



BACK TO THE FUTURE IN THE F/A-18A+

By Lt. Frank J. Weisser

In late 2006 Strike Fighter Squadron 87 bade a fond farewell to the F/A-18C Hornet and moved forward equipped with the lightweight fighting machine known as the F/A-18A+. Why would a successful team such as the Golden Warriors fly an older aircraft with fewer toys? CO Cdr. Frank Morley explained, “If you have a challenging and critical task to be accomplished for the betterment of the Navy, you want to minimize risk and give it to a proven performer that is up for the task.”

Naval Aviation values the F/A-18A+ airframes because they have more useful life remaining than most

F/A-18Cs flying today. Despite the low bureau numbers, the F/A-18A+s are, relatively speaking, newer airplanes because they have significantly fewer hours and traps on the airframes. The fatigue life expectancy and the trap count are considerably lower on the F/A-18A+s, which last served as U.S. Navy Reserve assets, than the F/A-18Cs the Golden Warriors previously flew.

From the beginning of the transition in mid-September 2006 to its conclusion in late November, squadron personnel faced the challenges of accepting and transferring aircraft while continuing to fly at least



A VFA-87 Hornet traps aboard *Harry S. Truman* (CVN 75) during carrier qualifications on 20 January off the Virginia coast.

a four-jet flight schedule. Nearly every shop in the command was affected by the transition. Maintenance/Material Control Officer CWO3 Jeffrey Brewer described the transition's impact on VFA-87's aviation maintenance administrationmen. "The magnitude of screening List 2s and List 4s for the technical directives in compliance with the appropriate log book directives was a monumental task, and those sailors in Logs and Records had their hands full for the entirety of the two month swap." In addition powerplants personnel adapted to a less advanced fuel system, which is more maintenance intensive and more difficult to troubleshoot. The aviation structural mechanics also said goodbye to the NACES ejection seats and onboard oxygen generating system, and embraced the SJU-5/6 ejection seats and LOX bottles. And the aviation electricians became accustomed to changing Kapton wiring, which has the tendency to crack after rapid heating.

Squadron maintainers were responsible for the acceptance inspections on all new F/A-18A+s and transfer inspections on all F/A-18Cs, while still maintaining "up" aircraft for the flight schedule. Working with two sets of maintenance instructions for two different jets, and multiple shops working in the same area with multiple tool boxes, could have led to confusion. However, the Golden Warriors leadership and the Safety Department ensured that VFA-87 continued its tradition of operating safely during the transition. In addition, Commander, Strike Fighter Wing Atlantic, coordinated training for the Golden Warriors maintainers affected by the transition. VFC-12 conducted training on the fuel system for the Golden Warriors powerplants



Above, AEAN Kelly Taylor, VFA-87's Plane Captain of the Year, works on one of the squadron's F/A-18A+ Hornets. Right, a pilot with the Golden Warriors maneuvers a legacy Hornet above NAS Oceana, Va. Below, flight deck crewmembers converge on a VFA-87 Hornet aboard Harry S. Truman (CVN 75) on 20 January.





shop and VFA-106 loaned ejection seats and LOX bottles for AME training.

The ultimate key to success was working as a team with all transferring and receiving commands. The Golden Warriors received six F/A-18A+s from VFC-12, one from VFA-201, and three from VFA-204, and transferred one F/A-18C to VFA-15 and eight to VFC-12. Tiger teams ensured each aircraft was up to standards on both the transferring and receiving ends, resulting in not only an on time delivery, but more importantly a safe and professional exchange of aircraft.

While balancing the logistical elements of the transition itself, the Golden Warriors also had to adapt to the challenges of operating an older aircraft with fewer capabilities on the battlefield. For example, the Multifunctional Information Distribution System (MIDS) employed in newer Hornets is not utilized in the A+ model. Commonly referred to as “Link-16,” MIDS uses digital communication links to exchange real-time data and voice information among air, ground, and sea elements—allowing aircrew to see targets and positions

of friendly and enemy forces by simply pushing a few buttons, rather than finding them one by one with precise coordinates and radar searches. Although not currently approved for retrofit into the F/A-18A+, “our pilots, from the most senior to the newest check-ins, take part in MIDS training in the simulator,” Cdr. Morley explained. “We cannot afford to have aircrew uncomfortable with using MIDS, or unprepared to operate in theater and utilize the system. Until MIDS is incorporated into F/A-18A+s, Golden Warriors aircrew will master fundamental employment skills through a disciplined and aggressive training plan.”

As the Golden Warriors journeyed into the past for a time, squadron personnel continued to keep their sights set on the future. “We welcomed the challenge because it was for the betterment of the overall team, and we gladly took on our charge to make the oldest of the F/A-18 line combat ready. The Navy made an excellent decision to extend the life of legacy Hornets, and we understand our role and the significance of this evolution.” ✈

Lt. Weisser is a pilot with VFA-87.