

MARINE AVIATION IN KOREA, 1950–1953

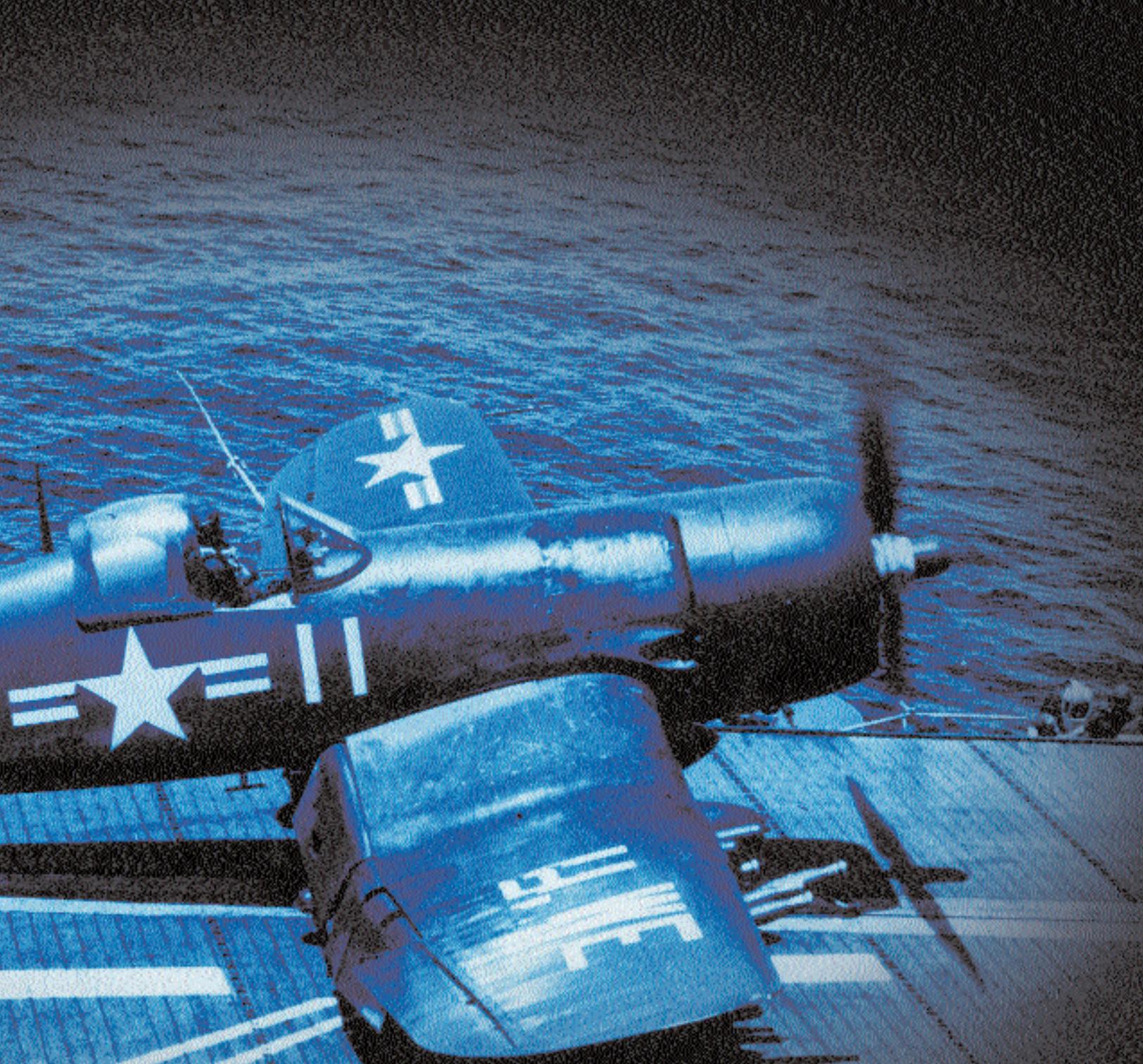
By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

After the invasion of South Korea by North Korean troops on 25 June 1950, American forces were strung out through the Far East. One American carrier was available, along with one British Royal Navy flattop, and that was the extent of naval airpower in Korea for a month.

