



F-35 Lightning II Program

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TRAILBLAZING LIGHTNING II TEST PILOT HITS THE ROAD

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – “Lightning 8” is signing off, at least for now.

The senior F-35 military test pilot who ensured the safe execution of flight test from the delivery of the first F-35B in 2009 and sea trials on USS Wasp (LHD 1) last year is moving on.

“[Lt. Col. Fred “Tinman” Schenk] has poured his heart and soul into this team for nearly four years,” said Navy Capt. Erik Etz, government director of test for F-35 naval variants. “He consistently provided outstanding leadership and guidance for our team of more than 800 personnel, and he’s been a vocal advocate for always doing the job right.”

Schenk, or “Lightning 8,” left the F-35 Integrated Test Force and Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 23 at Naval Air Station Patuxent River on June 29.

As the government flight test director, and one of the first test pilots qualified to fly the F-35 at NAS Pax River, Schenk can list a number of “firsts” under his name, including the first vertical landing aboard Wasp.

“My time here [at Pax River] has been a real privilege,” Schenk said. “All test pilots dream about working on the newest aircraft and being a part of the first sea trials. It has been the pinnacle of my career, and I am truly honored and humbled to have been a part of such a professional team.”

One of his teammates and former commanding officers praised him.

“I have been extremely fortunate throughout my career to work with truly incredible people and Tinman ranks high on that list,” said Marine Col. Art Tomassetti, former commanding officer of VX-23 and current vice commander of the 33rd Fighter Wing at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. “He has been the kind of Marine, the kind of officer, the kind of pilot and the kind of human being that you want on your team, on your wing and as your friend.”

Schenk’s achievements at the F-35 ITF belie the intense program scrutiny he withstood during his tour, evidence of which is visible with one visit to his relatively spartan office.

A handful of the military coins on his desk yield a constellation of stars and top military brass, including the secretary of defense, the commandant of the Marine Corps and the chief of naval operations.

In addition to the coins, Schenk received a personal letter from the commandant upon his departure, congratulating him on his “monumental” contributions to Marine aviation.

Schenk’s parents, who live in White Lake, Wis., were on hand for his last scheduled test flight.

“We couldn’t be any prouder,” said his mother, Dorothy Schenk.

“The contributions he made to the team will never be forgotten,” Etz said. “I’m sure we’ll be reading about his leadership on the team and test pilot capabilities in the air in Navy and Marine Corps history books yet to be written.”



Marine test pilot Lt. Col. Fred Schenk begins his last scheduled F-35 test flight June 26 in BF-4 at Patuxent River, Md. Schenk concluded his tour as government flight test director June 29 and was the first pilot to land the short takeoff and vertical landing version of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter on USS Wasp (LHD 1) in October 2011.

(Photo courtesy of Lockheed Martin)

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Each test pilot qualified to fly the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter gets a “Lightning number,” a distinction currently held by only 40 pilots. The F-35B and F-35C naval variants of the Joint Strike Fighter are undergoing test and evaluation at NAS Patuxent River prior to delivery to the fleet.

WHAT’S NEXT

Schenk departed for his next tour to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), where a select group of military officers and civilians prepare for senior leadership positions.

According to its website, the college conducts postgraduate, executive-level courses of study and associated research dealing with national power, materiel acquisition and joint logistics, and national security strategy for peace and war.