



F-35 Lightning II Program

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NAVY LAUNCHES FIRST LOCAL F-35C SORTIE

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. -- Sailors from U.S. Navy F-35 Strike Fighter Squadron-101 made history completing the first local flight in the F-35C Lightning II carrier variant Aug. 14, here.

The F-35C, piloted by Lt. Cdr. Christopher Tabert, took off from Eglin shortly after 9 a.m. for about an hour flight.

Satisfied with the maintenance verification sortie, Tabert stated "the flight went great, the weather was gorgeous, the jet performed well, we couldn't have asked for anything better."

Tabert was joined in the air by two F/A-18E aircraft, one of which was flown by Navy Capt. John Enfield, the commanding officer of VFA-101.

"The first flight of the Grim Reaper 102 today is the acme of many years of hard work and planning by the Sailors of VFA-101 and our Lockheed Martin partners and is an exciting first step in introducing the Navy's first fifth generation fighter to fleet," said Enfield. "Now that we're flying, we will be able to validate and evaluate both pilot and maintainer syllabi as we train the initial cadre of instructors."

Tabert is no stranger to the F-35. He has been flying the F-35 since August 2011, and has flown the A, B and C variants of the aircraft. He served as a test pilot for the joint strike fighter program at Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md. Now assigned to Eglin's VFA-101, Tabert is the Navy's first F-35C instructor pilot.

"It was an honor to fly this flight and see the Sailor's hard work pay off," said Tabert.

This week is filled with several firsts for VFA-101. Prior to this flight, Enfield completed the first syllabus training event, a taxi familiarization, on Aug. 12. The next milestone, the first student sortie, is scheduled for later this week, weather permitting.

"Today is a great day, look around and you will see smiles on the Sailors' faces. Now we can start training in earnest," said Enfield about yesterday's flight.

The Navy's first F-35 pilot training course here concluded in January, and the second course began June 4. Currently, there are seven Navy pilots training at the F-35 Integrated Training Center located at Eglin's 33rd Fighter Wing. The goal is to have four or five pilots qualified in the F-35C by the end of 2013, according to Enfield.

"This is a great day for the F-35 airpower team at Eglin," said Col. Todd Canterbury, the 33rd FW commander. "It represents the final piece of the puzzle for F-35 training systems at Eglin and is a very visible symbol of all the hard work and determination from all team members. The 33rd FW is proud to work side by side with our sister services and looks forward to advancing the F-35 toward its initial war fighting capability."

The F-35C variant is a carrier-capable low-observable multi-role fighter aircraft, designed to provide unmatched airborne power projection from the sea.

The Navy reported, by 2025, their aircraft carrier-based air wings will consist of a mix of the F-35C, F/A-18E/F Super Hornets, EA-18G Growler, E-2D Hawkeye, Unmanned Carrier Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike air vehicles, MH-60R/S helicopters and Carrier Onboard Delivery logistics aircraft.

The Navy's joint strike fighter bears structural modifications from the other variants, necessitated by the increased resiliency required for carrier operations. Some of these modifications include a broader wingspan, tail hook and ruggedized launch equipment.



The first F-35C Lightning II sortie takes off from the U.S. Navy F-35 Strike Fighter Squadron VFA 101 at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. Aug. 14. Sailors have been on station for two years ready for the day they would launch a carrier variant of the military's joint strike fighter. The Navy's first pilot training course at Eglin was concluded in January and the second course began June with seven pilots soon to begin training flight operations in two of the squadron's F-35Cs. (U.S. Air Force photo/Samuel King Jr.)