



Marine Corps Aviation in the Korean War, the First Year



Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret) • Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps Historical Center

"I'm a U.S. Marine, and I'll be one 'til I die."

—Capt Theodore "Ted" Williams
Marine fighter pilot and member of the
Baseball Hall of Fame

The airplane and the pilot both were in their second war. The airplane, a Vought F4U-4B, was the latest and last model of the famous inverted gull-wing Corsair that had been the mainstay of Marine aviation units in the bitterly fought island campaigns of World War II.

Alongside their Navy brethren, Corsairs had lent a hand in sweeping the Japanese from the Pacific skies and had helped Marines on the ground blast Japanese defenders from islands with

names such as Peleliu, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The Japanese called them "Whispering Death." As airplanes go, the Corsair was getting old, destined to be the Marine Corps' last propeller-driven fighter. Sleek new jets were entering service; however, it wasn't time for the old warrior to go just yet. There was still work to be done.

To the pilot, Major Kenneth L. Reusser, the Corsair was an old friend. He had flown Corsairs in the Pacific—flown them so well and with such resolve and courage in the face of danger that his aerial exploits had brought him America's second-highest award for bravery: the Navy Cross. Now there was another war.

A scant six weeks earlier, in June 1950, North Korea's communist dictator,

Kim Il Sung, had sent his so-called North Korean People's Army (NKPA) crashing deep into neighboring South Korea. Less than a month later the First Provisional Marine Brigade, with Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 33 as its aviation component, was activated and embarked for the war zone. Action on the ground and in the air was not long in coming, and Maj Reusser would be in it from the start.

Saturday, 5 Aug. 1950 found Reusser leading a division of Corsairs from Lieutenant Colonel Walter E. Lischied's Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 214, the "Black Sheep," made famous by the legendary Gregory "Pappy" Boyington in WW II. Flying from the deck of USS *Sicily* (CVE-118), the division was seeking targets of opportunity in the vicinity

Marine Corsairs were a little long in the tooth when the Korean War began, but they still had bite as both fighters and ground attack aircraft.

of the South Korean port city of Inchon, now occupied by hostile forces. Despite intense and accurate antiaircraft fire, Reusser led his flight in a low-level strafing and rocket attack against a North Korean vehicle park and factory that resulted in a number of trucks destroyed and NKPA soldiers killed.

The ferocity with which the North Koreans defended the area aroused Reusser's suspicions. Ordering the rest of the division to orbit the target out of range, he set his Corsair snarling past the large factory building barely above the ground and close enough to actually look in the windows. What he saw explained the tenacity of the enemy defenses. The building was a tank maintenance facility, packed with Soviet-made T-34 tanks.

With both of the Corsair's wings damaged by heavy ground fire, Reusser flew to USS *Sicily* to rearm and refuel, then returned to the target, setting the factory ablaze with rockets and napalm, destroying every tank and truck in the area. Continuing on, Reusser led his division in a low-level attack against oil storage tanks in the Inchon harbor area, turning the tanks into fireballs.

With all of his rockets and napalm expended, Reusser then attacked a camouflaged oil tanker in the harbor, diving through murderous antiaircraft fire to mast height and raking the tanker with 20 mm gunfire. The tanker exploded, almost blowing Reusser's Corsair out of the air. For his daring attacks Maj Reusser received a second award of the Navy

Cross, becoming the first Marine to be decorated for bravery in the Korean War.

The courage and flying skill exhibited by Kenneth Reusser would set the tone for Marine air operations during that desperate summer when 11 NKPA divisions sought to land the knockout blow on the American and allied forces clinging grimly to the perimeter ringing the vital port city of Pusan. For the first time, the invader's front-line troops would find out what it was like to be subjected to deadly accurate air attacks. From the moment Marine ground units went into action, the constantly swarming Corsairs were a fixture in the skies overhead. Combining with the Black Sheep, the "Death Rattlers" of Maj Arnold Lund's VMF-323, based aboard USS *Badoeng Strait* (CVE-116), flew in daily support of their fellow Marines on the ground.

That support was of the first-rate, professional variety. Fully three-fourths of the pilots of both squadrons were experienced combat veterans of the war against Japan, men with more than 1,000 hours in the cockpit. They knew their business, frontwards, backwards, inside out and upside down.

