



F-35 Lightning II Program

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ADDING LIGHTNING TO STEEL KNIGHT

MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER TWENTYNINE PALMS, Calif. - Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121 and Marine Operational and Test Evaluation Squadron 22 performed the first ever expeditionary test of the F-35B Lightning II during Exercise Steel Knight at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif., Dec. 10, 2015.

The pilots carried out close air support drills, or CAS, and conducted expeditionary scenario missions supporting the ground forces of the 1st Marine Division.

“Getting the opportunity to come out here and do this for the first time for the program is a milestone,” said Capt. John Stuart, a pilot with VMFA-121. “A lot of things down the line are going to be predicated on how we integrate with the ground units, how we adapt to this environment and how we execute our mission sets.”

The F-35B is a single seat, single engine, stealth, multi-role fighter planned to replace Marine Corps’ battle tested fixed wing AV-8B Harrier, F/A -18 Hornet and EA-6B Prowler.

“Everything the three of those could do, this [F-35B] can do in one aircraft,” said Gunnery Sgt. Christopher Ames, the ordnance staff non-commissioned-officer-in-charge for VMFA-121.”

The Marine Corps’ version was designed to be a STOVL aircraft, or short take-off and vertical landing variant. This function allows the aircraft to use expeditionary airfields to refuel and reload, which can be established anywhere.

“We’re working on MAGTF [Marine Air Ground Task Force] integration,” said Staff Sgt. Martin Aldrete, a maintenance controller with VMFA-121. “This is the first time using this platform, supporting ground troops, supporting ground operations and we’re proving a lot of the concepts laid out by the Marine Corps.”

In the near future, the F-35B will stake its claim as the primary fighter aircraft of the Marine Corps and the familiarity of its crew and pilots are critical to its success.

“That’s one of the biggest things to take from this, having a good after-action report to say what we did wrong and what we did right,” said Stuart. “So the next time we are going to do this, we’re going to do it exponentially better and eventually have it down to a science.”



Marines hook up a hose for a power cart before a weapons functional test during Exercise Steel Knight at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, California, Dec. 10, 2015. The Marines are with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121 and Marine Operational and Test Evaluation Squadron 22. The F-35B is a single seat, single engine stealth multi-role fighter bringing the Marine Corps into a whole new generation of aircraft. Exercise Steel Knight allowed for VMFA-121 and VMX-22 to train on integrating the F-35B and find its place in the Marine Air Ground Task Force, while giving the ground forces of 1st Marine Division the ability to become familiar with it.