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

To this point, what is the greatest legacy of the Hornet?

The airplane's real legacy is its record of service to the nation, defending the fleet and supporting troops ashore. But from a programmatic perspective, the evolutionary development of the F/A-18 has been a phenomenal success and a tribute to all of the folks who've preceded me in this program.

The A through D models had a fairly normal progression, but then we took the leap to Super Hornet. I was a test pilot during its development and the big things we would emphasize were increased range, increased endurance, increased performance, more carrying capability, better bring-back and survivability enhancements. It's a tanker as well and it was 90 percent common avionics-wise with the A through D Hornet.

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All of that contributed to controlled risk. "Let's build the truck and let's take advantage of what's common and get a new airplane out." In the meantime, we worked independently on other avionics development programs with the requisite space, cooling, and power designed into the airplane to bring together the attributes that make up the Block II.

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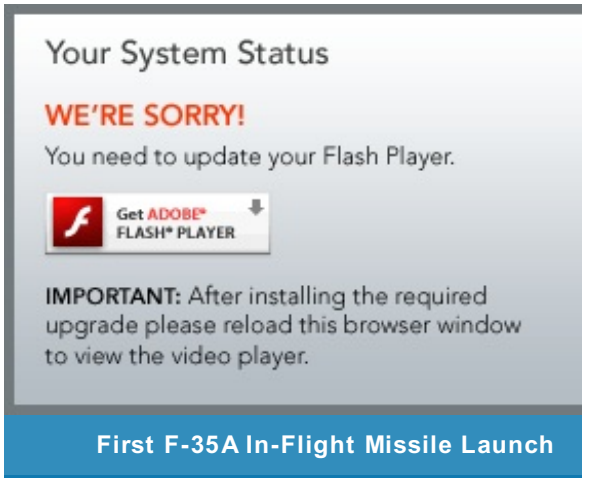

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A two-ship formation of U.S. Marine Corps F/A-18C Hornets fly a training mission during the Red Flag 12-3 exercise March 9, 2012, over the Nevada Test and Training Range. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Brett Clashman

That worked out very well for us, the whole cost-risk schedule that we maintained. With Lot 30, we've finally started building full-up Block II Super Hornets off the line. We took the same kind of steps with the Growler. "Let's take the current Super Hornet and the ICAP [Improved Capability] III AEA [Airborne Electronic Attack] suite and let's jam those" – no pun intended – "together." That's probably a big enough capability increase because now you have this AEA suite on a fighter with AESA radar, air-to-air missiles, and all that good stuff. Independently, we developed Next Gen Jammer.

The whole flight plan of the Super Hornet is based off that, taking coordinated, measured hardware/software capability steps to continue to advance the airplane. We've delivered fairly predictably on what we set out to do.

How much longer could the F/A-18 potentially be flying from the decks of our CVNs?

The A through Ds will be around with the U.S. for the better part of the decade-plus, dependent upon F-35 phasing in.

We continue to advance the Hornet, taking advantage of data links, smart weapons, and other things that increase the airplane's lethality. Our foreign partners will fly the Hornet even longer, so they're still putting investment dollars into capability, and we're the beneficiary of that just as they've benefited from our development.

With regard to the Super Hornet, the Navy plan has always been that the air wing up through the 2030s combines Super Hornet,

Growler, and F-35. The F-35 will replace the A through D airplanes. It's never been a Super Hornet replacement. The airplane is heavily invested for continued capability enhancement. That's on a number of fronts.

A Super Hornet is put through its paces. This second generation of Hornet, often called the Rhino, provides the airframe for the EA-18G Growler, often called the Grizzly. Boeing photo

We're focused on the air-to-air environment, being able to operate in a denser electronic attack world because more and more of those systems are out there – in band and out of band when you include the IRST [infrared search track] pod. You've got the Distributed Targeting System that will be coming out this year for the air-to-ground role, an enhancement to rapidly self-generate – at range – GPS-quality weapon coordinates.

We'll also start focusing on anti-surface warfare. What Growler brings is the ability to detect electronic systems and localize them, working with the synergies between airplanes. The EA-18G will also enhance our capabilities in the maritime environment against threat systems there. Really, we're just writing the book on the Growler. It's exciting to see the variety of ways we can employ an AEA platform now that it's part of a fighter. The Next Gen Jammer will be a big part of this as well.

What are the chief challenges you face today as PMA-265 program manager?

The challenge right now is uncertainty with all of the goings-on around sequestration. The investments we're making in the F/A-18 remain fairly steady. It's more about the adjustments we make in the near term to support the fleet. But we're about supporting, sustaining, and advancing the fleet here – both our operators and the airplanes. We take seriously the ability to answer any fleet concerns and questions.

This article was first published in Defense: Spring 2013 Edition.

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