

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Black Sheep Homecoming Members of famed Marine Corps fighter squadron pays visit to World War II station in SB

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Lt. Col. Mark Elfers, commanding officer of the Black Sheep Squadron VMA-214, climbs down from the cockpit of his McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harrier II after arriving in Santa Barbara on Friday afternoon.

BRETT LEIGH DICKS/NEWS-PRESS



F4U Corsair fighter planes of the Black Sheep Squadron fly over the Santa Barbara County Courthouse in 1944.

COURTESY PHOTO

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It was an arrival that had Santa Barbara gazing skyward Friday afternoon.

Four McDonnell Douglas AV-8B Harrier II jet aircraft from the U.S. Marine Corps VMA-214 Black Sheep squadron thundered over the city on their approach to Santa Barbara Municipal Airport.

Their touchdown at the airport was no less dramatic. As the Harriers roared to a halt on the north side of the airfield in front of Hanger Two, they signaled a much anticipated homecoming for the famed Black Sheep.

Now based at the Marine Corps Air Station in Yuma, Ariz., the squadron, then known as VMF-214, was based in Santa Barbara during World War II.

The planes, pilots, and support crew are in Santa Barbara on a two-day visit at the invitation of the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation, a local nonprofit that preserves the Central Coast's rich military history and hosts events throughout the year to support and honor veterans and active duty military.

"This is a homecoming of sorts," said Pete Schenck, a member of the foundation's board and a former Marine corporal who is coordinating the squadron's visit.

"The Black Sheep became heroes as a fighter squadron in World War II led by Pappy Boyington and although they're now based out in Yuma, they were stationed here at Santa Barbara when they returned from the South Pacific."

After a private dinner reception on Friday night at the Montecito home of John

Blankenship, founder of the Pierre Claeysens Veterans Foundation and former Navy pilot, the crew will tour Santa Barbara airport guided by local historian Adam Lewis. During World War II the facility served as Marine Corps Air Station Santa Barbara and was the squadron's home base from January 1944 to April 1945.

The Black Sheep legacy and the role Santa Barbara played in its history is something the current VMA-214 commanding officer, Lt. Col. Mark Elfers, is well aware of.

"The squadron spent nearly a year here before they went back out to finish the war on the USS Franklin," he told the News-Press. "There's a lot of tradition here and this almost feels like the squadron is coming home.

"Santa Barbara provided such a warm welcome when we started to talk about bringing some airplanes and Marines up here. The community here is so supportive of active duty military. That pull was magnetic and that alone would have been enough to entice us to come up."

Flying in with Lt. Col. Elfers Friday were Capt. Joshua Woods, Capt. Kevin Smith, and Maj. Luke Esposito, while Capt. John Baker supervised a ground crew of five who arrived earlier in the day to prepare for the arrival of the four aircraft.

This weekend's visit came about after the death last September of the last surviving member of Pappy Boyington's original Black Sheep squadron, Staff Sgt. Ken Thompson. Mr. Thompson's daughter, Martha Zicherman, a Carpinteria resident, reached out to Lt. Col. Elfers about a possible Marine Corps tribute to her father. Lt. Col. Elfers contacted Mr. Schenck and arranged for several VMA-214 squadron members to attend Mr. Thompson's memorial service in Santa Barbara.

"Lt. Col. Elfers and I kept in touch and I invited him and his wife to our Military Ball last November," Mr. Schenck said. "His plans changed and unfortunately couldn't make it, but he said that since the squadron was stationed in Santa Barbara he could arrange for some of his guys to come up for a 'homecoming.' About a month ago he contacted me and said they would come in May."

Marine Fighter Squadron 214 was commissioned in 1942 in Hawaii. Formed under the leadership of former Flying Tiger and Medal of Honor awardee Maj. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, the squadron was created out of 27 unassigned pilots.

Given its origins, in August 1943 the unit adopted the nickname of Black Sheep and chose the black shield of illegitimacy for its badge.

The Black Sheep's World War II campaign in the South Pacific included destroying or damaging 203 enemy aircraft, sinking a number of transport and supply ships and the destruction of numerous land installations.

Their deeds were later immortalized in the 1970s television series "Baa Baa Black Sheep," starring Robert Conrad as Boyington.

After their World War II triumph, the squadron regrouped in Santa Barbara before

relocating to El Centro in April 1945 and moving again a few months later to El Toro. In 1950, VMF-214 was the first Marine squadron to see action in the Korean War. Its designation was changed in 1957 from a fighter to an attack squadron and it was renamed VMA-214. The unit later served in Vietnam.

The Black Sheep relocated to Yuma in 1982 and in 1989 became the first operational squadron of AV-8B Night Attack Harrier II aircraft. VMA-214 has subsequently been deployed in operations in Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Kuwait and Yemen, and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The squadron has an incredible history," said Mr. Blankenship, who was on hand Friday to welcome the airmen. "They were probably the most famous Marine fighter squadron to come out of the Second World War. Now they're flying the Harriers, but back when they were here in Santa Barbara they flew the F4U Corsair, which was a real beast to fly."

Flying the Harriers in and out of Santa Barbara is something Lt. Col. Elfers could get used to. "This is a real pilot's airplane," he said. "We don't have a computer in here that tells the airplane what to do, so it's a real pleasure to fly."

"And flying into here over the water with the mountains right there was just great. We saw fishermen down there with the birds hovering above them like a cloud. Santa Barbara is such a beautiful place, it's a real joy to fly in here."