

TacAir Integration: Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Story and Photos by Cdr. Paul Mackley



A historic document signed on 14 August 2002 by the Secretary of the Navy, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and the Chief of Naval Operations began the process of tactical air (TacAir) integration. Days later, the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Warfare Requirements and Programs) and the Deputy Commandant for Aviation, USMC, signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) to merge Navy and Marine Corps tactical air into a seamless Naval Aviation force at sea and ashore. This MOA supercedes one drafted in 1997 to integrate four Marine F/A-18 Hornet squadrons in carrier air wings.

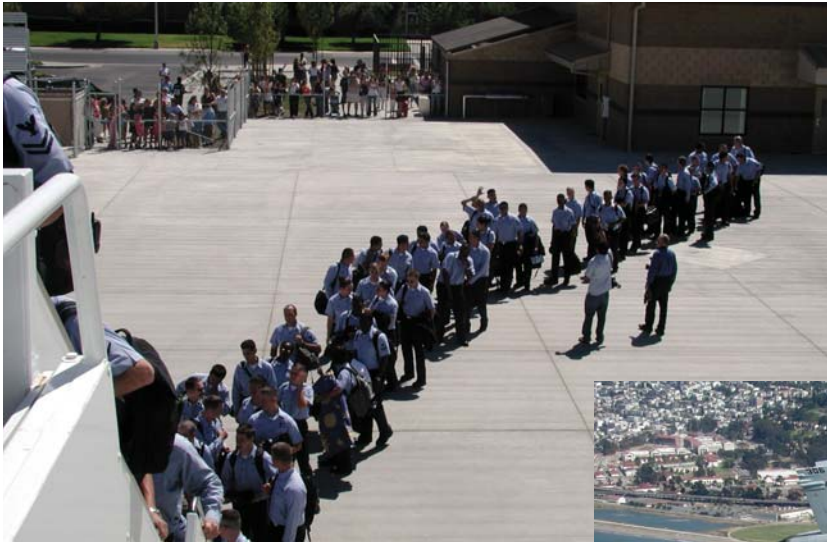
Under the agreement, three Navy squadrons will participate in the Marine Corps' Unit Deployment Program (UDP) rotation, deploying to the western Pacific with the Marines for approximately six months at a time. The agreement also calls for one Marine F/A-18 squadron to be assigned to each of the 10 Navy

air wings. This integration of TacAir assets will allow the Navy and Marine Corps to surge more aircraft than would otherwise be possible, and allow the exact mix of forces to flow where required, whether ashore or at sea.

As the layers of leadership in both organizations pondered the implications of TacAir integration, Strike Fighter Squadron 97 prepared to become the first Navy squadron to deploy under the new plan. But first, the Warhawks had to complete an 8-month deployment as part of Carrier Air Wing 11, deployed aboard *Nimitz* (CVN 68) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). This deployment concluded on 5 November 2003.



Warhawks 201 flies over Japan in October 2004 during VFA-97's first UDP deployment.



Left, VFA-97 personnel depart NAS Lemoore on 12 September 2004 for the squadron's first UDP deployment. Below, Warhawks 306 flies over the Golden Gate Bridge in June 2004. Below, the view from the cockpit of a Warhawks Hornet as it approaches Iwakuni's runway 02 on final.



The Unit Deployment Program is quite unlike any carrier deployment, and the squadron was sure to need some assistance. At first, it was difficult to find anyone willing to admit that a Navy F/A-18 squadron was going to deploy to Iwakuni, Japan. Rumors had floated around of possible squadrons and various notes were scribbled at TacAir Integration Team meetings, but the word had not come down from on high that UDP was actually happening. The VAQ-133 Garudas offered assistance based on their expeditionary deployments.

The most obvious difference between expeditionary and carrier deployments involved logistics. Carrier Navy is used to throwing everything in tri-walls (triple thickness cardboard boxes approximately three feet square), strapping them to pallets, and loading them on trucks. At the other end, you unload the trucks, unload the tri-walls, and hump your gear to work centers, ready

rooms, and berthing. Cube and weight are not critical, or even known. On VAQ-133's recommendation, we assigned a department head as the first Navy F/A-18 squadron logistics officer (S-4 in USMC speak). LCdr. Edward Plott quickly got up to speed by contacting anyone and everyone he could in the Marines, Navy, or Air Force. Our first training detachment of the turnaround was a trial run using a dual role KC-10 and packing things light.



Operating from land bases throughout the region is business as usual during a UDP deployment. Right, VFA-97 officers and chiefs celebrate the end of an exercise at Korat, Thailand, in November 2004. Below, AO2 Adams drives a SATS loader as Warhawks ordnancemen guide the loading of Mk 83 bombs in Thailand on 26 October 2004.



traditional exercise, building up from small unit operations to full-scale maneuver warfare at the battalion level. Instead, this CAX would emphasize convoy and urban operations like those happening every day on the ground in Iraq, meaning that the strategic expeditionary landing field at Twentynine Palms would be wall-to-wall helicopters. With this training opportunity gone, VFA-97 would have to shift operations to MCAS Miramar.

