Big plans to combine Navy and Marine Corps air in a single operational force have come apart.

By Otto Kreisher
Whitson, operations and readiness officer for the commander of Naval Air Forces, in San Diego. The war has “effectively taken three or four [Marine Corps] squadrons out of the hunt for air wing integration.”

Because of its commitments to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Marine Corps has actually removed squadrons from carrier air wings, instead of adding more, said Whitson, and Marine Corps fighter requirements have increased by a third because of OIF. “We have to work through this,” he said.

Whitson said the Marine Corps has contributed only three fighter squadrons to carrier service. The Navy has contributed only two fighter squadrons to regular unit rotation to Japan.

"Perhaps when the Joint Strike Fighter comes on line and OIF settles down and some of these other worldwide commitments that we have get on perhaps a more steady state, maybe then we’ll get ourselves back on track” to the original integration goals, Whitson said.

Where It Started

The recent campaign for tacair integration started in 2002 with the signing of a formal agreement between what were then the three top officials in the Navy Department—Gordon England, the Secretary of the Navy; Adm. Vern E. Clark, Chief of Naval Operations; and Gen. James L. Jones, Commandant of the US Marine Corps. (See “Air Wings Built for Two,” December 2002, p. 68.)

Their agreement required the Marine Corps to contribute an F/A-18 Hornet squadron to each of the Navy’s 10 carrier air wings. (This accord superseded a 1997 Marine Corps commitment to put one strike-fighter squadron in each of four Navy carrier wings.) The new integration effort was to be completed by 2012.

In exchange, the Navy would have assigned three of its Hornet squadrons to augment the six-month Marine Corps deployments to Iwakuni, Japan. The units deployed to Iwakuni serve as an on-call tactical aviation asset in the Western Pacific and frequently are dispatched to other locations for exercises with allies or in response to contingencies.

To demonstrate the unity of the tacair force, a Marine Corps colonel, rather than a Navy captain, would command a carrier air wing, and a Navy captain, rather than a Marine Corps colonel, would command a Marine Air Group, a similarly sized collection of aircraft.

While operational synergy was a
key goal of the integration initiative, its real driving force was a growing gap between the Navy Department’s budget figure and its two most critical needs—maintenance of an aged aviation force and procurement of new generation fighters.

Estimates were that integration would slice roughly $35 billion from procurement costs over 20 years. That would greatly ease the impact of a projected Navy Department procurement bow wave by reducing the number of tacair squadrons and aircraft in each squadron. When completed, the sea services would have 35 percent fewer naval strike fighters.

Pocketing, Spending

The savings from eliminating existing units were to be used to improve the readiness of the remaining aircraft, but, as often happens in the world of defense budgeting, the financial moves were implemented before the promised efficiencies were actually realized. In other words, the savings were pocketed and spent before they existed.

The Navy Department slashed nearly 500 F-35s and F/A-18E/F Super Hornets from its long-term spending plans, and the Pentagon commissioned studies to determine whether and to what extent it should pull the Air Force into the arrangement.

In 2004, the Pentagon decommissioned one of the Navy Reserve’s three strike-fighter squadrons and one of the Marine Corps Reserve’s

Above, the Nimitz-class USS Dwight D. Eisenhower churns up the Arabian Sea on a regularly scheduled deployment. At left, an F/A-18 Super Hornet moves so quickly through the sky that it condenses moisture around the aircraft.
four squadrons. The Navy followed up with elimination of an active duty Hornet squadron. This spring, it will decommission another Navy Reserve squadron. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps has decided to cut two more active duty and two more Reserve Hornet squadrons, mainly in an effort to make funds available for more-urgent modernization efforts.

The Marine Corps also has plans to trim the number of fighters in each squadron. These squadron reductions could occur with the transition to the F-35 Lightning II.

Also under review is the Navy Department’s declared intent to cancel procurement of 497 fighters—mostly F-35s. This cut may well be affected by a comprehensive review of the Navy’s future aviation program, ordered last year by the current CNO, Adm. Michael G. Mullen.

To some extent, the lofty tacair integration plan has been replaced by a concept called “capabilities-based scheduling,” which seeks to use all naval service strike-fighter assets to meet the global commitments. Matching the new CBS concept with the agreements between the Navy and the Marine Corps, Whitson said, “we prioritize what the global requirements are” and determine “what squadrons will go where, based on that.”

The new scheduling concept allows the Navy and Marine Corps to put “the most capable squadron in the right place at the right time,” he said. Because of the demands of the war on terrorism, he went on, there are now no plans to disband any additional Navy squadrons.

From the start, the project was controversial.

The integration process itself attracted loud catcalls from respected naval authorities. “It’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” said Norman Polmar, a military scholar and author of a history of carrier aviation and many other books on maritime power. “If you integrate, what’s the need for Marine air?” Polmar went on. “The reason for Marine air is to support the grunts [infantry]. If you start to put them together [with the Navy], you lose the uniqueness of the Marine air.”

The planned cuts in procurement and in the total naval tacair force raised a number of concerns from government analysts and within the naval services. Ronald O’Rourke, veteran naval programs analyst at the Congressional Research Service, suggested Congress should reconsider the impact of the aircraft reductions on the Navy Department’s ability to fulfill its share of the total Defense Department’s operational requirements, including surge.

Changes in the Navy’s squadron reduction schedule indicate that O’Rourke’s concerns were justified.

Analysts also questioned the soundness of an outside contractor’s study, which concluded that the naval services could meet their obligations with fewer strike fighters because the new airplanes would be more effective and have higher availability.

Similar arguments are used today to justify cutting the size of the Air Force’s F-22 and F-35 fighter fleets.