Utilizing the air-ground tactics pioneered by Marine aviators in Nicaragua a quarter-century earlier, and honed to perfection in the Pacific, the Black Sheep and the Death Rattlers quickly taught the North Koreans that there was a dimension to warfare they had not considered. That dimension was that of fully integrated air-ground combat conducted by a truly combined-arms force, the only such force in Korea—or in the world, for that matter.

Racing in from the sea, the Corsairs plastered North Korean targets in front of advancing Marine ground units as the Marine brigade drove into the Sachon corridor in the first United Nations offensive action of the Korean War. Vectored to targets by the tactical air control parties (TACPs) of the battalions on the ground, Marine aviators ripped in, skimming the treetops to devastate North Korean units with bombs, rockets, napalm and gunfire, often no more than a few hundred feet in front of friendly lines.

At Kosong, MAG-33 pilots broke the back of the enemy defenders with a punishing attack that sent North Korean soldiers fleeing in disarray from the key ridge below the town. The echoes of that encounter had hardly faded away when a division of Corsairs from VMF-323 caught a column of more than 100 North Korean vehicles on the road. What followed came to be known as the "Kosong



Leatherneck ordnance crews rearmed and refueled Corsairs of 1stMAW in a concerted effort to take the war to the communists.

Turkey Shoot,” resulting in the complete destruction of the NKPA 83d Mechanized Regiment, leaving nothing but shattered, burning vehicles and blood-soaked corpses to mark the event.

That was also the day that First Lieutenant Doyle Cole met his brigade commander, Brigadier General Edward A. Craig. With his Corsair shaking and stuttering from multiple hits by ground fire, Cole was forced to ditch at sea just offshore at the very moment BGen Craig was making an inspection tour by helicopter. Pulled dripping wet from the ocean, Cole was dumbfounded to see BGen Craig operating the hoist.

The 1stProvMarBrig, with its integral aviation combat element, quickly became known as one of the most powerful, friendly combat formations in Korea, packing a punch far out of proportion to its relatively small size. The responsiveness, accuracy and ready availability of Marine aviation combat elements, coupled with their ability to spend much more time over the target than Japan-based U.S. Air Force planes, was the envy of Army commanders operating adjacent to the Marines.

In assessing the effectiveness of Ma-

rine close air support, Colonel Paul Freeman, USA, commanding officer of the 23d Infantry, wrote that “the Marines on our left were a sight to behold; they had squadrons of air in direct support. They used it like artillery. It was ‘Hey, Joe, this is Smitty. Knock off the left of that ridge in front of Item Company.’ They had it day and night.” Freeman ended with, “We just have to have air support like that.”

It wasn't only the Corsairs that were making the Marines such a deadly opponent for the NKPA. In the air as well were the fixed-wing OY artillery spotters and HO3S-1 helicopters of Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) Six, a squadron that could trace its beginnings back to the “Banana Wars” of the early 1920s. Ranging ahead of Marine ground elements, the squadron's tactical air observers developed valuable information on enemy dispositions, while artillery air observers brought murderous fires to bear on enemy forces opposing the Marines.

From the standpoint of the NKPA, as if it wasn't bad enough that the Black Sheep and the Death Rattlers were mak-

ing the daylight hours dangerous for any North Korean soldier who showed his head, now Maj Joseph H. “Hunter” Reiburg's Night Fighter Squadron (VMF(N)) 513 weighed in.

Flying from Itazuke Air Base in Japan, the “Night Hecklers” wasted no time in demonstrating to the NKPA that even darkness offered no safe haven. Day and night, MAG-33 aviators pummeled North Korean targets. During the defense of the Pusan Perimeter, they flew 662 sorties in support of Marine ground forces and assisted U.S. Army and South Korean units with an additional 333 close air support missions, for a total of 995 sorties in little more than four weeks of fighting.

