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NAS Oceana Boots on Ground improves readiness

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"Boots on the ground at 1300" may sound like an amphibious mission on a foreign soil, but this time it was the designation of an equally precise assault by the brass on barriers holding down naval aviation non-deployed readiness.

As part of a program to improve readiness, and as the culmination of five weeks of work group effort, the "boots" of a number of admirals recently touched down at Naval Air Station Oceana, Va., Aviation Intermediate Maintenance Department (AIMD) for the "boots on the ground" (BOG) part of the improvement program. The visit took them to the work areas of five aviation systems, where they received firsthand accounts of readiness problems from military and civilian maintainers.

The systems reviewed in this BOG included the F/A-18's engine, radar and forward-looking infrared pod (FLIR); and the F-14's engine and radar. Flag officers attending the BOG included RADM Wally Massenburg, Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) assistant commander for Logistics; RADM Mike Finley, commander, Naval Inventory Control Point (where aviation spare parts are managed); RADM Steve Heilman NAVAIR assistant commander for Industrial Operations; and RADM Jake Shuford, assistant commander of the Navy Personnel Command for Distribution.

Each of the admirals has a leadership role as a part of the Naval Aviation Readiness Improvement Team (NAVRIT). NAVRIT is a cross-Navy implementation team directing the Naval Aviation Readiness Integrated Improvement Program (NAVRIIP), a systemic approach to improving naval aviation non-deployed readiness through integrated requirements, supplier and budget solutions. The NAVRIT also includes members from OPNAV, the Defense Logistics Agency, Commander Naval Air Force U.S. Atlantic Fleet (AIRLANT), Commander Naval Air Force U.S. Pacific Fleet (AIRPAC) and others.

"From the deck plate perspective, we've had dozens of people come ask what hurts our heads. They write reports and nothing seems to happen. This is different and I'll stake my reputation on it," said CAPT Mark Clemente, a 22-year Navy veteran, referring to the flag-officers presence and support

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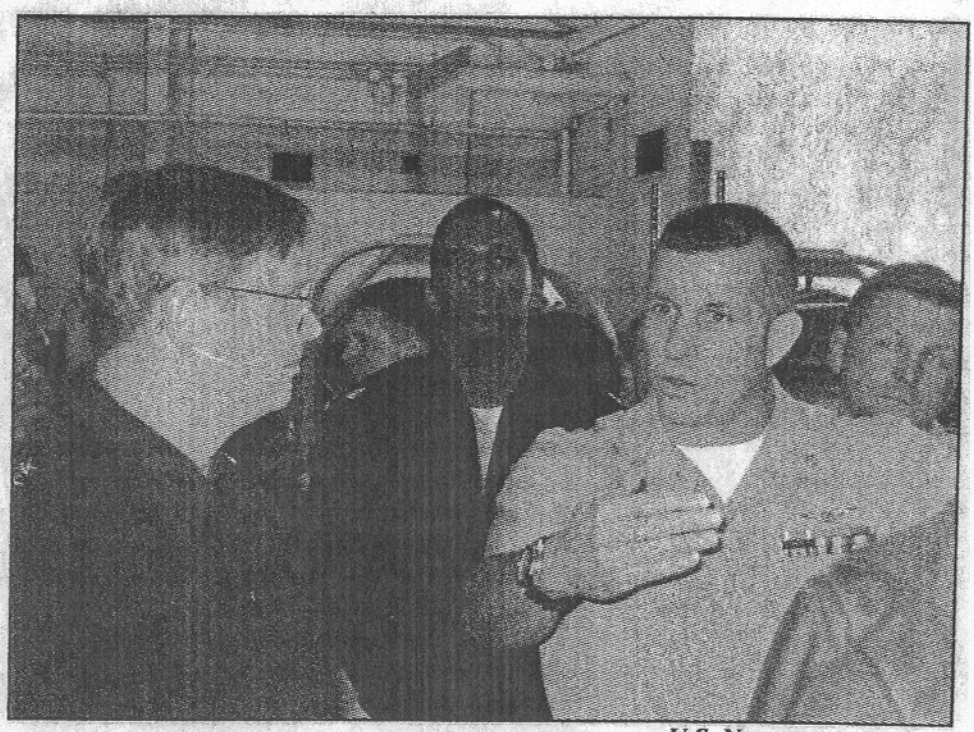

U.S. Navy courtesy photo

ADCS(AW) Paul Beni, NAS Oceana's AIMD F-18 engine repair center supervisor, explains to RADM Wally Massenburg, NAVAIR assistant commander for Logistics, some of the barriers to aviation readiness discovered during the Oceana "boots on the ground" event, held as part of a cross-Navy program designed to improve aviation readiness between deployments.

