VMFT-402 begins standup at Fighter Town East

10 Jun 2024 | Lance Cpl. Kyle Baskin, Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION BEAUFORT, S.C. – Three F-5N Tiger IIs arrived to Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Beaufort, South Carolina, on May 30, 2024, as part of Marine Fighter Training Squadron (VMFT) 402's stand up process to serve as an adversary squadron.

"It's a huge day in the lifecycle of our squadron," said Lt. Col. Andrew Christ, commanding officer, VMFT-402, Marine Aircraft Group 41 (MAG-41), 4th Marine Aircraft Wing (4th MAW), "we just delivered the first F-5N Tiger IIs, and it marks a significant milestone in our stand up towards activation."

VMFT-402 will serve as the Marine Corps' second adversary squadron; VMFT-401 located at MCAS Yuma is already in operation. Both VMFT-401 and VMFT-402 will be assigned to MAG-41, 4th MAW, Marine Forces Reserve.

"This is a unique collaboration between the air station and the parent unit of VMFT-401, which will remain MAG-41 in Dallas Fort Worth, Texas and 4th MAW," said Bortnem, "so this is a very unique partnership that we have with our ability to host aircraft and units that are both part of 2nd MAW and 4th MAW."

"We are expanding to establish a second adversary squadron that is VMFT-402, here in Beaufort, South Carolina," said Maj. Erin Mathis, operations officer, VMFT-402, Marine Aircraft Group 41, 4th Marine Aircraft Wing.

An adversary squadron acts as opposing forces during training with other squadrons. Pilots with adversary squadrons study the tactics and maneuvers of foreign adversaries to employ them in training to create realistic scenarios.

"We, as experts in adversary tactics and experts in the way the adversary fights, provide the fleet units with a unique look at basically what the adversary does," said Mathis.

"The ability for us to have on-station adversary support is absolutely critical to the development of both our fleet F-35 pilots in the future and our current training F-35 pilots," said Bortnem.

Having a local adversary squadron allows for more training opportunities, an easier planning process and allows for VMFT-402 to provide in person debriefs.

"We have a rapidly growing F-35 fleet particularly on the East Coast now and Marine Corps aviation has an insatiable need for as much adversary support and training as they can receive to prepare them for the next fight that's coming," said Christ.

Due to available space to house and support the squadron, and the proximity to Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron 501 and the closest training ranges, MCAS Beaufort was chosen to be the home of VMFT-402, said Bortnem.

“This has been Fighter Town East since 1950. VMFT-401, the previous squadron, had been here many, many times before. So the ability for VMFT-402 to be housed here just makes perfect sense,” he said.

The unit will officially reactivate as Marine Medium Helicopter Training Squadron (HMMT) 402 in September 2024, and will then be redesignated as VMFT-402.

Originally, HMMT-402 was stood up in 1967 and trained helicopter pilots for the Vietnam War, before it was decommissioned in 1972, said MSgt. Jason Tracoma, senior enlisted advisor, VMFT-402.

“Our short term goals will evolve over the course of the summer, we’re going to go through a number of maintenance inspections to make sure that we’re safe for flight operations autonomously,” said Christ.

“It’s been a long time coming, we’ve needed this capability on the East Coast for a number of years and can’t come soon enough,” said Christ, “we need to get our house ready for the high fight.”

MCAS Beaufort provides support to the 2nd MAW and attached II Marine Expeditionary Force units. The air station is the operational base for Marine Aircraft Group 31 and its associated squadrons. MCAS Beaufort is home to Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron 501, the premiere F-35 training squadron on the East Coast.

Marine Corps’ Second F-35C Squadron Declares Initial Operational Capability

U.S. Marine Corps F-35C Lightning II aircraft assigned to Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 311, Marine Aircraft Group 11, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, are staged during a live ordnance training event at the Marine Corps Air Station Miramar combat aircraft loading area, California, July 24, 2024. This was the first time VMFA-311 conducted live ordnance operations independently and a milestone for the squadron, which declared initial operational capability on July 31, 2024. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Jennifer Sanchez)

From III Marine Aircraft Wing

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION MIRAMAR, Calif.—Demonstrating the Marine Corps' commitment to aviation advancement, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 311, Marine Aircraft Group 11, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, declared initial operational capability on July 31, 2024.

