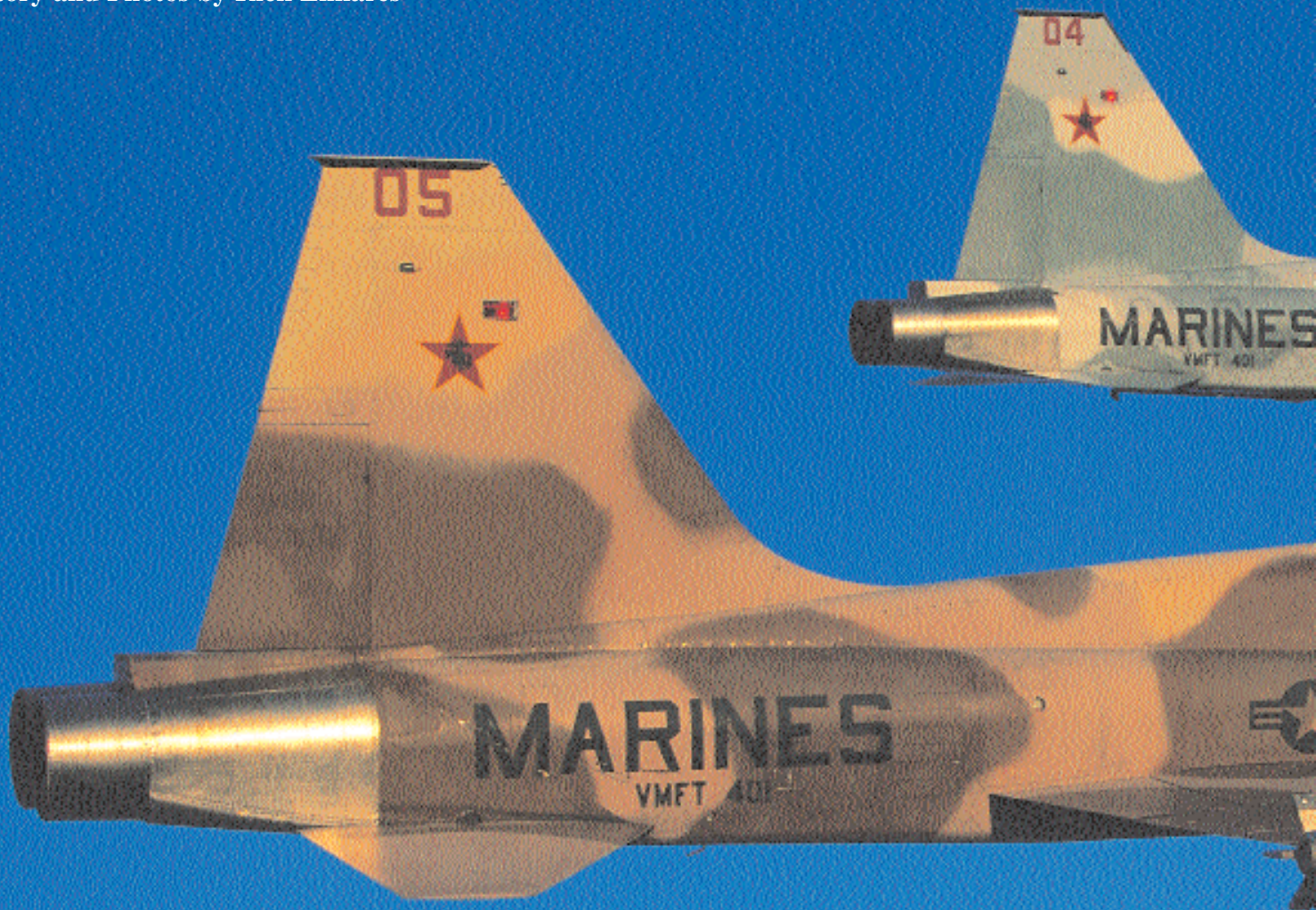


VMFT-401: ADVERSARY TACTICS EXPERTS

Story and Photos by Rick Llinares



“Therefore I say, know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

On any day of the week, Marine Corps aircrews face off against some of the finest adversary fighter pilots in the world. They fight an “enemy” who probably has more experience and skill and who rarely makes mistakes. Fortunately for them, they are fighting the *Snipers* of Marine Fighter Training Squadron (VMFT) 401. These experienced air combat tacticians

are masters in the art of air combat tactics training. Their job is to play the bad guy in order to teach Marine pilots about the threats they are likely to face in the world of aerial warfare.

