

Marine Air Group 11: Ready When Called

Story and Photos by Rick Llinares

To say that the past two years have been busy for the officers and enlisted personnel of Marine Air Group (MAG) 11 does not tell the whole story. Remaining at the forefront of America's 911 Force in Readiness is no simple job. Marine aviation is heavily tasked with supporting Marine expeditionary and ground forces conducting operations in many parts of the world fighting the war on terrorism.

Based at MCAS Miramar, Calif., MAG-11 consists of six F/A-18 Hornet squadrons, one F/A-18 fleet readiness squadron (FRS), a sole KC-130 unit and a single Marine aviation logistics squadron (MALS). With the exception of the FRS, every unit under the MAG has deployed numerous times in support of combat operations. Every model of Hornet except the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet is flown by MAG-11, including the single-seat F/A-18A, A+ and C, as well as the two-seat F/A-18D night strike Hornet.

The Hornet units provide a wide range of capabilities and firepower due to the aircraft's flexibility. The F/A-18 is the mainstay of the current Marine fixed wing strike capability, fulfilling a variety of missions formerly assigned to F-4 Phantom IIs, A-6 Intruders, A-4 Skyhawks and OV-10 Broncos. The Hornet is the most prevalent fixed wing aircraft operated by the Marines and will likely be in service for many years.

The other fixed wing aircraft operated by the MAG is the KC-130 Hercules workhorse. Also known as the "Battle Herk," the KC-130 is the primary aerial refueling platform for both Marine fixed wing aircraft and CH-53 Sea/Super Stallion rotary wing and MV-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft. Aerial refueling can be done during the day and night, greatly



increasing the range and on-station time for Marine assets. KC-130s can also be used close to the action, providing fuel to forward-based aircraft, as well as carrying critical supplies and personnel. Operating combat aircraft is a dangerous business. While flying their aircraft in the war on terrorism, some MAG-11 personnel have paid the ultimate price. A KC-130 assigned to Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 352 (VMGR) crashed during a mission in Afghanistan's theater of operations, losing the seven person crew.

An organization as large as MAG-11 can only work efficiently with the committed efforts of capable officers and enlisted personnel. MAG-11 is currently commanded by Colonel Earl Wederbrook, who has more than 25 years of service as a Marine aviator and 4,800 hours of flight time in fighters. He leads the air group comprised of 409 Marine officers, 2,640 Marine enlisted personnel, 51 Navy officers, 198 Navy enlisted personnel, 3 foreign officers and approximately 120 aircraft.

Col. Wederbrook said, "I am both honored and privileged to lead the finest group of Marines in the Marine Corps today." He emphasized that during Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF], MAG-11 provided the majority of the offensive firepower of the 3d Marine Aircraft

Wing, which in turn supported the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force on its drive to liberate Baghdad. In addition to the Hornets, MAG-11 provided most of the KC-130s that supported fixed wing, helicopter and ground operations. With the official ending of combat operations, MAG-11 returned to the United States and began preparations for future deployments aboard aircraft carriers, or to the Far East in

support of other U.S. military commitments.

The colonel explained that MAG-11 now has three squadrons participating in the Tactical Air [TACAIR] Integration Program, two squadrons preparing for future expeditionary deployments and one currently deployed to the western Pacific in support of the global war on terrorism [GWOT]. In the near future, some squadrons (either carrier or land based) may deploy to participate directly in OIF or Operation Enduring Freedom, while others may deploy to various strategic locations in support of the GWOT. He said, "The TACAIR Integration concept should provide a globally resourced pool of well-trained and well-led Marine/Navy fighter attack squadrons that can be used in an expeditionary role to support an engaged marine air-ground task force [MAGTF], or embark aboard a carrier as part of a carrier strike group. "Each MAG-11 squadron is an individually deployable unit, which can be used as an integral component in organizing a MAGTF that is just the right size for the mission and, most importantly, can be deployed to the right place at the right time."

Col. Wederbrook praised the Hornet's capabilities and added, "With the support of our 'Battle Herks' [of VMGR-352], we can go almost anywhere and do almost anything."

In simple terms, there are four air wings within the Marine Corps. The 1st Marine Air Wing (MAW) and 3rd MAW support Commander U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific, while the 2nd MAW supports the Atlantic forces commander and the 4th MAW the Reserve forces commander. Each MAW has a number of Marine air groups with numerous squadrons of either fixed wing or rotary wing aircraft. Units within a MAG typically

F/A-18D Hornets of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (All Weather) 121 fly in formation.



