



# **F-35 Lightning II Program**

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## **FIRST OPERATIONAL F-35 SQUADRON HONORED IN HISTORIC CEREMONY**

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**MARINE CORPS AIR STATION YUMA, ARIZ.-** Celebrating 100 years of Marine Aviation, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing welcomed its first F-35B squadron during an official ceremony at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Ariz., Nov. 20 at 1 p.m.

During the ceremony Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 121, formerly an F/A-18 Hornet squadron, re-designated as the Corps' first operational F-35 squadron, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121. The squadron also received its second aircraft at the end of the ceremony, BF-20, and its third F-35B, BF-21, later the same day.

The arrival of the F-35B Lightning II, also known as the Joint Strike Fighter, to Yuma signifies the Marine Corps' forward progress in transitioning the F-35 from a testing and training aircraft to a fully operational tactical aviation capability.

Hundreds of senior military, civic and industry leaders attended the ceremony to mark the next generation of tactical aviation dominance in the Marine Corps to include Arizona Senator John McCain, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, Under Secretary of the Navy Honorable Mr. Robert Work and the Commandant of the Marine Corps General James Amos.

"Today marks the beginning of Joint Strike Fighters flying over the skies of Arizona for perhaps the next 50 years," stated Arizona Senator John McCain during the ceremony. "That's another 50 years for the city of Yuma, and the state of Arizona to do their part to help ensure this great nation remains strong and secure."

LtCol. Jeffrey Scott, native of San Jose, Calif. and formerly an AV-8B Harrier pilot, is the new commanding officer of VMFA-121 and is joined by Sgt. Maj. Carlos Williams, native of Beaufort, S.C., as the squadron's first sergeant major. Both Marines were hand selected to lead the Marine Corps' first operational F-35 squadron towards revolutionizing expeditionary Marine air-ground combat power in all threat environments. The squadron will be home to approximately 300 Marines and is expected to receive additional F-35s throughout the next 8 to 12 months, with a total of 16 aircraft scheduled to arrive by late 2013.

As the Corps' top leader and a Marine aviator, Commandant of the Marine Corps General James Amos provided words of encouragement and optimism about the forward progression of the F-35B program with its first operational basing at MCAS Yuma.

"For the first time in aviation history, the most lethal fighter characteristics, supersonic speed, radar-evading stealth, extreme agility, short takeoff/vertical landing capability, and an impressive array of 21st Century weapons have been combined in a single platform. the F-35B Lightning II you see behind me," stated Amos. "VMFA-121 is at the forefront of one of the most significant transition periods in the 100-year history of Marine Aviation, as we replace nearly every aircraft in the Corps between 2005 and 2025. Certainly, it is the most significant transition in quite some time, maybe since the introduction of the helicopter to our forces in the post World War II 1940s," Amos added.

Differently from previous fixed wing capabilities across the Department of Defense, the integration of U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps and coalition F-35 Joint Strike Fighters will provide the dominant, multi-role, fifth generation capabilities needed across the full spectrum of combat operations to deter potential adversaries and enable future aviation power projection. Specific to the Marine Corps, consolidating three aircraft into one is central to maintaining tactical aviation affordability and serving as good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

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From MCAS Yuma's groundbreaking ceremony in mid-2011, marking the air station's preparation for the arrival of its first F-35, to today's event, MCAS Yuma's Station Commanding Officer Col. Robert Kuckuk is proud of the shared commitment to excellence witnessed to make today a reality.

"We here on the air station, and throughout Third Marine Aircraft Wing and Marine Corp Installations West, are so fortunate to have the support of the people of Yuma, our elected officials, and the workforce that is making this program a reality," stated Kuckuk. "We could not have accomplished what we have done to date without their support and assistance, not to mention the very hard work that they have provided since the very idea of bringing this airplane to Yuma was first mentioned. This day is as much about the relationship the Marines have with the city and county as it is about a milestone in Marine Aviation."

As new F-35s flow in to Yuma, Ariz. over the next several years, MCAS Yuma will continue to refine its infrastructure to support additional F-35 squadrons, prepare its ranges and facilities for a full range of combat training operations and will lead the Marine Corps in evaluating the employment and advancement of the F-35B.

"The next step is to continue to build on the progress we saw this afternoon. Facilities need to continue to be built to include the auxiliary landing field on Barry M. Goldwater Range-West so the pilots can train for shipboard operations and the communication links need to be completed and tested," stated Kuckuk. "All of this will be in support of the Marine Aircraft Group 13 pilots that will train to take this airplane to war."

VMFA-121 is now setting the pace for the F-35 program based on a common platform. The U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps can integrate best practices from VMFA-121 in preparation for the future operational basing of the F-35A and F-35C.

(Marines of VMFA-121) "Marines. the eyes of the world are upon you. I know that everyone one of you are up to the challenge of making this aircraft successful, relevant and operational," stated Amos. "We will take things slow. We will do things the right way and in the end, you will deliver to our nation its very first 5th generation, operational COMBAT SQUADRON. It will exist for one purpose only.to defend America and its interests."