Achieving initial operational capability is a key milestone for the squadron as part of the Marine Corps tactical aviation (TACAIR) transition plan, the transition from the AV-8B Harrier and F/A-18 Hornet to the F-35. Receiving this qualification means that VMFA-311 has the operational F-35C Lightning II aircraft, trained pilots, maintainers, and support equipment to sustain its mission essential tasks. These tasks include close air support, strike coordination and reconnaissance, anti-air warfare, suppression of enemy air defenses and electronic attacks.

"I am incredibly proud of the Marines and Sailors in this squadron as they hit this critical milestone that ensures greater lethality and operational readiness for the Wing, the Marine Corps, and the joint force," said Maj. Gen. James Wellons, commanding general of 3rd MAW.

Formerly VMA-311, the "Tomcats" of VMFA-311 reactivated in April 2023 as part of the Marine Corps' transition to an all fifth-generation force. VMFA-311 achieved its "Safe for Flight" certification in September 2023, allowing the squadron to conduct independent flight operations.

The squadron flew more than 900 sorties, approximately 1,700 hours, and completed more than 800 simulator hours and 2,400 maintenance actions to reach initial operational capability.

"Initial operational capability is a milestone and achievement in readiness," said Lt. Col. Michael Fisher, commanding officer of VMFA-311, "It's all on the backs of the Marines out there. What they do in their day-to-day actions is what made

this possible.”

In addition to achieving initial operational capability, VMFA-311 Marines have trained at the most advanced aviation schools offered by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Maj. Timothy Potter, an F-35C pilot, graduated from the U.S. Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor Program, more commonly known as TOPGUN, becoming a pilot instructor and increasing the squadron’s ability to train other pilots. Warrant Officer John Page, an aviation ordnance officer, graduated from the Marine Corps Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course. Marines completed lightning tactics instructor qualifications, air combat maneuvering qualifications, division lead and section lead qualifications.

The next step for VMFA-311 is full operational capability, attained when VMFA-311 receives its complete inventory of ten F-35C aircraft, projected for fiscal year 2025.

“Nothing changes for us, our pursuit of excellence and how we carry ourselves, initial operational capability is a byproduct of daily competency and being good at our job,” Fisher said. “It is a great accomplishment, but when we wake up the next day, we are going to keep doing the same thing. Now full operational capability is the goal.”

The Marines of VMFA-311 are actively training and preparing for potential future deployments with the F-35C, continuing the squadron’s legacy as a vital component of Marine Corps aviation.

VMFA-311 was originally commissioned as VMF-311 on December 1, 1942, in Cherry Point, North Carolina and has had a notable history of “firsts” for Marine Corps aviation.

Over the last 80 years, VMFA-311 has flown a variety of aircraft, including the F4U Corsair, F9F Panther, A-4 Skyhawk,

AV-8B Harrier II, and currently the F-35C Lightning II. VMFA-311 was one of the first Marine Corps squadrons to transition to jet aircraft with the F9F Panther.

Now the squadron leads the way alongside VMFA-314 as one of the first Marine Corps F-35C Lightning II squadrons.

“The Tomcats have a storied history that includes legends such as Ted Williams and John Glenn, and participation in every major conflict since World War II,” Wellons said. “Today’s Marines add another chapter to that legacy with the introduction of the F-35C and fifth-generation capabilities to VMFA-311.”

In 2020, the squadron, then VMA-311, deactivated its legacy Harrier, and began preparing for its reactivation in April 2023, as VMFA-311, the Marine Corps’ second F-35C Lightning II squadron. Starting with 84 Marines and one aircraft, the reactivation was part of ongoing modernization efforts across the Marine Corps to make the force more lethal, effective, and survivable.

The F-35C’s multirole capabilities enable Marine Corps aviation to adapt to a wide range of mission requirements, including air-to-air combat, air-to-ground strikes, reconnaissance and electronic warfare. As operational challenges evolve, the F-35C’s versatility enhances the Marine Corps’ ability to respond.

“As a previous F/A-18 Hornet pilot, the F-35 is our bid for success for the future,” Fisher said. “It is where the Marine Corps is going for TACAIR.”

