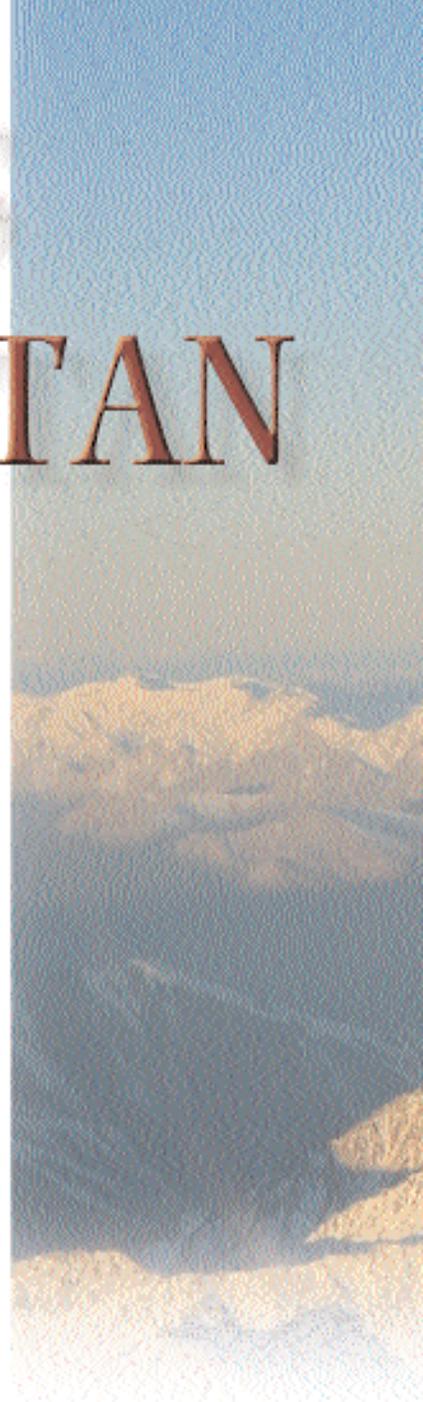


NIGHTMARES IN AFGHANISTAN

Story and Photos by Major Michael V. Franzak, USMC





On 15 October 2002, the first of six AV-8B Harrier IIs from the *Flying Nightmares* of Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 513 settled on the rough tarmac at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. After rolling out to the end of the runway, the aircraft turned onto a perpendicular taxiway lined with active minefields and continued past the visual remnants of a war that has ravaged this country for many years. Numerous abandoned MiG and Sukhoi aircraft lie overturned as heaps of junk throughout the base. Burned out tanks, trucks and armored personnel carriers litter Bagram's infield. Within this eyesore, American resolve is strong and undeterred. The 6 aircraft, 10 pilots and more than 180 Marines and Sailors of VMA-513 (Reinforced) are an integral part of the U.S. war on terrorism and add to the Department of Defense's

Facing page, the author and his wingman come back from a mission. Above, a VMA-513 AV-8B returns from dawn patrol as the sunrise highlights the Hindu Kush mountains surrounding the airfield at Bagram. The peaks rise to heights of 16,000 feet.

flexibility by increasing the options available to the U.S. military.

In fall 2002, the squadron received tasking to forward deploy its assets to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Within a week, personnel were sent to prepare facilities for the squadron's arrival in theater. Shortly, the rest of the unit members left their families and friends at MCAS Yuma, Ariz.

Operating out of an old, neglected Soviet air base, the *Nightmares* encountered numerous challenges but have overcome them. The base's runway and taxiways are in such poor condition that they are constantly being repaired. Rocks and debris are so numerous they make

the runway at Twenty-nine Palms, Calif., seem clean by comparison. To deal with the situation the squadron modified its procedures, in

part due to the unique capability of the AV-8B.

Lieutenant Colonel Jim Dixon, commanding officer of VMA-513, said, "People have the misconception that the Harrier must be employed vertically to be successful. We've proven once again you don't need to do that. The inherent flexibility of vertical/short takeoff and landing aircraft gives us other options. If we were operating from an amphibious ship, we would adjust our procedures for that environment. That's what makes the Harrier such a great aircraft; it gives the warfighter so many options with the same asset." The skipper's comments seem justified by the success the *Nightmares* have enjoyed. In a little over 12 weeks of combat operations, they averaged more than 100 sorties and 400 hours per month, and maintenance ready rates remained extremely high.

