



F-35 Lightning II Program

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MARINES: F-35B SQUADRON READY FOR WORLDWIDE DEPLOYMENT

WASHINGTON, July 31, 2015 - The Marine Corps today declared that a squadron of 10 F-35B Lightning II aircraft is ready for worldwide deployment. The Marines' declaration of initial operational capability for its squadron of F-35Bs "marks a significant milestone in the continued evolution of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program," Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Frank Kendall said in a statement issued today.

"The decision was made following a thorough operational readiness inspection, which assessed the Marine Corps' ability to employ this complex weapon system in an operational environment," Kendall continued. "This achievement is a testament to the efforts of the F-35 Joint Program Office and industry team, as well as the hard work and support from the Marine Corps."

"This accomplishment is an affirmation that the F-35 program is on track to deliver essential 5th generation warfighting capabilities to our U.S. services and international partners," he added. "It is also a reminder that we still have work ahead to deliver the full warfighting capability required by all three services and our partners while we continue our successful efforts to drive cost out of the program."

Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121, or VMFA-121, based in Yuma, Arizona, is the first squadron in military history to become operational with an F-35 variant, following a five-day operational readiness inspection, which concluded July 17, according to a news release issued today by the Marine Corps.

"I am pleased to announce that VMFA-121 has achieved initial operational capability in the F-35B, as defined by requirements outlined in the June 2014 Joint Report to Congressional Defense Committees," Marine Corps Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., commandant of the Marine Corps, said in the Marine Corps release.

"VMFA-121 has ten aircraft in the Block 2B configuration with the requisite performance envelope and weapons clearances, to include the training, sustainment capabilities, and infrastructure to deploy to an austere site or a ship," Dunford continued. "It is capable of conducting close air support, offensive and defensive counter air, air interdiction, assault support escort and armed reconnaissance as part of a Marine air-ground task force, or in support of the joint force."

Dunford stated that he has his full confidence in the F-35B's ability to support Marines in combat, predicated on years of concurrent developmental testing and operational flying.

"Prior to declaring [initial operating capability], we have conducted flight operations for seven weeks at sea aboard an L-Class carrier, participated in multiple large force exercises, and executed a recent operational evaluation which included multiple live ordnance sorties," Dunford said. "The F-35B's ability to conduct operations from expeditionary airstrips or sea-based carriers provides our nation with its first 5th generation strike fighter, which will transform the way we fight and win."

As the future of Marine Corps tactical aviation, the F-35 will eventually replace three legacy platforms: the AV-8B Harrier, the F/A-18 Hornet, and the EA-6B Prowler, according to the Marine Corps release.

"The success of VMFA-121 is a reflection of the hard work and effort by the Marines in the squadron, those involved in the program over many years, and the support we have received from across the Department of the Navy, the joint program office, our industry partners, and the undersecretary of defense," Dunford added. "Achieving [initial operating capability] has truly been a team effort."



The Marine Corps has trained and qualified more than 50 Marine F-35B pilots and certified about 500 maintenance personnel to assume autonomous, organic-level maintenance support for the F-35B, the release said.

Marine Attack Squadron 211, an AV-8B Harrier II squadron, is scheduled to transition next to the F-35B in fiscal year 2016, according to the release. In 2018, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 122, an F/A-18 Hornet squadron, will conduct its transition.