



F-35 Lightning II Program

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NTTR SUPPORTS FIRST F-35B INTEGRATION INTO USMC'S WEAPONS SCHOOL EXERCISE

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NELLIS AIR FORCE BASE, Nev. -- The Nevada Test and Training Range was part of history April 21, when four U.S. Marine Corps-assigned F-35B Lightning IIs participated in its first Marine Corps' Final Exercise of the Weapons and Tactics Instructor course on the NTTR's ranges.

The Final Exercise, or FINEX, is the capstone event to the U.S. Marine Corps Marine Aviation Weapons Tactics Squadron 1's seven-week WTI course and is a semi-annual, large-force employment exercise held throughout the NTTR.

This particular evolution of FINEX employed the F-35Bs as part of the "Blue" strike package whose objective was to degrade, depress and destroy integrated air defense systems and other ground targets on the NTTR, which were guarded by "Red" adversary aircraft from Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona, and Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada.

U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Geoff Franks, MAWTS-1 weapons school instructor and F-18 Hornet instructor pilot, explained the importance of integrating the F-35B into exercises like FINEX and the role the Air Force has played in helping MAWTS-1 generate tactics, techniques and procedures for Marine pilots of the fifth-generation aircraft.

"What we've done is we've leveraged the Air Force heavily because the Air Force is way ahead of the game in terms of fourth to fifth integration -- integrating fourth-gen assets like the F-15 (Eagle) with fifth-gen assets like the F-22 (Raptor)," Franks said. "Now as the F-35 has come along, which for the Marine Corps the F-35 is going to (initial operational capability) around July, we need to be postured to teach tactics to the F-18 community so the Marine F-18 fleet will be able to start integrating with the F-35s.

"In order to do that, we have leveraged heavily the proven, published TTPs that the Air Force has been using for about a decade," Franks continued. "One of the limiting factors of fifth-gen assets is they can't carry as much ordnance (as fourth-gen assets), so if you can maximize the lethality of fifth-gen assets using fourth-gen, we will become a very lethal and survivable force."

Franks also explained why MAWTS-1 WTI cadre love exercises on the NTTR.

"We do it on the NTTR because of the unique nature of what we can do there -- the NTTR offers a unique opportunity for students, and the F-35, to operate in a heavily-contested environment," Franks said. "I will always bring in U.S. Air Force assets because it further increases our learning for our students. If they learn to (operate in) that heavily contested, very difficult mission set like what we can provide them in the NTTR, they see the benefit."

U.S. Air Force Col. Thomas E. Dempsey III, NTTR commander, said the NTTR offers users more than just its 2.9 million acres of land and 5,000 square miles of airspace.

"The NTTR ties all domains -- air, space and cyber -- into operational realistic training and readiness, so the Marines choose this as their battle space for their graduate-level graduation exercise because we, in an operationally-integrated mentality, offer the best battle space to get at the systems and the complexities that the F-35 brings," Dempsey said. "That's the thing about the NTTR that sets us apart from everybody else is not just the physical land space, but the systems that we can challenge aircrews with. We offer the most comprehensive environment for warfighter realism training."

In addition to the Marine Corps' semi-annual, large-force employment exercises, Martin Blount, NTTR project manager, said the NTTR supports another 8-10 Marine Corps training entities on the range per year, including the U.S. Marine Corps Program Office, which conducts shelf-life testing of munitions.