

GUNSLINGERS MOUNT NEW STEEDS



By Lt. Paul Oyler

What does it take to transition from Hornets to . . . Hornets? VFA-105 spent six months exploring that question. As the first East Coast squadron to make the transition from F/A-18Cs to F/A-18Es, the Gunslingers navigated uncharted waters. The squadron, based at NAS Oceana, Va., aimed to set the standard for future transitions as they prepared for an intense Safe-For-Flight (SFF) inspection.

At first glance, the two aircraft might easily be mistaken for each other. Upon closer inspection, however, the rectangular intakes and huge leading edge extensions of the Super Hornet stand out as obvious distinguishing features. Inside, it is an entirely new warplane. Nearly every system has been updated, upgraded, redesigned, or reconfigured. In most cases,

these changes are the product of lessons learned the hard way. As experienced Hornet maintainers, VFA-105's sailors were in a unique position to appreciate the work Boeing's engineers had done to improve upon the F/A-18's original design.

Trading in aging legacy Hornets for Super Hornets took more than a trip to the factory. Transferring the old aircraft and accepting the new ones was arguably the easiest part of the process. Maintainers spent weeks at E/F Differences School, or months temporarily assigned to VFA-106, or both. LPOs and program managers worked endless hours surveying tools, reworking training jackets and program binders, accepting new Individual Material Readiness Lists, and setting up their shops.

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Above, a pair of VFA-105 F/A-18E Super Hornets fly over the Atlantic Ocean off the Virginia coast on 17 July. Photo by Rick Llinares. Facing page, squadron maintainers perform final checks as the Gunslingers prepare for their first Super Hornet sortie on 14 July. Photo by Lt. Paul Oyler.



The atmosphere inside Hangar 145 on Friday, 14 July was electric with anticipation. In the Ready Room the Wing Maintenance Officer (MO), Cdr. Chris Kennedy, presented the SFF inspection results to the Gunslingers' front office and top maintenance personnel. The room was full, but the Wing MO spoke directly to VFA-105 CO Cdr. Douglas Verissimo. The inspectors' findings and conclusions were summarized in an outline that took less than 30 minutes to talk through. Overall the Gunslingers had performed superbly.

Cdr. Kennedy highlighted the performance of key players in the squadron's maintenance team and praised the work every member had done in preparation for the inspection. He concluded with a reminder that more inspections were soon to follow. Commander, Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic Capt. John McCandlish followed the Wing MO's remarks with some general comments about the future of Naval Aviation and the challenges and capabilities that these new Lot 28 F/A-18Es brought with them. He congratulated the skipper on the squadron's successful completion of the SFF inspection and VFA-105's redesignation as a Super Hornet squadron. In a

Navy steeped in tradition and ceremony, the informality of this milestone announcement made a stark contrast. With no pomp, no flair, no red carpet or pressed uniforms, the Gunslingers closed one volume of their storied history and began another.

Immediately following the SFF inspection debrief, VFA-105's maintainers leapt into action, with a two-plane sortie to launch and an acceptance inspection to perform. In the blink of an eye, a squadron that had for more than a year concerned itself more with paperwork and formatting returned its focus to aircraft and wrench-turning. The morning's anticipation was quickly replaced by enthusiasm as eager hands went to work on their own jets at last.

For each member of VFA-105, what it took to make the transition from Hornets to Super Hornets is a unique question with a unique answer. The successful completion of the Safe-for-Flight inspection is a testimony to the commitment of the Gunslinger team to each other and their mission. ✈

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Below, Gunslingers personnel gather along the flight line to welcome VFA-105 CO Cdr. Douglas Verissimo and LCdr. Mike Amos following the squadron's first F/A-18E sortie on 14 July. Right, Cdr. Verissimo debriefs AD1 John Davis on his jet's performance. Photos by Lt. Paul Oyler.