Since their arrival, the *Nightmares* have taken pride in their work and their living conditions. They built and named their small compound "Camp Tufel-Hunden," a reference to the moniker given to the Marines during WW I. The camp is dedicated to the Marines who gave their lives while deployed to this area of operations since 11 September 2001. Initially operating out of general-purpose canvas tents that constantly leaked during Afghanistan showers, the Marines erected an expeditionary hangar that provided improved shelter from the harsh environment. But weather was not the only obstacle. They had to work on aircraft under the pitch-black Afghanistan nights. Due to the constant threat of enemy direct and indirect fire (the base has been attacked several times since VMA-513 arrived), the Marines must work without the benefit of "white" light while operating on the flightline. If an aircraft cannot be moved into the hangar, the job must be done out on the line—working with only a red lens flashlight on moonless or overcast nights. When asked what he thought of the situation, power line mechanic Sergeant David Harris responded, "It's good to go. I enjoy the challenges. It makes the time go by faster."

The Harriers are heavily requested assets within the area of operations. Their proven reliability has won the confidence of those unfamiliar with the unique aspects of the AV-8B. U.S. and coalition forces are using new technologies to fight this war, and they rely on night



Above, a VMA-513 AV-8B is bathed in the warm glow of the early morning sun. Facing page, top, a pilot debriefs ordnancemen after a mission. Note the gun on the staff sergeant; all occupants at Bagram carry a loaded weapon. Facing page, bottom, AV-8Bs await the next flight. The burned out hangar in the background was converted into the base entertainment theater.

operations more than ever. In this regard, the *Nightmares* and their night-attack aircraft live up to their namesake. At least 80 percent of their sorties are conducted at night. Using night-vision goggles and their newly issued Litening II targeting pod, the pilots can see into the darkness of the Afghanistan landscape and provide detailed information to ground personnel who are either looking for the enemy or are actually engaged in combat with them. Flight operations at night are strictly "lights out" or "covert" due to the surrounding threat. One

pilot said, "We face danger as soon as we take off and until we land. It's not like we have the luxury of taking off far behind enemy lines and then prepare ourselves for combat. We're smack dab in the middle of it."

Thanks to the ingenuity of the squadron's maintenance department, the AV-8Bs were equipped with an infrared approach light before deployment. The light allows the pilot to see the "blacked out" runway during approach and landing, as well as allowing the pilot to navigate the aircraft on the unlit taxiways that are often lined with old Soviet mines. Thus, it's not just the environment outside the base that is a hazard, but within as well. Since the squadron's arrival, the daily detonations of unexploded ordnance being cleared by explosive ordnance teams are a constant reminder of the threat and danger in a combat environment. VMA-513's safety record and approach to business has mitigated these risks and resulted in no accidents or injuries. Protecting each other as well as their assets comes naturally to the *Nightmares*, which completed 47,000 mishap-free flight hours as of January 2003.

The *Nightmares* are a long way from home. They flew halfway around the world to support their country's efforts. Afghanistan may be different than Yuma, but it is similar in



many ways. One Marine summarized the sights of the country by describing the four colors he sees daily: “Gray, the color of the aircraft and sky. Green, the color of a few trees, many tents and military vehicles. White, the color of the mountains due to ever-present snow. Brown, the color of everything else.” A fine dust covers the barren landscape. It resembles the fine cocoa powder found inside the Marines’ MREs (meals ready to eat). The dust resides anywhere that is not paved or layered in gravel. When one walks on top of this powdery dirt, a brown haze lifts from the ground and trails the individual’s steps.

“I have to clean my glasses four times a day and I don’t even work outside,” said Lance Corporal Mechelle Ramsay, VMA-513’s operations clerk. A native of Jamaica, she said she doesn’t like the snow either, but it’s one or the

other in Afghanistan.

The wind can also be a serious challenge. Dust storms often reduce visibility to less than a mile. But the dirt, dust, rain and snow in Afghanistan have not deterred the Marines in their mission. They continue to work 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week. When asked about the long hours, aviation ordnanceman Sgt. David Morrell said, “What else are we going to do out here? Besides, it’s what I joined up for.” Sgt. Morrell is a newly married Marine who misses his family. His first child, a boy, was born in December 2002 but he has only seen pictures of him. When the Marines aren’t working, eating or sleeping they can often be found calling or emailing their loved ones back home. Asked what he missed most, Capt. Dan Carlson said, “My family, of course, but it sure would be nice to have good Mexican dinner.”

The Mexican food will have to wait. For now, the *Nightmares* are focused on the mission at hand, and that means getting aircraft ready for the next launch. Critics will continue to debate the utility of the AV-8B. Their opinions and arguments are important, but the Marines and Sailors of VMA-513 are concerned with one thing: making sure they continue to get the job done and do it professionally. As one Marine summed up, “The sooner we can accomplish the mission, the sooner we can go home.”



Maj. Franzak is executive officer of VMA-513.