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for NAVRIIP. Clemente, commander, Fighter Wing Atlantic, is the lead wing commander at NAS Oceana. He also oversees aviation maintenance and supply at the station. "This is a golden opportunity because we have leadership lined up," Clemente explained. "I'm extremely excited about this new program and what it will do for us in the future."

At the Oceana AIMD F/A-18 avionics work center, Massenburg asked Aviation Electronics Technician 2nd class Robert Bruce if training was adequate. "No, I'm doing highly intensive OJT (on-the-job training) so it takes them (the technicians) three years to learn what should take one year," he said.

Shuford explained that the NAVRIIP process had discovered similar barriers at the EA-6B Wing at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, Wash., the first air wing to conduct a BOG visit. "NAVRIIP is a process that you will benefit from as we continue to make changes based on what we find during these BOG visits," Shuford said. He added that the necessary changes would be pursued across naval aviation, instead of just at the station where the barriers are discovered.

Next, the group visited the F-14 avionics work center, where Aviation Electronics Technician 2nd class Richard Velte told them, "I have one (maintenance) bench that is down all the time ... all the time. I have to take parts off of the common test equipment." Massenburg was able to connect him with Marie Greening, NAVAIR program manager for common aviation support equipment, who was a part of the BOG group. She spoke with Velte about interim and permanent solutions as new equipment replaces legacy equipment.

The training and support equipment issues mentioned by the technicians and the responses offered by the BOG group members are examples of quick fixes in progress, but all the leaders expressed the importance of recognizing that NAVRIIP is a process.

"We have to get the fixes identified and in the POM (budget). If we do our part, we will benefit our followers. We will see some changes quickly, but most will be visible in the next two to three years," said Heilman, co-leader of the NAVRIT supplier team.

The BOG process at NAS Oceana is one that will be employed at seven other naval aviation facilities during the next 17 months. Naval leadership from the Pentagon to the waterfront endorses NAVRIIP to improve naval aviation non-deployed readiness.

At the end of the BOG visit, the naval aviation leaders, operators and maintainers sat at tables candidly discussing issues affecting readiness and potential solutions with the sincerity of an extended family at a reunion.

"Any expectations I had have already been met during the five weeks the teams were here doing NAVRIIP work," said Massenburg. He explained that a major part of his expectation is to find out where the barriers exist throughout naval aviation.

The BOG visits are a critical and integral part of a comprehensive process to implement systemic solutions to readiness problems.

In early January, a team of military experts familiar with each of these five systems began the NAVRIIP process to identify barriers to performance in various phases of the systems and working out remedies for permanent fixes. With the help of consultants from the Thomas Group, military experts mapped out proposed solutions to mitigate the barriers.

The team identified over 130 barriers and six were resolved immediately with local resources. For example, For example, when the team noted that a supply division's working hours hindered maintenance efforts, the hours were changed that day. Also, when the lack of required support equipment, in this case shipping containers, was noted as contributing to component damage when transporting them to the AIMD, additional containers were ordered and have been received. Both of these problems were easy fixes, but had not been communicated to the proper person for resolution. The NAVRIIP cross-functional approach put all of the right people in the room at the same time, which led to the quick identification of problems and immediate solutions in many cases.

"What we found in the past was that even when we knew where the barriers were, there was no organizational construct to pursue solutions," Massenburg said. "More often than not, these problem areas were - and are - being compensated for through extra work on the part of our Sailors. The NAVRIIP process gives us the structure to make permanent changes and get the added work off the backs of our Sailors."