



**Howard L. DeCastro, LCOL, USMC (Ret.)**  
"Lopp"

Date of Designation: 28 March 1961      NA # V-17476

Dates of Active Duty: 28 August 1958 - 1 September 1980

Total Flight Hours: 4,000

Approximate Flight Hours:

Jet: 3,750    Prop: 240

Other: 10 helicopter

Combat Tours:

Vietnam: VMFA-122, Sep. 1967 - Aug. 1968.  
380 combat missions

Aviation Commands:

CO, First Naval Gunfire Liaison Company

CO, MAWTS-1

Combat Awards:

Legion of Merit (non-combat)

Distinguished Flying Cross

20 Air Medals

### **Duty Assignment Chronology**

Enlisted in the Marine Corps and entered "Boot Camp" on 28 August 1958, at MCRD San Diego. In "Boot Camp" was tested for flight training and selected for the Marine Aviation Cadet (MARCAD) program, beginning Pre-flight in August 1959. Just one month under 20 years old.

Flight training began with VT-1, flying the T-34 at Sausley Field, followed by VT-4 flying the T2J-1 at Sherman Field, VT-21 flying the F9, and finally VT-23 flying the F-11, both at Kingsville. Earned wings and commission at Kingsville on 28 March 1961, with designation V-17476.

First FMF assignment was with VMF (AW)-542, commanded by Bob Parnell, flying the Douglas "Skyray" at El



Toro, deploying to Atsugi from October 1962, to October 1963. Numerous assignments followed, which included deployments from Atsugi to Iwakuni, Okinawa, and Taiwan.

Returning to CONUS, was assigned as a flight instructor in VT-31, flying the TS-2A. The Marine Corps required more C-130 pilots, and consequently decided to increase its instructor cadre in the twin-engine prop arena, sending six jet pilots directly to props. They initially tried to reassign instructors who were already flying the F-9s and F-11s, but were losing them to the airlines as fast as the assignments were made. Those of us returning from Japan got the job.

Flying the TS-2F was not as familiar as flying jet fighters and I was not skilled in flying props, so in my spare time I checked out in the only jet at Corpus Christi, the T1A. Within six months, the Navy and Marine Corps realized they made a mistake and five of the six Marines who were assigned to the TS-2A squadrons were reassigned to Kingsville to instruct in jets. I was assigned to VT-23, instructing in the F-11A. In June 1965, VT-23 switched from the F-11A to the F-9F and I finished my last year as an advanced jet instructor, flying the TF-9s and AF-9s.

Completed Amphibious Warfare School in the spring of 1967, and was assigned to VMFA-122 at El Toro, under command of John Verdi, to prepare for deployment to Vietnam. Served in Vietnam from September 1967, to August 1968, flying 380 combat missions. The missions were predominately close air support missions in South Vietnam with a few night Barrier Combat Air Patrol missions in North Vietnam, designed to keep the MiGs on the ground while A-6 crews were running low level night bombing missions in the North. Our most significant accomplishment was participation in breaking the siege at Khe San.

After Vietnam, was assigned to the First Marine Brigade at Kaneohe, Hawaii. Soon after, was assigned as the Commanding Officer, First Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, and a year later was assigned as the Safety

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Officer of MAG-24. Completed the Hawaii tour in VMFA-235 as Assistant Maintenance Officer and then as the Executive Officer when George Leach took command. During this tour, TransPac'ed to attend the Navy Fighter Weapons "Top Gun" School. Two Israeli Fighter Pilots also attended that class and after "Top Gun" was complete, we took the Israelis to El Toro where they flew Air Combat Maneuvering sorties against pilots of VMFA-531 over the weekend, essentially conducting an ACM Seminar that was valuable to all concerned.

From Hawaii, was assigned to VMFA-531 at El Toro as Operations Officer to prepare for a Mediterranean cruise aboard the USS *Forrestal*. That cruise was delayed when the USS *Forrestal* caught fire while in port. We used the three-month delay to practice fighter tactics and defensive maneuvering with the pilots of the Navy A-6 and A-7 squadrons that were deployed with us.

During the latter part of the cruise, was assigned as Fighter Operations Officer for the *Forrestal* and developed the plan that was used to escort the U. S. Air Force C-130 ELINT aircraft on its route near Libya. That plan continued to be used and several years later Navy and Marine Corps fighters shot down a Libyan fighter that attacked the C-130.

Returning to El Toro, remained with VMFA-531 for about one year, during which time I was selected as the "Marine Aviator of the Year" and received the Alfred A. Cunningham Award. My next assignment was Staff Secretary to General Quinn, CG 3rd MAW. General Hal Vincent was the Chief of Staff.

My last duty station was MCAS Yuma, Arizona, where I served as a Staff Projects Officer, developing a new media based training course for Marine Corps and Navy F-4 pilot and RIO training and worked on the formulation of Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1), before being assigned as Operations Officer of the Training Group.

I was very fortunate to be a part of the group of Marines who worked on the formulation of MAWTS-1. The Marine Corps was dissatisfied with the integration and coordination of air power and the overall effectiveness of aviation in Vietnam, and was looking for ways to improve combat effectiveness.

The Marine Corps developed several numbered projects to improve combat effectiveness. "Project 19" was the plan to improve our aviation support to the ground forces by conducting integrated aviation training using the full capability of an augmented Marine Air Group, supporting a ground scheme of maneuver. Over a two-year period with strong support from General Hal Vincent and General Andy O'Donnell, the plan was developed, approved by General Tom Miller, DCS Aviation and General Wilson, Commandant of the Marine Corps, and tested using Marine Aviation Training Units Pacific and Atlantic. The concept proved worthy and MAWTS-1 was formed at Yuma, Arizona, in July 1978, the first new aviation squadron commissioned since World War II.

I was again fortunate to be named the first Commanding Officer of MAWTS-1 and commanded the squadron through August 1980. Recognizing that FMF squadrons, not MAWTS-11, would be fighting wars, the emphasis from the start was to gain the best knowledge and skills possible and pass them to the FMF through graduates of the Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) courses, held twice yearly, and through MAWTS-1 instructor training visits to FMF squadrons and groups.

MAWTS-1 has proved to be a valuable addition to the Marine Corps' combat capability and has gained recognition for the significant role it has played in Marine Corps' combat actions since 1978.

On 1 September 1980, at the completion of my Command Tour at MAWTS-1, I retired from the Marine Corps as a Lieutenant Colonel with 22 years of service.

As a civilian, had the opportunity to work with Joe Prueher and Bill Pickavance in establishing the Naval Strike Warfare Center at Fallon, Nevada.

### **Summary of Significant Career Events**

- (1) Top Gun School graduate.
- (2) Marine Aviator of the Year and recipient of the Alfred A. Cunningham Award.
- (3) First Commanding Officer of MAWTS-1.