The Marine Corps has eight operational F-35B squadrons and two training squadrons, operating more than 100 F-35B aircraft around the world. The Marine Corps’ two F-35C squadrons, VMFA-311 and VMFA-314, are both home-stationed at Marine Corps

Air Station Miramar.

Each variant of the F-35 brings slightly different capabilities to the joint force. The F-35C is specifically engineered for carrier-based operations, with heavier landing gear and enlarged, foldable wings designed to facilitate flight operation on naval vessels.

The transition to the F-35C Lightning II is a testament to the Marine Corps' continued evolution and commitment to maintaining cutting-edge capabilities in modern aerial combat.

Parsons Offers Counter-UAS Technology to Protect Marine Corps Installations

– Drone Dome: Fast-Deployed Configuration. Credit: Parsons

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Marine Corps is seeking counter-unmanned aerial systems technology to protect its installations. One of the companies bidding to be the provider is Parsons, in partnership with Rafael Systems Global Sustainment LLC (RSGS).

Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems (CUAS) is a sector of defense technology that has been of increasing focus over the last decade and has become even more to with the extensive use of UAS in the Ukraine War, the Israel-Hamas War, and the Houthi drone attacks against naval and commercial shipping in the Red Sea.

The need to provide force protection extends not only to deployed forces but to their installations.

The Marine Corps solicited proposals for "installation counter-small UAS," said Christopher Hamilton, vice president for innovative technology solutions at Parsons, in an interview with Seapower. "They're looking to protect Marine Corps facilities and infrastructure around the world from the small UAS threat, primarily Group 1and Group 2 UAS, but some Group 3 potentially as well. That's the lower half of the UAS spectrum, but those drones, as we've seen, can do quite a bit of damage if configured in the right way and with explosives, or just wreak havoc in terms of security responses to drones, as we've seen with sporting events over the past year or so."

Parsons, in its proposal, is the prime solutions provider, delivering overall program management, sustainment, and systems integration, while RSGS is providing the Rafael Drone Dome System, a Parsons spokesman said.

The Marine Corps requirement is focused on its permanent installations in the United States and overseas, Hamilton said, noting that Parsons has "years and years of experience of developing, integrating, and deploying critical

infrastructure protection systems, and over the past few years, CUAS has become really the most critical of those infrastructure protection components.

He said the Marine Corps requirement for infrastructure protection played to the strengths of Parsons, which has been "deploying CUAS systems for other clients around the world to do very similar functions."

Parsons' analysis of the Marine Corps requirement came down to providing two capabilities: the most effective system and the most available system – 100% of the time.

The Drone Dome system would be tailored specifically for the Marine Corps. Hamilton said it was the most battle-proven system and has been deployed in several different theaters with great success in defeating threats.

In addition, Hamilton said that Parsons "has the knowledge and experience to manage a global logistics enterprise, where you're looking to maintain near 100% availability of systems. We do that today."

The Drone Dome system includes a command-and-control system, RF sensors, radars, and kinetic and non-kinetic effectors that are options. The Marine Corps requires a modular open systems approach to allow the system to adapt to evolving threats. It will make maximum use of artificial intelligence.

"It's clear that the Marine Corps wants a system that evolves over time," Hamilton said.

Parsons, based in Chantilly, Virginia, has a center of excellence for CUAS at Summit Point, West Virginia, where it assesses CUAS threats.

Parsons delivered its proposal to the Marine Corps in April. A single contract award in the competition is expected this summer. The program is to have a duration of at least 10

years.

NAVAIR Selects Near Earth Autonomy for USMC Aerial Logistics Connector Program

Near Earth will use Leonardo’s AW139 helicopter for the Aerial Logistics Connector program.

PITTSBURG, Pa. – [July 12, 2024] – NAVAIR has selected Near Earth Autonomy (Near Earth) to lead one of the teams demonstrating optimized logistics using rotorcraft for the U.S. Marine Corps’ Aerial Logistics Connector (ALC) program through an Other Transaction Agreement (OTA) under the Naval Aviation Systems Consortium (NASC). In collaboration with industry leaders Leonardo and Honeywell, Near Earth will showcase advanced autonomy on the Leonardo AW139 helicopter to provide logistical support during expeditionary operations in contested environments. The AW139, renowned for its versatility in defense, medical rescue, law enforcement, and

energy operations worldwide, combined with Near Earth's logistics mission autonomy system, will be the centerpiece of this program.

