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HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

**STATEMENT**  
**OF**  
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**UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON PERSONNEL**  
**OF THE**  
**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**  
**CONCERNING**  
**AVIATOR MANPOWER**  
**ON**  
**29 MARCH 2017**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Chairman Coffman, Ranking Member Speier, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to appear before you today to provide an overview on Marine Corps aviator inventory.

Since the first Marine aviator flew in 1912, our aviators, like all Marines, have answered our Nation's call, faithfully serving the American people and maintaining a first class standard of military excellence. Your Marine Corps is, and will continue to be, our Nation's expeditionary force in readiness. We will be ready to rapidly respond to crises around the globe, to ensure the continued security of the American people, and to protect the interests that underpin our Nation. Marines will be *always faithful* to the trust which the American people have vested in them. Everything we do in the Marine Corps must contribute to their combat readiness and combat effectiveness.

## **AVIATION RETENTION**

Our aviation Marines, those that operate the aircraft and the officers and enlisted Marines who are responsible for their maintenance, are a critical component of how the Marine Corps trains and fights. We vigorously track the accession and retention of all of our Marine occupational fields, and doing so for the aviation field is particularly important due to the time and expense required to train the majority of the Marines that make up this field. Our analysis shows that the Marine Corps is currently not experiencing a retention challenge for our aviators or enlisted maintenance Marines. While there are imbalances in grade and occupational fields, current aggregate inventory levels are at 100% of overall requirement. Our aviators generally have a higher retention rate than our ground Marine officers. This has been true for the past 30

years and is still true today. All of our officer occupational fields, aviation and ground, experienced an intentional increase in attrition rates during the drawdown period from 2012 to 2015 as we encouraged specific grades to separate or retire from the service. During the drawdown period, we also reduced the size of accession cohorts for the same reason. Now that our drawdown has concluded, and we are implementing a modest end strength increase, attrition is trending back down to our lower rates associated with stabilized end strength.

In regard to future commercial airline hiring, we note that the majority of Marine Corps aviators are from rotary wing and tilt-rotor communities. These aviation communities have historically been in less demand than the pilots of jet and larger multi-engine aircraft. Since the Marine Corps inventory is directly managed to meet structural grade/MOS requirements, a certain level of attrition is healthy, and in fact, required to be able to maintain our grade/MOS designs. At this time, our current and forecast aviator attrition rates do not exceed this healthy level and we have no data indicating that there is any specific draw for Marine aviators to depart the service in numbers greater than forecast. However, we will continue to closely monitor the retention trends of our aviators and take action should we begin to see a change in this arena.

### **TRAINING CHALLENGE**

Training for our aviation community is both long and expensive. It begins with ground-based instruction in aerodynamics and instrumentation, and progressing first to primary flight training in basic aircraft and then to advanced instrument flight and military formations in advanced tactical aircraft. Training continues in the operating forces as winged aviators continue to progress in more advanced tactical maneuvers. Training schedules are complex and must be coordinated as training squadrons compete for limited training ranges and airfield hours.

Currently, our initial training pipelines are experiencing challenges that are impacting aviation platforms in the operating force, primarily at the Company Grade level. Due to readiness issues with training aircraft, e.g. parts supply issues, it is taking longer to train our pilots. As a result, there is currently a number of aviators in the training pipeline who normally would already be in the fleet squadrons. Fortunately, higher ranking aviators, Majors and above, are currently making up for this shortfall. Still, we are exploring a targeted monetary bonus for Captains who have completed their initial undergraduate pilot obligation and some Majors in specific challenged inventories in order to encourage even higher retention. The specific and targeted nature of these potential bonuses will provide us the ability to increase and expand these incentives should we begin to see problems arise in our aviator retention rate.

### **AVIATION READINESS**

Another challenge impacting our aviation community, and the Marine Corps overall, is degraded aviation readiness. Since the conclusion of the combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, degraded aviation readiness is making it difficult to replace the advanced instructor and combat qualifications many of these aviators currently hold. Addressing readiness is one of our highest priorities. Independent Readiness Reviews with each of our aviation platforms are providing external assessments from independent experts to reveal current readiness issues for targeted solutions. The increased funding we've received for readiness, reliability, consumables, and parts is beginning to positively impact readiness. Additionally, we continue to modernize and transition into our new airframes, like the MV-22, AH-1Z and the F-35. Adequate manning will continue to be critical as we outfit with new aircraft while maintaining our operational tempo and strive to improve readiness. A continued commitment to investing in the

modernization of our legacy aircraft is paramount to our plans to return to an optimal state of readiness and combat any potential retention problems that may otherwise be on the horizon.

## **CONCLUSION**

The bottom line is that the Marine Corps does not currently have a shortage of aviators, as measured against our aggregate structural requirement, however we are experiencing a shortage of trained aviators, particularly in specific platforms, due to training and readiness issues with our aircraft. These aviators are critical to our ability to fulfill continued and increasing operational commitments, high operational tempo, and challenging deployment-to-dwell ratios. Overall, training time and full-mission ready aircraft, as well as pay, are all important factors in an aviator's and maintainer's decision to stay or depart the service. We take seriously our responsibility to train and retain the best aviators and maintainers for our Corps. We will continue our rigorous tracking of retention in the aviation field so that your Corps remains the most ready when the Nation is least ready.

The Marines of our Corps represent the American people who have stepped forward and sworn to defend and protect our Nation. Our individual Marines are our most precious asset. They are proud of what they do. They are proud of the "Eagle, Globe, and Anchor" and what it represents to our Nation. With your support, a vibrant Marine Corps will continue to meet our Nation's call.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.