As the small carrier task force pounded the North Koreans, the Truman administration sent in the Marines. On 7 July, the Forward Echelon, 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) and the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, consisting of the 5th Marine Regiment and Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 33, stood up. MAG-33 included Marine Fighter Squadrons (VMF) 214 and 323, Marine Night Fighter Squadron (VMF(N)) 513, Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 and two radar units. The brigade's formation and departure had been a marvel of logistical coordination, activating reserve components and creating new ground units almost overnight. The brigade left San Diego on 12 July aboard the escort carrier *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116). Transport squadrons VMRs 152 and 352 with long-range R5D *Skymasters* also moved men and material into the theater.

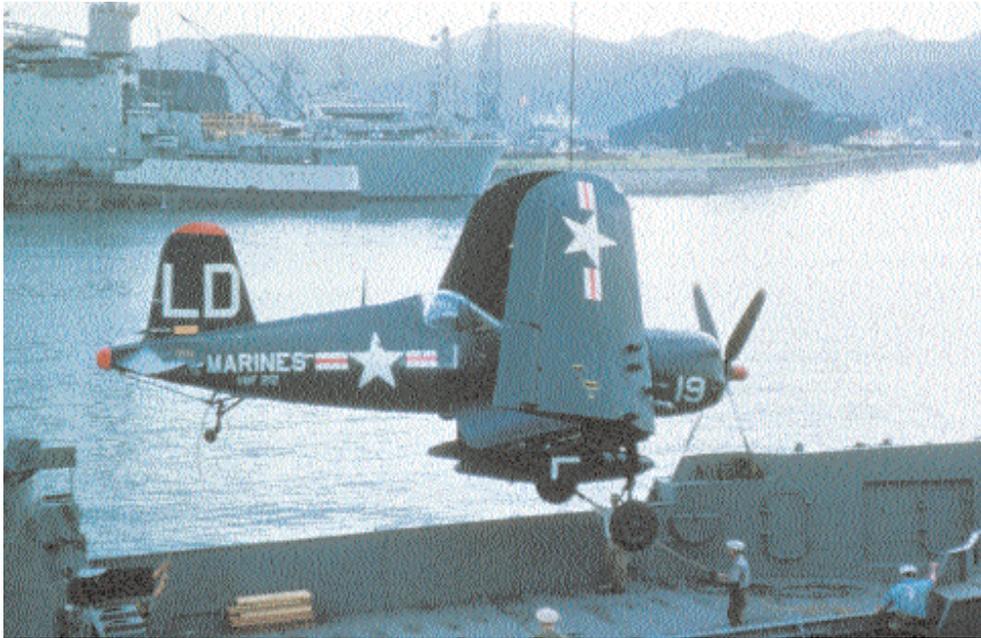
A VMF-214 *Black Sheep* F4U-4B launches from *Badoeing Strait* early in the war. The *Corsair* was invaluable in Navy and Marine Corps squadrons throughout the conflict in Korea.





The Marines on our left were a sight to behold. Not only was their equipment superior or equal to ours, but they had squadrons of air in direct support. They used it like artillery. It was, "Hey, Joe, this is Smitty, knock the left off that ridge in front of Item Company." They had it day and night. It came off nearby carriers, not from Japan, with only 15 minutes of fuel to accomplish the mission.

— from the viewpoint of an Army infantry regiment



Left, an F4U *Corsair* of VMF-212 is hoisted on deck off Yokosuka, Japan, in September 1950. Below, F4Us and F7F *Tigercats* wait on the frozen flight line at captured Yanpo airfield, North Korea, in 1950.



