

At Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash., crowds get a close-up look at the new EA-18G Growler, the first to be delivered to the U.S. Navy fleet.

MARIAN LOCKHART PHOTO

Set to soar and roar

U.S. Navy fleet gets its 1st EA-18G

By KATHY COOK

The EA-18G Growler program has accomplished something that, in acquisition circles, is rare. It's not the aircraft's airborne electronic attack capabilities, its speed, distance and maneuverability, or even its ease of maintenance.

It's that the Growler team made a promise to the U.S. Navy in 2003 to deliver all the above capabilities on time and within budget—no exceptions. With the early delivery in June of the first EA-18G to the Navy fleet, the Growler team has done just that and more.

"At a time when most acquisition news focuses on problems and setbacks, I am pleased to note that this has been a success story and an excellent example of Navy-contractor teamwork and collaboration," said Donald C. Winter, secretary of the Navy. "By leveraging and evolving legacy programs, this program stands as a model of what can be achieved."

"Being late or more expensive than original projections is something we never bought into," said Mike Gibbons, EA-18G program manager. "From day one, it simply was not acceptable."

It is a philosophy the team intends to maintain as it transitions from its current system development and demonstration phase to delivering the aircraft to the fleet. The SDD phase is scheduled to end in 2009, after the Navy's operational evaluation of the jet to determine its effectiveness and suitability for fleet operations. That evaluation begins next month.

The first squadron to get the Growler is Electronic Attack Squadron (VAQ) 129, which serves as the Fleet Readiness Squadron at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash.—home port for the Navy's airborne electronic attack aircraft. The squadron currently flies the EA-6B Prowler but is transitioning to the Growler. The Navy plans to transition completely from Prowlers to Growlers by 2013. VAQ 129 will receive the first five fleet EA-18Gs, and eventually will have as many as 12 Growlers, which they will use to teach pilots and weapon systems officers to fly the aircraft.

For current Prowler crew members, the Growler represents a significant change in the way they operate. The Prowler has four crew members, the Growler has two. In the aircraft's development phase, the

Growler team asked more than 500 aircrew members to help in designing cockpit displays and other tools. Their input ensured that the two-person crew could perform all the tasks needed to complete the mission without overwhelming them.

The Growler also has more places to attach weapons, fuel tanks or jamming pods; more thrust; and integrated systems that provide greater situational awareness and survivability to the crew.

Capt. Bradley Russell, commander of the Electronic Attack Wing, U.S. Pacific Fleet, said that with the Growler "we get the capability to do things at the same rate and capability as Super Hornets. Growlers will be able to perform self-escort, because they will have an air-to-air capability with their radar and Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles as well as that big Link 16 (radio) situational awareness picture. You add those things together and it's more than just two plus two equals four. It's two plus two equals 50." ■

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How the Growler works

The Growler's mission is to provide communications jamming and electronic attack support for fighter aircraft as they operate in battle. Simply put, the EA-18G's mission is to help the aircraft it flies with, or the ground troops it protects, to perform their missions and to increase the group's survivability.

The Growler does this by first locating possible radar or communications threats, using its onboard sensors and satellite communications devices. Next, the aircraft neutralizes any threats it detects, clearing the way for the aircraft or ground troops to do their jobs. The Growler does this by interfering with, or "jamming," opposing radars and other communication devices, effectively blinding the radars so they can't be used to direct defensive systems such as surface-to-air missiles. It can also confuse the enemy by denying communications and severing command networks. The Growler also carries high-speed missiles that can track an opponent's radar signal and destroy the threat.