



Air War, Korea— The Changing of the Guard

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)



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Maj John F. Bolt, in flight gear, using time-honored hand signals, described a MiG-15 kill on 11 July 1953 to fellow pilot Maj Roy L. Reed. With two kills that day, Bolt became the Marine Corps' first jet ace.

"Sure, an F2H will outrun a MiG, if you don't mind putting the nose down and popping a few rivets."

—MSgt Ed Chestnut, photo pilot, VMJ-1

On 5 Aug. 1950, Major Kenneth L. Reusser became the first Marine aviator, and for that matter the first Marine, to be decorated for gallantry during the Korean War.

Flying from the aircraft carrier USS *Sicily* (CVE-118), Maj Reusser led a four-plane flight of Vought F4U Corsairs from Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 214, the "Black Sheep," in a low-level attack. They savaged a North Korean

truck park and tank repair facility in the occupied port city of Inchon.

With his aircraft heavily damaged by ground fire, he returned to *Sicily* for repairs and rearmament, then made his way back to Inchon. In the face of fierce ground fire, he destroyed an oil storage facility. With his bombs and rockets expended, Maj Reusser next attacked a camouflaged oil tanker at anchor in the harbor, raking it with 20 mm gunfire until the ship exploded, almost blowing him out of the air. For his actions Reusser was awarded the naval service's second highest award for gallantry, the Navy Cross.

On 11 July 1953, Maj John F. Bolt of VMF-115 became the final Marine aviator to be awarded the Navy Cross during the war in Korea. On attached duty with the U.S. Air Force's 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing, Bolt was leading his four-plane flight of North American F-86 Sabrejets back from a raid against the vital North Korean installation of Sinuiju at the mouth of the Yalu River in the far northwest of Korea.

Sighting a flight of four Russian-built, and maybe Russian-piloted, MiG-15 jet fighters, Bolt immediately swung into the attack. It took him only five minutes to send two of the MiGs spinning to the ground in flames. They were his fifth and sixth kills in less than two months, making him the Marine Corps' first jet ace. Until the arrival of the F-86, the MiG-15 could outperform any fighter in Korea. Bolt emphatically let the enemy know a new top dog was in town.

Taken together, the actions of Reusser and Bolt illustrated the changing of the guard that was taking place in Marine Corps aviation. One era was ending, and another was beginning. The piston engine, propeller-driven airplane was passing from the scene, and the jet-powered airplane was taking its place on the stage.

The change wasn't sudden or dramatic. As is usually the case, the two eras overlapped. The venerable F4U Corsair, with its distinctive inverted gull-wing shape, so familiar to Marines in the war against Japan, continued to serve with distinction throughout the Korean War. So, too, did the Douglas AD1 Skyraider, a single-engine workhorse capable of carrying an ordnance load equal to a World

War II B-17 bomber and seemingly able to remain on station over a target forever.

Even as the propeller-driven Corsairs and Skyraiders were carrying out combat missions of the type that had begun more than two decades earlier, new faces were making their appearances. The rugged and powerful Grumman F9F Panther was asserting itself as the premier Navy-Marine fighter of the Korean War. Assuming a vital role in aerial photographic reconnaissance was the sleek McDonnell F2H Banshee, while the Douglas F3D Sky Knight was wasting no time in letting communist pilots know that it owned the night.

