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Navy captain returns to his roots as he joins F-35 test leadership team



Navy Capt. Erik Etz recently assumed duties here as the senior military representative of the F-35 Integrated Test Force (ITF). (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md.—Building on his history as a test pilot , Navy Capt. Erik Etz recently assumed duties here as the senior military representative of the F-35 Integrated Test Force (ITF).

Etz became the director for Test and Evaluation of F-35 Naval Variants in November, and replaces Marine Corps Col. Roger Cordell, who on Dec. 21 took command of Naval Test Wing Atlantic, which includes the “Salty Dogs” of Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 23.

“We could not have selected anyone better than Erik for the demands of the job at Pax River,” said Vice Adm. David Venlet, Joint Strike Fighter program executive officer. “Roger did a fantastic job of capitalizing on the momentum built in B and C test evaluation there in the past year, and I’m fully confident Erik will maintain that momentum.”

An F/A-18 pilot, Etz was the deputy lead for the F-35 Mission Systems Integrated Product Team at the Joint Strike Fighter Program Office in Crystal City, Va. He is a 1998 graduate of the U.S. Navy Test Pilot School, and completed

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two tours in VX-23, including a lead role in the third sea trials for the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet.

“The ITF this year has really ramped up the pace and diversity of flight test, completing initial ship trials for [the short takeoff and vertical landing variant], first catapult testing, including [the electromagnetic aircraft launching system], and getting ahead on test points,” Etz said. “I look forward to another great year of retiring risk in 2012, so we can get these aircraft out to the fleet.”

The F-35B short take-off and vertical landing variant and the F-35C carrier variant of the Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter are undergoing test and evaluation at NAS Patuxent River. The jets represent the next generation of tactical aircraft for the Navy, Marine Corps and international partners.

During his operational tours, including command of the “Stingers” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 113, Etz completed multiple carrier-based deployments, most recently in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. He has more than 3,300 flight hours in 35 types of aircraft, including over 2,700 hours in F/A-18 variants and more than 840 carrier landings on 14 different aircraft carriers.

Cordell’s yearlong stint included managing the F-35 ITF of more than 700 military, civilian and industry personnel. The team completed delivery of six test aircraft, including all three of the F-35C variants, bringing the total test force to eight.

“I have never been associated with a group of people who faced a more daunting challenge with the inspiring spirit, confidence and ability so prevalent at the ITF,” Cordell wrote in a note to the ITF. “Future success in delivering F-35 to the warfighter depends on your continued commitment to doing things right, trusting your judgment and voicing concerns.”