

VMA-251

VMA-251 was commissioned as an observation squadron (VMO) of the Second Marine Aircraft Wing at San Diego, California, on 1 December 1941. It was one of the first squadrons to go into the South Pacific area, although as early as May 1942 it had been ordered to New Zealand to furnish air support for the First Marine Division when it invaded the Solomons. En route the assignment was changed and VMA-251 went to Tontouta, New Caledonia. From there it flew to Espiritu Santo to operate the air base when the fighter strip was ready and to provide air defense for that island.

Shortly after its arrival in New Caledonia Major John H. Hart, then commanding the squadron, was advised by ComAirSoPac that the mission of the squadron would be changed from observation to that of a fighter squadron.

It had been equipped with modified P4F3s for long-range reconnaissance although no wing tanks had been provided, but as fast as planes were assembled the pilots undertook their newly assigned role and learned tactics and gunnery. The photographers flew with Army B-17's engaged in the preliminary reconnaissance and bombardment of the Guadalcanal area. Even after the squadron moved to Espiritu the seventeen photographers flew regularly with the 11th Bombardment Group there until 30 October 1942; although they were more occupied with warding off attacking Zeros than in taking pictures.

Toward the end of July the already depleted squadron (it had started from the States with 27 officers and 272 enlisted men) was further reduced when five of its pilots were ordered by ComAIRSOPac as observers in cruiser SOC's. Great secrecy surrounded this mission and nothing was heard of the pilots until the middle of August 1942 when three of them, Major William R. Campbell, 2d Lieutenant Robert T. Whitten and 2d Lieutenant Roy T. Spurlock, dressed in sailors' dungarees, arrived at Espiritu via APA. They had been aboard the USS ASTORIA at the Battle of Savo Island the night of 8 - 9 August when the Japs sank her and three other cruisers. The other observers, Second Lieutenants Carl I. Schuessler and William P. Kirby, had been in the VINCENNES and were either killed during the action or lost when that cruiser sank.

Meanwhile, the pilots at Tontouta were qualifying in carrier landings and "badly needed gunnery and tactical training". The flight echelon, despite shortage of manpower, transportation difficulties and other coercions of war, with the help of some of Colonel Edson's Raiders still at Noumea, and a B-26 which transported nine mechanics, joined the ground echelon at Espiritu Santo on 10 August. Ten days later the droppable wing tanks which were to have been picked up at Hawaii en route to Samoa arrived. On the same day the forward echelon of MAG-23 flew into Guadalcanal.

There Lieutenant Colonel Charles H. (Fog) Hayes,

executive officer of VMO-251 and First Lieutenant Robert M. Livingston, squadron construction officer, with 140 personnel of CUB-1 had prepared the field for MAG-23, having been ordered to Cactus (code name for Henderson Field) soon after the First Division landed.

VMO-251 at Espiritu might well serve as the prototype of the self-sufficiency of Marine aviation units in the South Pacific. It not only took care of its own requirements and operated the field at Espiritu, but also maintained and serviced Army, Navy, and Marine planes. Squadrons of our sunken or damaged carriers were maintained by VMO-251, survivors of the PRESIDENT COOLIDGE were quartered; transient planes and passengers of VMR-153 were cared for. In addition, the squadron not only operated the local Interceptor Command, and established a Fighter Direction Center, but also installed two radars on Espiritu. The site of the first was 900 feet above sea level, through six miles of jungle. Coconut trees two feet or more in diameter were felled by ax, in lieu of a cross saw, to reach the installation area, after which three 10-ton components of the radar had to be drawn by sledge to the site. Due to the technical skill of Captain Claude H. Welch, Master Technical Sergeant Howard A. Bailey and to the tree-felling ability of Staff Sergeant James J. Cosner, his four-man crew, and the exemplary co-operation of sixteen other enlisted men, within sixteen days of the squadron's arrival at Espiritu the first radar

was installed and operating. VMO-251 then prepared to set up a second radar, this one at Turtle Bay, and turned the one at the Cape over to the Army. To install the second radar 370 coconut palms were pushed over by a CB, at the cost of \$10.00 a tree!

