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## LAST OF THE MARINE CORPS' RED-HOT SCOOTERS

Report and photos  
by Don Linn

"Willow Grove tower, Viper Zero One."

"Viper Zero One, this is Willow Grove tower."

"Viper Zero One is 10 miles east of the field with a flight of four A-4 'Mikes.' Request permission for initial, low-pass, depart and re-enter for landing."

"Permission approved, Viper Zero One. Continue on runway heading, maintain pattern altitude; turn left at the numbers for downwind."

In the cockpit of "Viper Zero One" on that warm summer day on 7 August 1994 was Lt. Col. George Lake. As squadron commander of the VMA-131 'Diamondbacks,' the only Marine Corps unit then still flying the Skyhawk, Lake was bringing home his flight of A-4Ms to NAS Willow Grove for the very last time.

Lake formed the Skyhawks into a diamond formation and continued at the prescribed altitude down the length of the runway. Below, on the squadron ramp, the 4th Marine Air Wing (MAW) band began to play as the aircraft passed overhead. Then the Skyhawks separated and entered their downwind legs in preparation for their last official landing. Lake was last to touch down.

Waiting at the entrance to the ramp were two of the air station's fire trucks, parked facing each other but leaving sufficient distance for the A-4s to pass through as they taxied in. As Lake passed between them, the two trucks opened up their water cannons to form an arch of water that rained down on his aircraft, and so began the customary wetting-down ceremony reserved for pilots completing their last flight.

Simultaneously, two firefighters on the ground opened up with their water hoses, wetting down the remaining pilots standing at attention while the Marine Corps band continued to play. Then it was over; the Marine's last A-4 squadron had officially retired and the Skyhawk's 40 years with the

service had ended.

Among the many officials, pilots and ground crews taking part in the ceremony was Bob Rahn, guest of honor and the first man to fly the A-4. Test pilot Rahn provided a direct link to the Skyhawk's past. He flew XA4D-1 on its first flight on 22 June 1954, and worked directly with Douglas chief designer Ed Heinemann to refine the Skyhawk's design. It was fitting that the man who had been there at the beginning was also witness to the final flight of the last Marine Skyhawk.

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 weighed 200 pounds then, and the first thing I did was climb in the cockpit to see if I would fit.*

The A-4's cockpit is small and, for pilots of Rahn's size, was always a tight fit. Upon entering the cockpit for the first time he remarked that his shoulders were right up against the side rails. The same was still true when Rahn climbed into Modex/nose number 00 ("Double Nuts") during his visit



to VMA-131 on that August day.

The Skyhawk's first flight lasted about 40 minutes, according to Rahn: *It was basically uneventful. All we did was take it up to 10,000 feet. A lot of guys won't raise their landing gear on the first flight, but I did. I had enough confidence in the aircraft.* He added: *First, I climbed up 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 a little about stability, control and handling qualities and approach speeds. Everything seemed OK, so I raised the gear and*

*increased airspeed to 250.*

So marked the beginning of a service career that has 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 A-4, but I was no longer the primary pilot,* he added.

Sadly, Bob Rahn died on 18 May 1997, at age 77. He will be forever linked in aviation history with this great airplane.

below: **For the retirement ceremony, this representation of VMA-131's squadron patch, along with fuselage chevrons, was applied to the left side of the commander's aircraft by artist Gary Campbell.**

below, left: **In 1994, the same artist painted this "hawk" badge on the right side of BuNo 160024 to commemorate the Skyhawk's 40th anniversary.**



### Gone but Not Forgotten

Throughout its service life, 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, all but two of the squadron's remaining A-4Ms were 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" (Modex 01) were saved from the desert sun and are now permanent reminders of the Skyhawk's Marine Corps service.

