Whenever Marine aviators, from the Vietnam War to the Gulf War, got together – whether they flew fixed wing or helicopters, the sky was the limit and pushing it was the norm, as in no guts, no glory. As the wife of an F-4 Phantom pilot killed in combat, I witnessed the early stages of what became a life-long bond among a special subset of Marine pilots and Radar Intercept Officers (RIOs), who flew the F-4, a supersonic fighter jet with a proud 30-year Marine Corps history.

Although their style might not be perceived as politically correct by today’s standards, these Marine aviators had an indomitable lust for life that made them and the F-4 legendary. Undoubtedly, that can-
do spirit rubbed off on some of us who lived -- even for a short time -- within this tight-knit, Marine Corps community.

In November, 2011, Maj Gen Mike “Lancer” Sullivan pushed out a thousand emails across the Internet, ultimately forming a database that best explains how the idea of organizing the first all-Marine F-4 Phantom Foray turned into reality a year later. Several hundred Marine aviators and guests descended upon San Diego, November 1-4, 2012, and although now history, the Foray was a powerful reminder that this popular fighter jet may be gone, but the connection among the aviators who flew her is still very much alive.

This blog is about three Marines, who rekindled the camaraderie of an era when the Phantom ruled and its aviators lived up to expectations in the air and on the ground.

The Marine Corps’ high regard for the F-4 had a lot to do with its long service and versatility -- but to a group of young, cocky pilots, it was the hottest jet of the day, having already set 16 World altitude and speed records by 1962 when it arrived at the first two Marine squadrons. Over time, the Marine Corps had 25, F-4 squadrons until production of the aircraft ended in 1992. As a career Marine, Lancer flew F-4s in five different squadrons, and the same applied to his long-time F-4 buddies, Col. Bob “Fox” Johnson, and Col. JP “Monk” Monroe, who teamed up with him to help make the Foray happen.
“The reunion’s success was beyond our wildest dreams,” said Lancer, who logged 8,700 hours in more than 15 aircraft, of which 4,977 were in F-4s. He is credited with the go-big idea that worked. Thinking the event would draw perhaps 500-plus pilots, RIOs, support personnel and families, the number climbed to 750 for the Saturday night banquet of which 390 were Marine pilots and RIOs; 100 were enlisted Marines; and 260 were spouses and guests.
Team Effort

The guys divided reunion duties into three segments with Lancer taking the lead on the organization, events/schedules and tours, which involved MCAS Miramar; Marine recruit graduation at MCRD San Diego and aboard the USS Midway. Fox worked on the all-squadrons Ready Room, photo displays and programs; and Monk took care of industry attendees invited to the banquet, including one of the two Guests of Honor, JP “Cap” Capellupo, retired president of McDonnell Douglas Aerospace, which built the F-4 Phantom. Special Guest of Honor was General James Amos, the first Marine aviator to serve as Commandant of the Marine Corps, and of no small significance, General Amos also flew F-4s early-on in his career.

When the event began to take hold, the guys called in the experts – Armed Forces Reunion. Inc. (AFR), who arranged for the accommodations and use of the hotel facilities. “They were extremely good to us and exceeded all expectations,” said Fox, praising AFR Founder Ted Dey for successfully negotiating excellent prices with the hotel and making sure that everything ran smoothly. Lancer agreed, and also called Molly Dey “indispensable” for handling hundreds of email communications for registration; paying the bills and coordinating events at the Foray.

Although the event did not officially begin until Thursday, November 1, many attendees arrived a day early and were ready to party. Fox said the guys had bought a significant amount of booze that morning, thinking it would last throughout the weekend but instead ran out that night. “We refueled three times during the event,” he laughed, recounting that they inadvertently thought age might slow down consumption.

There were Ready Rooms set up by individual squadrons, but eventually everyone gravitated to the all-squadrons Ready Room that became the center of activity. Registrants were urged early-on to send along photos from the old days, and many guys -- short timers and career Marines -- followed through on this request. Fox then created poster-size displays that were spread throughout the Ready Room, and they were a big hit with everyone and a reminder that a picture is worth a thousand words. However, words were not in short supply, either. “I flew those things for 23 years, and I’d already heard
most of the stories,” said Lancer, who undoubtedly had a few of his own. “I still laughed so hard my sides hurt, remembering some of the stupid things we did and survived!”