Different Forces, Missions
Forecasting difficulties, O’Rourke noted the two services’ differences in pilot training, which reflect the primary purpose each sees for its strike aircraft. Navy fighter pilots, much like their Air Force counterparts, often focus on air-to-air tactics. They protect the carrier and its escorts and, after they have done that, they practice interdiction and suppression-of-enemy-air-defenses (SEAD) missions.

The Marine Corps traditionally has held that the fighter’s key mission is support of its engaged ground forces. Hornets and Harriers serve as flying artillery to make up for limited amounts of heavy weapons in those units. That is why the Marine Corps organizes its operational units into Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs), which are combined-arms teams integrating rotary and fixed-wing aircraft, infantry, and supporting assets.

Preparing today’s specialized Navy pilots and Marine Corps pilots to perform all Navy Department missions could require much additional training, O’Rourke suggested. In an article in Naval Aviation News, a VFA-97 squadron officer described the steep learning curve the unit faced in preparing for an integrated deployment. It included training for close air support and force protection on the ground, including small-arms training.

Despite the cultural differences, Whitson said Marine Corps pilots—normally shore-based—have performed well on the carriers, and Navy pilot training for “expeditionary” assignments at foreign bases has been manageable.

When integration was launched, some officers in the infantry-heavy Marine Corps worried that their aircraft assigned to carrier air wings would not be available and on station when the grunts needed them. Navy Department leaders, however, assured Congress that tacair integration “retains our culture and reinforces our expeditionary ethos.” The plan also “globally sources all Department of the Navy tacair assets to ensure support to the nation and MAGTF.”

During actual combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Navy and
AIR FORCE aircraft were as likely as Marine Corps types to provide close air support. This was made possible by the availability of precision guided munitions that reduce the need to go low to ensure accuracy.

Economy of Scale

Then there were cost problems. O’Rourke warned that the naval services’ reduction in F-35 procurement could cause higher unit costs for all three armed services that are buying them. Currently, the Air Force plans to buy the conventional takeoff and landing F-35A; the Marine Corps the short takeoff and vertical landing F-35B; and the Navy the carrier-based F-35C. (See “Struggling for Altitude,” September 2006, p. 38.)

Although each variant is optimized for its particular operating environment, the three have many common parts and subassemblies. This is critical to achieving low unit costs—an important F-35 selling point. F-35 program managers insist that the reduced US buys will be offset by the purchases from foreign allies. That claim has yet to be substantiated.

Within the naval services themselves, a sharp F-35 dispute threatens the tacair integration effort. The Marine Corps, because of its focus on support for their ground forces, wants to buy only the short takeoff and vertical landing version of the F-35s. These would replace both their CTOL Hornets and their Harriers, the current STOVL attack airplane. The “jump jets” can operate from both the large-deck amphibious assault ships sailing just off shore and from expeditionary airfields close to the front lines. That would let the Marine Corps meet its goal of delivering tacair support within 30 minutes of a request from engaged ground forces.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, for example, the Marine Corps sent many of its Harriers to Kuwait and then into Iraq as their ground forces moved north toward Baghdad. Other AV-8s flying from the nearby amphibious ships re-armed and refueled at the crude forward operating bases to make additional strikes before returning to sea.

However, Navy officials argue, STOVL aircraft are not compatible with carrier operations, which are geared to the rapid cycles of catapult launchings and arrested landings. The STOVL F-35s also carry less ordnance and fuel than either the Navy’s carrier version or the Air Force’s conventional type, reducing their the strike capability.

The Navy has made no final decision on whether to bring their jump jets onto the carriers, but it has no strong desire to do so.

The different plans for F-35s are “certainly a challenge,” Whitson reports. The Navy is conducting “several studies” right now to determine “what the carrier-VSTOL mix should be,” he said. Whitson added, “Clearly there are pretty big implications not only for tacair integration, but for overall force structure capabilities.”

Marine Corps officials declined to speak on the record about the various issues involving integration. Marine Corps Headquarters spokesman Lt. Col. Scott Fazekas said only that the Corps is “fully committed to tacair integration.”

Despite all the turmoil, there was some progress toward the naval services’ goal of tacair integration.

Marine Corps Col. Douglas P. Yurovich made history when he took command of Carrier Air Wing 9 in January 2006 and led it on a deployment of the carrier USS John C. Stennis. This air wing was one of those with a dedicated Marine Corps Hornet squadron attached. In a similar vein, Navy Capt. David B. Emich is now commanding Marine Aircraft Group 12 during its deployment to Iwakuni. This is another first.

In September 2004, Strike Fighter Squadron 97 became the first Navy Hornet squadron to deploy to Japan with marines. A second Navy squadron has now joined the Marine Corps rotation.

And the Air Force?

England, the former Secretary of the Navy who presided over the project, is now deputy secretary of defense, the Pentagon’s second highest civilian position. Although England has discussed extending the tacair integration concept to all of the services’ air assets, his spokesman, Kevin Wensing, said, “There has not been a lot of significant movement on that.”

He noted, however, that the naval services’ efforts “could certainly set up future integration.” Wensing also suggested that the F-35 “could lead to integration down the road, not only with our services, but with allies” because of widespread international interest. The tilt-rotor V-22 Osprey, which the Marine Corps and the Air Force are buying and which the Navy may buy, offers another possible vehicle for fuller joint-service integration, he said.

Air Force representatives declined to discuss whether the Navy-Marine Corps integration has had any effect on their combat operations or procurement plans, saying there was nothing to report. But Air Force and Marine Corps officials plan to meet this month to discuss the issue, a spokeswoman said.


The Marine Corps is buying F-35B STOVL fighters, such as this one, to replace the F/A-18C Hornets and AV-8B Harriers, its current fixed-wing combat aircraft.