

VMFA(AW)-242:

Bats in Combat

By Lt. Col. Doug Pasnik



Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA(AW)) 242 was first established as a Marine Torpedo Bombing Squadron in July 1943 and flew the TBF/TBM Avenger in WW II. They traced a path across the Pacific with bases in the New Hebrides, Bouganville, and Tinian, flying strikes against Rabaul, Bouganville, and the Buka Passage, and flying patrols over the Marianas and Iwo Jima. The squadron was reactivated as Marine Attack Squadron 242 in October 1960 and flew the A4D Skyhawk. The squadron ushered in an era of operations flying the A-6A Intruder beginning in 1964 as a Marine All Weather Attack Squadron (VMA(AW)). The squadron deployed to Vietnam in 1966 and operated from Da Nang. VMA(AW)-242 flew missions in defense of Khe Sanh, and exploited the capabilities of the Intruder

during Operation Rolling Thunder and interdiction missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Bats aircrews logged 16,783 combat sorties and delivered nearly 86,000 tons of ordnance over four years in that combat theater. The squadron was redesignated VMFA(AW)-242 in December 1990.

In August 2004, the Bats returned to combat operations for the first time in thirty-four years. The squadron deployed with its F/A-18D Hornets to Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, a former MiG-29 and MiG-25 base, to begin sustained operations in support of I MEF (Marine Expeditionary Force) stability operations. The squadron began 24-hour operations upon arrival, flying its first combat sorties within 36 hours, and within the first two days had already expended ordnance on several hideouts and mortar positions containing anticoalition forces.

A plane captain salutes as an F/A-18D Hornet of VMFA(AW)-242 prepares for takeoff at Al Asad, Iraq, on 30 October 2004. On this day the squadron surpassed 3,000 flight hours since arriving in Iraq in August. Photo by Cpl. Paul Leicht.





Above, a squadron F/A-18D equipped with the Advanced Tactical Airborne Reconnaissance System taxis at Al Asad, Iraq, on 30 October 2004. Right, VMFA(AW)-242 imagery analyst Sgt. Michael Ramirez demonstrates ATARS equipment to Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Michael W. Hagee.

The squadron's missions included close air support (CAS) sorties with an embedded airborne forward air controller (FAC(A)) capability, utilizing the Advanced Tactical Airborne Reconnaissance System (ATARS) and the Litening Advanced Targeting (AT) Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR) Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) pod. This deployment marked the first integration of this Litening sensor on Hornets during combat.

Routine missions included work with ground FACs from other services in support of convoy escort, counter-indirect fire, cordon and search, armed reconnaissance, precision strike, and on-call CAS missions. Aircraft weapons





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complement included a mix of GBU-12 laser guided bombs, AGM-65 Maverick missiles, rockets and guns. The squadron performed its first employment of the GBU-38 “J-82” laser-guided bomb in the reactive role during urban CAS missions over Al Fallujah.

On 8 November 2004, I MEF forces were amassed outside the city of Al Fallujah, primed to begin an assault during Operation Phantom Fury. The city held countless numbers of weapons caches, torture chambers, hundreds of improvised explosive devices, traps, and an estimated 5,000 insurgents. The Bats opened the assault with the delivery of four GBU-31 2,000 pound joint direct attack munitions to breach a fifty-foot berm north of the city, setting in motion the ground assault. The Bats continued with “surge operations” throughout Phantom Fury,



A VMFA(AW)-242 F/A-18D Hornet displays its armament near Fallujah, Iraq, on 9 November 2004 during Operation Phantom Fury. Below, the building that shelters a group of insurgents who are firing on nearby Marines in Iraq is destroyed by a laser-guided missile from a Bats F/A-18D Hornet. This image was captured by the gun camera of the AH-1W Sea Cobra that laser-designated the target.



flying around the clock missions, providing an eye in the sky for assaulting forces and expending over 253,000 pounds of ordnance on enemy targets. Nearly all missions during this operation were conducted under challenging “troops in contact” and “danger close” situations, and all were executed skillfully

and without incident. Following Phantom Fury, reduced enemy activity was observed in the area of operations (AO), and the Bats transitioned to reconnaissance operations as civilians began to return to the war-torn city. In January the squadron “surged” once again during Operation Citadel, providing air support coverage 24 hours a day for a five-day period in support of the Iraqi elections.



Above, VMFA(AW)-242 F/A-18D Hornets enroute to a CAS mission in support of I MEF Marines in Iraq. Right, a Bats Hornet releases a GBU-12 during Fallujah operations.



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Takeaways from this deployment will include a paradigm shift for offensive air support missions, as the capabilities of the Hornet have been exponentially enhanced with the addition of the Litening AT pod. Now, CAS and FAC(A) aircrew routinely augment FAC situational awareness to a level never before achieved in the low- and medium-threat environment. The Litening pod also introduced an enhanced- ISR capability to the battlefield, allowing enemy movement to be seen where it had never been seen before. Examples abound in which aircrew traced and foiled improvised explosive device emplacement operations by anticoalition personnel, tracked individual cell movement during Al Fallujah clean-up operations, and produced targeting information that allowed “danger close” missions to be conducted with relative ease.



SSgt. Chad McMeen

Left, Marines of VMFA(AW)-242 cheer as some of the first squadron aircraft prepare to take off from Al Asad, Iraq, in August 2004. Above, the men and women of VMFA(AW)-242 are proud to support I MEF Marines in Iraq.



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The common theme among squadron aircrew is that the Hornet could not perform this mission without the addition of this sensor; it has revolutionized the way precision munitions are employed in this environment.

At the close of its seven month deployment in March 2005, the Bats had amassed over 8,000 hours during 210 days of combat operations, averaging 1,100 hours and 550 sorties per month in support of Marines engaged in combat operations in Iraq. During the Operation Iraqi Freedom, the squadron delivered over 400,000 pounds of precision ordnance on enemy targets, flew 700 sorties in

direct support of troops in contact situations, and were noted as providing the “fastest fixed-wing time to kill” by many ground FACs.

The squadron kept watch over the western half of Iraq, where names like Al Fallujah, Ramadi, and the Sunni Triangle have already become part of Marine Corps history. The Bats of VMFA(AW)-242 are proud to have been part of the endeavor. ✈

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