

HISTORY - Articles - Mike Crowder

The following information is provided by Mike Crowder of Golden Wings Enterprises. The information is from their new CD, USMC Aviation Squadron Lineage, Insignia and History, Vol 1 - The Fighter Squadrons, VMF, VMF(N), VMF(AW), VMFA & VMFA(AW). You can order the CD from the above site. Used with permission.

MARINE FIGHTER/ATTACK SQUADRON 251, THE THUNDERBOLTS, a.k.a., THE BLACK PATCHES (as VMA), LUCIFER'S MESSENGERS (as World War II VMF), NO NICKNAME AS VMO



Author's Collection

Today's VMFA-251 was activated on 1 December 1941 at San Diego as Marine Observation Squadron 251 [VMO-251] under the command of Captain Elliot E. Bard whose tenure of command lasted only eleven days until Major John N. Hart assumed command on 12 December. These changes came in the midst of the turmoil that existed in the wake of the Japanese strike against Pearl Harbor, and there can be little doubt that tasks that were merely difficult in more normal times were rendered almost impossible amid the rush to war. While the "powers that be" settled the squadron's command arrangements, it went about the business of preparing for what was to come. As an observation and reconnaissance squadron, VMO-251 was serving in the original mission of military aircraft in the armed services of all nations. In order to perform this mission, it was equipped with two different, and highly specialized versions of the standard Navy and Marine fighter aircraft of the period, the Grumman F4F WILDCAT.

The first of these versions of the WILDCAT was the F4F-3P. It was a camera-equipped photo-reconnaissance version of the standard F4F-3 fighter and retained the armament of the standard fighter versions. The second version was the F4F-7, which was virtually a fuel tank with an engine and wings attached. All armor and armament were deleted, and this camera-equipped aircraft carried an incredible 555 gallons of fuel. It was the longest-ranged, single engine U.S. aircraft of the time, and its ability to fly great distances would soon be put to good use in the South Pacific. [It would be interesting, perhaps, to know what its pilots thought of this ability to stay aloft for these extended periods. One of the most frequently heard complaints about the fighter versions of the WILDCAT was its relatively short range. No doubt those pilots who frequently flew the F4F-7 had exactly the opposite complaint!]

The squadron's original insignia was applied to the fuselage sides of its aircraft, just below the windscreen. It consisted of a white, cloud-shaped background with a green octopus equipped with gold wings. Each of the creature's tentacles held various items emblematic of the squadron's mission, such as a pair of binoculars, a camera, etc.

VMO-251 received a warning order to prepare for movement to the South Pacific in May 1942, just after the conclusion of the Battle of the Coral Sea. Its original destination was to be New Zealand, but the hurriedly mounted landings on Guadalcanal in the Solomons caused its destination to be changed while en route. The squadron was ordered to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides from where it operated in support of the American troops engaged on Guadalcanal. Its primary duties were long-range reconnaissance missions in search of Japanese forces attempting to recapture the island and photo missions of enemy installations, but the long-range fuel tanks for its aircraft were delayed in transit. During this interval, several of the squadron's photographers flew missions aboard Army Air Force B-17s of the 11th Bomb Group that were employed to the photo-reconnaissance mission. In addition to these official duties, it served as a replacement training squadron in support of the Marine fighter squadrons at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal. VMO-251 also functioned as a ferry squadron to move replacement aircraft to the fighter squadrons on the island that, fortunately, suffered a much higher rate of attrition in aircraft than in pilots. This duty presented a unique problem for the squadron members in that the primary method used to move fighter aircraft to Guadalcanal was via carrier. The problem lay in that few of the squadron members had so much as set foot aboard a carrier, and those that had were nowhere near current in carrier qualification.



via Holmberg

Lieutenant Colonel Hart instructed the members of his brood selected to take part in the first large-scale movement of replacement WILDCATs to the island in mid-September in the fine art of carrier takeoffs. Satisfied they were as ready as his hurried lectures could make them, Hart wished his charges well as they and the replacement fighters were loaded aboard U.S.S. Wasp (CV-7) and Hornet (CV-8) in the harbor of Espiritu Santo on 12 September. As soon as the loading was completed, the two carriers and their escorts cleared the harbor and set a course northwestward toward Guadalcanal.

That night, the members of VMO-251 aboard the two ships enjoyed a taste of the comparative luxury in which the carrier aviators lived. While the living conditions at Espiritu Santo were certainly far better than those encountered on Guadalcanal, they were the very definition of the adjective "primitive" when compared to those aboard a carrier. The squadron's officers enjoyed the evening and dinner in the wardroom, and the enlisted aviators savored whichever of the crews' messes to which their rank entitled them. Said Master Technical Sergeant Wendel Garton after a dinner of salad, steak, cake and ice cream in the Chief Petty Officers' mess, "That was the only way to fight a war!" The Sergeant's enthusiasm may have been tempered somewhat had he known that in slightly more than six weeks from that night, both carriers and a considerable portion of their crews would lie on the bottom of the Pacific. Wasp would fall victim to the torpedoes of a prowling submarine a mere three days after it sailed from Espiritu Santo, and Hornet would receive the coupe de grace from Japanese destroyers after she was reduced to a flaming hulk by air strikes during the Battle of Santa Cruz.

