The following article appeared in the May 1965 issue of Leatherneck magazine. It features VMFA-251 and its newly acquired F-4B Phantom II's. It was written by then S/Sgt Steve Stibbens and appears on pages 18 - 25. Thanks to Leatherneck Magazine for its permission to post this article.

PHANTOM FLYERS

The Phantom is an unearthly creature. It squats awkwardly on the tarmac ramp, leaning forward slightly, looking every bit the world's fastest jet fighter that it is.

From head-on, the Phantom looms into one's vision, its sharp, yet blunted, nose trying to burst forward like a thoroughbred filly chomping at the bit. Its short, stubby wings break sharply at each tip, reminiscent of the Corps' old faithful-the Corsair. The Phantom's solid steel stabilizers hang droopingly from the rear of the fuselage.

As the pilot goes down the pre-taxi check list, stabilizers rotate; flaps drop out from both the leading and trailing edge of the wings; an in-flight refueling probe appears from inside the craft, then disappears.

The plane captain gives the pilot a "thumbs up" and the Phantom lurches forward, on the way....

"Don't interrupt a Phantom," the advertisement says. "It can turn on you." The ad could have gone a little bit farther and said the Phantom can out-climb, out-dive and out-do about everything else, except hover like a helicopter. Designers are no doubt working on that.

To call the Phantom in airplane is like calling Native Dancer a mere horse. The Phantom is a thoroughbred -a winner. McDonnell Aircraft Corp., builders of the F4B Phantom, in fact describe it as a ". . . two engine, two man, all-weather weapon system." Marine pilots who ride the Phantom's range at Mach 2.5, or two and a half times the speed of sound, describe it as a flying computer.

Weapon system, computer, or whatever, the Phantom is the Free World's fastest, slowest and highest-flying bomb rack yet. The Phantom is a highly maneuverable fighter, confident enough to tackle any opponent. The Phantom is a high-altitude, long-range bomber capable of toting twice the load of the World War II workhorse, the B-17 "Flying Fortress." The F4B is the world's slowest operational jet fighter, able to operate from forward area landing fields, carriers, and scoot in low over the trees to deliver accurate close air support to infantrymen.

What's more, the Phantom has not one gun in its armament. Instead, it carries enough rockets and a variety of bombs to make up the difference. The basic load-

4 all -weather, radar-guided Sparrow III air-to-air missiles, and;
2 additional Sparrow III's or;
4 heat-seeking Sidewinder missiles; ID 8 tons of miscellaneous external payload (conventional or nuclear bombs, fuel, tanks, rockets, mines).

The additional armament includes:

15 680-lb. bombs
18 750-lb. bombs
11 1000-lb. bombs
7 smoke bombs
11 150-gal. napalm bombs
4 Bullpup air-to-ground missiles
15 Air-to-ground multiple rocket packages

The best feature about the Phantom -it's on our side.

Phantom flyers in the Corps usually refer to the Phantom as "a hot bird." And, indeed it is. The Phantom began setting records almost before it was off the drawing boards. The Phantom, in fact, set five records before delivery to Navy and Marine Corps squadrons began.

The first was set in 1959 when a Navy pilot zoomed upward to an altitude of 98,557 feet. Then another Navy aviator whipped the Phantom up to 902.768 m.p.h. for a three-kilometer, low-level speed record.

Marine LtCol Thomas H. Miller set the 500-kilometer mark at 1216.78 m.p.h. in 1960; a Navy pilot got his Phantom up to 1390.21 m.p.h. on the 100-kilometer closed course at Edwards AFB, Calif., in 1960.

On November 22, 1961, Marine LtCol Robert B. Robinson hot-rodded the Phantom II to 1606.342 m.p.h. over a 15/25 kilometer course. During the record run, he reached a maximum speed in excess of 1650 m.p.h. The colonel was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross by Navy Secretary John B. Connally for the effort.

The Russians still claim to have the world's fastest aircraft with their "E-166." Little, however, is known about their aircraft and its claims have not been verified by the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, a French organization recognized as the authority on flight records.

Now, with 15 world records under its belt, the Phantom is off the drawing boards and sitting on the parking ramps of squadrons throughout the Corps. VMF-314 was first to get the high- flying Phantom and was first to deploy overseas.

One of the latest units to join the list of Phantom flyers is VMF/A-251 at MCAS, Beaufort, S.C. Like all other squadrons equipped with the F4B, VMF/A-251 began preparing months in advance to receive the new aircraft. The nucleus of pilots was already "supersonic-qualified," mostly in the squadron's F8 Crusader. They further underwent specialized training at MCAS, Cherry Point, N.C., and NAS, Oceana, Va.

Mechanics and repairmen came from all parts of the Corps to make up the ground crews of VMF/A-251. Most came from units already equipped with the Phantom. Others attended maintenance courses at Cherry Point.

In December, 1964, the squadron's skipper, LtCol Arthur 0. Schmagel, made the unit's first Phantom familiarization flight with a one-hour check-out in the first aircraft delivered. His was plane number 120, or the 120th Phantom to roll off the assembly line.

Perhaps indicative of the jet-aged pace of Marine aviation, the plane was already well used and had just been completely overhauled and repaired at Cherry Point's "O and R."

Col Schmagel was already a "night- fighter" or all-weather veteran when he took command of VMF/A-251. He flew AD Skyraiders with the First Marine Air Wing in Korea, where he won a Distinguished Flying Cross for combat missions.

