

From the Fleet

The Lightning II at VMFAT-501

Story and Photographs by Rick Llinares/Dash 2 Aviation Photography



The Warlords of Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron 501 (VMFAT-501) represent the first U. S. Marine Corps training unit for the new fifth generation, Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning II. The aircraft, also called the Joint Strike Fighter or JSF, will form the backbone of the future USMC aviation force, replacing the AV-8B, FA-18 and EA-6B currently in service. The USMC tactical air transition plan calls for F-35B and C aircraft to be fielded in USMC air wings through fiscal years 2032. The Marines plan to purchase a total of 353 F-35Bs and 67 F-35C JSFs.

Before fleet F-35 units can be fielded, however, those Marines who need to fly and maintain this latest marvel of American aviation technology will need to be trained. That is the mission of the VMFAT-501 Warlords, a Fleet Replacement Squadron (FRS) that will be based at MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina and will be responsible for training USMC pilots in the aircraft. The unit stood up in 2010 at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida and trained the initial group of USMC pilots in the F-35B. The squadron is expected to operate 20 of the Short Takeoff and Vertical Landing (STOVL) F-35Bs. MCAS Beaufort is slated

to field a total of two F-35 FRS units and two operational F-35 units.

The Warlords relocated to Beaufort in mid-2014. The JSF will be based at Beaufort, as well as MCASs Yuma, Cherry Point, Miramar and Iwakuni, Japan. VMFAT-501 is assigned to the 2nd Marine Air Wing, Marine Air Group 31. It traces its history to the VMF-451 Blue Devils who fought in WWII as well as Operation Desert Storm before being de-activated in 1997.

In the years in between, VMF-451 entered the jet age with the F9F-2 Panther, followed by the FJ-2 Fury. The 1960s and 1970s saw the squadron re-designated as All Weather Marine Fighter Squadron VMFA (AW)-451. During this period, the unit flew F8U Crusaders and F-4J Phantom IIs. The ensuing years saw the unit trade in the venerable F-4 for the 4th generation FA-18 Hornet. The Warlords were deactivated in 1997, bringing to a close a proud 57 year history. On 1 April 2010, the squadron was reactivated and designated VMFAT-501. The squadron's motto, a Latin phrase, "VINI- VICI," is vividly displayed on its insignia along with an image of the F-35B, and stands for, "I came. I conquered."





The photographs of VM-FAT-501 F-35Bs that appear in this feature article were taken in the skies over northern Florida by the author, Photo-Journalist Rick Llinares. His "platform" was a USMC KC-130J assigned to VMGR-252, MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina.



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