After arriving in Japan and checking its aircraft and equipment, the brigade set out for Korea, landing at Pusan on Korea's extreme southeast coast on 2 August 1950. The first Marine strikes of the war launched on 3 August, with VMF-214 sending eight F4U *Corsairs* flying close air support (CAS) for U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) soldiers near Pusan. Initially on board *Badoeng Strait*, VMF-214 transferred to *Sicily* (CVE 118), skippered by WW II Navy ace

Captain John S. Thach. By 7 August VMFs 214 and 323 were flying continuous CAS sorties ahead of the Marine and Army troops on the ground.

The WW II-vintage *Corsair*, rockets and napalm were an effective combination throughout the entire war, but especially during this early period. Short-legged jets could not loiter above the battlefield, and airfields in country were not yet available. Flying from carriers allowed more on-station time. Thus,

it fell to the veteran Navy and Leatherneck *Corsairs* to carry the war in the beginning.

Marine helicopters were active, too. One of the first helicopter rescues by Marine aircrews occurred on 10 August 1950, when an HO3S-1 of VMO-6 flown by First Lieutenant Gustave F. Lueddeke picked up Captain Vivian M. Moses of VMF-323. Moses's *Corsair* had been hit by enemy ground fire and lost oil pressure, and he had to ditch. In a sad twist, Capt. Moses



Left, Marine pilot 1st Lt. Gus Lueddeke hovers a Bell HTL-3 during a simulated rescue using a sling. Below, a VMO-6 HO3S leaves a front-line position carrying a Navy corpsman injured while trying to rescue a Marine from a minefield in September 1951. Bottom, an OY-2 *Sentinel* flies over a ridge in North Korea in June 1951. The pilot spotted fleeing Chinese troops, and shortly after this photo was taken, Marine aircraft bombed the ridge.



volunteered for another mission the next day, only to be shot down again. After being thrown from his aircraft on crashing into a rice paddy, he drowned. It was MAG-33's first combat fatality.

VMO-6 also flew several OY *Sentinel* artillery-spotting aircraft, nicknamed "Grasshoppers." Although unarmed, these little planes flew a dangerous mission, and after taking ground fire several spotter pilots retaliated. Capt. Francis A. McCaleb began carrying hand grenades, tossing them out over any small group of enemy troops that fired on him.

Inchon Operations

After intensive planning, a massive allied operation against the port of Inchon on the west Korean coast began in September 1950.

Inchon was the port facility for the capital city of Seoul, now under Communist domination. The projected amphibious landing required a lot of planning. The great tides moving on the harbor, with differences of as much as 35 feet, were of primary concern. In fact, the tides actually determined the invasion date of 15 September when the flood tide would be highest.

The invasion force hit Green Beach on the northwest tip of the small offshore island of Wolmi-do after a lengthy softening up by carrier aircraft. VMF-323 and VMF-214 *Corsairs* flew cover for the Marines, pouring machine gun fire into enemy positions not 50 yards ahead of the assault forces. Men and tanks stormed ashore, but met surprisingly light resistance. The enemy had badly underestimated American capabilities, thinking the

dangerous tides and currents would take care of the invaders.

Operation Chromite established an allied foothold that eventually pushed the North Koreans back, freeing the South Korean capital area and proving the Marine Corps amphibious operation was alive and well. Chromite also upheld the hard-won doctrine of Marine CAS, the *Corsair* squadrons in particular receiving high praise from Army and Marine commanders.

After the great gains of the Inchon invasion, however, the Marines faced one of their greatest challenges as they came up against a new and powerful enemy, the Chinese Army at Chosin. The withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir in the bitterly cold early winter of 1950 is one of the most terrible, yet heroic chapters in Marine Corps history.

By mid-November, the winter had arrived, creating a new danger for friend and foe. Communist China had joined the fighting and the Marines faced a huge force of 10 Chinese divisions, comprising 100,000 men. Outnumbered and fighting against the unexpected Chinese offensive, the Marines

began to withdraw. This started an epic story of survival and courage whose costly success would be due in no small measure to cooperation between Navy and Marine Corps air units coordinating with the struggling ground troops.

