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## Fast-FACs Are 'Special Breed' of Marine Pilots : Strategy: El Toro airmen 'hang out' over a battlefield until someone shoots at them, then they use phosphorous rockets to mark the gunner's location for their buddies.

June 23, 1991 | GEORGE FRANK | TIMES STAFF WRITER

EL TORO — Marine Corps fliers considered it the most dangerous job in the Persian Gulf War.

They flew day and night, inviting ground fire from the enemy below. And although they worked much of their time spotting targets for other attack planes they had their own weapons and inflicted their own destruction.

In military lingo, they are called Fast-FACs, for fast-forward air controllers. Their specially built, two-seat, F/A-18D Hornets swoop low to lure hostile antiaircraft artillery fire in search of enemy targets. Once they spot the flashes from the guns or the puffs of smoke from missile launches, they mark the target with white phosphorous rockets so other Marine fighters and attack planes can find them.

The pilots and the weapons officers from El Toro Marine Corps Air Station's VMFA-121 squadron who fly in the F/A-18s are a "special breed of maverick," said Maj. Gen. Royal N. Moore Jr., commander of the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. They spend a lot of time precariously "hanging out" over battlefields, where they have to be able to quickly improvise and "take whatever the enemy will give them and then use it against them."

Maj. Jim V. McClain, a Marine Corps spokesman and a fast-forward air controller, compared the job to the old fisherman's trick of throwing out "chum," small, oily fish parts scattered around the boat in hopes of attracting large fish.

During the war, any time a plane got below 5,000 feet it was risking being hit by a shoulder-held missile. But as the war progressed and the Fast-FAC crews gained confidence, they spent more time at lower altitudes spotting artillery and Republican Guard positions, said the VMFA-121 commander, Lt. Col. St. Mugg.

The squadron, called the Green Knights, was part of a Marine aviation force in the Persian Gulf that numbered 450 aircraft, ranging from the small, dead-end Cobra helicopters to the sleek, supersonic F/A-18s.

In the closing days of the war, one of the Fast-FACs from El Toro's Green Knights, using night vision goggles, broke through the cloud cover and got the first look at the long columns of enemy tanks, armored personnel carriers, trucks and troop buses retreating north from Kuwait City. The vehicles were bump

bumper as far as the eye could see just north of Kuwait City. They were moving slowly, four abreast.

It was still pitch-dark when Capt. Bob Turner, the pilot, and Lt. Col. Robert Zimmerman, the weapons sensor officer, made a low pass heading north over Kuwait city. Antiaircraft shells hissed over their cockpit. Turner could not believe what he saw through his goggles.

"It was like Interstate 5 on a bad Friday night," Turner said of the lines of military and civilian vehicles carrying troops and "whatever else wasn't nailed down" from Kuwait city.

Fearing that the military convoy would somehow disperse before the F/A-18s, A-6 Intruders and AV-8 Harriers arrived, "we decided to make a strafing run. We picked the largest target on the road and fired our cannon," Turner said.

That target turned out to be a huge fuel truck.

The tanker truck erupted. Turner's cockpit turned bright red as the plane flew through a fireball at 500 feet and at more than 400 m.p.h.

"When the truck blew up it stopped everything behind it," said Maj. Bob Kennedy, second in command of VMFA-121, the Marine Corps' first squadron of two-seat, F/A-18Ds. "Other military vehicles started to drive around the burning fuel truck, and they were caught by their own land minds on either side of the highway."

Everything on the road stopped moving, creating a giant traffic jam.

"From there on it was kind of like piranhas in the gold fish bowl," Kennedy said.

The Green Knights backed off after the initial hit and, using its sophisticated communications systems, began coordinating the aircraft attacks from above the battlefield. Plane after plane was called in and directed to the target by the fast-forward air controllers. After seven hours of bombing and strafing by dozens of airplanes, the battlefield "looked like something right out of a World War II movie," Gen. Moore said.

Although VMFA-121 has a rich history that takes it back to the Pacific Theater in World War II, its role as all-weather, fast-forward air controllers is newly christened under fire in the Persian Gulf.

The squadron received its first brand-new, two-seater plane (all the other F/A-18s except a few trainers have only a pilot's seat) in March. They trained during the summer and fall to get ready for the deployment of their first six planes in January. They arrived in Bahrain just days before the air war opened Jan. 17. The second six planes followed.

The pilots and back-seat weapons officers, who can help the pilots with communications, observation and the sophisticated electronic honing devices aboard, are trained for more than just spotting targets and airborne traffic control.

The crews can perform all-weather daytime bombing missions and nighttime patrolling and bombing and strafing with night-vision goggles and infrared

equipment. Also, they were the first Marine air squadron to fly combat missions with night-vision goggles.

The debate over whether they were ready for combat continued through late fall and into the winter. But high-ranking Marine aviators knew that the propeller-driven OV-10 Bronco was not fast enough to survive in the flat desert of Kuwait and Iraq. The Bronco could avoid being shot down if it had jun hills and mountains to hide it.

The worst fears were borne out only days after the air war started. An OV-10 was shot down during a combat mission and its pilot and observer from Car Pendleton were captured by Iraqi forces. Another one was later shot down. It confirmed what the military had suspected.

The F/A-18 Hornets were rushed into service. They were so new to the region that they had to be escorted to the battlefield over Kuwait by more seasoned pilots in one-seater F/A-18s.

The Hornet, a supersonic plane, constantly changed altitude and direction in combat, making it almost impossible for the ground guns to hit them, squadron commander Mugg said.

VMFA-121 did not lose a plane in the war, even though the squadron had one airborne over the battlefield almost continuously. The squadron flew a total of 1,426 hours during February, calling for many of the pilots to perform double duty.

Mugg said he was continuously amazed when he would fly low over a target and an enemy soldier would run out of a bunker or from behind a tank and throw a smoke grenade as far as he could, thinking it would confuse those in the aircraft.

"We used their mark to guide the airplanes to the target," Mugg said. "They never did catch on. It saved us a rocket."