The objective is to field a flexible solution capable of transporting various types of cargo and serving in casualty evacuation roles, operating in both crewed and uncrewed configurations. This dual capability will significantly expand the range of missions USMC rotorcraft will be able to undertake. Specifically, the 20-month initiative will demonstrate the rapid deployment of cargo up to 3,000 lb. over a 200 NM radius.

For the ALC program, Leonardo will implement a fast loading, securing, and unloading system for Joint Modular Intermodal Containers (JMIC) on the AW139 helicopter. This system will integrate seamlessly with the helicopter, maintaining payload capacity and structural integrity. Honeywell, which already provides the AW139's autopilot, will augment it to enable autonomous take-off and landing capabilities. As the prime contractor, Near Earth will demonstrate a fully integrated logistics system featuring onboard autonomy that guides the aircraft and modifies the flight trajectory to avoid hazards without requiring a remote operator. Additionally, Near Earth will demonstrate mission autonomy, enabling lightly trained personnel to request, dispatch, monitor, and retask supply deliveries in contested environments.

The ALC program marks an operational-scenario implementation of Near Earth's foundational vision – to pioneer autonomous solutions for full-scale helicopter logistics. This initiative underscores Near Earth's commitment to enhancing efficiency, safety, and reliability in aerial logistics.

Sanjiv Singh, CEO of Near Earth, stated, "We started the company in 2012 to demonstrate autonomous resupply operations in austere environments at an unprecedented scale. We proved feasibility in 2017 with an autonomous UH-1, and now the

Aerial Logistics Connector program allows us to demonstrate a complete system that meets this operational need in the near future. We look forward to working with our partners at Leonardo, Honeywell and NAVAIR to build upon state-of-the-art to advance the efficiency and safety of military logistics. ”

“Leonardo Helicopters is excited to introduce the USMC to the world-class AW139 helicopter for this next-generation FVL mission,” said Scott Volkert, Dir. of USMC Programs for Leonardo Helicopters. “The combination of Near Earth’s autonomy and AW139 platform will provide the Marines relief on their combat rotorcraft fleet and reduce their workforce requirements.”

“The future of aviation will include several layers of autonomy, and Honeywell is proud to work with our partners to provide the cutting-edge technologies that enable safe and secure autonomy solutions across a range of vehicles, including the AW139,” said Matt Milas, president, Defense & Space, Honeywell Aerospace Technologies.

This project builds on Near Earth’s extensive experience with numerous defense logistics products and initiatives. In 2010, the founders demonstrated the first autonomous helicopter flight for the Army Combat Medic program. From 2012 to 2017, Near Earth focused on the USMC Autonomous Aerial Cargo/Utility System (AACUS), to demonstrate an aircraft-agnostic autonomy system suitable for logistics. Currently, Near Earth is actively integrating autonomy into various other aircraft to support USMC logistics needs. Near Earth also leads Project Crimson to enable autonomous delivery of blood and medical supplies for Army Telemedicine and the Army Heavy VTOL UAS program to demonstrate a multipurpose uncrewed aerial system.

U.S.- Australian Interchangeability: VMFA-214 leaders fly RAAF F-35A

U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Robert Guyette, an F-35B Lightning II pilot and commanding officer of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 214, Marine Aircraft Group 13, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, places an American flag and an Australian flag in the cockpit of a Royal Australian Air Force F-35A Lightning II aircraft assigned to RAAF No. 75 Squadron before a bilateral training flight at RAAF Base Tindal, Northern Territory, Australia, June 20, 2024.(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Nicholas Johnson)

By Cpl. Nicholas Johnson, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, July 8, 2024

TINDAL, NORTHERN TERRITORY, Australia – Northern Territory – In a demonstration of the ever-increasing interchangeability between U.S. Marine Corps and Royal Australian Air Force

aviation, two F-35B Lightning II pilots with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 214, Marine Aircraft Group 13, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, flew RAAF F-35A Lightning II aircraft, June 13, 2024.

