



F-35 Lightning II Program

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U.S. AIR FORCE PREPARES FOR F-35A TRAINING ON F-35B AND F-35C

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – U.S. Air Force maintainers are getting hands-on experience with the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter here.

Seven airmen from the Air Force's 33rd Fighter Wing are at Naval Air Station Patuxent River for 75 days to gain first-hand experience maintaining the F-35B and F-35C variants, while those aircraft continue flight test and evaluation. They are the second group from the Wing to visit the F-35 test facility at Pax River. The crew arrived April 20 and another group is expected to follow this summer.

Lockheed Martin is scheduled to deliver the F-35A aircraft AF-8 to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and the first joint training squadron later this year.

"It is beneficial working around the F-35B and F35-C variants," said Master Sgt. Timothy Weaver, crew chief, and member of the 33rd Fighter Wing. "With this being a joint program, we learn a lot about how each branch handles maintenance. We are learning how the Marines operate, how the Navy operates, and sharing how we operate."

The F-35C is distinct from the F-35A variant with its larger wing surfaces and reinforced landing gear for greater control in the demanding carrier take-off and landing environment. However, the three variants are similar enough that maintainers benefit from performing basic maintenance, such as refueling, launch and recovery and tire changing, all functions the Navy considers day-to-day maintenance, Weaver said.

"The C and A variants have a lot of the same systems, but some of the parts are in different locations," said Weaver. He serves as the lead Air Force maintainer and production supervisor over the day-to-day activities on a flight line. He was also instrumental in the stand-up of the training wing at Eglin.

Eager to know what to expect before AF-8 arrives at Eglin, the maintainers volunteered for this assignment.

Tech. Sgt. Miguel Aguirre, armament specialist and a quality assurance specialist, is here to gain knowledge of how the Lockheed Martin team performs maintenance. He will be responsible for overseeing the contractor-performed maintenance for AF-8 at Eglin. While there are no weapons being tested yet, Aguirre is the only armament specialist in the Air Force to work directly on the F-35.

"We are the eyes and ears for the group," said Aguirre. And from what he has seen so far, "from a maintenance perspective, the JSF is user-friendly."

“Procedures require that we start small,” said Tech. Sgt. Lucas Delk, crew chief, who performs similar duties to the Navy’s plane captain rate. “It is real exciting to see the F-35, and get hands-on experience.”

Delk noted minor differences between the Air Force and Navy’s carrier variants, but said “the meat and the potatoes are the same.”

Weaver’s team looks for any opportunity to get their hands dirty, and when they cannot, they are watching and gaining knowledge. “There is always work going on,” he said.

“Members of the 33rd Fighter Wing are not just here for training,” Weaver added. “We help the test points advance.”

The AF-8 test asset is currently in Fort Worth, Texas, undergoing airworthiness testing prior to transfer to Eglin. The F-35A conventional take-off and landing model is undergoing testing at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif.

The 33rd is the Defense Department’s first joint graduate flying and maintenance training wing for the three F-35 variants organized under Air Education and Training Command’s 19th Air Force. It is an associate unit at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. Its mission is to train Air Force, Marine, Navy and international partner operators and maintainers of the F-35.

Caption:

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, Patuxent River, Md. – U.S. Air Force crew chiefs Master Sgt. Timothy Weaver and Tech. Sgt. Lucas Delk from the 33rd Fighter Wing at Eglin Air Force Base work with Pedro Vera, Lockheed Martin Airframe Powerplant Group, inside the F-35C internal weapons bay at Naval Air Station Patuxent River. Seven airmen from Eglin AFB are embedded with the F-35 Integrated Test Facility team here to gain hands-on experience on the F-35B and F-35C variants in preparation for the first Joint Strike Fighter arrival at Eglin AFB and start of F-35 training for the Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force.



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