- MAG-11 Squadrons**
- VMFA-232 Red Devils
 - VMFA-314 Black Knights
 - VMFA-323 Death Rattlers
 - VMFA(AW)-121 Green Knights
 - VMFA(AW)-225 Vikings
 - VMFA(AW)-242 Bats
 - VMFAT-101 Sharpshooters
 - VMGR-352 Raiders
 - MALS-11 Devilfish

Here, aircraft from all of MAG-11's Hornet squadrons fly together over the Salton Sea in California. Below, a VMGR-352 KC-130 crew conducts a refueling mission with MAG-11 F/A-18s over the Pacific Ocean.



detach both aircraft and personnel to join Marine expeditionary units (MEU) that deploy on board Navy assault ships, providing a self-contained rapid response force. A mixture of helicopters and AV-8B Harrier IIs form the air combat element supporting the MEU. Hornet MAGs also support Navy carrier air wings (CVW) with an F/A-18 squadron and deploy squadrons to a forward facility as part of the Unit Deployment Program. In any case, an entire squadron within the MAG deploys for at least six months.

Since WW II, Marine fighter units have operated effectively with Navy air wings. MAG-11 Executive Officer Lieutenant Colonel Morrison discussed the current integration between the Marine Corps and the Navy, "The TACAIR Integration Plan includes an increase in the amount of Marine fighter attack

squadrons participating in carrier air wing deployments. MAG-11 has integrated F/A-18 squadrons into CVWs since 1993. In the near future, the air group will join Marine Fighter Attack Squadron [VMFA] 232 with CVW-2, VMFA-323 with CVW-9 and VMFA-314 with CVW-11. All three squadrons will commence training with their respective Navy air wings in the next few months."

MAG-11 traces its roots to 1941, when it stood up at Quantico, Va. During WW II, MAG-11 saw extensive combat throughout the South Pacific and by war's end was stationed at Peleliu. In subsequent years, elements of the MAG saw combat in Korea and Vietnam.

By the late 1960s, the MAG operated a variety of aircraft, including the F-8 Crusader, F-4 Phantom II, A-6 Intruder and A-4 Skyhawk. In 1971 the unit took up residence at MCAS El Toro, Calif., where it remained until it moved to MCAS Miramar. MAG-11 traded in its F-4s and A-6s for the multimission F/A-18 Hornet in the early 1980s.

Flying nearly 43,000 hours annually, MAG-11 continues to support Marine air-ground task forces as needed, wherever and whenever called upon. 

Rick Llinares is a professional photographer and writer specializing in Naval Aviation.

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Recent MAG-II Unit Deployments



VMFA(AW)-121

Exercise Bright Star: Egypt, Oct 01
Operation Enduring Freedom: Manas, Kyrgyzstan, Apr–Oct 02; 900 combat sorties, 4,200 combat hours
Operation Southern Watch: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Jan–Mar 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Mar–May 03; 796,763 lbs. ordnance delivered

VMFA(AW)-225

WESTPAC Deployment: Iwakuni, Japan, Mar–Sep 02
Operation Southern Watch: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Jan–Mar 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Mar–May 03; 755,246 lbs. ordnance delivered

VMFA-232

WESTPAC Deployment: Iwakuni, Japan, Sep–Mar 02
Operation Southern Watch: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Jan–Mar 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Mar–May 03; 689,364 lbs. ordnance delivered

VMFA(AW)-242

WESTPAC Deployment: Iwakuni, Japan, Sep 02–Sep 03

VMFA-314

Operation Enduring Freedom: *Stennis* (CVN 74), Nov 01–May 02

VMFA-323

Operation Southern Watch: *Constellation* (CV 64), Nov 02–Mar 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom: *Constellation* (CV 64), Mar–May 03

VMGR-352

Operation Enduring Freedom: Jan–Dec 02; Jan–Dec 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom: 2003–2004

VMFA-251 (temporarily attached to MAG-11)

Operation Southern Watch: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Feb–Mar 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom: Al Jaber, Kuwait, Mar–May 03; 785,417 lbs. ordnance delivered

VMFA(AW)-533 (temporarily attached to MAG-11)

Operation Southern Watch-Al Jaber, Kuwait, Feb–Mar 03
Operation Iraqi Freedom-Al Jaber, Kuwait, Mar–May 03; 790,003 lbs. ordnance delivered

An F/A-18 Hornet of VMFA-232 continues its mission after refueling from an Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker while supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom. Photo by USAF SSgt. Cherie A. Thurlby