

Modern USMC Air Power—Aircraft and Units of the Flying ‘Leathernecks’

Author: Joe Copalman, Harpia Publishing, 2020, 253 pages

A book review by COL Jayson A. Altieri (Ret.)

Modern USMC Air Power—Aircraft and Units of the Flying ‘Leathernecks’ by

Joe Copalman is one of the most comprehensive literary studies of U.S. Marine Corps airpower published in the last 20 years. During that time, Marine Corps Aviation adjusted tactics and equipment to meet the demands of the United States’ shift from combatting global insurgencies to peer-state competition that characterized the Cold War a generation ago.

Compared to their counterparts in the U.S. Air Force, Army, and Navy, the U.S. Marine Corps Aviation branch is one of the smallest of the four major U.S. military services’ air arms. The formation of the Marine Corps air arm traces its origins to 1912, when the first Marine Aviator, 1st Lt. Alfred Cunningham, reported for flight training at the Naval Aviation Camp in Annapolis, Maryland, to train in one of four aircraft owned by the U.S. Navy. By 1914 with the coming war in Europe, the Marine Corps was flying land-based aircraft and conducting rudimentary Air-Ground support with its Marine infantry brethren. By the time the Marines went to France in 1917, they were flying DH-4 and DH-9 bombers alongside their British Royal Air Force counterparts, ending the war with experience gained in air-to-air

combat, aerial resupply, and air interdiction operations.

The years between the First and Second World Wars saw the Marine Corps balance the operational requirements to support small wars in China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Honduras, all while facing budget cuts and hostile senior military leaders from inside and outside the Marine Corps. As a result of these challenges, the Corps developed what was to become the foundational principle of Marine Corps Aviation: *‘The only excuse for aviation in any service is its usefulness in assisting the troops on the ground to successfully carry out their missions.’*¹ The Second World War proved to be the crucible by which Marine Corps Aviation would model itself during the rest of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The battles of Wake Island, Guadalcanal, the Philippines, and Okinawa allowed Marine Aviators to successfully apply the theories of the 1920s and 1930s against conventional Japanese land- and sea-based forces. The Cold War saw the advent of jets and helicopters, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars added to the Corps’ combat aviation experience. The divestment of legacy aircraft from the Vietnam era and introduction of digital communications, global position-

