

Marine Corps' Black Sheep to Ride the Lightning



An AV-8B Harrier and an F-35B Lightning II are staged during the change of command and re-designation ceremony for Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 214 aboard Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona, March, 25. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Sgt. Samuel Ruiz* ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps' famous Black Sheep squadron has a new designation as it upgrades to from its AV-8B Harrier II attack jet to its new aircraft, the Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning II strike fighter.

Marine Attack Squadron 214 (VMA-214) – the Black Sheep – was re-designated Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 214 (VMFA-214) at Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Yuma, Arizona, on March 25, marking the beginning of its transition from the AV-8B to the F-35B.

VMA-214 was the last AV-8B squadron based at Yuma and based near the West Coast. Three other AV-8B squadrons – VMAs 223,

231, and 542 – remain in service at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina. The Harrier is scheduled to serve with the Marine Corps until fiscal 2028.

Having flown the Harrier since 1989, the Black Sheep routinely deployed six-plane detachments on board amphibious assault ships as part of the Air Combat element of a Marine Expeditionary Unit and flew combat missions in numerous operations.

The Black Sheep began as Marine Fighter Squadron 214, activated with F4F Wildcat fighters on July 1, 1942, in Hawaii. In August 1943, Maj. Gregory “Pappy” Boyington and Maj. Stan Bailey formed a group of unassigned pilots into a combat squadron with the callsign “Black Sheep” and flew their F4U-1 Corsair fighters to an outstanding record in the Solomon Islands.

The squadron has built a solid legacy with numerous aircraft types in combat in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan and many other crises. For the official history of the Black Sheep, see this link: <https://www.3rdmaw.marines.mil/Units/MAG-13/VMA-214/History/>

“Having previously served in VMA-214 and flown the AV-8B for many years, the Black Sheep and the Harrier hold a special place in my heart,” said Maj. Gen. Bradford J. Gering, the commanding general of 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, in a Marine Corps release. “As 3rd MAW says a bittersweet farewell to the Harrier, we are excited to increase our number of F-35B squadrons with the re-designation of VMFA-214.”

“The re-designation of VMA-214 to VMFA-214 is the end of a legacy for the Black Sheep and Marine Aircraft Group-13,” said Lt. Col. Keith Bucklew, the outgoing commander of VMA-214. “This symbolic event finalizes the sundown for Harriers on the West Coast and closes the chapter on 58 years of attack aircraft operations for the Black Sheep.

“Finishing this mission with a successful 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployment is a testament to the viability and performance of the Harrier over the last 33 years and, more importantly, the talent of the Marines who managed them,” Bucklew said. “The AV-8B will be missed in the skies of Yuma, but it is time to transition to the next generation of fighter attack aircraft.”

“The F-35’s fifth-generation strike fighter capability brings more lethality and flexibility to combatant commanders than any other fighter platform,” said Lt. Col. Christopher Kelly, the commanding officer of VMFA- 214. “The STO/VL capability inherent in the F-35 B variant allows the Marine Corps to operate expeditiously and from remote locations, making the model uniquely qualified at supporting expeditionary advanced base operations.”

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