Before dawn the next morning, the carriers turned into the wind, and seventeen members of VMO-251 were on their way to an uncertain future on Guadalcanal. All seventeen managed to get airborne without mishap and two hours later, broke into their landing pattern above Henderson Field. Hardly had the Marines reached the ground when the wail of the air raid warning sounded at 0800, and one of the newly arrived aviators of VMO-251, Lieutenant Rutledge, tried to join his fellow Marines in the pending fight. Manning an unattended F4F, Rutledge attempted to get it airborne without taking the time to adjust the seat and rudder pedals. Barely managing to clear the trees at the end of the runway, the fighter suddenly stalled, snapped rolled to port and crashed inverted into the trees. Miraculously, Rutledge survived the mishap, but what happened to him was but one of many typical examples of the potential brevity of life on the island - three of the newly arrived F4Fs were shot down or otherwise lost before they could be assigned to a squadron. The next day, the members of VMO-251 were flown back to Espiritu Santo, but most of them had not seen the last of life on Guadalcanal.



via Albright

Throughout the remainder of the heavy fighting around Guadalcanal, members of VMO-251 continued to act as a ferry service to move badly needed fighters to the squadrons on the island. While there, most also flew combat missions with those fighter squadrons assigned to Henderson Field, some officially and others unofficially and, regardless of status, certainly repaid the American taxpayer in full for the moneys spent for their training. And, as the squadron continued to send men aircraft forward, life continued at Espiritu Santo. Like most of the other squadrons in the Pacific during this period, VMO-251 experienced a series of changes in command during the last quarter of 1942. On 30 October, Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. "Fog" Hayes relieved Lieutenant Colonel Hart. Captain Ralph R. Yeaman commanded the squadron for a week from 1 - 7 December and Major William R. Campbell from 8 - 10 December. The changes continued as Major Joseph N. Renner assumed command on 11 December.

The entire squadron moved from the New Hebrides to Guadalcanal on 17 January 1943, and once there it continued to fly its assigned photo and reconnaissance missions up the Slot from Henderson Field. It also served as a de facto fighter squadron due to the fact that it had managed to acquire several standard fighter versions of the WILDCAT. It is likely these were left behind by squadrons that had completed their combat tours and departed the South Pacific for the rear areas or were returned the United States. Prior to the arrival of the entire squadron, however, its members continued to take part in combat. As the Cactus Air Force began to move from defense of the island and its surroundings to offensive operations, Lieutenant Michael N. Yunck claimed three kills on 8 December during a strike against New Georgia. Lieutenant Kenneth J. Kirk, Jr. claimed three on 24 December on a strike against Munda while flying on the wing of Major Donald Yost, the commander of VMF-121. On 15 January, while engaged in coverage of a strike against shipping in the New Georgia area, aviators from VMF-121 and VMO-251 claimed twenty of the enemy. Meanwhile, another series of changes of command took place. Major Renner was transferred to other duties, and Lieutenant Walter W. Pardee commanded the squadron from 9 - 31 March. He was relieved by Captain Claude H. Welch on 1 April, and he was followed by now-Captain Yunck on 15 May, who commanded the squadron during most of its return trip to the United States until relieved by Major Carl M. Longley on 4 June.

Captain Yunck was awarded the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions

during the squadron's service in the Solomons. Likewise, Major Renner and Lieutenant Kirk each received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

After spending the early months of 1943 in the Solomons, the squadron was relieved from combat and ordered to return to the West Coast. By July, it was in Southern California enjoying a well-earned rest. For its service during the Guadalcanal campaign, VMO-251 was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for the period 7 August through 9 December 1942.

After its arrival in the United States, the squadron began to exchange its specialized WILDCATS for fighter versions of the F4U CORSAIR, and Captain Robert W. Teller assumed command on 1 November 1943, but Major William C. Humberd succeeded him on 6 November. With the arrival of its new aircraft, it became obvious to all that the squadron's days as an observation squadron were a thing of the past, in fact if not in the eyes of officialdom as it retained its designation as an observation squadron. It then began the process of training and familiarization with its new aircraft. Shortly after the turn of the New Year of 1944, VMO-251 was alerted to prepare for movement overseas once again.



via Albright

On 29 February 1944, the erstwhile observation squadron and its now familiar CORSAIRs departed the West Coast, bound once again for the South Pacific. It arrived at its old home, Espiritu Santo, on 9 March. After a short stay at Espiritu, VMO-251 moved up the Slot to the Northern Solomons. Its destination was the Green Islands, but after a short stay there, the squadron moved again, this time to Bougainville.

