

LAUNCH¹

WHAT DO YOU MEAN,
IT'S JUST A RAG?

by Douglas D. Olson

Did you know VF-121 has made five cruises to the Far East, two of them combat deployments during the Korean War? Did you know VF-121 has two *MiG* kills [later raised to 3 confirmed and 2 possible] to its credit? Few people are aware of these early activities of the west coast F-4 replacement training squadron during its first decade of existence as a fleet unit.

The squadron had its beginning officially on 1 July 1946 with the inception of the Naval Air Reserve Training Program and was located at NAS Los Alamitos near Los Angeles. The worth of these Ready Reserve units became apparent four years later when the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel to invade South Korea in late June of 1950.

Established as VF-781, the squadron flew F6F-5s and was at full strength, both officer and enlisted ranks, by 1950. Shortly after the beginning of hostilities VF-781, commanded by LCDR Collin I. Oveland, became the first Navy Reserve Unit to volunteer 100% for active duty. This step earned them the nickname of *Pacemakers* which they still carry to this day.

[LCDR Oveland was skipper of VF-781 through the first Korean Cruise attached to CVG-102 aboard the USS Bon Homme Richard, 1950-1951; LCDR Stan Holm was skipper of VF-781 on its 2nd Korean tour attached to CVG-102 aboard the USS Oriskany, 1951-1952. VF-781 was redesignated VF-121 and CVG-102 redesignated CVG-12 on 11 November 1953.]

On 20 July 1950, VF-781 was called to active duty at NAS North Island where, along with three other fighter and one attack squadrons [VF-783, NAS Los Alamitos; VF-873 and VF-874, NAS Oakland; VA-923, NAS Olathe; (VF-873 was transferred to CVG-101 in November, 1950)], they became a part of the newly formed CVG-102, comprised entirely of recalled reserve squadrons from across the country. The squadron transitioned to F4U-4 *Corsairs*, but they quickly gave way to jets and by the end of the year they had nearly completed the change to Grumman F9F-2 *Panthers* [CVG-102 was now based at NAS Miramar (formerly MCAS Miramar)].

The *Panthers* brought some new problems to LCDR Oveland, who was trying to get his squadron combat-ready while transitioning from *Hellcats* to *Corsairs* and now jet *Panthers*, all in less than six months.

North Island had become overcrowded with new squadrons brought in for the Korean build-up. Refueling services were limited and gas-guzzling jets were getting more ground turnaround time than flight time. Skipper Oveland, using resourcefulness

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acquired through his experience as a fighter pilot in WWII, began looking for a quick solution. What he found was at NAAS Miramar, 20 miles north, and at that time virtually uninhabited for its size. The ex-major Marine Corps facility's population consisted of two utility and one photo squadron [VC-61], as well as a helo outfit and a VP detachment; there was room to spare.

After a hard-sell program to the AirPac training officer, which included a dollar bet that he could move his squadron in one day and have them flying at 0800 the following morning. Oveland received permission to move. Not only were the Pacemakers moved in one day, they launched a division of four aircraft from Miramar the same afternoon for a training mission. Oveland collected his dollar.

With their move to Miramar in January 1951, the Pacemakers can lay claim to being the first U.S. Navy fighter squadron assigned to what is now the Navy's west coast master jet fighter station. However, this move was almost the undoing of the squadron when on 9 January, two aircraft flamed out and made forced landings, one reaching the runway but damaged during landing [LT Homer Davis] and the second plane going into the brush and rocks short of the runway [ENS Jack Dewenter]. Fortunately both pilots escaped unharmed.

Fuel pump seizure was determined to be the cause of both accidents and the trouble was quickly pinned down to *coral dust* in the fuel system causing the pumps to seize. It didn't take long to figure out that the problem was coming from the fuel trucks which had been stored in a pool at Miramar for several years. However, their previous tours of duty were in the Pacific islands, thus the coral dust. The dust didn't bother the recip engines of the other guys, but the fine tolerance of the *Panther* fuel pumps couldn't handle it.

Suddenly the too-good-to-be-true Miramar was unusable, and after only three weeks the Pacemakers were moving again, this time 100 miles east to NAAS El Centro.