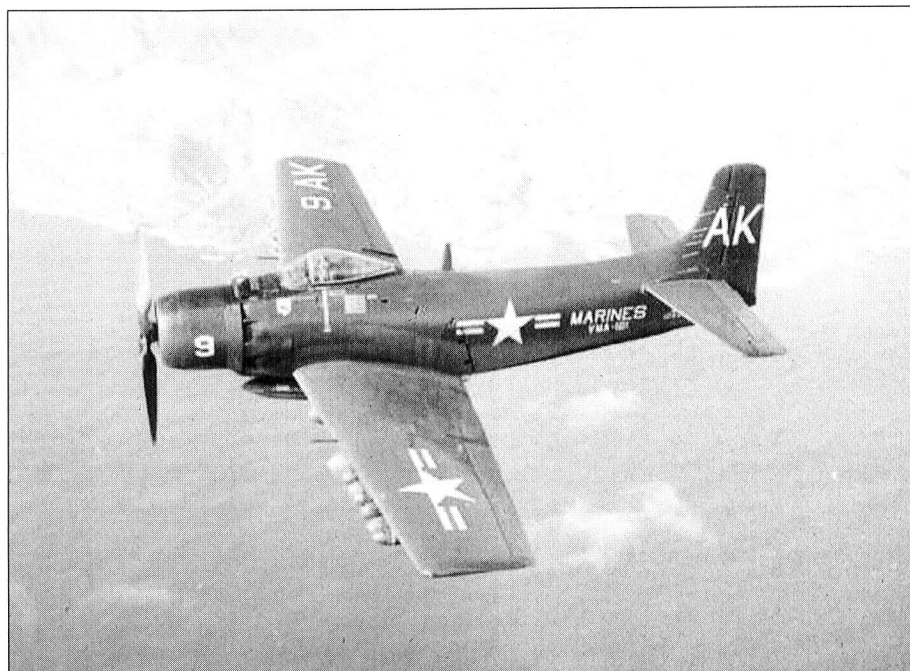
This trio of newcomers was quick to make its mark. From its arrival in Korea in December 1950 with the Marine Corps' first jet squadron, VMF-311, the F9F Panther lost no time in establishing itself as a first-line combat aircraft. The latest in a long line of powerful products that generations of Navy and Marine aviators affectionately called the "Grumman Iron Works," the F9F was built to take and dish out punishment. A stable, flyable aerial platform, the F9F soon won a reputation as a "pilot's airplane," one that was "made to fly."

Prior to the arrival of F9F squadrons, there had been widespread concern over the ability of jet aircraft to accurately deliver ordnance against targets on the ground. The much greater speed of jets, it was feared, would make it extremely difficult for a pilot to put bombs on a target with only seconds to line up and make corrections.

The F9F soon proved these fears to be groundless. The time-tested and -proven Marine Corps system of air-ground control was found to be no less effective with jet aircraft than it had been with propeller-driven planes. The stability of the F9F ensured pilots a solid approach to the target and a steady platform from which to deliver ordnance. Designed as an air-supremacy fighter, the F9F turned out to be highly effective in a close air support role. Marines on the ground could look with equal confidence on close air support from Panthers, Corsairs or Skyraiders.

Any doubts as to the accuracy of aerial-delivered ordnance by jet aircraft were put permanently to rest in June 1952 by a series of joint Navy, Marine and Air Force strikes against North Korea's electric power system. Taking part in these raids, Panther jets from VMF-115 and VMF-311 helped blast a series of hydro-electric plants into rubble, blacking out all of North Korea for weeks.

When Chinese and Soviet technicians were rushed in to get things working



LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO

Above: Skyraiders, such as this VMA-121 aircraft loaded for bear, were solid contributors to Marine operations on the ground because of their comparatively long loiter time and heavy bomb loads.

Below: Grumman F9F Panther jets assigned to VMF-311 were among the first Marine jets to see action in Korea. They were fast but had limited endurance and a high-maintenance reputation.



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again, the raids were repeated, and once more North Korea was plunged into darkness. Colonel Robert E. Galer, the commanding officer of Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 12 and a Medal of Honor winner from WW II, summed it up this way: "The capability of jet strike aircraft for extremely accurate bombing, an item of open discussion prior to this time, was never questioned in the First Marine Aircraft Wing after this mission."