VMFT-401 is a reserve unit under the command of the 4th Marine Air Wing, based at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Yuma, Ariz. Activated in March 1986, it is the



A pair of VMFT-401 F-5E *Tiger IIs* sport dissimilar camouflage schemes to present different looks to the Marine aircrews who fly against them.

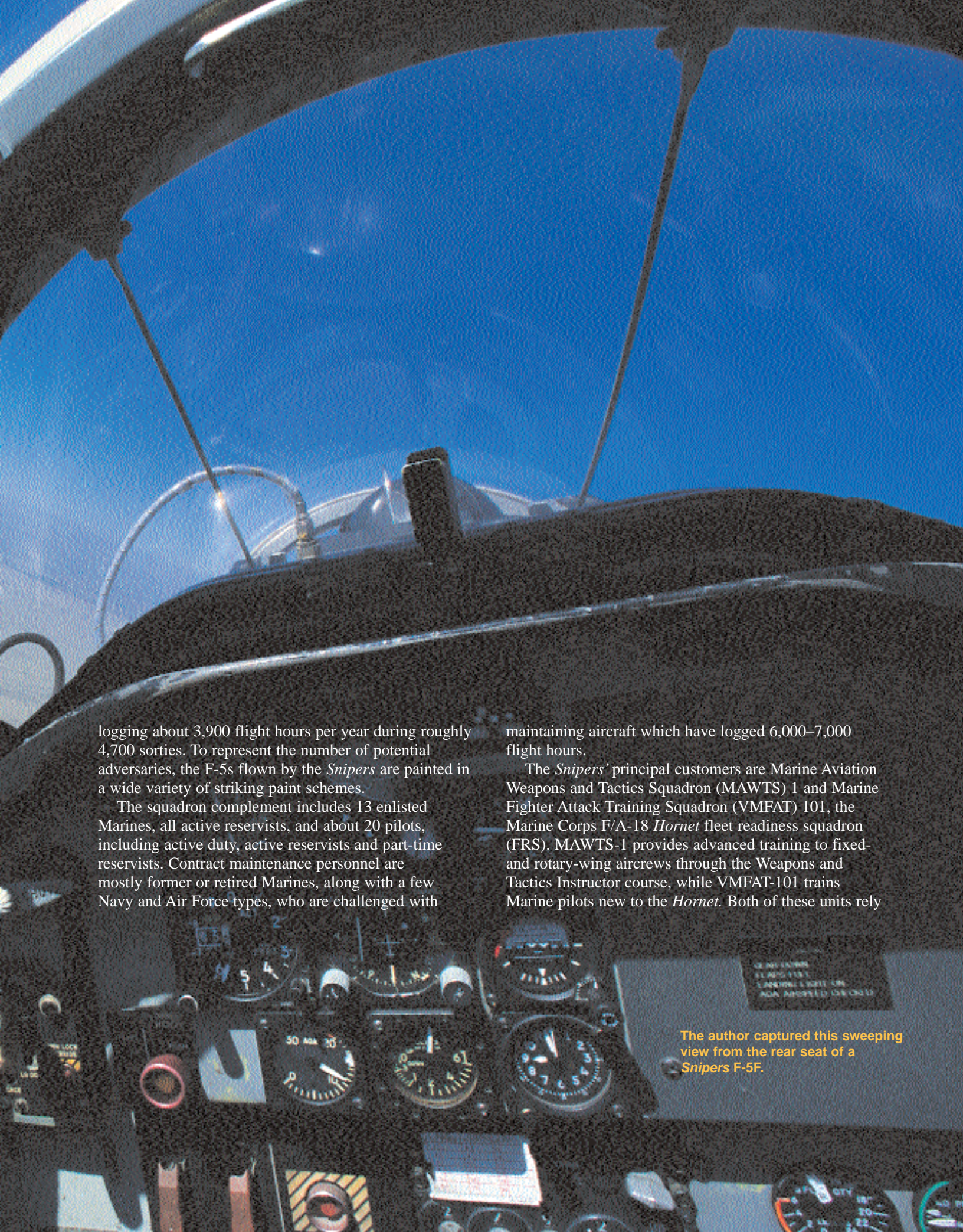
only dedicated adversary tactics training squadron in the Marine Corps, providing dissimilar air combat tactics instruction to both active and reserve Fleet Marine Force and fleet squadrons.

By June 1987 the first VMFT-401 Israeli-built F-21A *Kfir* fighters on loan from Israeli Aircraft Industries had been delivered, and the *Snipers* logged more than 4,000

accident-free sorties in support of 16 major exercises during the first year. In 1989, the squadron began transitioning to the Northrop F-5E *Tiger II*, an aircraft used by Air Force aggressor squadrons.

