Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 542 Returns from Historic Deployment with F-35B



U.S. Marine Corps pilots with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 542, Marine Aircraft Group 14, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, taxi F-35B Lightning II aircraft at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina, Oct. 8, 2025. Marines with VMFA-542 returned to MCAS Cherry Point following a deployment in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Landon Lingle)

Story by Master Sgt. Shakima Deprince, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command

MacDill AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 542 (VMFA-542), operating the F-35B Lightning II stealth fighter, has successfully returned from a historic five-month

deployment to the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, marking a major milestone in Marine Corps aviation and joint force integration.

During the deployment, VMFA-542 made a significant operational and strategic impact in the CENTCOM AOR. The squadron conducted Close Air Support, Armed Overwatch, and Defensive Counter-Air missions in support of Marine, Navy, Army, coalition, and partner nation forces. They advanced F-35 tactics, techniques, and procedures while demonstrating the aircraft's flexibility in real-world operations.

The unit flew more than 1,099 combat sorties and accumulated over 4,736 mishap-free flight hours, providing essential support to CENTCOM's integrated air operations. VMFA-542 not only enhanced deterrence, supported regional maritime security, and deepened interoperability through combined training with allied and partner air forces, but also led the way in USMC F-35 flight hours, maintaining a high Aircraft Mission Capable readiness rate, setting the standard for aviation units across the fleet.

"VMFA-542's historic deployment has set new benchmarks for Marine Corps aviation, demonstrating that a forward deployed F-35B squadron can deliver unmatched combat power and readiness while seamlessly integrating with Joint Forces during a major regional crisis," said LtCol Carlo F. Bonci, Executive Officer, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 542.

As part of CENTCOM's Air Component Ninth Air Force (Air Forces Central), VMFA-542 integrated into coalition air and defense operations. The addition of the F-35B Lightning II brought a major upgrade in tactical flexibility, intelligence gathering, and precision strike capabilities.

The F-35B is a fifth-generation stealth fighter uniquely capable of short takeoffs and vertical landings, providing the

Marine Corps with operational agility across both air-to-air and air-to-ground missions.

This deployment underscores the Marine Corps’ commitment to maintaining readiness and effectiveness in complex environments while reinforcing partnerships with regional allies. VMFA-542 set a new standard for aviation units across the fleet, leaving a tangible impact on the CENTCOM mission recognized by joint and coalition commanders alike.