

# NAVY F-35C ROADMAP REVEALED

November 2019 Combat Aircraft

Following much speculation, and set against the wider politics of the F-35 program in terms of trained personnel, mission capable aircraft and delivery rates, the US Navy has unveiled its current planning for the F-35C variant as it integrates further with the fleet and its carrier air wings.

With VFA-147 'Argonauts' preparing to commence work-ups with Carrier Air Wing Two (CVW-2) for a cruise in USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) in 2021, the US Marine Corps' VMFA-314 'Black Knights' finally began training with VFA-125 'Rough Raiders' at NAS Lemoore, California, on September 9. The squadron, which will initially receive 10 aircraft from the F-35 Low Rate Initial Production (LRIP) batch 12, will be assigned to CVW-17, which itself is currently attached to USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71). VMFA-314 will also become the first F-35C squadron to be based at MCAS Miramar.

Next through the classrooms of VFA-125 will be VFA-97 'Warhawks', which should become operational with Lot 13 standard F-35Cs in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 before moving to MCAS Iwakuni, Japan, in FY 2024 to join CVW-5 which, by then, will have been reunited with USS *George Washington* (CVN 73). Meanwhile, another USMC squadron (VMA-311 'Tomcats' currently flying the AV-8B Harrier II from MCAS Yuma) will have transitioned to the Lightning II

and will move to Miramar. The F-35C fleet as a whole will receive weapons upgrades around this time, including provision for the second-generation Small Diameter Bomb and an upgraded AIM-9X Sidewinder missile.

VFA-115 'Eagles' will exchange its F/A-18Es for Lot 17 F-35Cs to become operational in FY 2025, followed the next year (and stand by for confusion here) by VMFA-115 'Silver Eagles', which will finally relinquish its F/A-18 Hornets at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina. Fiscal

Year 2027 will herald the arrival of Lot 19 F-35Cs, which will be issued to VFA-151 'Vigilantes', while Lot 20 machines will be flown by VMFA-251 'Thunderbolts', which will become the second Beaufort-based F-35C squadron in FY 2028. This timeframe should see some 200 F-35C airframes in the navy/marine corps inventory, with the LRIP aircraft likely to be subject to upgrades in plans yet to be funded or revealed publicly.

With the majority of the F-35C fleet units on the Pacific coast, from this it seems logical to assume that the first Atlantic Fleet deployment by the F-35C will be conducted by one of the Beaufort squadrons. **Mike Crutch**

VFA-97 'Warhawks' has been identified as the US Navy's next F-35C unit. **US Navy/MCS1C Brian M. Wilbur**

