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HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT

OF

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DEPUTY COMMANDANT FOR AVIATION

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

BEFORE THE

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

SUBCOMMITTEES ON READINESS & SEAPOWER

CONCERNING

PACIFIC FLEET READINESS

ON

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SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

Good afternoon Chairman Garamendi, Chairman Courtney, Ranking Member Lamborn and Ranking Member Wittman. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

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. 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.

Marine Corps squadrons stand resilient and become healthier each day as we continue to adequately fund our readiness accounts and invest in the material condition of our aircraft to ensure that our aircrew flight hour requirements are met. Prior to FY17, the service was forced to choose between modernization and funding its readiness enabler accounts. That process changed with the enacted RAA17 budget – allowing for additional appropriations – and two subsequent budget cycles. This increase in funding afforded the service the ability to simultaneously modernize and fully fund its readiness accounts. By funding enabler accounts to the requirement, we have been better able to provide the resources necessary to continue our readiness recovery plan in line with the National Defense Strategy, increasing readiness to adequate levels by 2021 for those units forward deployed as well as for those at home. Stable, predictable funding for sustainment and aviation spares accounts is critical to our ability to increase our number of flyable aircraft.

As a testament to Congressional support and our efforts, Marine aviation readiness has continued improving since November of 2017. In 2019, Marine Aviation executed 78 operations, were part of 88 major security cooperation events with partners and allies, and

participated in 170 major exercises. Today there are over 19,000 aviation Marines forward stationed and 17,100 forward deployed, totaling 19% of the active duty force forward engaged in 60 countries around the world.

Our achievements, however, have not come without their share of tragedy and hard lessons learned. On December 6, 2018, the naval aviation community absorbed a devastating loss, when a Marine F/A-18D Hornet from Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA(AW))-242 collided with a Marine KC-130J Super Hercules from Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron (VMGR)-152, during a training event over the Pacific Ocean fifty miles off the coast of Japan. Both squadrons were based out of Iwakuni, on mainland Japan, under the Marine Aircraft Group-12 (MAG-12), 1st Marine Air Wing (I MAW), 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force (III MEF).

All these Marines served their country with honor, and they will never be forgotten. We cannot change what has happened; what we can do is use this tragedy to grow and change our organization to make these operations, and all operations, safer. Such initiatives will be the legacy of these six Marines.

On Sept 23, 2019, the Asst. Commandant of the Marine Corps appointed a Consolidated Disposition Authority (CDA) to further review this mishap, and a similar mishap from April 2016 that did not involve any casualties, along with any related matters. The CDA is an independent senior commander with the authority to initiate any investigation the CDA deems relevant and to take administrative and disciplinary actions it deems appropriate in the matter. This authority allows the CDA to follow any logical leads and adjudicate cases that result from any investigation into command climate, command culture, and command action. As the CDA review is currently an ongoing effort, it would be inappropriate to comment on particular mishap

details in order not to compromise the integrity of the review. I am here today to inform you of steps we have taken to increase our readiness levels and make our operations safer.

These steps fall into four categories: Materiel Readiness; Training; and Personnel.

MARINE AVIATION READINESS UPDATE

Materiel Readiness

Headquarters Marine Corps has made F/A-18 aircraft readiness one of its top goals as our Hornets provide the bulk of the Marine Corps' tactical aviation inventory and remain a critical asset as the institution transitions to the F-35. Improved materiel readiness within our fixed-wing community comes through: reducing maintenance and supply issues that lead to non-mission capable aircraft; reducing the number aircraft that are undergoing in-service repair; and increasing our depot throughput.

In FY17, the Marine Corps and Naval Supply Systems Command invested a total of $1.68B into legacy F/A-18 parts, of which $1.2B was devoted to flight surface spares. Across the entire Marine F/A-18 fleet, our overall mission capable rates have increased from an annual average of 48% in 2017 to 64% in 2019 – an increase of 16% in two years.

Programs such as the Depot Readiness Initiative (DRI), which maximizes the efficiency of the work conducted during depot operations, have increased the productivity of our Marines on the flight-line. DRI has resulted in a 70% reduction in required man-hours to return aircraft to the flight schedule upon delivery from a depot event. The result has been a more efficient use of maintenance man hours and increased touch time on additional airframes.

Today, nearly 9,600 repairable components have been returned to the F/A-18 supply system as a result of the Stricken Aircraft Reduction and Disposal Program (SARDIP), which utilizes contractors for the removal and conditioning of parts from stricken aircraft. These components are then made ready for use and then transferred to our current flight line. The program has increased the number of spare parts in our supply warehouses, helping to reduce our non-mission capable aircraft rates due to supply issues (NMCS).

