

Lieutenant General Davis on the USMC and the F-35: Preparing for 2015

12/14/2014 – The F-35B will mirror the MV-22 assault support revolution across three key functions of Marine Aviation: anti-air warfare, offensive air support and electronic warfare.

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2014-12-14 By Robbin Laird

The F-35 is entering service at a critical juncture when air and ground dynamics are being linked in new ways.

A 360 degree sensing aircraft which can do close air support and other air superiority missions in new ways, the F-35 will become a staple of the next round of ground-to-air and air-to-ground revolution which is ongoing.

The F-35 is entering service at an interesting time—a time when digital warfare is simultaneously seeing significant evolution.

The US and Allied fleet of F-35s will also add an “electronic warfare” component to the fight, an “E” for electronic.

It is not necessary to designate the F-35 as the F/A/E-35—although that might be more accurate.



As one combatant commander put it, “When the Marines bring the F-35B to my area of operation, as an air-enabled ground force, they can demonstrated innovation across the combat enterprise that our allies and ground forces can see themselves.”
Credit Image of F-35B Aboard the USS Wasp: SLD

In other words, the IOC of the F-35 is not simply about the introduction of a replacement aircraft but the next phase in the revolution of airpower as inextricably intertwined with doing air combat differently.

In wide ranging discussions with the pilots, maintainers and industrialists in the US, Asia and Europe involved in the launch of the F-35, there is clear awareness that the F-35 is not simply about business as usual.

And there is a clear sense of excitement seen by the F-35 launch cadre, which is missed by those not part of the process.

The USMC is the lead service launching the F-35 global fleet and as such has become a key global player as the partners and other services watch the USMC roll out the F-35B.

In this interview, Lieutenant General Davis, the Deputy Commandant for Aviation, discusses the approach the Marine Corps is taking to fielding the aircraft.

Question: As we come to the end of 2014, the USMC is anticipating the Initial Operational Capability by mid-2015.

How is that process progressing?

Lieutenant General Davis: Marine Aviation is progressing very well towards the initial operational capability (IOC) for the F-35B by summer of 2015.



A squadron F-35B seen at Yuma on July 16, 2014. Credit Photo: Second Line of Defense

The Joint Program Office, Lockheed Martin and Pratt and Whitney and Rolls Royce are diligently working with us to achieve this significant milestone.

The Green Knights of VMFA-121 at MCAS Yuma, Arizona are flying an advanced version of aircraft software that very closely mirrors 2B IOC software.

The major challenge is to simultaneously train our aircrew and maintainers to achieve the IOC standard while also meeting key Operational Test (OT) milestones. As a part of getting ready to declare IOC, we will conduct operational test with fleet aircraft aboard our amphibious carriers this spring.

The event will be a joint effort between VMFA-121 and VMX-22 to do the testing aboard USS Wasp.

Bottom line: it has been a multifaceted and integrated team effort to get our machines, crews and maintainers ready for IOC declaration

I'm getting more and more confident we will make it as I look at 121's readiness and sortie generation rate. It's getting better all the time.

Our F-35B pilots are today regularly flying in Yuma, and the operational readiness is solid. Our Lightning II pilots are excited about the missions they're flying and the great capabilities the F-35 brings to the fight.

Question: Recently, I talked with the RAF officer responsible for IOC for their F-35s and he commented that there is a significant gap between those who are commenting on the aircraft and the warriors figuring out how to use the aircraft.

How do you explain this gap?



A Marine with Marine Aircraft Group 40 shields himself, Nov. 6, from the dirt and rocks blown around from the first wave of MV-22B 'Osprey' entering the Taskforce Helmand area of operation. Credit: 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, 11/6/09

Lieutenant General Davis: This is an exciting time for Marine Aviation.

In some ways, that 'gap' is pretty normal.

We see it all the time and have seen it as we introduced new platforms in the past: F-4 and A-7 to FA-18, AV-8A to AV-8B, then to the Radar variant of the Harrier.

We pay our operators to be masters of the machine they fight today – not the next one they will transition to.

We tend to love what we do (especially if we are good at it), and seeing the potential in a future platform is sometimes difficult – especially in the middle of a fight.

A very recent example of this is the initial skepticism about the MV-22 in the Marine Corps.

We had a number of officers from both the air and ground elements of the Corps—very thoughtful and respected Marines, who thought we didn't need a V-22.

They claimed that it was "too much technology for Marines... it couldn't do this, couldn't do that."

All these officers have pretty much been proven to be dead wrong.

Also, when we initially fielded the Osprey it was viewed by many as a one-for-one replacement of each CH-46.

In other words, the mindset was “How good a CH-46 is the MV-22 going to be?”

The answer was that the MV-22 was not a CH-46, and for good reason: it was a sea change in Marine assault support aviation.

Indeed, getting the MV-22 into the Marine Corps has completely changed everything that we do in an exceptionally positive way.

The MV-22 is the single most in-demand platform we have in the Marine Corps right now.

The Osprey has transformed a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) that was, I would say, a great fighting force, but fairly localized in the capability set that it could provide.

With a CH-46, we projected sea-based combat power out to a 25 to 30-mile radius.



Students from the Infantry Officer Course (IOC) at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., completed a “Proof-of-Concept” 1,100 mile, long-range operation from Twentynine Palms, Calif., to Fort Hood, Texas, via MV-22 Ospreys, on Dec. 15, 2013. Credit: USMC, 1/2/14

Today equipped with the MV-22, the MEU has a 500-mile assault support radius and delivers combat power at 280 knots.

This exponential improvement in capability fundamentally changes the way the MEU operates—and also how the MEU is viewed both by our combatant commanders and our adversaries.

My biggest challenge is building trained squadrons on a timeline that meets the seemingly insatiable demand for MV-22s.

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VMX-22 Receiving its First F-35B (Part of a Slideshow): Credit: USMC

Question: What will be the role of VMX-22 in rolling out the F-35?

Lieutenant General Davis: VMX-22 will play an important role in F-35 development. The F-35 detachment is standing up out at Edwards Air Force Base with handpicked, top notch pilots and maintainers.

VMX-22 is not only looking at new equipment, but also exploring and experimenting with new ways to fight and share information more effectively, continuously seeking new answers to the question:

“How do we best employ the F-35 to meet the current and emerging requirements of the MAGTF?”

As VMX-22 transitions to MCAS Yuma, Arizona, they'll be integrated with Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1) and will advance how the F-35 operates in conjunction with not just other F-35s, but also our MV-22s, and

everything else we fly or fight with – all the way down to the individual Marine rifleman.

We fail as a Corps if we can't connect the kill and information chains from the F-35 to the Lance Corporal rifleman in the meeting engagement of the future battlefield.

We've had the F-35s from VMFA-121 participating in the Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) course while simultaneously meeting pilot and maintenance training milestones required to achieve IOC.

VMX-22 got its first F-35 this past September and will have 4 aircraft by the end of 2015.