By 10 May 1951, VF-781 had been molded into an effective combat unit and together with other squadrons of CVG-102 departed North Island in *USS Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31) for the war zone in Korea. Operating with *Task Force 77* aboard the *Bonnie Dick* the *Pacemakers* participated in five combat line periods and completed 1,925 combat sorties without the loss of a single man.

Following their return to San Diego 17 December 1951, the *Pacemakers* moved back to Miramar along with the entire air group where they began a cycle of work-ups for their next deployment. Most of the "old timers" departed leaving an almost new organization to emerge as LCDR S[tan] R. Holm took over the reins of the squadron in 1952. By July, VF-781 had partially completed its change to F9F-5 *Panthers* [first operational squadron to have the new F9F-5s] and beginning 24 July they participated in *Operation Signpost*, a five-day simulated defense alert of the San Diego-Los Angeles area in conjunction with the USAF 27th *Air Division*. During this exercise the *Pacemakers* maintained an average "scramble" time of three and one-half minutes while the average "turn around" time was eighteen and one-half minutes.

Carrier qualifications began 12 August aboard *USS Oriskany* (CV-34), which was newly arrived from the east coast [after its initial tour in the Med]. A minimum of 16 landings for new pilots and 8 for those on their second tour [LTJGs Jerry McCabe and Lou Ives] was required as CarQuals ended just 9 days before deployment.

With training activities completed, VF-781's 15 new F9F-5 aircraft were hoisted aboard *Oriskany* which departed North Island 15 September 1952 with CVG-102. For administrative purposes Detachment George of VC-61, flying three F2H-P [photo] *Banshees* was attached to the squadron during this tour. Thrust into action 1 November, it wasn't long before the *Pacemakers* had an opportunity to give the F9F-5 its first taste of aerial combat. While flying combat air patrol [CAP] above Task Force 77 on 18 November, LT Elmer (Royce) Williams and a wingman were attacked from the ten o'clock position by a strung out formation of four *MiG-15s*.

"As the four came toward us," said LT Williams, "and reached firing range, I turned hard left into them, spoiling the effectiveness of their run. I continued my wrapped-up turn and came on around for a tail shot at the last *MiG*. I commenced firing from 15 degrees off his tail. My first burst sent him into an uncontrolled spiral. Dave Rowlands followed this crippled *MiG* down to 8,000 feet where he left it smoking in a deep graveyard spiral. Later, gun camera film confirmed the kill of this *MiG*."

As Rowlands rejoined the flight from below, a *MiG* promptly made a head-on attack on him. The dogfight became a melee as three other *MiGs* joined the battle. To this time, neither *Panther* had suffered a hit. Both Williams and Rowlands were operating their engines at 100% power.

A third *Panther* flown by LTJG John Middleton climbed to join the fracas as William's plane was struck by a cannon shell which severed the rudder control and forced his hasty departure in a dive to clouds at a lower altitude. A *MiG* attacked Middleton, but his shots missed. The *MiG* reversed its course and Middleton came into a position for a full-deflection shot which hit home as the *MiGs*'s superior speed left his *Panther* trailing behind. Middleton saw the enemy pilot bail out and the *MiG* crashed into the sea. All three pilots then returned safely to *Oriskany*.

The Task Force had been operating just 90 miles from Vladivostok and with radar tracking the aircraft as they approached from that direction, there was little doubt these were Russian *MiGs*. VF-781 had successfully knocked down two of them and damaged a third in this dramatic encounter.

Shortly after this encounter, on 4 February 1953, the squadron became a full-fledged member of the Pacific fleet when it was redesignated VF-121 and the reserve CVG-102 became CVG-12. Following two more line periods *Oriskany* departed the war zone for home and arrived at San Diego 18 May 1953.

Once again the *Pacemakers* went through the succession of work-ups in preparation for their first peacetime cruise, but this time they had the new swept-wing F9F-6 *Cougar*. Under the command of CDR J.E. Savage, VF-121 deployed with CVG-12 in *USS Boxer* (CVA-21) from North Island 3 March 1954. Intensive training operations with the *Seventh Fleet* seemed routine after the previous two combat cruises before the air group and carrier returned to San Diego 11 October 1954.

