Countering Obsolescence

The fight for Marine Corps tactical aviation relevance

by Capt Daniel M. Belet

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You will lose this fight. This statement runs counter to the very lifeblood of what it means to be a Marine. However, current Marine Corps tactical aviation series aircraft (AV-8B, F/A-18, and F-35) warfighting capabilities are not keeping pace with the emerging threats of tomorrow and will not satisfy the Commandant's *Force Design 2030* objectives. Although in some areas it is hardware related, the primary shortfall that threatens the very solvency of Marine Corps tactical aviation is our approach to professional aviating. Inherent advantages in flight time, training, and aircraft capability compared to peer and near-peer threats are no longer guaranteed. As such, the Marine Corps' approach to aviation no longer assures future success. A seismic shift is required to ensure the performance vector of Marine Corps tactical aviation remains relevant in future conflicts and achieves the goals outlined in *Force Design 2030*.

Marine Corps aviation assets have always occupied a co-equal status with all other elements within the MAGTF. Although Marines within the ACE like to jokingly refer to the place of the ACE within the MAGTF as "big A, little G," aviation is not the sole warfighting component in the MAGTF. Sacrifices have always been required by aviation units flying any type, model, series aircraft in order to meet training requirements and keep pace with other DOD aviation forces. In many respects, the Marine Corps has not and never will be co-equal with the likes of the Air Force or aviation components of the Army and Navy—if for no other reason than the sole purpose of these forces is to aviate. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps does not have the fiscal luxury of other aviation branches, and the ethos of being a Marine aviator requires a different approach. This different approach necessitates Marine aviators conduct large amounts of "green side" training at the beginning of a pilot's career and continually throughout. Additionally, the force structure of a Marine squadron is modeled primarily after the fire team, squad, platoon, company, and battalion hierarchy typical of Marine Corps infantry units. Moreover, Marine Corps aviators spend large amounts of time working "ground jobs," essentially jobs that are found within infantry units and required within the infantry force

With the fielding of new fighter aircraft, a "seismic shift is required to ensure the performance vector of Marine Corps tactical aviation remains relevant." *(Photo by LCpl Seth Rosenberg.)*

structure design, even by aviation units. All of this is to say that Marine aviators spend a considerable amount of time doing things other than practicing, training, and aviating. Pilot talent is equally distributed across all aviation units and branches. Thus, it stands to reason that such talent is also equally distributed against pacing threats. However, training opportunity, flight time, and aviation focus is not equally distributed. The question still stands, "why are we not as good as our opponents?" The delta between the two can be partially explained by the discrepancy in a pilot's ability to conduct focused, uninhibited aviation tasks. Intuitively, if talent is equally distributed and opportunity not, then the overall quality (the vector sum of talent and opportunity) is directly proportional to the time available and time spent conducting those aviation tasks. The Marine Corps is falling behind other DOD aviation forces and threat nations of interest in this regard. Although qualitative in nature thus far, a quantitative comparison supports this. When you look at emerging threats and those countries that *Force Design 2030* specifically addresses, their ability to devote flight time, study, and uninhibited focus on being a professional aviator have surpassed that of the Marine Corps'. The lack of aviation focus in the Marine Corps often results in a "ground job first" mentality by aviators, squadrons, and support elements as a whole—sometimes leaving the aviator asking themselves if they are even a pilot at all? This is, however, just one portion of the broader issue.

Although different, and proudly different, the Marine Corps' adherence to an infantry force structure in aviation units is only one reason we are falling behind in tactical aviation quality. Additionally, the training structure and aviation mindset of the Marine Corps is not adequate. To explain, we must conduct a comparative look at our sister Services' training schools. For example, the Navy's pre-eminent aviation school is the Naval Air Station Fallon-based Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program. The training cadre is comprised of tens of pilots with thousands of flight hours in F/A-18 Hornet and Super Hornet aircraft whose sole job is to study the employment of their weapon (the aircraft) against a near-peer threat. Additionally, each individual instructor is a subject matter expert in one or more of the vast number of systems, aircraft, weapons, or tactics employed by both the United States and threat countries. Having personally experienced the high level of professional expertise by this cadre, their collective and current knowledge is unmatched. Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program (also known as TOPGUN) is a four month long training academy of repetitive and iterative immersive learning designed to produce effective aviators and instructors. The transformation is resounding, due in part to the uninterrupted devotion to pilot tasks. For example, the flight hours students receive during this school is typically more than Marine Corps tactical aviation pilots receive in an entire year. These newly minted pilots then return to front-line squadrons to teach, educate, and inform the next generation of tactical aviators.

Additionally, the Air Force conducts a similarly in-depth, aviation training academy that encompasses a six-month period of instruction known as the Air Force Weapons School. This school replicates a graduate-level education in aviating, producing research term papers that are peer reviewed and often published as employment updates and emerging tactics. The two schools mentioned previously represent the pinnacle of aviation training throughout the world, designed to meet the emerging threats of tomorrow.

