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HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
READINESS SUBCOMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF
LIEUTENANT GENERAL STEVEN R. RUDDER
DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR AVIATION
BEFORE THE
READINESS SUBCOMMITTEE
OF THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
ON
AVIATION READINESS

June 21, 2018

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Lieutenant General Steven R. Rudder
Deputy Commandant for Aviation

Lieutenant General Steven R. Rudder assumed his current position as the Deputy Commandant for Aviation, Headquarters Marine Corps in July 2017.



LtGen Rudder is a native of Canton, CT, and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in June 1984. LtGen Rudder previously served as the Director of Strategic Planning and Policy (J5), U.S. Pacific Command.

LtGen Rudder's previous assignments include: Serving in Co B, 3rd Amphibious Assault Battalion; Student, NAS Pensacola, FL, designated a Naval Aviator; HMT-303, AH-1J helicopter training; HMLA-367, Maintenance Quality Assurance Officer and Weapons and Tactics Instructor; unit deployments to Futenma, Okinawa, and Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM; HMM-161 (REIN), Weapons and Tactics Officer deploying with the 11th MEU(SOC) back to North Arabian Gulf; AH-1 Division Head, Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One; Operations Officer, HML/A-167; Future Operations Officer, deploying with the 22nd MEU(SOC) to EUCOM and CENTOCM AOR, HMM-261(REIN); Office of Net Assessment, the Office of the Secretary of Defense serving as Mr. Andrew Marshall's Military Assistant; Squadron Commander, HML/A-167 deploying to EUCOM AOR in support of Dynamic Mix; Senior Watch Officer, OIF, 3rd Marine Air Wing Tactical Command Center; J5 Lead planner for Afghanistan and Pakistan, CENTCOM, Tampa, FL; deployed to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Qatar in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM; Commander, Marine Air Group 26, deploying to Al Asad, Iraq, in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM 9.1; Branch Head of Aviation Expeditionary Enablers (APX), Headquarters Marine Corps Aviation; Legislative Assistant to the Commandant, Headquarters Marine Corps, Office of Legislative Affairs; Commanding General, 1st Marine Air Wing, Okinawa, Japan; deployed Wing to Thailand and South Korea.

LtGen Rudder holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Business Administration from Boston University, a Masters of Military Studies Degree from the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and a Masters of Strategic Studies from the United States Army War College.

Personal decorations include the Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit with Gold Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with Combat 'V', Defense Meritorious Service Medal with Gold Star, Meritorious Service Medal with Gold Star, Air Medal Strike Flight 4, Navy Commendation Medal with Gold Star and Combat 'V', Joint Achievement Medal and Navy Achievement Medal.

INTRO

Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Bordallo, distinguished members of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness, and other distinguished members: I appreciate the opportunity to testify on the current state of Marine Corps aviation readiness.

As you are all aware, the Marine Corps' Title 10 responsibility is to be the nation's expeditionary force in readiness. We are charged and expected to always be the most ready when the nation is least ready. This responsibility is at the very core of our identity as Marines. Marine aviation readiness has continued improving since last November. In that time Marines executed 126 operations, were part of 86 security cooperation events with partners and allies, and participated in 34 major exercises. Today there are over 35,000 Marines stationed or deployed in 67 countries around the world. 23,000 of these Marines remain stationed or deployed west of the International Date Line to maintain regional stability and deter aggression in the Indo-Pacific region.

MARINE AVIATION READINESS UPDATE

As Deputy Commandant for Aviation, my focus is building readiness for combat. By modernizing the force, supporting Marine aircraft maintainers, and continuing MAGTF integration, we as a team are ensuring Marine Corps aviation is ready to fight tonight. The truest metric of health in aviation is aircrew flight hours, because that number – which is easy to track, and which allows us to compare our combat readiness month over month and year over year - encompasses aircraft readiness, aircrew preparation, and flexible logistics and responsive supply chains.

We have seen significant improvement in aircrew flight hours since I spoke to you in November 2017. This shows our comprehensive recovery strategy is working – we are adding aircraft to the flight line and our aircrew continue building proficiency. In the last twelve months we averaged 17.2 hours per crew per month. In eight of those twelve months, Marine Corps aviation was at our T2.0 goal. Currently, Marine aircrew are flying 20% more flight hours on a year over year basis.

However, we are still challenged with low aircraft readiness rates. This is because, as we fly our pilots more often, we use our aircraft more often. We expect aircraft readiness rates to improve as effects from funding take hold beginning in FY19.

