F-35 Lightning II Program
Public Affairs Release – 2017 07 20

F-35-A, F-35B Integrate at Red Flag

Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. -- The 33rd Fighter Wing and Marine Attack Squadron 221 are participating in the first combat exercise with Air Force F-35As and Marine Corps F-35Bs operating simultaneously during Red Flag 17-3, at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

Red Flag is a realistic combat training exercise involving the air forces of the United States, its allies, and coalition partners. More than 100 aircraft and 3,000 personnel participate in the exercise an average four times each year.

The exercise was originally developed to provide pilots with critical experience in combat situations in a manner that can’t be replicated at most home stations. This training in turn improves pilot’s percentage of survivability during real-world combat operations.

“We are trying to create combat realism for these pilots,” said U.S Air Force Col. Ryan Suttlemyre, Red Flag Air Expeditionary Wing vice commander and 33rd Operations Group commander. “Normal missions at home are between six to eight aircraft on both the blue and red sides. Here, we have somewhere between 60 to 80 aircraft on the blue side and 30 to 40 on the red side. They also have 10 to 15 times the number of surface-to-air threat emitters that we have at Eglin Air Force Base.”

During this U.S. only installment of Red Flag, the Air Force and Marine Corps validated F-35 joint Tactics, Training and Procedures, through mission integration with one another.

“It's been an awesome experience integrating with everyone but especially the F-35A in particular,” said Maj. Brett Abbamonte, Marine Attack Squadron 211 F-35B pilot. “The ability to see the overall situational awareness and capabilities that the F-35 brings to this joint fight with all these assets is eye opening to us as F-35 pilots and pilots of other aircraft platforms.”

From the first combat sortie on, the commonality between each branch’s pilots was clear as they were able to predict one another's actions and movements.

“We are executing the same tactics and we are talking the same language which is a force multiplier between the two services,” Abbamonte said.

“They flowed where we expected them to flow and called kills where we expected them to call kills,” said Lt. Col. Matthew Vickers, 58th Fighter Squadron F-35A pilot. “Everything was going to plan. That was the first validation and it's been more of the same (since then).”

The interoperability between the branches stretches past the battlefield to mission planning.

“With the A to B similarities, I can walk into mission planning, know what they have to offer and they know what I have to offer, so we can build our tactics,” Vickers said. “Even though we may be executing different roles, if I need their help, they can swing immediately without having to explain any aircraft or capability differences.”
In the past, when the branches would fly together in a strike package using different aircraft, communications barriers existed between the services, creating limitations. With these consolidated guidelines, those issues are minimized if not eliminated.

“I flew F-18s prior, so every time we flew with an Air Force unit, the communications and tactics would be a little bit different; we've erased that and it's a really good thing,” Abbamonte said.

Together the Marine Corps and Air Force displayed the F-35’s wide range of abilities through the completion of multiple mission requirements presented to them.

“We've executed a myriad of different roles including suppression of enemy defenses, attack operations and defensive counter air. So we are testing the capabilities of the aircraft in several different mission sets,” Vickers said.

Participation in exercises like Red Flag is important across the enterprise because integration opportunities are limited without them.

“We need to (continue establishing) our commonality and tactics so that we can trust that everyone is bringing to the fight is what we expect,” Vickers said.

“We don't have enough opportunities to integrate which is why it is so important to be a part of exercises like Red Flag,” Suttlemyre said.

That continued integration is crucial as the F-35 enterprise approaches full warfighting capability. Currently, some of the aircraft’s systems only communicate amongst their own variant. As new sustainment blocks are created to upgrade the platform, those restrictions will also be erased.