



F-35 Lightning II Program

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AT EGLIN, F-35 FIGHTER SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE MILITARY

Some of the speculation about looming federal budget cuts for the military has focused on Eglin Air Force Base, but Col Andrew Toth sees a solid 50-year future there for his burgeoning training command.

Toth is executive officer of the Air Force's 33rd Fighter Wing, the global center for learning to fly and fix the next-generation Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning.

The brand-new jets, \$70 million each, are arriving at Eglin regularly — roaring in directly from the factory in Dallas.

"We're at about 1,000 people in the wing right now — contractors and uniformed personnel," Toth said.

By 2015, he expects the wing to grow to about 1,600 as a joint command, which includes the Navy and Marine Corps, and to remain at that level.

The F-35 is a gorilla in the room when it comes to the national defense budget.

There are \$500 billion in across-the-board defense budget cuts over 10 years scheduled to start in 2013 unless Congress finds a plan to stop them. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense has estimated the total cost of the F-35 program at more than \$1 trillion, and there's plenty of momentum.

That includes orders for 2,443 of the F-35s, set to replace the standard U.S. military fighter of Air Force bases and Navy carrier fleets around the world.

One argument that supporters make for the Lightning's expense is that it's the first new servicewide, multiuse design to be purchased in such bulk since the F/A-18 was introduced in 1982.

What's more, cutting back on the F-35 could cause complications for several U.S. allies who have also purchased many of the planes and are scheduling training trips for their pilots and maintenance personnel at Eglin.

One Lightning designated for the British arrived in August. Another destined for the Dutch is expected soon.

And the flags of six others nations planning to train on their F-35s at the 33rd Fighter Wing are routinely displayed in a Navy squadron hangar: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Italy, Norway and Turkey.

Thus F-35 boosters like Toth imply with confidence that their baby is virtually immune from the knives of Washington budget cutters.



Col. Art Tomassetti, vice commander of the 33rd Fighter Wing, Air Education and Training Command at Eglin Air Force, prepares to exit the cockpit of an F-35B with the help of a ground crew member after completing a training sortie in the Lightning II. (Photo by Tony Giberson)