“Interoperability is two different organizations figuring out ways to work together; interchangeability means the entire allied F-35 force can pool parts, maintainers, weapons, tactics – and now pilots and aircraft – to accomplish any mission,” said U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Robert Guyette, commanding officer of VMFA-214.

In May 2024, VMFA-214 deployed more than 200 Marines and eight F-35Bs from Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona, to RAAF Base Tindal, to conduct bilateral training with RAAF No. 3 Squadron and No. 75 Squadron and participate in the RAAF led exercise Diamond Storm. This training iteration enhanced each air wings’ “fight together” mindset.

Guyette and Maj. John Rose, executive officer of VMFA-214, took part in the bilateral training. The pilots flew RAAF F-35A jets alongside RAAF and USMC pilots in their respective platforms.

“Our formations are completely blended, and our pilots pull the same lessons learned from this incredibly realistic training,” Guyette said. “When the XO and I flew in the RAAF F-35As, we spent zero time briefing procedural differences in execution, because we have been adhering to the same standards as the RAAF from day one.”

Guyette flew alongside his counterpart, Wing Commander Andrew Nilson, commanding officer of No. 75 Squadron.

“The most impressive aspect of the exercise has been the depth of interoperability and interchangeability between our two nations,” Nilson said. “It was a further demonstration of our cooperation that Marine Corps pilots were able to fly RAAF F-35A aircraft during the exercise, allowing the RAAF to share

and learn tactics, techniques and procedures at a level of complexity that has truly tested the F-35's capability."

Incorporating two aircraft variants, pilots and maintainers from both teams introduced additional planning complexities at every organizational level.

"The mission planning factors for each event are very challenging, realistic, and relevant for high end conflict against the peer adversary," Rose said.

Such integration was made possible through previous training exercises between VMFA-214 and RAAF F-35 squadrons. VMFA-214 has trained directly with all three RAAF F-35 squadrons over the past year, building on the tactical, technical and personal coordination between the two aviation forces.

"This 'fight together' mindset has also been enhanced by the personal relationships established between the Marine Corps and the RAAF," Rose said. "VMFA-214 and RAAF No. 75 squadron were on the same tactical page from day one."

VMFA-214's transpacific deployment was preceded by a similar one executed by Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 314, Marine Aircraft Group 11, 3rd MAW, in the summer of 2023. VMFA-314, an F-35C Lightning II squadron from MCAS Miramar, deployed four F-35C aircraft across the Pacific to RAAF Base Williamtown, New South Wales, and trained alongside RAAF No. 3 Squadron.

"VMFA-314's detachment to Australia last year provided a winning template and really did an excellent job of setting the proper conditions for VMFA-214 to be successful this year," Rose said. "They passed on lessons learned, which VMFA-214 leveraged to efficiently deploy the squadron from MCAS Yuma across the Pacific to RAAF Base Tindal, Australia."

After reviewing VMFA-314's deployment, VMFA-214 was prepared to deploy an additional four jets this year, expanding the

latitude of training options for both Marines and the RAAF. Beyond professional growth, the Marines of VMFA-214 forged personal connections and friendships with RAAF aviators during the deployment.

“I have some long-time friendships within the RAAF that go back to my first Marine Corps fleet tour,” Rose said. “It has been such a cool experience to see my old Australian friends and get the opportunity to fly in such high-level events with them.”

VMFA-214’s deployment honed combat readiness and strengthened enduring friendships that underscore the U.S.-Australia military alliance. Marine Corps and RAAF aviators will continue to “train together, fight together,” preparing for any challenge to the Indo-Pacific region.

DoD Announces Modernization Plan for Tactical Aircraft Based in Japan

From the U.S. Department of Defense, July 3, 2024

U.S. Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II aircraft with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 121 approach the amphibious assault carrier USS Tripoli while underway, June 11, 2022. *U.S. Marine Corps | Sgt. Jackson Ricker*

The Department of Defense (DoD), in close coordination with the government of Japan, today announced a plan to upgrade U.S. tactical aircraft laydown across multiple military installations in Japan.

