

The Commandant's Perspective

Aviation Is Fundamental

by Gen Charles C. Krulak

For the past eight decades, Marine aviators have provided an integral part of our air-ground force. They've helped build an organization of unmatched expeditionary capabilities. But this is no time for resting on laurels.

On 20 August 1912, as he climbed into a leaking Wright hydroplane, Marine aviator number one—1stLt Alfred A. Cunningham—could scarcely have imagined the capabilities that Marine aviation would possess 84 years later. From its humble beginnings in the waters of the Severn River near Annapolis, Marine aviation has grown into a technologically sophisticated, multirole force unmatched in its combined arms, expeditionary capabilities anywhere in the world.

But for all of its capabilities, the true strength of Marine aviation is found far beyond the destructive might of weapons, beyond the technological sophistication of communications systems and the terrible beauty of machines that fly. The real strength of Marine aviation lies in the invisible bond shared by all Marines—a bond expressed in the words “every Marine a rifleman.” This bond is forged in the common hardships of initial training and tempered by the shared experiences of the years that follow. It is as profound as any of the bonds shared between those who endure the risks of war, and yet it is conveyed simply as “trust”—the knowledge that we can depend on family, those we know and believe in, when things get rough.

Built on the unique bond that Marines share, Marine aviation maintains a range of capabilities ideally suited for a naval expeditionary force. From antiair warfare, to assault and close air support, to expeditionary airfields and logistics, there is no

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other aviation organization like it in the world. Our aviation lends versatility and flexibility to our forces, and it enables us to transition and maneuver in both tactical and operational terms at sea and ashore. In its naval form at sea, it mirrors the many advantages of Navy aviation. In its expeditionary form ashore, it shares many of the advantages of land-based aviation, but it sheds the reliance on long runways and permanent logistics/maintenance infrastructures. Those capabilities, as well as the advancements we are pursuing for the future, are not just a tribute to the creative vision and innovation of a handful of Marines who conceived and proved combined-arms concepts such as vertical assault, close air support, and

expeditionary aviation logistics. They are also a testament to the thousands of Marines who have struggled day in, day out through the exhaustive schedules required to “keep them flying” in peacetime and in war.

I have met many of these Marines on ships and stations around the world. In hangars, in ready-rooms, and on the flight line, I have seen firsthand their enthu-

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siasm for what they do, their dedication and commitment to the Marine Corps, and their love and concern for their fellow Marines. These men and women make Marine aviation work. Some fly aircraft, some repair and keep those aircraft ready, some provide the communications that enable their missions, and some sustain them with the lifeblood of logistics support. Ultimately, they all share the same purpose—to support other Marines—and there are none who do that better. The words of a U.S. Army regimental commander, quoted in Clay Blair’s history of the Korean War, best capture the kind of support Marines have come to expect of Marine aviation regardless of mission or aircraft: “The Marines on our left were a sight to behold. Not only was their equipment equal or better than ours, they had squadrons of air in support . . . We’ve just got to have air support like that or we might as well disband the infantry and join the Marines.”

In the future, the global stage will demand versatile forces that can fight on short notice under unpredictable circumstances. Flexible, sea-based, expeditionary, combined arms forces will remain at the forefront of our Nation’s ability to respond rapidly and decisively in the event of a crisis. Crises will continue to occur where we least expect them. Winning will be determined by the speed with which we can respond and the effectiveness and survivability of the forces that we deliver. If we’re going to be successful on these fronts, the unique capabilities of Marine aviation will be key. Aviation is *fundamental* to the future of the Marine Corps—without the “A” there is no MAGTF. That fact bears repeating—*without the “A” there is no MAGTF.*

When I assumed the watch as the 31st Commandant, I promised that I would build upon my predecessor’s foundation. My first command was “continue to march.” I gave that command because I believed that we were on the right course—that our capabilities as a combined arms force had never been better. I still believe that today. But that doesn’t mean we can rest on our laurels; our future demands that we be better tomorrow and the day after tomorrow than we are today. As we take our combined arms team into the next millennium, we must improve

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upon our strengths and think about new ideas for the future. We must continue to maintain a combined arms warfighting capability that meets the Nation’s needs for the force in readiness of the 21st century. We must also strengthen and preserve the bond of the air-ground team that we have worked so hard to build over the last eight decades. I know we will.