Since last November, though we have increased the number of mission capable aircraft three percent on our flightlines, most of our squadrons still lack what we need to “fight tonight.” Through modernization and readiness recovery we have improved readiness rates in the active component to 61% - a significant number when discussing combat effectiveness. However, it is still short of our goal of 75%, but I am confident that the fleet is healthier today with our ability to conduct maintenance and generate sorties for our pilots.

Our most successful achievement has been realized in the MV-22 Fleet Replacement Squadron where the Marine Corps invested heavily in modernization. Today, this FRS has an 81% mission capable rate and is achieving predictable training goals. We are designed to do a lot with a little, and we are rebuilding our “ready bench.” We will continue adding mission capable aircraft to our flight lines by executing our readiness recovery plan, and by modernizing our fleet. Readiness recovery initiatives like CH-53E “reset” and MV-22 Common Configuration Readiness and Modernization (CCRAM) are positively impacting recovery.

Healthy readiness is also contingent upon having spare parts and trained aviation maintenance Marines to fix our aircraft. We strive to place the right people with the right leadership and skill sets in positions of authority and responsibility. Marine aviation maintainers are a very young force operating on the most technologically advanced aircraft in the world, and we need to retain the best and brightest. Since we offered the aircraft maintainer “kicker,” 676 Marines of the 1251 eligible Marines – about half- accepted that bonus. This equates to ten experienced, qualified and senior maintainers remaining in each squadron, providing maintenance and mentorship to the next generation.

Keeping qualified aircrew remains a strategic focus of Marine Aviation. We have seen an uptick in the amount of pilots leaving the service, and we are well aware that the airlines are ramping up hiring. Thus far, we have not seen an alarming rate of pilot attrition: currently, attrition is at about eleven percent per year, compared with our historical rates of about eight percent. However, that three percent increase means about ten more aviators – total - per aircraft type leaving us each year than we have had before.

This represents a concern that the service is addressing with a multi-prong solution. The service is working to improve the condition of the flight line to ensure our pilots can train. CNATRA is improving the training pipeline to wing new aviators with little to no “dwell” between stages. To follow through, the Marine Corps has heavily invested in the fleet replacement squadrons, to get qualified aircrew where they want to be and are most needed: our operational fleet. . The Marines are focusing resources to improve the time to train, which is improving the pilot inventory, which is likely to decrease attrition rates. Combined with the aviator bonus that we will maximize, the Marine Corps is committed to remain competitive and able to recruit and retain the nation’s finest current and future aviators.

Another critical area to Marine aviation is our readiness accounts, such as spare and repair parts. These accounts were previously underfunded as a tradeoff to procure modern aircraft. Non-mission capable (supply) continues to be the primary degrader of our readiness, and the slow rate at which we are adding mission capable aircraft to our flight lines is a result. However, since FY17, we have funded these accounts to their maximum executable levels and we are seeing an improvement in the number of parts available to sustain our fleet. With continued funding of these accounts we expect to see a corresponding mission capable aircraft recovery in 18-24 months.

AVIATION MISHAPS

The true metric of health in aviation is aircrew flight hours. We have increased our flight hours over the past year and continue to monitor the progress monthly. Chairman Dunford recently commented on the current flight hours our aircrew are getting compared to what they used to fly. He also discussed the different responses a high-hour aviator and a low-hour aviator may have in a given scenario. He concludes that the high-hour aviator is better-armed to make a split-second assessment and respond to an anomalous situation, correctly. General Dunford's assessment is spot-on.

While there is still no direct link between low readiness rates and high Class A mishap rates, there's no question that naval aviation is an inherently demanding discipline, and is unforgiving of any mistakes. Well trained and practiced aviators react to malfunctions and difficult circumstances far better and are much less likely to make mistakes, which in turn increases the chance of preventing these anomalous events from becoming mishaps. We typically think of mishaps in terms of number of mishaps and mishap rate. Given recent tragic events within our community, one could question whether flying more flight hours is the correct

solution. One might draw the conclusion that more flight hours equals more risk. To that end, mishap rates are expressed in terms of percent per 100,000 flight hours.

Historically, our mishap rates have been fairly flat though there has been a recent spike. However, a deeper analysis might be more revealing if we look at the environment in which we are seeing these mishaps (e.g. reduced visibility landings – or brownouts, shipboard landings, low altitude flying, etc.) compared to how often we are training in that environment (i.e. currency and proficiency). Viewed as a bell curve, the model for our aviators would be exposure to operational risk graphed against appropriate training and flight hours.

Conclusion

Marine aviation readiness is steadily improving, but requires stable, predictable and timely funding. Our readiness recovery lies in modernizing our aircraft, fixing the ones we have, and having trained aircrew ready to fly them. Mr. Chairman, distinguished committee members, we in the Marine Corps appreciate your continued support and look forward to answering your questions.