The modernization plan, which will be implemented over the next several years, reflects more than $10 billion of capability investments to enhance the U.S.-Japan Alliance, bolster regional deterrence and strengthen peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

The U.S. Air Force will upgrade its presence at Kadena Air Base by deploying 36 F-15EX aircraft to replace 48 F-15C/D aircraft as part of a planned divestment and modernization. The Joint Force will continue to maintain a rotational presence of 4th and 5th generation tactical aircraft at Kadena Air Base throughout this transition.

The U.S. Air Force will also upgrade its presence at Misawa Air Base from 36 F-16 aircraft to 48 F-35A aircraft, leading to greater tactical aircraft capacity and capability.

At Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Iwakuni, the U.S. Marine Corps will modify the number of F-35B aircraft to support the service's force design modernization implementation. The U.S. Marine Corps will continue to maintain an enduring and rotational aircraft presence at MCAS Iwakuni to ensure the necessary capabilities to support the defense of Japan.

The department's plan to station the Joint Force's most advanced tactical aircraft in Japan demonstrates the ironclad U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan and both countries' shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

II Marine Expeditionary Force: Ready for a New Challenge as a Joint Task Force Headquarters

From II Marine Expeditionary Force, 2 July 2024

U.S. Marines with 2nd Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, II MEF Information Group, II Marine Expeditionary pull coordinates for the Swedish mechanized 120mm mortars to target during BALTOPS 24 on Gotland, Sweden, June 16, 2024. *U.S. Marine Corps | Captain Mark Andries*

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP LEJEUNE, North Carolina – A key transformational step in the Marine Corps' journey of Force Design occurred in early July at the II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF) headquarters in Camp Lejeune.

During a visit by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Eric M. Smith, II MEF was officially validated as a Joint Task Force – Capable (JTF-C) headquarters on June 10, 2024. This milestone means II MEF is now ready to lead and coordinate complex operations involving different branches of the U.S. military and allied forces.

Transitioning to a JTF-C headquarters involves integrating and coordinating forces across land, sea, air, space and cyber domains, preparing for any situation, from peacekeeping missions to full-scale military operations. To prepare for

this new role, II MEF participated in several key exercises that tested their ability to plan, execute and sustain complex operations.

From Feb. 10-17, 2023, around 1,200 Marines and Sailors with II MEF and its four major subordinate commands—2nd Marine Division, 2nd Marine Logistics Group, 2nd Marine Air Wing, and 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade — conducted Marine Expeditionary Force Exercise (MEFEX) 23 at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This exercise showcased II MEF's ability to command and control forces during a simulated peacekeeping operation in a challenging environment. It was a crucial step toward their JTF-C validation.

II MEF came together again in Camp Lejeune from Sept. 9-15, 2023, to exercise command and control capabilities with the subordinate commands as well as joint enablers during Joint Task Force Exercise (JTFEX) 23. JTFEX 23 simulated II MEF's ability to operate as a task force during large-scale all-domain operations. Various tools were employed to test the command-and-control capabilities of II MEF during JTFEX 23 including a simulated information environment that tested the real-time response capabilities of the MEF.

In March 2024, II MEF participated in Nordic Response 24 in Norway, assuming authority as the Land Component Command headquarters for a multinational force. This exercise involved 20,000 participants from NATO allies and Nordic partner nations, focusing on crisis response in northern Europe. II MEF worked closely with Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish forces, demonstrating their ability to lead in cold weather conditions.

The validation process involved rigorous assessments by higher headquarters and independent evaluators, who verified II MEF's capabilities in command and control, intelligence integration, logistics and cyber defense. Colonel Matthew T. McSorley, II MEF G-37 Director of Training, praised II MEF's achievement.

“The validation of II MEF as a Joint Task Force – Capable headquarters is a significant milestone for the Marine Corps and our joint force capabilities. This transformation establishes II MEF as the service-retained JTF-C headquarters for assignment and tasking as an Immediate Response Force (IRF); enhancing our ability to respond to crises and underscores our commitment to maintaining a robust, adaptable, and ready force,” McSorley said.

As a JTF-C headquarters, II MEF will continue to evolve, embracing new technologies and doctrines. This new role places them at the forefront of the Marine Corps’ efforts to adapt to a complex global security environment. II MEF will play a crucial role in ensuring that the United States and its allies can face future conflicts with unity and strength.

