

VMM-266: "Ready to Go Fast"

By 1stLt Ahron Oddman and 1stLt Rebecca Massey, VMM-266.

The Fighting Griffins, based at MCAS New River, officially stood up as Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 266 on 26 March 2007. In a ceremony held on a beautiful North Carolina spring day, Commanding Officer LtCol Chris "Mongo" Seymour and SgtMaj Suzanne How uncased the VMM-266 colors, making it the Marine Corps' third operational *Osprey* squadron. Currently, of the other tiltrotor squadrons, VMM-263 is serving in Iraq and VMM-162 is preparing to relieve them in early 2008. VMMT-204 and VMX-22 support the fleet squadrons by providing qualified aircrew and validating operational procedures and equipment, respectively.

After standing up, VMM-266 hit the ground running, and began operations to become the first VMM to deploy as the Air Combat Element (ACE) of a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). The squadron flew its first flight on 10 April 2007, only 15 days after standing up. Section and division launches were soon to follow as the Fighting Griffins received more aircraft. With

those first flights accomplished and a maintenance battle rhythm established, VMM-266 set its sights on its first intermediate goal: Milestone 33, which dictates a core capable level of aircrew/maintenance training.

The squadron was comprised of Marines that were ten-year veterans of the V-22 program, and new check-ins reporting directly from MOS training. Everyone became a teacher, a student, and sometimes both, as the learning curve seemed near vertical for some--to include new co-pilots under instruction and young maintainers who had limited experience with the *Osprey*. The experienced *Osprey* Marines rose to the occasion and began the daily task of educating the fleet's future.

For example, in order to expedite the designation of VMM-266-bound copilots (T2P), the squadron shared training responsibilities with VMMT-204, the *Osprey* Fleet Replacement Squadron. Normally, copilots receive their initial, "100-level," training at VMMT-204,

and then move to their operational squadron after completing a copilot check ride. Of the fifteen VMM-266 T2Ps, ten were trained "in-house" by VMM-266 instructor pilots, most of whom had previously been VMMT-204 or VMX-22 instructor pilots. Not only did sharing training responsibilities with VMMT-204 help the Fighting Griffins get their T2Ps faster, but it also helped the overall V-22 transition, since VMM-266 instructor pilots were able to fly training sorties in support of VMMT-204 for students bound for other units.

The transition pilots in the syllabus

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were role models to the initial accession pilots, as they had to get used to a non-traditional FRS experience. Within a month of graduating flight school, several first lieutenants were learning their ground billets *continued...*



At the end of a long training day, the last MV-22 prepares to land.

VMM-266: The Fighting Griffins

(from Operations to Safety), while studying for their first flights in the MV-22.

1stLt Pascal "Fat Cat" Gonzalez is the ground safety officer of VMM-266, and a newly designated MV-22 T2P. Of the rigors, he said, "Though learning both (ground billet and how to fly the *Osprey*) is a full-time job, I'm excited to have this opportunity so soon after flight school."

1stLt Ahron "Sugar" Oddman is the navigation officer, and is still surprised at the diversity of his days: "In the morning, I was writing the schedule; and in the afternoon, we flew to Orlando and back, all before dinner," he commented.

On 03 Sept 2007, VMM-266 completed Milestone 33, validating the timeline implemented by HQMC to convert HMMs to VMMs, and serving as a model to future VMM transitions. The squadron flew 750 hours with a utilization rate of over 30 hours to reach the milestone.

"The Fighting Griffins had to prepare, both personally and professionally, for life aboard a ship; and not just any ship, but the ship that will eventually transport the MEU, the USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7)."

After reaching Milestone 33, the Fighting Griffins began the maturation training phase, which consists of a Deployment for Training (DFT), a boat period, and Ground Combat Element (GCE) integration. The DFT was completed at Kirtland AFB, the boat period was aboard the USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7), and GCE integration will be completed throughout various regions



VMM-266 Osprey on *Iwo Jima*.

of the country.

During early September, VMM-266 deployed to Albuquerque, NM for two weeks. The majority of the squadron flew to Kirtland AFB commercially, while the aircraft were flown utilizing two training evolutions. One was a "leap frog" consisting of a three-leg cross-country; and the other was a seven-hour, non-stop transcontinental flight with the Marines of VMGR-252 providing great refueling support.

