Close the fighter gap

Continued Super Hornet production would prevent future shortage

TODD AKIN

The writer, a Republican who represents Missouri's 2nd District in Congress, is a member of the House Armed Services Committee. Boeing Integrated Defense Systems is based in St. Louis.

"When word of crisis breaks out in Washington, it's no accident the first question that comes to everyone's lips is, 'Where is the nearest carrier?'"

These oft-quoted words of many former presidents remain true today, but if our aircraft carriers did not have aircraft on them, would they remain such strategic assets? The answer is clearly no.

Unfortunately, we are facing this very situation in the near future, when two or more of our carriers will lack the aircraft they need.

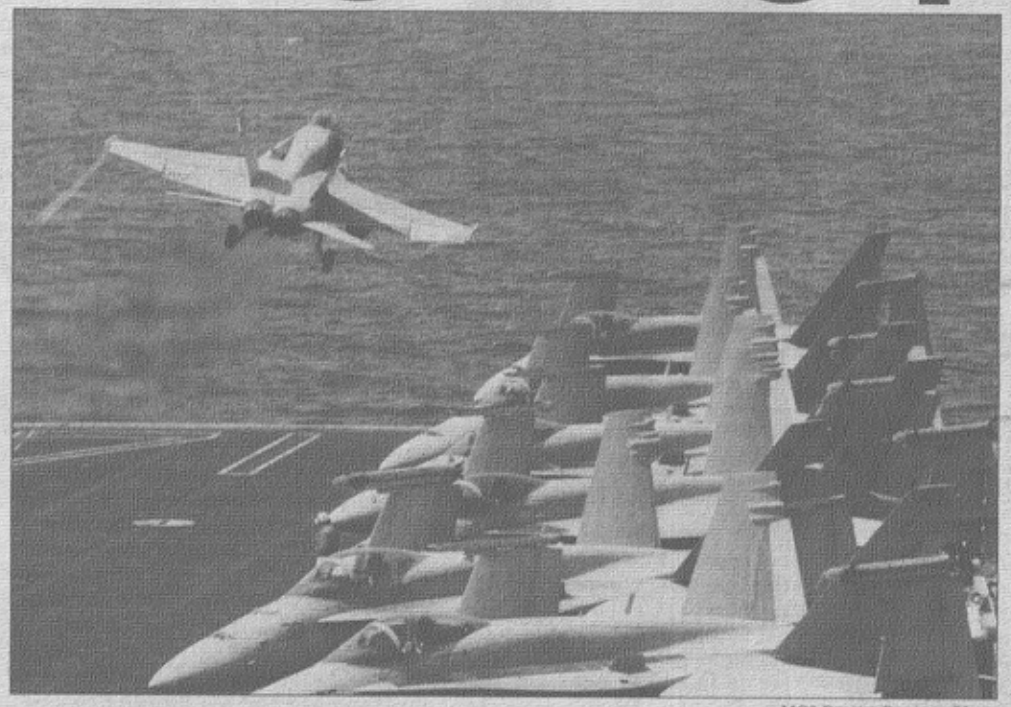
As a member of the House Armed Services Committee, I have closely followed the Navy's plans for its next-generation aircraft carriers and the planes that will go on those carriers. While there are a number of types of planes on a carrier, arguably the most important are the fighter aircraft, a mix of older Boeing F/A-18 Hornets and newer F/A-18 E/F Super Hornets, as well as the electronic attack EA-6B Prowlers that will be replaced by EA-18G Growlers. These Hornets and Super Hornets are flying missions around the world, keeping our service members safe and keeping our enemies on the run. (Sadly, an older Marine F/A-18D Hornet crashed Dec. 8 near Miramar, Calif. That incident remains under investigation.)

The Navy is not addressing the sizeable gap in its fighter aircraft inventory as older F/A-18 A-D Hornets retire before the aircraft carrier variant of the F-35C Joint Strike Fighter enters the fleet. The F-35C has not yet flown and is not scheduled to reach initial operational capability until 2015. At the same time, the Navy is planning to phase out production of F/A-18 Super Hornets and EA-18G Growlers in 2013, with some suppliers beginning to shut down their production lines as early as 2010.

There already is a shortfall of more than 30 strike-fighter aircraft in the Navy and Marine Corps. Under the most optimistic conditions, the shortfall will exceed 125 aircraft by 2015. This shortfall means that at least three of our aircraft carriers will not have the aircraft they need to conduct combat operations.

This lack of Navy fighters is an unacceptable risk to our Navy and to our country. At the same time, we have a production line building a superb Navy fighter that will be shutting down soon. Extending the Super Hornet production line would meet the Navy's needs with a great plane at a good price and is the only viable solution for this shortfall. It is imperative that the Navy buy additional Super Hornets.

Our Navy must remain a strong and capable force, able to go anywhere in the world and protect our nation and our allies. Our Nimitz-class carriers and our next-generation Ford-class carriers must have sufficient aircraft to protect themselves and accomplish their mission, whatever and wherever it may be. □



MC2 REMUS BORISOV/NAVY

The writer suggests that the Navy buy Super Hornets to prevent a gap in the fighter inventory as older F/A-18 Hornets are removed from service before the carrier variant of the F-35C Joint Strike Fighter enters the fleet.

This lack of Navy fighters is an unacceptable risk to our Navy and to our country.