

Even After Achieving IOC, Questions Continue to Surround Navy's F-35C



F-35C Lightning II's from Naval Air Station Lemoore, California, fly in formation over the Sierra Nevada mountains after completing a training mission. The F-35C is the carrier-capable variant of the Joint Strike Fighter. U.S. Navy/Lt. Cmdr. Darin Russell

After years

and years of waiting, the last variant of the Joint Strike Fighter – the F-35C Lightning

II – is officially operational. But it's still a couple of years away from

making an impact on the high seas – and some questions about the plane remain.

The U.S. Navy

on Feb. 28 declared that the F-35C, the aircraft carrier-capable variant of the

fifth-generation stealth fighter, had reached initial operational capability

(IOC). The Marine Corps vertical-lift F-35B and the Air Force conventional F-35A

variants already have been declared operational.

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Richard Aboulafia, Teal Group's vice president of analysis

The first

F-35C squadron, Strike Fighter Squadron 147, completed carrier qualifications

aboard the USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) as a precursor to IOC. All

that remains is a couple of years of preparations until the first squadron deploys aboard the Carl Vinson.

However, issues still surround the aircraft, which was plagued by development and production delays over its history.

A report issued in March by nonprofit watchdog Project on Government Oversight declared that the F-35 was “far from ready to face current or future threats,” citing data that allegedly shows “unacceptably low” mission-capable rates. The watchdog group also stated that the F-35 was initially promised at \$38 million per plane but that they now average \$158.4 million apiece.

Ceremonies and a flyaway May 23 at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, marked the deactivation of the Navy’s first F-35C fleet replacement squadron and its consolidation with the second F-35C FRS. <https://t.co/2GwzOKLNW8>

– *Seapower Magazine (@SeapowerMag) [May 28, 2019](#)*

Despite all the questions that surrounded the program for years, the plane is here. And the Navy is preparing to introduce its variant into the fleet.

The IOC was a joint declaration between the Navy and Marine Corps, because the aircraft will be flown by both services. In the six months before that, the

“last couple of pieces” began coming together for the program – training, crews and the like, Brian Neunaber, one of two national deputies for the Navy’s F-35 program, said in an interview with *Seapower*.

“So we have airplanes,” Neunaber said. “VFA-147 immediately reported to Carrier Air Wing Two. It’s involved with unit-level training, and they will commence air-wing workups, probably in the middle of next year.”

That said, the F-35C is still a couple years away from actual deployment. Their first ship – the Carl Vinson – is in drydock at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard for repairs and modernization after concluding a busy deployment cycle.



Marines prepare F-35B Lightning IIs for flight operations on the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp (LHD 1). The vertical-lift Marine variant of the JSF reached IOC ahead of the F-35C. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Benjamin F. Davella III

“She’ll come out of the shipyard in the middle of 2020, and shortly thereafter the entire air wing will start working up with Carl Vinson, and sometime in the middle of 2021,” the first deployment is expected, Neunaber said, noting that the deployment after that would probably take place six months later, and eventually all carriers would be flying the F-35C.

The Vinson’s F-35C

squadron will consist of 10 planes. Every air wing in the fleet eventually each will have a squadron of 10 aircraft before the Navy goes to two squadrons per carrier, he said. The program of record stands at 340 F-35Cs, Neunaber added.

Doubts, Praise for F-35C

Of the three JSF variants, the F-35C is the one that is “not in a particularly good place,” said Richard Aboulafia, Teal Group’s vice president of analysis.

Aboulafia said he believes that, though the Navy is going ahead with purchasing the aircraft, the sea service isn’t enthusiastic about the F-35C. He noted that the Navy wants to keep buying the F-35C’s predecessor, the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, and that appetite hasn’t seemed to diminish as the F-35C finally reaches IOC.

The Navy has a lot of reasons to hedge its bets, he argued.

“Why pay the up-front price at all – rather than wait for someone else to drive down the cost?” he said, also noting that the Navy “is less convinced themselves that [the F-35C] has much value at sea. There’s also an institutional preference for twin-engine fighters.”

Aboulafia also claimed the F-35C could diminish the Navy’s case for large-deck carriers. “If

the [F35B] works, and Marines deploy Bs and Cs together and the difference isn't all that great, then you have a situation where the case for large carriers is a little undercut," he said.

In a worst-case scenario – at least for a sea service that wants to keep operating a fleet of large aircraft carriers – the Navy could lose support for even a carrier fleet of 10 ships and see an argument for smaller carriers supplemented by amphibious ships gain a lot of steam, Aboulafia argued.

Though many have expressed doubts about the Navy's enthusiasm about the F-35C, the service has continued to publicly and emphatically support the fighter. The Navy argues that the F-35C offers the latest in technology and is perfectly suited to fight a modern war.

"The F-35C is ready for operations, ready for combat and ready to win," the commander of Naval Air Forces, Vice Adm. DeWolfe Miller, said in a statement following the declaration of the fighter's IOC. "We are adding an incredible weapon system into the arsenal of our carrier strike groups that significantly enhances the capability of the joint force."

Capt. Max McCoy, commodore of the Navy's Joint Strike Fighter Wing, predicted that the

F-35C would make us “more combat effective than ever before.”

“We will continue to learn and improve ways to maintain and sustain F-35C as we prepare for first deployment,” McCoy added in a statement. “The addition of F-35C to existing carrier air wing capability ensures that we can fight and win in contested battlespace now and well into the future.”