



F-35 Lightning II Program

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Eglin shows child what it's like to be an F-35 pilot

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AFNS) -- After spending the past few weeks watching "Top Gun" and videos of the F-35 Lightning II, Christian Loafman was ready for his May 18 visit to Eglin Air Force Base as its first F-35A Pilot for a Day.

"I feel the need, the need for speed," the 9 year old said."

The program, which started 26 years ago, allows units to get involved with the community and for children to experience a day in the life of an Air Force pilot. At age 2, Christian was diagnosed with progressive infantile scoliosis and autism. Since then, he has had multiple surgeries, wears a brace and attends weekly therapies to overcome his limitations.

Christian's mother, Kerri Loafman, described her son as very outgoing and larger than life, with a love of all things Lego. She shared that her son has been "over the moon" since he was chosen as the 33rd Fighter Wing's first F-35A Pilot for a Day almost two weeks ago.

"We've counted down every single day, every minute," Kerri said. "Every day he would wake up and ask, 'Is today the day?'"

Driving up to the wing, Christian was surprised to see a sign welcoming him to the 33rd FW. Upon arrival they were greeted by Christian's wingman, Maj. Mike Krestyn, the 33rd Operation Support Squadron chief of scheduling, who helped him transform into an F-35A pilot.

The duo's journey began at the 58th Fighter Squadron where the new pilot met the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Brad Bashore, and was given his flight suit complete with squadron patches and a nametag.

While touring the squadron, the young pilot received a mission brief from 2nd Lt. Colin Backet, the 33rd OSS unit intelligence chief, where he learned the kinds of information pilots receive before flying.

"Being able to give Christian one of these briefs was truly amazing," Backet said. "At the end of the day that's why I joined the military; to try to make a difference anyway I could. I hope he will remember this experience for a long time to come."

After the briefing, Christian was escorted to an F-35A static display where he received an up-close view of a jet that displayed his name on the side. Crew chiefs from the 58th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, Tech. Sgts. John Accurso and Michael Arwood, spoke with him and presented the young pilot with a squadron T-shirt.

"I have been in this unit for 3 1/2 years and spoke to many (distinguished visitors) -- by far Christian was the most important DV I have had the honor to meet," Accurso said. "Seeing his face when he saw his name on the jet was priceless and one of the highlights of my time here at Eglin."

While on the flightline, the young pilot was visited by the 33rd Maintenance Squadron wizard, the squadron mascot, and surprised by agents from the Marvel comic book series "S.H.I.E.L.D." The agents brought superheroes Captain America and the Winter Soldier along to escort Christian to the 33rd MXS for a look at where the heroes' weapons were made and where Airmen and Sailors create tools to maintain the F-35A.

The Winter Soldier, played by Capt. Josh Gradaille, the 33rd AMXS fabrication flight commander, believed being a superhero for Christian's visit was one of the most rewarding experiences as an officer.

"His response and expressions alone were extremely rewarding," Gradaille said. "The folks who were fortunate enough to meet Christian all agree that we need more (programs) like Pilot for a Day; it reinvigorates our desire to serve."



At the 33rd MXS, metals technicians demonstrated a water jet cutter's capability, and afterward, Christian received an F-35 silhouette memento.

Nondestructive inspection and low observable Airmen showed Christian how to repair panels similar to the Helicarrier seen in the Marvel movies and presented him with a miniature F-35A tail complete with stickers to decorate it. The "Avengers" superheroes also gifted him action figures in their likeness as souvenirs from their meeting.

Christian then traveled to the 33rd OSS pilot fit facility to fly the F-35 flight simulator under the guidance of Tech. Sgt. Omar Robinson, a 96th Aircraft Medical Squadron aerospace and operational physiology technician. He also tried on an F-35 helmet and participated in an aircraft flight safety equipment demonstration.

"As soon as (Christian) walked into the room, he jumped into the (flight simulator) with no hesitation and was ready to go," Robinson said. "After giving him a tutorial, he started flying and caught on extremely quick. He was a natural. He had a huge smile that lit up the entire room."