

# VMA-121: Marine Skyraiders

By Warren E. Thompson

When the Korean War began in late June 1950, the Marine Corps had large numbers of F4U *Corsairs* available in front line squadrons (stateside) that would be the first attack aircraft to see combat for the Corps in Korea. They were supplemented by the night fighter version that combined efforts with the Grumman F7F-3N *Tigercat*. These planes were critical assets that would support the Inchon landing and Pusan perimeter breakout. They were followed by two Marine squadrons of F9F *Panthers*. This gave the ground troops excellent protection, but they still lacked a heavy weight bomber that had loiter time far to the north with the capability of knocking out major fortified targets. This void would be filled by VMA-121 flying the AD-2, AD-3 and a few AD-4 *Skyraiders* during the course of their combat tour.

Douglas Aircraft records state that there were 156 AD-2s built using the powerful Wright R-3350-26W Powerplant. This generated about 2,700 horsepower which allowed the aircraft to carry the heavy ordnance loads. The AD-3 had some improvements over the Dash-2 with a stronger fuselage, improved landing gear and a slightly new canopy design. There were 125 of this model built by Douglas. The AD-4, available to the squadron in lesser numbers, was improved over the other two in that the landing gear was strengthened and the radar improved. It was also equipped with the G-2 compass. There were 372 Dash-4s built.

The Marines utilized all of these aircraft to the maximum. Fully loaded, the planes had an outstanding range which in some cases exceeded 1300 miles. Both earlier models are listed at an empty weight of about 12,000 pounds with a maximum takeoff weight of 25,000 pounds. These stats explain why the *Skyraider* was so valuable and effective in the Korean War.

Orders were cut in mid-1951 for VMF-121 and its reserve members to be activated for conversion to the Douglas *Skyraider*, and at this time, the squadron designation was changed to VMA-121.



Capt Thomas Murphree poses in full gear prior to climbing into the cockpit of his AD-3 at VMA-121's main base at Pyongtaek.

(Credit: Richard Hawley).

After all training regimens had been completed, the squadron was loaded aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Sitko Bay* for the trip to Yokosuka, Japan. From there, when their aircraft were combat ready, VMA-121 deployed to an airfield at Pohang (K-3) South Korea on October 19, 1951, where they would initiate combat operations until April 1952, when they moved



In preparation for incoming Typhoon "Karen," this fully loaded AD has been mired down in the dirt and the sandbags piled below the right wing will be placed on top of the wings. This weight guaranteed damage to the aircraft from high winds would be minimal. (Credit: Richard Hawley).

to Pyongtaek Airbase (K-6). Squadron records show their first strike was flown on October 27. From there, the squadron wrote themselves into the history books while adopting an insignia that depicted "Wolf Girl" from the famous Lil' Abner comic strip drawn by Al Capp. Thus, they referred to themselves as "Wolf Raiders."

The Navy had already turned its *Skyraiders* loose against the enemy when they began flying missions as early as the first week of August 1950. However, there was a vast difference between Marine and Navy ADs as far as being effective against hostile targets. *Skyraiders* operating from aircraft carriers were limited on ordnance (6,600 pounds) because of short takeoff distance. The Marine version could carry about 2,000 pounds more because of being land based, which gave them much more takeoff room.

Among the troops on the ground, the favorite aircraft for close air support were the prop types because they could loiter overhead much longer than the jets. The most requested aircraft of these was definitely the AD *Skyraider* because of its lethal load and ability to hang around for at least two hours.

2dLt Richard Hawley was one of the pilots who flew most, if not all, of the *Skyraider* models that served in the squadron. He stated that he flew missions with a wide variety of ordnance loads, and the big bombs were usually destined for hard targets further north. Some of these included three 2000# and eight 250# bombs; and then the next day they would have a mix of 1000#, 500# and 250# bombs on the same load. The newer AD-4s were heavier and when operating from K-6, with a Marston matting runway and a full bomb load, he said there was a "washboard effect" when taking off-- which meant sometimes launching before takeoff speed had been reached, resulting in many interesting and dangerous situations which included minor damage to the tips of the props.