By the time the squadron reached the battle area, Rabaul had been beaten into sullen submission and was largely a non-factor in the overall plans of Allied offensives. The Allied air forces then turned their might on the Japanese garrisons in the Bismarks, pounding them into the same state of impotence as those at the once-mighty Rabaul. VMO-251 was engaged in these missions from June until early December 1944.

By the latter months of 1944, Japanese strength in the Northern Solomons and the surrounding areas had been thoroughly sapped by a continuous stream of amphibious assaults and air strikes. In short, the vast majority of the squadrons engaged in these actions had literally run out of

worthwhile targets prior to the fall of 1944. By this time, their post-mission assessments of the damage inflicted upon the enemy largely revealed that they were doing an excellent job of blasting large chunks of rubble into many smaller chunks. The Marine squadrons in the area literally had worked themselves out of a job. This led to a situation in which a large, powerful and combat experienced collection of American air power in the Pacific Theater had very little that was worthwhile to contribute to the war effort.

This situation came to an end after the American return to the Philippines. Envisioned, at least by the U.S. Army, as their show, both in the air and on the ground, the Philippines campaign left the Army Air Forces in the rather embarrassing position of being unable to accomplish the missions assigned. Another factor that compounded this problem was the disdain in which the Army Air Forces generally held the close support mission. It seems that organization has always preferred to execute what is today called the interdiction portion of the tactical mission instead of the support of troops in contact with the enemy. The Marine Corps, on the other hand, has taken the exact opposite view. The primary mission of Marine air is close air support of the Marine on the ground. This, coupled with the immediate availability of a respectable number of veteran squadrons in the South and Central Pacific, areas led to the immediate dispatch of the majority of them to the Philippines. Among the first to be sent to the Islands was VMO-251. [Initially, the campaign was planned to be a straight, south to north, island-by-island series of amphibious assaults to free the Filipino people from the Japanese yoke. The first assault had been planned against the southernmost island of Mindanao in November, and the initial planning had called for the Marines to be included in the aerial assets assigned to the assault. However, the advanced timetable for the entire Philippines campaign left out the Marines.]

Alerted for movement in December 1944, the squadron arrived on the island of Samar in the central Philippines on 2 January 1945. It flew its first mission of its prolonged stay in the islands the next day. On 31 January, VMO-251 was redesignated VMF-251, a belated recognition of the squadron's actual mission performance during the previous two-plus years, and Major William L. Bacheler assumed command on 10 February. He commanded the squadron until 14 April, when Major Thomas W. Furlow took over VMF-251. It remained engaged in the central and southern Philippines until 12 May and was deactivated there on 1 June 1945. The squadron's last commanding officer was Lieutenant Glen F. Keithley who relieved Major Furlow on 21 May. Majors Bacheler and Furlow were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of the squadron's accomplishments while each was in command.



via Albright

In addition to the previously mentioned award of the Presidential Unit Citation, VMF-251 was credited with the destruction of nine Japanese aircraft in aerial combat. When one considers that the squadron was engaged in the Solomons campaign from the outset, that many of its pilots were assigned to other fighter squadrons on a temporary basis, and that it served as a fighter squadron, in fact if not in designation, for the bulk of its time in the Solomons, this kill total seems surprisingly low. Perhaps this is due to two factors. First, the kills achieved by VMO-251 pilots while serving with other squadrons likely were credited to that squadron. Second, perhaps the total of nine represents the number of victories scored after its redesignation as a fighter squadron and does not reflect the number scored while designated an observation squadron. Unfortunately, records from the period are far from clear on the subject.

VMF-251 was in limbo for thirteen months until it was reactivated as a component of the Marine Corps Reserve at NAS, Grosse Isle, Michigan in mid-1946. It continued in its role as a peacetime reserve squadron until its recall to active duty on 1 March 1951 as a part of the continuing increase in force levels brought about by the Korean War. Its activation was also the occasion for the squadron to exchange its CORSAIRs for the Douglas AD-3 SKYRAIDER attack aircraft. Shortly thereafter, the newly equipped squadron was transferred from its home station to MCAS, El Toro.

On 29 April 1951, the squadron was redesignated VMA-251. The training period for the squadron in its new role was a protracted one, and it did not depart the West Coast for Korea until 1 June 1953. Less than two months later, the Korean War came to an end.