With their new skipper, CDR Dusty Rhodes, former leader of the Blue Angels flight demonstration team, as one of only four pilots with previous operational jet experience, the squadron began preparations for its fourth deployment. Again the squadron worked-up with a new airplane, F9F-8 *Cougars* which featured a bright red nose paint scheme.

This cruise in USS *Hancock* (CVA-19) involved training operations with the *Seventh Fleet* and lasted from 10 August 1955 to 16 March 1956.

The string of Grumman fighters was broken in 1956 as VF-121, under the leadership of CDR T.S. Sedaker, transitioned to the North American FJ-3M *Fury*. This turned out to be the last cruise for both the *Pacemakers* and CVG-12 as they departed North Island in USS *Lexington* (CVA-16), 19 April 1957 for *Seventh Fleet* Operations in the Far East. The deployment ended 17 October 1957.

At this point it is appropriate to mention another distinctive record of sorts held by the *Pacemakers*. CDR Art "Swede" Hedburg, USN (Ret), a former *Pacemaker*, relates the story that VF-121 also has two confirmed "kills" of U.S. aircraft, one Marine and one Navy.

"In 1955, LTJG Fred Meardon, in a VF-121 F9F-8, was in a hassle with LTJG Ernie Geuter of VF-142, flying an F9F-6. Geuter experienced runaway nose-up trim and was forced to eject when the airplane went into a spin. He landed safely in the outskirts of Ramona, east of Miramar.

"Later, after the squadron got FJ-3s in 1956, LT Jon Parrish jumped a Marine F4D-1 *Skyray*. The Marine apparently didn't see Jon until he was in the saddle about 50 yard back and (we think) violently honked back on the stick in his surprise. Jon watched in amazement as drop tanks, slats and other assorted parts peeled off of the *Ford* and it went into a spin. The aircraft landed in the water while the pilot ejected and drifted in over the beach between San Diego and El Toto." One can only surmise how the Marine aviator explained the loss of his aircraft to the C.O.

So, we might say that VF-121 has the dubious distinction of having as many U.S. aircraft to its credit as *MiG* kill. However, as any good fighter pilot knows, "A kill is a kill."

In early 1958, VF-121 began the transition to another Grumman product, the F11F-1 *Tiger*, and the Chief of Naval Operations approved a reorganization plan for carrier aviation. Among other things this plan called for a permanent replacement air group on each coast responsible for the indoctrination of key maintenance personnel, the tactical training of aviators, and for the conduct of special programs required for the introduction of new models of aircraft.

Implementation of this plan began 10 April 1958 with VF-124 (ex-VF-874) merging into VF-121 and assuming responsibility for the all-weather portion of the training program while the rest of VF-121 became responsible for day flying training. Under the command of CDR Ralph Rosen the *Pacemakers* received a diverse group of aircraft including the F11F-1, F2H-4, F3H-2N, F3H-2N and F3D-2T2 to become the largest fighter squadron in the Navy. Included in these operations was Fleet All Weather Training Unit Pacific (FAWTUPAC) at North Island, which became Detachment A of VF-121 on 2 May 1958 and assumed responsibility for instrument training of fleet pilots using T-28B aircraft.

During 1959 VF-121 continued replacement pilot training for F3H-2 and F11F-1 equipped squadrons, but with the phasing out of FJ-4Bs from fleet service, the FJ-3s were dropped from the squadron inventory by mid-year. In a further move to integrate

training at one location, Detachment A at North Island was discontinued and moved to Miramar 1 March 1959 to become part of the parent organization.

Looking ahead to the procurement of McDonnell F4H-*Phantom II* aircraft, the Pacemakers began a new program of training Radar Intercept Officers in September 1960. Trained to perform the duty of radar operator and assist the pilot in high speed navigation and radio communications, the first class of eight officers received their wings in ceremonies held at North Island 12 December 1960.

Signaling a new era in fleet fighter aircraft, VF-121 became the first squadron on either coast to receive the F4H-1 (redesignated F-4B in October 1962) on 30 December 1960. With the introduction of the aircraft the *Pacemakers* trained instructor pilots during 1961 for their own programs as well as for VF-101 on the east coast.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Naval Aviation, *Project Lana* was approved by the Chief of Naval Operations in May 1961. This project turned out to be the Bendix Trophy Race, a transcontinental event which VF-121 entered with two aircraft and crews along with two from VF-74 and one from VF-101. VF-121 walked off with the honors on 24 May 1961 when LT Richard Gordon and LTJG Bobbie Young, taking off as the third aircraft from Ontario, California, flashed across the finish line at NAS Floyd Bennett Field, New York, in the record time of 2 hours, 47 minutes.

