

VMFA-251 Reactivated as Marine Corps' First East Coast-Based F-35C Lightning II Squadron



U.S. Marines with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 251 march in formation during the reactivation ceremony for VMFA-251 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina, Dec. 5, 2024. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Orlanys Diaz Figueroa)

From the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION CHERRY POINT, N.C. – Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 251, Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 14, 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW), reactivated during a ceremony on Thursday aboard Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, North Carolina, following a four-year, seven-month hiatus.

VMFA-251, known as the “Thunderbolts” or “T-Bolts,” was previously deactivated during a ceremony on April 23, 2020, aboard MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina, after returning from deployment in 2020 in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. The Thunderbolts’ deactivation concluded its 34 years as an F/A-18 Hornet squadron. The squadron was then relocated to MCAS Cherry Point to begin its transition to the F-35.

VMFA-251 received its first F-35C Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter delivery on Sept. 17, 2024, marking a key milestone in the squadron’s transition process. VMFA-251 is the Marine Corps’ first East Coast-based operational F-35C Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter squadron.

The F-35 is a fifth-generation fighter jet with advanced

stealth, agility and maneuverability, sensor and information fusion, and provides the pilot with real-time access to battlespace information. It is designed to meet an advanced threat, while improving lethality, survivability, and supportability. The F-35C is designed to operate from conventional aircraft carriers or land bases and provides operational maneuverability and persistence to the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF). Superior internal fuel capacity results in a significantly increased combat radius and longer on-station times as compared to the F-35B, the F-35's short takeoff and vertical landing (STOVL) variant.

"Today, almost 83 years to the day after it was founded, VMFA-251 reactivates as an F-35C Lightning II squadron. The T-Bolts are humbled and honored for the privilege of carrying that proud legacy forward," said Lt. Col. Evan Shockley, commanding officer, VMFA-251. "Our immediate focus is working towards initial operational capability, which means that VMFA-251 has enough operational F-35C Lightning II aircraft, trained pilots, maintainers, and support equipment to self-sustain its mission essential tasks. Following that, we will turn our attention towards reaching full operational capability to ensure that, when called upon, the T-Bolts will stand ready to serve our great nation."

VMFA-251 is a subordinate unit of 2nd MAW, the aviation combat element of II Marine Expeditionary Force.