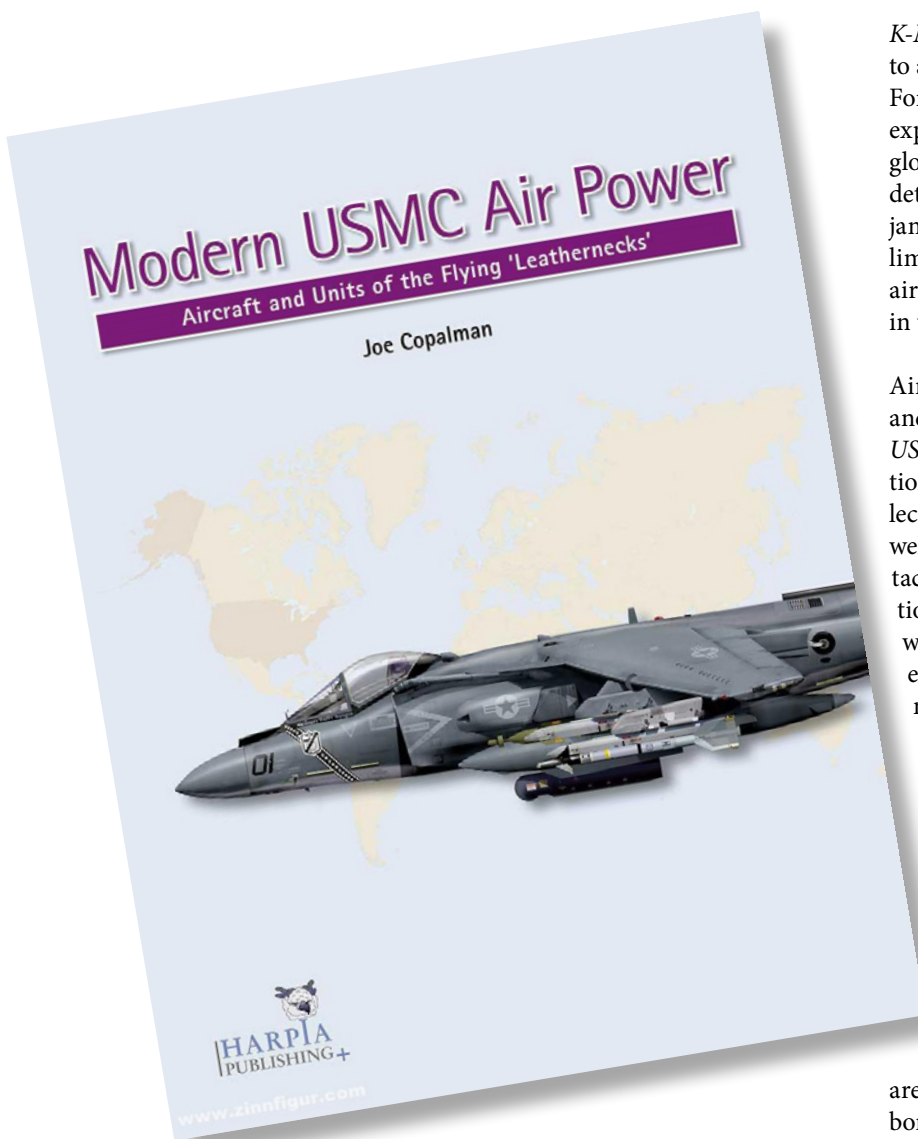
ing systems, “smart munitions,” and virtual takeoff and landing technologies allowed Marine Aviation even greater flexibility on the modern battlespace up to and including the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars.

Modern USMC Air Power covers, through high-quality illustrations and indepth analysis, the full spectrum of U.S. Marine Corps’ combat aviation power. In this book, the author provides 15 very informative chapters ranging from the history and future of Marine Corps Aviation, individual airframes’ current and future capabilities (rotary and fixed wing and unmanned aircraft systems [UAS]) and onboard weapons and defensive systems, Marine Corps aviation training and test and evaluation squadrons, and the composition of each of the Marine Corps’ combat and support squadrons. Additionally, the author’s book adds personal accounts from interviews of active-duty, reserve, and retired pilots and aircrews who operated the current fleet of aircraft, as well as from forward air controllers who relied on the support of the aforementioned aircrews incorporating an important personal dimension to the subject.

Readers of *Modern USMC Air Power* will find this book an excellent reference on how the U.S.

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¹Quote attributed to Alfred Cunningham, First Director of Marine Corps Aviation, 1920.



K-Max platforms—all designed to allow Marine Air-Ground Task Forces to conduct amphibious and expeditionary warfare around the globe. The author also provides detailed information on sensors and jamming pods that help make the limited number of Marine Corps aircraft some of the most versatile in the U.S. arsenal.

Aircraft enthusiasts, wargamers, and modelers will find *Modern USMC Air Power* a valuable addition to their aviation book collection. What is lacking in this well-written book is a chapter on tactical air traffic services and aviation maintenance organizations, as well as fuel/ammunition support equipment vital to the employment of Marine Corps Aviation units. This lack of information on aviation support systems is a common challenge among many books on this topic, but this oversight does not detract from an otherwise well-written book. Finally, while the first-person narratives for current and former Marine Corps Aviators lend credibility to this book, there

are a few instances of editorializing bordering on the book becoming a Marine Corps recruiting brochure. Minor criticisms aside, *Modern USMC Air Power* is a must-have book in any military aviation library.

Marine Corps shifted from its Cold War legacy systems so successful in the First Gulf War—to significant transitions in newer type aircraft like the Lockheed F-35 *Lightning*

II and Bell MV-22 *Osprey*, major upgrades to legacy aircraft like the AH-1Z *Viper* and KC-130 *Hercules*, and adoption of radically new UAS like the RQ-21 *Blackjack* and CQ-24



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