

Captain Paul L. Martelli was forced to bail out of his stricken aircraft on 3 April.* On the same day, Technical Sergeant Robert H. Bentley also bailed out after his Corsair was struck by ground fire. He was picked up by a helicopter which had been searching for Captain Martelli. On 9 April First Lieutenant Lilburn L. Harpe was shot down and successfully recovered.³⁷

Second Lieutenant James A. Gleaves, Jr., was shot down over Kwangdong-ni on 14 April. He was seen parachuting into enemy territory. A helicopter dispatched to rescue the downed pilot was repulsed by enemy fire.³⁹ Lieutenant Gleaves' status was later changed from MIA to KIA.

VMF-323 continued to operate out of K-1 through May, but on 20 April, the Death Rattlers also began to use K-16, an airfield on the bank of the Han River near Seoul, as a rearming and refueling point. This allowed the pilots to remain closer to the front lines throughout the day, making possible a greater number of combat missions. Most of the Corsairs would remain overnight, flying from K-16 until they had to return to K-1 for repair or scheduled maintenance. K-16 created a lot of problems because the airfield did not have a hard surface and heavily loaded aircraft would often get stuck in the sand.⁴⁰

On 27 April, First Lieutenant Earl F. Patrick was killed during an armed reconnaissance flight, when his plane crashed after being hit in the left wing root area by small arms fire. Three days later, First Lieutenant James L. Frazier died after his plane was hit by enemy ground fire and crashed on the top of a mountain ridge.

On 2 May, Captain Byron H. Beswick was downed by small arms fire while leading a flight that attacked a concentration of 500 enemy troops. He was making a strafing run on an unexploded napalm tank when his plane was hit and caught fire. He managed to bail out of the stricken Corsair, but a rescue helicopter could not be sent for him because of the intensity of ground fire in the area. First Lieutenant Neal R. Ewing remained on station overhead until darkness forced

*Captain Martelli's experiences following this incident are noteworthy. Initially listed as killed in action he was, in fact, taken prisoner by the North Koreans. Captain Martelli was the first Marine to be processed through "Pak's Palace," the most notorious of the many transit camps where prisoners were interrogated before assignment to permanent facilities. In September 1952, Captain Martelli escaped from Camp No. 2 only to be recaptured 10 days later. Captain Martelli was eventually freed during Operation Big Switch.³⁸

him to return to base. Captain Beswick was initially listed as missing in action, but was later classified as a prisoner of war.**

On 18 May, Lieutenant Ewing became a casualty, after his close air support mission was diverted to cover a downed pilot. Ewing and Second Lieutenant Bruce E. Clingan circled the downed pilot for 15 minutes, until they were told that they were no longer needed overhead. Later, proceeding west along the Choyang River, Lieutenant Ewing's aircraft was hit by ground fire that exploded a napalm tank. His plane crashed into a ridge and burned on impact.

On 2 June the squadron moved its base of operations from K-1 to Itami, to prepare for embarkation on board the USS *Sicily****. The Death Rattlers began flying missions in support of an ongoing blockade of the northeast coast of Korea.

While flying off the *Sicily*, VMF-323 had four types of missions: naval gunfire spotting; close air support; armed reconnaissance; and CAP. On 17 June Captain Bigelow Watts, Jr., was killed when his plane crashed into the sea during his attempt to land on the *Sicily*. The plane broke apart and sank immediately.

For the next three months, the primary mission of the squadron was the blockade of the northwest coast of Korea, which was maintained by two aircraft carriers, the *Sicily* and the British HMS *Glory*, and other United Nations warships. The two carriers took turns patrolling the coast. Flight operations were severely curtailed in July by inclement weather, but not in August, when the squadron flew a total of 1,452.2 hours in combat.

The CAPs flown by the squadron consisted of two aircraft, each loaded with 2,400 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition. Close air support missions and naval gunfire spotting flights were flown on request from higher authority. Because the squadron's primary mission was to enforce the blockade, at least one and often two daily reconnaissance flights sought out enemy

**An official Marine Corps history notes the following information about the downed pilot: "Captain Byron H. Beswick, VMF-323, was a member of a large POW column being marched north. Although still suffering severe burns on his face, hands, and leg incurred while bailing out of his plane that caught fire, Beswick and four others attempted to outwit their guards while on the march. All the would-be escapees were placed in solitary confinement."⁴¹

***The squadron replaced its F4U-4Bs with the F4U-4 when it went aboard. Due to limited magazine space on the *Sicily* only fighters equipped with .50-caliber machine guns were operated from it. When the squadron was relieved from carrier duty another aircraft exchange was made.⁴²

shipping along the coast. Land reconnaissance missions also were flown which searched main routes of supply and communications in the northwestern region of Korea.

On 20 September the Death Rattlers left the *Sicily* for a short stay at Itami and a change to F4U-4Bs, before setting up a new base of operations at Bradshaw Airfield, K-1, near Pusan. The first month of operations out of Bradshaw Airfield was record breaking. The Death Rattlers flew 2,767.3 hours of combat time, in close air support missions and strikes against enemy installations. On 10 October, they flew two 20-plane strikes against vital equipment depots in Mulgae-ri. The following day, the squadron flew close air support missions, for the first time since it left the *Sicily*.

On 30 October VMF-323 began its move to K-18, near Kangnung, MAG-12's new airfield. One of the ships carrying squadron materiel ran aground on a sand bar and remained immobilized for six days, but only one day of air operations was lost during the move, and that loss came from inclement weather.

