver Eagles "had done what no other Marine Corps squadron had ever done, taking part in three major NATO exercises, two on the Northern flank and one on the Southern flank." They had flown "1,182.1 hours in six and a half weeks, working from a 'suitcase' . . . crossed the Atlantic twice non-stop and operated from five bases in four countries, primarily in an austere, expeditionary environment."

The remainder of 1986 was much more routine. Participation with the Ninth Air Force in Exercise Quick Thrust in October, air-to-air training in November, and deployments of some aircraft to Tyndall AFB, Florida, and Langley AFB, Virginia, in December con-

cluded "the busiest period in recent Silver Eagle history."<sup>27</sup>

The end of 1986 marked more than four decades of outstanding achievement by VMFA-115. The squadron saw extensive service in all the wars in which Marines were involved during those years; it carried out its assigned missions with distinction in the South Pacific, in the Philippines, in North China, in Korea, on Taiwan, in Vietnam, and in Thailand. In peace-

time training, whether in Japan, the United States, Hawaii, Okinawa, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, or Western Europe, it set a standard for the other fighter-attack squadrons of the Marine Corps. This record of exceptional performance was recognized by numerous citations and awards. Thus today's VMFA-115 Marines may look back on the squadron's proud history of accomplishment, and look forward to a promising future in the annals of Marine aviation.

# Notes

## Formation and Pacific Action

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section was derived from the VMF-115 World War II Diaries, (Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Md.), hereafter War Diary and date. Technical data on planes is taken throughout from Gordon Swanborough and Peter M. Bowers, *United States Navy Aircraft Since 1911* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2d ed., 1976).

1. War Diary, Jul43.
2. War Diary, Mar44.
3. Col Charles A. Lindbergh, *Autobiography of Values* (New York, Harcourt, 1978).

## Philippine Combat

1. Maj Charles W. Boggs, USMC, *Marine Aviation in the Philippines* (Washington: HistDiv, HQMC, 1951), p. 26, hereafter Boggs, *Philippines*.
2. FAdm William F. Halsey, USN, and LCdr J. Bryan III, USN, *Admiral Halsey's Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1947), p. 231.
3. Boggs, *Philippines*, p. 29.
4. Robert Sherrod, *History of Marine Corps Aviation in World War II* (Washington: Combat Forces Press, 1952), p. 275, hereafter Sherrod, *History*.
5. Boggs, *Philippines*, p. 31. This incorrectly lists Lindley as "Captain John..."
6. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
9. War Diary, 23Feb45, RptNo. 129.
10. War Diary, Feb45, Attachment.
11. Sherrod, *History*, p. 316.
12. Boggs, *Philippines*, p. 117. This action was repeated on 28Mar.
13. War Diary, 31May45.

## A Move to China

1. Henry I. Shaw, Jr., *The United States Marines in North China, 1945-1949* (Washington: HistBr, G-3 Div, HQMC, 1962), p. 1.
2. Col Fred J. Gilhuly, Comments on draft ms, 21Oct86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

3. Col Harry B. Hooper, Comments on draft ms, 11Nov86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

## Hawaiian and Stateside Duty

1. Col Gordon H. Knott, Comments on draft ms, 7Oct86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
2. *Jane's All the World's Aircraft 1949-50*, (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd.) p. 228c, hereafter *Jane's Aircraft* and date.
3. Col John B. Maas, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 22Sep86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.). Confirmed by telecon with LtCol Boyd O. Whitney, 16Oct86.
4. VMF-115 Historical Diary, (Washington National Records Center), hereafter HistD and date. HistD, 1Jul49-31Dec49.
5. HistD, 1Jan50-30Jun50.
6. HistD, 1Jul50-31Dec50.

## Korean Combat

In this period the official records of VMF-115 were called Command Diaries (Washington National Records Center), hereafter ComdD and date.

1. LtCol Thomas M. Coles, Comments on draft ms, 14Dec86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
2. ComdD, Jun52, App D, Ordnance Dept. Rpt, para 3.
3. See also MAG-33 ComdD, Jun52, App 3, p. 3, and Tab D, p. 21.
3. Maj William J. Sambito, USMC, *A History of Marine Attack Squadron 311* (Washington: Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, 1978), pp. 23-24, hereafter Sambito, *VMF-311*.
4. Col John M. Verdi, USMCR, "The First Hundred" (unpublished ms, 1953), Chap VI, pp. 1-3.
5. Sambito, *VMF-311*, p. 24.
6. ComdD, Jul52, Ordnance Appendix.
7. LtCol Pat Meid, USMC, and Maj James L. Yingling, USMC, *Operations in West Korea—U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, 1950-1953*, vol V (Washington: HistDiv, HQMC, 1972), pp. 177-178, hereafter Meid et al., *OpsWestKorea*.
8. Sambito, *VMF-311*, p. 26.
9. ComdD, Apr53. Chronological narrative for 17Apr.

10. Meid et al., *OpsWestKorea*, p. 334. The VMF-115 ComdD makes no mention of this.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
12. Peter B. Mersky, *U.S. Marine Corps Aviation, 1912 to the Present* (Annapolis: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co. of America, 1938), pp. 150 and 183, hereafter Mersky, *USMC Aviation*.
13. Meid et al., *OpsWestKorea*, pp. 376 and 578.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 375.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 385 and 389.
16. Col Harry B. Hooper, Comments on draft ms, 11Nov86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

#### Back to the States

Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section was derived from *The Flight Jacket* (MCAS El Toro, California), hereafter *Flight Jacket*. This is on microfilm at MCHC, Washington, D.C.

