USMC's Air-Group Task Force

HQMC Department of Aviation

Building Marine Aviation of Tomorrow…Today

The Department of Aviation at Headquarters Marine Corps is accountable to the Commandant for the Marine Corps' Title 10 responsibilities with respect to aviation. To that end, HQMC Aviation must supervise the manning, training, and equipping of the force. It provides the best Marines to the fleet, ensures those Marines are properly trained to win the nation's battles and are retained in sufficient numbers, and achieves maximum readiness from our old and new gear.

We demand much from our Marines, and we will continue to do so as they operate and maintain our legacy platforms while transitioning into newer, more complex ones. As we examine how to better man, train, and equip our units to succeed operationally, HQMC must seek ways to improve the institutions that train aviation Marines, while also reducing timelines that delay our Marines' entry in the fleet and reduce their impact on operational units. Marine Corps Aviation in the Pentagon is linked tightly with the operating forces. It is focused on getting the best people and aircraft to the fight.

Talent Management: Recruiting and Retaining the right Personnel

The focus of aviation manpower is to improve current and future readiness through active management of structure and associated aviation policy. Aviation Marines continue to stay highly engaged at home and abroad. Operational tempo, legacy aircraft reset, and fleet upgrades continue to present challenges to managing manpower in a fiscally constrained environment. In particular, company grade manpower shortfalls due to force-shaping measures and delays in pilot production further tax aviation readiness recovery. HQMC Aviation is working with Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) and the training command on top-down solutions. Additionally, bottom-up approaches such as surveys and Operational Advisory Groups provide valuable input from the fleet and shape HQMC Aviation's advocacy efforts.

The Marine Corps' end-strength will solidify at 182,000 active duty Marines, down from 202,000 at the height of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Meanwhile, aviation's current operational requirements, continued transitions, and future force requirements challenge our ability to maintain a 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio (deployed time compared to time at home) for our Marines. Given these constraints, aviation structure will need to be closely managed with the understanding that any increase in structure for one entity comes at the expense of another's.

It is incumbent upon Marine Aviation to recruit the best talent this country has to offer and once we have them, to keep them. Marine Corps Recruiting Command (MCRC) continues to provide quality candidates to fill both enlisted and officer vacancies every year. Their efforts are vital to the selection and processing of men and women who will serve as pilots, maintainers, and logisticians, and replace those who retire or choose to leave our active duty ranks.

Balancing Act

Preserving the capabilities of our active duty force takes effort. In FY15, 41,599 active duty Marines had primary military occupational specialties that were aviation and aviation support-related. However, only 29,000 of these Marines were assigned to fleet or deploying units. The rest filled staff and training billets. These billets are vital to retaining corporate knowledge, plotting tomorrow's course, and creating tomorrow's force. Thus, management of this "structure" is a balancing act as we must ensure the success of our operational units and achieve our readiness goals while also meeting the needs of transitioning platforms and the training institutions which provide the next generation of pilots, maintainers, and logisticians.

Further complicating matters is the fact that nearly one-third of active duty Marines transition or retire every year. This puts added stress on both Marine Corps Recruiting Command and Manpower and Reserve Affairs to meet accession goals.

The Deputy Commandant for Aviation and the Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs have teamed to institute an initiative that will assign Additional Military Occupational Specialties to aviation designations and qualifications that contribute to the enhancement of combat readiness. Historically, aviation readiness has been inextricably linked to the qualifications and designations of our personnel. The MOS Initiative intends to improve our readiness through the creation of metrics that prevent inefficient manning and staffing while also creating opportunities for directed retention incentives of our Marines who have attained advanced qualifications. All of this will assist in identifying the right people for the right jobs at the right time.

Competing Interests

The civilian airlines are on the verge of a massive hiring surge. Many of the Vietnam-era pilots who left military service and began flying for the airlines are approaching the FAA's mandatory retirement age. When this happens, the airlines will come calling.

Additionally, airlines around the world are expanding. They are procuring new aircraft and expanding their routes. This will require more maintainers and logisticians to keep them on track. Here again, our Marines will be highly sought after.

To fight back against this loss of expertise, Marine Aviation has been analyzing the need and potential of retention bonuses for aviators and aircrew, and proficiency pay for maintainers who demonstrate leadership and possess key technical skills. Providing a bonus is a tangible way to demonstrate the Corps' desire to retain those we have already invested in as well as demonstrating an appreciation for their service. We will keep them, and we will keep them flying.