Aircrew losses had been high during October. Captain Emanuel R. Amann was lost following an attack on an enemy rail line on 4 October. Three days later, Second Lieutenant Arthur D. DeLacy was reported missing in action after he bailed out of his Corsair after it took an antiaircraft hit. The attempt to rescue him by helicopter failed because of intense ground fire. Lieutenant Delacy was confirmed as a prisoner of war by the 1st MAW intelligence section on 11 October.

Captain Cornelius T. Montgomery was killed on 10 October, when his aircraft was hit by antiaircraft fire as he dove on a target in Mulgae-ri. He radioed that he would bail out, but no parachute was seen. And on 30 October First Lieutenant Herman F. Stanfill was listed as missing in action after his plane was hit by ground fire during a close air support mission. He bailed out and landed behind enemy lines. An attempted rescue by helicopter was repulsed by ground fire. Later reports listed Stanfill as a prisoner of war.

During November and December 1951, close air support missions declined as interdiction missions aimed at the destruction of railroad operations increased. On these interdiction flights, commonly known as "rail cut" missions, each Corsair usually carried a 1,000-pound GP and six 100-pound GPs equipped with variable time fuzes to be used for flak suppression. Each plane also carried an external fuel tank that allowed for longer time over target.

In December the squadron devised a new tech-

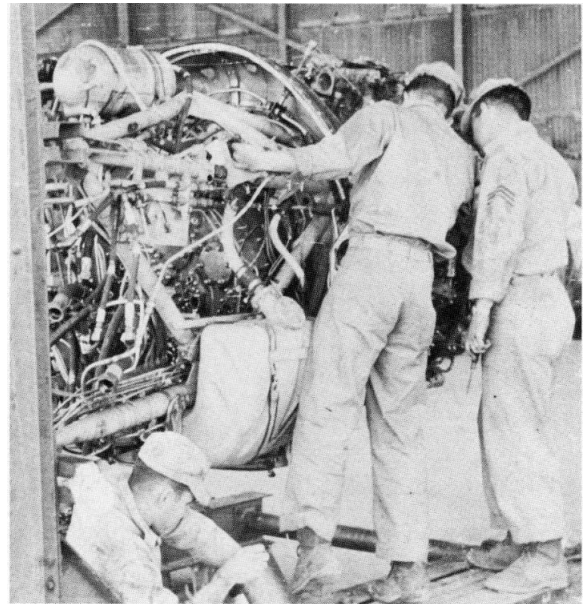


Photo courtesy of Maj James W. Kirk, USMCR (Ret)
An engine change is being conducted for a Corsair at K-6, Pyong-Taek, Korea, in the summer of 1952.

nique. An additional Corsair was added to each rail-cutting mission. The extra aircraft carried a drop tank that contained survival equipment, which could be dropped to any pilot forced down in enemy territory. During December, the Death Rattlers lost Captain Herbert D. Smith, last seen after his plane was hit by a 90mm projectile during the attack on a rail line. His last radio transmission indicated he was hit and was heading west. He bailed out and was visible on the ground for 90 minutes, but no signs of life were seen by the time the survival gear tank was dropped. Later, Captain Smith was officially declared dead.

During the first four months of 1952, VMF-323 continued its rail cutting and close air support missions, flying from K-18. On 21 April the squadron began another move to a new base of operations. This time, it was K-6, an airfield near Pyongtaeng-ni. This move was completed in 10 days.

On 30 June the squadron was redesignated Marine Attack Squadron 323 (VMA-323), reflecting its change in mission. The Death Rattlers continued operations from K-6 until 2 July 1953, their last day of combat flying in Korea. It should be noted, the squadron was commanded by Marine Corps Reserve officers twice during 1952. Lieutenant Colonel Richard L. Blume led the squadron from 16 January to 25 April and Lieutenant Colonel Henry S. Miller commanded the Death Rattlers from 1 June to 31 August.

Colonel Miller, in recalling his period of duty at K-6, provided an excellent example of the kind of rap-

port that exists between pilots and maintenance personnel in Marine Corps aviation:

In my Organized Reserve days in VMF-451 in Willow Grove, we had a superb enlisted engineering chief named Andrew Marushok. Andy and I always had a firm and clear understanding: he was to maintain aircraft availability at the highest possible percentage, and I was to see that every airplane was flown as much as possible. When I reported to 323 in 1952, who should be the engineering officer but Lt Andrew Marushok! We were delighted to see each other, and it was pure joy to work with him during the period he remained assigned to 323.⁴³

Lieutenant Colonel Willard C. Lemke, Death Rattler commanding officer from 20 November 1952 to 12 January 1953, also provided an informative summary of the squadron's role while stationed at K-6:

Sometime in 1952, probably about the time the squadron was redesignated from VMF to VMA, the 24 aircraft complement was changed to include approximately half F4U-4Bs and half AU-1s. The AU-1 was similar to the F4Us but optimized for the attack role. It was strictly a low altitude aircraft with a two-speed supercharger, versus the two-stage, two-speed supercharger in the F4U. As a result, it had more power at the lower altitudes but was a "dog" up high. We routinely carried an extra 500 lbs of ordnance on the AU-1. . . .

Flight operations fell into four primary categories. The most unique, and disliked, missions were the RESCAPS. Whenever there were large-scale combined strikes, or any significant air activity north of the bomb line it was customary for the Fifth Air Force to assign a four-plane "Rescue" Combat Air Patrol (RESCAP)

on station near the activity, but orbiting off the coast. In the event an aircraft was downed and the pilot believed to be alive, the RESCAP was vectored to the scene and would attempt to locate the pilot and hold off enemy troops or boats until a rescue helicopter could reach the scene. The F4Us of VMA-323 were the prime recipients of this mission because they had four 20mm cannons for strafing, long endurance, and maneuverability best suited for the task. They were usually long, dull flights boring holes in the sky around an orbit point while the pilots tried to ignore their frozen feet, because the F4Us did not have cockpit heaters. Infrequently, fortunately, the blissful boredom would be exchanged for an overabundance of excitement dodging enemy flak in case of a downed pilot. While that usually defrosted the toes, it was not a satisfactory solution. The 1st Marine Division provided a better solution when they donated some good old "cruncher" thermoboots. They were a little large and awkward on the rudder pedals, and although many a Corsair may have been noted fishtailing down the runway, they kept the toes warm.

