

VMA-331, MEDITERRANEAN DEPLOYMENT 1970 -71

- I. Preparation (1 January 1970 - 22 June 1970)
  - a. Deployment to Marine Corps Air Station, Yuma, Arizona (19 February 1970 - 18 March 1970)
  - b. Day carrier qualifications (16 April 1970 - 7 May 1970)
  - c. Night carrier qualifications (18 May 1970 - 22 May 1970)
    1. Aircraft lost, AG 333, Pilot Major R. C. BLACKINGTON (19 May 1970)
- II. Deployment
  - a. At sea: Caribbean Sea and Operational Readiness Inspection (23 June 1970 - 22 July 1970)
    1. Departure Pier 12 (23 June 1970)
    2. Operational Readiness Inspection
    3. Transit to Mediterranean Sea (9 July 1970 - 17 July 1970)
    4. Flight Demonstration in Azores (14 July 1970)
    5. Enter Mediterranean Sea (18 July 1970)
    6. Relief of USS ROOSEVELT (CVA-43) (19 July 1970)
  - b. Port: Naples, Italy (23 July 1970 - 26 July 1970)
    1. Commander, Attack Carrier Air Wing - Seven Change of Command (23 July 1970)
  - c. At sea: (27 July 1970 - 10 August 1970)
    1. Aircraft lost, AG 311, Pilot 1stLt K. L. HEITEL (31 July 1970)
    2. Anchored Porto Conte, Sardinia (1 August 1970 - 3 August 1970)
    3. PHIBLEX 2-71 (4 August 1971)
    4. CRAE (8 August 1970)
    5. Detachment "A" to Naval Air Facility, Sigonell, Sicily (9 August 1970)
  - d. Port: Malta (11 August 1970 - 19 August 1970)
    1. CVA-62 Change of Command (19 August 1970)
  - e. At sea: (20 August 1970 - 25 August 1970)
    1. Detachment "A" to Souda Bay, Crete (21 August 1970)
    2. "National Week VIII" (22 August 1970 - 24 August 1970)
  - f. Port: Athens, Greece (26 August 1970 - 3 September 1970)
  - g. At sea: (4 September 1970 - 6 October 1970)
    1. Jordanian Crisis
  - h. Port: Athens, Greece (6 October 1970 - 10 October 1970)
  - i. At sea: (11 October 1970 - 23 October 1970)
    1. First Lieutenant Rodney Max SMITH lost at sea (14 October 1970)
    2. "Deep Express" (12 October 1970 - 23 October 1970)
    3. Commandant of the Marine Corps and Commanding General Second Marine Aircraft Wing visit (17 October 1970)
    4. First "Centurion", LtCol F. T. SULLIVAN, Commanding Officer (20 October 1970)
  - j. Port: Athens, Greece (24 October 1970 - 28 October 1970)
  - k. At sea: (29 October 1970 - 6 November 1970)
    1. Port: Taranto, Italy (7 November 1970 - 15 November 1970)
      1. United States Marine Corps Birthday (10 November 1970)

- m. At sea: (16 November 1970 - 22 November 1970)
  - 1. CRAE (19 November 1970 - 20 November 1970)
  - 2. Aircraft lost, AG 311, Pilot Captain Leslie B. HERMAN (20 November 1970)
  - 3. CAWEX, USS KENNEDY (22 November 1970)
- n. Port: Naples, Italy (23 November 1970 - 30 November 1970)
- o. At sea: (1 December 1970 - 7 December 1970)
  - 1. CAWEX, USS KENNEDY (6 December 1970)
- p. Port: Barcelona, Spain (8 December 1970 - 14 December 1970)
- q. At sea: (15 December 1970 - 20 December 1970)
  - 1. PHIBLEX 6-70 (17 December 1970 - 18 December 1970)
- r. Port: Cannes, France (21 December 1970 - 5 January 1971)
  - 1. Dependents Cruise (2 January 1971)
- s. At sea: (6 January 1971 - 17 January 1971)
- t. Port: Balencia, Spain (18 January 1971 - 22 January 1971)
- u. At sea: (23 January 1971)
- v. Depart Mediterranean, transit to Norfolk, Virginia (24 January 1971 - 31 January 1971)
  - 1. Fly off (30 January 1971)
  - 2. Surface Echelon docks Norfolk, Virginia (31 January 1971)
- w. Home, Marine Corps Air Station, Beaufort, South Carolina (31 January 1971)