Marine Corps Commandant Sheds Light on Reaper UAV Capabilities

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps' MQ-9A ER [extended-range] Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are capable of carrying an electronic warfare pod that renders the UAVs "mostly undetectable" to enemy radars, a senior Marine Corps official said.

General Eric M. Smith, commandant of the Marine Corps, speaking July 2 at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, discussing the capabilities of a Marine littoral regiment and the forces supporting them – including the Reaper UAVs – pointed out the sensing mission of the regiments in the first island chain in the Pacific.

"What they bring with them is a sensing and making sense capability;" Smith said. "Some of the programs are classified. Some of the pods that go on our MQ-9s are classified. It's called a T-SOAR pod, and what it does is it can mimic things that are sent to it that it detects, turn it around, and send it back so that it becomes a black hole. It becomes mostly undetectable."

"Without crossing classification levels, it has the ability to somewhat disappear off of an enemy radar," he said later in

the webinar, in response to a reporter's question. "I'll just leave it at that."

Although not clear, the commandant may have been referring to the Scalable Open Architecture Reconnaissance (SOAR) pod, which L3Harris describes as a "groundbreaking, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) solution from L3Harris Technologies and General Atomics Aeronautical Systems, Inc. (GA-ASI). SOAR integrates L3Harris' industry leading full-band signals intelligence (SIGINT) capability with a medium altitude long-endurance GA-ASI Predator B wing-mounted pod to offer unparalleled options for warfighters in the ISR domain. SOAR provides significant mission expansion for Predator B operations against modern threats in new operating domains and a new dimension for remotely piloted aircraft systems."

The builder of the SOAR pod and the MQ-9, GA-ASI, says on its website that the SOAR pod "provides long-range detection, identification, and location of radar and communication signals of interest. SOAR enables MQ-9 or other aircraft operators to provide standoff surveillance – seeing threats before threats can see the aircraft – and communicate actionable intelligence. The system leverages significant U.S. government technology investments in strategic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems to provide a low-cost, widely deployable capability for a variety of National Security Council and Combatant Command signals intelligence collection objectives."

GA-ASI lists key benefits of the 634-pound SOAR pod as:

- Enables long-range persistent surveillance of enemy communications and radar emitters
- Enables cooperative collection and target exploitation capabilities

- Features real time collection and onboard storage for post-mission analysis

- Allows for true multi-intelligence target identification and tracking in real time

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HMLA-269 Reactivates After 18-Month Hiatus

U.S. Marine Corps Col. David Fitzsimmons, from Pennsylvania and commanding officer of Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 29, addresses the audience during the reactivation ceremony of Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 269 at Marine Corps Air Station New River, North Carolina, July 1, 2024.

(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Staff Sgt. Theodore Bergan)
MARINE CORPS AIR STATION CHERRY POINT, N.C. – Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA) 269, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW), reactivated during a ceremony this morning aboard Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) New River, North Carolina.

HMLA-269, known as "The Gunrunners," previously deactivated on Dec. 9, 2022, in accordance with Force Design initiatives. Throughout the course of the squadron's brief deactivation, the Marine Corps conducted analysis on force management in order to ensure that no operational commitments were left unfulfilled. This analysis identified the need for an additional HMLA squadron on the East Coast to provide sustained operational support to II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). This change within 2nd MAW represents incremental change to Force Design to meet the conditions described in recent national security and defense strategies.

The reactivation ceremony featured remarks from Col. David Fitzsimmons, commanding officer, Marine Aircraft Group 29, who thanked the various advocates at 2nd MAW, II MEF, and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, that made HMLA-269's reactivation possible.

"It was a decidedly somber day when HMLA-269 deactivated," said Fitzsimmons. "That was certainly reversed today."

Also present was Lt. Col. Jens Gilbertson, commanding officer, HMLA-269, who highlighted Marine Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMA) 269's legacy as the Marine Corps' first attack helicopter squadron and recounted the multiple pilots and aircrew within HMA and HMLA-269's history who received the Distinguished Flying Cross. He noted that HMA and HMLA-269 was recognized eight times by the Marine Corps Aviation Association as the Marine Corps' Light Attack Helicopter Squadron of the Year, more so than any other Marine Corps light attack helicopter squadron in history. Gilbertson also recognized the Marines of HMLA-269 who enabled the squadron's

reactivation.

