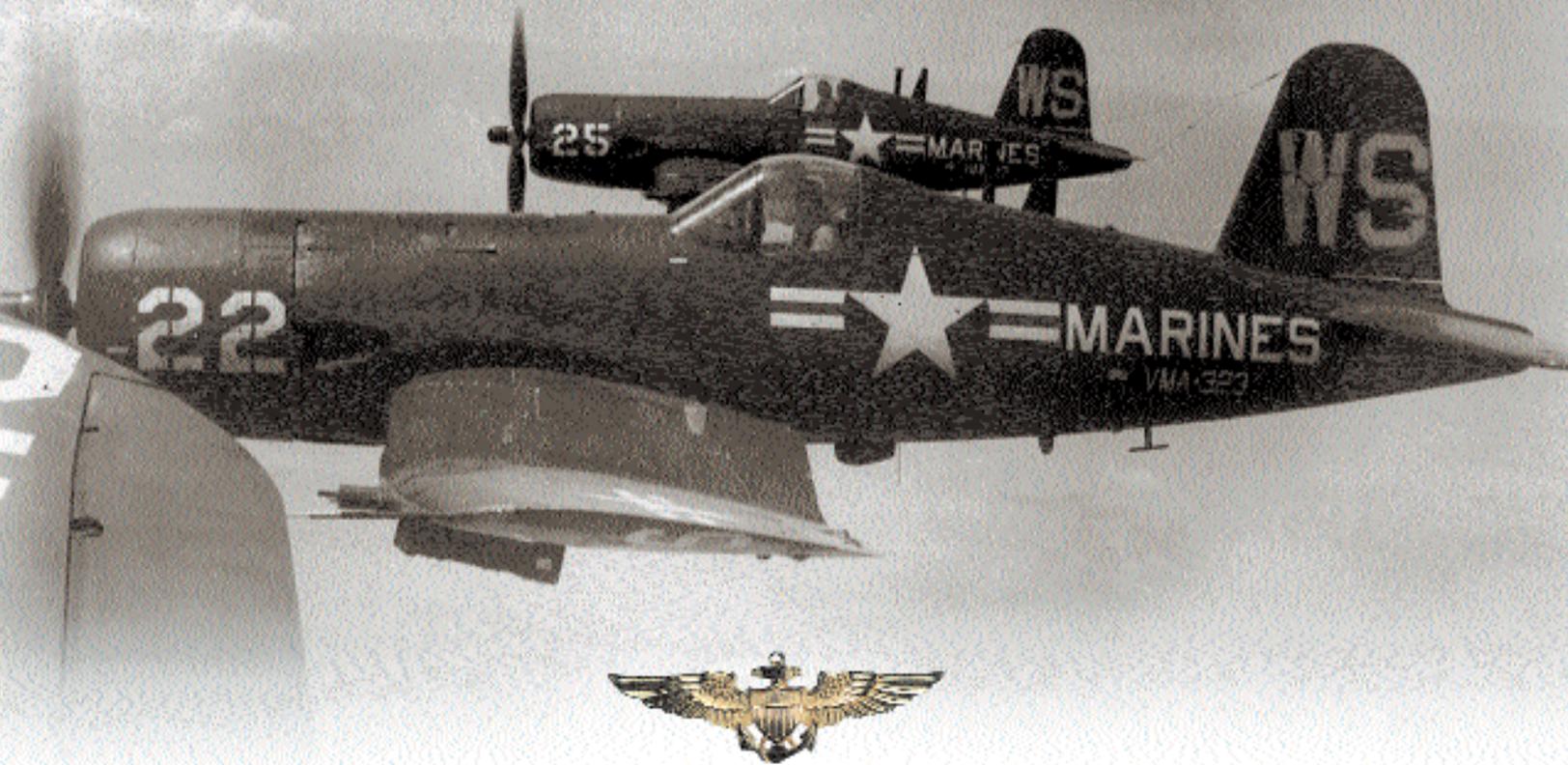


# A MARINE AVIATOR'S VIEW OF THE KOREAN CONFLICT



By Lt. Gen. Thomas H. Miller, USMC (Ret.)

