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F-35C completes initial catapult testing

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, Lakehurst, N.J. – Navy test pilot Lt. Chris Tabert takes off in F-35C test aircraft CF-3 from a degraded test catapult Oct. 6. The test used an intentionally degraded catapult to check the aircraft's response to steam ingestion. The F-35C Integrated Test Force at NAS Patuxent River, Md., recently concluded the first round of catapult testing for the F-35C. Future testing will include launches at varying weights, stores and with increased mission system functionality. The F-35C is undergoing test and evaluation at NAS Patuxent River prior to delivery to the fleet. (Photo courtesy of Lockheed Martin)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – F-35 integrated test force personnel and F-35C test aircraft CF-3 returned to NAS Patuxent River last week after completing two major catapult test events.

Starting this past summer, the test team put the carrier variant of the Joint Strike Fighter through its first set of catapult launches. The goal was to complete an initial structural survey of the aircraft to withstand launch stresses and the impact of steam ingestion into the engine.

"The testing went very well," said Tom Chaillou, lead government ship suitability engineer. "The aircraft completed the structural survey, and the steam ingestion was a non-factor. The team spent a lot of time up at Lakehurst [N.J.] away from home, and just did a tremendous job."

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The team completed more than 50 launches to collect the needed data. The steam ingestion data produced robust results, allowing the team to reduce the number of test launches by four.

“[The F-35C] did really well from the cockpit perspective,” said Cmdr. Eric Buus, F-35 test pilot. “The aircraft actually flew away after launch a bit better than was predicted.”

Catapult testing will continue at Lakehurst and Patuxent River to include launches at varying weights and stores, and with increased mission system functionality.

The F-35C carrier variant of the Joint Strike Fighter is distinct from the F-35A and F-35B variants with its larger wing surfaces and reinforced landing gear to withstand catapult launches and deck landing impacts associated with the demanding aircraft carrier environment. Initial carrier trials for the F-35C are scheduled for 2013. The F-35C is undergoing test and evaluation at NAS Patuxent River before delivery to the fleet.