



F-35 Lightning II Program

Public Affairs Release – 2014 10 22

FIRST F-35A OPERATIONAL WEAPONS LOAD CREW QUALIFIED

By Staff Sgt. Marleah Robertson, 33rd Fighter Wing Public Affairs

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. -- Three Airmen with the 58th Aircraft Maintenance Unit became the first qualified operational weapons load crew for the F-35A Lightning II during a qualification load here, Oct. 10.

Staff Sgt. Zachary Watts, the 58th AMU crew one load crew chief, leveraged his 10 years of experience loading munitions on F-16 Fighting Falcons to lead his crew through the successful load. Airmen 1st Class Robert Hughes and Reece Zoller, both 58th AMU crew one load crewmembers, joined Watts for the weeklong load drill after completing technical training at the Academic Training Center.

"Before us, there was no weapons capability," Watts said. "We're making it from an airline into the Air Force."

With the first operational weapons load crew qualified, the F-35A is now one step closer to its initial operational capability (IOC).

"We have a total of 10 weapons load crews in the wing," said Senior Master Sgt. Jason Sells, the 33rd Maintenance Group weapons standardization superintendent. "The next step is to bring a new load crew through every month and get them qualified through a weeks' worth of training. Once that happens, each load crew will continually come through every month for proficiency load training."

Sells added that all weapons load crews will be qualified and performing proficiency training within the next six months.

The F-35 training program here currently serves as the primary source of F-35 expertise to new F-35A units across the Air Force. The newly qualified teams will continue to hone their skills and become experts at their jobs so they can go train the weapons load crews at those bases receiving the F-35A.

"We are trying to build the most educated and most proficient F-35A weapons loaders out there," Sells said. "Anything that we can do to help mature the program to get us ready for IOC, that's our big thing. Training is what the 33rd (MXG) is all about - whether it's pilot training or maintenance training, that's what we're doing."