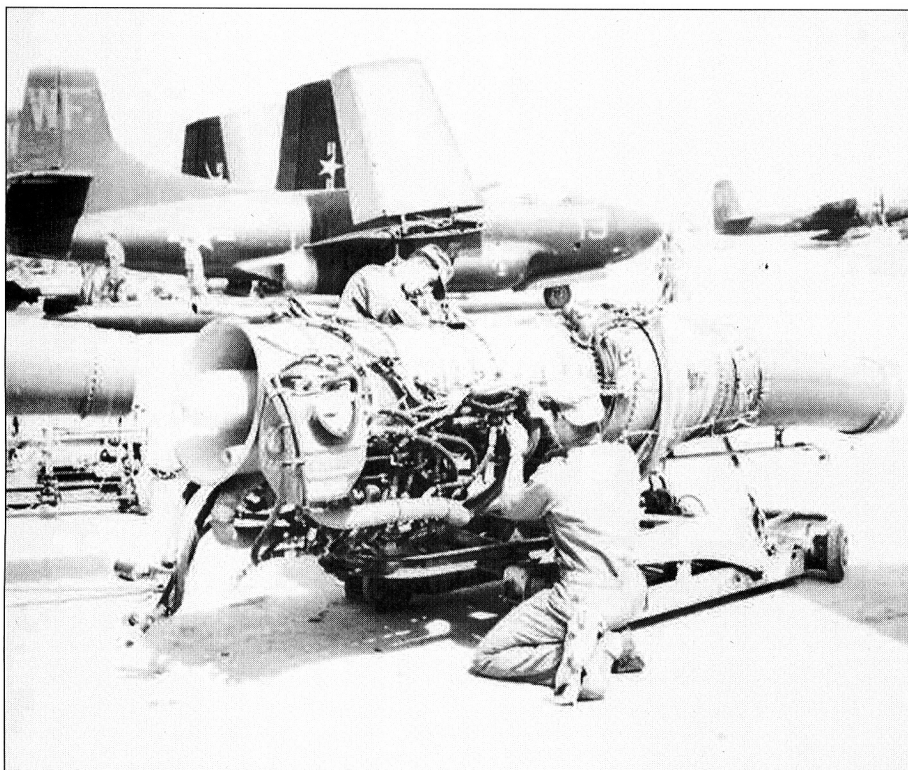
Along the main line of resistance (MLR), this accuracy was extended into the night with the arrival of the MPQ-14 radar, which made night bombing a matter of precision rather than luck. Marines on the MLR throughout the Korean War could count on close air support around the clock and in almost all kinds of weather. Marines on the ground in 1952 might have been surprised to learn that one of their fellow Marines flying an F9F in



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Above: The VMF(N)-513 squadron commander, LtCol Robert F. Conley (center), was congratulated on downing a MiG by MSgt Lawrence J. Fortin (left) and Maj Elswin P. Dunn.

Below: F3D Sky Knight power plants were overhauled and reinstalled in a day by hard-working jet mechanics whose efforts ensured the aircraft were available for night operations.



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support of them was none other than the commanding general of 1stMAW, Major General Christian F. "Frank" Schilt, the Marine Corps' first general officer to qualify in jets.

The slender McDonnell F2H was designed as a carrier fighter for the Navy. For Marine Corps aviation it was, in the words of one enlisted Marine pilot who flew it, "a natural photo bird," one that could outperform any photo plane in Korea. Maj Robert R. Read took his newly formed Marine Reconnaissance Squadron (VMJ) 1 to K-3 Airfield at Pohang in February 1952. It didn't take long for the squadron's 14 twin-jet F2H-2P Banshees to become the mainstay of the aerial photography effort in Korea.

Flying in support of both the First Marine Division and the Fifth Air Force (FAF), the 550-mph, single-seat jet was described as being "the first important development in aerial photography in the Korean War." Only weeks after its introduction, the Banshee was providing one-third of the day photo requirements of the FAF. This was despite constituting only one-quarter of the total available assets and being based at an airfield more than 150 miles farther from most targets than any other aerial photo unit in Korea.

Master Sergeant Louie Guesman, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the VMJ-1 photography laboratory, said that the Banshee "could take one helluva lot of pictures." This was more than just colorful talk. During its time in Korea, VMJ-1 turned out almost 800,000 feet of film, equal to a photo strip wrapped 6½ times around the Earth at the equator. Banshees from VMJ-1 accounted for one-third of all friendly photo missions in Korea and at times flew half of all such missions for the FAF.

The importance attached to the F2H Banshee by FAF may be seen from some of the missions assigned and the protection afforded. These missions ranged from the MLR to the far northern regions of Korea along the MiG-guarded Yalu River. Strong FAF fighter cover accompanied each mission. On one mission flown against the vital Suiho Reservoir hydroelectric power complex deep in North Korea, a pair of VMJ-1 Banshees was escorted by two entire squadrons of Air Force F-86 fighters. The Banshee was an asset of the first order.

The Douglas F3D Sky Knight was, in many ways, obsolete the day it rolled off the production line. Designed as an all-weather fighter, the two-seat, twin-jet F3D with the distinctive wide body that earned it the enduring nickname of "Willie the Whale" was outclassed by other jet fighters almost before it entered the Ma-

rine Corps' inventory. In Korea, thanks to its airborne intercept radar equipment, the F3D turned out to be a natural night fighter, a mission that was born of necessity.