*This article summarizes activities during the last phase of the Korean War. To understand the military conflict in Korea, it is important to know the mood of the American people and the state of readiness of our military forces when the war began. It was a military conflict without a declaration of war, and for the personnel involved it was a frustrating and dangerous war for survival. From a military viewpoint, operations were frequently constrained by politically*



*dictated rules of engagement that prevented a quick ending to the conflict. Public support dwindled as the fighting continued and casualties mounted. Though WW II had ended successfully in the mid-1940s, the American people were tired of war and could no longer foresee any military threat to the United States or world peace. As a result of demobilization efforts, military budgets and manpower requirements were given lower priority within the national*

When the Korean conflict commenced in June 1950, I was a flight instructor in Advanced Training Unit (ATU) 1 of the Naval Aviation Training Command at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas. The unit's F4U Corsair trainers had previously performed on a five-day schedule, but now flight operations were often suspended several days prior to the end of each month due to lack of funds for aircraft fuel. All of Naval Aviation was in a reduced state of readiness during the efforts to transition from prop-driven to jet-powered aircraft, especially during a period of reduced military spending. Many Navy and Marine Corps squadrons were well below their normal operating allowance of manpower and aircraft.

An early indication of the seriousness of the situation was when the training command was ordered to transfer all of its F4Us to Navy and Marine Corps fleet squadrons. The Corsairs were replaced by WW II-vintage F6F Hellcats that had been stored in the Arizona desert. The poor condition of the F6Fs and a sudden demand to increase the rate of pilot training placed an unusually heavy workload on the training units. At the same time, there was a shortage of experienced pilots in the fleet squadrons, and many of the flight instructors and critical maintenance personnel were assigned to fleet units.

Since I had just returned from an overseas tour, I was retained in the training command and given additional duties as aircraft maintenance officer. ATU-1 was operating about 30 training aircraft with only 100 maintenance personnel. The challenge to meet the accelerated flight training schedule was tremendous.

The sudden and unexpected military operations in Korea highlighted a number of other requirements. Based on experience gained during WW II and in the transition to jet aircraft, it became apparent that Naval Aviators needed to improve their skills in instrument flying. The U.S. Naval School, All Weather Flight at Corpus Christi provided second-tour Navy and Marine Corps aviators a three-month postgraduate course in instrument flying. Looking back, this was probably one of the best flying experiences and insurance that a Naval Aviator could have.

By mid-1951 I was ordered to the Marine Corps Air Technical Training School at Quantico, Va., to be an instructor in aircraft maintenance. The war was heating up and many of my peers were sent to Korea. In 1952, after completing jet refresher training in F9F Panthers, I departed in December with other replacement pilots for Japan, where I was assigned to Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 323 in Korea. On 23 December I flew my first combat flight against an interdiction target in North Korea, where we received a significant amount of small arms and medium antiaircraft fire. By the end of the month I had flown four interdiction missions and three close-air-support missions.

**Facing page: top, the AU-1 version of the F4U Corsair was flown by Marine squadrons; bottom, VMA-323 pilots return from a mission, l-r, Capt. Pineo, Maj. Miller, Capt. Coleman and Lt. Watts. Photos courtesy of Peter B. Mersky**

By this time military operations in Korea had been going on for more than two years. United Nations (UN) forces in South Korea consisted of military units from the United States, the British Commonwealth, South Korea and 13 other allied nations. U.S. Navy forces were under the direction of Commander Carrier Task Force 77.

The First Marine Aircraft Wing was responsible for Marine air power in South Korea. Marine Aircraft Groups (MAG) 33 and 12 were the two tactical fighter/attack groups. MAG-33 included VMFs 115 and 311 with F9Fs; Marine All-Weather Fighter Squadron 513 flying F3D Skynights and F4U-5N and F7F Tigercat night-fighter aircraft; and Marine Photographic Squadron 1 operating F2H-2P Banshees, F7F-3P Tigercats, F4U-5Ps and F9F-2Ps. MAG-12 consisted of VMA-121 flying ADs, VMAs 223 and 323 with F4U and AU Corsairs, and VMF-312 flying F4Us. Two squadrons were assigned to the First Marine Division (Ground Force) for direct support. Marine Observation Squadron 6 flew OY Sentinel and OE Bird Dog observation aircraft, TBM Avengers and HTL and HO5S helicopters, while Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron 161 operated HRS and HO5S helicopters for troop lift, supply delivery, medevacs and recovery of downed pilots. In addition, Marine Wing Support Squadron 1 R5D Skymasters and R4D Skytrains carried mail, aircraft parts and personnel in and out of Korea, and flew occasional combat support missions.

Supporting elements included Marine Wing Support Group 17, which provided aircraft maintenance and logistic support from its base in Japan. The Marine Aircraft Control Group supplied ground radar support for the control of Marine aircraft at airfields, and tactical control radar for all-weather precision bombing along the frontlines. In addition, AD-4W Skyraider electronic warfare aircraft located, jammed and collected information on enemy radars and radio communications.