Another type of mission was MPQ radar bombing. If cloud cover precluded direct air support when needed by friendly troops, flights would be dispatched to the Marine Corps or Air Force radar controller, who would vector the aircraft on a prescribed course and direct triggering of the bombs at the correct release point. This system was also used as a secondary alternative whenever weather inadvertently prevented successful attack on a primary target.

Vought AU-1s of VMA-323 at K-6, Pyong-Taek, Korea, in the fall of 1952 are lined up in the foreground. VMA-212's line, consisting also of AU-1s is in the left background.

Photo courtesy of Maj James W. Kirk, USMCR (Ret)





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A131264

VMA-323 ordnance crews loading bombs and rockets by hand at K-6 airfield in Korea.

The majority of missions at K-6 were in providing close air support, with primary effort in support of the 1st Marine Division. However, frequent missions were also flown in support of the U.S. Army and ROK divisions. The other major activity included regular squadron size attack missions against enemy supply dumps, troop concentrations, storage areas, etc., which were generally located well north of the bomblines.⁴⁴

Colonel Miller added to the story as he related information about raids on North Korean power stations during June 1952:

Those raids represented a change in strategy, which as I recall required the personal approval of President Truman. There was no briefing or any other information about the raids until the last minute, so that we got only one or two hours of sleep before the first raid. About a dozen of our squadron's planes, which led the flight, were loaded with "Tiny Tim" torpedoes, which no one in the air group had ever used, and which I suppose operations thought we might as well get rid of.⁴⁵

Colonel William M. Frash, commanding officer of the squadron from 13 January to 10 April 1953 also provided valuable insights into the Death Rattlers'

Korean operations. He recalled that during the Korean Defense and Winter Campaigns of 1952-53:

The squadron was flying daily in physically difficult (cold) conditions, carrying bomb loads of 6,200 pounds . . . off a 4,200[-foot] strip of PSP [pierced steel planking] against well dug-in and prepared enemy positions.⁴⁶

Much of the flight activity Colonel Frash described involved interdiction operations carried deep into North Korea.

The airfield which the squadron operated from during this period did little to relieve the hardship of the situation. Colonel Frash describes it as "living on a little island amid rice paddies. . . . K-6 was probably a smaller island than any used in World War II. True, not all surrounded by water, but isolated."⁴⁷

Colonel Moore summarizes, the squadron's K-6 activity best when he reflects, "These were not dramatic operations but were just hard slugging flying against intense antiaircraft fire most of the time."⁴⁸

The squadron left Korea for a brief stay at Itami in July 1953, before moving to the Atsugi Naval Air Station, near Tokyo, for transportation back to the United States. The arduous commitment in Korea had

ended, with the Death Rattlers again serving with honor in combat. VMA-323 was the Marine fixed-wing attack squadron with longest overseas service during the Korean War. By July 1953, the Death Rattlers had accumulated a total of 48,677.2 hours of flight time since their August 1950 arrival in Korea.⁴⁹

*El Toro and the Dominican Republic Episode:
1953-1965*

Before it left Korea, VMA-323 distributed its aircraft and material allowance to other units of the 1st MAW remaining in the Far East. Most of the VMA-323 personnel were sent on leave, with orders reassigning them to a variety of duty stations upon their return.

When VMA-323 left Korea it was represented by only one officer and five enlisted men, who, under the command of Captain Ted J. Foster, travelled by air to Itami for a one-day stay, then on to Atsugi for further air transportation to Naval Air Station Barbours Point, Hawaii.

On 13 July 1953 the six-man squadron arrived at NAS Moffett Field, California, and later that day proceeded by air to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, its home base prior to the Korean war. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Watkins relieved Captain Foster as commanding officer and VMA-323 became a part of MAG-15. The squadron accepted 16 F9F-2 Panther jets. Flight testing and familiarization began within two days.

The new VMA-323 was composed primarily of Marines who had joined the unit at El Toro. The material allowance had been left at El Toro by VMA-251 when it left for Korea to relieve VMA-323.

The F9F-2 Panther was the first Navy jet fighter ever used in combat. In July 1950, Navy pilots had put the Panther into action in Korea, flying off the USS *Valley Forge* (CV-45). Within days, a Navy pilot became the first to shoot down a MiG-15. The Death Rattlers were one of many Marine squadrons to use the reliable Grumman aircraft during the mid-1950s. By 1956, the squadron was flying the F9F-8 Cougar, a swept-wing version of the original Panther aircraft.

Training problems mounted as the squadron entered the jet era. Less than half the enlisted men had any experience in squadron duty and less than half the assigned pilots had flown jets. To complicate matters further, the squadron had to move to a Marine Corps Auxiliary Landing Field (MCALF) in the Mojave Desert, to make room for a Marine Corps Reserve squadron coming to El Toro for annual two-week training duty.

The move from El Toro to MCALF Mojave took two

days and was completed by 23 July. Flight time during the rest of the month was devoted to familiarization flights, section and division tactics, and extensive ordnance delivery.⁵⁰ Still designated as an attack squadron (VMA), the squadron was operating under a table of organization for a "Marine Fighter Squadron, Single Engine (Jet)."⁵¹

The unit returned to El Toro on 8 August 1953 and resumed its flight training operations. During the fall of 1953 the squadron began planning for a six-month deployment to Hawaii. All squadron aircraft were transferred to VMF-235 during the week of 15 October. Full scale packing began on 19 October, and no flying took place during the last two weeks of the month.

