

THE A-4 EVER

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- Last of the Marine Corps' Red-Hot Scooters
- Case of the Skyhawk with Two Rudders
- Captain Royce Williams Upgraded to Navy Cross Medal

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Spring 2023

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 (1939-2007)
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• Spring 2023 •

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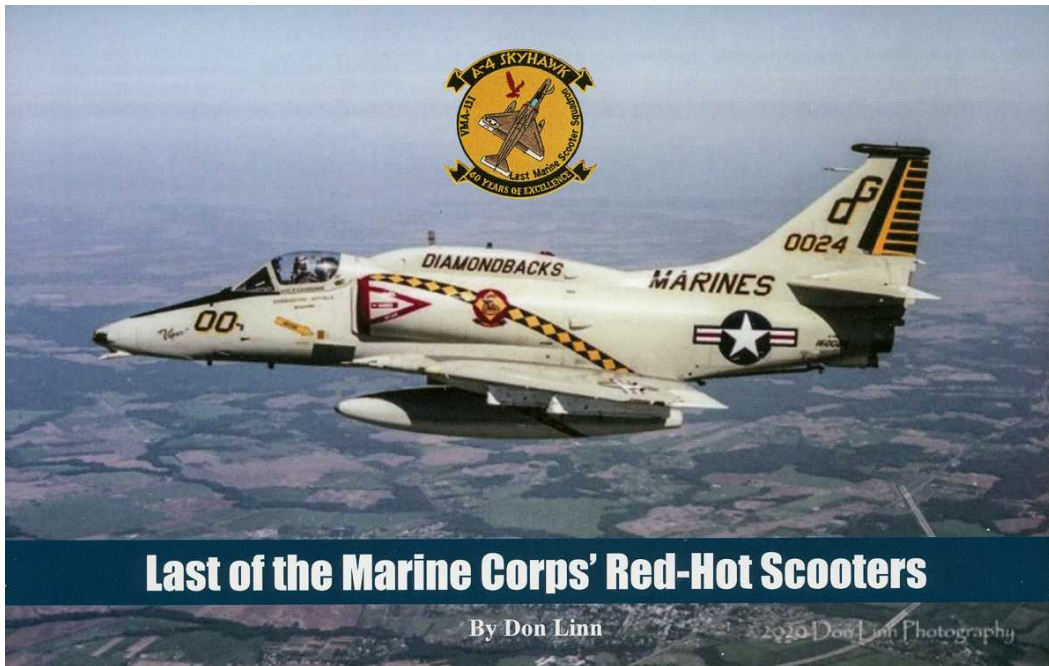


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Contributions

We actively seek contributions from members, including news, photos, historical documents, anecdotes and other items of interest. Submissions may be edited due to space limitations in the magazine. Contributions may be emailed to the Journal Editor at sa-journal-editor@skyhawk.net. Stephanie Davis, graphics, msleefi@gmail.com. Paper issues printed by Acculink, Greenville, NC.

On the Cover: Photo by Don Linn - The purpose of the flight was to support a feature story, "Skyhawk Salute," for Air Combat magazine. A-4M, 160024, in the special paint scheme to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the A-4, and for the deactivation of VMA-131, as a key feature for the story. The squadron was based at NASJRB Willow Grove from 1971 until 1998. Flying the A-4M was VMA-131 CO LtCol. George "Eagle" Lake and the F-18 was flown by MAG-49 commander Col. Vic "Clam" Simpson, the backseat passenger is unknown. Maj. Ken "Junior" Waidelich was flying the TA-4J photo bird with me in the backseat. The date was 14 July 1994, the location was off the NJ coast near Atlantic City.



Last of the Marine Corps' Red-Hot Scooters

By Don Linn

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Sunday, August 7, 1994, was a warm, pleasant summer day at NAS Willow Grove as a crowd of Marines and guests gathered on the VMA-131 flightline to witness the close of a chapter in Marine Corps' aviation history. Suddenly, after much anticipation, to their left, a four-ship formation of A-4M Skyhawks appeared over runway 33 in a low pass. In the lead was a special Skyhawk painted in an anniversary scheme to commemorate the Skyhawks' 40th anniversary. LtCol George "Eagle" Lake, CO, was leading the flight, bringing his A-4Ms home for the last time. The Skyhawks continued down the full length of the runway in a final salute to the Diamondbacks' thirty-two years of flying Skyhawks and the end of service for the Marine Corps' legendary Skyhawks. VMA-131 was deactivated shortly after and the squadron's remaining Skyhawks were bound for the boneyard.

As Lake continued his flight to the landing pattern, the 4th MAW Band began to play. The Skyhawks "broke"

and entered the downwind in preparation for landing. Lake was last to touch down. Waiting at the entrance to the squadron ramp were two of the air station's fire trucks, parked facing each other but leaving sufficient distance for the A-4s to pass between as they taxied in. As Lake passed between them, the fire trucks opened their water cannons, fixed on the top of their trucks, to form an arch of water that rained down on his aircraft. Thus, began the customary "wetting-down" ceremony reserved for pilots making their last flight.

