FRCs Gets Hornets Back in Action Quickly, Now Turning Attention to Other Aircraft

An F/A-18 Hornet assigned to the Gladiators of Strike Fighter Attack Squadron (VFA) 106 prepares to launch from the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71) in this 2014 photo. *U.S. NAVY*

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – Intense and extended efforts by the command of naval aviation's Fleet Readiness Centers have cut the time to get F/A-18 Hornet fighters out of maintenance and back to the flight line by half.

Those efforts are now are being used to do the same with other Navy aircraft, and to reduce the cost of those updates and maintenance, officials at the command said Aug. 3.

The series of reforms to accelerate the turn-around of aircraft were driven by the chronic shortfall of tactical planes, particularly fighter jets, a decade ago. The program also stemmed from the revised National Defense Strategy, which turned the military's focus to the return of great power competition due to rising threats from China and Russia, Rear Adm. Joseph Hornbuckle, Fleet Readiness Centers commander, told a Navy League Sea-Air-Space 2021 briefing.

The initial effort was focused on the F/A-18, the key to the carrier air wings' strike capabilities. By applying industry best practices, largely copied from the airlines, FRCs were able to cut the typical 120 to 150 day average turnaround time in half, said Roy Harris, the command's executive director.

The command established an operations center that looked at all elements of FRC's operations and prioritized allocation of resources, Harris said. A key element of the reforms was

setting targets for the centers to meet important milestones in the repair and maintenance process and pushing the centers to meet those goals, Hornbuckle said.

One of its early achievements was meeting the chief of naval operations' goal of putting 341 mission-capable Hornets on the flight line. The effort then turned to the EF-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft and now is extending to other Navy aircraft, including E-2C Hawkeyes and H-60 helicopters.

The reform efforts now are focusing not only on producing "mission-capable aircraft quicker, but also at the lowest possible cost," Hornbuckle said.

FRC operates nine readiness centers and 25 other tenant sites and employs nearly 22,000 individuals, Navy, civilians and contractors, Hornbuckle said. It annually works on 300 aircraft and 150,000 aviation components.

As with most naval systems, a major problem for FRC is fighting corrosion, which "can eat our lunch," Harris said. They are working to collect data on the problem to find the most effective and efficient solutions.