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# The F/A-18 Celebrates 35 Years

## Interview With Capt. Francis D. Morley, Program Manager F/A-18 and EA-18G Program Office (PMA-265)



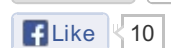
Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on June 19, 2013

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Capt. Francis D. Morley, program manager for the F/A-18 and EA-18G Program Office (PMA-265). U.S. Navy photo

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Introduced in 1978, the venerable F/A-18 is celebrating 35 years as an integral part of naval aviation. The multimission strike-fighter debuted in 1983, but its status as top dog on Navy flight decks is a 21st century phenomenon worth reflecting on.

The [Hornet](#) (F/A-18A-D) and [Super Hornet](#) (F/A-18E/F) are survivors, having succeeded where other aircraft fell short. Developed in evolutionary fashion over three decades, the F/A-18 has been there for the U.S. Navy both operationally and as an alternative to other unsuccessful tactical aircraft programs.

Today, the classic Hornet, Super Hornet, and [Growler](#) (EA-18G) form the backbone of Navy air. Capt. Francis D. “Spanky” Morley, a career Hornet/Super Hornet pilot and test pilot, heads up the F/A-18 and EA-18G Program Office at [Naval Air Station \(NAS\) Patuxent River](#), Md. Recently featured in a [Naval Air Systems Command \(NAVAIR\)](#) video celebrating the Hornet, Morley discussed the history of the F/A-18, its current and future role, and its legacy.

**Jan Tegler: You began flying Hornets roughly seven years after their introduction to fleet service. As you progressed through flight school, was the Hornet the aircraft you wanted to fly? Was it your first choice?**

**Capt. Francis D. Morley:** Yes, absolutely. There wasn’t a lot of doubt about that. When I came out of flight school, I put down F/A-18s first, then [F-14s](#) and A-6s. The Hornet was the newest airplane out there, pretty cool looking and – most important to me – it did all of the missions. I was excited about that. I enjoyed air-to-air, air-to-ground – everything I had done in flight school.



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**Two F/A-18E Super Hornets from the Tophatters of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 14 participate in an air power demonstration over the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74), April 24, 2013. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Apprentice Ignacio D. Perez**

**Having flown, fought, and test-flown the Hornet/Super Hornet, what impresses you most about the airplane? Are there any specific events in Hornet history that stand out for you?**

Throughout my career there have been multiple platforms on deck. It started with F/A-18s, F-14s, A-6s, A-7s, and S-3s. As I've advanced through the years, we see it all assimilated into the different variants of the F/A-18. That's the most impressive evolution that I've seen throughout the airplane's history – how it has taken on all these missions and how that has occurred.

We get quite a bit of benefit from that, from the synergistic and logistic sides of things. We have lower costs and we develop a

certain capability that's applicable across a lot of the fleet. That's been very beneficial. I also think it's interesting how history repeats itself.

If you look at our carrier air wing in 1939 on the USS *Enterprise* (CV 6), for instance, they were made up of nine squadrons and 11 different airplanes. Look at that same air wing in 1944 after three-and-a-half years of conflict, and it was down to about three different types of airplanes. I think we've seen that evolution again in the 21st century with the Hornet. It has been impressive for me to see that and be a part of it.

As you conclude in the NAVAIR “Celebrating 35 Years of Hornet Excellence” video, the versatility of the Hornet is one of its strengths. That’s particularly true today with the advent of EA-18G. However, the operational history of the airplane has overwhelmingly been as a strike platform. Its role as a “fighter” has been minimal. That is partly due to roles and missions and the [Air Force](#)’s dominance in the aerial combat sphere. Do you see that changing for the F/A-18 in the future?

I think you hit it there with the roles and missions. But the airplane is a true strike-fighter and we utilize it as such. There have been very few air-to-air kills since [Desert Storm](#), and those have been pretty much all [[F-15](#)] Eagles because they’ve been assigned all of the CAPs [Combat Air Patrols] and everybody else is dropping bombs. [So it’s more of a mission-driven history for the Hornet.](#)



An F/A-18F Super Hornet from Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 22 approaches the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) for landing, Feb. 12, 2013. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Iain L. Stratton

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*“I equate the F/A-18 to a gracious winner. A lot of people have been critical of the Hornet/Super Hornet because their tactical community or airplane ended up being assimilated by it. There hasn't been a lot of firing back from the F/A-18 world because there wasn't much of a reason to do so. The Navy recognized where it wanted to take naval aviation and the synergies we mentioned.*”

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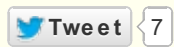
The F/A-18 does all sorts of air defense for the carrier strike group. That hasn't resulted in any kills for the last 20 years or so, but there hasn't been anybody coming out to knock out the strike group. We've also been predominantly in air-superiority environments where the emphasis has been on air-to-ground strike.

We certainly train a lot on the fighter side and the versatility of the aircraft means we can maximize our striking power. The way we train and fight is that we don't necessarily need dedicated fighters or bombers. You can do missions that way, or if the aerial threat is lower, you can make everyone a striker, capable of defending themselves.

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