



F-35 Lightning II Program

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What is it like to fly the Navy's F-35C?

The best part of my job as a naval aviator is, for sure, being able to hop in a jet and leave all of life's other concerns behind. Allowing yourself to focus completely on the task at hand can be therapeutic.

I have flown a handful of different aircraft, starting out in flight training with the T-34C Turbo Mentor and the T-45A and C Goshawks. After receiving my wings, I flew the F/A-18C Hornet with Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 113. Now, I'm flying the F-35C Lightning II. And just like that sounds, the F-35C is leaps and bounds ahead of what I've grown accustomed to.

The F-35C is a stealth aircraft with powerful avionics that are at the cutting edge of technology. The F/A-18C was at the cutting edge in the '90s, but the venerable Hornet is showing its age after more than two decades; so you can imagine the difference.

Regardless, ignoring the tactical capabilities of the F-35, it is a similar piloting experience to most of the other jet aircraft that I have flown. The giant touch screen is a big advantage—it has certainly got me feeling spoiled. As much as I'll always love the legacy F/A-18C, I have to admit that I would probably feel a bit disappointed if I went back to using the smaller, all-green displays in the Hornet.

Every carrier aviator faces the same challenges prior to going to the ship; each one of us gets nervous every time. Now, factor in that we're conducting carrier qualifications with a new platform. You can see that we're operating in a high-pressure and unforgiving environment that requires 100 percent focus, from the pilots to the maintainers.

The best part of participating in the F-35C's carrier qualification is witnessing first hand such a major, significant evolution in carrier aviation. The Lightning II is outfitted with a landing mode that greatly enhances the pilot's ability to safely land aboard an aircraft carrier – a feature that has been developed alongside a similar program for the F/A-18 Super Hornet. The precise landing capabilities granted by these programs come as close as possible to simplifying the most demanding aspects of shipboard recovery.

Leading up to the carrier qualifications, I was particularly excited to see how this jet handled behind the aircraft carrier. It really exceeded my expectations. Having only previously conducted arrested landings in Hornets, the comparison between the two was night and day.

The F-35C brings a multitude of tactical mission sets to the U.S. Navy, and will prove to be a lethal and capable asset to carrier air wings. I'm both proud and excited to be a participant in this history.

Editor's note: Lt. Rezendes, a native of Berkley, Massachusetts, graduated with a degree in criminal justice from Northeastern University in Boston. He earned his commission through Officer Candidate School in 2008. In 2011, he finished flight school in Kingsville, Texas. He has deployed aboard USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) in support of Operation Inherent Resolve in the Arabian Gulf from 2014 to 2015.



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