



F-35 Lightning II Program

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F-35B IN BEAUFORT: ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION BEAUFORT, South Carolina - July 17, 2015 marks the one year anniversary of the F-35B Lightning II's arrival to Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron 501 and the Pilot Training Center aboard the Air Station, have trained 16 F-35 pilots to date, and have flown 5,551.5 hours. The F-35's journey to Beaufort began in 1997, when Lockheed Martin was selected to participate in the Joint Strike Fighter demonstration phase. Lockheed Martin won the competition with their X-35 model, and thus came along the F-35. Production began a few years later, and in 2006, the first F-35 rolled off the production line. The lineage of VMFAT-501 can be traced back to the 1940s when Marine Fighting Squadron 451 was activated at Marine Corps Air Station Mojave, Calif. After multiple squadron re-designations, duty station relocations, and aircraft changes, VMFAT-501 uncased its colors aboard MCAS Beaufort July 11, 2014 and received its first F-35B on July 17, nearly a week later.

The F-35B has short take off and vertical landing capabilities, meaning it only needs approximately 550 feet of runway to execute a short takeoff, which is about a third of the takeoff distance of the F/A-18.

Along with its stealth fighter capabilities, the jet has 43,000 pounds of thrust, according to Lockheed Martin.

The jet is capable of carrying up to 18,000 pounds of ordnance, and can reach speeds up to 1,200 mph, slightly faster than the F/A-18. The jet also has a mounted helmet display system to provide pilots with unprecedented situational awareness. Everything the pilot needs to see is projected on the helmet's visor, rather than on a traditional heads-up display. The F-35s distributed aperture system streams real time imagery from six infrared cameras mounted around the aircraft to the helmet, allowing pilots to 'look through' the airframe.

Working hand in hand, the Pilot Training Center and VMFAT-501 train the Corps' future pilots to use these capabilities as tactically and lethally as possible. "The mission of the squadron is to train pilots and maintenance Marines for the F-35," said Lt. Col. Joseph T. Bachmann, the commanding officer of VMFAT-501. "We currently have 16 pilots, and are three-quarters away from the pilot training requirements for the year." The aircraft meets all expectations, but still needs to go through many tests, according to Sgt. Maj. Eric Siddons, the sergeant major of VMFAT-501. The squadron works alongside the UK Royal Air Force and Royal Navy to build a working relationship with the F-35 program. Royal Air Force personnel began arriving in July 2014. On Feb. 3, VMFAT-501 welcomed its first UK F-35. There is one UK pilot currently assigned to VMFAT-501 along with 14 maintainers and one officer. "Jets will start to roll off the production line early to mid-next year, and will slowly increase until 2018," said Squadron Ldr. Hugh Nichols, the UK senior national representative with VMFAT-501.

"Day to day, we do a little bit of everything," said Nichols. "From teaching the new pilots, which is our main focus, to generating a syllabus as we look at new capabilities and roles the F-35 can fill, and how we can teach them to the new pilots."

"I think it's a huge achievement with how complex the program is, the different services we've got, and different languages," said Nichols. "The fact that we can mesh it all together is a great achievement."

"The concept of us working together is that we will all come out at the end of this with a right way of operating the F-35, as opposed to the Marine Corps or UK way, to meet a middle ground," said Nichols.

With the combined effort of the two nations, they are able to figure out the most sufficient, safe, and tactical ways to operate the F-35.

"We had a successful six-week evolution on the USS Wasp in May," said Siddons. "But the big test will be when we go somewhere like Afghanistan and wonder if the jet will fulfill the expeditionary requirements that the F/A-18 currently does."

Training the future of Marine Corps Aviation is the mission of VMFAT-501, and it won't be much longer until there is an operational squadron aboard MCAS Beaufort. "The future is bright, but there is a lot of work to be done in the next few years," said Nichols.

"We can perform close air support, armed reconnaissance, and electronic warfare missions all from the same jet," said Bachmann.

"That's what's exciting about it. We have the element of surprise. What we can do and see for the Marines on the ground is amazing."

The F-35 Lightning II is referred to as a 5th generation fighter, combining advanced stealth capabilities with fighter aircraft speed and agility, fully-fused sensor information, network-enabled operations and advanced logistics and sustainment, according to Lockheed Martin. "It's been a great first year here in Beaufort," said Siddons. "It's been challenging, but the Marines, Lockheed Martin, and our UK brethren have come together, and are meeting and exceeding all expectations for the F-35. The Marines here work long hard hours, but I know it's rewarding to them to see their fellow Marines and pilots exceed expectations every day."