VMFT-401 currently operates 12 single-seat F-5Es and a two-seat F-5F. The unit deploys 3 to 6 times a year and participates in 16 to 20 individual training exercises,





logging about 3,900 flight hours per year during roughly 4,700 sorties. To represent the number of potential adversaries, the F-5s flown by the *Snipers* are painted in a wide variety of striking paint schemes.

The squadron complement includes 13 enlisted Marines, all active reservists, and about 20 pilots, including active duty, active reservists and part-time reservists. Contract maintenance personnel are mostly former or retired Marines, along with a few Navy and Air Force types, who are challenged with

maintaining aircraft which have logged 6,000–7,000 flight hours.

The *Snipers'* principal customers are Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron (MAWTS) 1 and Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron (VMFAT) 101, the Marine Corps F/A-18 *Hornet* fleet readiness squadron (FRS). MAWTS-1 provides advanced training to fixed- and rotary-wing aircrews through the Weapons and Tactics Instructor course, while VMFAT-101 trains Marine pilots new to the *Hornet*. Both of these units rely

The author captured this sweeping view from the rear seat of a *Snipers* F-5F.

on the *Snipers* for air combat training support. VMFT-401 also participates in Marine Division Tactics exercises and general air combat maneuvering training with Marine Corps and Navy fleet fighter squadrons.

VMFT-401 Operations Officer Major Will Harkin explained, "Our mission is to fly the F-5 as a threat replicator in support of U.S. Marine Corps fleet aviation units. The spectrum of flights range from air-to-air versus F/A-18s to helicopter attack missions versus AH-1 *Sea Cobras* with MAWTS-1, the FRS and various fleet units. As a result of the varying missions and complex scenarios required, VMFT-401 relies on experienced pilots. Flying the F-5, which is inferior to most modern-day fighters, makes experience paramount."

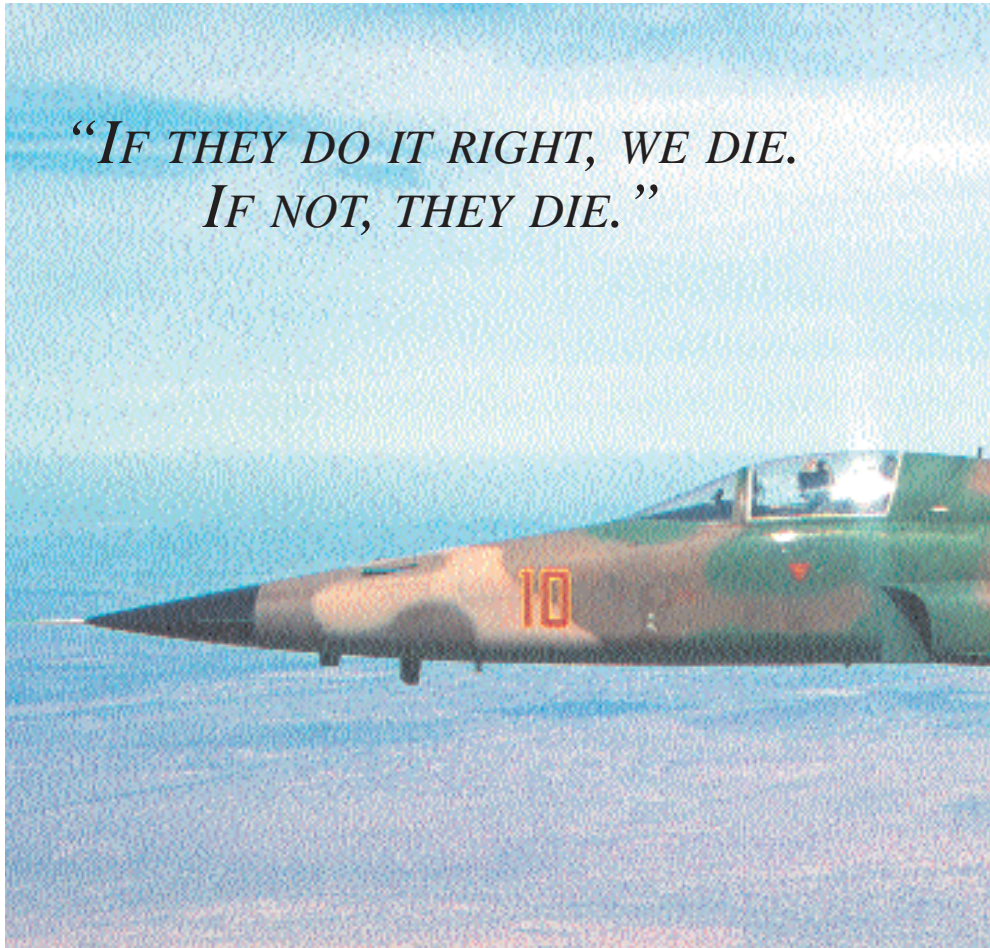
Maj. Harkin continued, "When fighting other modern-day high-performance aircraft, we are often at a disadvantage in maneuverability and onboard systems capability. We attempt to exploit the advantages that we possess in performance. We force them to make mistakes by flying our aircraft to the best of our ability and making them react to us. One of our mottos is to 'punish their mistakes' and this is where the training comes into play. If their mistakes are not revealed, bad habits form. The air-to-air environment is dynamic, uncertain and dangerous, even more so in combat. With training, young pilots overcome fear, develop confidence in themselves and their aircraft, and sharpen their minds to make quick decisions while under stress."

