

Michigan Marine's squadron featured in North Carolina Aviation Museum



The EA-6B Prowler arrives at the Hickory Aviation Museum. (Courtesy | Jon Houghtaling)

By [Malachi Barrett | mbarret1@mlive.com](mailto:mbarret1@mlive.com)

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LUDINGTON, MI -- A Ludington Marine's name will be forever painted on the side of a newly dedicated historical aircraft.

The Hickory Aviation Museum in North Carolina accepted the EA-6B Prowler in May. Painted on the aircraft is the squadron lineage, the aircrew's names, the maintenance department's names and the squadron's banshee logo.

"I was (at the dedication ceremony), we demilitarized the aircraft and it was a good event," said Gunnery Sgt. Ki Kimball. "It will be nice when my kids can see it. It's a part of history. Everyone was happy to know that something we flew and worked on will be a piece of history forever."

The Prowler has been in service since 1975, Kimball said. The EA-6B's primary mission is to protect U.S. and coalition forces through electronic attack and suppression of enemy air defenses. Kimball said the Prowler interrupts enemy electronic activity and obtains electronic intelligence within the combat area.

"In other words, their job is to jam enemy RADAR and missile systems to protect our forces," said Jeff Wofford, director of the Hickory Aviation Museum. "These guys were the first in to blaze a trail for the other aircraft to follow. During recent missions, the aircraft was able to jam cell phone signals to prevent the enemy from using cell phones to detonate IEDs."

The aircraft on display in Hickory has been in service since 1991 and has been involved in most of the combat operations that the United States has been in since that time. All EA-6B will be removed from service by 2019.

The Marine Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron 1 — also known as VMAQ-1 — was first established during the Korean War and saw combat in Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia, Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Their last combat deployment was in 2013.

Upon returning to Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in North Carolina, Kimball's squadron was tasked with training pilots and Naval Flight Officers to operate the EA-6B Prowler. The Quality Assurance Chief of his unit, Kimball is responsible for making sure the aircraft is properly maintained and safe to fly on missions.

Kimball has served in the Marine Corps since graduating from Ludington High School in 2000. In total, he has served four tours of duty — in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo and Italy.

"At a young age I knew I wanted to be a Marine," Kimball said. "In my experience the camaraderie, being around all guys and the traveling keeps you young, you get to serve your country and work with a lot of people. I enjoy it. It has a challenge."

He completed boot camp at Camp Pendleton, San Diego. Kimball was in the same unit as his half-brother Chad Lawton during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"We had a fascination with the Marine Corps and how high their standards were," Lawton said. "If we were going to go in, we wanted to set the bar high."

Lawton retired in 2009 and is now Medical Control Authority coordinator for the West Michigan Regional Medical Consortium.

"I miss being a Marine quite a bit, I really value my time and if you ask anyone I think you would get mostly the same response," he said. "I was not the best student in high school, at that time I was pretty young and I knew that I needed to do something drastic or I would end up somewhere bad. I never would have been able to get this far without the Marine Corps."

Kimball remains in North Carolina with his wife and two children.

"We're very proud of him, he's done a good job of hashing a name for himself and he's a dedicated Marine," Lawton said. "He's always been a go-getter."

Wofford said the museum is honored to receive the aircraft from VMAQT-1. Originally, there were plans to display a Navy plane from Washington, but plans fell through.

"We had a great time hanging out with the guys from VMAQT-1," Wofford said. "They are a tribute to their squadron, the Marine Corps and our country."

Likewise, Kimball said the museum has done an "outstanding job to represent the Navy and Marine Corps."