

Final Flight: War plane to come to rest at Hickory Regional Airport

B.J. Ruppel /U.S. Marine Corp



This EA-6B Prowler is flying in to Hickory Regional Airport at 11 a.m. on Saturday, where it will be decommissioned and displayed at the Hickory Air Museum. The plane's mission was to jam enemy radar signals and surface-to-air missiles.

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BY SHARON MCBRAYER Staff Writer

HICKORY -- For those who thrill at the sight of a military airplane, be at the Hickory Regional Airport on Saturday morning.

That's when air traffic over the airport will be halted so a piece of military history can fly in to its final resting place.

U.S. Marines will fly in a EA-6B Prowler from Cherry Point to Hickory to be decommissioned and put on permanent display at the Hickory Air Museum, which houses a dozen or so other military aircraft.

A welcoming ceremony starts at 10:30 a.m., with the Marines flying in at 11 a.m. People will be able to talk to the Marines and get an up-close look at the EA-6B Prowler until 1 p.m., Kirby said.

While the name EA-6B Prowler may not mean much to civilians, what the aircraft does has been pivotal to military battle successes.

The sole mission of the plane, along with the Marines onboard, is to jam radar signals and surface-to-air missiles of the enemy so that other fighters can fly into an area undetected, said Gregg Kirby, a professional pilot, Hickory Air Museum member who is responsible for acquisitions, and a volunteer. The planes also can jam cellphone signals on the ground to keep terrorists from detonating a bomb, he said.

“For Hickory to get one is nothing short of a miracle,” Kirby said. “There are so many museums fighting for one.”

After the EA-6B Prowler is decommissioned in Hickory, only three will be left in Cherry Point, where the squadron is based, Kirby said. The military will decommission one each year through 2019, he said.

“The whole A6 squadron has been flying half the lifespan of aviation, and they’re getting ready to go away,” Kirby said.

But never fear, the EF-18 Growler, a new body frame, will take over the mission of the EA-6B Prowler.

That’s when the aircraft will be decommissioned, he said.

The federal government will maintain ownership of the plane but is making a conditional deed of gift to the museum in exchange for the museum agreeing to take care of it, Kirby said.

For more about the Hickory Air Museum, go to

www.hickoryaviationmuseum.org.

Its Facebook page is www.facebook.com/HickoryAviationMuseum.