



F-35 Lightning II Program

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MARINES FLY FIRST F-35 STOVL MISSION AT EGLIN

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. -- The 33rd Fighter Wing and the F-35 Lightning II program reached a new milestone when Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron-501 completed its first short take-off and vertical landing mission here Oct. 24.

Maj. Brendan M. Walsh flew the hour-long mission in which the aircraft remained in the STOVL configuration for the entire flight. The aircraft flew pattern procedures around the base before gliding in, stopping in mid-air about 100 feet off the Eglin runway, performing a stationary right turn and slowly lowered to the ground.

"This mission made one of the key capabilities for this fighter an operational reality not just for VMFAT-501, but for the entire F-35B program," said Lt. Col. David Berke, the VMFAT-501 commander. "Our expeditionary operations are rapidly evolving, and STOVL capabilities give us a flexibility to stage our aircraft not just from major bases and carriers, but also out of damaged airstrips and other austere operating sites."

Walsh is the only pilot at Eglin qualified to fly in the STOVL configuration, but he said the flight paved the way to locally train F-35B instructors and new students in STOVL operations.

"STOVL is going to quickly become a routine, administrative function of the F-35B, said Walsh. "We will upgrade all current pilots to a field STOVL qualification. This will facilitate the F-35B community training for shipboard operations in the near future, and it will allow more focus on training for tactical mission sets."

Walsh qualified in vertical landing operations six months ago at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Ariz.

"I came to this program as an F-18 pilot, so to become the first STOVL qualified instructor in the fleet without a background in vertical landings is a testament to the ease of operation of the F-35," Walsh said.

STOVL operations allow the F-35B to operate in austere conditions, and it is a key difference between the Marine variant and other F-35 variants.

The STOVL operation also marks a significant achievement in the program for some partner countries. VMFAT-501 hosts three pilots and 13 maintainers from the United Kingdom's Royal Air Force and Royal Navy.



A Marine F-35B joint strike fighter lifts off from the runway during the first short take-off and vertical landing mission at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., Oct. 25. The milestone training mission was flown by Maj. Brendan M. Walsh, of the Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron-501. Walsh recently qualified in vertical landing operations at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Ariz. in preparation for this mission. (U.S. Air Force photo/Samuel King Jr.)