

Marines prepare for F-35B operational testing

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – Four Marine aircraft maintainers assigned to Tiltrotor Test and Evaluation Squadron (VMX) 22, the U.S. Marine Corps' operational test authority for the F-35, completed a 40-day visit to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter integrated test force facility here Aug. 12.

The Marines are among the first in VMX-22 designated to perform operational test and evaluation on the Marine Corps' F-35B at Edwards Air Force Base in California, and were able to get their first hands-on experience on an F-35B test aircraft.

"We learned a lot, and by coming out here, we're setting ourselves up to be ready to handle the aircraft when it comes out to Edwards for operational test," said Gunnery Sgt. Bruce Cervelli. "Most of the work we're able to do now is tabletop joint test data verification. There is nothing like being able to get some hands-on OJT."

One of the differences in maintenance for the F-35 will be the aircraft's low-observable (LO) characteristics. "The LO material is going to require different maintenance practices for the F-35, because we don't have LO now in the fleet," said Sgt. Tyler Brockman, a hydraulics and airframe maintainer.

As maintenance procedures are developed during the developmental test period, the aircraft itself will save maintenance time in other ways.

"The F-35 troubleshoots itself," said Sgt. William Cone, an avionics maintainer. "We won't be doing any wire chasing anymore."

The first F-35B operational test aircraft is scheduled to deliver next year, and the VMX-22 detachment will gradually ramp up from 12 personnel now to 120 when operational testing begins.

The F-35B is the variant of the Joint Strike Fighter for the U.S. Marine Corps, capable of short take-offs and vertical landings for use on amphibious ships or expeditionary airfields to provide air power to the Marine Air-Ground Task Force. Initial ship trials for the F-35B are scheduled for this fall. The F-35B is undergoing test and evaluation at NAS Patuxent River prior to eventual delivery to the fleet.