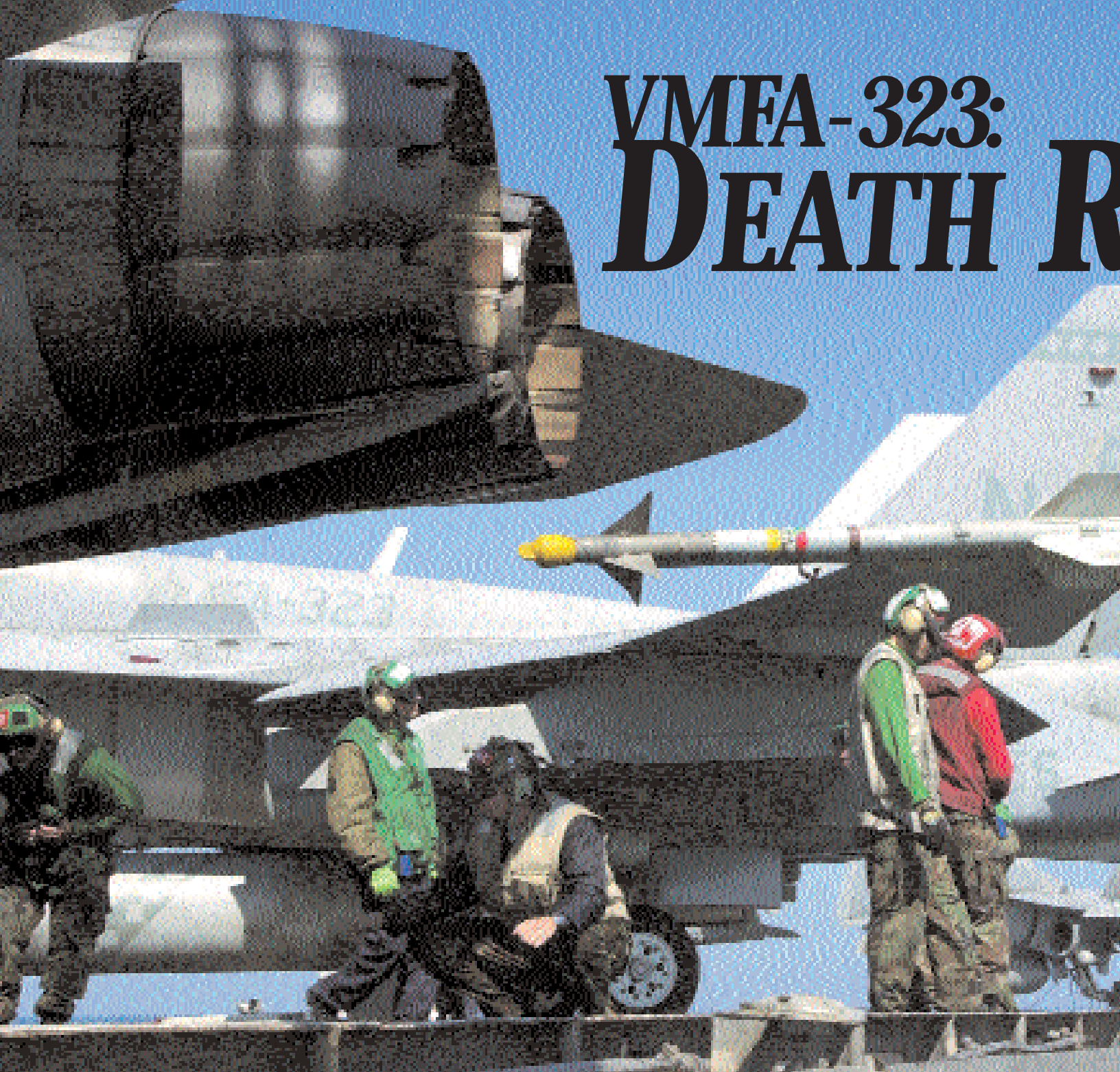


VMFA-323: DEATH R



Photos by Wendy Leland

Constellation (CV 64) began her 21st deployment in November 2002 with a familiar mission ahead: Operation Southern Watch. Then, from her station in the Arabian Gulf, she became a key player in Operation Iraqi Freedom, a fitting end note for the carrier's final deployment before decommissioning.

Among the carrier's jet squadrons, one stood apart as the sole Marine Corps squadron on board. The Marine

Fighter Attack Squadron 323 *Death Rattlers*, MCAS Miramar, Calif., flew the F/A-18C Hornet from *Connie* during two previous Operation Southern Watch deployments. The "Snakes" flew numerous strikes during their third deployment with *Connie* and the subsequent war in Iraq.

