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The lineage of Marine Squadron 251 began on 1 December 1941 when Marine Observation Squadron 251 (VMO-251) was established at San Diego, Calif., under the command of CAPT Elliot E. Bard. The unit received the Grumman F4F-3P Wildcat, a camera-equipped fighter. Although the primary mission of the unit was reconnaissance, the unit trained and flew as a fighter squadron.

In May 1942 it was ordered to proceed to New Zealand in the South Pacific for the build-up of U.S. forces for the offensive against the Japanese. They arrived at Noumea, New Caledonia, on 12 July aboard USS Heywood (AP-12), and began unpacking and reassembling their crated Wildcats. At this point, the invasion of Guadalcanal (code-named Cactus) was imminent, and VMO-251 was ordered to the island of Espiritu Santo, nearly 500 miles southeast of Guadalcanal. The squadron reached Espiritu Santo on 2 August, and upon arrival, several of -251's photographers were sent to Army B-17 squadrons to participate in the pre-strike photo-reconnaissance of Guadalcanal. The ground crews were responsible for fueling, loading and servicing Army, Navy and Marine Corps planes.

The Guadalcanal landings were scheduled for 7 August and it was determined that VMO-251 and established VMF-212 would provide air support for the invasion, However, VADM John S. McCain, ComAirSoPac, was concerned with the make-up of the two Squadrons overwhelmingly stocked with pilots straight from the training command. He passed the responsibility of air support to MAG-23, which basically had the same problem.

After the successful invasion of Guadalcanal, LTCOL Charles "Fog" Hayes, the executive officer of VMO-251, was ordered to prepare an airfield on the island for MAG-23's aircraft. With three officers and 118 men from CUB-1, the field was ready for fighters and dive bombers on 20 August. The Japanese were determined to reclaim the island, and sent waves of Rabaul-based fighters and bombers to destroy the American forces. Although VMO-251 was based on Espiritu Santo, several of the pilots got into the action by ferrying replacement aircraft to Guadalcanal and tagging along with MAG-23's pilots.

VMO-251's Wildcats were adorned with the most distinctive markings in theater. The fuselage carried the pre-war identification codes, for example, 251-MO-11, along squadron's insignia. The unit crest consisted of a green octopus with yellow wings and goggles superimposed over a cloud. In the six visible tentacles, the octopus is carrying an item consistent with VMO-251's responsibilities: a monkey wrench to symbolize the servicing mission of the ground crews, binoculars for reconnaissance mission requirements, a camera to show its photographic



capability, a bomb to signify ground attack, a machine gun for air-to-air combat and toilet paper for servicing, refueling and loading the Army and Navy aircraft which the ground crews referred to as "wiping their butts."

Under the command of MAJ Joseph N. Renner, VMO-251 was officially ordered to Guadalcanal on 1 December after receiving a complement of replacement pilots from Samoa. The Japanese were constructing a new airfield on Munda Point, New Georgia, only 175 miles north of Henderson Field. The Marine flyers attacked the field daily, and on 4 December, LT Kenneth H. Kirk Jr. downed three Zero fighters. After six months of continuous fighting, the unit was ordered back to the United States in July 1943. The squadron was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for the Guadalcanal and Tulagi campaigns.

On 29 February, the squadron was ordered back to Espiritu Santo, and arrived there on 9 March with a fresh batch of F4U Corsairs. The unit continued to pound at the Japanese fortress on



Rabaul until 2 January 1944, when they were ordered to Guiuan, Samar, thus becoming the first Marine unit to arrive in the Central Philippines. The squadron moved to Bougainville in June to participate in the Bismark Sea campaign before returning to Samar on 2 January. At the end of the month, the unit was redesignated VMF-251 and adopted the new nick-name Lucifer's Messengers.

The squadron supported missions in Central and Southern Philippines until 12 May 1945, when flight operations were suspended. The unit was deactivated on 1 June of that year. VMF-251 finished the war with a Presidential Unit Citation and nine air-to-air kills.

On 1 July 1946, VMF-251 was reactivated at Grosse Isle, Mich., as a Reserve unit and equipped with F4LJ-4s. The unit was recalled to active duty on 1 March 1951 in response to the Korean War. The squadron was moved to MCAS El Toro, Calif., and equipped with the Douglas AD-3 Skyraider. On 26 April, the unit was designated an attack squadron, VMA-251, and adopted the name Black Patches.

On 1 June 1953, the squadron was sent into combat again, and operated from Pyongyang, Korea (K-6). Their combat tour was brief yet remarkable, for on 27 July, CAPT William J. Foster dropped three 2,000-lb. bombs-the last ordnance expended in the Korean War. VMA-251 continued to operate the AD Skyraider from Pyongyang until 7 January 1956, when they were ordered to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. In April 1956 the unit was reduced to zero-strength and moved to MCAS Miami, Fla.

