



F-35 Lightning II Program

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PANETTA LIFTS F-35 FIGHTER VARIANT PROBATION

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NAVAL AIR STATION PATUXENT RIVER, Md., Jan. 20, 2012 – Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta announced today he's lifted probation from the Short Takeoff, Vertical Landing variant of the fifth generation F-35 Lightning II joint strike fighter which is absolutely vital to maintaining air superiority.

Speaking during a town hall-style meeting here, the defense secretary discussed the latest development in the progress of the joint strike fighter program as service members, politicians and the civilian workforce listened. "Early in 2011 DOD was compelled to put [the Short Takeoff and Vertical Landing] ... on probation," he said.



Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta speaks to military members and civilian workers at the Joint Strike Fighter hanger on Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md., Jan. 20, 2012. DOD photo by Erin A. Kirk-Cuomo

"Over the course of last year, you here at Pax River helped make an incredible difference by completing tremendous amounts of STOVL testing," Panetta noted. "You demonstrated that we've made real progress towards fixing some of the known problems that we had with STOVL."

Panetta lauded the joint strike fighter's workforce at NAS Patuxent River for their efforts to bring the STOVL variant up to the standards of the two other existing versions of the F-35, the Conventional Takeoff and Landing and Carrier Variant.

"We now believe that because of your work, that the STOVL variant is demonstrating the kind of performance and maturity that is in line with the other two variants of the JSF," Panetta said.

"As a result of your hard work and the hard work of JSF's government and industry team ... the STOVL variant has made, I believe and all of us believe, sufficient progress so that as of today, I am lifting the STOVL probation," he announced.

Panetta commended the crowd for their hard work, but cautioned that the JSF program still has more work to do. "We've got a long way to go with the JSF testing, and it's obviously not out of the woods yet," he said.

"But I am confident that if we continue to do the hard work necessary ... that both the Carrier and the STOVL Variant are going to be ready for operations and are going to be ready for doing the work that they have to do, which is to help protect this country," Panetta said.

"I want you all to know that as secretary of defense, my department is committed to the development of the F-35," he said. "It's absolutely critical ... that we get it right. And that's why you're here. The developmental testing that's going on here will ensure that we get this right."

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James F. Amos called Panetta's decision to lift the probation of the F-35B "hard-earned."

"Secretary Panetta's decision to take the F-35B Lightning II Short Takeoff, Vertical Landing variant off probation was a hard-earned and rewarding announcement for the entire DOD/industry team that worked very hard last year," he said.

"Successful F-35B performance ashore and at sea has very positively advanced the state of demonstrated capability in 2011," Amos said. "The positive momentum generated during 2011 will continue as testing proceeds, production aircraft are delivered, and fleet training begins in 2012."

Panetta said it is important that the U.S. military maintains its technological edge into the future. "That's where we have to be," he said. "We're going to have a strong defense; we have got to be there." Panetta praised the capabilities of Patuxent's workforce.

"Because of you, because of the very unique testing and capabilities that are offered here, we are able to maintain that technological edge," Panetta said. "And I want to thank you again for your dedication, for your commitment, for your great skills."

Panetta lauded the Patuxent River installation calling it "a very unique facility" and "a national treasure" that is important to maintain.

"These are world-class facilities ... that [are] important to our military, important to our men and women in uniform who have to put their lives on the line, and it's important to our national security," Panetta said.

"Please accept my deepest thanks for your work and dedication," he said. "I couldn't do it without you."