1. *Flight Jacket*, 27Apr56.
2. Nicholas M. Williams, "VMF(AW)-115," *Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society* (Santa Ana, California), Summer78, p. 132, hereafter Williams, *Journal*.
3. "History of MAG-33," Unit File, RefSec, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC.
4. *Flight Jacket*, 20Jul56.
5. *Ibid.*, 10Aug56.
6. *Ibid.*, 17Aug56.
7. *Ibid.*, 10Sep56.
8. LtGen Leslie E. Brown, Comments on draft ms, 4Nov86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
9. *Flight Jacket*, 9Nov56.
10. *Flight Jacket*, 23Nov56.
11. *Ibid.*, 4Jan57.
12. Col Stoddard G. Cortelyou, Comments on draft ms, 19Sep86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
13. *Flight Jacket*, 12Apr57.
14. Cortelyou, op. cit., Comments.
15. *Flight Jacket*, 15Feb57.
16. *Ibid.*, 7Jun57.
17. Williams, *Journal*, p. 132.
18. *Flight Jacket*, 6Dec57 and 17Jan58.
4. CO, MAG-11, Special Report to CMC, dtd 7Apr59 (MAG-11 File, RefSec, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC), p. 4. This account covers the period 24Aug58 to 11Dec58, the Taiwan assignment for VMF(AW)-115. No squadron ComdD exists for this period.
5. ComdD MAG-11, 1-30Sep58, App D, p. 1. The VMF(AW)-115 section gives the departure date as 6Sep58, App J, p. 1.
6. CO, MAG-11, op. cit., p. 14.
7. Langstaff, op. cit., Comments.
8. Mersky, *USMC Aviation*, p. 196.
9. ComdD, op. cit., App J, p. 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
12. ComdD MAG-11, 1Feb to 16Mar59, App E, p. 2.
13. VMF(AW)-115 MRoll (RefSec, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter MRoll with month and year. MRoll, Mar59.
14. Williams, *Journal*, p. 133.
15. *Windsock* (MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina), 25Sep59, p. 1, and 2Oct59, p. 1, hereafter *Windsock*. This base newspaper is the main source of information for the squadron from 4May59 to 18Jun60.
16. *Ibid.*, 6Nov59, p. 8.
17. *Ibid.*, 26Feb60, p. 1, and 11Mar60, p. 1.
18. *Ibid.*, 29Apr60, p. 1. The F4D-1 had an empty weight of 16,024 pounds and a maximum gross weight of 25,000 pounds.
19. MRolls, Apr-Jun60.
20. *Ibid.*, Jun-Jul60.
21. *Windsock*, 11Aug61, p. 4. This gives the date of return to Cherry Point as 1Jul61, p. 1.
22. *Ibid.*, 1Sep61.
23. *Ibid.*, 1Dec61, p. 3.
24. *Ibid.*, 9Mar62, p. 1.
25. *Ibid.*, 31Aug62, p. 8.
26. *Ibid.*, 14Sep62, p. 8.
27. MRolls, Dec62 and Jan63.
28. Col Charles V. V. Smillie, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 7Oct86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
29. *Windsock*, 11Jan63, p. 1.
30. *Ibid.*, 25Jan63, p. 1.
31. Smillie, op. cit., Comments.
32. *Windsock*, 17May63, p. 1.
33. *Ibid.*, 27Mar64, p. 1.
34. Col Don W. Galbreath ltr to Dir, MCHist&Mus, dtd 10Sep86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
35. *Windsock*, 28May64, p. 3.
36. *Ibid.*, 5Feb65, p. 8, and 12Feb65, p. 4.
37. MRolls, May-Jun65.

#### Japan-U.S. Shuttle

1. *Tori Teller* (MCAS Iwakuni, Japan), 22Mar58, p. 1. The base newspaper gives the arrival date as 11Mar.
2. LtCol Harold A. Langstaff, Jr., Comments on draft ms, 1Dec86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
3. Col Robert D. Heinl, Jr., USMC, *Soldiers of the Sea, The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1962), p. 595.

## Vietnam Combat

In this period the terminology for the official records of squadrons changed to Command Chronology (History and Museums Division, HQMC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter ComdC and date.

1. Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson, USMC, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington: Hist&Mus Div, HQMC, 1978), p. 149, hereafter Shulimson et al., *Vietnam*.

2. MAG-11 ComdC, Oct65.

3. III MAF, *Sea Tiger*, 14Jun66, p. 6.

4. Hist&MusDiv, HQMC, *The Marines in Vietnam, 1954-1973* (Washington, 1974), p. 181.

5. "Marines at Work," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Feb67, p. 3.

6. VMFA-115 ComdC, Dec67.

7. BGen Edwin H. Simmons, "Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam, 1968," in U.S. Naval Institute, *Naval Review, 1970* (Annapolis, 1970), p. 299.

8. ComdC, Jan68, p. 2.

9. There were also close escapes, such as that of Capt Douglas P. Light when an enemy incendiary .50-caliber round cut through his flight suit, parachute harness straps, pilot's seat, and canopy during a bombing run. Unharmed, he returned to Chu Lai. (III MAF, *Sea Tiger*, Vol. IV, No. 28, 12Jul68, p. 2).

10. ComdC, Aug68.

11. ComdC, May69.

12. LtCol Donald P. Bowen, Comments on draft ms, 15Sep86, (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

13. ComdC, Feb70, Sec. 2.

14. ComdC, 1-23Aug70, p. 2.

15. ComdC, Dec70, Pt. IV, Sec. 2.

16. ComdC, Feb71, p. 2. As might be expected, there are minor variations plus additional details shown in the totals contained in higher-echelon reports. MAG-11 reported: "VMFA-115, completing its last combat mission on 22 February 1971, stood down the same day, concluding three successful tours in the Republic of Vietnam (11 October 1965-11 January 1966, 11 April 1966-14 February 1967, 16 May 1967-22 February 1971). The squadron compiled 34,480 combat flight hours; 30,083 combat sorties; and dropped 58,345 tons of ordnance. Total bomb damage assessments credited the F4B squadron with more than 668 enemy killed; 1,103 secondary explosions; and 883 secondary fires. VMFA-115 also destroyed 3,062 bunkers; 65 bridges; 167 crew-served weapons; 55 vehicles; 270 fighting positions; and cut 475 roads." See CG, 3d MAB, ltr to SecNav, recommendation for Navy

Unit Commendation for MAG-11, 15Jun71, para 19, in MAG-11 file (RefSec, Hist&MusDiv, HQMC).

17. U.S. Marine Corps, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Headquarters Staff Study: "Operations of U.S. Marine Forces, Southeast Asia, 1Jul71-31Mar73," Sec 2, pp. 1 and 19.

18. LtCol Kent A. McFerren intvw, 30Jun72, Tape 5053 (Oral Hist Coll, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter McFerren intvw.

19. McFerren intvw.

## Thailand Deployment

1. 1st MAW, "The Rose Garden Story," May72-Sep73, dtd 6Jan 75, (MCHC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter "Rose Garden."

2. Smillie, op. cit., Comments.

3. McFerren intvw.

4. Col Aubrey W. Talbert Jr. intvw, Aug74, Tape 5071 (Oral Hist Coll, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), hereafter Talbert intvw. Col Talbert was commander of MAG-15 from 10Aug72 to 24Jul73.

5. McFerren intvw.

6. Talbert intvw.

7. Mersky, *USMC Aviation*, p. 281.

8. ComdC, 1Jan72-30Jun72, p. 3.

9. ComdC, Aug72 p. 3.

10. LtGen Andrew W. O'Donnell, Comments on draft ms, 23Oct 86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

11. ComdC, Oct72, Tab C.

12. "Rose Garden," pp. 1-15.

13. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun73, Tab D.

## Japan Again—U.S. Again

The principal source for this period is the ComdC of VMFA-115.

1. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun76, pt. IV.

2. LtCol Richard H. Glass, Comments on draft ms, 15Oct86 (Comment File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).

3. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec76, pt. IV.

4. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec77, pt. IV.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun78, p. 5.

7. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec78, p. 1.

8. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun79, pt. III, 1a.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

10. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun80, p. 4.

11. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec80, encl 5, AAR, CO VMFA-115 to CG 2d MAW, 3Jan81, p. 1.

12. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun81, encl 1, AAR, CO VMFA-115 to CG 2d MAW, 5Feb81, p. 1.

13. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec81, p. 5.
14. Ibid., End of Cruise Report, pp. 1-2.
15. *Jane's Aircraft*, 1978-9, p. 374.
16. ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun83, encl 2, p. 4.
17. Ibid., encl 3, p. 1.
18. *Jet Stream* (MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina), Vol. 27, No. 33, 23Aug85, p. 7.
19. MajGen Richard M. Cooke, intvw, *Amphibious Warfare Review*, (Alexandria, Va.), Vol. 3, No. 2, Nov85, p. 12.
20. Bob Jordan, "Hornet's Nest East," *Leatherneck*, Jan86, p. 39.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 60.
23. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec85, AAR, p. 1.
24. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec85, p. 3.
25. Facts and quotes for the entire NATO deployment are from VMFA-115 AAR for Exercises Northern Wedding/Bold Guard/Display Determination, dtd 3 and 6Nov86 (Unit File, MCHC, Washington, D.C.).
26. ComdC, 1Jul-31Dec86, pp. 3-5.
27. Ibid.

# Appendix A

## Chronology

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- 1Jul43 Organized at Santa Barbara, California, as Marine Fighting Squadron 115, MBDAG-42.
- 12Feb44 Sailed on board USS *Pocomoke* (AV-9).
- 4Mar44 Arrived at Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides.
- 18Apr44 Flight echelon moved to Bougainville enroute to Emirau.
- 20Apr44 Ground echelon arrived at Emirau, assigned to MAG-12, 1st MAW, FMF.
- 2May44 Flight echelon arrived at Emirau.
- 3Dec44 Arrived at Leyte, Philippine Islands.
- 11-14Mar45 Moved to Zamboanga, Philippine Islands.
- 21Oct45 Left for China, arriving at Peiping 25Oct45.
- 1Apr46 Reassigned to MAG-24, 1st MAW, FMF.
- 30Dec46 Reassigned to MAG-15, AirFMFPac.
- 8Feb47 Completed deployment to MCAS Ewa, Oahu, Hawaii.
- 15Mar49 Sailed on board USS *Boxer* (CV-21) for San Diego, California.
- 1Apr49 Flight echelon arrived at MCAS Edenton, North Carolina.
- 6Apr49 Reassigned to MAG-15, 2d MAW.
- 1Aug49 Redesignated Marine Fighter Squadron 115.
- 1Apr50 Moved to MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina.
- 13Aug50 Reassigned to MAG-11, 2d MAW.
- 11-23Oct50 Deployed to NAS Guantanamo, Cuba.
- 20Nov50-
- 10Aug51 Participated in operations aboard the USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CV-42) and USS *Tarawa* (CV-40).
- 15Jan52 Embarked by train from MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, enroute to NAS San Diego, California.
- 19Jan52 Arrived at NAS San Diego, California.
- 27Jan52 Sailed from NAS San Diego, California, to sea and foreign shore duty aboard USS *Bataan* (CVL-29).
- 11Feb52 Arrived at USNB Yokosuka, Japan disembarked and entrained for Itami AFB, Japan, arriving 12Feb.
- 20Feb52 Reassigned to MAG-33, 1st MAW, AirFMFPac.
- 29Feb52 Korean combat operations began.
- 27Apr55 Embarked by air from Yongil-man K-3 Airfield, Korea, and departed for USNS Iwakuni, Japan.
- 13May55 Embarked on board the USS *Princeton* (CVS-37) at Iwakuni, Japan, and departed for the U.S.
- 31May55 Disembarked at San Diego, California, and deployed to MCAS El Toro, Santa Ana. Reassigned to MAG-33, AirFMFPac.
- 15Sep55 Reassigned from AirFMFPac to the 3d MAW.
- 31Dec56 Redesignated Marine Fighter Squadron (All Weather) 115.
- 11Feb58 Deployed to NAS North Island, San Diego. Embarked on board the USS *Windham Bay* (CVU-92) and sailed for duty in Japan.
- 1Mar58 Arrived at NAS Atsugi, Japan, and disembarked. Reassigned to MAG-11, 1st MAW.

- 2Sep58 Ground echelon departed NAS Atsugi and arrived at USNB Yokosuka, Japan. Sailed for duty on Taiwan on board USS *Windham County* (LST-1170).
- 6Sep58 Flight echelon arrived at Pingtung North, Taiwan, to reinforce the island's air defense during the crisis over the Formosa Straits.
- 14Mar59 Ground echelon departed Pingtung North, Taiwan, for Kachsiung. Sailed on board the USS *Plumas County* (LST 1083) en route to USNB Yokosuka, Japan.
- 22Mar59 Arrived at USNB Yokosuka and disembarked for duty at NAS Atsugi, Japan.
- 4May59 Reassigned to MAG-24, 2d MAW, AirFMFLant, at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina.
- 9Jun60 Deployment to Japan began.
- 18Jun60 Reassigned to MAG-11, 1st MAW. Based at NAS Atsugi, Japan.
- 1Jul61 Reassigned to MAG-24, 2d MAW, AirFMFLant, at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina.
- 19Apr-27 Aug Deployed to Mediterranean on USS *Independence* (CVA-62).
- 5Dec62 Deployment to NAS Leeward Point, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for missile crisis.
- 1Jan64 Redesignated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115.
- 7Jul65 Reassigned to MAG-13, 1st MAW, FMFPac, at NAS Atsugi, Japan.
- 12-26Jul65 Deployed to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan, in preparation for movement to Republic of Vietnam.
- 30Sep-14Oct65 Deployed by elements to Da Nang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam.
- 10Oct65 Reassigned to MAG-11, 1st MAW, at Da Nang Air Base.
- 31Dec65-16Jan66 Returned by elements to MCAS Iwakuni. Reassigned to MAG-13 on 1Jan66.
- 26Feb66 Advance echelon transferred from MCAS Iwakuni to Naha AFB, Okinawa; training began 6Mar.
- 14Apr66 Relieved VMFA-314 at Da Nang and began second Vietnam tour. Reassigned to MAG-11 on 15Apr.
- 15Feb67 Departed Da Nang for MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. Reassigned to MAG-15.
- 14-15May67 Flight echelon deployed to Chu Lai, Vietnam, and began third Vietnam tour. Reassigned to MAG-13.
- 24Aug70 Deployed to Da Nang. Reassigned to MAG-11.
- 1Mar71 Returned to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. Reassigned to MAG-15.
- 6Apr72 Deployed to Da Nang for fourth Vietnam tour. Reassigned to MAG-15 (Forward).
- 16Jun72 Deployed to Nam Phong, Thailand, as part of MAG-15.
- 31Aug73 Left Nam Phong and deployed to Naha AFB, Okinawa.
- 17Dec73 Deployed to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan.
- Oct76 Deployed to Amberley, Australia.
- 22Jul-11Aug77 Deployed to MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina. Reassigned to MAG-31, 2d MAW, FMFLant, 10Aug.
- 30Aug-16 Sep79 Deployed to USNS Keflavik, Iceland, via Goose Bay, Labrador.
- 25Oct-16Dec80 Embarked on board USS *Forrestal* (CV-59) for cruise to Caribbean.