Simultaneously, a lone firefighter opened his water hose, also wetting down the remaining squadron pilots in formation, while the Marine Corps Band continued to play. Then, it was over. The Marines' last A-4 squadron had officially retired and the Skyhawk's 40 years of service with the Marine Corps ended.

Among the many officials, pilots and ground crews taking part in the ceremony was guest of honor, Douglas test pilot, Bob Rahn. He flew the

prototype XA4D-1 on its first flight on 22 June, 1952 and directly worked with Skyhawk designer Ed Heinemann to refine the Skyhawk's design. It was fitting that the man who was there at the beginning was also witness to the final flight of the last Marine Corps' Skyhawk. When asked about the Skyhawk's beginning, he recalled, "*I distinctly remember the first time I saw the mock-up of the A-4. I didn't think I was going to fit in that cockpit. I was six-one and weighted about 200 pounds then, and the first thing I did was climb in the cockpit to see if I fit.*"

The A-4's cockpit is small and for pilots Rahn's size it was always a snug fit. Upon entering the cockpit for the first time he remarked his shoulders were right up against the side rails. The same was still true when Rahn climbed into the anniversary Skyhawk, side number 00 (Double Nuts), during his visit with VMA-131 that day. The XA4D-1's first flight lasted about 40 minutes and according to Rahn, "*It was basically uneventful. All we did was*



Current and past squadron members pose for a group photo for the last time in front of the Anniversary Skyhawk on 7 August 1994. Douglas test pilot Bob Rahn is standing in the center wearing a white shirt and tie glasses. The Tailhook plaque reads, *Anytime Anywhere, VMA-131*.

take it up to 10,000 feet. A lot of guys wouldn't raise the landing gear on the first flight, but I did. I had enough confidence in the aircraft." Continuing, he added, "First, I climbed to 10,000 and checked out the stability with the gear down and flaps down. I did this in case I had an emergency where I had to land right away. I would at least know about stability, control and landing qualities and approach speeds. Everything seemed OK, so I raised the gear and increased airspeed to 250."

So marked the beginning of the Skyhawk's long service life. Rahn's career spanned well over four decades. He continued working with Heinemann on the flight-test program until 1956 when Douglas assigned him to the F5D Skylancer project. "I would occasionally fly the Skyhawk, but I was no longer the primary pilot," he added. Sadly, Bob Rahn died just a short three years after this ceremony on 18 May, 1997 at age 77. He will be forever linked in aviation history to this legendary airplane.

continued...



Douglas test pilot, Bob Rahn.

"Gone but Not Forgotten"

Throughout its service, the A-4 Skyhawk was an important asset in Marine Corps aviation. It served well in both war and peacetime. Following the stand-down ceremony on 7 August, 1994, all but two of the squadron's remaining A-4Ms were eventually retired to the infamous "Boneyard" at Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona, or selected for sale to foreign air arms. The Diamondbacks' "Double Nuts" and "Zero One" (side number 01) were saved from the desert sun and are now permanent reminders of the Skyhawk's Marine Corps service. "01" is displayed at the Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum located at Biddle Air National Guard Station, the former NAS Willow Grove, and "Double Nuts" is displayed in a park near New Bern, apparently lacking in care.

The beginning of the end of the Skyhawk saga came in 1989 when the "Wake Avengers" of Marine Attack

Squadron 211 transferred their A-4Ms to the reserves of the 4th MAW and began their transition to the new AV-8B (NA), Night-Attack, Harriers. The "Avengers" represented the last active-duty Marine unit to fly the A-4, and when they gave up the Skyhawks, just four Marine Reserve squadrons were left as USMC operators. When Marine Reserve Squadron, VMA-322, based at NAS South Weymouth, Massachusetts, disestablished on 27 June 1992, it left VMA-131 as the sole Marine Corps Skyhawk squadron.

It seemed fitting, too, that VMA-131 had the honor of flying Marine Corps A-4s into retirement. The squadron flew several different Skyhawk variants since being based at NAS Floyd Bennett Field, Brooklyn, New York, in 1968. The unit's first Skyhawk during that time was the A-4B. Ten years later it transferred to NAS Willow Grove to form the nucleus of Marine

Air Group-49 (MAG-49) and subsequently transitioned to A-4Es. At that time, VMA-131 adopted the striking paint scheme superbly duplicated on the Marines' last Skyhawk flown by Lt. Col. Lake during the 1994 stand-down ceremony. The Diamondbacks later traded their A-4Es for the A-4Ms which they flew to retirement.

When it was clear the squadron would phase out the A-4, unit personnel assumed they would receive new aircraft, perhaps the F/A-18 Hornet, or even the AV-8B Harrier. There was even suggestion they might receive helicopters. Unfortunately, new aircraft did not materialize. Reduced military budgets and force structure downsizing meant disestablishment of the unit. Nonetheless, VMA-131 was determined to secure a place in aviation history, both for itself and the A-4 Skyhawk, by giving the venerable aircraft a proper retirement. It was a great sendoff.