As operations officer of VMA-323, I learned that mission requirements fell into six general categories: interdiction, close air support, armed reconnaissance, rescue combat air patrol, precision radar bombing and air defense. The first two were predominant. The North Korean and Chinese enemy forces set up extensive antiaircraft defenses that made most close-air-support missions difficult and dangerous. Interdiction missions scheduled in areas of heavy enemy antiaircraft weapon defenses often included flak-suppression aircraft, which released proximity-fused bombs that were dropped from a high altitude and set to explode between 50 and 100 feet above the ground to suppress enemy fire. For close-air-support missions the target was usually within range of friendly artillery positions, so timing and coordination were very important to take maximum advantage of the artillery-fired flak suppression without risking damage to the strike aircraft.



Marvin Wallace courtesy Warren Thompson

**Above, a VMF(AW)-513 F4U-5N night-fighter taxis at Pusan, December 1950. Right, a Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron 161 HRS unloads rockets and launchers behind the frontlines. Facing page: top, a Marine F9F Panther releases napalm bombs (note arrows) in a supply area of North Korea, June 1953; bottom, Maj. Tom Miller (left) participates in the repatriation of prisoner of war 1st Lt. Baugh at Freedom Village, 31 August 1953.**



Armed reconnaissance missions were possibly the least complex of all assigned missions. They were normally scheduled in areas of known heavy enemy ground activity. With the exceptions of railroad/road tunnels and bridges, the targets were usually highly mobile, such as trains, trucks, tanks and large troop movements.

Rescue Combat Air Patrol (RESCAP) was a very important mission and a real morale booster for aircrews. It consisted of a division of four aircraft with a wide variety of armament. The purpose was to remain on station for three and a half hours and be prepared to proceed to any area of friendly downed aircrews and prevent their capture by enemy forces until friendly recovery aircraft arrived. RESCAP aircrews not only endured a long time in the air, but in winter months they had to wear a rubber anti-immersion suit, known as a “poopy suit,” which provided them protection from the freezing water if they ditched. Besides being clumsy, the suits had no ventilation and no way for the crew member to relieve nature’s requirements. In spite of these conditions, aircrews seldom complained about being scheduled for RESCAP missions.

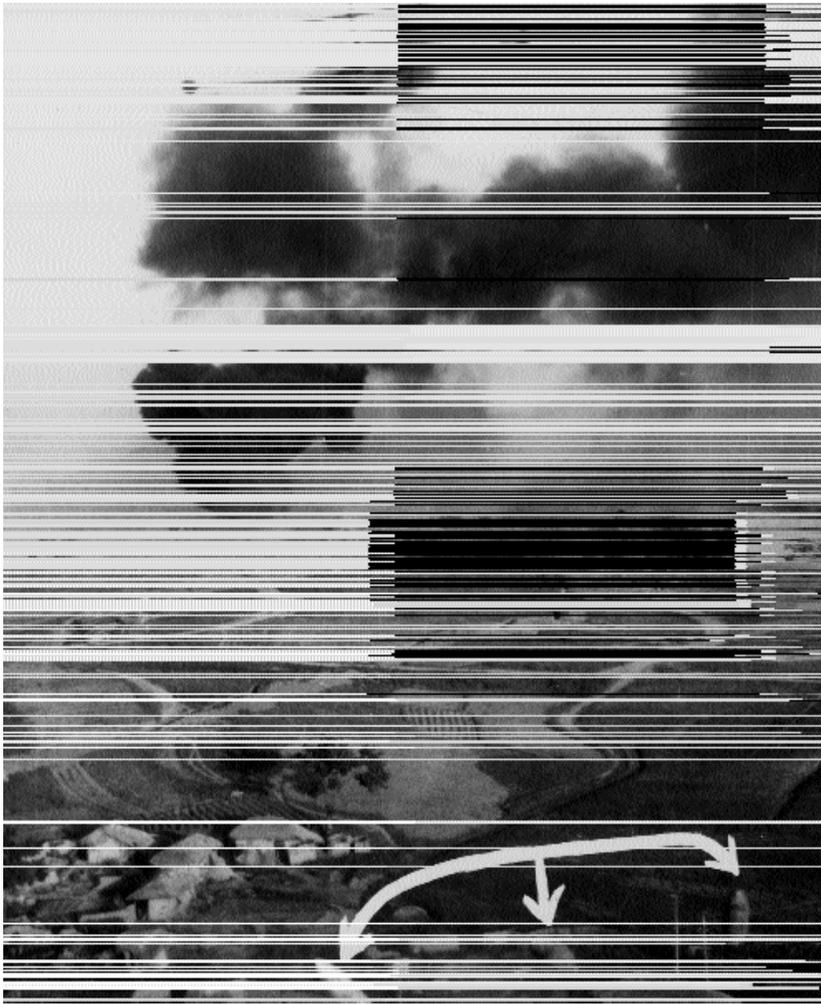
Precision radar bombing missions were used against targets normally within 10 miles of the frontlines and heavily defended by enemy anti-aircraft weapons. They were also used at frequent intervals during periods of darkness and bad weather as harassing fires to prevent enemy movements.

