

## HISTORY - Documents - Abbreviated History to 1994

Source: USMC History Division

VMFA-251 was first formed at North Island in 1941 as VMO-251. Their mission in the early days was observation and reconnaissance flying the F4F Grumman Wildcat. During the squadron's second combat tour in World War II, the unit turned to close air support and fighter support in addition to reconnaissance and was outfitted with the F-4U Corsair fighter. The areas of activity for the squadron included Guadalcanal, Vilia Villa, Rabaul, Bouganville and the Philippine Islands.

The squadron's designation was officially changed to VMF-251 in December 1944. The squadron was decommissioned on June 1, 1945, receiving the presidential unit citation for service with the 1st MAW and a commendation from the commanding general, 11th Bombardment Group. On April 15, 1946, VMF-251 was recommissioned as a reserve training squadron at Grosse Ile, Michigan.

The squadron was recalled to active duty in March 1951 as VMF-251 and directed to transition to the AD-4D "Skyraider. The squadron moved to Korea in June of 1953 and flew the last Marine combat mission of the war. In January of 1956, it relocated to MCAS Iwakuni, JA to remain in the Far East an additional fifteen months.

After a tour of duty in the far east, the squadron arrived in the U.S. and set up headquarters at MCAS Miami, training with the FJ6 Fury. In 1958, the squadron was transferred to El Toro where they were outfitted with F8U Crusaders. They departed El Toro in October 1959 for training in the Pacific area and carried with them the motto "custos caelorum" meaning "guardians of the sky."

They returned to MCAS Beaufort in December 1960 and commenced flight operations in January 1961. The reforming was complete with a highly successful two-month tour at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and Jamaica during August and September. At this time, VMF-251 was selected to be the first Marine F8U squadron to deploy to the Mediterranean with the Sixth Fleet.

In December of 1961 the "T-bolts" completed day and night carrier qualifications aboard the USS Shangri-La, another first for Marine F8U's, and on 9 February 1962, departed for seven months shipboard duty in the Mediterranean. During June, the squadron set a new record for flight time in one month by any Sixth Fleet based F8U squadron by flying over 600 hours. VMF-251 was detached from carrier group 10 and the USS Shangri-La on August 25, 1962 and rejoined MAG-32 at MCAS Beaufort.

In July of 1963 the Thunderbolts were the recipients of the 2nd MAW Commanding General's award for achievement in competitive exercises (winners in overall competition). Included in this award were awards for first place in air-to-air gunnery, sidewinder missiles and individual top guns, air-to-air gunnery (20,000 and 30,000 feet). The competitive exercises took place while the squadron was deployed to NAS Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico.

In July 1964, the Thunderbolts were placed under a contingency commitment and their assignments became numerous. In four months the squadron "fam-ed" 25 pilots for other F8U squadrons. They also put on a show "Flexed Muscles", performing numerous close air support and short airfield for tactical

support (sats) demonstrations for members of NATO and the CG, 2nd MAW. Finally during this period the Thunderbolts managed to complete the long task of re-schooling all enlisted personnel in preparation for the squadron's new F4-B Phantom II aircraft.

The squadron received its present designation of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251 on October 31, 1964. The next deployment for the squadron took place the following September when on the 19th it transferred to Roosevelt Roads where it remained until December 1, 1965. A few months later VMFA-251 participated in Lantflex '66, the largest U.S. Atlantic Fleet exercise in 1966.

An indication of the high degree of combat ability and professionalism achieved by squadron personnel is exemplified by VMFA-251's outstanding and remarkable safety record. In 1967 and 1969, the Thunderbolts received the CNO's flight safety award. They also received the Fleet Marine Force Atlantic safety award for the years 1967, 1968 and 1970.

VMFA-251 was the 1969 winner of the Robert M. Hanson award, presented annually to the "most outstanding marine fighter squadron of the year." VMFA-251, flying F4-B Phantom II jets, was cited for furthering fighter tactics in the Marine Corps, while continuously maintaining the high state of combat readiness necessary to fulfill any contingency commitments.

During January 1971, the squadron deployed to NAS Roosevelt Roads, P.R. over 85% of the squadron deployed to the Puerto Rico area for a phase 2 and phase 3 missile shoot and Firex 1- 71. During April the squadron assumed hot pad duty at NAS Key West. The Thunderbolts provided operational support to the North American Defense Command in the form of aircraft and aircrews.

On June 7, 1971 the squadron officially accepted its first F4-J Phantom II aircraft.

In 1972 the squadron was very active with three deployments to Tyndall AFB, Florida to compete in "College Dart", an air combat maneuvering program with the F-106. Additionally, it stood the hot pad at NAS Key West for two thirty day periods.

