





VMGR-452 Yankees Mobilize

Story and Art by Morgan Ian Wilbur

In April 2003, Naval Aviation News Art Director Morgan Wilbur spent a day flying with a VMGR-452 aircrew in Iraq. His series of paintings, two of which are shown here, document the Navy and Marines in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Last year, the *Yankees* of Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron (VMGR) 452 were called upon to support three major operations—Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Southern Watch. A reserve KC-130 Hercules squadron established in 1988, VMGR-452 is based at Stewart ANGB, N.Y., and derives its nickname from the New York Yankees. As part of the 4th Marine Air Wing and Marine Aircraft Group 49, the squadron's mission is to be ready for mobilization in time of need. The *Yankees* proved they were ready.

One-third of the squadron had been activated in 2002 for OEF, while the remainder was activated in January 2003 for OIF and began preparations for deployment to the Middle East. The following month the squadron's first group of KC-130Ts departed the United States, destined for the Central Command's area of operations (AOR). Once all of its aircraft, personnel and equipment were in theater, they joined one of the largest gatherings of KC-130s ever assembled, unofficially named the Hercules Air Group (HAG). Along with elements of VMGRs 234 and 352, the squadron began preparations for war in Iraq. The *Yankees* and sister HAG squadrons flew numerous fixed-wing aerial refueling (FWAR) missions in support of Operation Southern Watch, provided AOR lift for the First Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), and supported Task Force

A VMGR-452 Hercules passes over two CH-53s before landing in Iraq. The helicopters are preparing to take off amidst blowing dust while threatening weather moves toward the airfield.

Hurry up and wait! Cpl. Stewart sits on the loading ramp of a C-130 as he scans the tarmac for a load of cargo earmarked for the *Yankees*.

Tarawa with training sorties. The squadron maintenance personnel combined forces with crew members of the other two squadrons to keep the Hercules flying 24 hours a day.

When the war in Iraq began on 19 March, the *Yankees* provided round-the-clock missions to support I MEF. With night vision goggle-capable aircrews, darkness did not impede VMGR-452's assigned missions. The squadron flew FWAR, direct airborne support coordinator and assault support missions, and provided an air bridge into Iraq that kept I MEF on the move. Landing on any surface that would serve as a suitable runway, the aircrews were adept at squeezing every ounce of performance from their Hercules. Flight operations in that region entail subjecting planes and personnel to blowing sand, often with the consistency of talcum powder, that spares no human or machine from its effect.

Supplying the forward arming and refueling points with fuel, ammunition, food and water, the squadron supported their "Devil Dogs" in a relentless push for Baghdad. Squadron aircrews offloaded millions of pounds of gas to coalition aircraft through aerial refueling. VMGR-452 flew casualties from forward locations to rear areas, saving numerous lives. On one mission, the *Yankees* flew seven rescued U.S. prisoners from Iraq to freedom.

As major offensive operations slowed, the squadron flew humanitarian relief missions and delivered much needed supplies to the Iraqi people, while resupplying the Marines in theater.

VMGR-452 skipper Lieutenant Colonel James S. Bradley said, "I am very proud of the *Yankees*' performance during I MEF's historic drive to Baghdad in OIF. It was a team effort from the entire unit. The Marine Herks were critical in providing the assault support to the ground side and aerial refueling for the jets. The versatility of the KC-130 and the Marine aircrews was crucial during a very fluid environment."

The *Yankees* departed the AOR for New York in July 2003, returning to reserve status in September. While attached to I MEF during OIF, the squadron received the Presidential Unit Citation. Later that year, VMGR-452 was awarded the 2003 Safety Excellence Award.

Flying more than 1,300 sorties, they directly contributed to the effectiveness of OIF, OEF and Southern Watch, while contributing to the global war on terrorism. A bond between the Marines on the ground, fighting their way across Iraq, and the *Yankees* of VMGR-452 was forged in combat. ✈

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