Our Customer-Oriented Leveling Technique/Program Demand Level (COLT/PDL) is a new allowancing tool for consumable parts adopted from the Air Force, which will allow for us to place more parts on the shelf, improving access to consumable items for our Marine Aviation Logistics Squadrons (MALS) and subsequently our flying units. The impact translates to lower overall customer wait times for parts, which is particularly evident within our overseas squadrons. On average, wait times for consumable parts within our MAG-12 squadrons reduced by 50% from 12 days to 6 days from 2018-2019.

Finally, we have looked at ways to improve our maintenance practices on the flight line. In December 2019, we implemented a Maintenance Capacity Model (MCM), which is a management tool that leverages a more data-informed process to identify a better balance between operations and maintenance. The model analyzes current squadron practices and identifies limitations that prevent our Marines from exercising efficient forms of maintenance. Squadrons generally witness a 20%-30% increase in workforce productivity once the model is implemented. Last month, the Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron-1 (MAWTS-1) provided a team to visit all units in I MAW to teach improved maintenance management techniques through the Advanced Aircraft Maintenance Officer Course (AAMOC). MAWTS-1

also sent a team to VMFA(AW)-242 to discuss analytics-based planning, which provides a better forecast for maintenance capacity when balanced against operations.

A key indicator of our success was our ability to answer the October 2018 80% directive established by our Secretary of Defense, which mandated that our TACAIR squadrons achieve an 80% mission capable rate by the end of FY19. Our efforts resulted in meeting or exceeding the goal on 7 separate occasions and monthly mission capable rates of 76% for 2 consecutive months.

Training

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, flexible logistics and responsive supply chains, and aircrew preparation. Due to our efforts and support from Congress, the average monthly flight hours for our pilots is steadily increasing. Our F/A-18 pilots have witnessed a 2% increase in flight hours per month since FY16 and our F-35 pilots have seen a 6% increase in monthly flight hours also since FY16. The increased access to flight hours translates to better training and more proficient pilots.

Next, Headquarters Marine Corps procured an additional F/A-18D simulator for MCAS Iwakuni prior to December 2018. Delivery of that simulator is scheduled for this March. Complemented by the two F/A-18C simulators that already exist on the base, our crews will have additional opportunities to maintain proficiency levels and mitigate risk, even in the event of aircraft availability shortfalls.

Personnel

Finally, with respect to personnel, the Commandant of the Marine Corps has stated that III MEF will become the Marine Corps' main focus of effort. He has directed that our best Marines be identified for assignment, either immediate or pending, to our Japan-based force. As a former Commanding General of Marine Forces Pacific (MARFORPAC), our Commandant understands the need to place III MEF as our priority tactical unit with I MAW as our priority aviation wing.

Headquarters Marine Corps has implemented a change in tour lengths for Marines going to Okinawa and Iwakuni, shifting unaccompanied tours from the conventional two years to a new length of three years. This change allows us to "grow" and retain talented young NCOs within III MEF and address some critical experience shortfalls.

Headquarters Marine Corps has implanted a stabilization plan for Japan-based units providing support for the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The procedure was designed to maintain unit cohesion stabilization by ensuring that Marines in the unit do not receive orders out of the unit during preparation for deployment. The process also helps to identify those Marines who are experiencing high operational tempo in an effort to determine Marine volunteers or alternate solutions.

In the FY2018 retention guidance that was disseminated in July 2017, Marine Manpower and Reserve Affairs commenced incentives for aviation maintainers. All Corporals through Gunnery Sergeants holding current qualifications of Collateral Duty Inspector (CDI), Quality Assurance Collateral Duty Representative (CDQAR), Quality Assurance Representative (QAR), or Safe For Flight (SFF) within the Fleet Marine Forces who reenlist for 48 months, and agree to remain in a specified unit for the first 24 months (following the end of their current contract), will rate a $20,000 "kicker" in addition to the PMOS bonus amount. This monetary package was

designed to increase maintenance capacity and retain well-needed experience within specific units. The program has been widely successful. As of January 22 of this year, 80 Marines within MAG-12 had accepted this “Kicker”, 16 of which belong to VMFA-242. Across the entire fleet, over 1,900 Marines have accepted the “Kicker” since its inception in October 2017.

We have always focused on the measureable impacts of low readiness: mission capable rates, low flight hours, and retention rates. Naval aviation is a uniquely unforgiving environment, and we train for and anticipate every variable we can control. We feel this mishap and others deeply, and we are taking direct, decisive action to make our force tougher, smarter and safer. As we look to the future, we are optimistic that we are heading in the right direction.