Capt Jon Bertagna in Diamondbacks' A-4E 150001 in their colorful pre-1980s paint scheme, flying on LtCol Brooks Dyer, CO, in A-4E, 150121, with inert MK 82 Snakeyes, enroute to the Navy's Bloodsworth Island Range, on a 1981 training flight, with Maj Jack Rice, flying the photo TA-4F, with Don Linn.



“Double Nuts”

Ed Miranda, retired Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt), who spent his 20-year career with the Marines maintaining A-4s, was instrumental in securing permission to apply a special paint scheme to commemorate both the Skyhawk’s 40th anniversary and its retirement. The two events came close to falling on the same day. Assisted by squadron volunteers and with approval of squadron commander LtCol Lake, he and his small group of volunteers repainted A-4M, 160024, in the special scheme illustrated in this article.

The task was accomplished over a period of months because the A-4 was still operational at the time. The standard grey low viz camouflage was replaced with new markings to represent the squadron’s colorful markings from the early 1980s. Striking in appearance, the scheme comprises an overall gloss gull grey and white scheme, standard for the period, with a black-and-yellow

“Diamondbacks” chevron across the fuselage, and black and yellow rudder stripes. Local artist Gary Campbell volunteered his time and artistic talent to complete the work by applying a hand-painted squadron crest on the left side in the center of the chevron and a special anniversary crest on the right side. Naturally, the “Double Nuts” side number was applied to the nose that identified it as the commander’s aircraft and proudly flown by LtCol Lake on training hops. He and others were careful to maintain the flawless paint scheme during operational sorties wearing shoe covers to protect the finish.

Miranda, Campbell and the squadron volunteers did a superb job in recreating the 1980s anniversary scheme. Making the task more difficult, it was accomplished between regularly scheduled training sorties. They also succeeded in the daunting task of keeping the Skyhawk in pristine appearance during

the unit’s annual two-week training deployment to MCAS Yuma where the Skyhawk flew concentrated weapons training sorties. Taking extra precautions, the crew chief and maintainers even wore covers on their boots when servicing the aircraft. There was evident pride in their charge.

However, the surprising end of the story of A-4M, 160024, was the difficulty in getting the Marine Corps Museum at MCAS Cherry Point to accept the Skyhawk for permanent display. Reportedly, no money was available to put “Double Nuts” on display and maintain it. Temporarily, it was accepted at Cherry Point for display outdoors, but funding ran out after several months and it was moved to a hangar awaiting its final disposition. Since that time, the Skyhawk has moved, as previously noted and is now at a park in New Bern, NC lacking the care it deserves.

continued.



“Zero One”



In the second part of this story another VMA-131 A-4M, 158182, was restored by the same team of Ed Miranda, Gary Campbell and joined by John Benton, a retired naval aviation electronics technician and at the time curator of the Willow Grove Aviation Museum, famous for its display of captured WW2 aircraft. In recent years the Air and Space Museum and the Naval Aviation Museum at Pensacola have claimed many of the exhibits, although some of the display aircraft have been replaced with other donated historic aircraft. The group initially sought permission to obtain an A-4M that was badly damaged by a bird strike during a 1984 training flight. The pilot, Major Jim “Crash” Wright skillfully brought the Skyhawk home to Willow Grove with half its tail missing. The aircraft was written off and donated to the base fire department for practice firefighting

drills. Before it was destroyed by the fire department, Benton asked permission to restore the Skyhawk for the museum’s collection. Working closely with Miranda and Campbell, this second “Mike” was cosmetically restored and repainted in the same scheme as “Double Nuts” with a few differences.

Gary Campbell recreated a caricature of famed WW2 Marine pilot Butch O’Hare using a photograph of O’Hare as his model. The likeness is accurate and very well done. On the right fuselage he has painted a Grumman TBF Avenger as a tribute to the squadron’s WW2 service when the unit was VMSB-131 on Guadalcanal, with the image of O’Hare superimposed over it. Of course, O’Hare was a Grumman Wildcat pilot, but was still a suitable choice. On the left side is the squadron’s distinctive squadron crest. Both details applied to a black and yellow

Diamondback fuselage chevron, like “Double Nuts.” Today, this A-4M and other beautifully restored aircraft are on static display in Willow Grove at the Harold F. Pitcairn Wings of Freedom Aviation Museum.

Postscript

VMA-131 continued without aircraft until 5 December 1998 when the squadron was officially disestablished. On that unseasonably warm fall day, at 15:30 hours, the squadron colors were cased (retired), and members stood their last roll call and offered their final salute. However, “Double Nuts” and “Zero One” remain as poignant reminders of the proud history of Marine Attack Squadron 131.

Except for the Douglas Aircraft Bob Rahn photo, all pictures are from the author. Editor