That figure would be dwarfed by the 2,774 combat sorties flown by Marine pilots between 7 Sept. and 9 Oct. in support of the Navy-Marine amphibious masterpiece at Inchon and the subsequent drive to liberate the South Korean capital of Seoul. If there were more missions to fly, there were more aircraft to fly them. Major General Field Harris began bringing his entire First Marine Aircraft Wing into action. Two more squadrons, LtCol Richard W. Wyczawski's VMF-212

Captain Walter L. Redmond's F7F Tigercat brought back North Korean mud after an extremely low altitude strafing run in May 1951. (USMC photo)



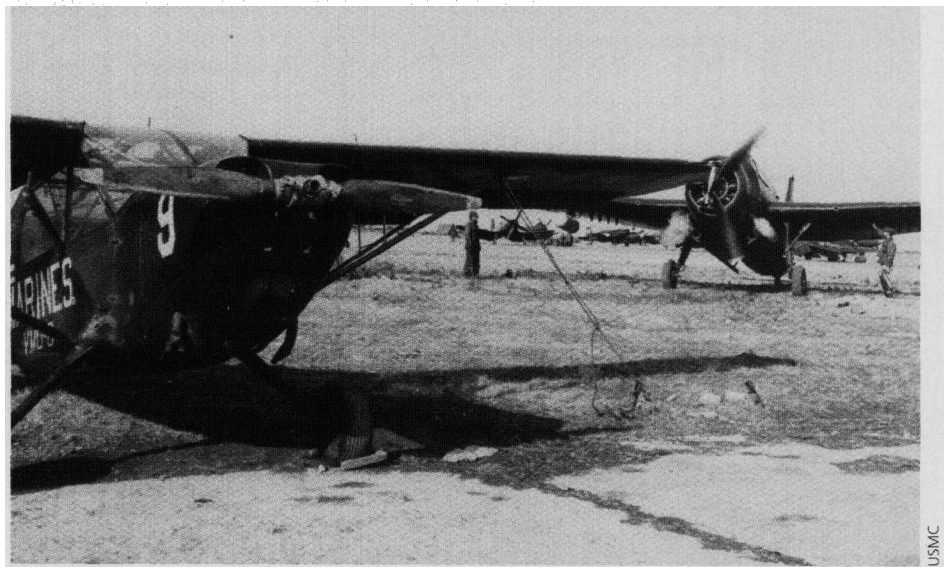
and LtCol J. Frank Cole's VMF-312, joined the veterans of the summer fighting to double the number of Corsairs in the air. In Japan, the Grumman F7F-3N Tigercats of LtCol Max J. Volcansek Jr.'s VMF(N)-542 added to the Marines' night-fighting capabilities.

Throughout the Inchon-Seoul Campaign the sight of Corsairs circling hawk-like above Marine ground units became so commonplace that the absence of Marine flyers overhead was the cause for questioning looks. On 10 Sept. two 14-plane flights from VMF-214 and VMF-323 turned Wolmi-do into a biblical "pillar of smoke," with napalm softening up the island for the landing of the Fifth Marine Regiment. That done, the Black Sheep and the Death Rattlers returned on 15 Sept. to escort LtCol Robert D. Taplett's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines ashore with rockets and gunfire, winging in so low over the island as to drop hot shell casings on the Marines in the landing craft below.

During the drive to capture Kimpo Airfield and liberate Seoul, the coordination between the 1stMarDiv on the ground and the 1stMAW in the air was flawless. Corsairs blasted enemy defenders with gunfire and rockets, often striking within 30 yards of friendly troops. A column of NKPA T-34 tanks attempting to counterattack Col Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines was caught on the road and turned into smoldering wreckage without having fired a shot.

The Marine air-ground team was functioning like a finely made watch. Not the least of the success of Marine aviators in the air was the work of other Marine aviators on the ground. Much of the credit for the accuracy of Marine air strikes must go to the regimental and battalion TACPs. Qualified naval aviators themselves, the air controllers were often on first-name terms with the pilots in the air. This blending of skills made for an entirely new dimension in the concept of combined arms warfare.

These skills would be put to the ultimate test in the vicious fighting that characterized the Chosin Reservoir Campaign when two new elements, the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) and winter, entered the war. Fighting in temperatures as low as minus 35 degrees against 10 CCF divisions intent on nothing short of the complete annihilation of the 1stMarDiv, the Marine air-ground team responded with maximum effort, dogged determination, constant improvisation and unconquerable esprit de corps. It was all done under weather conditions that taxed the skills and stamina of pilots and ground crews alike.



Even the old Grumman TBM dive-bomber (background) and the OY-1 observation aircraft (foreground) were pressed into action as medevac birds in efforts to evacuate the wounded from Koto-ri in December 1950.