The Mediterranean cruise for VMA-331 began on 7 January 1970 when the squadron was informed it would deploy about 23 June 1970 with 20 A-4E aircraft as part of Attack Carrier Air Wing SEVEN (CVW-7) aboard the USS INDEPENDENCE (CVA-62). Then began the long training and preparation process to prepare pilots, personnel, and material for the carrier environment. First the squadron stabilized 31 pilots to be readied for day and night carrier qualifications and required weapons training. On February 19 1970, the bumblebee's deployed to MCAS YUMA, ARIZONA for extensive conventional and special weapons training. Return to MCAS BEAUFORT heralded in the beginning of the "bounce pattern". Lieutenant Commander Kent T. Kilby, CVW-7 LSO joined the squadron and for two weeks watched in frustration, fear, awe and finally admiration as the pilots practiced carrier landings. On April 16, 1970, the practice ended and carrier qualifications began off the Virginia Capes. From 16 April to May 7 1970 the pilots carrier qualified and slowly became accustomed to cyclic operations aboard the CVA. Immediately upon return to MCAS BEAUFORT, pilot began the 12 day period of night field mirror landing practice (FMLP). For this period Lieutenant Commander Ken Werhan, Senior CVW-7 LSO became our overseer. On 18 May 1970, VMA-331 re-embarked aboard USS INDEPENDENCE and began night carrier qualifications. At 1200, 19 May 1970, the squadron received it's first introduction to the hazards of carrier aviation. Major BOB BLACKINGTON ejected right after takeoff due to a control malfunction. Everyone became rapidly aware of what the call "plane in the water" really meant. Out of this incident everyone gained a great deal of confidence by the ship's

rapid reaction and subsequent recovery of the downed pilot. The squadron returned to MCAS BEAUFORT on 22 May 1970 with all pilots day and night qualified. Now all that remained was the wait until 23 June 1970.

During the entire preparation period, squadron personnel were trained in ship board procedures and firefighting. Maintenance underwent a complete metamorphosis as we received new A-4E aircraft specially configured for carrier operations. Shops were required to relearn systems that until had not been required for flight. All aircraft were sent to the modification program and others were sent to have all systems checked prior to deployment. Finally, on 22 June 1970, all modifications were complete, all aircraft had been checked, all pilots had completed carrier qualification and weapons delivery requirements and all personnel were familiar with all aircraft systems. The entire squadron and all it's gear, less 16 pilots, boarded KC-130's and flew to NAS NORFOLK, Va. and boarded the USS INDEPENDENCE. At 1000, 23 June 1970, CVA-62 moved slowly away from pier 12, proceeded out the channel, passed through the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and turned south. Past was all the training and practice, now it was the real thing: the Mediterranean cruise had begun.

The carrier proceeded south to the Caribbean area. Our first test and task was the Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI). From 23 June to 9 July 1970, the squadron flew sorties against all the targets in the Puerto Rico Target Complex, compiling 355 day and 81 night hours, 223 day and 82 night traps. During the same period, VMA-331's A-4E aircraft dropped 55 tons of ordnance. The Navy was also kind enough to furnish us with one old destroyer, the ex-USS OTTER and then let us sink it. Unfortunately, even though aircraft from

INDEPENDENCE scored numerous hits, it required Naval gunfire from one of our escorts to put her to the bottom. The ORI satisfactorily completed, the Independence turned east, and on 9 July 1970 started her long trip across the Atlantic. 14 July 1970 saw the Independence pause in the AZORES where she launched three aircraft as a demonstration for Portuguese and United States visitors. Continuing east Independence passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on 18 July 1970 and the next day anchored in POLLENSA BAY, BALEARIC ISLANDS, for the relief of the USS ROOSEVELT (CVA-43). Independence with VMA-331 now became a unit of the Sixth Fleet, responsible for the Mediterranean area.

