



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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## HILL'S F-35S DROP FIRST WEAPONS

HILL AIR FORCE BASE, Utah --

Airmen from the 388th and 419th Fighter Wings dropped laser-guided bombs at the Utah Test and Training Range this week, marking the first time an F-35 combat unit has employed weapons from the F-35A.

Lt. Col. George Watkins, 34th Fighter Squadron commander, said employing weapons on the F-35 allows pilots to more fully engage the aircraft and confirm that everything works as planned.

"This is significant because we're building the confidence of our pilots by actually dropping something off the airplane instead of simulating weapon employment," Watkins said.

Air Force F-35s have dropped weapons in test environments, but this is the first time it's been done on jets designed to deploy once the Air Force declares initial operational capability, which it plans to do between August and December. IOC will be announced when the Air Force deems the F-35 combat-capable.

Lt. Col. Darrin Dronoff, director of Hill's F-35 Program Integration Office, said that while this achievement is a significant step toward Air Force IOC, the milestone goes beyond that mark.

"The pilots and weapons loaders in the 388th and 419th Fighter Wings are perfecting their skills not only to prove aircraft capabilities, but they'll also be the Airmen called upon to take the F-35 to combat, whenever that call may come," he said.

Hill's F-35 pilots will begin flying the F-35 in four-ship formations, which is the standard configuration flown in contested combat scenarios, as early as March.



Lt. Col. George Watkins, 34th Fighter Squadron commander, drops a GBU-12 laser-guided bomb from an F-35A at the Utah Test and Training Range Feb. 25, 2016. The 34th Fighter Squadron is the Air Force's first combat unit to employ munitions from the F-35A. (U.S. Air Force photo by Jim Haseltine)