

Miramar CLF Report
Feb 21, 2008

The February meeting of the Miramar Community Leaders Forum was conducted February 21st in the Commanding Officers Conference Room at MCAS Miramar.

Col Chris O'Connor, base commander, opened the meeting by informing us that the base was operating at approximately 2/3 of full operating tempo. He then had to attend a meeting with Congressman Bilbray and nominees for the Naval Academy.

LtCol Daniel Goodwin, Director of Safety at MCAS Miramar, presented the members with a very interesting briefing on the air war in Afghanistan and Iraq. From my perspective as an aging Vietnam era Fighter Pilot, a number of circumstances have changed with modern technology and the requirement for extreme accuracy in weapons delivery.

The primary missions of our Marine F-18 pilots are Close Air Support, Armed Reconnaissance, Deep Air Support, Long Range Strikes, Anti-Air Warfare and Air Defense. They also are involved in Non-traditional Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.

The aircraft model flown by the Marines is primarily the F-18C model, which is a single seat aircraft. The F-18D model, which has two seats, is not used in this conflict due to the extreme ranges of some of the missions. The single seat aircraft carries more fuel and has a longer range. The F-18E/F models which have much longer range, are flown by the Navy, not the Marine Corps.

Weapons used are state of the art Joint Attack Munitions (JDAMS), Laser Guided Bombs, the 20 MM cannon as well a non-guided "dumb" bombs.

One of the most startling elements of this briefing was that we learned that typical missions are 6.5 hours long and involve multiple air refuelings due to the extreme distances in the theater of operations. These missions take many hours to plan, but rarely turn out as expected. Targets are frequently changed in route, and high priority targets present themselves with very short notice. Pilots have to be extremely flexible.

The use of very sophisticated and expensive weaponry is required by the nature of the targets. Pilots must distinguish a single house, and even a single room within a house in order to strike only the assigned target without injuring innocent civilians. While the F-18 can place a ballistic (unguided) bomb within 50 feet routinely, this is not nearly accurate enough for the requirement of the mission. Pilots drop bombs guided by GPS and laser and are accurate within mere feet. The requirement to drop a weapon inside 10 feet from many thousand of feet up requires the ultimate in pilot skill and precise weaponry. This is very different from the "carpet" style bombing that was conducted during the Vietnam conflict.

Another startling fact from this briefing is that while the Marines are flying the latest models of the F-18, they are running into carrier landing limitations due to the heavy operating tempo. Aircraft are good for only so many flight hours and so many carrier landings before they are simply worn out. Strangely, the Marines, as well as the Navy will soon have to begin using the older F-18A models because many of these airframes still have flight hours and carrier landings left on them.

And finally, most people don't realize that the vast majority of Marines deployed are less than 23 years old, some not even old enough to drink. They work 12 hours on and 12 hours off for 7-13 months. Their families are just as young and somehow they all make it work – but it is not easy.

On the bright side, the local community has been very supportive and positive. This has been a big help to the Marines and their families. They love living in this community and praise the civilian leadership in San Diego for their support and assistance.

Regarding Fixed Wing and Helicopter operations at Miramar: January total operations were 8,444 compared with January last year, when operations totaled 9,360. Noise complaints have continued to be low. In January of last year, the base recorded 67 noise complaints. However, 44 of those were from one person. This January, only 39 noise complaints were logged for the month, none of which came from Ranch Bernardo.

The base operations personnel have met with the Air Traffic Control personnel and every attempt will be made in the future to avoid turning the F-18s early on the Julian departure. That early turn caused the jets to fly directly over RB at lower altitudes. From my perspective, this situation has improved a great deal, thanks to the Marine Corps meeting with the ATC personnel.

On February 11, the Marines began upgrading the underground circuitry that controls runway lights as well as the optical landing aids. Since they have to dig large trenches across the runways, it will obviously put one of the runways out of commission while this work is ongoing. The first runway to be completed will be runway 24L. The fixed wing aircraft will have one runway less from which to operate during this repair, but the public should not notice the difference. The first stage of this operation should be complete by the middle of March.

The next CLF meeting is scheduled for March 20.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeffrey C Frederick