The beginning of the end came in 1989 when the 'Wake Island Avengers' of Marine Attack Squadron VMA-211 transferred their A-4Ms to the reserves of the 4th MAW,

to begin transitioning to AV-8B Night-Attack Harriers. The 'Avengers' represented the last active-duty Marine unit to fly the A-4 and, when they gave up their Skyhawks, just four Marine Reserve squadrons were left as USMC operators. When Marine Reserve Squadron VMA-322, based at NAS South Weymouth, Massachusetts, decommissioned in 1994, it left VMA-131 as the sole Marine operator.

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 mount was the A-4C. 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 this time, the VMA-131 adopted the striking paint scheme so superbly duplicated on the last Marine Corps Skyhawk flown at the 1994 stand-down ceremony. The 'Diamondbacks' subsequently traded their A-4Es for A-4Ms and flew the "Mike" until retirement.

When it was clear the squadron would phase out its A-4s, unit personnel assumed they would receive new aircraft, perhaps the F/A-18 or even the AV-8B Harrier. There was even a suggestion they might receive helicopters. Unfortunately, new aircraft did not materialize. Reduced military budgets and force structure downsizing meant disestablish-

opposite page: **Having departed NAS Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, the last Marine Corps Skyhawk to fly in Marine Corps service, accompanied by an F/A-18B Hornet from VMFA-321, climbs to altitude en route to the Military Operating Area (MOA) located off the southern New Jersey coast.**

opposite page, inset: **This special patch was created as the unit's tribute to the 40th anniversary of the Douglas A-4 Skyhawk.**

below: **With squadron commander Lt. Col. George Lake at the controls, Modex 00 ("Double Nuts") is seen during a training flight off the New Jersey coast in June 1994.**







left: "Double Nuts" leads another A-4M Skyhawk from VMA-131 and a TF-188 Hornet from VMFA-321 on a flight over New Jersey farmlands. Before the 'Diamondbacks' were disestablished both units were part of Marine Air Group 49 (MAG-49) of the 4th Marine Air Wing (4th MAW).

below: After landing his A-4M Skyhawk on 7 August 1994, Col. George Lake (left) greets former Skyhawk test pilot Bob Rahn. The occasion was the last official US Marine Corps flight of an A-4. Rahn was at the controls when the type took to the air for the very first time on 22 June 1954.

ment of the unit instead. 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.

### "Double Nuts"

Ed Miranda, a 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 came close to falling on the same day. Assisted by squadron volunteers, and with the approval of squadron commander Lt. Col. George "Eagle" Lake, he repainted A-4M, BuNo 160024, in the special scheme illustrated.

The task was accomplished over a period of some months, because the A-4 was still operational at the time. The markings were those originally adopted by the squadron in the early 1980s. Striking in appearance, the scheme comprises an overall gull gray and white, with a black-and-yellow 'Diamondbacks' chevron across the fuselage and black and yellow tail stripes. Local artist Gary Campbell volunteered his time to complete the work by applying a hand-painted squadron crest on the left side of the fuselage and a special anniversary crest on the right side.

Naturally, the "Double Nuts" nose number that identified it as the squadron commander's aircraft was also applied and proudly flown by Lt. Col. Lake on training hops. He was careful to maintain the flawless paint scheme during operational sorties.

Miranda, Campbell and the squadron volunteers did a superb job in recreating the 1980s anniversary scheme between regularly scheduled training sorties, and also succeeded in the daunting task of keeping the Skyhawk in pristine appearance during the unit's annual two-week training stint at MCAS Yuma. Taking extra precautions, the crew chief even wore covers on his boots when servicing the aircraft.

However, the surprising end to the story of A-4M, BuNo 160024, was the difficulty in getting the Marine Corps Museum at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, to accept the aircraft for permanent display. Reportedly, no money was available to put "Double Nuts" on static display and maintain it. Temporarily, it was accepted at Cherry Point for display outdoors, but funding ran out after several months. The Skyhawk now sits in a hangar with other museum aircraft awaiting final disposition.