Training the Force: Investing in Our People for the Long Haul

Last year, we launched an Aviation Manpower Initiative, with the initial goal of increasing visibility on manpower-related readiness enablers. As with most technical fields, readiness is a byproduct of MOS qualifications, designations, and certifications and leadership capabilities. Tables of Organization and Equipment (T/O&E) reflect a unit's manpower requirements and authorizations but do not capture established Aviation Training and Readiness (T&R) metrics. The Aviation Manpower Initiative is a measured approach to updating fleet unit

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AH-1 SuperCobras, major combat aircraft for the Marine Corps.

T/O&E Billet MOSs (BMOS) with newly developed Necessary MOSs (NMOS) to match key T&R standards.

The current manpower assignment process is primarily focused on the individual mover and overall health of a unit from a percentage of the staffing goal based on PMOS requirements. The Aviation Manpower Initiative will allow for a more detailed picture of an individual Marine's contribution to unit readiness during the assignments process. During the planning and staffing process, we determined the initiative's benefits could reach beyond improved awareness of qualifications, designations, and certifications at the unit level and enable other manpower and readiness efforts. The Aviation Manpower Initiative parallels the "Leader to Led" effort and complements future phases to identify key skills associated with specific T/O&E Billet Identification Codes (BICs).

Maintenance Training Instructor (MTI)

The transition to the MV-22, and now the F-35 and its fifth-generation technology, are making USMC aircraft the most in-demand platforms in the world. This high demand requires high-level material readiness levels. That fact, combined with the inherent difficulty of maintaining a fleet of legacy aircaft has high lighted the need to improve maintenance training. Marine Aviation sought out best practices from our sister services, foreign partners, and industry leaders, and developed a plan to overhaul training.

We are building new curricula for aircraft maintenance officers, and are evaluating follow-on training after our Marines leave their A and C schools. We also have an initiative in place to develop what we call a Maintenance Training Instructor (MTI). This is based on the enormous success of the Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) program for our aviators and aircrew, and we are building a "tip to tail" expert capable of providing training on troubleshooting, theory of operation, and best practices to sustain readiness within our fleet.

Originally presented as Project 21 in November 1974 as a way to identify and reward competent maintainers through a professional designation similar to civil aviation standards, the MTI program is a way to identify and train our best. This concept will develop skilled/experienced maintenance professionals capable of leading maintenance operations at home or deployed and will enhance their ability to serve as Maintenance Chiefs or detachment Staff Noncommissioned Officers in Charge (SNCOICs). The focus of training will be on maintenance planning, manpower management, Naval Aviation Maintenance Program (NAMP) program management, deployment planning, Operational Risk Management (ORM), safety, culture of compliance, and human factors. In short, we will imbue them with the skills necessary to build, lead, and maintain a maintenance department capable of meeting the squadron's mission and ensuring readiness anywhere on the globe.

The first class of this course took place in the March 2016 WTI Class. We began with senior staff noncommissioned officers-primarily Master Sergeants who serve as Maintenance Chiefs in our fleet squadrons,and intend to gradually work backwards to younger SNCOs and NCOs who demonstrate the leadership and the skills necessary for success. Our ultimate goal is to produce MTIs at every level and in every squadron.

As with the Manpower Initiative, this qualification will yield an additional MOS which will aid Manpower and Reserve Affairs in properly identifying these Marines for future assignments, tracking them throughout their careers, and shaping retention efforts.

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Marine Corps ground forces at work. Note MV-22B Osprey at left.

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Procuring and Operating the Right Tools for the Job

The Marine Corps has always been focused on the individual rifleman. Everything we do in aviation is in support of him. In this period of fiscal austerity, Marine Aviation, like our sister services, is faced with a dilemma. We can, in the words of one senior leader, "either equip the man, or man the equipment." We choose to equip the man with the best possible equipment, then rely on him to support the individual rifleman through quality training, determination, and esprit de corps.

Return on Investment

Clearly, principal end items cost more than they did in the past. If the top line of our annual budget remains the same, the propensity will be to procure fewer numbers of aircraft and weapons systems. However, to ensure we remain capable and relevant in the days ahead, we must fully implement our Programs of Record. We need to stay the course in procuring new aircraft, weapons systems, and command and control systems.