On 4 November 1953 the squadron embarked on board the USS *Ft. Marion* (LSD-22) in San Diego. On 10 November while still on board the *Ft. Marion*, the Death Rattlers celebrated the 178th birthday of the Marine Corps. The squadron commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William M. Watkins, gave a talk on the history and traditions of the Corps, after a turkey dinner hosted in the general mess by the officers and crew of the *Ft. Marion*. The festivities were topped off by the traditional cake-cutting ceremony.

On 11 November VMA-323 arrived at Pearl Harbor. Squadron personnel departed by bus for the Marine Corps Air Station at Kaneohe, where the squadron moved into permanent office and hangar facilities and began administrative operations as a part of MAG-13. By the end of the month flying was underway. The early schedules of air operations stressed tactical training flights.

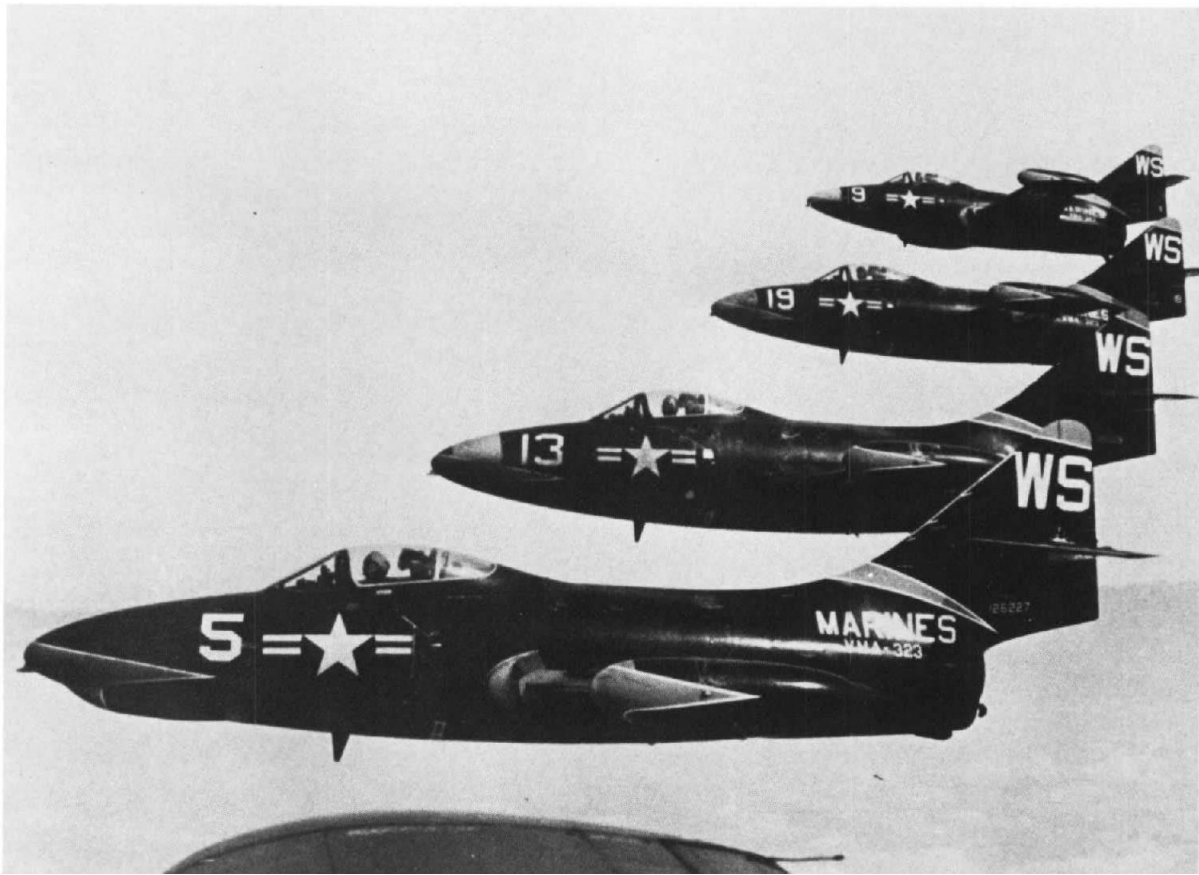
The Command Diary for December 1953 stated:

The squadron's assigned activities were severely hampered by other commitments, such as regimental parades and personnel inspections, weapons qualifications firing, and basic training.⁵²

This reflected a familiar complaint in Marine aviation, that ceremonial and administrative commitments result in undermanned maintenance sections, with adverse affects on a squadron's primary mission.

During January, February, and the first part of March 1954, VMA-323 remained at MCAS Kaneohe. In addition to tactical flight training, the Death Rattlers engaged in aerial gunnery and close air support missions.

The otherwise successful deployment to Hawaii was marred by the death of the squadron's operations officer, Major Roy J. Irwin, during a training flight.⁵³ On 16-17 March personnel and equipment were loaded aboard LST-742 and LST-802 for transport back to the



Marine Corps Historical Collection

A flight of VMA-323 Grumman F9F-2 Panthers displays an echelon formation in 1955.

West Coast and a return to MCAS El Toro.* By 27 March the squadron had again become a part of MAG-15.

Except for temporary training deployments, the Death Rattlers remained at El Toro until June 1957, carrying out a variety of assignments. In February 1955 the squadron, led by its new skipper, Major Richard Hey, Jr., deployed to MCALF Mojave where the pilots received training in airborne rocket firing, bombing, strafing, and section and division tactics.

