



F-35 Lightning II Program

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. -- An F-35B Lightning II made its first flight at Eglin Air Force Base today, two months after 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing officially introduced the Marine Corps' fifth generation fighter to the world at the 33rd Fighter Wing.

"Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron 501 has had an exciting year with the arrival of our first three aircraft in January, the official roll out ceremony in February and now generating sorties along with other military service and contract partners here," said Lt. Col. David R. Berke, commanding officer of VMFAT-501.

The goal for Marines was to start local area operations and conventional flights, beginning the process of gradually expanding the envelope to short takeoffs and vertical landings (STOVL) and more complex aerial training.

The F-35B is part of the Marine Corps' ongoing effort to modernize its aging fleet of aircraft and to take advantage of fifth generation technology that will greatly enhance its capabilities as America's expeditionary crisis response force. Once fully fielded, the Joint Strike Fighter will replace the F/A-18 Hornet, EA-6B Prowler and AV-8B Harrier.

With a fully-fielded fleet of F-35Bs and F-35Cs, America will maintain 22 capital ships - 11 carrier and 11 amphibious assault - with strike assets capable of projecting influence and conducting strike operations.

"It's another milestone in what we are calling our execution year," said Col. Andrew Toth, 33rd FW commander. "Adding more aircraft to the fleet, filling up the flying schedule with two aircraft variants and certification classes ongoing at our F-35 Academic Training Center are testimonies of our wing's success in standing up our nation's Joint Strike Fighter training for future generations."

Since 2009, the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps have sent their best aviators and aircraft mechanics to pave the way for this execution year and beyond. Each service's operational squadron is collocated on the 33rd FW flight line, sharing capabilities although each reports through its own chain of command. VMFAT-501 reports to 2nd MAW, headquartered at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C.

Maintainers have been preparing for today's launch with engine runs and taxi operations for approximately eight months since F-35 aircraft began arriving here last summer. Utilizing virtual trainers, developing pilot curriculum and hosting small group tryouts has been the focus for personnel readying themselves for flight operations to come.

"It's amazing to believe 100 years ago Marine Corps aviation started and here today we launched a fifth generation aircraft," said Marine Sergeant Eric Spence, VMFAT-501 plane captain for the first F-35B sortie. "It's history in the making. Every time one of those engines fires up I get pumped up and today it was a little extra."

The power plant mechanic said he prepared for the last six months by being involved in any F-35 maintenance training he could at the 33rd FW.



(U.S. Air Force photo/Maj. Karen Roganov)



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F-35B LIFTS OFF FOR FIRST FLIGHT AT EGLIN

January's arrival of the first F-35Bs to Eglin Air Force Base was called an historic event in Marine aviation history by the Deputy Commandant for Aviation, Lt. Gen. Terry G. Robling.

"With the arrival of that evolutionary aircraft, the first in a line of 420 Joint Strike Fighters that we will integrate into the force, we have come full circle nearly a century since our first aviator took flight," he said.