On 20 April 1956, the unit was redesignated VMF-251 and equipped with the North American FJ-3 Fury. The tail code "AL" was replaced by MAG-31's "DW." With the new designation, the



unit adopted the name Thunderbolts. CAPT Richard Carey designed the unit insignia consisting of a white cross (symbolizing purity) over a red diamond (indicating courage) on a blue field (loyalty). A silver thunderbolt (later changed to orange) slashed diagonally across the crest. The squadron's motto became Custos Caelorum or "Guardians of the Sky."

The Thunderbolts continued operating from Miami until 28 April 1958, when they were again reduced to zero-strength and moved to MCAS El Toro. Once established on the West Coast, the unit was equipped with the Vought F8U-1 Crusader. On 16 October 1959, the squadron boarded Core (T-AKV-41) and deployed to NAS Atsugi, Japan, arriving on the first day of November. In January 1960, the unit moved to NAS Cubi Point and upgraded to F8U-IEs. After six months in the Philippines, the squadron returned to Iwakuni, where it remained until 1 January 1961, when it quite literally swapped places with VMF-312 Checkerboards at MCAS Beaufort, S.C.

The Thunderbolts went aboard Shangri-La (CVA-38) on 7 February 1962, and applied CVG-10's AK tail code to their Crusaders. The squadron returned from the Mediterranean on 28 August.

It began receiving the McDonnell F-4B Phantom II in the fall of 1964, and was redesignated a Marine Fighter/Attack Squadron (VMFA-251) on 31 October 1964. The squadron continued operating the F-4B until the early '70s, when it upgraded to the F-4J.

On 22 July 1977, the unit deployed to MCAS Iwakuni and relieved VMFA-115, which had been stationed in the Far East for more than 12 years. The Thunderbolts were relieved by VMFA-122 in July 1978, and returned to Beaufort.

The unit began trading their aging F-4Js for the upgraded F-4S Phantom II in 1979. It deployed to Denmark in August of 1982, and returned to Beaufort in October. The squadron ended its 22-year affiliation with the Phantom in July 1986, when it accepted the McDonnell Douglas F/A-18A Hornet.

The Thunderbolts deployed to Iwakuni for the first time as a Hornet squadron in July 1988. Returning to Beaufort in January 1989, they deployed to WestPac again in July 1991 and remained there until January 1992. The squadron participated in an additional six-month WestPac tour from January to July 1993, before being assigned to Aviano, Italy, in January of 1994.

While at Aviano, the squadron participated in UN contingency operations Deny Flight and Provide Promise over Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the afternoon of 11 April, UN positions in Gorazde came under attack by Bosnian Serbs. Two T-Bolt F/A-18As, flown by LCOL Robert E.

"Rooster" Schmidle Jr., the squadron's commanding officer, and CAPT William H, "Ozzie" Osborne were ordered to attack the Serbian positions by a British FAC. As CAPT Osborne released a Mk 82 Snake, it marked the first time that -251 had dropped a bomb in anger since the Korean War. LCOL Schmidle made several strafing runs on the target before both Hornets left the area. The strike resulted in the loss of one Serbian tank and two armored personnel carriers.

The Thunderbolts were relieved by VMFA (AW)-224 on 14 April, and they returned to Beaufort four days later. Upon their arrival, they gave their Lot Xi F/A- 18As to VMFA-115 and accepted Lot XVI F/A- 18Cs in May.

In August they began preparing for their first carrier deployment in 32 years. They were scheduled to conduct carquals aboard America (CV-66), but the carrier was diverted to cover the Haitian crisis. The Thunderbolts were then ordered to the West Coast, and began qualifying aboard Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72) on 1 October. They returned to Beaufort three days later.

In December, they began preliminary carquals aboard their home carrier, America, in preparation for joining CVW-1 for the 1995 Med cruise. In March, the air wing deployed to NAS Fallon, Nev., for close air support training.

The T-Bolts began their cruise on 28 August, when LCOL Colin "Leak' Lampard, the new CO, led a 12-plane fly-on to the carrier. America's air wing participated in Operations Deny Flight and Deliberate Force over Bosnia-Herzegovina. The squadron was the first CVW-1 unit to drop ordnance over Bosnia when MAJ Kevin "Boink" Elder and LCOL Lampard dropped GBU-12 laser guided bombs on a target provided by a Danish FAC. The T-Bolts continued to strike targets in the area until mid-September, when a bombing halt was called and the carrier sailed to Greece for R&R. America was relieved in January and returned to the East Coast in February, where VMFA-251 disembarked and returned to Beaufort. The Thunderbolts remained at Beaufort as CVW-1 was moved to George Washington (CVN-73) after decommissioning America.

As the Thunderbolts continue to add a carrier-borne Marine presence, they can do so with a proud heritage, an impeccable history and the firm knowledge that Marine Squadron 251 has made a difference.