On 15 September 1955 the Death Rattlers' parent unit, MAG-15, became a part of the 3d MAF, which had moved on 1 September 1953 to El Toro from MCAS, Miami, Florida. Shortly thereafter, the squadron supported the 1st Marine Division and several Canadian armed forces units in Pacific Training Exercises (PaTraEx). These exercises took place between 7 and 18 November 1955 in the Camp Pendleton-San Clemente-San Diego area. VMA-323 also engaged in air tactical training in the Mojave desert and at the Naval Auxiliary Air Station, El Centro, California.

An interesting diversion from the flight training

*On 1 July 1955, these ships were renamed *Dunn County* and *Hamilton County* respectively.

schedule occurred in August 1956 when Major Summerfield M. Taylor, squadron executive officer, led 100 planes in a flyover of the Los Angeles Coliseum for the American Legion Convention gathered there. VMA-323 aircraft led the way, and the flight was augmented by planes from VMF-224 as well as from other services.⁵⁴

Later in August 1956 the squadron began a three-week deployment in which 12 F9F-8 Cougars spent the first week on board the USS *Shangri-la* (CVS-38), the second on board the USS *Bennington* (CV-20), and the third at NAS El Centro.⁵⁵ This assignment marked the last significant use of the F9Fs. In September the Death Rattlers received their first FJ-4 Fury, a supersonic, single-engine, single-place fighter.⁵⁶

The FJ-4 Fury had first appeared in February 1955, and this version of the fighter retained the four-cannon armament used in earlier models. All four wing pylons could carry the Sidewinder missile. The FJ-4 was used almost exclusively by Marine aviation units.⁵⁷

On 31 December 1956, VMA-323 was redesignated VMF-323 once again to reflect its primary fighter mission. Three days later, 3 January 1957, Lieutenant Colonel Daniel L. Cummings relieved Lieutenant

Colonel Warren H. McPherson as commanding officer. Preparations began in earnest for a deployment to Japan later in the year.

VMF-323 was the first Marine squadron on the west coast to receive the FJ-4. Because of this a great deal of emphasis was placed on maintenance routines and the understanding of all aircraft systems. Classes were held for pilots to give them solid background on all aspects of the new aircraft.⁵⁸

Simulated carrier qualifications were accomplished on a runway at MCAS El Toro. A mirror landing system was installed and a portion of the runway was painted to represent a carrier deck. In addition, Side-winder training, instrument flying, and a deployment to MCAS Mojave in May for air-to-air gunnery rounded out the preparations.⁵⁹

The departure of the squadron from MCAS El Toro began on 30 June 1957. By 5 July, 40 officers and 152 enlisted men had arrived at NAS Atsugi, Japan. They were joined by eight officers and 59 enlisted men transferred to the Death Rattlers from VMF-451, the squadron being relieved. Since VMF-323 received the aircraft used by VMF-451, the first job was to remove

the old squadron markings and replace them with those of the Death Rattlers.⁶⁰

Flight operations were conducted over the next few months and the pilots became especially proficient in instrument flying. By February 1958 the squadron had reached 10,000 accident free hours in the FJ-4. "Both the wing and group commanders gave the Death Rattlers a well received 'Atta Boy!'" as Colonel Cummings recalls.⁶¹

While stationed in Japan the squadron participated in several training exercises. These included Phiblink, at the Cubi Point Naval Air Station in the Republic of the Philippines from 28 November to 18 December 1957, and Strongback, 22 February to 4 March 1958, also in the Philippines.

Following the completion of Operation Phiblink squadron pilots and aircraft took part in a historic non-stop flight from NAS Cubi Point to NAS Atsugi. Colonel Cummings' account of the accomplishment related the details:

For the return flight to Atsugi, Japan, permission was requested to attempt a non-stop, non-air refueling flight to home base. Permission was granted by the Group and Wing

Ten of the 11 pilots who completed the non-stop, non-air refueling flight in FJ-4s on 17 December 1957 from NAS Cubi Point, Philippine Islands, to NAS Atsugi, Japan. Standing fourth from the left is the Commanding Officer, LtCol Daniel L. Cummings.

Photo courtesy of LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, USMC (Ret)





Photo courtesy of LtCol Daniel L. Cummings, USMC (Ret)

FJ-4s conduct air refueling from a AJ-2 Savage near NAS Atsugi, Japan, in July 1958.

commanders, and the flight was flown on 17 December 1957. A great deal of planning had been expended in preparation of this flight starting with the extended range tanks around northern Japan. Secondly, the flight plan was worked out every day according to the aerologist winds aloft chart, destination weather, etc. It was determined that the flight was indeed well within the capability of the FJ-4. As it turned out, only eleven of the sixteen pilots landed non-stop to Atsugi. Five of the ships experienced external fuel tank drop problems and elected to land at Iwakuni. The flight was planned for 1687 nautical miles (1940 statute miles) with an elapsed time of 3 hours and 14 minutes with 1265 lbs. of fuel remaining over the high key. The flight was accomplished in 3 hours 17 minutes and 110 lbs. of fuel over high key. The flight was to be flown in division (4 aircraft) ten minutes between each division, cruise climb to 37,000 feet until drop tanks were empty, drop tanks and climb to 42,000 feet and cruise at mach 8.6 to destination. It worked out well.

