

The Day the Magic Died

A Marine pays a special tribute to a fallen comrade . . . and gives us an allegory of war that goes full circle to capture the uncertainty, tensions, excitement, frustrations, exhilaration, tragedy, and self-doubts that are the experience of war.

by Maj Ben D. Hancock

I stepped into the darkness of the flight deck and carefully made the way to my jet. We had been told to expect better weather today, but it was overcast and raining. The chill and the rain were helping me wake up along with the anticipation that goes with launching off the end of the ship into the pitch black sky of the Persian Gulf. It was 0510 on the 27th of February 1991, the last full day of the war, and I was only minutes away from leading a flight of four AV-8B Harriers from VMA-331 off of the USS *Nassau* to attack Iraqi targets up north. We were Marine attack pilots, and it was time to go to work.

I felt a little rushed after preflight as I worked to get organized in the cockpit. None of the squadron's preset way points were in the INS (inertial navigation system), so I began the finger drill of entering them in. The weather was bothering me, and I was a little nervous about leading the commanding officer's (CO's) division around on a complex combat mission. The flight consisted of myself, known by my tactical call sign of "Lawman," Capt Kevin "Peewee" Herrmann, Capt Reginald "Woody" Underwood, and LtCol John "Mystic" Fitzgerald. Peewee was the squadron assistant operations officer, Woody was the unit intelligence officer and a WTI (weapons and tactics instructor), and Mystic was the CO. We had been flying together as a four-man team for a couple months now and had flown all of our previous combat missions together. We knew each other well and knew we could count on each other.

We took off and rendezvoused overhead the ship at about 2,000 feet, then started a climb at 300 knots to get on top of the clouds. Mystic lost sight of us in the thick clouds in the climb, but as we broke out at 27,000 feet he regained sight and joined back up. I was beginning to

think that this was going to be another struggle against not only the Iraqis but also the weather. Our first combat mission had been a real zoo. In fact, the entire deployment up until we had started flying combat missions had been an exercise in frustration and despair.

VMA-331 had deployed aboard the USS *Nassau* (LHA 4) on 18 August 1990 as the ship sat off the coast of North Carolina near Morehead City. On board were the sailors and Marines of the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade and Amphibious Group 2. We were to spend the next 8 months together before returning home.

I was an instructor pilot with VMAT-203 at Cherry Point when the Iraqis invaded Kuwait. I was on leave in Flagstaff, AZ, and called back to my squadron to see if I needed to come off leave early. I was told to just enjoy the rest of my leave. The next morning the admin officer called and told me to get back to Cherry Point that night. I tried to find out what was going on, but he wouldn't tell me a thing. I hung up and told my wife, Jan, that we had to get back immediately, but I didn't know exactly why. She called another Marine's wife and in 5 minutes told me that I had an FCLP (field carrier landing practice) period scheduled for the next morning and that I was sailing onboard the USS *Nassau* with VMA-331 to the Persian Gulf. Again, the wives intel network was ahead of the game.

I flew back to Cherry Point, did two passes in a jet lightly loaded with fuel to one of the Harrier pads and was blessed as "carrier qualified." A few days later I flew an AV-8B with four drop tanks on it onto the *Nassau*. I hadn't flown a jet off a ship in about 2 years but here I was. No big deal for day operations, but that good deal didn't last forever.

For the next 5 months our squadron flew

