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Every Marine a Rifleman: A Badger Harrier Pilot Recalls Taliban Attack

VMA-211, known as the "Wake Island Avengers," has a distinguished combat record stretching from 1937 through the recent fighting in Afghanistan. On Friday, September 14, at 10:15 PM (local time), the squadron was attacked by insurgents at Camp Bastion, in Helmand province, southwestern Afghanistan. The raid caused the greatest one-day air loss since the Vietnam war as well as the heaviest damage sustained by VMA-211 since December 8, 1941. Neither the extent of the damage nor the gallantry of the Marines' counterattack has been fully aired.

A Wisconsin NROTC alumnus, Captain Brett Ackerbauer USMC '05 is assigned to VMA-211 as a pilot flying the AV-8B Harrier. He witnessed the attack and here shares his experience with *Shipmate* readers. [Captain Ackerbauer USMC will be well known to his classmates, while others are familiar with his father, Captain Kris Ackerbauer USN (ret.), who was the CO of the unit 1997-2000 and is presently the secretary of the association.]

Fifteen Taliban armed with rocket-propelled grenades, crew-served machine guns, mortars, and suicide vests followed a network of dry river beds, then cut through a fence designed to protect the flight line. The intruders blew up a Harrier, causing a massive explosion which demolished the plane's canvas hanger. The squadron's CO, LtCol Chris "Otis" Raible USMC, sighted the fireball from his barracks and sped to the scene in his personal vehicle. Finding the airfield under attack, LtCol Raible took charge of the defense.

Only a few mechanics from the night crew were on duty. They were equipped with M-16 rifles but had no body armor on hand. They had been issued only 25 rounds of ammunition. "We were outgunned," Captain Ackerbauer observes (with considerable understatement). Taking the initiative, the mechanics broke out their weapons, defined a defensive perimeter, and sealed their position.

A chaotic firefight commenced. The Taliban held a position between the Marines, mostly mechanics, and the aircraft. Conditions were confused as the enemy were dressed in U.S. Army uniforms. Beards and training shoes were give-aways, but in the darkness the intruders were difficult to identify. The lightly armed Marines managed to pin them down but not until six Harriers were demolished and two more heavily damaged. When the smoke settled, only two of VMA-211's ten jump-jets remained in operational condition. Equipment losses totaled more than \$200 million.

LtCol Raible, carrying only his service pistol, was organizing a counterattack when he was struck by shrapnel and killed. (A second Marine, Sgt. Bradley Atwell of MALS-13, was killed in a separate skirmish during the attack.) The acting squadron XO, Major McDonald, assumed command and requested assistance from a nearby light attack helicopter squadron, HMLA-469. This unit was able to get two AH-1 Cobras and UH-1 Hueys airborne quickly. The Marines of VMA-211 killed at least two of the insurgents with their rifles, but the Cobras and Hueys were able to maneuver around the insurgents and they dispatched the others. Royal Air Force helicopters supported the counterattack, and an RAF quick reaction force fought

"quite admirably." "Air power decided the outcome," Captain Ackerbauer notes. (LtCol Raible, a distinguished officer highly respected by his men, is survived by his wife, Donnella, and their three children.)

The squadron's barracks were just a few hundred yards from the fence line, but the pilots and other personnel were spared from direct fire as the attack focused on their aircraft. When he first heard firing, Captain Ackerbauer was surprised, thinking that maybe "it was a little late" for controlled detonations, which were a common occurrence on the base. But when he and his comrades were told that they were actually under attack, they grabbed M-16's and passed the word that "we're going to secure this position." Tracer fire lighted the sky and a few rounds struck their barracks, but in the moonless night "there was no way of knowing where the enemy were." The squadron's Sergeant Major, an experienced infantry Marine, helped to coordinate the defense, and since all Marines receive infantry training, "we knew what to do."

How the enemy managed to sneak through the wire so easily or why the defenders were armed so lightly are issues which are being resolved. Nonetheless, a mark of military excellence is the ability to adapt under adverse conditions and return fire effectively. At Camp Bastion the men of VMA-211 showed their mettle. They held their position, improvised a defense, counterattacked, devastated their enemy, and kept their personnel loss to just a single man. Their performance honored the memory of their forebears, the pilots and mechanics of VMA-211 who while posted on desolate Wake Island in 1941 were victimized by a sneak attack, were left with little with which to fight, and yet defended their island gallantly. "Remember Wake, Remember Bastion!"



AV-8B Harrier, Camp Bastion, two weeks before the attack