- 1Mar81 Embarked on board USS *Forrestal* (CV-59) for Mediterranean cruise.
- 18-19Aug81 Engagements with Libyan MiGs.
- 15Sep81 Returned to MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina.
- 1Jul85 VMFA-115 received first F/A-18 Hornet planes.
- 25Sep-
- 20Oct86 Deployed to Denmark, Italy, and Turkey in NATO exercises.

## Plane Chronology

Jul43	.....	SNJ-4
Jul43	.....	F4U-1 and FG-1
Jul44	.....	FG-1A
Dec44	.....	F4U-1D
Apr45	.....	FG-1D
Sep45	.....	F4U-4
Sep49	.....	F9F-2
Dec50	.....	F9F-2B
Aug51	.....	F9F-4
Apr53	.....	F9F-5
Apr55	.....	F4D (F-6A)
Sep63	.....	F-4B
Aug75	.....	F-4J
Aug82	.....	F-4S
Jul85	.....	F/A-18

## Appendix B

# Commanding Officers

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Maj John S. MacLaughlin	1Jul43 – 16Jul43
Maj Joseph J. Foss	17Jul43 – 20Sep44
Maj John H. King, Jr.	21Sep44 – 29May45
Maj John S. Payne	30May45 – 17Aug45
Maj Thomas M. Coles	18Aug45 – 8Mar46
Capt Fred J. Gilhuly (acting)	9Mar46 – 14May46
Maj John E. Reynolds	15May46 – 16Aug46
Maj Harry B. Hooper	17Aug46 – 6Nov46
LtCol Gordon H. Knott	7Nov46 – 8Jun47
Maj Thomas O. Bales	9Jun47 – 31Jul47
LtCol Monfurd K. Peyton	1Aug47 – 10May48
Maj James A. Feeley, Jr.	11May48 – 27Feb49
Maj Richard R. Amerine	28Feb49 – 26Oct50
LtCol Robert G. Owens, Jr.	27Oct50 – 23Aug51
LtCol Thomas M. Coles	24Aug51 – 19May52
Maj John W. Zuber (acting)	20May52 – 5Jun52
LtCol Robert C. Armstead	6Jun52 – 15Jul52
Maj Wallace G. Wethe (acting)	16Jul52 – 17Aug52
LtCol Royce W. Coln	18Aug52 – 27Sep52
LtCol John B. Maas, Jr.	28Sep52 – 31Jan53
LtCol Stoddard G. Cortelyou	1Feb53 – 30Mar53
LtCol Joe L. Warren	31Mar53 – 4Jun53
LtCol Lynn H. Stewart	5Jun53 – 31Aug53
LtCol James E. Johnson (acting)	1Sep53 – 28Sep53
LtCol Lynn H. Stewart	29Sep53 – 4Oct53
LtCol James E. Johnson	5Oct53 – 28Feb54
LtCol Robert O. White	1Mar54 – 5Jun54
LtCol Dean S. Hartley, Jr.	6Jun54 – 13Jul54
Maj William I. Taylor	14Jul54 – 16Jul55
Maj James T. Pearce (acting)	17Jul55 – 31Aug55
LtCol John S. Flickinger	1Sep55 – 7May56
Maj Leslie E. Brown (acting)	8May56 – 17Jun56
LtCol Ralph H. Spanjer	18Jun56 – 31May57
LtCol Harold A. Langstaff, Jr.	1Jun57 – 2May59
LtCol Howard J. Finn	3May59 – 8Aug59
Maj Robert S. Hemstad	9Aug59 – 28Apr60
Maj George J. Collins (acting)	29Apr60 – 17Jun60
LtCol Robert S. Hemstad	18Jun60 – 4Jul61
LtCol John N. Swartley	5Jul61 – 31Aug61
LtCol William L. Atwater	1Sep61 – 7Sep62
LtCol Jerry B. Smith	8Sep62 – 9May63
LtCol Don W. Galbreath	10May63 – 21May64
LtCol Clement T. Corcoran	22May64 – 19Dec64
LtCol Clyde R. Jarrett	20Dec64 – 22Feb66
LtCol Dean C. Macho	23Feb66 – 7Aug66
Maj Larry R. VanDeusen	8Aug66 – 23Jan67

Maj Guy R. Campo	24Jan67—27Jul67
LtCol Kenny C. Palmer	28Jul67—4Oct67
LtCol Richard E. Carey	5Oct67—16Jan68
LtCol Gerald W. Vaughan	17Jan68—12Aug68
Maj John I. Hudson	13Aug68—27Nov68
LtCol Robert R. Norton	28Nov68—1Jul69
LtCol Edwin C. Paige, Jr.	2Jul69—31Dec69
LtCol Donald P. Bowen	1Jan70—1Mar70
LtCol John V. Cox	2Mar70—21Jul70
LtCol Michael Mura	22Jul70—3Mar71
LtCol Raymond R. Powell	4Mar71—8Dec71
LtCol Kent A. McFerren	9Dec71—23Jun72
Maj Gerald DeJong (acting)	24Jun72—22Jul72
LtCol Henry C. Ivy, Jr.	23Jul72—1Jul73
LtCol Charles V. V. Smillie, Jr.	2Jul73—19Jun74
Maj Alec Gillespie (acting)	20Jun74—15Jul74
LtCol Harvey D. Bradshaw	16Jul74—4Aug75
LtCol Donald D. Wilson	5Aug75—16Jun76
LtCol Richard H. Glass	17Jun76—2Jun77
Maj Patrick J. Jones (acting)	3Jun77—29Aug77
LtCol Robert S. Morris, Jr.	30Aug77—14Dec78
LtCol Larry B. Hannah	15Dec78—14Dec79
LtCol Jack B. Hammond	15Dec79—16Oct81
LtCol James A. Davis	17Oct81—18Apr83
LtCol John C. Church	19Apr83—27Jun84
LtCol James D. Wojtasek	28Jun84—30Jun86
LtCol Horace L. Logan III	1Jul86—

# Appendix C

## Honors

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### PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION STREAMER WITH TWO BRONZE STARS

