



F-35 Lightning II Program

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F-35 FIGHTER REACTIVATES GRIM REAPERS, STORIED NAVAL FLIGHT SQUADRON

The display of Navy signal flags outside the Eglin Air Force Base building where Cmdr. David Dorn works is many miles from the nearest ship, let alone the aircraft carriers he's used to.

"We affectionately call this Naval Air Station Eglin," Dorn said.

The ship's flags make Dorn and his colleagues at the landlocked Navy Strike Fighter Squadron 101 feel more at home. The aviators and ground crews are the latest incarnation of a storied and globe-trotting unit that takes pride in its nickname, "The Grim Reapers."

Now the Grim Reapers, periodically deactivated over the years, are back and brandishing a brand new scythe.

"We're training to teach a new generation of sailors how to fly and maintain the military's newest aircraft, the F-35 Lightning," said Dorn, the Grim Reapers' executive officer, or second in command. "We used to say this unit evolved from Hellcats to Tomcats, and now we're on to an entirely new era."

So new, in fact, that the Navy doesn't yet have any of the F-35s, manufactured by Lockheed Martin and priced at \$70 million apiece, about 40 percent more than the Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet that the F-35 is scheduled to eventually replace.

That temporary supply shortage is why the Navy Grim Reapers are training at Eglin: The only F-35s available for another year or so are models that were ordered by the Air Force and customized to that branch's specifications.

Thus, Dorn's Navy unit is training as part of a joint operation, along with a Marine Corps squadron, under the umbrella of the Air Force's 33rd Fighter Wing.

"It's a whole new concept in training," Dorn said. "We capitalize a lot on what the Air Force and Marines are learning."

The original Grim Reapers were founded on June 3, 1942, and deployed on the USS Enterprise, which was their home during the Battle of Guadalcanal. They also flew combat missions in the Marshall Islands and the Battle of the Philippine Sea.

Over the next six decades, the Grim Reapers were in and out of existence, depending on the Navy's needs. They morphed into a training squadron, were renamed, sometimes with different unit numbers, and were stationed at a variety of bases, including in Key West and Oceana, Va.

Through it all, each new command maintained the group's traditional nickname and the emblem — a winged skeleton swinging a scythe.

Dorn, who took his early Navy flight training at Whiting Field Naval Air Station near Milton in 1993, said the Grim Reapers have a "big history to follow."



Cmdr. David Dorn is the executive officer of the Navy Fight Squadron 101 (VF101) at Eglin Air Force Base. Dorn is also one of the oldest actively serving members of the squadron. This is his third time as a 'Reaper' (Photo by Tony Giberson)

The unit keeps in touch with its past by maintaining a small museum of sorts: a hallway decorated with memorabilia that includes aviator seats salvaged from World War II fighters.

Some of the artifacts are on loan from the National Naval Aviation Museum at Pensacola Naval Air Station and Navy archives in Washington.

Now the Grim Reapers are poised to make more history. By training aviators and ground crews for the F-35, the unit is likely to extend its heritage for several decades.

Consider that the last new Navywide fleet fighter, the F/A-18, was introduced in 1982. If three decades as the Navy's mainstay tip-of-the-spear are ahead for the F-35, Dorn's unit could be training thousands of fliers and maintenance technicians.

"We're looking forward to a long future of fighter attack training," he said.

So, for the celebrated Grim Reapers, making history seems far from over.