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Fox said it was interesting to see how the lines had blurred between pilots and RIOs. “Initially, many of us had flown solo before flying the F-4, so it took a little while to adjust, but pilots and RIOs became very close. Often, I couldn’t remember if someone at the Foray was a pilot or RIO.”

The three career Marines have a history that dates back to their Flight School days in the mid-1950s, when they went through the flight program within three weeks of each other. Over the years, there
were a lot of ties that bound them together -- not the least of which was the Marine Corps’ involvement in Vietnam where they met again in 1968-69 while serving one of their in-country tours flying F-4s with VMFA-314, which is now attached to MCAS Miramar in San Diego.

“Holding the Foray in San Diego was Lancer’s idea,” said Fox, explaining that Lancer felt San Diego would be a perfect venue with its huge Marine Corps presence, especially MCAS Miramar and the USS Midway, but also because of its ability to accommodate a large group. Initially, Fox favored the Ft Worth area, home of MAG 41, where he and Lancer, respectively, served as commanding officer in the early 1980s. Fox felt that Ft. Worth would be a good central location for East/West Coast Marines. However, he warmed to the idea of San Diego when he realized that the Town & County Hotel was offering an excellent event package that in the end turned out to be even better than expected, thanks to an Asian Film company and Ted’s negotiating skills.

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The film company wanted to use several rooms previously booked for the Marine F-4 event, so Ted eventually cut a deal that the guys couldn’t refuse – think free dinners and booze for all guests attending the Farewell Banquet (as it turned out, the “new” rooms were a better fit to accommodate the Foray’s burgeoning size). This windfall eventually allowed the three old guys (TOGs) as Lancer, Fox and Monk jokingly called themselves, to donate any residual funds to Marine–related organizations, such as the Semper Fi Fund, National Museum of the Marine Corps, Marine Corps Aviation Association and Flying Leatherneck Museum.

**Marine Corps Country**

As expected, the USS Midway was a hit with the Foray group, especially for those who had landed an F-4 on deck during her 45 years afloat before being decommissioned in 1992. Now a popular floating museum in San Diego, the Midway is home to a large aircraft fleet, including an F-4, making it a great tourist attraction for the city. But for some of the Marines, it was a true walk down memory lane. One of those was Col. Bob Johnson.

Fox landed on the Midway in the late 1970s when visiting a detachment of VMCJ (Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadron) while serving as Commanding Officer of MAG-15 in the Sea of Japan. The ship never had an O-6 land his own aircraft (F-4) aboard the carrier and apparently were pleased to welcome him. No doubt, Fox did not offer that his last carrier landing had been 17 years earlier on the USS Roosevelt. “They gave me 2 touch & goes, and 2 traps, 4 for 4 -- not bad,” he laughed. The Colonel hadn’t lost the touch.

While some Marines and guests were touring the Midway on Friday, Nov 2, others were bused to MCAS Miramar for several scheduled events, including a special dedication ceremony, honoring four recent Medal of Honor (MOH) recipients. The Foray Marines received an invitation from MAG 11, where Lancer had served as commanding officer, 1981-1982. Also involved with Miramar’s hospitality was
Lancer’s son, Lt. Col. Byron “Shrek” Sullivan -- an F/A 18 fighter pilot and now Commanding Officer of Miramar’s VMFA-232.

The event began with four F/A-18 jets flying over the base in a missing man formation. When Number 222 broke away and landed, General Amos climbed down from the cockpit onto a red carpet and spoke to MOH family members, Marines and special guests, highlighting the sacrifices made by the four brave recipients, only one of whom survived. Their names and citations were inscribed on the fuselage of the glossy white F/A-18, parked on the runway behind General Amos. Symbolically speaking, the MOH recipients would soon be soaring with Marine instructors and aviators, training with the 3rd Marine Air Wing’s VMFAT-101, flying the aircraft in their honor.

**Phantom Warrior Panel**

At the conclusion of the dedication ceremony, most Foray Marines were bused back to the hotel to prepare for squadron dinners – except for a very small contingent of aviators who remained at Miramar since they were chosen to participate in a Warrior Panel, hosted by MAG 11. The panel fielded questions from active duty Marine officers in MAG 11 squadrons.