Our first tragedy struck on 22 July 1970. After two bolters, an RA-5C from RVAH-11 broke it's arresting hook after landing and rolled off the angle deck. Both crew members were lost at sea.

Still stunned by the loss, the carrier continued on. Captain M.P. Green finally flew aboard that day, bringing with him our four TIAS aircraft. The squadron was now at it's full strength of twenty aircraft and twenty eight pilots.

After 31 days at sea, independence put into her first port on 23 July 1970: NAPLES, ITALY. Commander Dave LEUE, Commander Attack Carrier Airwing Seven, was relieved and replaced by Commander Bob DUNN.

The first port was only a short four day visit and on 26 July 1970 Independence once again put sea. Our first Mediterranean at sea period proved very interesting. First Lieutenant Dave White had a little trouble landing on 29 July 1970 and managed somehow to hit the mirror with his hook. No real damage was done to anything except his pride, but he did tear hell out of the mirror. On 31

July 1970, First Lieutenant Ken Heitel ejected from AG-311 after two successive bolters. He was quickly picked up by the HS-2 angel. From 1-3 August 1970 the carrier anchored in PORTO CONTE, SARDINIA. Back at sea again CVW-7 participated in PHIBLEX 2-71 off the coast of CAPTEULADA, SARDINIA. Beginning on 4 August squadron pilots flew close support missions for the Battalion Landing Team 2/2. On 8 August 1970 we participated in our first Combat Readiness Assessment Exercise (CRAE). The CRAE is primarily concerned with the safe handling and loading procedures of ordnance. The squadron had little trouble surmounting this test.

Due to a cut back in operating funds and because of a need to maintain pilot proficiency the squadron launched the first and original SIGONELLA detachment "A" to beautiful NAS SIGONELLA, SICILY on 9 August 1970. It was also during this period that the squadron was forced to adopt the day and night team concept due to funding austerity.

Our first Mediterranean at sea period over we anchored in the island of MALTA on 10 August 1970. During our 15 days at sea we had flown 353 day and 59 night hours, made 211 day and 39 night traps and dropped 35 tons of ordnance.

Malta in the summer is a beautiful island south of Sicily. You really cannot call it tree and grass infested, but the view is nice. During this inport period we had a change of Captains aboard Independence; Captain G.G. O'ROURKE relieved Captain B.B. FORBES.

Independence put to sea on 21 August 1970, one day early. This was done to fool the Soviet ships shadowing us, however the only people it fooled were Lieutenants Larry Sitz and Ken Heitel, who missed the sailing and were stranded in Malta.

Fortunately they were able to snivel a ride aboard the modern tanker USS WACCAMAW and were Helo lifted aboard on 25 August 1970. VMA-331's aircraft were recovered from Sigonella, Sicily, turned around and re deployed to SOUDA BAY, CRETE to act as aggressors for NATIONAL WEEK VIII. National Week VIII was a combined exercise with USS SARATOGA, USS INDEPENDENCE and their escorts to test the carriers capability to protect itself from airborne attack. This exercise was successfully completed on 25 August 1970. The aggressors returned to the ship and Independence headed east for our next port: ATHENS, GREECE. From 21-26 August 1970 the squadron had flown 85 day hours and made 77 traps.

The first visit to Greece was exciting and interesting, visiting for the first time places and sights you had only read about as a student and spending countless hours in the beautiful surroundings such as the Congo Palace {African national display}. Due to the beautiful weather, the squadron officers rented a moderately priced beach house which would have been outrageous at half the price.

Spirits were high on 5 September 1970 as we left Athens. Ahead lay a short operating period before our next port: RHODES. However, the at sea period proved to be our longest of the cruise and we never saw Rhodes. On 9 September 1970, flight operations were suspended and the ship steamed southeast to a point south of CYPRUS, 100 miles off the coast of ISREAL. From this point CVA-62, in company with most of the Sixth Fleet, conducted normal flight operations as the Middle East situation bubbled. The squadrons only problem during this period was recovering our five deployed to Souda Bay. On 18 September 1970, Lieutenant Dave White was transferred from the USS CALOOSAATCHIE and the squadron was once again at full strength. Independence was relieved on 5 October 1970 by the USS

KENNEDY (CVA-67) and proceeded back to Athens, Greece.