The five-ship formation of two KC-130s and three MV-22s completed the non-stop flights there and back at altitude, in both VMC (Visual Meteorological Conditions) and

IMC (Instrument Meteorological Conditions). The "Otis" KC-130J served as a more than capable

platform, coordinating block altitude reservations, ATC (Air Traffic Control) deconfliction, and impressive control of the division in the clouds. The transcontinental flight instilled confidence, by confirming that the MV-22 is truly a self-deployable, instrument-capable aircraft, limited only by crew considerations. And the training didn't stop with weight-on-wheels in New Mexico.

The maintenance department immediately shifted into gear by establishing its facilities and executing its training plan. The Marines quickly became comfortable with maintaining the aircraft in an unfamiliar desert setting. Of its 10,000 maintenance man-hours performed to date, many were executed in this unfamiliar environment.

The squadron took advantage of the high altitude desert environment. Precious and valuable lessons were learned about reduced visibility land-



Stacked up and ready to go.

ings (brownout), mountain and desert operations, and high density altitude operations. These lessons were incorporated into rapidly expanding tactics, techniques, and procedures.

In addition to the physical lessons learned in the air and in the hangar, many intangible insights were gained from joint operations with the U.S. Air Force. The 71st Special Operations Group, which flies the USAF variant CV-22, was a gracious host to the Fighting Griffins. A professional bond was formed that will only help to advance future Joint Employment/Operations of the platform.



Squadron pilot 1stLt Ahron Oddman is shown before a mission, wearing survival vest and oxygen mask as part of standard flight gear.

MV-22 Ospreys Are Here



(Photos by MCC Robert Fluegel, USN)



MV-22 launching from USS Iwo Jima.

While on DFT at Kirtland AFB, the Griffins completed the plan for the ship deployment that would follow, only thirty days after returning. The thirty days consisted of completing deck qualification prerequisites and classes, while maintenance developed a strategy of utilization and training. The Fighting Griffins had to prepare, both personally and professionally, for life aboard a ship; and not just any ship, but the ship that will eventually transport the MEU, the USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7).

As of this writing, the Fighting Griffins are currently on the ship engaged in dynamic operations that include day and night Carrier Qualifications (CQs) and tactical flight training. On the first day embarked, VMM-266 conducted operations both at sea and on land, simultaneously basing a detachment at NAS Willow Grove (hosted by MAG-49 and HMH-772). The maintenance department continued to practice and refine shipboard procedures for a platform that has never endured months on the ship.

All of these operations validated the MV-22's ability to provide long-range, land and sea based assault support. On a typical day, a crew conducts a Marine Logistics (MARLOG) flight from NAS Willow Grove, PA; executes a low-level

route to MCAS Cherry Point, NC; then flies a composite VFR/IFR flight to recover on the ship, covering over 700 miles in under four hours. With vigilance, the Fighting Griffins continue to expand the scope of their operational/maintenance capabilities, while gaining priceless lessons.

The final stage of maturation will appropriately be a period of Ground Combat Element (GCE) integration during the winter months. This will include operations with ground force elements of varying sizes and missions, with a focus on the combat arms. The Fighting Griffins will work to demonstrate and refine their ability to deliver the fighting Marine and his gear to the right place, at the right time. Though the MEU's Battalion Landing Team (BLT) is currently deployed forward, VMM-266 will work with sister battalions to validate and refine the tactics that will define the MEU's capabilities, to include all forms of USMC Assault Support.

The Fighting Griffins are looking forward to operational tasking. In the Spring of 2008, they will become a composite squadron and form the Aviation Combat Element of the 26th MEU. The unit is capable, yet still growing and is anticipating start-

ing the tradition of MV-22s deploying with MEUs. In the seven months since stand up, one truth has become evident: No matter what mission the MEU is assigned, from a Mediterranean cruise, an OIF mission, or a MAGTF deployment to Afghanistan, the Marines of VMM-266 will be ready. Nacelles are on their way to the downstop, and the Fighting Griffins are:

"READY TO GO FAST"!



VMM-266 squadron pilot 1stLt Pascal Gonzalez before going on deck for launch during flight ops from the USS *Iwo Jima*.