“They filled the O’ Club,” said Lancer, who facilitated the panel, consisting of seven participants – the seventh was a welcomed surprise when General Amos came in and joined them. “The Commandant ejected out of an F-4 in Hawaii as a young pup,” said Lancer, explaining that all but two members of the panel had ejected from an F-4 during their careers.

The criteria Lancer used to select aviators for the Warrior panel focused on Marines with high-flyer F-4 credentials, including pilots like Col. Manfred “Fokker” Rietsch, credited with 653 combat missions. Fokker is recognized as the Marine pilot with the most F-4 combat missions flown in Vietnam.
High flyers from the Foray participated in a Warrior Panel hosted by MCAS Miramar’s MAG-11 squadrons. Although a different era, the Marine warrior culture continues.

For approximately two hours, MAG-11 aviators asked questions of Lancer, Fokker, Capt. “Scotty” Dudley, Capt. Gary Bain, Col. Dick “K-9” Kindsfater and “Stick” Richards, whose flying resumes are of historic significance with flight hours in the F-4 averaging about 4,000 – 5,000 – those days are history, with many F-18 aviators flying sometimes as few as 20 hours a month, the numbers would never add up.

Similar to Fokker, K-9 became the RIO with the most combat missions – 616 – flown in Vietnam. He later served as Commanding Officer of VMFA-451, Top Gun instructor and had one F-4 ejection; Stick had more than 400 combat missions and shot down a MiG 21 with an AIM-7 supersonic, medium range, air-to-air-missile while on exchange with the USAF.

Scotty was the wingman on a flight in North Vietnam, flying off the USS America, when he witnessed Maj Lee Lasseter and RIO Capt “Li’l John” Cummings shoot down a MiG 21, becoming the only Marine squadron credited with downing a MiG during the war. Capt. Gary “Rebel” Bain ejected twice in Vietnam, once for being shot down and the other for an aircraft fire. Rebel returned to the U.S. and transitioned into Harriers and ejected from one of them. Li’l John and Maj. Jim “Doc” Warner, a former POW in Hanoi Hilton, were also on the schedule but cancelled because of a family emergency and hurricane Sandy, respectively.

As one might expect, the young guys learned that life during the F-4 era was equally entertaining on the ground as in the air. When the event was drawing to a close, one of the aviators asked, “Which of you is the best fighter pilot?” Lancer quickly responded, “The first guy to the bar,” and laughter filled the room, as everyone understood the joke. The first guy to the bar can tell the story that makes him out to be the hero and the others have to contradict it. But when they get to the bar, the story has already been told. The Marine Warrior culture continues, and that was a good sign.
The Last Leg

One of the major highlights of the event was the Saturday evening Farewell Banquet which exceeded all expectations. Fox, who had worked closely on the details to ensure the banquet’s success, described the atmosphere as elegant, complete with linens, fresh flowers and beautifully produced programs on each table, emphasizing the Phantom Foray theme.

With special guests, Commandant Jim Amos and his wife, Bonnie, the Marine band and Color Guard from Camp Pendleton went through all the protocol befitting the Commandant’s presence. The large room with 750 attendees was magical amidst the sparkling, theater-like lighting and music and lyrics performed by the band. “It was first-class throughout,” said Fox, noting that each table also featured excellent wine produced in Northern California and embellished with the label designed especially for the F-4 Phantom Foray. The wine was so well received that there was not an empty bottle to be seen at the end of the evening, and that was a compliment. Fox said that everyone wanted them for souvenirs.

Marine Commandant James Amos & wife, Bonnie, accompanied by Maj Gen Michael Sullivan and wife, Nicole, at the First All-Marine F-4 Phantom Foray. The two Marines were the primary speakers at the banquet and did not disappoint.

The night progressed with delicious tenderloin steak entrees devoured, speeches delivered and gifts bestowed, and like all reunions this one was coming to an end and that was hard. The word began circulating about the next reunion in two or three years. “We relived the best days of our lives,” said Lancer, questioning if it could ever be replicated.

Yet Lancer, Fox and Monk realized that there was something so comforting about sharing the best days of your lives with Marines who were there and flew the mighty F-4, too. A quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes in the Foray Memorial Service program explained it best: “We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt the passion of life to its top. In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire.”