MAG-33 squadrons did their best to hamper the enemy. VMF-312, which had arrived in theater with F4U-4s in mid-September, accumulated nearly 2,000 flight hours, while losing four aircraft and one pilot, even while moving to Yonpo Airfield near Hamhunn on 1 December. By 28 November, the situation was becoming desperate as Chinese troops harassed positions at Hagaru-ri, where a 2,900-foot airstrip had become crucial to the resupply effort.

An essential airborne asset to what was called the Chosin Breakout was the air-supply operation by VMR-152 R4Q *Packets*. These twin-engine, twin-boomed cargo planes made most of the supply runs to Marines trying to get out of the Chosin area—dropping some 1.8 pounds of supplies, including a 19-ton bridge in eight sections.

The first Marine jets arrived with VMF-311 at Yonpo on 10 December, assigned to MAG-12, flying its first combat missions that afternoon. The squadron was soon ordered south to Pusan, from which it flew missions all over Korea. The Marines had developed CAS during the Philippine Campaign of January 1945 and made this coordination between aircraft and requesting ground units their own special field of operations. CAS by F9F *Panther*



Sgt. C. D. Prindle

Above, film is loaded in a VMF-311 Panther's gun camera as the pilot folds the plane's wings after a mission. Right, Maj. John H. Glenn poses by the torn tail of his F9F Panther in March 1953. Below, R4Q Packet cargo planes were key to the resupply effort. Bottom, Korean farmers seem unconcerned as two Panthers fly overhead while returning to their base.



Sgt. Curt Gleese



MSgt W. F. Gemeinhardt via Nicholas Williams

jets brought in a new discipline, which took into account the new type's high speed and reduced range and loitering capabilities. There was also concern about the *Panther's* shallower dive angle because of the jet's higher speed. This reduced angle increased the fighter's exposure to its own bomb fragments after delivery.

By January 1951, however, the *Panthers* were grounded because of problems with their Pratt & Whitney engines, and the squadron was sent back to Japan. In February VMF-311 was reassigned to MAG-33 and relocated to Pohang's airfield. Until February 1952 VMF-311 was the only Marine jet squadron in Korea. It was joined by VMF-115, and in March by Marine Photographic Squadron (VMJ) 1 flying F2H-2P *Banshees*.

During the Korean War, the Marines initiated a new form of troop insertion with the introduction of the helicopter. Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (HMR) 161 brought HRS-1s in September 1951

Background photo by TSgt Ralph J. Austin

aboard *Sitkoh Bay* (CVU 86), and quickly began using the newly developed doctrine of vertical envelopment: moving Marine combat troops and their equipment to the battlefield by helo. The HRS-1, right, was an unusual helicopter with its engine mounted in the nose, below and in front of the cockpit, and two clamshell doors.

HMR-161 flew its first resupply missions by mid-September, followed by its first airlift missions on 21 September in support of Operation Summit, the relief of an embattled ROK unit. Besides 224 troops and nearly 18,000 pounds of cargo, the HRSs carried telephone wire to connect the reconnaissance



TSgt V. Murdutt

teams with the command post. That November, the HRS crews airlifted Thanksgiving dinners to the men in the field.

Aerial Combat

From the Navy and Marine Corps

standpoint, air-to-air action was sporadic, with the Air Force seeing most of the engagements against Communist aircraft. At first, the enemy seemed reluctant to commit its few modern MiG-15 fighters, and sent in WW II veterans like Yak-9 fighters and Il-10 ground-attack bombers. Flying from *Bataan* (CVL 29), VMF-312 *Corsair* pilot Capt. Phillip C. DeLong shot down two Yaks on 21 April 1951, while his wingman, First Lieutenant Harold Daigh, accounted for two others. DeLong was already an ace in the Pacific with 11 Japanese kills. Squadron aviators scored again on 10 September 1952 when Capt. Jesse G. Folmar shot down a MiG-15 with his *Corsair*.