PHILIPPINES

1944-1945

VIETNAM

1965-1967

1968

### NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION STREAMER WITH ONE SILVER STAR

PHILIPPINES

1945

KOREA

1952-1953

VIETNAM

1967-1968

1970

1970-1971

1972

### MERITORIOUS UNIT STREAMER WITH ONE BRONZE STAR

VIETNAM

1968-1970

1980-1981

### ASIATIC-PACIFIC CAMPAIGN STREAMER WITH ONE SILVER STAR

### WORLD WAR II VICTORY STREAMER

### CHINA SERVICE STREAMER

### NATIONAL DEFENSE SERVICE STREAMER WITH ONE BRONZE STAR

### KOREAN SERVICE STREAMER WITH FOUR BRONZE STARS

### ARMED FORCES EXPEDITIONARY STREAMER WITH ONE BRONZE STAR

### VIETNAM SERVICE STREAMER WITH TWO SILVER AND FOUR BRONZE STARS

### PHILIPPINE LIBERATION STREAMER WITH TWO BRONZE STARS

PHILIPPINE REPUBLIC, PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION STREAMER

KOREAN<sup>2</sup> PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION STREAMER

VIETNAM<sup>2</sup> CROSS OF GALLANTRY<sup>2</sup> WITH PALM STREAMER

<sup>2</sup>VIETNAM MERITORIOUS UNIT CITATION CIVIL ACTIONS STREAMER

# Appendix D

## Citations

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The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION to

### MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP TWELVE

for service as set forth in the following

#### CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism in action against enemy Japanese forces in the Philippine Islands from December 3, 1944, to March 9, 1945. Operating from the captured airfield at Tacloban, Marine Aircraft Group TWELVE employed Corsairs as bombing planes to strike destructive blows at escorted enemy convoys and to prevent the Japanese from reinforcing their beleaguered garrisons by landing troops and supplies on western Leyte. Undeterred by intense aerial opposition and accurate antiaircraft fire, these pilots provided effective cover for ground troops, shore installations and Fleet units and, on several occasions, when ground troops were held up by heavy enemy fire, bombed and strafed Japanese positions, thereby enabling our land forces to advance unopposed. As hostile resistance lessened on Leyte, Marine Aircraft Group TWELVE expanded its sphere of operations to strike at enemy garrisons on the Visayan Islands and southern Luzon and to support the Lingayen beachheads, neutralizing the enemy's lines of communication, his harbors, airfields and escape routes, and ranging far from base to provide aerial cover for ships of the SEVENTH Fleet and merchant-ship convoys operating in the area. During February and the early part of March, this courageous Group gave direct support to guerrilla units fighting on Cebu Island and aided in their rapid advance and the ultimate neutralization of the island. Well supported by skilled and dependable ground personnel, the gallant pilots of Marine Aircraft Group TWELVE caused the Japanese severe losses in airplanes, installations and surface craft, contributing to the achievement of air superiority so essential to the success of the campaign and thereby upholding the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

For the President:

/s/ FRANCIS P. MATTHEWS  
Secretary of the Navy

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUPS, ZAMBOANGA consisting of the following Marine Aircraft Groups:

Marine Aircraft Group TWELVE	March 10-June 30, 1945
Marine Aircraft Group THIRTY TWO	March 16-June 30, 1945
Marine Aircraft Group TWENTY FOUR	April 11-June 30, 1945

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service and outstanding heroism in support of elements of the Eighth Army during operations against enemy Japanese forces on Mindanao, Philippine Islands, and in the Sulu Archipelago. After landing with the assault forces, MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUPS, ZAMBOANGA, effected wide coverage of battle areas in flights made extremely hazardous by dense jungles, precipitous cloud-obscured mountains and adverse weather conditions. The gallant officers and men of these Groups penetrated hostile defenses to press relentless attacks and reduce vital enemy targets, disrupt communications and troop concentrations, and destroy ammunition and fuel dumps despite intense antiaircraft fire over Japanese objectives. The vital service rendered during these campaigns in providing convoy cover, fighter defense and close aerial support of ground forces is evidence of the courage, skill and devotion to duty of the pilots, aircrewmembers and ground personnel operating as a well coordinated team, and reflects the highest credit upon MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUPS, ZAMBOANGA, and the United States Naval Service. All personnel attached to and serving with Marine Aircraft Groups 12, 32 or 24 during their respective periods of service as designated are authorized to wear the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION ribbon.

/s/FRANCIS P. MATTHEWS  
Secretary of the Navy

PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION. The President of the Republic of Korea takes profound pleasure in citing for outstanding and superior performance of duty

THE FIRST MARINE AIRCRAFT WING  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

The First Marine Aircraft Wing has distinguished itself in support of United Nations Forces in Korea from 27 February 1951 to 11 June 1953. During this period Marine aircraft flew over 80,000 combat sorties braving intense opposition to strike enemy fortifications, weapons and logistical installations throughout North Korea. These extensive combat operations, often conducted in hazardous weather, have provided United Nations' ground forces with unparalleled close air support and have inflicted heavy casualties and tremendous damage on enemy forces. Flying from forward Korean bases and from naval aircraft carriers, Marine aircraft have continually harassed enemy communication and transportation systems, successfully curtailing the resupply of hostile front line troops. The exceptional achievements of the officers and men of the First Marine Aircraft Wing have materially assisted the Republic of Korea in its fight for freedom. Their outstanding performance of duty reflects great credit upon themselves and is in accord with the highest traditions of military service.

The citation carries with it the right to wear the Presidential Unit Citation Ribbon by each individual member of the First Marine Aircraft Wing who served in Korea during the stated period.

/s/SYNGMAN RHEE  
President

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in commending the

FIRST MARINE AIRCRAFT WING, REINFORCED

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service during operations against enemy aggressor forces in Korea from 1 August 1952 to 27 July 1953. Flying more than 45,000 combat sorties against determined opposition during this period, the First Marine Aircraft Wing, Reinforced, struck repeatedly and effectively at enemy troops, fortifications, logistical installations and lines of communication throughout North Korea. These extensive combat operations provided friendly ground forces with decisive close air support during such battles as Bunker Hill, The Hook, Reno, Carson, Vegas, Berlin and East Berlin, and inflicted heavy casualties and tremendous damage upon the enemy. Operating from naval aircraft carriers and from forward Korean bases, Marine aircraft continually harassed enemy communication and transportation systems, curtailing the movement of hostile troops to the front lines, and provided the air defense of South Korea. The notable record achieved by the First Marine Aircraft Wing, Reinforced, is an eloquent tribute to the resourcefulness, courage and stamina of all her gallant officers and men. Their inspiring and unyielding devotion to duty in the fulfillment of these vital tasks reflect the highest credit upon themselves and the United States Naval Service.

All personnel attached to and serving with the First Marine Aircraft Wing, Reinforced, during the above period, or any part thereof, are hereby authorized to wear the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION RIBBON. This includes all organic units and the following reinforcing units: Construction Battalion Maintenance Unit 1; 1st 90mm Anti-Aircraft Artillery Gun Battalion; and Ground Control Approach Unit 41M.