While the carrier's May return to her West Coast home port marks the end of the squadron's service on

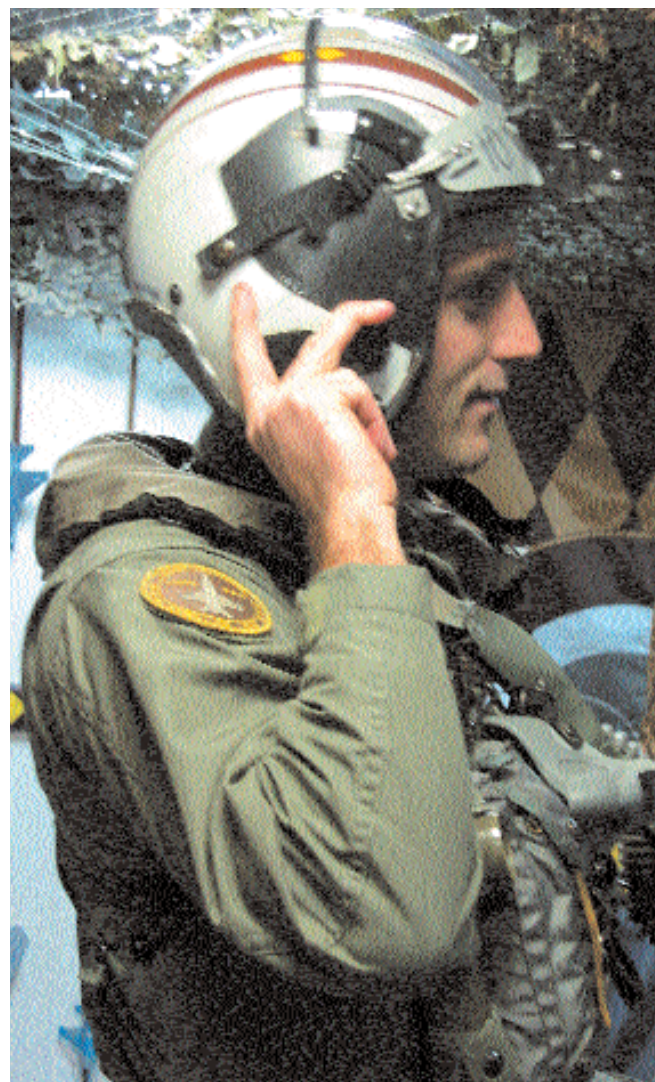
RATTLERS AFLOAT



Above, the VMFA-323 *Death Rattlers* deploy on board *Constellation* (CV 64) with approximately 250 Marines and 12 F/A-18C Hornets. Right, Captain Christopher Cannon suits up in the squadron's ready room.

board *Constellation*, the men and women of VMFA-323 are certain to continue the proud tradition described by their motto: "Come to fight, come to win."

The following photos illustrate the people of VMFA-323 in February, as they awaited the call to war in the Arabian Gulf.





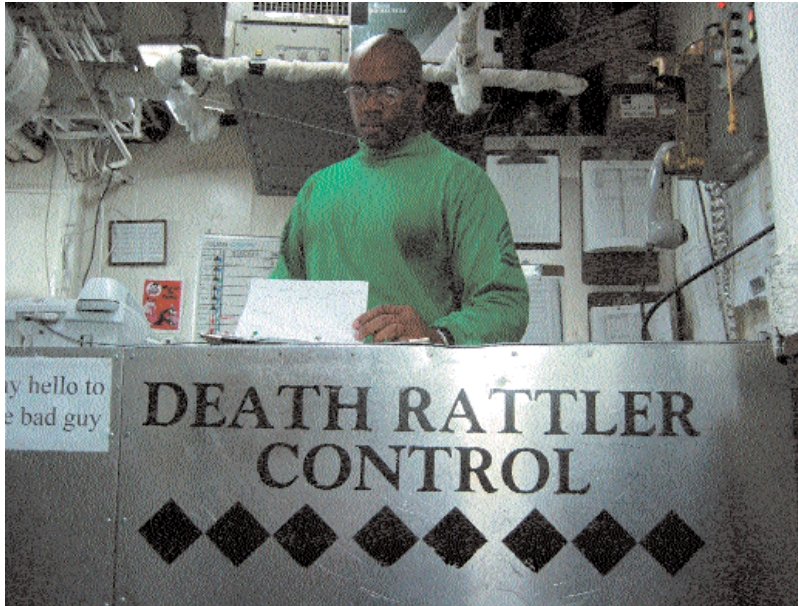
Above, Capt. Christopher Cannon takes a moment to reflect in the “Snakes” ready room as he and a fellow pilot prepare to “walk” for a mission. Left, while all ready rooms are the same on the business end, the VMFA-323 ready room is decorated with a Marine touch. Facing page, Capt. Cannon conducts a preflight inspection of his F/A-18C Hornet.





Above, Gunnery Sergeant Jason Patrick, right, confers with a fellow gunny during maintenance on a squadron F/A-18C on *Constellation's* flight deck. Below, "Snakes" redshirts observe flight operations after loading the Marine F/A-18s with ordnance on deck.





Left, Gunnery Sergeant Jason Patrick reviews the maintenance log of a VMFA-323 Hornet in the squadron's maintenance control spaces. Below right, Corporal John Fuller works on an F/A-18 Hornet engine in the carrier's AIMD shop. The squadron's maintainers integrate with the ship's company. Below left, VMFA-323 CO Colonel Gary Thomas enjoys a lighter moment in the *Death Rattlers'* ready room. Below, culminating the efforts of all the enlisted members and officers, a VMFA-323 F/A-18 Hornet is a blur as it heads toward *Constellation's* bow after a cat shot.

