

F-35As to replace Hornets

Finland's Hornet replacement programme, known as the HX Campaign, had been running for years. Candidates included the Boeing Super Hornet/Growler, Dassault Rafale, Eurofighter Typhoon, Lockheed Martin F-35A and Saab Gripen E.

Requirements for the five potential Hornet replacements were an Initial Operations Capability (IOC) in 2026 and Full Operational Capability (FOC) in 2030. IOC is reached when air-to-air capability is achieved and FOC when all air-to-ground/surface weapons are integrated and capability is also available. The last Finnish Air Force (FAF) Boeing F/A-18C/D Hornets will leave service in 2030 when FOC of the new fighter is achieved.

Currently, the FAF Hornet fleet boasts the most capable legacy Hornet in service by initially undergoing Mid-Life Upgrade – MLU1 (2006-10) and then MLU2 (2012-16). MLU1 concentrated on improving air-to-air capability with a helmet-mounted cueing system, plus new AIM-9X and AIM-120C-7 missiles. The Litening targeting pod was also introduced during the MLU1 phase, until then with MLU2 the Finnish Hornets gained an air-to-ground capability. Also with MLU2, new weapons were

Order of battle

| | | |
|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Fighter Squadron 11 | F/A-18C/D Hornet | Rovaniemi |
| Fighter Squadron 31 | F/A-18C/D Hornet | Kuopio-Rissala |

Source: *AirForces Intelligence*

integrated to the fleet – Joint Direct Air Munition (JDAM), AGM-154C and AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM). The new Link-16 datalink system was also installed as part of MLU2 to provide better compatibility with NATO air forces.

Finnish Defense Minister Antti Kaikkonen announced on December 10, 2021, that the Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II had won the HX competition. Finland will purchase 64 F-35A Block 4 with F135 engines. It was also announced that the air-to-ground/surface weapons for the F-35A will be bought by 2031. Requirement was that FOC should be achieved by 2030. Does this have an effect on the Hornet fleet retirement? The Finnish Air Force has said the Hornet air-to-ground/surface weapons JDAM, AGM-154C and

AGM-158 JASSM will be used to achieve F-35A FOC 2030 and new weapons will be purchased/integrated later.

One aspect which might affect the Hornet retirement schedule is F-35A IOC. Finland has purchased the F-35A Block 4 with the current F135 engine, but the USA's latest General Accounting Office (GAO) report on January 14, 2022, stated that development of Block 4 was delayed and at the earliest it would not be available in the US until 2026, or even later. Also, Block 4 requires more electricity and cooling and without a new engine not all Block 4 capabilities will be possible. To achieve IOC in 2026, the FAF will have to use Block 3F aircraft.

The first F-35A deliveries are planned for 2025, when training is expected to commence in the US and the first aircraft will arrive

in the country around 2026. This means Finland will receive the Block 3F aircraft, which need to be upgraded when Block 4 becomes available.

The Finnish Hornet fleet will remain in full service until the first F-35A is delivered to Finland around 2026 and achieves IOC. After that, the Hornet will be progressively retired as new F-35As are delivered.

Russia has based the newer more capable Su-35S *Flanker* close to Finland, soon to be followed by the Su-57, so the Finnish Air Force had to keep up with its neighbours and the F-35A was deemed to be the aircraft to achieve that.

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Inventory

| Inventory | Del | Current |
|----------------|-----|---------|
| F/A-18C Hornet | 55 | 55 |
| F/A-18D Hornet | 7 | 7 |

Prior to the mid-life upgrade in 2012-16, the FAF had lost a single F-18C. Another F-18D was damaged in an accident and rebuilt as a dual-seat F/A-18D.

Source: *AirForces Intelligence*