



F-35 Lightning II Program

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Idaho deployment to push F-35 limits

Eight F-35A aircraft and 160 personnel from Hill Air Force Base will depart this week for rigorous operational testing through June 17 at Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho. This marks the first time Hill's operational F-35s will travel out of state for training.

The F-35A pilots and maintainers from Hill's active-duty 388th Fighter Wing and Reserve 419th Fighter Wing will push the aircraft to their limits to simulate deployed operations and ensure the Air Force's newest fighter aircraft are performing as expected.

"Mountain Home is an ideal location for our first off-base exercise because it allows us to fully test the deployment capability of the unit and the aircraft while remaining close enough to Hill for home station support if needed," said Lt. Col. Curtis Pitts, commander of the 419th Operations Group, detachment 1.

"We're going to do our best to stress our entire system while at Mountain Home," said Maj. Luke Harris, deployment project officer and F-35A pilot with the 34th Fighter Squadron. "Our biggest focus areas are the number of sorties we can generate, the number of sorties that may be lost, loading and employing our weapons, and finding any unique issues with the F-35A."



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The Air Force's first operational F-35 arrived to the 388th FW's 34th FS in September 2015. The 419th OG, detachment 1, is a contingent of Reserve F-35 pilots who fly in partnership with the 34th FS.

During roughly eight sorties a day, three key F-35A mission sets will be tested: suppression and destruction of enemy air defense, air interdiction missions, and basic close air support to include alert launches. Each is required to reach Initial Operational Capability, Harris said.

A declaration of IOC means the Air Force has deemed the F-35A combat-capable. Right now, all indications point to the aircraft reaching IOC at Hill later this year.

"Since the aircraft's arrival last fall, there have been too many milestones to count and we're making great progress," said Lt. Col. George Watkins, 34th FS commander. "The Mountain Home deployment marks another significant milestone in validating the F-35A's capabilities as we pursue IOC."

In February, Hill F-35 pilots dropped laser-guided bombs at the Utah Test and Training Range in Utah's West Desert, marking the first time these weapons were employed by a combat-coded unit. In May, Hill's F-35 pilots began flying routine four-ship configurations. More than 500 F-35A sorties have been launched from the Hill AFB runway to date.

Hill's fleet of F-35 aircraft has also received lightning protection and anti-ice modifications, and pilots are now using the lightweight "Gen-3" helmet.

In addition to its advanced stealth capability, the F-35A is designed to gather, fuse and distribute more information than any fighter in history.

The base will be home to three operational F-35 fighter squadrons with a total of 78 aircraft by the end of 2019. The 388th and 419th FWs fly and maintain the Air Force's newest fighter aircraft in a Total Force partnership, which capitalizes on the strength of both components.