/s/CHARLES S. THOMAS  
Secretary of the Navy

CERTIFICATE OF COMMENDATION. Commanding General, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing,  
takes pleasure in commending

MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 115  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for

Outstanding performance of duty and meritorious achievement by the members of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 in support of combat activities in the Republic of Vietnam during the period 15 May 1967 to 1 June 1967. The outstanding close air support supplied by the members of this Squadron, coupled with the exemplary manner in which they have brought about the destruction of enemy supplies, supply and infiltration routes, ammunition dumps and fortresses is highly commendable. The aggressive spirit which pervades in this Squadron reflects credit upon each member and denotes the professionalism, initiative, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty that exists throughout this Squadron. The teamwork, ingenuity and dedication by the members of this Squadron have been in keeping with the highest standards of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing.

/s/LOUIS B. ROBERTSHAW  
Major General, U.S. Marine Corps

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION to the

FIRST MARINE AIRCRAFT WING

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces in the Republic of Vietnam from 11 May 1965 to 15 September 1967. Throughout this period, the First Marine Aircraft Wing, operating in I and II Corps tactical zones of the Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnam, and adjacent waters, sought out and destroyed determined enemy forces and provided combat air support to ground forces of the Free World and the Republic of Vietnam. Participating in 195 major operations, and thousands of other attacks, the Wing continuously and aggressively carried the battle to the elusive enemy in bitterly contested actions. Operations such as Double Eagle, Harvest Moon, Starlite, Hastings, Prairie, Union, Hickory, Cochise, and Swift, reflect the high degree of superior airmanship, valor, devotion to duty and professionalism exhibited by personnel of the Wing. Although heavily committed to increased combat operations, the Wing developed and successfully employed new weapons, tactics, and procedures against the hard-core communist forces with gratifying results. Through the aggressive actions of the Wing, military and political victories were denied the insurgent communist forces, thereby providing a more stable atmosphere for the legally constituted Government of the Republic of Vietnam. The establishment and logistical support of many separate airfields throughout the I Corps tactical zone and the vital air supply support provided the III Marine Amphibious Force and its allied ground forces, was a tribute to the resourcefulness and determination of the Wing. This dependable support was provided under the most trying and difficult combat conditions. Flying in fair weather and foul, against a fanatical, well-armed enemy, the uncommon courage and intrepidity of the Marine pilots and supporting Wing personnel, acting in a concerted team effort, contributed to another glorious chapter in an already illustrious history. The valor, devotion to duty, aggressive spirit, professionalism, and ingenuity of the entire First Marine Aircraft Wing in battle against a well trained, dangerous, and determined enemy, reflected the highest degree of heroism and exemplary performance, and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

/s/LYNDON B. JOHNSON

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION to

MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP THIRTEEN

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service while based at Chu Lai, Republic of Vietnam from 15 September 1967 to 30 April 1968. With its efforts directed toward air-to-ground ordnance delivery in support of U.S. Marine and Allied ground operations in Vietnam, Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN carried on combat operations during all types of weather conditions utilizing the exceptionally versatile F4B aircraft. Dedicated and skillful aircrews of the Group amassed 14,230 combat sorties and delivered 28,393 tons of ordnance on enemy positions while providing close air support for 60 major operations. The exceptional airmanship and accurate ordnance delivery of these aircrews accounted for 751 confirmed enemy dead, 3,581 structures destroyed, 1,242 bunkers destroyed, 5,420 meters of trenchline destroyed, 103 AAA/AW positions and 94 rocket and mortar positions destroyed. During the *Tet* Offensive which began on 31 January 1968, the officers and men of Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN displayed remarkable courage, dogged determination, and superb teamwork. Despite extremely poor weather associated with monsoon rains, the Group's aircraft launched on numerous emergency missions to aid Marine and Allied forces during Operation Hue City and delivered 125 tons of ordnance with pinpoint accuracy on the entrenched enemy gunners. During the siege of Khe Sanh a North Vietnamese Army of 40,000 completely surrounded the small airfield. Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN provided essential close air support throughout the siege, often delivering ordnance right up to the airfield's perimeter to stop enemy forces threatening to breach the wire. Despite the heavy enemy antiaircraft fire, low ceilings and poor visibility in the mountainous terrain, the valiant crews delivered their ordnance precisely on target to protect their fellow Marines. This outstanding close air support was culminated with Operation Pegasus in March, allowing friendly forces to link up with the beleaguered Marines at Khe Sanh. Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN aircrews delivered 1,000 tons of ordnance in support of Operation Kingfisher in and immediately north of the Demilitarized Zone, resulting in pinpoint destruction of heavily camouflaged North Vietnamese Army rocket, mortar and artillery positions which were heavily bombarding Marine ground forces in the Con Thien—Gio Linh—Dong Ha—Cam Lo quadrangle. Through the Civic Action and Personal Response Programs, Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN played an important and vital role in the war to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. The Group provided materials and supervisory assistance to the Vietnamese for the completion of numerous public improvements, including a vigorously pursued sanitation and hygiene program, and building projects. The people were provided with helpful new ideas for increasing their standard of living through numerous small industrial and agricultural projects. Money, clothing, school and household supplies were donated to the Vietnamese by the Group and also by interested persons in the United States through the efforts of Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN personnel. By its unparalleled accomplishments, unexcelled teamwork, and exceptional professional competence, Ma-

rine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN contributed substantially to the success of American efforts in the Republic of Vietnam. Its exceptional accomplishments were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and United States Naval Service.

All personnel attached to and serving with Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN consisting of the following units, during the period 15 September 1967 to 30 April 1968 are authorized to wear the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION Ribbon:

... Marine Fighter-Attack Squadron 115 ...

/s/JOHN H. CHAFEE  
Secretary of the Navy

By virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States and as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States, I have today awarded THE PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION (NAVY) for Extraordinary Heroism to

FIRST MARINE REGIMENT (REINFORCED),  
FIRST MARINE DIVISION (REINFORCED),  
FLEET MARINE FORCE

For exceptionally meritorious and heroic achievement during the period 20 November to 9 December 1968 in connection with operations against enemy forces in Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam. Participating in Operation Meade River, a combined operation in support of the Government of Vietnam's Accelerated Pacification Campaign, the First Marine Regiment (Reinforced) skillfully utilized foot and motor transportation, along with the largest assault helicopter lift in Marine Corps history, to successfully emplace a cordon around an eleven-square-mile area from which civilian populace was evacuated for screening by province and district agencies. Following the establishment of the virtually impenetrable cordon, the Marines commenced to fan out from their positions along the eastern edge of the encirclement to conduct a systematic sweep and search operation in order to ferret out the entrapped enemy. For the next several days, the First Marine Regiment (Reinforced) relentlessly pressed the attack in a series of intense and fierce engagements against an extremely stubborn foe, resulting in a resounding victory for the friendly forces and extensive enemy losses in personnel, supplies and equipment. By their superb professionalism, valiant fighting spirit, and unflagging devotion to duty throughout Operation Meade River, the officers and men of the First Marine Regiment (Reinforced) made a significant contribution to United States efforts in Southeast Asia and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and of the United States Naval Service.