Due to the potential of the *Skyraider*, the squadron aircraft and their targets would be determined by the Joint Operations Center (JOC) which was staffed by 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force and 8<sup>th</sup> Army personnel. All of their targets were determined by this group, based on photo reconnaissance pictures that made their way up through the chain. Of course, this system did not sit well with the Corps because the emphasis was placed on interdiction of

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The Skyraider could handle an enormous amount of ordnance. Most of the aircraft carried numerous mission symbols which were testimony to their ruggedness over heavily defended targets. (Credit: Lawrence Alley).

the logistical road and rail lines, and there was very little attention given to close air support (CAS) which was the Marine's life blood!

Any pilot who flew over North Korea can tell you that weather played a big factor in a mission's success, especially during the winter months. With the ADs beginning operations in late October, the squadron didn't have to wait long for Mother Nature to interfere. However, November proved to be a lucrative month for the squadron even though they had five days of combat operations cancelled due to bad weather. A good example of this occurred on November 26 when 26 sorties were attempted against targets behind the lines, and 22 had to be cancelled. VMA-121 records show that about 60% of their missions in November were centered on rail cuts and destroying trains that had been disabled with aggressive night attacks by USAF B-26 *Invaders* and Marine night fighters. Only 32% were classified as CAS and the remainder flown were non-combat types. The focus for -121 was near Anbyon, which was due south of Wonsan. It was a key road junction that led to all segments of the communist front line positions and was also the main rail line between Wonsan and Pyongyang.

1stLt Thomas Murphree was a young lieutenant who had finished flight training and opted to choose ADs over the fighter types because he believed strongly in CAS and wanted to help the ground troops all he could. He related details of a difficult mission he flew in bad weather that had formed a low ceiling over the heavily defended target area. "This was a strike in central North Korea that featured all the elements of a Hollywood production. It involved all the ADs our squadron

could muster up, and our target was a lucrative one--a major logistics center hidden in the mountains. We would be operating under some low slung clouds with AA rounds coming toward us from every direction.

"The initial roll in wasn't bad. We were above broken clouds and you could pick an opening for your first run, but we quickly realized that we were going to be operating under a 2500 foot ceiling! Coming down on my first drop, I spotted a poorly concealed warehouse and put four of my 250# GP's right in the middle of it. As I pulled off, I saw a few trucks which whetted my appetite. Unfortunately, that was the last I saw of them. When I pointed the nose up, I realized we were going to have a hard time delivering bombs under that low ceiling. At that time, I decided to stay underneath it anyway and take my chances. As I glanced over to the right, I saw three or four golf ball size holes in my right wing. To my amazement, there were no rips or tears, and after each bomb run, the number of holes would increase. Thank goodness I was in one of the toughest aircraft you could be in.

"We were picking up targets, but the bombing accuracy was poor due to the circumstances. In this case, the best weapon was our 20mm guns. A real melee, with traffic hazards galore, as ADs were attacking from all directions! Our attack was being monitored from above by a LtCol in an AD and our group C.O., Col Bob Gaylor in an F4U *Corsair*. A short while into our attack, I checked over at my 9 o'clock and saw an F4U streaming smoke in a slight descent. Our group commander was in trouble. I turned toward him in order to keep him in sight. There was nothing on the Tactical channel so I switched over to Guard and glanced up just in time to see Col Gaylor bailing out and hung on a strap. He pulled himself up and got released, and down he went! (His *Corsair* was perfectly trimmed as it continued down with wings level). The observer above us in the AD contacted the search and rescue helicopter on the deck of a carrier off shore and gave them coordinates."

That strike took out a vital Chinese logistic complex and the only loss was to Col Gaylor's *Corsair*. LtCol Fletcher (in the observer AD) did a great job of taking over the rescue efforts and guided the helicopter in for a successful rescue.

Col Gaylor had worked his way over to an adjacent valley into a clear area where the chopper picked him up. If the strike force had been made up of F-51 *Mustangs*, with their vulnerable cooling system, they probably would have lost a few because of small arms fire at such a low altitude.

When the weather was marginal or better, VMA-121 had a full schedule. An example of this occurred in March 1952, when the squadron had 42 interdiction sorties against Karhwarri, located close to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel northwest of Seoul. The Chinese had been able to get enough supplies

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With part of the cowl removed, the powerful Wright R-3350-26 radial engine can be viewed. This was taken in late 1952 at K-6 airfield. (Credit: Richard Hawley).