continued on p. 37



via Col. Phillip C. DeLong



Clockwise from left: VMF-312 aviators (left to right) 1st Lt. Harold Daigh, 2nd Lt. Robert Howard, Jr., 1st Lt. Shelby Forrest, 2nd Lt. Edward Leiland and Capt. Phil DeLong celebrate a quadruple shootdown. Maj. John F. Bolt shot down six MiG-15s in Korea to become the Marine Corps' only jet ace, and the only Marine aviator to achieve ace status in two different aircraft and two wars. With the F3D-2 *Skynight's* nose compartment open in preparation for maintenance, the large search radar antenna and the small lock-on radar antenna which made the F3D-2 a skilled night fighter are visible. From the cockpit of their *Skynight*, Lt. Col. Robert Conley (right) and radar operator SSgt. Connor indicate their nighttime shootdown of a MiG-15.

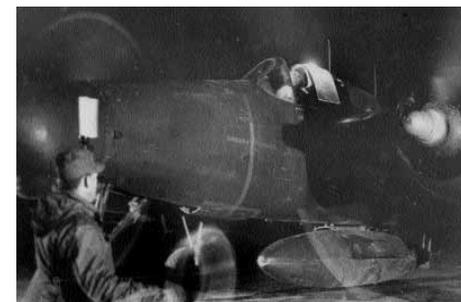


Yefim Gordon Archive



E. S. Holmberg via Steven P. Albright

The maneuverable MiG-15 was a formidable adversary. Left upper, Soviet volunteer pilots inspect a MiG-15 for use in Korea. Left lower, well over 30,000 Po-2 biplanes were built and found work throughout the Communist world. During the war the Po-2 was used mostly as a nuisance raider in Korea, carrying light bombs and machine guns to harass the enemy at night. Right, an F7F *Tigercat* crew chief sends off his plane and pilot.



Other aerial kills by Marine crews included Po-2s used as night hecklers by the enemy. These small biplanes were very hard to locate in the dark, because their wooden construction greatly reduced the effectiveness of the Marines' radar.

A new phase of the air war opened on the night of 3 November 1952 when an F3D-2 *Skyknight* crew from VMF(N)-513 shot down the first enemy jet at night, a Russian Yak-15. Painted flat black with red tail code letters and side numbers, the *Skyknights* were intended as escorts for Air Force B-29s that had been harassed by enemy interceptors. The F3Ds proved their worth and never lost a B-29 to Communist fighters, shooting down seven enemy aircraft, including six MiG-15s.

Marines also flew exchange tours with the Air Force's F-86 squadrons. Major John F. Bolt had been a Pacific ace with six kills flying with Pappy Boyington's



via L. R. Truex

Above, MSgt. Paul Miller takes advantage of personal time to read a letter in his quarters at the K-3 airfield in South Korea. Left, five master sargeant Naval Aviation Pilots of VMJ-1 pose with a squadron *Banshee*, left to right: J. R. Todd, Sam Cooper, LeRoy Copland, Marv Myers and Red Truex.



via L. R. Truex

Black Sheep of VMF-214. After 89 missions with VMF-115, he got a 90-day assignment with the 39th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. During May and June 1953, he shot down six MiG-15s to become a two-war ace, and the Marine Corps' only jet ace.

Flying Sergeants: Enlisted Aviators in the Marines

WW II, but by the end of the war, most of them had accepted commissions.

Navy and Marine Corps enlisted aviators were called Naval Aviation Pilots (NAPs). The Marines had 131 NAPs in 1952, and not just in transport squadrons. NAPs flew helicopters and jets, seeing heavy action in Korea. Flying sergeants flew *Corsairs* and F7F *Tigercats* at Pusan and Chosin, *Panthers* in close air support against the Chinese, and OY *Sentinels* in dangerous artillery-

spotting missions.