/s/RICHARD NIXON

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION to

MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For meritorious achievement while participating in combat operations in Southeast Asia from 10 November 1968 to 20 May 1970 as an element of Marine Aircraft Group Thirteen, First Marine Aircraft Wing. Marine Fighter Attack Squadron One Hundred Fifteen contributed significantly to the combat mission of the III Marine Amphibious Force and the Seventh Air Force by conducting numerous successful close and direct air support missions against heavily defended enemy military and logistic installations in North Vietnam and the multitude of hostile targets in and around the Republic of Vietnam. Through their continuous display of professionalism, pride, determination, resourcefulness, and effectiveness, the officers and men of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron One Hundred Fifteen made a major contribution toward the significant achievement of Free World objectives in Southeast Asia. The performance of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron One Hundred Fifteen was in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

For the Secretary of the Navy:

/s/R. E. CUSHMAN, JR.  
General, U.S. Marine Corps  
Commandant of the Marine Corps

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION to

**MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP THIRTEEN**

for service as set forth in the following:

**CITATION:**

For exceptionally meritorious service from 28 February 1969 to 1 June 1970 while conducting around-the-clock operations from Chu Lai Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, against enemy aggressor forces. During this period, Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN compiled an outstanding record of combat achievement despite the many difficulties created by tropical heat and humidity and the hazards attendant to monsoon rains. In addition to the success achieved in directing its efforts toward air-to-ground ordnance delivery in support of ground operations, the group provided excellent air cover in support of U.S. Seventh Fleet and Seventh Air Force operations. Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN was equally successful in winning the esteem of the Vietnamese people, contributing substantially to U.S. goals through an active and progressive Civic Action and Personal Response Program. The outstanding professionalism, teamwork, and dedication displayed by the officers and men of Marine Aircraft Group THIRTEEN reflected great credit upon themselves, the Marine Corps, and the United States Naval Service.

... VMFA-115, 21 May-1 June 70 ...

/s/JOHN W. WARNER  
Secretary of the Navy

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION to

MARINE AIRCRAFT GROUP ELEVEN

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service from 1 November 1970 to 10 June 1971 during sustained combat operations against enemy forces in Southeast Asia. Tasked with complex and highly hazardous combat commitments under difficult conditions and round-the-clock operations, Marine Aircraft Group Eleven compiled an enviable record of combat successes throughout this period. The officers and men of the group consistently demonstrated a high degree of courage, aggressiveness, and professionalism in the employment of a wide variety of fixed-wing aircraft while carrying out a myriad of successful missions against heavily defended enemy military forces, logistic installations, and lines of communication. In the area of civic action and "people to people" programs, the personnel of Marine Aircraft Group Eleven provided material and personal services for a wide variety of community projects, thereby earning an immeasurable amount of good will and contributing greatly to the welfare of the people of the Republic of Vietnam. By their exemplary performance, the officers and men of Marine Aircraft Group Eleven made a major contribution toward the achievement of United States objectives in Southeast Asia and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

/s/JOHN H. CHAFEE  
Secretary of the Navy

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION to

TASK FORCE DELTA

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For exceptionally meritorious service from 23 May 1972 to 31 December 1972 in support of U.S. military operations in Southeast Asia. Commencing an unprecedented air-base construction and operational schedule in the face of torrential rains, sweltering heat and countless other obstacles, Task Force Delta succeeded in meeting seemingly impossible operational deadlines. The first combat aircraft arrived within three weeks of the beginning of construction, and continuous air operations commenced the next day. Around-the-clock operations included air-to-ground close air support, fighter barrier combat air patrols and night systems bombing. Almost immediately, daily sortie rates were equaling those expected of an air group operating from a sophisticated, permanent base. Through their superlative performance, the personnel of Task Force Delta contributed significantly toward supporting the South Vietnamese counteroffensive as well as the U.S. air offensive of 1972. Their courage, professionalism and inspiring devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

/s/JOHN W. WARNER  
Secretary of the Navy

The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION to

MARINE FIGHTER ATTACK SQUADRON 115

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For meritorious service while serving in support of the overall combat readiness posture of Carrier Air Wing SEVENTEEN, USS *Forrestal*, and the United States Navy from 3 October 1980 to 13 September 1981. Commencing their cruise with a paucity of previous carrier experience, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 115's drive to learn plus their demand for perfection derived great dividends. During the squadron certification for day and night carrier operations, VMFA-115 received a noteworthy cumulative grade of 3.51. While participating in the USS *Forrestal* Operation Readiness Evaluation (ORE), the Squadron was assigned a grade of excellent. Additionally, VMFA-115's officers created a comprehensive AAW TACNOTE (Operation Plan) which is forming the basis for full spectrum anti-air warfare planning, conduct, and coordination within the Battle Group. Upon entry into the Mediterranean, the pace of operations accelerated with highly successful participation in a joint task force [missile exercise] at Salto di Quierra Missile Range; Exercise Daily Double, a combined U.S., Greek, and Italian naval operation; Encounterex TF-61; and Exercise Dual Dagger, a joint U.S. and French air/sea exercise. While on a open-ocean missile exercise in the Gulf of Sidra off Libya in conjunction with USS *Nimitz*, VMFA-115's aircraft successfully intercepted numerous sections of armed Libyan fighter aircraft and precluded any from penetrating their CAPS or reaching USS *Forrestal*. This exercise, with its attendant intercepts of Libyan aircraft, was a challenge that was met successfully as a result of an enormous amount of work, dedication, and sacrifice. By their outstanding technical competence, astute professionalism, and steadfast devotion to duty, the officers and enlisted personnel of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 115 reflected credit upon themselves and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and United States Naval Service.