### "Zero One"

In the second part of this story, another VMA-131 A-4M (BuNo 158182) was restored by Ed Miranda, Gary Campbell and John Benton, a retired naval aviation electronics technician and curator of the Willow Grove Aviation Museum that is famous for its display of captured World War II aircraft. In recent years, the Air and Space Museum and the Naval Aviation Museum at Pensacola have claimed many of the exhibits, although some have been replaced with other donated aircraft. In fact, Willow Grove's displayed inventory has grown to the point where another site is being planned.

The group initially sought permission to obtain an A-4M badly damaged by a bird strike during a training flight in 1994. The pilot,

Maj. Jim "Crash" Wright, skillfully brought the Skyhawk home with half its tail missing. The aircraft was written off and donated to the base fire department for practice drills. Before it had been destroyed totally, Benton was granted permission to restore it for the museum's collection. Working closely with Miranda and Campbell, this second "Mike" has been restored and repainted in the same scheme as "Double Nuts," with a few differences.

Gary Campbell has recreated a caricature of a World War II Marine aviator using a photograph of Butch O'Hare as his model. On the right fuselage he has painted a Grumman TBM Avenger superimposed over the Marine aviator, as a dedication to the squadron's wartime mount. On the left side he has recreated the squadron's distinctive 'Diamondbacks' squadron patch.

Today, this A-4M and other beautifully restored historic military aircraft are on static display at NAS Willow Grove. Maintained by the volunteers of the Delaware Valley Aviation Historical Society, the museum is free and open to the public.

VMA-131 continued without aircraft until 5 December 1998, when the squadron officially decommissioned. On that unseasonably warm fall day, at 1530 hours, the squadron colors were "cased" for the last time, and members stood their last roll call and offered their final salute. However, "Double Nuts" and "Zero One" live on as poignant reminders of the proud history of Marine Attack Squadron 131.

#### Acknowledgements:

The author wishes to extend special thanks to Ed Miranda for his help and guidance, John Benton and Gary Campbell, as well as VMA-131 for their support and friendship over the years. Good Luck!

#### Recommended reading:

*Tempting Fate*, Bob Rahn and Zip Rausa, Specialty Press.  
*Douglas A-4 Skyhawk*, Peter Kilduff, Osprey Publishing Ltd.

#### Website:

*Skyhawk Association*. [www.skyhawk.com](http://www.skyhawk.com)



