Celebrating 45 years of the F/A-18 Strike Fighter

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NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md.—Born out of necessity and innovation, the U.S. Navy's F/A-18 Hornet introduced a level of aircraft superiority that had not been seen before and set the standard for future development of next-gen fighters. Now, celebrating the 45th anniversary of its first flight Nov. 18, the original strike fighter aircraft is affectionately referred to as the "Legacy."

Appropriately coined, the nickname encapsulates not only the cutting-edge capabilities of the aircraft at the time, but its place in history as the first in its class that would pave the way for future aircraft platforms.

Before the creation of the Legacy Hornet, the Navy's fighter air wing consisted of multiple aircraft, each with a specific skill set and mission. The arrival of the F/A-18 Hornet ushered in a generation of carrier-capable, multirole fighter aircraft that were all-weather and attack, designed for traditional strike applications and close air support without compromising fighter capabilities.

"It showed a great understanding of what a strike fighter mission requires," said Cmdr. Tim Tuschinski, Integrated Product Team Lead for Radar/Fighter Electronic Warfare in the F/A-18 and EA-18G Program Office (PMA-265). "It allowed pilots to move quickly and efficiently between the air-to-air combat mission and the air-to-ground mission; it's the flip of a switch."

The Hornet cut its teeth during Operation Desert Storm, proving its lethality and versatility. Pilots could engage adversary fighters in the air and take out ground targets during the same mission. The aircraft's survivability and easy repair only proved to further solidify its role as the preeminent aircraft in the carrier fighter air wing.

This aircraft was born at Naval Air Systems Command and developed to be a strike fighter.

"It's fast! When you slick this thing up, it flies like a bat out of hell," said Tuschinski. "It paved the way for the multimission platform aircraft that we see with the Super Hornet, the F-35 and the next generation fighters."

Originally created by McDonnell Douglas and Northrop Grumman, the versatility of the aircraft came from its avionics, cockpit displays, excellent aerodynamics and its capability to carry a variety of weapons. It was built for pilot interface with a hands-on throttle and stick incorporation, as well as a digital cockpit.

"The most rewarding missions were the ones when we were able to locate and neutralize high value assets to keep our guys on the ground safe," said Tuschinski, when reflecting on his time in the cockpit.

Today, the Legacy Hornet is no longer the preeminent strike fighter in the carrier air wing, that role has been passed along to its offspring, the Super Hornet. The Navy retired its last remaining legacy aircraft in the spring of 2023. However, the Hornet remains a workhorse for the U.S. Marine Corps and the militaries of several allied nations.

"We're poised to continue sustaining this platform, keeping it lethal and survivable until its sundown," said Tuschinski. "It's going to continue its mission for the Marine Corps."

Tuschinski flew the Legacy Hornet for 15 years and supported

missions in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. His squadron provided close air support for troops under fire and completed pre-strike missions to set up ground troops for success. He now works in PMA-265, leading the team focused on radar and electronic weapons for the F/A-18 and the EA-18G.

This year not only marks the 45th anniversary of the Legacy Hornet's first flight, but also the 50th anniversary of the establishment of PMA-265. For a half-century, the men and women of the program office have provided critical capabilities, cradle to grave, for the Hornet, Super Hornet and Growler.

"Our team continues to move fast and take risks to support, sustain, and advance the fleet," said Capt. Michael Burks, PMA-265 Program Manager. "The technologies and capabilities that we develop are reliable, maintainable, and upgradable, allowing constant improvement, so that we can best support the Sailors and Marines in the fleet."

The Hornet was just the beginning and set an expectation for fighter/attack aircraft that continues today. Over the past decade the U.S. Navy fully transitioned from use of the Hornet to the Super Hornet. This includes its use by the Blue Angels. The F/A-18 family of aircraft has surpassed 11 million flight hours. Through initiatives like Service Life Modification, the Super Hornet will be the numerically predominant aircraft in the carrier fighter air wing into the mid-2030s and will provide significant combat capability for the air wing into the 2040s.

"It is a privilege to be at the helm of this esteemed, dedicated workforce," said Burks. "PMA-265 continues to ensure responsiveness, innovation, expertise, professionalism and priority when addressing the needs of our warfighters and the challenges facing our international partners; that legacy continues."