/s/JOHN LEHMAN  
Secretary of the Navy

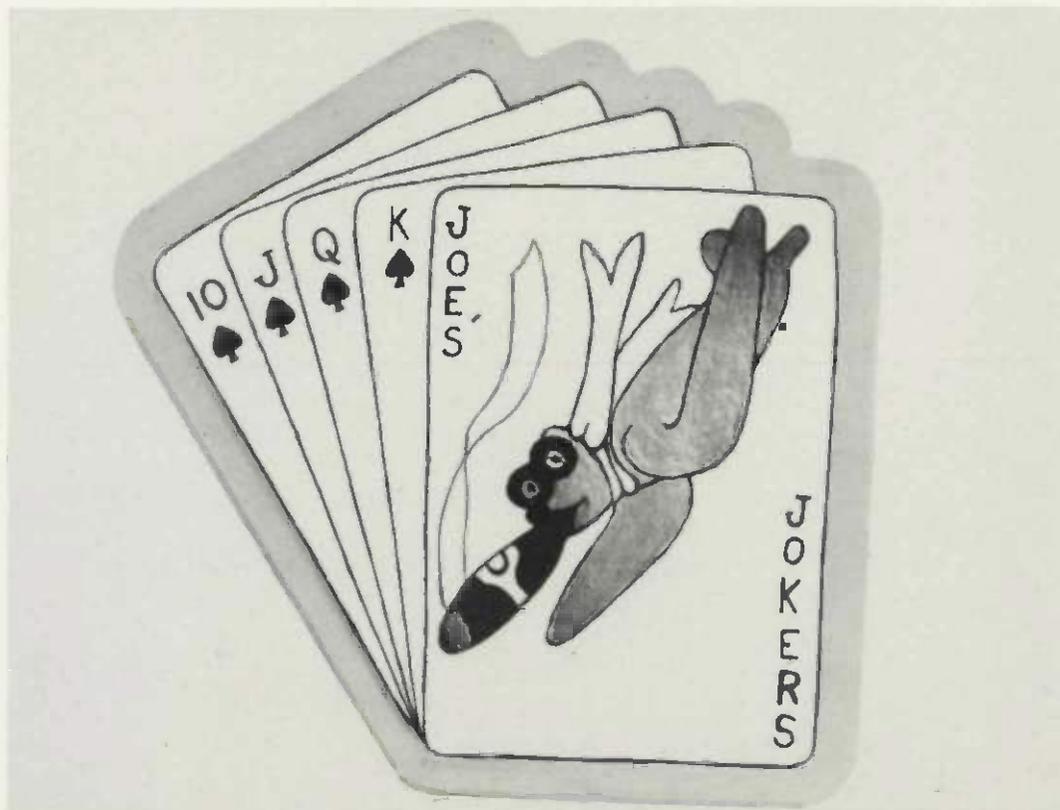
## Appendix E

# Squadron Insignia

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As might be expected in a squadron which has been on active duty for nearly 45 years, its distinctive insignia have undergone a variety of changes. In a letter on 28 September 1944 to the Chief of Naval Operations, the commanding officer of VMF-115 explained the earliest one adopted:

The insignia proposed by Marine Fighting Squadron One Fifteen depicts both the squadron and its original commanding officer. Upon request, the insignia was drawn by the Walt Disney studios with an eye to originality. The center of interest is an aircraft, similar to the one flown by this squadron, smoking a cigar. The plane, humorous in design, is exemplary of the squadron itself, and the cigar pays tribute to Major Joe Foss' ever-present "stogie." The name was chosen by popular vote, and itself shows the manner with which this squadron attacks the problems of aerial warfare: earnestly intent and yet in high spirits.



1944



1951



1956

On 14 March 1951 the squadron's commanding officer submitted for approval a new design, indicating the 1944 insignia was "obsolete." For the first time, an eagle (continued in various forms to the present day) was included. This new emblem was "intended to present triphibious capabilities of this fighter squadron. Capable of operating either from carrier or land bases as represented by beach, its striking power, which is symbolized by the rocket, has no geographic limitation."

The next change came in a letter from the CNO to VMF-115 on 20 August 1956. This followed the logic of the squadron's adoption of the nickname "Able Eagles" on 14 April 1952: "The modex letters of Marine Fighter Squadron 115 are A.E. Thus the large A in the background of the design. The Eagle is representative of the letter E. Thus the Squadron modex letters are represented by a simple readily identifiable insignia."

Again, in a letter on 30 April 1958, the CNO authorized a new insignia. This emblem featured a diving eagle superimposed on diagonal red, white, and blue stripes.

Finally, on 14 February 1986, the CNO approved the current insignia for the "Silver Eagles" (although the nickname dated back to 1959). This design has a dark blue background, a white shield, and a silver eagle with a red, white, and blue stripe behind it.

1958



1986



## Appendix F

# Plane Markings

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During 1956 and into mid-1957 the squadron applied distinctive markings to its Skyrays. These consisted of red, white, and blue bands on the wing tips, drop tanks, and near the top of the fin and rudder. During this time period, the VMF(AW)-115 insignia featured a diving eagle superimposed over a large capital "A." This insignia was supposed to depict the squadron modex letter "AE" through the use of the "A" and the eagle. (This combination symbolized the earlier adoption, on 14 April 1952, of the nickname "Able Eagles.")

By April 1957, VMF(AW)-115 had been ordered to change its modex to "VE". This repainting job occurred gradually, with the squadron flying its Skyrays with both markings for some time afterward. With this modex change came a second trio of red, white, and blue bands carried below the tail code, the colors of these being reversed from the top tail bands. A revised squadron insignia was approved on 30 April 1958. This emblem featured a diving eagle superimposed on diagonal red, white, and blue stripes.

At Cherry Point, in May 1959, a few of VMF(AW)-114's brightly colored planes were taken over by VMF(AW)-115 with no change in markings. These Skyrays now sported a day-glo orange spine that continued rearward, tapering up the tail and downward on the fuselage. The drop tanks also featured day-glo designs along with the unit designation, tail code, and nose numbering painted in black on each side. (It is doubtful whether the "Silver Eagles" carried these day-glo markings on their Skyrays for much more than a year.)

For the tour on the *Independence* in 1962 the squadron's planes were painted in their most flamboyant markings: their traditional red, white, and blue bands on the tail and drop tanks were supplemented by the first appearance of the squadron insignia, which was carried on the "turtle back" with a red wing trailing behind it. A red "arrow" outlined in black adorned the white rudder, while the air group's "AG" tail code was carried along with "USS *Independence*" on the rear fuselage.\*

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\*See Nicholas M. Williams, "VMFA-115," *Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society* (Santa Ana, California), Summer 1978, pp. 133, 140.

# Appendix G

## List of Reviewers

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LtGen Leslie E. Brown, USMC (Ret)  
LtGen John I. Hudson, USMC  
LtGen Andrew W. O'Donnell, USMC (Ret)  
MajGen John V. Cox, USMC (Ret)

Col William L. Atwater, USMC (Ret)  
Col Stoddard G. Cortelyou, USMC (Ret)  
Col Don W. Galbreath, USMC (Ret)  
Col Howard J. Finn, USMC (Ret)  
Col Fred J. Gilhuly, USMC (Ret)

Col Harry B. Hooper, Jr., USMC (Ret)  
Col James E. Johnson, USMC (Ret)  
Col Gordon H. Knott, USMC (Ret)  
Col John B. Maas, Jr., USMC (Ret)  
Col Kenny C. Palmer, USMC (Ret)

Col John S. Payne, USMC (Ret)  
Col William L. Shanks, Jr., USMC (Ret)  
Col Charles V. V. Smillie, Jr., USMC (Ret)

LtCol Donald P. Bowen, USMC (Ret)  
LtCol Thomas M. Coles, USMC (Ret)  
LtCol Richard H. Glass, USMC (Ret)  
LtCol Harold A. Langstaff, Jr., USMC (Ret)  
LtCol Horace L. Logan III, USMC

LtCol Michael Mura, USMC (Ret)  
LtCol Jerry B. Smith, USMC (Ret)  
LtCol Lynn H. Stewart, USMC (Ret)

Maj William I. Taylor, USMC (Ret)

*A squadron insignia of VMFA-115 is shown on the back cover. For a history of the insignia and other illustrations see Appendix E.*