Most air defense missions were performed by U.S. Air Force aircraft, except for night operations. The versatility

of a Marine night-fighter squadron flying F3D all-weather jets and F7F and F4U reciprocating-engine fighters proved to be very effective. Several daylight Marine interdiction missions were intercepted and attacked by North Korean/Chinese MiG-15 aircraft; however, the air-to-air armament on all Marine aircraft and the tactics used by Marine pilots successfully countered the enemy’s efforts.

Air-to-air and air-to-ground communications security was a factor that became increasingly important for all missions. The enemy forces had learned to interpret our six-digit coordinate ground locations transmitted in the clear. A very simple system was devised in which several letters of the alphabet corresponded to a number from zero through nine. Known as the “Shackle Code,” it was changed every two hours. The person transmitting a location would preface his remarks with the statement “Shackle” and then provide six letters corresponding to the six numbers that he wished to pass. This system worked very well since the two-hour period of each code did not provide adequate time for the code to be compromised.

During the 120 days that I was assigned to VMA-323, the squadron averaged 20 to 22 F4U-4B and AU-1 Corsairs and 20 to 22 pilots. During this period the



squadron lost five pilots, including the executive officer, as a result of enemy action.

In May 1953, I was assigned to the headquarters staff of the First Marine Air Wing as the targets officer of the Target Planning Group, which developed targets most beneficial to Marine forces and scheduled Marine aircraft to strike them. In July I transferred to the Marine Liaison Office of the Joint Operations Center in Seoul.

After numerous efforts by the United Nations to get the North Korean and Chinese Communists to agree to a cease-fire, on 10 July 1953 they returned to negotiations in North Korea. On 27 July a cease-fire was signed, and 12 hours later all combat operations ceased. Negotiations continued to work out the details of the agreement and a procedure for the exchange of prisoners of war. The UN commander tasked the Commanding General of the First Marine Division to set up and run a reception center for the returning UN prisoners in his area of responsibility. This facility became known as "Freedom Village" and I was assigned to act as the

general's representative there. On 4 September the first UN prisoners were repatriated at Panmunjom and driven by ambulances across the Han River to Freedom Village, about 30 miles north of Seoul, South Korea.

By about 0900 each morning a list arrived at Freedom Village with the names of the prisoners who were being repatriated that day. The returning prisoners arrived at about 1100 dressed in the blue pajamas that they were issued when taken prisoners.

The repatriation process commenced with the prisoners being given showers, medical examinations and new uniforms from their branch of service, followed by intelligence debriefings. Only a few had to be helped or carried on stretchers. Following debriefing, those who desired were allowed to be interviewed by the press. The repatriated prisoners were then transported to an Army hospital near Seoul. In my view, most of the prisoners were suffering from malnutrition and some had scars and bruises indicating they had been physically mistreated. The prisoner exchange lasted about a month and I returned to my duties in the Joint Operations Center. In mid-December I received orders for return to the United States.

My tour in Korea was a most interesting and valuable experience. It gave me the opportunity to observe and participate in a truly joint military operation involving a wide variety of unique military forces operating under a single UN force commander. Based on my 37 years of active military service at all levels of command during WW II, Korea, two tours in Vietnam and as commander of two Marine air-ground landing force operations in NATO, effective joint operations are not new. The lessons learned in

prior conflicts can be seen in the way our warfighters do business today. The combined strengths of each military service bring a stronger and more cohesive fighting force to missions around the globe. 

When Lt. Gen Miller retired in 1979, he was Deputy Chief of Staff for Aviation in Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, Washington, D.C. The staff of *Naval Aviation News* extends special thanks for his support in producing this tribute issue to Marine Aviation.