Once again in Athens the squadron rented the penthouse of a local hotel. The rooms were situated overlooking Athens harbor and Lieutenant Bruce Cheever's room, 100 feet below the final approach course to Athens Airport and in close proximity to Athens most visited tourist attractions: the Congo Palace and The Bahamas Club.

Returning to sea on 11 October 1970, Independence proceeded into The AEGEAN SEA to participate in exercise "DEEP EXPRESS"; a combined NATO exercise with the armed forces of GREECE, TURKEY, ITALY, GREAT BRITAIN and the UNITED STATES. The exercise was conducted in the Northeast corner of Greece along the Turkish border, south of the BULGARIAN border near the town of ALEXANDROPOLIS, GREECE. The squadron's primary mission was to provide simulated close air support to the Battalion Landing Team 2/2 and other attached units. The entire exercise was a complete success, however for VMA-331 the price of success came high. On 14 October 1970, First Lieutenant RODNEY MAX SMITH was lost at sea during a night bombing hop. A memorial service was held on 16 October 1970 aboard Independence.

During "Deep Express" the bumblebees flew 379 day and 151 night hours compiling 211 day and 83 night traps.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, GENERAL LEONARD F. CHAPMAN and the Commanding General, Second Marine Aircraft Wing, Major General GEORGE AXTELL, in the Mediterranean to observe "Deep Express" visited Independence and her embarked marines on 17 October 1970. VMA-331 reached a milestone in its deployment on 20 October 1970 when Lieutenant Colonel F.T. (PETE) SULLIVAN made his 100th arrested landing aboard Indy and became the squadrons first "CENTURION". The following day saw Major John Waples (USN), Major Tom Elser and captain George Kersey reach the 100 mark.



During the at sea period from 11 October to 24 October 1970, the squadron had flown 792 day and 335 night hours and made 389 day and 170 night landings. This was to be our most intensive operating period; but now it was over, it's success's and tragedies were now memories as the ship dropped anchor in Athens, Greece on 24 October 1970.

After three port visits to Athens we were ready to see new places. The final half of the cruise began on 29 October as Independence left her anchorage in Athens Harbor and put to sea. Because the situation was still tense in the Middle East no one was sure what our schedule would be, but with the cessation of hostilities a firm schedule began to evolve.

We departed the eastern Mediterranean with it's good weather and proceeded to the western Mediterranean and winter. Our operations during the entire period were normal and on 7 November 1970 we entered our first western Mediterranean port since July: TARANTO, ITALY. During the seven days at sea the squadron had amassed 274 day and 49 night hours, compiling 164 day and 34 night traps. During this period Major Bill Horner, Captain Duke Savage and Lieutenants Bruce Cheever and Lou Costello became "Centurions".

You really cannot say that much about Taranto, Italy because there is not much there. The Squadron did celebrate the Marine Corps birthday in Taranto. After a short shipboard ceremony, the squadron moved to the Jolly Hotel, with it's guest of honor, Captain J.J. O'Rourke, and celebrated the day in true Marine Corps fashion.

After four full days to recover, the ship departed Taranto on 16 October 1970. Our principle this period was to successfully complete our second CRAE on 19&20 November 1970. This we did. Once again

Fortune struck a blow to the Bumblebee. ON 20 November 1970 Captain Les Hermon ejected from AG-311 when his engine failed after the cat shot. He was quickly recovered by the HS-2 angel and was back on the flight deck seven minutes after launch; quite wet, but unhurt. It was during this at sea period that we were introduced to a new type exercise: the CAWEX. Our mission was to find the USS KENNEDY and then launch simulated strikes against her and vice versa. The 22nd of November 1970 found CVW-7 pilots searching for Kennedy. She was quickly found and the strike aircraft were launched. The Kennedy finally found the Independence the next day as she anchored in NAPLES, ITALY. During this at sea period squadron pilots flew 203 day and 44 night hours and made 109 day and 36 night landings. Majors John Caldas, Bob Blackington and Terry Cline and Lieutenant Larry Sitz made their 100th arrested landing.

