

# Navy's Third Operational F-35C Lightning II Squadron Achieves Safe For Flight Certification



An F-35C Lightning II from VFA-86 performs a touch and go aboard USS Nimitz (CVN 68) in the Pacific Ocean. (U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Carson Croom)

From Lt. John Choi, Oct. 23, 2024

VFA-86 has earned a Full Safe for Flight certification on the F-35C.

The F-35C enhances the carrier strike group's ability to project power, supporting U.S. national security and integrating seamlessly with other carrier air wing assets.

"I couldn't be more proud of the Winder Team for this achievement," said Cmdr. Nathan Staples, VFA-86 Commanding Officer. "Our team has excelled since the transition began in February 2023, and I look forward to our future achievements and the standards we set for the Lightning II community."

The squadron's transition from the F/A-18, flown for 36 years, began in September 2023. Nearly 200 personnel completed training at Eglin AFB, Fla., and NAS Lemoore, while nine pilots finished their flight syllabus with VFA-125, the Navy's F-35C Fleet Replacement Squadron, while simultaneously executing tactical training events with Naval Aviation Warfighting Development Center and TOPGUN.

After achieving several key milestones, including a perfect score on the Conventional Weapons Technical Proficiency Inspection and the highest Maintenance Program Assist

inspection score, VFA-86 earned Interim Safe for Flight certification in June 2024. In July, they conducted their first embarked operations aboard USS Nimitz (CVN 68), culminating in Full Safe for Flight certification.

“Our success is due to proactive management, engaged leadership, and a can-do attitude,” said AFCM Rich Brickey, VFA-86 Maintenance Master Chief. “Our Sailors have excelled in every metric and will continue to do so whenever called upon.”

Established in 1951, VFA-86 has flown nine different aircraft and supported combat operations in Vietnam, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. As the Navy’s newest F-35C squadron, the Sidewinders remain committed to their motto: “When diplomacy fails... 86 'em!”