Maximum speed of more than 1,300 miles per hour was attained with the use of afterburners as the crew flew most of the way at 50,000 feet over the measured distance of 2,445.9 miles. With the afterburners consuming fuel twice as fast as at normal cruise, the *Phantom II* had to descend three times to 30,000 feet and reduce speed to 530-630 miles per hour to refuel in mid-air.

During 1962, VF-121 participated in North American Air Defense operations in the Los Angeles sector by providing interceptors. These two exercises included *Operation Grass Shack* on 29 and 30 March 1962 and *Operation Sky Shield III*, 2 September 1962.

1963 marked the end of Demon operations in the squadron as these aircraft were phased out and flown to the storage center at NAF Litchfield Park, Arizona.

Making plug-ins under both wet and dry conditions, VF-121 conducted the first inflight refueling tests from one F-4B to another on 8 February 1963. A year and a half later, to test the concept of rapid delivery of aircraft to forward areas, two crews from VF-121 became the first to complete a trans-Pacific flight with F-4Bs between MCAS El Toro and NAS Atsugi, Japan. By utilizing air-to-air refueling only two stops en route were necessary.

In 1965 the TF-10B (ex-F3D-2T2) *Skynight* was phased out of squadron service as sufficient quantities of F-4Bs had been delivered to take over the RIO training duties.

On 20 April 1967, the first F-4J to arrive on the west coast was delivered to VF-121. Other firsts during the year included the receipt of the initial F-4J equipped with the AWG-10 missile control system, and a Martin-Baker H-7 rocket ejection seat equipped *Phantom II* on 28 December.

March 1969 marked the inaugural Navy Fighter Weapons School with instruction being conducted by VF-121. The purpose of the *Top Gun* seminars was to provide graduate level F-4 weapons training to career oriented, exceptionally qualified fighter crews. These crews would then become the nucleus to design and direct the weapons training in air-to-air tactics and air-to-ground delivery within their parent commands. The course required 4 weeks for completion including 77 academic hours and 27 flight hours.

By the end of 1970 at least one *Top Gun* graduate crew could be found in every fleet F-4 squadron. In addition to this training a fleet advisory program was initiated to provide fleet squadrons with sorties against dissimilar aircraft such as the A-4E. Six of these aircraft were assigned to *Top Gun* in 1971. Another program inaugurated was the F-106 adversary program between USAF *Air Defense Command* fighter squadrons and *Top Gun* classes.

Changes in the aircraft maintenance training program in 1970 led to a new title known as FRAMP (Fleet Replacement Aviation Maintenance Personnel) Training. The result of this move was an increased overall qualification level of replacement maintenance personnel for assignment to fleet squadrons.

With the continued growth of the Fighter Weapons School it was detached from VF-121 on 1 July 1972 to become a separate command under *Commander Fleet Air Miramar*.

On 27 June 1978 CDR Frank Mezzadri took over command of VF-121, one of the Navy's largest fighter squadrons. At that time the *Pacemakers* had accumulated an unprecedented record of over 30,000 accident free hours.

For 18 years the *Pacemakers* have provided a continuous program for training of F-4 replacement fleet aircrews and maintenance personnel. However, the declining number of fleet F-4 units has greatly reduced the training program and the demise of VF-121 is at hand. The *Pacemakers* have been scheduled for decommissioning 30 September 1980. The FRAMP Training responsibilities have been transferred to VF-171 at NAS Oceana, and that squadron will assume total training of F-4 replacements in 1980 as VF-121 gradually phases out of the program. CDR Phil Anselmo became the final skipper of VF-121 when he assumes command from CDR Mezzardi on 14 December 1979.

The *Pacemakers* leave behind them an illustrious career spanning 34 years and two wars. In Korea they answered their country's call in exemplary fashion and in Vietnam they provided the training that allowed the Navy's *Phantom* crews to surpass the best the enemy had to offer. The personnel of the *Pacemakers* can take great pride in being "just a RAG."

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