At the time, it is certain that this flight set an FJ-4 record for a mass, long distance flight, point to point over the open ocean area.⁶²

Beginning in June 1958 the flying duties of the squadron included assignment to daylight strip alert in defense of northern Japanese air space. During the following month all pilots qualified in air-to-air refueling. The Navy used a converted AJ aircraft as the tanker.⁶³

On 31 August, Death Rattler flight elements departed NAS Atsugi destined for Ping Tung, North Taiwan. The squadron as a part of MAG-11 was used to cover the naval resupply of Chinese Nationalist forces on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu located between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.* Previous

*VMF(AW)-115 and VMF(AW)-314 were also assigned to MAG-11 and participated in the Taiwan Straights crisis.

attempts to resupply the position by Chinese Nationalist forces were thwarted by coast artillery barrages from Communist forces on the mainland. As Seventh Fleet LSTs steamed toward the islands, Death Rattler Furies armed with Sidewinders and a full load of 20mm ammunition circled above. Fortunately, the supply effort was not challenged and the tense situation eased. Colonel Cummings later remarked that he “wondered if this was to be the first day of World War III.”⁶⁴

The squadron remained at Ping Tung, North Taiwan, flying routine patrols until 15 September when it was relieved in place by VMF-451. Squadron personnel departed Taiwan by air on 18 September bound for the United States via NAS Atsugi. Returning once more to MCAS El Toro, the Death Rattlers were then assigned to MAG-33.

In September 1959 the squadron spent a two-week training period at NAS Whidbey Island, Washington. It was the first time in five years that Marine squadrons from El Toro had deployed there. By then, the Death Rattlers were flying the F8U-1 Crusader aircraft. The Whidbey Island training exercise emphasized advanced weapons missions and instrument flying.⁶⁵

The single-place, single-engine, supersonic F8U-1 Crusader was a fighter aircraft with a variable incidence wing to give greater angle of attack during landing and take-off.**

**The F8U-1 was redesignated the F-8A in 1962 due to a decision by the Secretary of Defense to identify all Air Force and Navy aircraft using the existing Air Force designation system.

On 21 February 1960, 21 VMF-323 pilots brought their Crusaders on board the USS *Oriskany* (CVA-34) for a week of carrier qualification flying.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, insufficient winds during the period kept the pilots from getting the required number of landings for full carrier qualification.

In July 1961 the squadron was informed that it would become a part of Carrier Air Group 14 (CAG-14) on a six-months' long western Pacific (WestPac) cruise on board the USS *Lexington* (CVA-16). The attachment to a CAG was a first for a Marine Corps Crusader squadron. In preparation for this deployment, the Death Rattlers flew weapons training missions and took part in a 10-day carrier strike exercise, flying against "aggressor" aircraft from other west coast installations.⁶⁷

During the WestPac cruise VMF-323 pilots flew combat air patrol and escort missions from the *Lexington* as part of the U.S. Seventh Fleet's Task Force 77. Lieutenant Colonel Frederic T. Watts, Jr., recalled that the squadron gained the respect of its Navy counterparts due to the high degree of professionalism demonstrated by Death Rattler personnel. Of the five squadrons on board the carrier, VMFA-323 achieved the second highest grade in the operational readiness inspection held early in the cruise.⁶⁸

The squadron returned to MCAS El Toro in May 1962, and redeployed to NAS Dallas shortly thereafter. At Dallas the unit accepted new, improved F8U-2NE Crusaders, and Death Rattler personnel were given technical training by the aircraft manufacturer, the Ling-Temco-Vought Corporation.⁶⁹ In July the squadron was redesignated Marine Fighter Squadron (All

Weather) 323 (VMF(AW)-323) in order to depict the enhanced all weather fighting capabilities which the F8U-2NE afforded, and the fast pace of training continued.

In January 1963, VMF(AW)-323 took part in the largest peacetime exercise ever conducted by MAG-33, at MCAS Yuma. In the first two days of the exercise a total of 302 sorties were flown. The squadron took part in familiarization flights, tactics, instrument flying, gunnery runs, aerial photography runs, early warning alerts, and practice in delivering the "Sidewinder" missile.⁷⁰ The group flew 565 sorties during the first week of the exercise, despite record breaking cold temperatures and high winds. The final flight tally for the exercise was 1,508 sorties for a total of 2,343 hours in the air.⁷¹

A month later the Death Rattlers took part in the first phase of Operation Steel Gate, providing air support as a part of MAG-33 for an amphibious landing exercise held at Camp Pendleton.⁷² The second phase of Steel Gate, called Desert Winds, found the squadron operating from a Short Airfield for Tactical Support (SATS) site, providing strafing and bombing runs in support of a three-pronged attack by Pendleton-based 1st Marine Division forces against "aggressors" from the Hawaii-based 4th Marines.⁷³

In the summer of 1963 the squadron engaged in Operation Green Wave, a trans-Pacific flight of 18 Crusaders from El Toro to NAS Atsugi, with mid-air refueling from Marine Corps KC-130 transport aircraft. The exercise, which coincided with the squadron's scheduled transfer to Atsugi, began on schedule on 18 June 1963, but two of the first six F-8s launched,

A F8U-2 Crusader, over Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, in October 1962.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A146379





Photo courtesy of Maj Donald K. Tooker, USMC (Ret)

The rescue of Maj Donald K. Tooker on 18 June 1963 was a "one in a million chance" in the shark-infested waters. The seas were so rough with 12-foot swells that the ship's other whale boat had sank earlier in the day during a practice man-overboard drill.

had to abort their flights. The remaining four, led by squadron commander Lieutenant Colonel Claude O. Barnhill proceeded without incident to MCAS, Kaneohe, Hawaii. The leader of the second group of six aircraft, Major Donald K. Tooker, was forced to eject from his Crusader when it caught fire after the main fuel cell ruptured from overfilling during in-flight refueling. The F-8 exploded only seconds after Major Tooker ejected. Rescue operations were severely hampered because of poor weather, high seas, and low visibility in the region of the mishap, but were dramatically successful.

