

# **F-35C's Arrival at NAS Lemoore: Beginning of Critical Element of U.S. Navy's Future Carrier Air Wings**

*Defense-aerospace*

Naval aviation reached a significant milestone on January 25 when the first four F-35C Lightning II aircraft arrived at Naval Air Station Lemoore. It was also a historic day for NAS Lemoore, our only West Coast Master Jet Base, and the local community partners who've been so supportive of Naval Aviation's presence in California's central valley for more than 50 years.

I attended the arrival ceremony with Rear Adm. Roy "Trigger" Kelley, who is doing great work as the Director of the Navy's F-35C Fleet Integration Office; Jeff Babione, Executive Vice President for Lockheed Martin's F-35 Program; and Capt. Markus "Goody" Gudmundsson, Commodore, Strike Fighter Wing Pacific.

Lemoore has been home to the Navy's west coast strike fighter community since 1980, when VFA-125 was the first squadron established to train Navy and Marine Corps aviators in the F/A-18 Hornet. Earlier in January, we reactivated VFA-125 as the Navy's first F-35C fleet replacement squadron, and I am confident the squadron's storied history and legacy will continue as they start to fly the Navy's newest strike fighter aircraft.

The arrival of the F-35C at NAS Lemoore marks the beginning of what will be a critical element of our future carrier air wings and the future of Naval Aviation. To keep pace with global threats, we need to integrate a carrier-based 5th generation aircraft – the F-35C is that aircraft.

The four jets that flew in to Lemoore bring incredible new capabilities and truly game changing technologies. The aircraft's stealth technology will allow it to penetrate and conduct attacks inside threat envelopes, and its integrated sensor packages collect and fuse information to provide a common operational picture for the carrier strike group and joint forces, and most importantly, enable long range identification of air and surface targets. Without question the F-35 is required to win the future high-end fight, but it will be effectively complemented by the 4th generation capabilities and capacity of our Super Hornets – as well as the rest of our future air wing – to include carrier-based unmanned platforms.

Much has been said about the value of 4th and 5th generation aircraft, and I'd like to share why our carrier air wings need both capabilities. There are mission sets each platform could accomplish, but some, like maritime intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (MISR) or close air support (CAS) in the relatively permissive environment we see today in Iraq and Syria, don't require 5th generation aircraft. Across the force we carefully manage aircraft utilization, and I would rather not expend precious 5th generation fatigue life doing missions that can be performed by other, 3rd or 4th generation platforms. This is why CNO said we will

supplement Lightning II with a healthy cadre of Super Hornets. This “high-low” mix is essential to sustainable, cost effective, combat lethality now and in the future.

Also, the requirement for our pilots to execute high-end missions that only F-35C can do, as well as those missions it could potentially do, would quickly make the training syllabus and the hours required to be current and proficient in all mission areas, unexecutable. Therefore, we will focus and tailor F-35C training where its design and capabilities add most value to our integrated carrier air wing. The Navy is in a unique position to do just that, and we plan to keep that advantage and capitalize on the synergy of our 5th generation Lightning IIs and 4th generation Super Hornets.

In other discussions with flight line leadership in Lemoore, I assured them that recovering readiness in our Super Hornet fleet, sustaining it through mid-life upgrades and smartly modernizing it, will ensure that fleet remains the lethal, warfighting partner to the remarkable F-35C platforms that just arrived. And as the home for our new F-35C fleet as well as our west coast Super Hornets, we need to ensure NAS Lemoore continues to grow in capacity and services to support both our warfighters and their families, well in to the future.

January 25th was a historic day for Naval Aviation, for the broader NAS Lemoore community and for the new team of professionals at VFA-125. Naval Aviation has taken another major step forward with the arrival of F-35Cs at Lemoore, and these first four aircraft are just the beginning of an extremely bright future for our carrier air wings!