Conspicuously absent from branches hosting notable professional aviation schools is the Marine Corps. It is true

A dedicated opposing force in simulated air combat such as the "Snipers" of Marine Fighter Training Squadron 401 flying the F-5N Tiger II is an essential component of TACAIR training. ***(Photo by Sgt Kirstin Rodgers.)***

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that the Marine Corps sends a select number of individuals to the Navy's Fighter Weapons School and has in the past housed instructors as part of the TOPGUN instructor cadre, but this is on an augmented basis with only minimal presence and attendance to date. The closest Marine Corps analogous to the Navy and Air Force's professional schools' is Marine Corps Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1), responsible for conducting the biannual Weapons and Tactics Instructor course. This course, lasting six to eight weeks, includes the integration of all MAGTF forces into a joint operating environment designed to train all components of the MAGTF simultaneously. Although as rigorous and demanding as any school in the world, it lacks the directed, focused, and iterative approach of the Navy and Air Force schools. MAWTS-1 is staffed by a small cadre of instructors for each type, model, and series of aircraft in the ACE—a far cry from the instructor population seen at other DOD aviation schools. Additionally, this smaller cadre makes staying current on pacing threats and emerging tactics very difficult, when coupled with considerable travel requirements to go to MAWs to certify and train squadron pilots. This reality is illustrated by the fact that the publications produced by MAWTS-1 are sophomoric at best when compared to Navy and Air Force products. In truth, many tactics and products that are produced by MAWTS-1 are simply a repackaged facsimile of the Navy and Air Force. If we again approach the quality of a tactical aviator as a product of talent and opportunity, we see that the Marine Corps again falls behind TOPGUN and the Air Force Weapons School in time spent conducting aviation tasks. As we combine the effects of the Marine Corps' force structure and lack of aviation training school, we see that the time devoted to being a professional aviator falls short of sister Services. Additionally, when we reference Gen Berger's *Force Design 2030*, we are challenged by the fact that

> in light of unrelenting increases in the range, accuracy, and lethality of modern weapons; the rise of revisionist powers with the technical acumen and economic heft to integrate those weapons and other technologies for direct or indirect confrontation with the United States; and the persistence of rogue regimes possessing enough of those attributes to threaten U.S. interests, I am convinced that the defining attributes of our current force design are no longer what the nation requires of the Marine Corps. Past performance no longer guarantees future success, and the Marine Corps must adapt.

In light of the concern that we are trailing other Services and peer and near-peer threats, we must, in Gen Berger's words, "transform our traditional models for organizing, training, and equipping the force to meet new desired ends, and do so in full partnership with the Navy." A wholesale change in the force structure of aviation units is not required. We can still maintain unique aspects of the Marine Corps and an integrated force while optimizing and increasing time spent in aviation tasks. To point, individual squadrons must take a hard look at tasks that require devoted time that are not pilot related. In doing so, aviation as a whole must divest in aviator filled billets and invest in professionally trained Marines. Squadrons must increase the number of school trained Marine officers in occupational specialties such as S-1 (Administration), S-4 (Logistics), S-6 (Communications), and key maintenance-related billets. This alone would free four to six aviators per squadron to focus on being an aviator or dilute the tasks required of aviation ground billets, such as operations and safety. Although this measure has been proposed, discussed, and rumored before, no action has resulted. Additionally, a measure seen in sister Services, that admittedly have greater fiscal pools to draw from and hence a larger manpower footprint, is increasing Staff Non-commissioned Officer presence within individual work centers. This would free considerable time spent by aviators conducting non-aviation tasks. Although these steps appear minor, they would require sweeping changes to tables of organization and manpower models within Marine Corps aviation as a whole.

Adjusting manpower allocation alone will not change the quality vector of Marine Corps tactical aviation, however. What is required is a paradigmatic change in how the Marine Corps views training aviators. This includes either creating or further augmenting Marine Corps aviation schools to align with or more closely model those of the Navy and Air Force. This may look like including additional aviators to the Navy's TOPGUN courses, including platforms in the Air Force's Weapons School, or creating an organic school that models the curriculum and end product produced by those schools. Given Gen Berger's directive that we must initiate change "within the fiscal resources we are provided," creating a home-grown school is unlikely. As such, the Marine Corps must find a way to increase student attendance to TOPGUN courses or provide a radical process by which Marine Corps aircraft are integrated into the Air Force Weapons School. Both options would require a commensurate increase in instructor cadre provided by the Marine Corps, and money added to the host service budget from Marine Corps coffers, but the investment is well worth the cost. It is only through sweeping changes such as these that we can correct our quality vector to that required to meet the 2030 threat.

Although anathema to Marine Corps esprit, tactical aviation capability in the Marine Corps is not on track to meet the quality required by Gen Berger's *Force Design 2030*. In order to meet this call, tactical aviation assets must restructure squadron manpower and re-model professional aviation schools. Through these efforts, Marine Corps tactical aviation can maintain relevancy in the coming decades.

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