First operational F-35B unit conducts firing of live air-to-air missile

The US Marine Corps' (USMC) Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 211 has become the first operational F-35 unit to fire a live air-to-air missile.

The firing was carried out during the 53rd Weapons Evaluation Group Weapons System Evaluation Program (WSEP) at Tyndall Airforce base (AFB).

The event, named Combat Archer, was part of the WSEP conducted by the 83rd Fighter Weapons Squadron, and intended to prepare and test the fighter squadrons' readiness for combat operations.

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It tests all phases of combat operations ranging from weapons loading to performance of aircraft, aircrew and weapons in a realistic environment.

During the exercise, the VMFA 211 engaged four F-35s and 112 Marines to complete its first deployment. VMFA 211 commander colonel Chad Vaughn said:

> "For our squadron, this was our first deployment. We took a small footprint of Marines, and we had significant challenges in terms of logistics. But it was awesome, it was both a confidence and morale builder as well as motivational for pilots and Marines. It showed the Marines that regardless of how old or young you are that when you shoot a live weapon it is always a learning experience."

He further stated that some integration exercises were conducted with the US Air Force's (USAF) F-22 Raptor aircraft at WESP. Vaughn added:

> "We fly common airplane and have taken a common approach to our tactics and how we speak to each other. This has paid huge dividends. During the exercise, the VMFA 211 engaged four F-35s and 112 Marines to complete its first deployment. Basically when we go to work with people, whether it is an Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon, F-22 or a Marine or Navy F-18 Hornet squadron, we are all generally speaking the same language. The point of emphasis for us was that we can work with anyone. Just the nature of this programme has made us more compatible."