Despite its short combat tour in Korea, VMA-251 achieved at least one notable milestone during that time. At 2125, 27 July 1953, Captain William J. Foster rolled his SKYRAIDER into a dive and planted three 2,000-lb. bombs into Communist positions along the battle line. Slightly more than half an hour later, the cease-fire went into effect, and the Korean War passed into the pages of history. It is believed that Captain Foster's bombs were the last to be dropped in combat during this bitter, three-year "non-war." [It should be noted that several other squadrons claim the distinction of dropping the last bombs of the Korean Conflict, but this account appears to be the most credible.]

VMA-251 was one of the many former Reserve squadrons that remained on active duty after the end of hostilities rather than being released to return to the Reserves. It stayed in Korea as a part of the American forces that served as guarantors of the ceasefire agreement until 7 January 1956, when the squadron was transferred to MCAS, Iwakuni, Japan. Its stay there lasted slightly more than fifteen months. At that time, it departed the Far East for its new home at MCAS, Miami. No doubt, it did not take long for the squadron members to come to appreciate their new station when compared to several long, cold winters spent in Korea and in Japan, among other equally obvious reasons.

After its return to the United States, the squadron was redesignated VMF-251 on 20 April 1957 and exchanged its SKYRAIDERS for the North American FJ-4 FURY. This marked the squadron's initiation into the jet age, and after a year at Miami, VMF-251 was transferred to

MCAS, El Toro.

After it had settled into its new surroundings, the FURYs were exchanged for the supersonic F8U-1 CRUSADER. The new aircraft brought with it a whole new vista of aircraft operations and a quantum leap forward in capabilities. It was during this period the squadron adopted the design of its current insignia that has been in use more than thirty years with only a single change to the designation in the ribbon at the bottom of the insignia.



via Albright

After their return to a combat ready status, the squadron departed El Toro for NAS, Atsugi, Japan, on 16 October 1959. Their stay in the Far East lasted slightly less than fifteen months during which the squadron operated from a number of bases and installations throughout the region. Its deployment completed, VMF-251 was relieved by VMF-312 on 1 January 1961. VMF-251 took the place of VMF-312 at MCAS, Beaufort, South Carolina, and in the process, the two squadrons exchanged aircraft.

In the latter months of 1960, the squadron was ordered to undergo carrier qualifications in preparation for its first carrier deployment. On 7 February 1962, operational control of the squadron passed from the Marine Corps to the Navy's CVG-10. The squadron boarded U.S.S. Shangri-La (CVA-38) for a Mediterranean deployment that lasted until 28 August of the same year when it returned to Beaufort.

In addition to the usual complement of ghosts and goblins that accompany the season, Halloween of 1964 brought the squadron another new aircraft and another designation, the McDonnell F-4B PHANTOM II (appropriate for Halloween) and VMFA-251, respectively. It immediately began the process of attaining a combat ready status with its new aircraft. The rumble of guns in Southeast Asia added urgency to the tasks at hand.

Despite the extremely large U.S. commitment to the Vietnam War, VMFA-251 did not deploy there. Instead, it remained based at MCAS, Beaufort and maintained a normal, non-combat unit deployment rotational schedule.

After nearly fourteen years of operating various models of the "smoke and thunder hog," as the PHANTOM was sometimes called, the squadron began to transition to the F/A-18 HORNET in the spring of 1986. The transition was completed by 1987. Today, it operates the latest upgraded versions of the F/A-18C. The squadron did not deploy to Southwest Asia during either Desert Shield or Desert Storm, and at the present time, it continues to conduct peacetime operations and deployments from its home station at MCAS, Beaufort.

In recent months, however, VMFA-251 has been assigned to CVW-1 on what appears to be a more or less permanent basis aboard U.S.S. George Washington (CVN-73).

The first of the squadron's insignia depicted in the plate is its current design that has been worn since its designation as VMFA-251 in 1964. There are several versions of this insignia to be found, but they are virtually identical in all respects except for their slightly different background colors. This is another example of variations in various examples of "official" insignia that will be found when squadrons obtain their stock from different suppliers at different times.

The second example is the current flight suit shoulder disk of VMFA-251.

The third insignia in the plates is the first to bear the shield and cross and was adopted when the squadron was re-designated a fighter squadron in April 1957.

The fourth example is the insignia of VMA-251 that was worn during the squadron's service in the attack mission from 1951 until 1957. During the period, the squadron was nicknamed the "Black Patches."

The fifth insignia is an original example of the design adopted after the squadron was re-designated VMF-251 on 31 January 1945. The artist who drew this design is unknown, and it did not receive official approval.

The sixth insignia, that with the inverted gull wings of the F4U on either side of the head of the octopus, is an original. This change to the design was made when the squadron was re-equipped with the CORSAIR but prior to its re-designation as a fighter squadron in 1945.

The final insignia is an original that dates from the period of the squadron's service during the Guadalcanal Campaign. This design was drawn by Lieutenant E.H. Railsback and was used without official blessing.