

The Future of Marine Corps Aviation



By Lt. Gen. Mike Hough, Deputy Commandant for Aviation

I recently assumed the duties of Deputy Commandant for Aviation from Lieutenant General “Spider” Nyland, now the Assistant Commandant. I am truly blessed and honored to hold this position, and I intend to continue the tradition of professional excellence established by those who held the position before me. Since this is my first chance to address you in this magazine, I would like to take the opportunity to share with you my vision for the future of Marine Aviation.



We are facing a period of great transformation. Over the course of the next 10 to 15 years, most of what we have in Marine Aviation will change. This includes Tactical Air (TacAir) Integration, legacy-to-modern aircraft transition, Marine Air Command and Control System modernization, and new basing requirements. The management of this change will dictate the Marine Corps’ future for the next half century. We will harness this transformation as a total force Aviation Combat Element (ACE) composed of *four* Marine Aircraft Wings in order to maintain operational flexibility and retain our culture within our capstone operational concept, Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare. I want to stress that the 4th Marine Aircraft Wing is an equal player within our ACE and fills a crucial role in the future success of Marine Aviation.

The one thing that will not change, however, is our professionalism and expeditionary culture. My top priorities are and will remain the accomplishment of our mission and the welfare of our people. I would like to express my vision for our future across four themes: safety, budget, Aviation Transition Plan, and TacAir Integration.

Safety. Aviation *and* ground safety are my primary focus. My goal is to attain the highest possible combat readiness to support Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare, while preserving and conserving our most precious assets—our Marines, Sailors and equipment. I see leadership as the key to aviation safety, and I continue to work with the force, wing, group and in some instances squadron commanders at our quarterly Marine Air Boards to discuss safety issues. I expect the aviation leadership throughout the chain of command to stick to the basics: take care of people, make the right decisions, lead by example, use their heads, and focus on mishap prevention. I am holding Marine leadership accountable, but I am also giving these leaders the tools to make their jobs easier,

including standardized training and readiness manuals and tactical standard operating procedures, and a newly initiated crew resource management working group. My intent is to use these tools to improve safety by sufficiently preparing Marines for combat so that when they do go to war, they don’t experience situations for the first time, such as high-altitude flight, mountain area landings, and brownout.

Budget. The Marine Corps is planning for our requirement to remain a “Force in Readiness.” We are programming our needs, not our wants. We have in the recent past during the era of downsizing, and to some degree today, had to do more with less as a matter of necessity. Our Marine Aviation Campaign Plan represents a significant effort toward mitigating the strain of operating legacy aircraft through the transitions.

Aviation Transition Plan. As we transition to new aircraft, we continue to modernize existing aircraft to ensure readiness and warfighting relevance. The key to success will be the careful balancing of people and equipment that allows us to also maintain combat readiness. The Marine Aviation transformation involves over 20 years of aircraft transitions and modernization in an effort to maintain combat superiority and tactical relevance in an uncertain security environment. This neck-down strategy hinges on reducing the number of type model aircraft and procuring weapon systems that maximize commonality in support requirements. The intent is to maintain relevant forces while reducing the logistics burden on the commander. Our Aviation Transition Plan will support Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare and provide enhanced strategic agility, operational reach, tactical flexibility, support and sustainment, and joint/multinational enabling.

TacAir Integration. The Navy and Marine Corps team have embarked on a TacAir Integration plan that will enhance core combat capabilities and provide a more potent, cohesive and affordable fighting force. A cornerstone of this plan is Department of the Navy (DON) funding and maintenance of legacy aircraft at the highest levels of readiness until replacement by the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF). This requires an unwavering commitment to a heightened strike fighter readiness across the DON. The readiness levels associated with integration will allow the DON to surge more aircraft than is within our means today.

We recently signed a TacAir Integration Memorandum of Understanding and Memorandum of Agreement with the Navy. The days of doing it on our own are over, and we must work together as a Navy-Marine Corps team to



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A Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323 F/A-18C Hornet prepares to launch from *Constellation* (CVN 64) operating in the Arabian Gulf in February 2003.

ensure continued wellness of TacAir in the DON. My philosophy for the success of Marine Aviation is a single naval solution using one team and one vision. TacAir Integration allows us to better meet our 21st century requirements while simultaneously increasing efficiencies, unifying our core Naval Aviation competencies, and maintaining our unique Marine expeditionary culture. The TacAir Integration plan reduces 1 TacAir squadron in the 4th Marine Aircraft Wing and adds 6 additional Marine TacAir squadrons to carrier battle groups for a total of 10. Conversely, the Navy accepts the reduction of three active and one reserve TacAir squadron and commits three strike fighter squadrons to the Marine Unit Deployment Program. Additionally, both the Navy and the Marine Corps will make reductions in the primary aircraft authorized of current F/A-18 Hornet and future JSF squadrons in support of TacAir Integration. These adjustments will provide a more capable force, ensure better utilization of our precious assets, and create significant savings that will be applied to Navy and Marine Corps recapitalization. Naval TacAir, with a smaller more efficient force, will continue to provide combatant commanders and joint force commanders with a flexible, scalable, full-spectrum response capability from the sea. While modernization remains a high priority, the legacy aircraft that we fly today must serve the Corps for many years to come.

I would like to close by discussing the roles of some of our deployed aviation units. The *Flying Nightmares* of Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 513 deployed to Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, in October 2002, and have flown over 250 sorties totaling more than 1,000 flight hours in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (see pp. 18–21). From their austere base located over 5,000 feet above sea level, the AV-8B Harrier IIs provide close air support,

armed escort of aircraft and vehicle convoys, and air cover during helicopter insertions and

extractions.

The Harriers of VMA-513 are equipped with the Litening II targeting pod, which gives pilots the ability to laser-designate targets for precision munitions and mark spots on the ground with infrared energy. This function has put the Harriers in Afghanistan in high demand. Coalition and sister service forces regularly request the Litening II pod capability to accurately locate and identify enemy positions. Since VMA-513's arrival in theater, 100 percent of their precision ordnance drops have been direct hits.

The AV-8B that we fly today is not the same aircraft we flew 10 years ago. During the last decade, the Harrier has developed from a day, ground-attack aircraft to a night, adverse-weather precision strike platform. The AV-8B remanufacture program has updated the Harrier into a more capable and reliable aircraft that possesses a night-attack avionics suite, the APG-65 multimode radar, and a more powerful and reliable Pegasus 408 engine. Clearly, the deployment of a squadron of AV-8Bs to the expeditionary environment of Afghanistan to fight in the global war on terrorism illustrates the combat relevance that the Harrier brings to the fight. Additionally, our helicopters, KC-130 Hercules tankers and Harriers that make up the Aviation Combat Elements of the deployed Marine Expeditionary Units (Special Operations Capable), our squadrons deployed as part of the Unit Deployment Program, our EA-6B Prowlers, and our Marine Air Control Group personnel continue to provide a force in readiness to support our combatant commanders.

I look forward to sharing Marine Aviation with the readers of *Naval Aviation News* in the months to come. Warm regards and *Semper Fidelis*.