Hill AFB, UT, United States -- Airmen from the 388th and 419th Fighter Wings supported and flew their F-35A Lightning II aircraft during Combat Hammer, the first operational air-to-ground weapons evaluation for the Air Force’s newest fighter jets.

Combat Hammer is one phase of the Weapons System Evaluation Program, or WSEP, and it tests and validates the performance of crews, pilots, and their technology while deploying air-to-ground precision-guided munitions. For the F-35A

The weeklong evaluation exercise concluded Aug. 11 and Lt. Col. Timothy Smith, commander of the 86th Fighter Weapons Squadron detachment at Hill AFB that oversees Combat Hammer, said he received positive feedback regarding above-average mission and sortie rates.

"Overall, everything went as planned and all participating units performed very well, including the 34th Fighter Squadron F-35s," he said.

Smith also praised the team effort involving corporate partners, the 388th and 419th FWs, pilots, munitions and maintenance personnel, and 86th FWS evaluators for making Combat Hammer a success.

Col. Dave Abba commands the 53rd Wing at Eglin AFB, Florida, which is the operational test wing for the U.S. Air Force. As such, the 53rd Wing develops, tests, evaluates, and delivers effective and sustainable combat capabilities to perfect lethality and survivability of our nation’s combat forces. Teams from the 53rd Wing, parent command of the 86th FWS, have been integral in the operational testing and evaluation of the F-35A that supported last year’s Initial Operational Capability declaration and now continue marching toward Full Operational Capability (FOC) for the Joint Strike Fighter.

Abba visited Hill AFB to observe Combat Hammer and meet with 86th FWS Airmen, operations crews, and evaluation participants. While here, he was impressed by all Airmen and program partners involved with Combat Hammer.

"It’s obvious to me that the active-duty and Reserve leadership chain at Hill have completely jumped on board with bringing this airplane up to speed, getting it to FOC, and getting it ready to participate on a global scale,” he said. “They’re passionate to learn more about the weapon system and everybody is concerned with providing effective capability for the warfighter.”
Combat Hammer provides a lot of accurate information and is "absolutely essential to ensuring that our [weapons] systems continue to work as they were designed to work," said Abba. "The emphasis is on finding potential issues in a controlled environment, with the ability to assess the weapons in real time to ensure that we don’t get surprised in combat."

Statistical data derived from Combat Hammer assists leaders at the highest Air Force levels in making resourcing decisions; it also provides contingency planners with a solid understanding on weapons systems performance and the effects they’ll achieve.

“What air-to-air (Combat Archer) and air-to-ground WSEP bring to the fight is statistical confidence,” said Abba. “So that’s really the key to this: it’s not simply subjective opinions about whether these things work or whether they don’t work, we bring the numbers to back it up so we can tell our senior leadership with a certain degree of confidence that this airplane with this munition against this sort of a target is going to have this probability of success.”

Abba is confident the F-35A will be a critical system in ensuring national security.

“It’s going to be the cornerstone of our fighting force for a long time and from what we’ve seen so far, it’s living up to the challenge and meeting our expectations, and in several areas exceeding it,” he said.