The Marine Corps will operate its equipment for decades. In fact, many of our TACAIR Hornets and Harriers will see service lives in excess of 40 years. As such, much time and attention is placed in researching the correct type and number of systems necessary, and then producing items that meet tomorrow's requirements on the battlefield. Said another way, if we build and procure systems that meet only today's requirements, we will be irrelevant in the fight of the future.

Aircraft such as the MV-22, CH-53K, H-1Y/Z, and F-35 are expensive, but they are immediately operational. V-22s, KC-130Js, and H-1Ys were introduced into combat operations in OIF/OEF as soon as they came off the line, and have since become some of the most utilized and requested platforms by combatant commanders and the operational units within their (respective) Areas of Responsibiity (AOR). Technology inserted into the 53K and F-35 will provide significant capabilities immediately upon introduction. For the Marine Corps to remain the nation's force in readiness, we must continue to invest in systems that will provide the capabilities we need both today and tomorrow.

Operational Impact

Our helicopter force is transitioning smoothly to one that flies faster, farther and in worse weather than anything we could have imagined even ten years ago. Our rotary wing and tiltrotor communities are getting closer to complete transition with AH-1Z, UH-1Y and MV-22B fully operational and deployed across the MAGTF, and the CH-53K is coming next. We will introduce Ground/Air Task Oriented radar G/ATOR radars for better MAGTF integration. We will fly MQ-21 unmanned aircraft with increasing levels of capability. We will roll five command and control systems into the new Common Aviation Command and Control System (CAC2S). MAGTF and joint force commanders will take advantage of the expanded flight ranges that our AH-1Z, UH-1Y, MV-22 and CH-53K provide, in order to give battle-or not-at the times and places of their choosing.

Our fixed-wing Marine Corps is continuing to send our legacy aircraft into the fight and around the world, operating the Harrier, Hornet, Hercules, and Prowler in every clime and place in support of our ground brethren. As we keep those legacy airframes ready, we are steadily transitioning the force to one flying the F-35B and C Joint Strike Fighter, an aircraft that will take us into the next fight, and the one after that. Unmanned systems are coming online as we have planned, with new systems moving into the fleet and manning, structure and training in place to support those high-demand units. We continue to improve ground-based air defense, command and control and logistics. These are the enablers that make us expeditionary, and that make us unique.

The F-35 is the only TACAIR platform that can go from fifth generation to fourth generation and back again simply by adding or removing pylons. No other aircraft can do that and also operate from amphibious carriers and expeditionary strips ashore. The F-35B is a transformational aircraft that will be more than a one-for-one replacement of the jets in our current TACAIR inventory. Like the MV-22, it will revolutionize the way the MAGTF sees, projects power, and fights, in a very positive way. We need that capability now. We are committed to the ramp/procurement rate of the F-35, both the B and C models, and in fact should accelerate that production time-line to get these airplanes into the fleet sooner.

Our big deck amphibious ships will serve predominantly to project Marine Expedition Units (MEU) ashore, as required, but should be prepared to flex to provide ready decks for 16-20 F-35Bs and four V-22 aerial refueling system (VARS) equipped MV-22s for a high-end fight or a mix of MV-22s, CH-53Es/Ks and UH-1Ys for a humanitarian or disaster relief mission. By 2018, Anphibious Ready Groups (ARGs)/MEUs will be complemented with enhanced strike, close air support, and airborne electronic warfare missions. Added with forward response elements already in theater, the combined capabilities of our Special Purpose MAGTF ARG/MEUs, and our ready to deploy and fighter crisis response elements already in theater, the combined capabilities of our Special Purpose MAGTFs (SPMAGTFs), Amphibious Ready Group (ARG)/MEUs and our ready-to-deploy and fight Marine Expeditionary Brigades and Marine Expeditionary Forces will stretch from the lowest to the highest end of the Range of Military Operations (ROMO).

Know this: our forward-deployed units and those preparing to go, know they exist to make the rifleman at the point of the spear more effective, survivable and lethal. Our joint force wins wars, and your Marine Corps is an integral part of that joint war-winning force. But we specialize in winning the battles that help us win wars and other conflagrations that fall short of war. In winning those battles, we remain focused on the Marine Corps' central piece of gear, the individual Marine. Marines fight well, believing that he will have USMC Aviation support in every clime and place, in every terrible situation, in every meeting engagement, in big wars and small wars, in low-threat scenarios, and in the highest ones. To support them we must properly man, train and equip our aviation units. It all starts there.

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