



F-35 Lightning II Program

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AFNS) -- The Air Force's premier fighter, the F-35 Lightning II, surpassed its 500th sortie only 16 days after reaching the 400 mark and only 238 days from the beginning of the program.

Maj. Matthew Johnston of the 58th Fighter Squadron completed the 500th combined sortie for both the F-35A and F-35B at the 33rd Fighter Wing Nov. 2, marking a continued progress in sortie generation rates since the wing started flight operations March 6.

"On Friday during our F-35A operational utility evaluation we hit the 500th flight in 16 days from the prior 400th combined sortie flown on Oct. 16," said Col. Andrew Toth, commander for the 33rd Fighter Wing. "This is significant progress forward since it took 123 days to achieve the 100th combined sortie on July 12."



F-35A Lightning II joint strike fighter maintainers from the 58th Aircraft Maintenance Unit at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., preflight the jet before taking off for a local training mission over the Emerald Coast Sept. 18, 2012. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock)

"The joint team is focused on safe and effective flying to stand up their unit's future operations and the increased amount of sorties and quicker turnaround time to maintain and turn jets is a simple byproduct of this."

According to the maintenance squadron commander, the number of Air Force maintainers continues to grow as the program progresses. "When we first started F-35A flying you could count the uniformed maintainers trained on the system on one hand," said Maj. Maurice Lee, commander, 33rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. "Now we have more than 100 Air Force maintainers trained up.....I am very proud of their legacy aircraft expertise and newly-learned F-35 skills."

While the Air Force's A variant of the Lightning II was the jet flying the 500-sortie milestone, the Marine Corps' B variant has been the other part of the team effort progressing the multi-role fighter forward for joint and partner nation fifth-generation air power.

"Both services' efforts are a precursor to training other services and allies at the world's only F-35 Integrated Training Center," said Toth. Currently two pilots from the United Kingdom are gearing up to begin classes in aircraft familiarity and simulator training at the F-35 Academic Training Center along with almost 20 Royal Air Force and Royal Navy maintainers who began through their country's first courses Oct. 1.

"And next spring the Navy's F-35 C variant will begin contributing to the sortie successes," said Toth, who besides spearheading the joint and international efforts at Eglin, is also flying weekly joint strike fighter sorties.

The multi-role joint strike fighter is the centerpiece of the Defense Department's future precision attack capability, designed to penetrate air defenses and deliver a wide-range of precision munitions. It offers increased interoperability and cost-sharing across three of the U.S. services and coalition partner nations. Eglin is home to the largest fleet of F-35s at any DoD base with 22 jets.

- . 100th combined sortie - July 12 - accomplished in 123 days
- . 200th combined sortie - Aug. 24 - accomplished in 44 days
- . 300th combined sortie - Sept.21 - accomplished in 30 days
- . 400th combined sortie - Oct. 16 - accomplished in 25 days
- . 500th combined sortie - Nov. 2 - accomplished in 16 days