Marine Corps’ Second F-35C Squadron Declares Initial Operational Capability



U.S. Marine Corps F-35C Lightning II aircraft assigned to Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 311, Marine Aircraft Group 11, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, are staged during a live ordnance training event at the Marine Corps Air Station Miramar combat aircraft loading area, California, July 24, 2024. This was the first time VMFA-311 conducted live ordnance operations independently and a milestone for the squadron, which declared initial operational capability on July 31, 2024. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Jennifer Sanchez)

From III Marine Aircraft Wing

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION MIRAMAR, Calif.—Demonstrating the Marine Corps’ commitment to aviation advancement, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 311, Marine Aircraft Group 11,

3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, declared initial operational capability on July 31, 2024.

Achieving initial operational capability is a key milestone for the squadron as part of the Marine Corps tactical aviation (TACAIR) transition plan, the transition from the AV-8B Harrier and F/A-18 Hornet to the F-35. Receiving this qualification means that VMFA-311 has the operational F-35C Lightning II aircraft, trained pilots, maintainers, and support equipment to sustain its mission essential tasks. These tasks include close air support, strike coordination and reconnaissance, anti-air warfare, suppression of enemy air defenses and electronic attacks.

“I am incredibly proud of the Marines and Sailors in this squadron as they hit this critical milestone that ensures greater lethality and operational readiness for the Wing, the Marine Corps, and the joint force,” said Maj. Gen. James Wellons, commanding general of 3rd MAW.

Formerly VMA-311, the “Tomcats” of VMFA-311 reactivated in April 2023 as part of the Marine Corps’ transition to an all fifth-generation force. VMFA-311 achieved its “Safe for Flight” certification in September 2023, allowing the squadron to conduct independent flight operations.

The squadron flew more than 900 sorties, approximately 1,700 hours, and completed more than 800 simulator hours and 2,400 maintenance actions to reach initial operational capability.

“Initial operational capability is a milestone and achievement in readiness,” said Lt. Col. Michael Fisher, commanding officer of VMFA-311, “It’s all on the backs of the Marines out there. What they do in their day-to-day actions is what made this possible.”

In addition to achieving initial operational capability,

VMFA-311 Marines have trained at the most advanced aviation schools offered by the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. Maj. Timothy Potter, an F-35C pilot, graduated from the U.S. Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor Program, more commonly known as TOPGUN, becoming a pilot instructor and increasing the squadron's ability to train other pilots. Warrant Officer John Page, an aviation ordnance officer, graduated from the Marine Corps Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course. Marines completed lightning tactics instructor qualifications, air combat maneuvering qualifications, division lead and section lead qualifications.

The next step for VMFA-311 is full operational capability, attained when VMFA-311 receives its complete inventory of ten F-35C aircraft, projected for fiscal year 2025.

"Nothing changes for us, our pursuit of excellence and how we carry ourselves, initial operational capability is a byproduct of daily competency and being good at our job," Fisher said. "It is a great accomplishment, but when we wake up the next day, we are going to keep doing the same thing. Now full operational capability is the goal."

The Marines of VMFA-311 are actively training and preparing for potential future deployments with the F-35C, continuing the squadron's legacy as a vital component of Marine Corps aviation.

VMFA-311 was originally commissioned as VMF-311 on December 1, 1942, in Cherry Point, North Carolina and has had a notable history of "firsts" for Marine Corps aviation.

Over the last 80 years, VMFA-311 has flown a variety of aircraft, including the F4U Corsair, F9F Panther, A-4 Skyhawk, AV-8B Harrier II, and currently the F-35C Lightning II. VMFA-311 was one of the first Marine Corps squadrons to transition to jet aircraft with the F9F Panther.

Now the squadron leads the way alongside VMFA-314 as one of the first Marine Corps F-35C Lightning II squadrons.

“The Tomcats have a storied history that includes legends such as Ted Williams and John Glenn, and participation in every major conflict since World War II,” Wellons said. “Today’s Marines add another chapter to that legacy with the introduction of the F-35C and fifth-generation capabilities to VMFA-311.”

In 2020, the squadron, then VMA-311, deactivated its legacy Harrier, and began preparing for its reactivation in April 2023, as VMFA-311, the Marine Corps’ second F-35C Lightning II squadron. Starting with 84 Marines and one aircraft, the reactivation was part of ongoing modernization efforts across the Marine Corps to make the force more lethal, effective, and survivable.

The F-35C’s multirole capabilities enable Marine Corps aviation to adapt to a wide range of mission requirements, including air-to-air combat, air-to-ground strikes, reconnaissance and electronic warfare. As operational challenges evolve, the F-35C’s versatility enhances the Marine Corps’ ability to respond.

“As a previous F/A-18 Hornet pilot, the F-35 is our bid for success for the future,” Fisher said. “It is where the Marine Corps is going for TACAIR.”

The Marine Corps has eight operational F-35B squadrons and two training squadrons, operating more than 100 F-35B aircraft around the world. The Marine Corps’ two F-35C squadrons, VMFA-311 and VMFA-314, are both home-stationed at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar.

Each variant of the F-35 brings slightly different

capabilities to the joint force. The F-35C is specifically engineered for carrier-based operations, with heavier landing gear and enlarged, foldable wings designed to facilitate flight operation on naval vessels.

The transition to the F-35C Lightning II is a testament to the Marine Corps’ continued evolution and commitment to maintaining cutting-edge capabilities in modern aerial combat.