Several of these NAPs had actually been commissioned officers in WW II. After mustering out in 1945 and 1946, many of the former *Corsair* and SBD *Dauntless* drivers regretted leaving active duty. When the Corps found itself short of aviators to fly its new jets and to man its remaining squadrons, it developed a program whereby former Marine officer aviators could return as master sergeants (E-7s) if they reupped 90 days or less after leaving active duty. After the 90 days, the former aviator could rejoin as a technical sergeant, a grade below master sergeant.

When VMF-311 brought its F9F *Panthers* to Korea, several of its pilots were enlisted. Master Sergeant Avery C. Snow was the first NAP to



George Terry



Ron Marsh

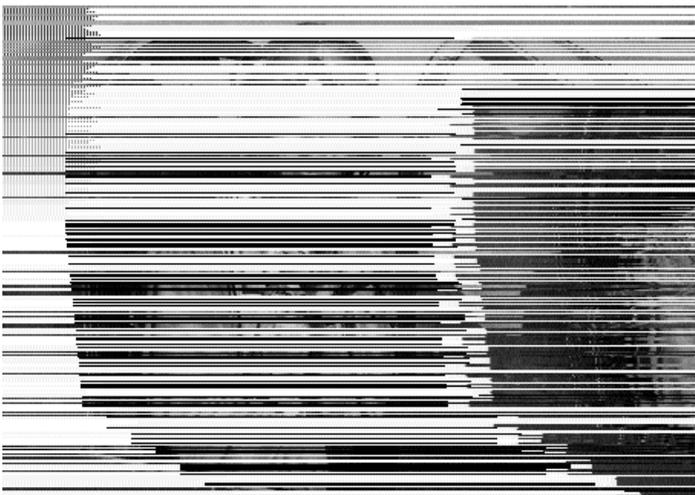
Above, an F2H-2P *Banshee* photoreconnaissance plane awaits its next mission in South Korea. Left, Maj. Tom Miller, XO of VMA-323, climbs out of his AU-1 after a mission in 1952. Among the many reservists recalled to active duty were two professional baseball players who traded in their bats and gloves for the controls of Marine aircraft. Capt. Jerry Coleman, below left, flew F4U Corsairs with VMA-323, and Capt. Ted Williams, right, flew *Panthers* with VMF-311.

complete 100 combat missions in a jet. He had been a captain with Marine Torpedo Bomber Squadron 232 during WW II. Another new NAP was Master Sergeant Lowell T. Truex, also flying photo *Banshees*, who was a commissioned fighter pilot in the Pacific.

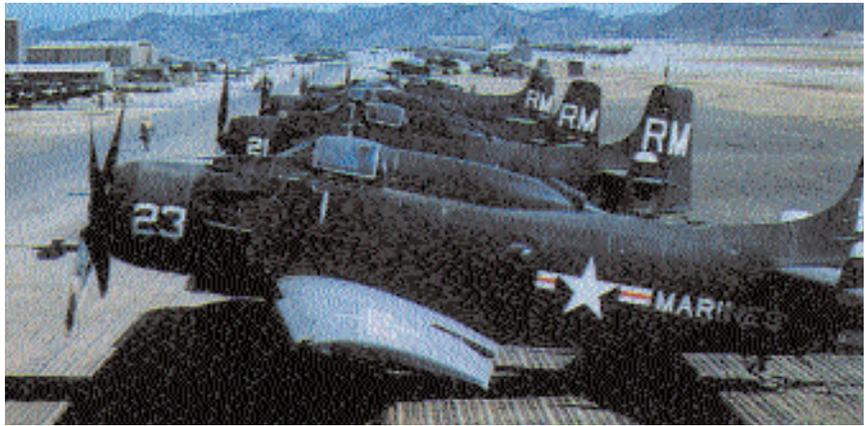
Master Sergeant James R. Todd was VMJ-1's high-mission man, completing 101 photo sorties. He was a second lieutenant at the end of WW II and was mustered out in 1946. He returned in November, resigned his commission and reenlisted as a master sergeant. Todd served in Vietnam, where he flew



via Jerry Coleman



Right, VMC-1 AD-4W *Skyraiders* on the flight line at the K-3 airfield in Pohang, South Korea. Below, ground crew members maintain a VMA-121 *Skyraider* which sports a notable mission scoreboard below the cockpit.