During the 3-week detachment, the Warhawks flew over 300 hours and expended over 162,000 pounds of ordnance, exercising every

With the assistance of a U.S. Air Force load planning and verifying team, the squadron managed to transport six F/A-18s, 23,000 pounds of equipment, and 50 personnel to Savannah, Ga., via KC-10. This essential training det was very successful from an operational standpoint, but also highlighted our lack of logistical experience. Unfortunately with OIF underway, the Marine Corps was stretched too thin to assign an embarkation specialist to our squadron. More assistance from Marine UDP squadrons and additional schooling helped us develop a fairly robust logistics team. With logistics now on line, the next focus was to be the highlight of our turnaround training plan: Combined Arms Exercise (CAX) 6-04.

Initial planning for CAX included preparations for staying in “field” conditions on site at MCAS Twentynine Palms, Calif. However, OIF modified the training syllabus for CAX. This would not be a

possible type of close air support. We simulated and dropped ordnance during the day and night; in urban complex scenarios; under ground control, F/A-18 Hornet control, and AH-1 Cobra control; and any combination thereof. Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA(AW)) 242 graciously provided their expertise to our pilots and superb support to our maintenance efforts. While pilots trained to integrate seamlessly into the Marine Air Ground Task Force, maintenance personnel were learning skills specific to Marine Corps operations. Thanks to Marine Wing Support Squadron (MWSS) 373, fourteen Warhawks sailors earned their High-Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicle licenses. In addition, MWSS-373 provided training to our ordnance personnel to qualify on the short airfield tactical loader—a flattened forklift used in loading weapons in expeditionary settings.

In addition to air and ground training specific to aviation, all personnel were treated to some quality time in



Above, VFA-97 Hornets fly with an Air Force KC-10 during the training det in Georgia in March 2004. Right, Warhawks 213 tanks from a Marine C-130 on 16 November 2004 during the squadron's first UDP cycle.



gas mask confidence training. Marine Aircraft Group 11's Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defense Team provided the professional instructors, facilities, and equipment to conduct several hours of chemical and biological training in the effects of agents and preventative measures, concluding with exposure to gas in the gas chamber. The course taught the Warhawks that protective gear is effective with proper training and practice. CAX 6-04 was absolutely essential in enabling all squadron personnel to learn Marine Corps language, rank structure, military occupational specialties, and organization. Although the Navy and Marine Corps perform almost identical functions in aviation, they use different terminology. MAG-11, led by Colonel Earl Wederbrook, was an outstanding host and instrumental in the success that VFA-97 enjoyed.

Following CAX, key players including CO Cdr. Chris Earl, XO Cdr. Paul Mackley, logistics officer/operations officer LCDr. Scott Tingle, maintenance officers Lt. Rick Perez and Ltjg. Suzy Richardson, maintenance/material control officer Ltjg. Ron Delgado, AFCM Steve Barbour, PNC Brian Wheeler, IT1 Dave McAlpine, and AZ1 Gary Sullivan made a site visit to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan. The visit provided MAG-12 personnel their first opportunity to talk directly to members of the squadron that would soon come under their operational control. MCAS Iwakuni has every facility found on any air base, but would not be our home for much of our fast-approaching

deployment. UDP squadrons spend about half of their time deployed away from Iwakuni in support of international exercises and other training opportunities. MAG-12 CO Colonel Stephen Pomeroy emphasized logistical capability in addition to the obvious operational requirements. We take for granted many things when we deploy in the U.S. In MAG-12's area of operations, you can't take for granted that electricity, transportation, communication, water, or billeting will be available unless you coordinate properly. Remote locations in Thailand, the Philippines, or even Bangladesh have varying levels of support. The site visit brought the UDP picture into proper perspective and highlighted areas that needed more attention.

While VFA-97 personnel were now familiar with USMC operations from an aviation standpoint, our ground skills were lacking. Earlier attempts to receive ground training were unsuccessful due to impending OIF deployments. Marine Corps ranges and other training resources were working overtime to support USMC ground and aviation units. With no additional time available, VFA-97 sought M-16 and 9mm

training at our home base, NAS Lemoore, Calif. NAS Lemoore security personnel provided M-16 familiarization and range experience for 92 squadron members. The officers were each given 9mm familiarization and range experience as well. Again, due to impending real world operations, squadron personnel were unable to train with 782-gear (flak jacket, Kevlar helmet, sleeping bags, and other essential field gear).

During this training, VFA-97 continued to fly necessary tactical training sorties and conduct required turnaround evolutions. The Warhawks completed the same inspections as any other Navy strike fighter squadron. One of the main hurdles is the Conventional Weapons Technical Proficiency Inspection conducted by the Strike Fighter Weapons School, Pacific. Their ordnance and avionics personnel inspect every aspect of aircraft avionics testing, safe ordnance loading, and ordnance expenditure. Personnel like CWO3 Mike Patek,

CWO2 Ramsaur, AO1 Brink, AO1 Klein, AT2 Fagg, and AT3 Schmahl led the Warhawks maintenance, ordnance, and avionics team and completed the inspection with a zero/zero, indicating no major or minor discrepancies.

As the turnaround wound down, VFA-97 began to transfer aircraft to other commands. This logistical move is yet another reality of TacAir integration, albeit a painful one. As aircraft were being transferred at NAS Lemoore, we sent 27 personnel to Japan to accept 13 F/A-18C aircraft from VMFA-212. Clearly, a 10-month turnaround with all the additional requirements was not optimal for learning all the necessary Marine Corps tasks, however it did contain most of the key elements. VFA-97 will build upon this experience for our next UDP cycle. ✈️

Cdr. Mackley is the CO of VFA-97 and has been deployed to Iwakuni, Japan, since 12 September 2004.

