

Naval Aviation Leaders: Readiness Improving, but 'Still Not Where We Need to Be'

WASHINGTON — The combat readiness of naval aviation is improving, but it is not where it needs to be, the Navy and Marine Corps top aviation leaders said Oct. 5.

Vice Adm. DeWolfe Miller, commander of Naval Air Forces, said his readiness has increased from the one-third availability reported by his predecessor a year ago, "to about 50 percent, on average. We're still not where we need to be."

"I have 260 airplanes [ready] on average. We need 341," Miller told a Center for Strategic and International Studies forum.

Miller noted that when he was director of Air Warfare in the Pentagon last year, the feeling was they could fix readiness quickly and move on to modernizing the force. When he moved to the fleet as air boss, he said, "we found the hole is a little bit deeper than we thought."

But, Miller said, "the entire naval air enterprise is being aligned toward this recovery," and there is "a sense of urgency" throughout that enterprise.

After a lot of analysis by industry and military experts, "It comes down to people and parts," he said.

Marine Lt. Gen. Steven Rudder, the deputy commandant for Aviation, had a similar conclusion on what it will take to fix the Corps' aviation readiness, which had been lingering around 25 percent in some aircraft types.

Rudder did not give a readiness number, saying the Marines

used different metrics, but said the Corps made a decision that they needed to “fully fund the accounts for keeping aircraft up, and we did.” He said they gave money to the supply system to buy the parts required, to the Fleet Readiness Centers and aviation depots that repair aircraft, and to the program managers so they could “help a particular community to get out of the hole.”

He said later that they were taking steps to reverse personnel decisions made when the Marines were reducing end strength and created shortages of experienced maintenance noncommissioned officers on the flight lines.

And, he said, “we put money back into the flight-hour program so we can fly. We’re not where we should be, but we are seeing some increases” and “seeing higher percentage of up aircraft.”

Rudder said Marine pilots had averaged 13.5 hours a month in fiscal 2016, 15.4 hours in fiscal 2017 and “we’re closing out ’18 averaging 17.9. Our readiness is creeping up. It will take time, because some of our aircraft are old. ... But we’re moving in the right direction.”

Asked about complaints about the material condition of the new F-35Bs they are receiving, Rudder acknowledged that he was not satisfied with the quality of some of the planes delivered by Lockheed Martin.

But, he said, “if the taxpayers give the Marine Corps new airplanes, we’re going to use them.”

He noted that the Corps has 33 operational F-35Bs, and 22 are forward deployed in Asia, and in the Central Command where the Marine Lightning IIs reportedly conducted their first combat missions.

Miller said the Navy’s first squadron of carrier-capable F-35Cs was in transition and expected to make its first deployment in fiscal 2021. He said the Navy was preparing for

that deployment by using tactics developed by the Top Gun air combat training unit and applying lessons from the Marines' experience with their F-35s on the amphibious ships to the F-35s.

Both of the aviation leaders said they no longer used old metrics of whether aircraft were "full mission capable" or lower readiness status.

"It's going to be very simple. We're going to have an airplane that's ready to fight, or it's not," Miller said, adding that the aircraft being deployed are the best they can be.

And both listed a variety of programs they are using to retain qualified pilots, including a new Navy program that would allow some midgrade aviators to opt out of the normal quest for command positions and remain as "permanent pilots" in training units.