1973 was a busy year for the Thunderbolts as they again picked up the hot pad twice and deployed to MCALF Bogue Field in support of exercise "Exotic Dancer VI" and conducted a missile shoot at NAS Roosevelt Roads, P.R. the year ended with a trans-atlantic flight to Cigili Air Base, Turkey in support of the NATO exercise "Deep Furrow".

Bogue Field was the site for deployment of the Thunderbolts again in mid-1974 for exercise "Solid Shield". As in the past VMFA-251 spent two periods on the hot pad at NAS Key West during the year 1974.

In 1975 the squadron completed three deployments. The Thunderbolts traveled to MCAS Yuma in February, Rota, Spain in June, and Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico in October.

Two squadron deployments to Yuma, Arizona were completed in March and October of 1976 to maintain the air-to-ground and dissimilar aerial combat maneuvering readiness of aircrews.

April 1977 saw the present group of Thunderbolts come together as a squadron. After a weapons and tactics deployment to Yuma in April, the Thunderbolts transited the Pacific in July to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan for a one year tour with Marine Aircraft Group 15 and the First Marine Aircraft Wing.

The squadron was soon involved with the fast pace of operations familiar to Westpac. The remainder of 1977 found the Thunderbolts participating in Readiness Exercise Check 'Alligator" and Exercise "Cope Strike Mike/Cope Jade Charlie" in August. "Cope Thunder XI" in September and exercise "Fortress Lightning" in the Republic of the Philippines followed in October. Late November saw VMFA-251 involved in exercises "Cope Jade Delta" and "Cope Strike 78-4". Exercise "Ssang Yong VII/bltx 1-78" were completed in December. During the latter two exercises, the Thunderbolts operated out of Taegu AB, Republic of Korea.

1978 has seen the men of VMFA-251 continue to maintain a high state of combat readiness and professionalism characteristic of the Thunderbolt tradition without sacrificing safety. The squadron received noteworthy recognition as the result of a Fleet Marine Force Pacific inspection in January. In February, while participating in exercise "Team Spirit '78", the squadron completed its second consecutive accident free year, having flown 6096 hours during this period without a major accident. The Thunderbolts flew missions in support of U.S. and R.O.K. marines while operating from the Barren Base Ye' Chon and achieved the unusually high 72% full systems capable rate for March 1978. This record resulted in VMFA-251 receiving the Commanding General Fleet Marine Force Pacific annual aviation safety award. July 1978 finds the men of VMFA-251 completing a long, often lonely, yet rewarding year in Westpac.

During the 1980's VMFA-251 participated in several exercises. In 1984, VMFA-251 deployed to the Kingdom of Norway for NATO exercises, with a brief refueling stop at Mildenhall RAF base in England. All personnel earned an Arctic Certificate from the Norwegian government for their stay at Bodo, above the Arctic Circle. The operation was also mentioned specifically in the citation for the Meritorious Unit Commendation awarded to MAG-31 for the period 7 November 1983 to 31 March 1986. All personnel permanently assigned to VMFA-251 during that time, or any part thereof, are entitled to wear the ribbon as a personal decoration. The advanced party and chase crew also passed through the Azores, before returning to Beaufort, South Carolina.

During January of 1986, the "Thunderbolts" transitioned to the F/A-18 "Hornet". The squadron stood up as the sixth Marine F/A-18 squadron the following August and reported fully combat ready in March of 1987. Over the next 6 years, the squadron participated in the WESTPAC Rotation Program, completing 3 six month deployments to Iwakuni, JA flying the F/A-18 Hornet.

From January 1994 to April 1994, the "Thunderbolts" participated in close air support combat missions while deployed to Aviano, Italy in support of the United Nations peace keeping efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina. These missions marked the only combat sorties for a Marine Squadron in Europe since World War I. In May 1994, VMFA-251 received new F/A-18C Hornets in preparation for assignment to Carrier Air Wing-I aboard the USS America.

The Thunderbolts successfully completed its first carrier deployment with F/A-18s. VMFA-251 participated in many NATO operations during CVW-1's Mediterranean deployment. After the squadron's return home to Beaufort, it began its rigorous training schedule to prepare for its next deployment. The "Thunderbolts" again deployed with CVW-1, but this time aboard the USS George Washington.

During this deployment, the USS George Washington was ordered to the Persian Gulf to help support United Nations operations. The Marines of VMFA-251 participated in many operation Southern Watch sorties over Southern Iraq. The "Thunderbolts" returned home after another long sea deployment to their families and loved ones.