The only surface vessel within 300 miles was the USS *Koimer* (DE-331), which was unaware of the incident. "By supreme good luck," as Major Tooker put it, the *Koimer* cruised precisely over his position and effected a much welcomed rescue from the shark-infested waters. The element of luck was indeed "supreme," as Major Tooker related:

The destroyer was monitoring emergency channel as required, but the rescue was being carried out on the refueler's discrete channel—hence the element of luck prevailed.⁷⁴

The remaining five aircraft flew on to Kaneohe, but the third six-plane flight was aborted to El Toro.

Further problems experienced on the following day led to the eventual cancellation of Operation Green Wave. First Lieutenant Cliff J. Judkins III, a member of the third six-plane flight of Crusaders, was refueling in the same location at sea where Major Tooker's accident occurred. Following the precedent set the day before, the fuel cell on Lieutenant Judkins' plane burst during the refueling operation. Lieutenant Judkins chose to eject immediately because of the rapidity with which Major Tooker's plane caught fire and exploded the day before.

The lieutenant's problems were only beginning, however. The aircraft's ejection mechanism failed, and he was forced to "bail out." His problems continued when his parachute failed to open, and he plummeted 10,000 feet into the sea. Hitting the water at approximately 120 miles per hour, Lieutenant Judkins miraculously survived with two broken ankles, a fractured pelvis, and severe facial injuries.

One of the K-130 tankers successfully dropped a life raft within 10 feet of the injured pilot, whose survival equipment had been torn from his body on impact with the water.⁷⁵ Lieutenant Judkins was rescued by

the USS *Embattle* (AM-434) and was later transferred to the USS *Los Angeles* (CA-135). A rescue helicopter later transported him to a naval hospital in Long Beach, California.

On 22 June the trans-Pacific exercise was cancelled. Squadron personnel and equipment were airlifted by 3d MAW and Military Air Transport Service (MATS) aircraft, and arrangements were made to ship the squadron aircraft to Atsugi from Kaneohe and El Toro.

On 30 June the main body of VMF(AW)-323 personnel arrived in Atsugi, and on 2 July 1963, the USS *Core* (CVE-13) departed Hawaii with nine F-8s, two officers, and 18 enlisted men. Seven Crusaders were flown from El Toro to NAS Alameda on 5 July 1963 for subsequent surface shipment to the squadron in Atsugi.⁷⁶

VMF(AW)-323 operated for one year from Atsugi, as part of the 1st MAW. Operational readiness was the main goal of the squadron during its overseas assignment. The Death Rattlers deployed twice on board aircraft carriers and took part in operations in Okinawa, the Philippines, and Taiwan. During these operations the squadron flew 1,600 hours in one month, an accomplishment which Major Tooker credits to dedicated maintenance personnel and to two full years of hard work and training.⁷⁷

On 1 July 1964 the unit was redesignated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323 (VMFA-323), a designation it retains to the present day. Shortly after being redesignated the squadron was transferred to MCAS, Cherry Point, North Carolina, the first time the Death Rattlers had been based on the East Coast since their commissioning and initial training 21 years earlier.

In August 1964, the squadron began operating the F-4B Phantom II aircraft. This plane had a second seat for a radar intercept officer. On 17 August 1964, First Lieutenant Raymond R. Dunlevy, a newly designated naval flight officer reported on board as the Death Rattlers' first "back seat" Phantom flyer. Lieutenant Dunlevy described the F-4B weapons system as "fantastic . . . , an entirely new concept in aerial warfare."⁷⁸ The primary role for which the F-4B had been developed was interception and air superiority. But upcoming employment of the aircraft in Vietnam would place emphasis on the aircraft's attack role.

The squadron deployed to NAS Key West for the period 15 December 1964-15 January 1965 to stand the Cuban missile crisis fighter alert on an around-the-clock basis.

Major General Norman W. Gourley, Death Rattler commanding officer at the time, recalled that although only an eight-plane detachment was required

for the alert, the entire squadron deployed to Key West and received invaluable air-to-air training.⁷⁹

On 13 March 1965, the squadron moved to Naval Air Station Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico, for training. The next day the squadron relieved VMA-324 and training began. This included conventional weapons training, rocket and bomb runs, and practice using the Sparrow III missile. VMFA-323 was now part of MAG-24, 2d MAW.

On 27 April 1965, the squadron was placed in readiness for possible operations in the Dominican Republic. The next day it was alerted by Commander, Caribbean Sea Frontier, to prepare four aircraft with air-to-air and air-to-ground ordnance for missions over the Dominican Republic. That evening, the alert status was modified. Four unarmed aircraft were to be on 30-minute alert for possible use as a show of force until sunrise on 29 April. In addition, eight aircraft were to be available for launch at first light, armed with mixed air-to-air and air-to-ground ordnance.

On 1 May the squadron was directed to discontinue CAP missions and to commence low level armed reconnaissance flights over the Dominican Republic. These flights were aimed at gathering intelligence relating to any surface movements of a military or quasi-military nature; restrictions to movement of civilian and military personnel along road networks; unusual movements of large groups of civilians; activity at aircraft facilities; the location and movement of aircraft; and small craft activity.⁸⁰

During their deployment to NAS Roosevelt Roads, the Death Rattlers became the first Marine Phantom II squadron to operate in Puerto Rico. They set a new Navy-Marine missile firing record by successfully launching eight consecutive Sparrow missiles against supersonic airborne targets, and they logged a record-setting number of close air support missions during Operation Quick Kick VII.⁸¹ Further, the squadron's ground crews kept the Phantom IIs at nearly full availability during the demanding deployment period.⁸²

On 2 September 1965, Major General George S. Bowman, Commanding General, 2d MAW, presented a Wing Competitive Evaluation Exercise (CompEx) trophy to Lieutenant Colonel Norman W. Gourley, commanding officer of the squadron during the period of the competition.

