VMFA-542 Becomes First F-35B Squadron on East Coast to Achieve Initial Operational Capability



Two U.S. Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II jets with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 542 taxi at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina, Dec. 28, 2023. *U.S. Marine Corps | Warrant Officer Akeel Austin*

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION CHERRY POINT, North Carolina – Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 542, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW), became the first East Coast F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter squadron in the Fleet Marine Force to achieve initial operational capability, Feb. 5.

Initial operational capability means that VMFA-542 has enough operational F-35B Lightning II aircraft, trained pilots, maintainers, and support equipment to self-sustain its mission essential tasks (METs). These METs include conducting close-air support, offensive anti-air warfare, strike coordination

and reconnaissance, and electronic attacks.

“VMFA-542 is the first operational fifth-generation squadron in II Marine Expeditionary Force, giving the aviation combat element the most lethal, survivable, and interoperable strike fighter in the U.S. inventory,” said Lieutenant Colonel Brian Hansell, commanding officer of VMFA-542. “The F-35B is unmatched in its capability to support Marines against the advanced threats that we can expect in the future.”

The F-35 is a fifth-generation fighter jet with advanced stealth, agility and maneuverability, sensor and information fusion, and provides the pilot with real-time access to battlespace information. It is designed to meet an advanced threat while improving lethality, survivability, and supportability. The F-35B Lightning II is the short-takeoff and vertical-landing F-35 variant. This capability allows the aircraft to operate from amphibious assault ships and expeditionary airstrips less than 2,000 feet long.

“I am extremely proud of the Marines and Sailors of VMFA-542,” said Colonel James T. Bardo, commanding officer of Marine Aircraft Group 14, the parent command of VMFA-542. “Achieving initial operational capability at the pace and precision of which they did truly demonstrates what an exceptional unit this is. This milestone demonstrates their hard work, ingenuity, and perseverance.”

Achieving initial operational capability also means that VMFA-542 is one step closer to achieving full operational capability and completing its F-35B Lightning II transition, a process that began in December 2022.

VMFA-542 is a subordinate unit of 2nd MAW, the aviation combat element of II Marine Expeditionary Force.