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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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Another interesting point you raise in the video is the history of the Hornet as the “backbone or savior of naval aviation” and its role in preserving tactical capability. That is undeniably true, but it’s also interesting to note that the Hornet has always been something of a fallback option.

As you mention, when it became clear that the Navy would not be able to afford the F-14 in sufficient numbers, the service turned to the cheaper Hornet. Then again, in the early '90s, after the failure of the A-12 and AFX programs, the Navy turned to an evolved version of the F/A-18 – the Super Hornet. The EA-18G was a ready alternative to designing a new dedicated electronic warfare platform.

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.

“If you think about it, you’re in an interesting place in the curve of development of the airplane. Sometimes people don’t realize that the Super Hornet has been around as long as it has, but the Block II Super Hornet is actually very new. VFA-213 was the first AESA [active electronically scanned array]-equipped Block II Super Hornet squadron, and they started transitioning in 2006. Our first Block II airplanes deployed in 2008, so they’re still quite new.”

Every pilot loves the airplane they fly. It’s your home, your office, and you trust your life with it. So everybody’s emotional when their airplane type changes. But it’s been funny and



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interesting to watch over the years as my friends and colleagues have ended their criticisms pretty quickly once they got into the airplane and understood what it could do.



Two generations of Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18s: a “classic” Hornet at left, and a Super Hornet at right. By any standard, export sales of the Hornet family have been successful. Australian department of defense photo

I wouldn't confuse “saving naval aviation” as I talked about in the video with the F/A-18 being a fallback option. If you think back, the Air Force and Navy had the F-15 and F-14 as air superiority platforms. That was an era when we still specialized with dedicated fighter and attack aircraft. But both services were looking for a strike platform. We had had strike fighters like the F-4 [Phantom] and that came back in vogue.

The Navy was stuck in a political situation of having to go along with the winner of the Lightweight Fighter competition. They recognized that the F-16, although a great airplane and right for the Air Force, wasn't

going to fit the Navy's requirements – not only from a carrier-suitability perspective. If you remember, the F/A-18 had a radar-missile capability that the F-16 did not have at the time. The Navy fought to get the F/A-18, not to settle for it.

In the 1990s, the A-12 program failure advanced the urgency for another platform because it had been the A-6/deep-strike replacement. The Navy also had been evaluating other options. The F-14D was there, the A-6F was offered, and Vought even came out with a supersonic A-7, which I'd call an F-8. There was also the Hornet 2000, which, of course, became the Super Hornet. The A-12 accelerated the discussion about these options and the requirement.

The Super Hornet won, and yes, it has been in the right place at the right time. But I think ultimately it was a choice and not something the service settled for.

Throughout its career, the Hornet – classic and Super – (like many other tactical

aircraft) has faced criticism and resistance from naval aviators and others. But it survived the criticism. I covered the end of the F-14 era extensively and there's a well-known patch crafted by VF-31 and VF-213 as a comment on the F-14's final cruise that reads, "Hornets by mandate, Tomcats by choice! Transition time, baby!"

That kind of thing is natural with fighter pilots, but I would say that that line lasted until about FAM-5 [familiarization flight five] in the RAG [Replacement Air Group, now known as the Fleet Replacement Squadron or FRS] for all of the guys who transitioned Tomcat to Super Hornet. After that they were converts.

The Hornet/Super Hornet/Growler have had success in export markets. Today, the Super Hornet is being marketed aggressively both as an option for foreign air forces and as an alternative/fallback for the troubled F-35 program. Looking to the future, what do you see in store for the Hornet in U.S. Navy service?

The international nature of the program has been wonderful. It's a tribute to the airplane because there are no other navies that fly the F/A-18. It's all foreign air forces, and their first thought is to go with Air Force-type airplanes.

On the A through D [models] side, we have seven foreign partners. That's beneficial in a number of ways. Obviously we fight in a coalition environment these days. Equipping our allies with similar equipment makes that go much smoother. Having partnered with these air forces over the years of the airplane's life on capability advancements, sustainment, lessons learned, and understanding tactics is very enriching for all involved.



Two Canadian Air Force F/A-18 Hornets prepare to be refueled by the 465th Air Refueling Squadron, Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., during the Rim of the Pacific exercise, July 30, 2012. The legacy Hornet enjoyed significant export success. U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Bradley C. Church

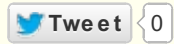
For the Super Hornet, Australia is the customer right now, and they're involved with all three variants. They have a significant A through D fleet, 24 Super Hornets, and they're getting [EA-18G] Growlers now. We're offering the Super Hornet option to other countries. There are several that are in play – some public, some not so public. We would love to gain more capability partners going into the future. The users realize pretty quickly that it's a good value for the capability it provides, for its ability to expand capability, and the security of the design.

If you think about it, you're in an interesting place in the curve of development of the airplane. Sometimes people don't realize that the Super Hornet has been around as long as it has, but the Block II Super Hornet is actually very new. VFA-213 was the first AESA [active electronically scanned array]-equipped Block II Super Hornet squadron, and they started transitioning in 2006. Our first Block II airplanes deployed in 2008, so they're still quite new.

The Super Hornet is on the cusp of a lot of new features with a robust investment portfolio, yet we're far along on the learning curve with it. There are a lot of synergistic aspects. We've isolated the risks of development and manufacturing with the airplane and it's a pretty interesting time for the F/A-18.

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