The capabilities that the squadron demonstrated during its Caribbean deployment would soon be tested in combat. The Death Rattlers were headed for war in the Pacific area for the third time in their history. This time the scene would be the Republic of Vietnam.

The Vietnam Years: 1965-1969

During the period from 10 September to 13 September 1965, VMFA-323 transferred its 20 F-4B aircraft in preparation for deployment to the Western Pacific.⁸³ On 25 October the squadron departed MCAS Cherry Point for MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. During a brief stop there the squadron picked up the aircraft and the material it would take to combat in Vietnam. The squadron subsequently arrived at Da Nang Airbase, Republic of Vietnam on 1 December.⁸⁴

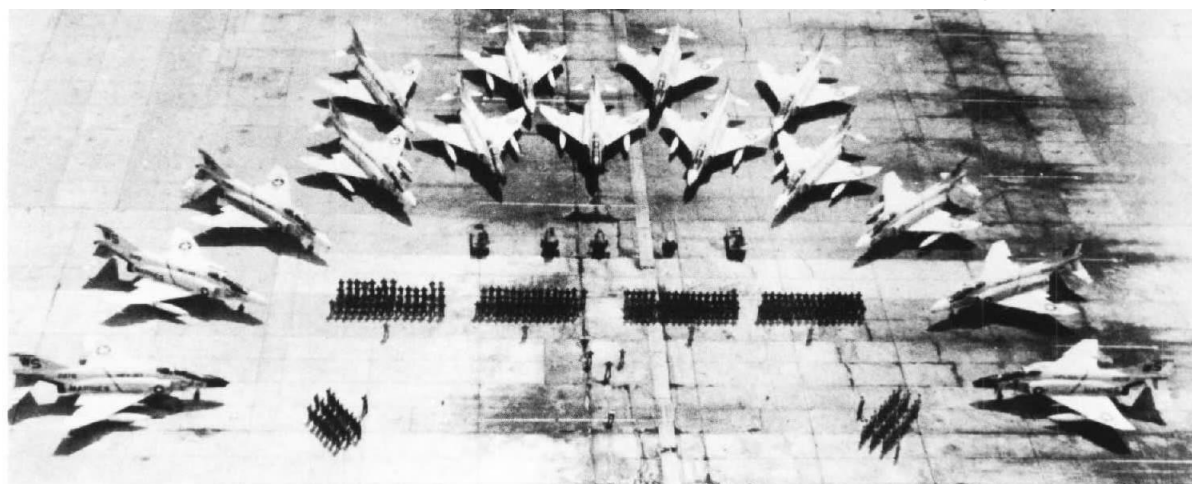
VMFA-323 began combat operations the following day, and on 7 December the Death Rattlers suffered their first personnel losses. Major John H. Dunn, squadron executive officer, was shot down by a surface-to-air missile over North Vietnam. Major Dunn survived in a North Vietnamese prison camp for over seven years. His radar intercept officer (RIO), Chief Warrant Officer John W. Frederick, died after five years in a prison camp.

By the end of December the squadron had flown 407 sorties for a total of 520 hours in the air. During that period the Death Rattlers participated in Operations Harvest Moon and Steel Tiger, flying combat air patrol missions in support of Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron 1 (VMCJ-1). These flights were named "Firecracker CAPS."

The Firecracker CAPs in support of VMCJ-1 continued through February 1966. During that month the Death Rattlers were also flying support missions for the Marine KC-130 Hercules transport aircraft of Marine Refueler Transport Squadron 152 (VMGR-152). During the period between 2 December 1965 through 28 February 1966, the squadron flew 1,567 combat sorties for a total of 2,131.6 hours.

The 15 F-4B Phantoms of VMFA-323 surround a squadron formation in 1965.

Marine Corps Historical Collection



From March to June 1966, the squadron stood air defense alert on Taiwan. In addition to a normal routine which emphasized air-to-ground weapons delivery, air-to-air tactics, and inflight refueling, the Death Rattlers flew in support of the Nationalist Chinese Army on Exercise Li Ming. On 23 June the squadron was relieved of its air alert duties by VMFA-314, and it returned to MCAS Iwakuni the following day.

The stay at Iwakuni would be brief, for the squadron was almost immediately ordered to deploy to Da Nang. An advance party departed Iwakuni on 1 July to establish liaison with MAG-11 Headquarters so that flight operations could begin immediately upon arrival of the lead element of the flight echelon.

On 5 July four of the squadron's F-4B Phantoms arrived in Da Nang. The following day, combat operations began with an morning takeoff by four Phantoms for a road reconnaissance mission. Later in the day, a second four-plane flight launched into haze and rain. Neither flight on this opening day of combat operations saw significant action.

Late in September 1966, the squadron participated in Operation Prairie with significant results. On 19 September eight structures and four dams were destroyed. Two days later squadron aircraft delivered 4.5 tons of ordnance to destroy six more structures. Finally, on 27 September, a total of 62.5 tons of ordnance was expended in leveling 20 structures. One secondary explosion was also observed.

Combat operations continued through the fall of 1966 with the squadron operating out of Da Nang and Chu Lai.* On 6 October VMFA-323 was reassigned from MAG-11 to MAG-13 and relocated to the Chu

*A detachment of 90 Marines and six F-4Bs from VMFA-323 operated from the Chu Lai airfield as early as 31 July 1966.