



F-35 Lightning II Program

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Lightning strikes at largest F-35A deployment

VOLK FIELD, Wis. -- The 33rd Fighter Wing wrapped up the largest F-35 deployment to date at this year's Exercise Northern Lightning Aug. 31 at Volk Field, Wis.

Northern Lightning is a tactical-level, joint training exercise which serves as a combat rehearsal for both legacy and modern aerial and ground assets in a contested, degraded environment.

The 33rd FW deployed over 150 personnel and 14 F-35As for two weeks to train to a realistic threat level and develop how to deploy and sustain a squadron of F-35s.

The Air Force announced the fighter jet was initially capable of combat operations in August of this year. With the service's shift in focus to full operational capability for the aircraft, the lessons learned from this exercise will shape future real-world deployments of F-35A squadrons.



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"The aircraft and enterprise still has some maturing left to do," said Lt. Col. Brad Bashore, 58th Fighter Squadron commander. "With as capable as the F-35A is already though, that should be a scary thought for our adversaries. Performance during the exercise displays that the aircraft is combat ready, even in its infancy."

The 33rd FW scored over 110 kills against "enemy aircraft," supported a surge of 138 sorties and dropped 24 GBU-12 bombs during Northern Lightning.

During the exercise, 33rd FW pilots were able to execute offensive counter air, suppression of enemy air defenses, destruction of enemy air defenses, and employ GPS-guided munitions for close air support.

"This exercise has increased my confidence in the F-35," Capt. Mark Schnell, 33rd FW pilot said. "Believing that you are invisible is hard. (But) to come out and fly against fourth-generation assets and really see that the stealth capabilities of the F-35 are as advertised has been awesome. It makes our job easier knowing that we are (stealthy), and we can arrive at a position of advantage without (our adversary) knowing."

Crews from the 33rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron were able to support operational demands of the exercise by executing high-tempo maintenance operations, and preparing aircraft to drop munitions in a deployed location with less manning and resources than afforded to them at home station.

"This is the first time the program has supported such an extensive aircraft deployment," 1st Lt. Krista Wooden, 33rd AMXS Aircraft Maintenance Unit assistant officer in charge, said. "We were able to simulate a deployed priority on our supply system, (and) successfully gauge the logistics of how a deployment will successfully run its course."

The F-35A pilots practiced joint operations with F-16 Fighting Falcons, F/A-18 Super Hornets, E/A-18 Growlers and E-3 Sentries to create a more lethal and survivable strike package. The experience gained from deploying as a total force will shape how the units work together in future combat operations.

"Working with the F-35A really provides a unique capability for us," Capt. Austin Kennedy, E/A-18 Growler electronic warfare officer, said. "They allow us the opportunity to train against more advanced threats that a fourth-generation aircraft wouldn't be able to go after."

"The (low observable) characteristics of the jet make our jamming more effective, and it makes it easier for us to do our job."

The dynamic threat environment of the 115th Fighter Wing's Northern Lightning exercise provides a unique training ground for the fifth generation fighter with surface to air threats, a large air space that extends up to 50,000 feet, inter-service training and an expansive range for live and inert weapons drops.

"Thanks to the Air National Guard, and their herculean efforts to make this exercise happen," said Lt. Col. Brad Bashore, 58th FS commander, said. "Thank you to the Duluth and Madison Guard for being our adversaries during this exercise. It's not always fun being red air and flying against us when you're at a disadvantage. We couldn't have done this without you."