In the air day and night, Marine aviators held nothing back, routinely putting their lives on the line for the sake of their brother Marines on the ground. Long years afterward, Corporal Florian Kovaleski, a 5th Marines machine-gun squad leader, remembered them. "God, how I loved those airdales. I don't know what we would have done without them. I don't know. Thank God for them."

Kovaleski was only one among many Marines to voice his admiration for the unflinching support from the air. Universally appreciated by Marines on the ground were the tireless efforts of the 1stMAW pilots, pilots who often were volunteering to fly extra missions for the sake of their fellow Marines. The result of this selflessness was a constant swarm of Corsairs in the skies above the Chosin Reservoir, often in marginal flying conditions. In one day alone, 30 Nov., VMF-312 put up 31 sorties, logging a total of 824 flying hours.

When 1stMAW pilots weren't supporting the 1stMarDiv they were in the air over the nearby 7th Infantry Division. Aided by ground controllers from the 1st Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, Marine aviators flew more than 1,000 sorties in support of the division. The superb effectiveness of this support led BGen Homer W. Kiefer, the division's artillery commander, to write: "Again, allow me to reemphasize my appreciation for the outstanding air support received by this division. The Marine system of control, in my estimation, approaches the ideal, and I firmly believe that a similar system should be adopted as standard for Army divisions."

It was combined arms warfare at its best, and its effect was not lost upon the Chinese who were on the receiving end. Remarkably candid in their assessment of their own conduct of the campaign, the Chinese credited Marine air attacks with inflicting 15,000 casualties on General Sung Shih-Lun's 9th Army Group. The Chinese lack of preparedness for the combined arms tactics of the Marines was illustrated by the text of a captured CCF after-action report: "The coordination between the enemy infantry, tanks, artillery and airplanes is surprisingly close."

During the course of the Chosin Reservoir Campaign, the 1stMAW launched nearly 4,000 sorties in support of the 1stMarDiv, leaving the division's commander, MajGen Oliver P. Smith, to express the appreciation of all members of his division. In a personal letter to MajGen Field Harris, he wrote: "Never in its history has Marine aviation given more convincing proof of its indispensable value to the ground Marines. A bond of understanding has been established that will never be broken."

The new year of 1951 was destined to be a year of change for Marine aviation in Korea. With the move of the 1stMarDiv to the East-Central Front in February, Marine fighter squadrons would move ashore to operate from bases on the Korean peninsula. Joining them would be the Marine Corps' first jet squadron, the "Willing Hearts" of LtCol Neil R. McIntyre's VMF-311, flying the newest aircraft in the Navy-Marine inventory, the Grumman F9F Panther. A typical product of what generations of Navy and



The mobility of helicopters began to be exploited in both vertical envelopment tactics and medevac missions as the Korean War progressed. (Photo by SSgt Michael McMahon)

Marine aviators had come to affectionately call the "Grumman Iron Works," the Panther was a rugged, powerful airplane, built to withstand—and dish out—impressive amounts of punishment. It would soon make its presence felt.

Soon to join the Marine air effort would be the world's first helicopter squadron, Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (HMR) 161, bringing its new Sikorsky HRS-1 helicopters into action. Even before the arrival of this revolutionary squadron, however, the HO3S-1 helicopters of VMO-6 were being utilized more and more in support of Marines on the ground. The scarcity of roads and trails in the 1stMarDiv's new zone of action

made the helicopter invaluable for evacuating wounded and resupplying small units operating on their own for extended periods of time.

Not all of the change that accompanied the new year would be beneficial, however. With the restructuring of the higher command levels of friendly forces, all air assets in Korea came under the control of the Joint Operations Center (JOC) of the Eighth United States Army in Korea. As a means of conducting deep or interdictionary air warfare, the new system, directed by the 5th Air Force, offered a flexible means of directing air power across the entire 135-mile front. It was, however, a

system designed to fit the concept of air warfare. Unfortunately, in the conduct of combined arms warfare, the system left much to be desired.

The theory was that the JOC could allocate air assets to whatever sector of the front had the greatest need. In practice the system was too cumbersome, unwieldy and unresponsive. It suffered from rigidity and unacceptable time delays due to requests for air support having to move sluggishly upward through multiple layers of command. In the summer of 1950 the average elapsed time between a Marine ground commander's request for an air strike to the arrival of aircraft over the target was 15 minutes.



