F/A-18E/F Super Hornet Enters Production at Boeing

The nation's newest tactical fighter -- the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet -- moved one step closer to entering service with the U.S. Navy today. Boeing employees gathered in St. Louis to celebrate the start of production of the advanced tactical fighter that will carry naval aviators well into the next century.

The first production model Super Hornet is a single-seat F/A-18E that will be delivered in late 1998. Seven of these advanced Hornets were built during the development phase of the program and are being flight tested. Super Hornets are scheduled to enter the fleet in 2001, and production of the Super Hornet for the U.S. Navy is expected to continue beyond 2010. The Hornet program employs more than 7,000 people in St. Louis and some 46,000 nationwide.

"This is a great day for Boeing and the entire Super Hornet team," said Pat Finneran, Boeing vice president and general manager for the F/A-18 program. "We have moved beyond building test aircraft. What you see on our assembly line are the real thing -- the strike fighters that will be the backbone of our nation's carrier aviation force for decades to come."

Boeing employees watched as an aluminum bulkhead was installed in the forward fuselage of the first production Super Hornet. The bulkhead is a critical component of the forward fuselage providing much of the support needed to withstand the loads generated by the nose landing gear. The bulkhead also supports a major fuel cell and forms a boundary between two of the avionics bays.

The bulkhead was installed on top of the keel/drag brace subassembly, which forms the foundation for the entire forward fuselage and nose of the aircraft. The subassembly was constructed and placed in the tooling in half the time required during the engineering and manufacturing development (EMD) phase of the program.

"We learned a lot during EMD, and we are continually applying what we've learned to the production program," Finneran said. "This is a model acquisition and development program. We're on schedule, on budget and we're meeting or beating all of the aircraft's performance requirements. Now our challenge is to ensure that the Super Hornet is a model production program."

Production model Super Hornets will be built using the low-rate expandable tooling concept that the company introduced during EMD. This mainframe tooling approach allows the aircraft's forward fuselage and nose to be built as a single structure. In conventional construction, the forward fuselage and nose are built in three separate subassemblies that are then joined together.

"The low-rate expandable tooling concept enables us to expand the rate at which aircraft are built without making a huge investment in tools," Finneran explained. "In addition, we've found that this process actually improves the quality of the finished product."

The Super Hornet is the newest edition to the combat-proven family of F/A-18 Hornets. Both the single-seat E and two-seat F models offer longer range, greater endurance, more payload-carrying ability, more powerful engines, increased carrier bringback capability, enhanced survivability and the growth potential to incorporate future systems and technologies to meet emerging threats. Although it is 25 percent larger than the Hornet, the Super Hornet has nearly half as many parts.

An industry team led by The Boeing Company builds the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet. Northrop Grumman Corp. is the principal airframe subcontractor, supplying the center/aft fuselage, as well as a number of systems. General Electric Co. produces the Hornet's smokeless F404 and F414 engines and Hughes Aircraft Co. provides the APG-73 radar.

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