Before Korea, in World War 11, the colonel was a pilot in VMF-214, the "Black Sheep" squadron made famous by the exploits of "Pappy" Boyington. Boyington, who was later awarded the Medal of Honor, was the Corps' top ace during World War 11.

Then a lieutenant, Schmagel was returning from his second raid on Japan to the carrier Franklin when the ship was hit by a Kamikaze suicide plane. He was badly burned and subsequently evacuated home.

Another old hand in the all-weather intercept business is the squadron's senior radar intercept officer, Maj Joseph Thompson. He started out in 1942 as an enlisted gunner in the South Pacific, later became one of the first Marine RIO's and ended the war with 84 combat missions.

While flying in F7F Tigercats and F3D Skyknights in Korea, the major racked up another 40 night-fighter missions. As VMF/A-251's senior "back seat driver," he holds the RIO flight-time title with more than 3,000 hours.

To show for all his experience, Mai Thompson has been awarded three DFC's and 11 Air Medals.

Helping out in the RIO experience department is another veteran, CWO Richard A. Kerr, with some 500 back-seat flight hours in Phantoms. Gunner Kerr, formerly a master sergeant and chief drill instructor at Parris Island, has racked up some 1500 hours in his three years of flying. Except for his Phantom time, the hours were flown in helicopters and light observation planes of the Corps' VMO squadrons.

When he dons the high-altitude space suit required for Phantom flying, and heads out to the flight line. carrying his portable air-conditioner, unknowing Marines might swear that it is John Glenn. The gunner, in fact, closely resembles the former Marine astronaut.

Another old hand in Marine Corps aviation is the squadron maintenance chief. MSgt Jesse Garrett. He got his first taste of flying as a torpedo bomber gunner over Bougainville, the Solomons, Saipan. the Philippines, Okinawa and Borneo during World War 11.

By the end of WWII, Garrett had 65 missions, a DFC. and six Air Medals.

The "Top" has been in the Phantom business since 1961, when he was assigned to help evaluate F4B's being used by the Navy. Then he was one of the first "Phantom-qualified" NCOs detailed to re-form VMF/A-251 last year.

Head of the squadron "headache department" is WO-1 Alfred J. Golab, the avionics officer. His job is keeping tabs on the approximately one million feet of wire which makes up the Phantom. That is not to mention the multitude of airborne computers such as the:

Armament control system, auto-flight system, loft bombing release computer, radar altimeter, automatic direction finder, missile system, radar camera, navigation computer, plus all instruments, lights, radios, intercoms and generators in each aircraft. In other words, anything with a wire attached to it is most likely under the category of avionics.

The gunner, a former gunnery sergeant and aviation electronics technician, is well trained for the job. In 14 years of avionics duty, he has attended some 150 weeks of electronics schooling. "It's like the old country doctor," he says. "An avionics man must keep on learning. By the time he completes a course, the gear is obsolete back in his squadron."

Constant training sessions continue for all hands in VMF/A-251. As soon as a man returns from a specialized course on a piece of equipment peculiar to the Phantom, he becomes an instructor, checking out others until all are well versed. The goal is to have "check crews" that can handle the maintenance of an entire aircraft.

Gunner Golab has some qualified help in his monumental task. GySgt George Gable is the avionics chief and SSgt F. C. Barnes is the avionics shop chief. Also, Mr. Bob Fournier is permanently assigned to the shop as a "technical representative" from McDonnell Aircraft Corp.

The biggest helpers, however, are the avionics technicians-the men who in a Phantom squadron comprise more than half of the entire unit. They are the men who put to use their more than 40 weeks of specialized schooling to keep the $3-million aircraft in the air.

In an aircraft as complex as the F4B, the two huge J-79 engines are almost of secondary importance. It's a "sweet bird" to work on, say the avionics men. Some parts are easier to get at than on the Crusader but "there are just more of them."

"What's more," they say, "everything has got to be in the right place or she don't work."

The unit has gained considerable momentum since it was first commissioned as an observation squadron in 1941. Its job in the early days of the war was reconnaissance in F4F Grumman Wildcats.

The then VMO-251 turned to close air support and fighter missions as the war continued. In 1943, VMO-251, equipped with Corsairs, flew numerous air duels over Guadalcanal, Rabaul and Bougainville. The squadron accounted for nine enemy aircraft destroyed and was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for action over Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

The squadron became VMF-251 in 1944 and returned to the U.S. three months later. It saw five years' weekend-warrior service at Grosse Ile, Mich., before being called to active duty as VMA-251 in 1951.

Since Korea War days, VMF/A-251 has seen duty around the world, in the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, and the Far East. Most likely, when the transition from "obsolete, old supersonic Crusader" to Phantom is completed, the "Thunderbolt" squadron will be on the move again.

Just doesn't sound right, you say, to hear hangar-bound mechanics refer to the Phantom's predecessor as the "obsolete old Crusader . . ." Seems like we just got the Crusader. Why, yesterday, those same ground crewmen were gossiping around the line shack about ". . . so-and-so getting orders to factory school because such-and-such squadron is going to get the new Crusaders when they come out . . ."

Many of today's line chiefs look with a nostalgic sniffle at the Crusader, much the same as their fathers view the Corsair, or the good old Brewster Buffalo, or the good old De Havilland DH-4 bomber.

But they all agree on two points: 1) Wars cannot be won with nostalgia; and 2) the best thing about a Phantom - it's on our side.