

Navy Reserve Recapitalizing Adversary Aircraft Fleet, Admiral Says



An F-5N Tiger-II from the “Sun Downers” of Fighter Squadron Composite (VFC) 111 takes off from Naval Air Station Key West’s Boca Chica Field during the last day of training before the potential bad weather resulting from Tropical Storm Eta. *U.S. NAVY / Danette Baso Silvers*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Reserve Tactical Support Wing of the Navy Air Reserve provides the fleet with adversary services to train crews in aerial combat between dissimilar aircraft and does so using a fleet of F-5 Tiger II and F/A-18 Hornet fighters. The Navy is taking steps to recapitalize the adversary fleet with refurbished fighters.

“The Reserve Tactical Support Wing (TSW) maintains 31 F-5N/F aircraft to provide low-to-mid level threat replication,” wrote Vice Adm. John Mustin, chief of Navy Reserve, in a statement submitted to the defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee for its May 4 hearing.

The F-5Ns are refurbished F-5Es procured from the Swiss Air Force, and the F-5Fs are two-seat versions procured from the manufacturer and later refurbished. These aircraft are flown by two squadrons, VFC-13 at Naval Air Station (NAS) Fallon, Nevada, and VFC-111 at Naval NAS Key West, Florida. In order to increase the number of adversary aircraft, the Navy purchased a further 11 F-5E/F aircraft from Switzerland in fiscal 2020.

“Prior to delivery, these aircraft will receive modern avionics and an airframe reconfiguration to match the current active Navy airframe configuration,” Mustin said. “These 11 aircraft will deliver to TSW squadrons from 2022-2025 as

F-5N+/F+, increasing both capacity and capability.”

TSW also provides critical high-end adversary support to the Fleet with 27 F/A-18A-D Hornets. These aircraft are assigned to VFA-204 at NAS Joint Reserve Base New Orleans, Louisiana, and VFC-12 at NAS Oceana, Virginia.

“Due to the extremely high projected cost per flight hour (+\$44,000) of these ‘Legacy Hornets,’ the Navy is accelerating divestment from the F/A-18A-D aircraft,” the admiral said. “VFC-12’s transition from the F/A-18A-D Hornet to the Block I FA-18E/F Super Hornet in [fiscal 2021] is the first step towards accelerating Legacy Hornet divestment.”

Mustin said there are not enough Block I Super Hornets to replace the legacy Hornet adversary fleet, so the Navy is proposing the aircraft be replaced by used Air Force and Air National Guard F-16 fighters.

He also said the adversary aircraft need upgrades with threat-representative capabilities “such as Infrared Search and Track Systems and the evolution of the Adversary data link known as RedNet.”

Mustin also pointed out the sustainment issues with the adversary fleet.

“Within the next decade, 62% of the Navy Reserve’s current adversary aircraft will be retired due to the high cost of each service hour, or because they have reached the end of their service life,” he said. “Recapitalization and expansion of adversary capacity in the Navy Reserve presents a cost-effective, sustainable solution to develop warfighting readiness.”

The admiral also tallied the value of the adversary fleet.

[In fiscal 2020], active component strike fighter squadrons flew 13,129 hours of adversary support, generating more than

half of the total Navy adversary hours while adding costly flight hours on inventory-limited fleet aircraft," he said. "Flying more adversary hours in the Reserve increases service life of those active fleet strike fighter aircraft and at the same time reduces overhead operational costs. As such, increasing Navy Reserve support to Navy adversary requirements will improve active component strike fighter service life, while enabling the dedication of fleet flight hours to train for warfighting readiness."