Although VMO-251 did not actually go into Guadalcanal as a unit until 17 January 1943, many of its pilots had served on detached duty at Henderson. They had ferried planes to Cactus and stayed to fight. At various times during October and November Major William R. Campbell, Captains Charles P. Weiland, Thaddeus P. Wojcik, and Carl Longley, First Lieutenants Kenneth J. Kirk, Robert M. Livingston, Joe H. McGlothlin, Roy T. Spurlock and Michael R. Yuncik, and Second Lieutenant Herbert A. Peters went into combat from Henderson. By December most of the original personnel had been dispersed and, with the exception of Majors Joseph N. Renner and William R. Campbell, 1stLt Livingston and 2dLt Peters of the original squadron, an entirely new squadron was formed. Fourteen former SBC-4 pilots joined from VMFB-151 in Buna. Six VMFB-142 pilots and two newly arrived from flight school made up the new organization that went to Henderson Field as a fighter squadron under the command of Major Renner.

From July 1943 until February 1944 the squadron was on the west Coast but on 29 February it set sail for its second overseas tour, arriving at Espiritu Santo again on 9 March 1944.

from there it moved to Green, then to Bougainville where from June until December 1944 it participated in the neutralization of the Bismarcks area. It was the first Marine VF squadron to land at Samar, on 2 January 1945 (1730). While at Samar its designation was changed from an observation to a fighting squadron 31 January 1945 although it had actually been a fighting squadron all the time. It participated in attacks on Ison, Cebu, Negros and Mindanao targets and furnished close air support to Army troops in numerous amphibious landings in the Philippines. During January 1945 two pilots were killed in action and two more were missing in action. The last operation VMF-251 participated in was on 1 May 1945 when twelve Corsairs flew in close support missions for guerrilla troops at Sulpa, Leyte. It was decommissioned 1 June 1945.

The squadron shot down nine planes and received the Presidential Unit Citation for service with the First Marine Aircraft Wing, and a commendation from the Commanding General of the 11th Bombardment Group.

On 15 April 1946 ^{a new} VMF-251 was commissioned as a squadron of the Marine Air Reserve Training Command, attached to the Marine Air Detachment, U. S. Naval Air Station, Grosse Ile, Michigan. Major Ralph G. McCormick assumed command and the following month building up the squadron began.

Forty-six pilots flew 88.4 hours during August. In addition to the regularly assigned personnel a group of sixteen enthusiastic "volunteers" averaged more flight time

than those assigned to the squadron. Squadron expansion and training suffered most from lack of enlisted strength which handicapped the squadron's efficiency as a self-contained unit.

Between 1 October and 31 December 1946 a recruiting drive successfully augmented enlisted personnel strength. At the start of the period there were only nine enlisted men, by the beginning of December enlisted strength totaled 13, but at the end of December 34 enlisted personnel were attached. During the first quarter of calendar 1947 enlisted strength had grown by nearly 400 per cent - 132 had been sworn in by 31 March. This increase is remarkable in that there was no economic necessity to account for so many young men joining the squadron. The average industrial wage in Detroit was \$55.00 a week and the employment level high.

Great credit is due the recruiting campaign directed by Captain Richard Braun. Newspaper publicity, radio "spots", a sound truck that cruised the populated areas and speaking tours at nearby colleges all had helped stimulate interest.

Due to an abundance of volunteer reserves, naval-aviator strength was never a problem because the volunteers had been ready to fill any existent vacancies. Recruiting activities continued during April to June and inquiries came from interested persons within a radius of 150 miles.

Despite the bad weather the squadron flew 1333.8 hours in the first three months of 1947, 211.9 in gunnery, 217

in test flying, 113.4 of familiarization flights, 519 in cross-country, and 467.8 in tactical flying. Training was also devoted to ground school, using movies, lectures, plotting-board problems, mock-ups, link time, GCA and GCI procedure. As of 30 June 1947 squadron strength totaled 216: 52 officers and 164 enlisted.

From 14 - 29 August 1947 33 NA's and 71 enlisted personnel attended the annual Reserve maneuvers at Cherry Point. From 1 July to 30 September the squadron logged nearly 500 hours, exclusive of those hours flown at Cherry Point which amounted to 365.

In addition to the regular recruiting measures, a special series of articles on the maneuvers at Cherry Point were conducted by Detroit, Wyandotte, Dearborn and other papers. Unexpected publicity emanated from Chattanooga, Tennessee, by way of pictures and an article in the Chattanooga TIMES. Detroit radio stations also responded graciously as well as several in Toledo, Ohio.

VMF-251 placed second in the 1949 competition for the Marine Reserve Trophy which was won by VMF-142 stationed at Miami. During the first half of calendar 1950 despite unfavorable weather conditions the squadron flew 1026.9 hours or 63% of the possible hours based upon what is considered ideal conditions -- that each assigned pilot fly six hours per drill.

