VMFT-402 begins standup at Fighter Town East



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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.