FRCE Marks 150th F-35 Induction



Workers on the Fleet Readiness Center East (FRCE) F-35 Lightning II aircraft modification line confer with the pilot prior to conducting a functional check flight inspection on an F-35B at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point. This aircraft is the 150th fifth-generation fighter inducted by the depot. From Fleet Readiness Center East, Dec. 2, 2024

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION CHERRY POINT, N.C. – Fleet Readiness Center East (FRCE) marked a milestone in its support of the F-35 Lightning II program when the depot recently inducted and completed modifications on its 150th F-35 and returned the aircraft to the Fleet.

FRCE is the lead site for depot-level maintenance on the F-35B Lightning II and has conducted modifications and repair on the Marine Corps' short takeoff-vertical landing variant of the aircraft since 2013. The depot has also worked with the F-35A

(conventional takeoff and landing) and F-35C (carrier) variants.

“The F-35 plays such a crucial role in our national defense,” said FRCE Commanding Officer Capt. Randy Berti. “It is the next-generation strike aircraft weapon systems for the Navy, Air Force, Marines and our allies. It gives our warfighters unprecedented capabilities. We’re extremely proud of the support we provide for this aircraft.

“The F-35 was completely new when the first aircraft was inducted in 2013,” continued Berti. “There were a lot of unknowns. Inducting our 150th F-35 highlights how far we’ve come and how dedicated and innovative our people are. They were constantly breaking new ground and they continue to do that today.”

Dustin Schultz, an aircraft planner and estimator with FRCE’s F-35 team, was one of those trailblazers.

“Everything was brand new in the beginning,” said Schultz. “From engineering support to tooling and logistics, we were starting from scratch. We had one aircraft with six of us working on it. Now we have 130 artisans working on the F-35 alone. That’s a lot of growth.

“We have other aircraft programs that are sundowning,” he continued. “The F-35 is filling that gap now as we move forward.”

According to Ike Rettenmair, FRCE’s F-35 branch head, the depots F-35 workload has grown exponentially over the years and is expected to expand further.

“I was in the hangar as a Harrier mechanic when the first F-35 rolled in,” said Rettenmair. “We’ve grown from that one stall to what will soon be multiple hangars of F-35s. The F-35 plays such a significant role in the U.S. military with more and more continuing to enter the Fleet. The number of F-35s used

by international partners is also growing. Our F-35 workload goes hand in hand with all of this."

As the F-35 program continues to grow at the depot, Rettenmair said FRCE continues to expand and develop key F-35 support elements.

FRCE declared capability on its first F-35 component – meaning FRCE is now a verified source of repair and testing for that item – in 2020. Since then, the depot has declared capability on approximately 76 different components for the Lightning II and continues to stand up capability.

In 2023, FRCE personnel became the first within the Department of Defense to perform the successful assembly of a lift fan clutch for the F-35B Lightning II aircraft outside of the original manufacturer's facility. Additionally, F-35B vertical lift fan testing and processing facilities are scheduled to come online at FRCE in early 2025.

The depot is also capable of bringing F-35 support to the warfighter when and where it's needed. FRCE's F-35 Rapid Response Team, made up of highly skilled, cross-trained aircraft maintenance professionals, can deploy at a moment's notice to any location, from a Marine Corps Air Station halfway around the globe to a Navy aircraft carrier afloat in the Indo-Pacific region.

FRCE's F-35 support isn't limited to aircraft repair and modification or component capabilities. Don Werner, an aircraft planner and estimator with FRCE's F-35 team, said the lessons learned and the innovation that occurred over the years while expanding FRCE's F-35 program have also found their way to the warfighter.

"There are so many entities within FRC East working on things you would never even think of," said Werner. "They create things and come up with ideas that enable us to get aircraft to the warfighter even faster while saving money in the long

run. They create things that make the job easier and these go out to the whole Fleet."

In addition to mechanics, Werner said the team includes quality assurance personnel, parts and logistics experts, planners, engineers and even fabric workers who design and produce heavy-duty protective covers for the aircraft's tires, intakes and other parts.

"You can see people right here at the depot working on all these things," said Werner. "They're designing it, going down to manufacturing and coming up with the tools or equipment our people need because there's nobody out there that's going to get it to us in such a timely manner."

Schultz said the warfighter benefits from the innovative processes and procedures the depot's F-35 team has come up with over the years.

"We've had many modifications that come through here that we were performing for the first time ever," said Schultz. "The manufacturer would say this mod is going to take 10,000 hours and our artisans and engineers would go look at it and end up saving thousands of hours because they came up with a new way to do the job that nobody else had thought of."

According to Rettenmair, the success and expansion of the F-35 program at FRCE, lies with the depot's personnel. He credited their dedication and innovation as instrumental in establishing the reputation of FRCE's F-35 program.

"We've made a name for ourselves as the F-35 facility for depot maintenance," said Rettenmair. "It shows the trust and confidence the enterprise has in FRC East to do this work. That trust is a testament to the people working here who've earned us this reputation."

He said everyone at FRCE, no matter what their job, is committed to supporting the Fleet by providing the highest

quality, combat ready aircraft and components.

“Every day when we come to work, we know why we’re here,” said Rettenmair. “We deliver product back to the Fleet so the warfighter has what he or she needs to fight and win. The people working here take a lot of pride in that.”

FRCE is North Carolina’s largest maintenance, repair, overhaul and technical services provider, with more than 4,000 civilian, military and contract workers. Its annual revenue exceeds $1 billion. The depot provides service to the fleet while functioning as an integral part of the greater U.S. Navy; Naval Air Systems Command; and Commander, Fleet Readiness Centers.