# VMA-121: Flying the AD-2, AD-3 & AD-4



Pilots from VMA-121 pose in front of one of their fully loaded AD-3 *Skyriders* at Pyongtaek AB (K-6) in South Korea. (Credit: Perry Jensen).

through during the January/February bad weather to mount an offensive that was quickly shut-down by UN airpower.

Marine ADs played a big part in this. *Skyriders* began launching at 0635, with the last division taking off at 1600 hours. The first wave involved six ADs that attacked a major supply dump; and this was followed by eight aircraft tasked with taking out AA positions in that general area. At 1025 hours, five ADs bombed buildings close to the supply dump that were probably housing enemy troops; and the division ended their mission by cratering the roads into the village from the north. All aircraft survived the mission with one of their AD-4s having to abort due to a faulty air speed indicator. Damage assessment late that afternoon showed that 90% of all the food supplies were destroyed, while 30% of the ammunition storage area was taken out. The final wave came in at last light and did significant damage, but it was too late to evaluate the results.

Any fighter bomber pilot that had flown rail cutting missions could tell you how efficient the enemy was in repairing the damage. Most of the small villages located close to the railroads housed workers (locals) that were forced into the work crews; and these must have numbered in the thousands. Most of the damage was repaired within hours, and the trains were running again before first light.

VMA-121 records give a good example of how frustrating these missions could be; and once the Chinese began bringing in heavy automatic AA firepower, the cost of doing business increased significantly. In late March 1952, 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force initiated a major effort to curtail the movement of supplies by rail. On one day mission, they sent a large number of bomber types in with 53 x 1000 # and 84 x 500# bombs on the rail line between Chongju and Sinanju. That night, B-26s hit the same area with 42 x 500# bombs; and at first light, 161 fighter bombers struck with 322 x 1000# bombs. The Wolf Raider ADs delivered 60,000 pounds of bombs in the attack. On paper, this type of effort should have shut the rail movement down for months. The fact is that their trains were running that route again within one week after the attack.

Lt Ernie Brace was one of the younger pilots to fly with

VMA-121, coming into the squadron in April 1952. At this time, the unit had been in combat about five months, so the average experience level of the pilots was very high. He recalls his first combat mission: "We were loaded with a standard load of twelve 250#s and three 1000# GPs. We could arm them nose and tail or just tail, for deeper penetration when being used on enemy bunkers. The twelve wing racks could be salvoed, ripped off or dropped in any combination of pairs. The first take-off fully loaded was exciting and we had been briefed to hold it on the ground until we reached the end of the Pierced Steel Planking (PSP). The loaded aircraft had knocked the dirt and dust out from under the planking in several areas and you found yourself

airborne off of a bump before you wanted to be. As time went by, you learned to anticipate the bumps and stay light on the controls to get across them.

"We were tasked with close air support along the front lines which required a lot of circling in loose formation before we were finally called in by a forward air controller. Front lines were marked with panels, and all runs were to be made parallel to the lines. Runs were adjusted by referring and adjusting to the last hit. Pull out was always over enemy territory, just in case a bomb or rocket was inadvertently or accidentally released. Targets were marked with flares or smoke rockets from the FACs. We did a lot of damage to enemy positions on my first mission."

On big strikes far north of the front lines, most or all of the squadron ADs were involved, and they usually took along escorts in the form of Marine F4U *Corsairs*. Far above the formation were F-86 *Sabre* jets flying top cover in case any MiG-15s decided to interfere. Also, search and rescue helicopters were standing alert on one of the small islands off the coast of North Korea should a *Skyraider* go down. Another precaution was that some of the ADs in the formation were equipped with



Capt Lawrence Alley, one of the top timers in VMA-121 is strapped in and ready for the order to start engines. Note the mission symbols painted on the side of his *Skyraider* named "Nita." (Credit: Lawrence Alley).

# The Wolf Raiders at War

belly or wing fuel tanks so they would be able to linger over an area to protect a downed pilot until a rescue chopper arrived. However, some of the missions were in the north central section of North Korea above Pyongyang, and they were out of range of the helicopters.