Major D. C. Georgia

C-117s, occasionally on dangerous night flare-dropping missions.

Marine enlisted aviators were an integral part of their service's capability. In the Vietnam War, however, there were only a few NAPs on active duty and fewer still flying. By 1973, only four NAPs were still serving and all four were simultaneously retired on 1 February 1973, closing a colorful era in naval aviation and Marine Corps history.

Reserves

Most countries rely on a cadre of regular servicemen, backed up with a larger contingent of reservists who can be called back to active duty in a short time. During the Korean War, reservists from all of the U.S. military branches were mobilized. The Marine Air Reserve had a small number of people participating, but a large number of "inactive" reservists were on the rolls, and many of these were called up by late 1950.

Many of the activated reservists had seen action in WW II, but very few had any flight time in the new jets. Thus, the reservists filled out the *Corsair* squadrons, performing vital CAS work. One such former aviator-reservist played for the New York Yankees, another for the Boston Red Sox. Capt. Jerry Coleman played in Yankee pinstripes at second base after flying SBD *Dauntlesses* with VMSB-341 during the Philippine Campaign in January 1945. Capt. Theodore "Ted" S. Williams played left field for the BoSox, but was better known for his hitting genius. Unlike Coleman, Williams had not seen action in WW II, but served as a flight instructor in the States. Coleman flew *Corsairs* with VMA-323, while Williams got



Fred C. Dickey Jr. via Nicholas Williams

the jets of VMF-311. (The Navy and Marine Corps fighter squadrons flying propeller-driven aircraft were redesignated as attack squadrons in March 1952.)

Final Days

As the spring and early summer of 1953 proceeded, the Marine squadrons of MAGs 12 and 33 kept up the pressure, flying countless sorties against enemy lines and installations. Sometimes, their attention made the difference between a Communist victory and an outpost remaining in Marine hands.

Flying was completely cancelled for 12 days in July because of rain and heavy cloud cover, but there were signs of a coming cease-fire. Even so, Chinese troops made one or two last-ditch efforts. On 25 July, VMFs 115 and 311 flew strikes against enemy concentrations. Finally, word came that 27 July would be the last day of the war. Even as the 7,000 men of the 1st MAW prepared to stand down, the wing's aircraft flew 222 sorties on

that final day. Capt. William I. Armagost of VMF-311 flew the last jet mission of the war against Chinese supply areas in the late afternoon, 35 minutes before the cease-fire was to take effect at 1910 hours.

After the armistice went into effect, the 1st MAW remained part of the Fifth Air Force to enforce the no-fly zone south of the demilitarized zone. F3D *Skyknights* of VMF(N)-513 and radar-equipped AD *Skyraiders* from Marine Composite Squadron 1 and Marine Attack Squadron 251 flew security patrols to guard against Communist violators. Aerial movement in and out of Korea was restricted to five airfields. Withdrawal of in-country units, either to Japan or back to the United States, was an ongoing operation, coupled with introducing new squadrons into the theater to continue post-armistice activities.

The war in Korea had given the Marine Corps in general, and Marine aviation in particular, a much needed shot in the arm. Although its record in WW II spoke for itself, the Corps' air arm had been close to disbanding. But when the first shots were fired in June 1950, the air Marines were among the first to be sent. They would also be among the last to leave.



Cdr. Mersky has written several books and magazine articles on Navy and Marine Corps aviation. He has been the book review editor for *Naval Aviation News* since 1982. He retired as the editor of *Approach* in 2000.