That necessity was the Boeing B-29 Super Fortress. Flying from bases on Okinawa, the big four-engine heavy bombers began flying deep interdiction missions over North Korea almost as soon as the firing of the first shots of the war. Initial successes were dampened and then seriously curtailed with the arrival of Soviet anti-aircraft and fighter units, a participation that never was acknowledged officially by either side.

Firing from positions just across the Yalu River separating Korea from Manchuria, anti-aircraft batteries subjected the B-29s to heavy concentrations of fire. Flying from bases in untouchable Manchuria, MiG fighters made the area so hazardous that the border region soon became known as "MiG Alley." Bomber losses mounted, and day bombing was abandoned in favor of night bombing. The MiGs continued to tear at the bomber formations.

It was painfully apparent that the B-29s were going to need fighter escort if the interdiction raids were to continue. Knowing the need for fighter cover was one thing. Doing something about it was another. There simply wasn't a friendly fighter in Korea suited for the night-fighter role. Enter Willie the Whale and Marine Night Fighter Squadron (VMF(N)) 513.

No sooner had Lieutenant Colonel Homer G. Hutchinson's VMF(N)-513 "Flying Nightmares" become operational with their new F3Ds than FAF put them to work escorting B-29s over North Korea. Hostile MiGs rising to challenge the bombers soon learned that they had met an aircraft that was more than their match. This was demonstrated less than 72 hours after the squadron assumed its escort duties. Maj William T. Stratton Jr. and his airborne intercept operator (AIO), MSgt Hans C. Hoglind, blasted a Soviet jet out of the sky over the heavily defended communist airfield at Sinuiju. It was the first time that an enemy jet had been shot down at night by an aircraft using airborne intercept radar equipment, and it was only the beginning.

As fast as they went up, the MiGs were batted down. In only a few short weeks, bomber losses declined to the point of being negligible, while MiG losses soared. The MiGs, dependent on visual sightings, were no match for the on-board radar fire direction system of the F3Ds, which made it possible to destroy a MiG without either the pilot or the AIO ever seeing it. Communist pilots, totally unaware that they had even been detected,

were acquired first by the F3D's radar, then shredded by a stream of 20 mm projectiles guided unerringly to their target.

It was one such mission that provided a mystery that lasted nearly 50 years. In the early morning hours of 30 May 1953, an F3D-2 piloted by Captain James B. Brown, with Sergeant James "Red" Harrell as AIO, disappeared from ground approach radar while preparing for its final descent to its base at Kunsan's K-8 Airfield on South Korea's West Coast. There was no inclement weather, and there were no other aircraft airborne in the area. An extensive daytime search uncovered no trace of the aircraft or its crew. The cause of the disappearance was never determined.

On 27 July 2001, a South Korean family vacationing on the beach west of Kunsan came upon human remains and dog tags belonging to Harrell. The remains were sent to the Army's Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, where they were determined to be those of Red Harrell. With many of his old squadron mates from VMF(N)-513 in attendance, Harrell was laid to rest in Virginia's Arlington National Cemetery on 1 Feb. 2002.

Augmented by Navy pilots and AIOs from Fleet Composite Squadron (VC) 6, the Flying Nightmares of VMF(N)-513 made the night skies over the Yalu hazardous to the health of MiG pilots. MiGs were going down nightly, blown out of the air by deadly accurate radar-controlled 20 mm gunfire. By the end of the Korean War, the unique Navy-Marine team of VMF(N)-513 had destroyed more enemy aircraft than any other Marine or Navy day-fighter squadron. The F3D, supposedly inferior to other fighters, had proven itself the master of them all.

Thought to be obsolete the day it was born, the F3D outlived any jet fighter of the Korean War. Reconfigured as an electronic warfare platform, the warhorse continued in service long after its contemporaries had been retired. In the spring of 1965, when LtCol Otis W. S. Corman took his Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron (VMCJ) 1 to Vietnam from its base at Iwakuni, Japan, old, reliable Willie the Whale was among the first to land at Da Nang.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine and later an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. He is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck and has been writing a continuing series of Korean War articles to commemorate the 50th anniversary of that war.

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