

Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornet Operational Evaluation Continues

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Hangar 1 at the Naval Air Warfare Center, China Lake, Calif., is home to Air Test and Evaluation Squadron NINE - called VX-9. This is the same hangar that shelters aging secrets which helped win World War II and contributed dramatically to allied air superiority in Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm and most recently Kosovo. Today it is the hub of activity as VX-9 conducts a rigorous operational evaluation of the most modern, capable strike-fighter in the world -- the Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornet.

"Thanks to excellent communication between the U.S. Navy and the contractor we have a better idea of where we are with the Super Hornet than any program we've ever done," said VX-9 Commanding Officer Capt. John Stivers. "We don't expect to see any surprises."

VX-9's mission is three-fold. The squadron conducts independent operational tests of strike weapons systems including strike aircraft, conventional warfare equipment, and electronic warfare equipment; develops tactics and procedures for weapons systems employment; and supports the Navy/Marine Corps fleet.

OPEVAL of the Super Hornet is just one of many operational tests being supported by VX-9. "We knew OPEVAL of the Super Hornet would be a tremendous effort," said Stivers. "Our team is working 12 and 14 hour days with an occasional one-day weekend. In addition to OPEVAL of the Super Hornet, we are supporting 65 other activities."

For six months from the start of OPEVAL in May, VX-9 crews are putting the Super Hornet through a complex variety of tactical missions representing the operational arena.

By the conclusion of OPEVAL, about 700 sorties will have been flown. U.S. Navy Cmdr. Jeff Penfield, VX-9 Lead F/A-18E/F Operational Test Director, describes this as a huge operation for everyone involved.

"Flying more than 700 sorties in six months is a 30 percent increase in normal operations for VX-9," explained Penfield. "This is a dramatically bigger operation, and everyone is giving 110 percent to the effort."

After VX-9 pilots became qualified in the Super Hornet at China Lake, the squadron took the aircraft to Key West, Fla., for a two-week detachment to evaluate tactical capability. A second detachment put the Super Hornet through two weeks of day and night carrier operations aboard the U.S.S. JOHN C. STENNIS. Here, VX-9 crews operated and supported the Super Hornets as an integrated part of the carrier's airwing, just as they will be used when they complete the rigors of OPEVAL and become the strike-fighter core of the fleet.

Later this month, OPEVAL pilots will be participating in a "Red Flag" exercise at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., along with 60 other aircraft. During the two-week exercise, the Super Hornets will be flying interdiction sorties, fighter escort and defense suppression missions, and demonstrating joint interoperability on a large scale.

In September and October the focus will be directed toward testing aircraft survivability, which is a challenging metric to demonstrate. The Operational Requirements Document states that the Super Hornet must provide an improvement in survivability over the currently deployed F/A-18C/D.

When testing is complete, a full evaluation of the Super Hornet's performance will be forwarded to Navy leadership. The final report is similar to a report card and the best possible grade the Super Hornet can receive is to be designated "operationally effective and operationally suitable." Throughout OPEVAL, communication between the members of the Hornet Industry Team and VX-9 has been severely restricted to preserve the integrity of the assessment.

"I know it's tough waiting for this six-month final exam to be completed and the report filed," says Stivers. "I understand this, but it is imperative that OPEVAL be an all-Navy independent assessment of the Super Hornet."

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