“Ultimately, it was up to these Marines to get it done,” said Gilbertson. “They have discipline, and they have precision, and that’s the same discipline and precision they’re going to bring when they maintain and fly our aircraft.”

The squadron will resume operating the AH-1Z “Viper” attack helicopter and the UH-1Y “Venom” utility helicopter. Both aircraft are manned, trained, and equipped to fight from the sea into austere environments and confined littoral spaces, and support the Marine Air-Ground Task Force by providing offensive air support, utility support, armed escort, and airborne supporting arms coordination.

Amphibious Combat Vehicles Conduct Egress Training, Mark First Time Ashore Overseas in Okinawa

From the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit

OKINAWA, Japan (June 24, 2024) – The 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit conducted the first overseas ship-to-shore operations with Amphibious Combat Vehicles June 24, 2024, at White Beach Naval Facility, Okinawa, Japan.

Elements of the 15th MEU, embarked aboard the amphibious dock landing ship USS Harpers Ferry (LSD 49), arrived at White Beach June 18 for a port visit and to conduct sustainment training.

During the training June 24, the Marines and Sailors of Alpha Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/5, 15th MEU, embarked the ACVs as they splashed from the well deck of Harpers Ferry. Safety boats assigned to 3rd Expeditionary Operations Training Group then pulled alongside the ACVs to transfer personnel to their boats and back to the pier, simulating a situation that required personnel to execute safety egress procedures.

Following the transfer of all embarked personnel, the ACV

Platoon then transited through the nearby boat basin to come ashore at the White Beach area to conduct maintenance.

“This was fairly standard training for us, but I’m proud it also represented the first overseas ship-to-shore employment of ACVs,” said U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Nick Freeman, commanding officer of BLT 1/5, 15th MEU. “We’ll continue to train at other locations in the months ahead, using a deliberate approach, capturing useful data and lessons learned, and ultimately sharpening our understanding of how to best employ the ACV in its intended environment – embarked with our forward-deployed ARG/MEUs.”

In the days prior to the ACV amphibious operations, commanders from III Marine Expeditionary Force, 3rd Marine Division, 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, Task Force 76, and Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade of the Japanese Self Defense Force and other commands visited 15th MEU aboard Harpers Ferry on June 20. This visit included a tour of the amphibious combat vehicles staged aboard Harpers Ferry, the ship’s well deck, the ACV simulator, and a demonstration of an unmanned hydrographic sensor. See imagery of this visit on DVIDS here. Some of the VIPs also returned to observe the ACV egress training.

Marines and Sailors of Alpha Company, BLT 1/5, are scheduled to host Marines of Battalion Landing Team 1/4, their counterpart unit assigned to the 31st MEU, at White Beach for a subject matter expert exchange about expeditionary ACV operations. The hands-on exchange will include topics such as well deck operations, vehicle handling, maintenance, embarked troops and amphibious operations.

The 15th MEU’s Reconnaissance Company is also scheduled to pair with other U.S. military units in the area in the coming days to conduct integrated maritime interdiction operations. The teams will plan, rehearse and execute a simulated visit, board, search and seizure mission using small boats to climb

aboard Harpers Ferry and clear key objective areas together to improve their ability to conduct these types of specialized missions.

“Although this was a routinely-scheduled port visit, both Harpers Ferry and the 15th MEU took advantage of the time to conduct sustainment training to enhance their readiness and cross-train with other Navy and Marine Corps units to strengthen our force,” said U.S. Navy Rear Adm. Chris Stone, commander, Task Force 76 and Expeditionary Strike Group 7. “It was incredible to see the ACVs in operation, as they truly are a force multiplier in this area of operations.”

The 15th MEU is under the command and control of Commander, Task Force 76, which the U.S. 7th Fleet employs to cooperate with allies and partners to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As the U.S. 7th Fleet’s primary Navy advisor on amphibious matters in the 7th Fleet area of operations, CTF 76 is responsible for conducting expeditionary warfare operations to support a full range of theater contingencies, ranging from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations to full combat operations.