The pilots in VMA-121 were totally focused on close air support and on many occasions this included night missions. They kept a few aircraft loaded and ready at last light for any troops that might need their services after dark. When that call came, they would usually launch one *Skyraider* that would be under the control of a radar unit near the front lines. The pilot would be on instruments for the entire mission; and he would have to fly in a given direction and at altitude and speed that was directed by the ground radar controller. At

a certain point along that track, the pilot would be told when to drop his ordnance. Due to the heavy firepower dispensed by Marine troops, the Chinese chose to fight during the hours of darkness, so the squadron got calls on a regular basis.

1stLt Dale Gough flew his share of night missions against unseen targets close to the lines. He remembers one of them in particular: "This one night a call came in very late, about 1 or 2 A.M... The weather was miserable and visibility was about zero. I was on instruments as soon as I pulled the gear up and headed north. I will first describe what I, as a pilot, experienced soon after lift off and then I will describe what caused my AD to act as it did.

"I remember passing through 500 feet when all hell broke loose! Without warning, my aircraft began running very rough and made a sharp roll to port. I had put both hands on the stick in order to get it straight and level. I knew I was in trouble and immediately dropped all of my ordnance, and about that time, there was a huge explosion right in my face and then it became



On many close air support missions, ADs carried napalm. This one is loaded with 250 pound GPs and napalm.

(Credit: Lawrence Alley).

deathly silent. The rudders were flopping and the stick moved with no effect. I knew I was too low to bail out and realized I had to ride the aircraft to the ground. It landed flat and gave me a significant jolt. Fortunately, it landed upright in a rice paddy and I was able to get out and start walking back to base.



Capt Lawrence Alley stands by the famous "Wolf Girl" emblem that VMA-121 adopted. She was a character in artist Al Capp's "Lil Abner" comic strip. (Credit: Lawrence Alley).

"What happened to the aircraft to cause this sequence of events was as follows: the AD has four very large prop blades. Each of these propellers is attached to the engine by being screwed into a metal collar. On this occasion, one of the props started to turn out of its collar due to a large crack in the collar because of metal fatigue. The propeller action caused the aircraft to turn violently to the left and within seconds, the prop went all the way out of the collar and the vibration from the remaining props still running under full power shook the engine loose from its

mounts and it dropped from the aircraft! The next morning, we found the propeller some distance from the aircraft with bombs strewn across several paddies, and then found the engine and finally, the aircraft. All of the above occurred in a very short period of time as you can imagine. I was fortunate to have survived the incident."

Until well into the war, the North Korean dams were considered off limits because the general population depended on them for help in growing the enormous amount of rice needed for food. They were considered to be non-military, but all that changed during the final months of the war. In order to force the Chinese to start talking seriously about a ceasefire, the dams became fair game. Lt James Shank was in the squadron during that period and recalled a hazardous mission on the Yalu River. What made it so dangerous had nothing to do with the anti-aircraft fire but with MiG-15s!

At the time of this mission, the 18<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Group had traded in its F-51D *Mustangs* for the new F-86F *Sabre* fighter-bombers. The group also included one squadron of South Africans (2<sup>nd</sup> SAAF). Lt Shank recalled the events: "This mission was known as a 'dam buster,' and it put us in the middle of the most intense firepower that the Chinese had. We were loaded with bombs; and right before I began my initial dive, some big orange golf balls streamed by my cockpit and they weren't coming up from the ground! Actually, there were two sets of tracers whizzing by, and one was from a MiG-15 on my tail and the other was from a South African F-86 that was on the MiG's tail. At that moment, I heard one South African pilot tell another about a MiG on his tail and he answered that as soon as he creamed the MiG in his sights, he'd turn on the other one. Those guys were cool under pressure! Although the sky was filled with aircraft, I don't believe any of the friendlies were lost.

"I had come into the squadron with practically no experience in single engine types as I was multi-engine

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# July 27, 1953 - End of the Korean War



VMF-121 transitioned to *Skyraiders* in April 1951. In mid-May 1951, they changed their designation to VMA-121 because of the new attack mission. 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Perry Jensen, at Pyongtaek is suited up and ready to fly. (Credit: Perry Jensen).

rated. I studied the manual and jumped right in flying missions. At a point later in my tour, our squadron was chosen to start flying Automatic Bomb Control (ABC) missions. We were fitted with avionics gear that by use of radar control from a Marine Corps ground station south of the lines, they controlled us in over a target and pickled our bomb loads. We just turned on our auto pilot and they took over the aircraft and all we had to do was maintain the right airspeed and altitude. Usually on the ABC missions, we were loaded with three 2000# GP bombs.”