Through it all, Marine aviators never lost the focus—support of their brother Marines on the ground.

One year later that time had ballooned to an hour and a half. No one was happy.

Tinkering eventually produced a system that was modestly more responsive. At best, though, it could be considered as only slightly better than nothing at all. In the conduct of combined arms warfare, the JOC system simply was not a good fit. Fifty years later the concept of combined arms warfare in a joint service environment is still the subject of intense debate.

As Marines had ushered in a new form of warfare in the summer of 1950, so, too, it was Marines who closed out the first year of the war in Korea with a revolutionary new development, helicopter mobility. The broken, rugged, near-vertical Korean terrain, where roads and trails were few and far between, was made to order for the helicopter. It was there that the large-scale heliborne troop movements in combat, so commonplace in another war 15 years later, saw their beginnings.

On 21 Sept., as the first year of the war closed out, the helicopters of HMR-161 successfully landed a reinforced company of Marines on the dominating height of Hill 884 that controlled the critical terrain of the Punchbowl. Landing at 30-second intervals, the HRS-1s delivered 224 Marines and more than 17,000 pounds of cargo under the very noses of the NKPA defenders. It was the first time in the history of warfare that such an operation was conducted, and it opened up an entirely new book in tactics and the operational art.

As 1951 sizzled into summer, the flyers and support personnel of the 1st-MAW could look back on 12 months of accomplishments. During that first year of the war in Korea, Marine aviators flew more than 34,000 sorties, logging enough air miles to equal 760 flights around the world. It was an effort characterized by dedication to duty, superb flying skills, total professionalism and esprit de corps, and it was an all-hands undertaking by aircrews and ground crews alike.

The pilots who flew the planes, the mechanics, armorers and refuelers who put them in the air, the air controllers who guided them to targets and brought them safely home all gave unstintingly of themselves, motivated by a common goal: to help brother Marines on the ground.

In keeping that bond of brotherhood, they held nothing back. Together, Marines in the air and on the ground showed the world a new form of warfare conducted by a new kind of fighting force, a truly integrated force of all arms. That fighting force, the Marine air-ground team, remains the only force of its kind in the world.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a frequent contributor to Leatherneck, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.



U.S. MARINES



IT'S BEDTIME. HAVE YOU SEEN MY MARINE? (MC106) One size fits all. White knit nightie. Logo red/gold. \$20.00 + shipping.



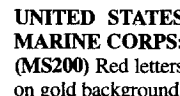
SCARLET PULLOVER JACKET: (MC955) Nylon windpouch with front zipper, elastic cuff, drawstring bottom. USMC emblem embroidered in three colors on left chest. Sizes S-M-L-XL \$35.00 + shipping. XXL \$40.00 + shipping.



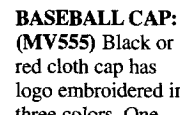
"MARINES ARE COOKING" APRON: (MB10) Two pockets accent the front of this red apron. The logo appears in gold. \$18.00 + shipping.



LICENSE PLATE FRAMES: (MS201) Aluminum. Red background. Gold lettering reads ONCE A MARINE ALWAYS A MARINE. \$15.00 + shipping. Sold in pairs.



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS: (MS200) Red letters on gold background. \$15.00 + shipping. Sold in pairs.



BASEBALL CAP: (MV555) Black or red cloth cap has logo embroidered in three colors. One size fits all. \$15.00 + shipping.



WHITE POPLIN GOLF CAP: (MV553) Displays "United States Marines" embroidered in red. One size fits all. \$15.00 + shipping.

SHIPPING: Up to \$5.00 add \$1.50
\$5.01 to \$20.00 add \$4.00
\$20.01 to \$60.00 add \$6.00

TO ORDER: Send full amount plus shipping charges with item number and description to: **THE DONLEN COMPANY, P.O. BOX 1355, Kearney, NE 68848-1355.** Foreign service charge add \$15.00. We accept orders using a personal check, money order, or MC/VISA. No CODs. Prices and availability subject to change without notice. Phone 308-237-4778. Please ask for our free CATALOG.

SERVING MARINES FOR 23 CONSECUTIVE YEARS
The Donlen Company
P.O. BOX 1355, KEARNEY, NE 68848-1355