But on the bleak Sunday of 14 January 1951 when the

PG-ID's were grounded because of cold and low-visibility a telegram was received from Commander, Marine Air Reserve Training directing VMF-251 to prepare for mobilization on 1 March 1951.

VMF-251 remained a Reserve unit of Marine Air Detachment, Naval Air Station, Grosse Ile, Michigan, until 1 March 1951. Until then it continued week-end training, annual two-week maneuvers and carried on the routine functions of a Reserve squadron.

The first day of March was one of feverish activity. There were barracks assignments, physical examinations, and clothing issues which continued far into the night. As though that were not enough to take in one day, it was announced that the "beloved Corsairs would be cast aside" for AD-1's, which evoked meager if any enthusiasm from the pilots.

On 6 March eight pilots left for El Toro to pick up the first AD-1's assigned VMF-251. The first four arrived at Grosse Ile without mishap on 16 March followed by four more which also arrived safely on the twentieth. During the rest of March and the first two weeks in April the squadron was occupied with familiarization in AD-1's, and normal working and training routine preparatory to the transfer to El Toro where it would be stationed.

The first echelon of 33 officers and 48 enlisted men departed for El Toro by privately owned transportation; the AD's took off at 1000 on 20 April and at 0500 Monday the twenty-third 5 officers and 122 enlisted were airlifted

to El Toro in six R5C's from Cherry Point. All echelons had arrived by the end of that Monday afternoon.

By 25 April VMA-251 redesignated thus 20 April was shaken down at El Toro and morale was high. So was enthusiasm for the AD-1 which by now had convinced the pilots that it was perfect for close support. However, the pleasure ever having been kept intact as a unit was somewhat dimmed on 3 May when 15 enlisted men were drafted for overseas duty. On 3 June the squadron left for the Naval Auxiliary Air Station at El Centro for two weeks' ordnance training and to participate in Operation Log One Able, and returned 16 June to El Toro.

VMA-251 is presently on duty at El Toro fulfilling training requirements. Some officers and men were on TAD in February 1953 qualifying for carrier operations; others were at the Naval Amphibious Base under instructions in tactical air support. Close air support problems were worked on at Pendleton, and intensive training in the ubiquitous and versatile F4U-4 was received by 24 officers and 95 enlisted men at NAAS, El Centro during February. Later that month the enlisted men of the squadron were detached for instructions in the maintenance of the AD. By the end of March all NA's and NAP's of the squadron were receiving combat training in AD's.

What the future holds for VMA-251 one cannot say but wherever it may serve it will keep the traditions and live up to the standards set by its predecessor at Espirita Santo, Guadalcanal, Bougainville, and Samar.

The following officers have commanded VMA-251:

Capt Elliott E. Bard	1Dec41 - 11Dec41
Maj John N. Hart	12Dec41 - 29Oct42
LtCol Charles H. Hayes	30Oct42 - 30Nov42
Capt Ralph R. Yeaman	1Dec42 - 7Dec42
Maj William R. Campbell	8Dec42 - 10Dec42
Maj Joseph N. Renner	11Dec42 - 12Mar43
Capt Claude H. Welch	13Mar43 - 21Apr43
Capt Michael E. YuncK	22May43 - 31Jun43
Maj Carl M. Longley	4Jun43 - 31Oct43
Capt Robert W. Teller	1Nov43 - 5Nov43
Maj William C. Humbert	6Nov43 - 9Feb45
Maj William L. Bachelor	10Feb45 - 14Apr45
Maj Thomas W. Furlow	16Apr45 - 20May45
1stLt Glen "F" Keithley	21May45 - 10Jun45
Maj Ralph G. McCormick	1Jul45 - 30Nov46
Maj William . Carlton	1Dec46 - 31Dec50
Maj Donald P. Troyer	1Jan51 - 27Feb51
Capt Earl C. Miles	27Feb51 - 27Apr51
LtCol Gregory J. Weissenberger	27Apr51 - 15May51
LtCol Philip "L" Crawford	15May51 - 31Dec52
LtCol Joe L. Warren	1Jan52 - 3Jan52
LtCol Arthur M. Moran	4Jan52 - 31May52
Maj Clarence H. Moore	1Jun52 - 7Nov52
LtCol S. H. Whitten	8Nov52 - 13Feb53
LtCol Harold A. Harwood	14Feb53 - presently

Prepared by:

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