The pilots in the Wolf Raider squadron formed a very exclusive club. It was aptly named “The Railroad Cutter’s Union,” and VMA-121 was one of the most proficient squadrons to take on this task. Lt Shank gave some background on what was required to join this elite club: “First of all, when a pilot joined the squadron, he had to fly at least 10 missions or get shot up on one before achieving the 10, to become an unofficial member of -121. At that point, he had to throw a party for the squadron at his expense. Once fully qualified as a squadron pilot, he then had a chance to join the ‘Union.’ I was ordered to write back to the states to the real Railroad Union back home and explain what we were doing and a little about our exclusive club. I explained that we had a rule that each pilot had to fly 10 rail cutter missions to qualify, and that we would like to have some recognition from them. Needless to say, we were warmly welcomed by their organization and in a short while each of us received engineer hats and membership cards! Although the enemy had a huge work force to repair any damage we did to the rails, we sure kept all of them busy!”

Normally on strikes deep into North Korea, the squadron would have extra aircraft, fully loaded, that circled off the coast ready to support any pilots who were shot down. The protection they provided bought enough time for most of the pilots to be rescued by helicopter. With its excellent loiter time, these *Skyraiders* could deliver lethal blows to any efforts by the enemy. 1stLt Perry Jensen was on one of these missions and narrowly escaped crashing when his AD developed some serious problems while he was waiting for the call.

“There were four of us just flying off the North Korean west coast waiting to see if any of our guys went down. Our job was

to cover for the rescue chopper. Well anyway, as we circled around this small island a few miles off the coastline, my cockpit suddenly started filling up with smoke and I noticed I was rapidly losing all my oil. The island we were circling had a cliff at each end of the beach which was going to make it difficult. I decided to make a wheels-up landing on that beach, but it wasn’t very long, so it took me a couple of tries before I set it down and slid to a stop. My next move was to destroy the identification equipment onboard. Then I climbed out of the cockpit and went up the beach a short distance and waited for a helicopter to pick me up.

“After about 45 minutes, the chopper came in and lifted me out. They took me down the coast and dropped me off on another island. This island was bigger and had a fairly good landing strip on the beach. Soon a Greek C-47 landed and took me back down to Seoul. I waited until there was a mail plane headed back to K-6, and got a lift. We got back to my base about midnight, and as I walked into my hut with my parachute on my shoulder, all of the guys rose up in their beds and asked what had happened? They thought I was either dead or a POW. It was about this time that the Marine general over the Air Wing increased the number of missions that had to be flown from 40 to 100, in order to complete our tour. I sneaked an extra one in before my tour was up, so I was credited with 101 missions.”

The Wolf Raiders paid a heavy price for their outstanding achievements in Korea. Their first loss in combat was recorded on November 19, 1951. The Douglas ADs were extremely tough and could absorb plenty of punishment before going down, but due to the heavily defended targets they went after, the loss rate was high and this included Navy *Skyraiders* also.

VMA-121’s initial combat stint was in the AD-2, in which they recorded 22 losses (this included two losses prior to the first combat mission). Later on when they transitioned into the AD-3, they recorded a total of 14 losses, while the AD-4 (available in smaller numbers) totaled only three lost. Keep in mind that these losses were recorded for only one squadron, and they were the only Marine unit to use the attack version of the *Skyraider*.

During the final months of the war, the squadron still had a few AD-2s in inventory. Their final recorded loss came on June 27, 1953, and it was identified as a Dash-2. The war ended 30 days later on July 27, 1953.

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*Author Warren Thompson, a member of MCAA, is an internationally known aviation writer, historian and researcher. He has written and edited aviation material for over 40 years, and has authored over 25 books. Warren’s personal reference collection includes thousands of photos and detailed interviews with over 2,000 pilots and air-crew members. We are delighted that he continues to share his work with the Yellow Sheet. A big THANK YOU to him!*