The majority of the missions are flown in the desolate, sparsely populated ranges near Yuma. For long-range, deep-strike missions, MAWTS-1 instructors and student aircrews fly north into the ranges attached to Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake, Calif., and VMFT-401 is deployed for support.



A squadron pilot taxis an F-5E in preparation to train Marine fixed- and rotary-wing aircrews in air combat tactics.

*"IF THEY DO IT RIGHT, WE DIE.
IF NOT, THEY DIE."*



The *Snipers* also conduct missions with nonfighter fixed-wing types. This includes evasive maneuvering with EA-6Bs and KC-130s to heighten the crew coordination and lookout doctrine of the *Prowler* and *Hercules* units so they can locate the bandits and keep them at bay long enough to bring in some fixed-wing fighter assistance.

In addition, VMFT-401 F-5s conduct evasive maneuvering with MAWTS-1's AH-1s and defensive maneuvering with CH-53 *Sea Stallions*, UH-1 "Hueys" and CH-46 *Sea Knights*. The intent is not to teach helo drivers how to dogfight a fixed-wing threat, but to teach them how to identify the threat and choose the proper course of action to stay alive.

Unlike more advanced adversary fighters, the F-5E does not use head-up display tapes or any video tools to capture the fight for later analysis during the debriefs. The squadron relies primarily on the air combat maneuvering instrumentation range for capturing the engagement, and also on the experience level of its pilots. With the significant amount of time that *Sniper* pilots have in the air, they are adept at reconstructing the details of a



Above, the *Snipers* squeeze every ounce of performance out of their F-5s to sharpen the skills of Marine pilots and weapon systems operators, such as this aircrew from VMFA(AW)-224 flying an F/A-18D *Hornet*.

complex aerial dogfight and relating the good and bad points to Marine pilots.

Maj. Harkin is representative of the highly qualified fighter pilots and tacticians in VMFT-401. He has accumulated 3,550 hours in several different fighter aircraft during more than 15 years in the Marine Corps. He flew 40 combat missions into Iraq and Kuwait during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and is a graduate of the Navy's former TOPGUN program, as well as the MAWTS-1's Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course. He later served with MAWTS-1 as an F/A-18 instructor pilot.

Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Mike Manuche described his goal for the unit and what they are trying to teach fledgling *Hornet* pilots, "The day I took command, I said we had one goal in training: when Marine aviators meet the enemy in air combat, they come back and say, 'That was a lot easier than flying against the *Snipers*.' We try to give them the toughest problem they will ever see against the older type aircraft we represent with the F-5. We fly the threat tactics better than the threat does.

"However," the skipper went on, "we do vary the intensity depending on our customer. VMFAT-101 usually limits our tactics, since they are training with brand-new F/A-18 pilots. We do not teach the *Hornet* pilots how to fight their airplane. We are the experts in threat tactics, and

that is what we show them. They have their own instructors in the squadrons to teach tactics and techniques. We just try to capitalize on their mistakes, so they know they made one that could cost them their lives, or at least leave them eating fish head soup in captivity for a couple of years. If they do it right, we die. If not, they die."

The *Snipers* have earned a solid reputation, and serving with VMFT-401 is a highly coveted role for Marine fighter pilots. As a minimum, a full- or part-time candidate has to be a MAWTS-1 certified Air Combat Training Instructor. The candidate must also have at least 1,500 hours in a fighter aircraft (preferably the F/A-18) with an emphasis on air combat maneuvering.

The flying that the *Snipers* do every day can be dangerous, and the unit's outstanding safety record is due to the quality and capability of the pilots, officers and enlisted personnel in this unique squadron. Fortunately for fleet Marine aviators, the "bad guys" they practice against are really the good guys. ✈

Rick Llinares is a photographer and author of Naval Aviation subjects.

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