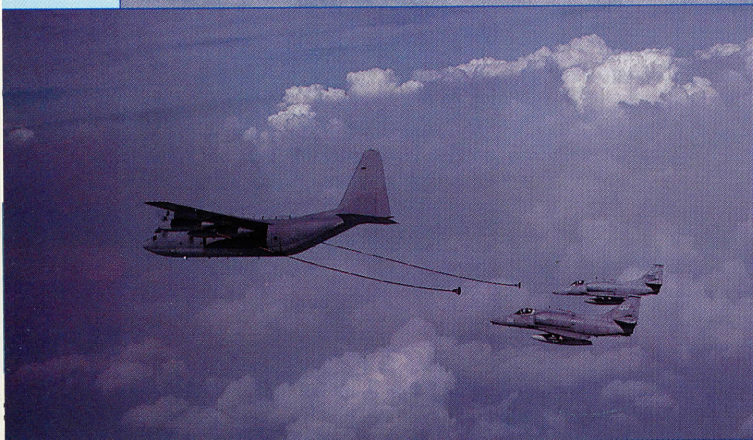


# DIAMONDBACKS

## 20-year retrospective

Photos by Don Linn

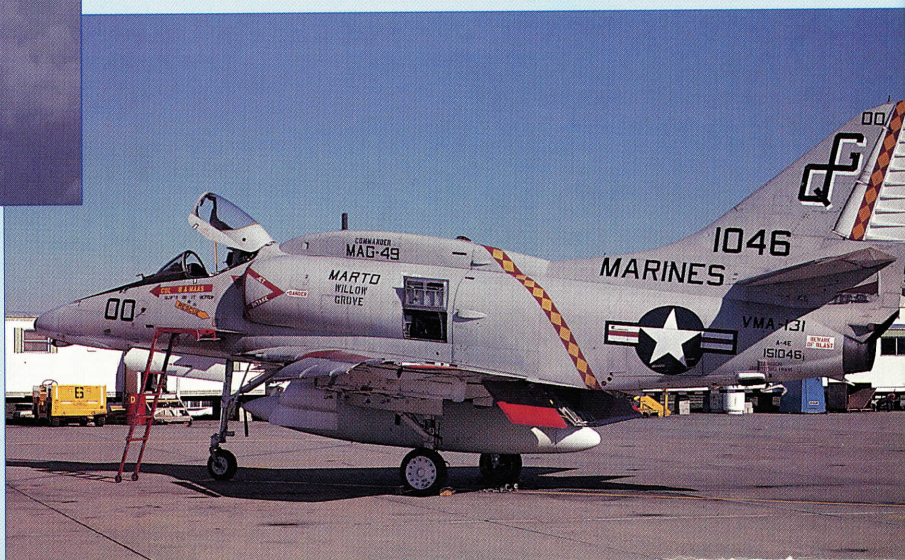
right: VMA-131 had the distinction of being the last Marine Corps unit to operate the A-4 Skyhawk. As described in the previous pages, this 1980s-style paint scheme was applied to the commander's aircraft to commemorate the last official flight on 7 August 1994.



above: Two A-4Ms "plug" for fuel from a KC-130 belonging to VMGR-252 in July 1992.

right: Without a doubt the most colorful period for naval aircraft was the 1970s. This A-4E, in service in November 1977 with VMA-131 at NAS Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, is no exception. Bearing Modex "00," this aircraft was assigned to MAG-49 commander Col. B. A. Maas.

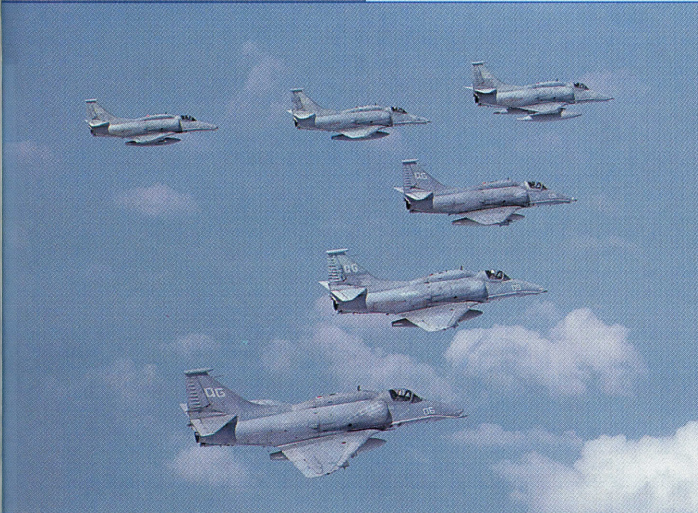
above: During 1981, the US Navy and US Marine Corps began to apply low-viz gray camouflage to their aircraft. It marked the beginning of the end for striking naval colors. In the lead position, piloting an A-4E, is Col. Bruce Martin making his last flight as commander of MAG-49.







above: When photographed on 15 May 1977, black rudder stripes had just been added to this A-4E. The "Echo" was the fourth Skyhawk variant to enter naval service, flying for the first time on 12 July 1961.



top: One of two TA-4Fs assigned to Headquarters and Maintenance Squadron (H&MS), and flown by VMA-131 pilots during 1977.

above: Unusual to see back in 1991, this six-ship formation of A-4Ms is flying north out of NAS Willow Grove, led by the squadron commander, Lt. Col. F. A. Feltenberger.



above: By October 1988, VMA-131 had completed its transition to the A-4M Skyhawk. The aircraft were handed down from active-duty USMC units then being re-equipped with AV-8B Harriers.



left: With the end of the Skyhawk era just a few weeks off, these A-4Ms go through final checks prior to a training mission in June 1994.