Naples was the same city it had been four months earlier only now it was just a little colder. The Exchange was besieged by stereo frieks trying to purchase all their electronic gear in this our last exchange port.

The ship departed Naples on 1 December 1970 for a short seven day at sea period. Flying only normal cyclic operations the squadron amassed 252 day and 58 night hours and added 128 day and 41 night traps to it's growing total. and completed 100 landings for Lieutenants Gary Kiel and Al Morrison. On 8 December 1970 we once again heard the "special sea and anchor detail" called away and we were in BARCELONA, SPAIN. Prior to doing our thing in Barcelona we under went our second CAWEX against the USS KENNEDY. Once again we caught them steaming with there pants down and proceeded to sink her with a "Betty Crocker Flour Bomb".

Barcelona proved to be one of the most enjoyable ports for many of the pilots. One reason could possibly have been the fact that quite a few were stranded for three days ashore due to high sea conditions. All too soon the Barcelona port period ended and once more the squadron found itself back at sea.

On 15 December 1970, Independence put to sea and steamed west to an area near CAPO TEULADA, SARDANIA to participate in PHIBLEX 6-71. Captain Mike Green and Lieutenant Gary Kiel were sent ashore to act as forward air controllers for the Battalion Landing Team 2/2. Due to unfavorable weather, we were not able to provide close air support for the Marines ashore, however the squadron did fulfill all other commitments. In support of PHIBLEX 6-71 VMA-331 flew 177 day and 56 night hours compiling 101 day and 37 night traps. Lieutenant Al Schuele made his 100th arrested landing and became the first day flier to reach the mark.

Christmas and New Years were drawing near and so was our next port: CANNES, FRANCE. Independence arrived in Cannes on 21 December 1970 and stayed until 5 January 1971. The holidays were spent by most people away from their families on the French Riviera, but now we knew home was less than one month away. Our Cannes visit was interrupted on 2 January 1971 for eight hours as Independence conducted a dependents cruise. At eight A.M. the ship departed Cannes and steamed forty miles off the French Riviera. Over 300 dependents and guests received a first hand view of shipboard operations and normal flight operations as squadron pilots ran the deck for four hours. The ship returned to anchor that afternoon and all returned to normal.

Independence slipped out of anchorage on 6 January 1971 to begin its last at sea period. During these two weeks we once again flew our normal bombing, search and raid hops compiling 325 day and

and 103 night hours with 200 day and night traps. The squadron was now composed of all "centurions" as Major Mike Griffith, Captains Mark O' Connor, Bill Peters, Bob Harding, Les Herman, Dave Caldon, Mike Green and Lieutenants Tom Svoboda, Dan Hardman, Ken Heitel, Doug Kirschke and Dave White, made their 100th landing.

18 January 1971 found us back in port at VALENCIA, SPAIN for four short days and one final good time?

On 22 January 1971, the Independence left Valencia and began heading west. The next day the squadron flew 25 hours with 16 landings as the ship moved into the Straits of Gibraltar. Flight operations for the squadron terminated for VMA-331 when Captain Bob Harding made the squadrons final arrested landing. Independence refueled that evening and then began her long trip back to Pier 12, Norfolk, Virginia. Enroute we passed our relief, USS FORESTAL (CVA-59).

From a point 300 miles off the east coast of the United States, Vma-331 launched 19 aircraft on 30 January 1971 for the final fly off. The next morning at 1130 Independence tied up at pier 12. That evening all VMA-331 personnel were transported back to MCAS BEAUFORT, S.C. and the Mediterranean Cruise was over.

For seven months as members of CVW-7 aboard USS Independence, VMA-331 pilots had flown a total of 4841 hours, made 3711 arrested landings and delivered over 285 tons of ordnance. We had visited seven foreign ports and flown over most of Southern Europe. We had participated in 15 exercises from the deck of Independence. We had learned a great deal about our trade, our fellow pilots and ourselves. We shared many good times and survived a few unpleasant moments. Now this cruise is only a memory and as most people know they get better as they get older.