FAA hands local air traffic control to MCAS Cherry Point

By Derrick Perkins, Staff writer *4:31 p.m. EST February 25, 2015*

The air traffic control tower is silhouetted by the rising sun over Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, NC (Photo: Sgt. T. T. Parish/Marine Corps)

Scheduling flight training got a lot less complicated aboard Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina, after officials there took on local air traffic control responsibilities from the Federal Aviation Administration.

In years past, the FAA's Washington Center — actually located in Leesburg, Virginia — oversaw the airspace in and around the North Carolina air base, but the system proved troublesome for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was setting aside time and air space for military use. Doing so required close communication and careful coordination with Washington, said David Plummer, Cherry Point's regional airspace coordinator.

"Any time we wanted to use the [airspace] above Cherry Point, we had to spend a little time on the phone exchanging all of the relevant information," he said. "Then Murphy's Law sets in, whether it's the weather or a pilot's airplane breaking down … the timing became a challenge. Controllers would spend time on the phone saying, 'This is what we're going to do,' and then the planes don't show up for half an hour or 45 minutes later."

But earlier this month, air traffic controllers at the Marine facility cut out the middleman, setting up restricted areas for training and other military purposes at will. As part of the deal, they assumed responsibility of managing air traffic out of five local civilian airfields.

Washington's prior control over local airspace also presented problems for commercial aircraft — mostly Cessnas, Beechcraft, Pipers and those flown by package carriers like FedEx and UPS, Plummer said. The FAA center mainly handles high-altitude jetliner routes, which made it less adept at overseeing lower-level, local air traffic.

In practical terms, the equipment used in Washington allows officials there to manage a great span of space. But that same gear makes local traffic appear much more tightly packed, meaning those controllers often instructed aircraft to give each other unnecessarily wide berths, Plummer said. That can add travel delays.

Local air traffic controllers govern a much smaller space and are able to more precisely maneuver aircraft safely around one another, he said. Giving Cherry Point control should prove advantageous to civilian air traffic as well, according to Plummer.

Assuming command of the airspace came at a cost of about $21,000, money needed to install telephone lines between Cherry Point and its neighboring jurisdictions, which allows air traffic controllers to pass off aircraft as they exit or enter the area under the Marine base's authority. Except for that capital cost and a regular phone bill, the transfer should not draw on the facility's resources, Plummer said.

"In the air traffic control business, more airspace sometimes makes things easier," he said.