

Marine Corps Prowlers Meet Global Demands

Story and Photos by Rick Llinares

As the U.S. military's sole tactical electronic warfare aircraft, the EA-6B Prowler supports joint operations around the globe. Whether escorting high-value strike assets into hostile territory in the Balkans or supporting combat missions in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Navy and Marine Corps Prowler squadrons are heavily tasked.

Although the Prowler serves in far greater numbers in Navy carrier air wings, the aircraft owes its genesis to the Marine Corps. During the Vietnam War, the Marines

began operating a variant of the A-6 Intruder, designated EA-6A, as a replacement for the EF-10B Skyknight. The aircraft's success in surveillance and jamming did not go unnoticed by Navy planners, and they developed a dedicated requirement for a carrier-based electronic warfare aircraft.

The early EA-6As were concentrated within already existing Marine Composite Reconnaissance Squadrons VMCI-1, -2 and -3. These units also included RF-4B Phantom IIs until 1975, when it was determined that

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EA-6B Prowlers like this pair from VMAQ-2 provide direct electronic protection to ground forces.

the two aircraft types should be operated by separate squadrons. All of the former composite squadron EA-6As were sent to VMCF-2, which became Marine Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron (VMAQ) 2 on 1 July 1975. Two years later, the squadron transitioned to the EA-6B. Reserve squadron VMAQ-4 stood up on 21 May 1981 and flew the EA-6A until transitioning to the EA-6B in 1991. On 1 July 1992 VMAQ-2 was split into three squadrons, designated VMAQ-1, -2 and -3, and in October of that year VMAQ-4 became a regular Marine Corps squadron. All four Marine Prowler squadrons are part of the 2nd Marine Air Wing, Marine Air Group 14, based at MCAS Cherry Point, N.C.

Lieutenant Colonel James Stewart, an EA-6B electronic countermeasures officer (ECMO) and U.S. Marine Corps EA-6B requirements officer, detailed the current status of the Prowler fleet. "Between the Navy and Marine Corps, 95 EA-6Bs are authorized for service, 74 of which are operational. The remainder are in depots for wing fatigue repairs and ongoing equipment enhancement. We expect that by October 2005 the force will be back to 95 airframes available to combatant commanders. The Marine Corps is authorized 20 Prowlers within its four VMAQ units, providing 5 aircraft per squadron. At this time, 16 aircraft are available and 4 are in Northrop Grumman's St. Augustine, Fla., repair facility."

Lt. Col. Stewart described the value of the Prowler to Marine Aviation: "Force protection is an absolutely vital part of the Prowler's mission and contribution. The aircraft provides direct electronic protection to ground forces, and not just its traditional suppression of enemy air defenses role with the ALQ-99 jamming system and AGM-88 High Speed Anti-Radiation Missile. Communications jamming and electronic attack supporting our soldiers and Marines maneuvering on the ground is a critical mission for the Prowler. The aircraft's endurance allows it to conduct real-time electronic intelligence gathering, which immediately can be relayed to forces in theater, or saved and analyzed post flight. Prowlers are protecting and supporting U.S. and coalition air forces, both fixed and

rotary wing, as well as Marines and special operations forces."

The Prowler continues to evolve to meet ongoing needs. "The addition of the USQ-113 communications jammer to the EA-6B in the mid-1990s has really been a growth aspect for the community. The jammer first saw action over Iraq and Kosovo, Yugoslavia, in the late 1990s, but its utility blossomed in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. ECMO-1, who occupies the front right seat, handles the system. Either of the two ECMOs in the rear cockpit can download mission planning data from a laptop onto the aircraft systems during preflight, and provide redundant control ability during the mission," Stewart explained.





All Marine Corps Prowlers, including these of VMAQ-1, are part of the 2nd Marine Air Wing, Marine Air Group 14, MCAS Cherry Point, N.C.

As the platform nears the end of its service life, it continues to be heavily tasked. “The Prowler allows Naval Aviation to force its way into denied airspace and recapture it. We are deploying the Prowler with great effectiveness, employing ‘nonkinetic fires’ when we don’t want to destroy target areas but rather isolate and blind the enemy without leaving physical destruction that we would have to go in and repair,” Stewart continued. “Examples of this include delivering psychological operations messages and isolating high value targets. As technology expands our capabilities, we can meet the more advanced levels of threats we expect to face.”

Continuing upgrades and repairs will keep the Prowler fleet flying through the end of its service life, projected to be around 2015, when it will be replaced by a follow-on platform that is yet to be decided. Stewart explained, “At this time, the plan favors an electronic attack variant of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which the Corps is planning to procure as a replacement for the F/A-18 and AV-8B. The Marine Corps continues to keep all follow-on airborne electronic attack platform options open, including unmanned solutions, the EA-18G, or adding ‘clip-in’ electronic warfare functionality to current aircraft. The Marine Air-Ground Task Force will continue to face advanced threats and we need to select the optimal solution to provide the Corps with maximum flexibility for the future.” In the meantime, the Marine Corps Prowler fleet will continue to proudly support military operations around the globe. ✈

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