

## AVIATION WEEK Bulletin [bulletin@aviationweek.com]

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The U.S. Marine Corps is preparing to begin operations for the first operational F-35 squadron next month at MCAS Yuma, Ariz., and officials are optimistic for a mid-month standup despite some challenges ahead.

Key to starting up squadron operations will be a small but growing cadre of maintainers, pilots and aircraft, says Col. Kevin Killea, aviation requirements branch head for the Marine Corps.

The first F-35B is expected at Marine Fighter Attack Sqdn. 121 in early November, with the second slated for delivery mid-month. These will be the first low-rate-initial-production aircraft delivered from prime contractor Lockheed Martin to the Defense Department, and these aircraft will include the 1B software. A total of 16 F-35Bs, the number needed for full operational capability, are expected at the base within the next year, Killea says.

Six pilots have been tapped for early operations at Yuma, as well. They are currently in various stages of training; some are already qualified to use the 1A software and simply need to get "difference training" between the two blocks. Killea says small group tryouts are slated for November to determine which two of five pilots in the first 1B class at Eglin AFB, Fla., where pilot training is handled, will be among those first six pilots selected for ops at Yuma.

But to begin operations, the Marine Corps must continue to implement a foundation for the squadron's infrastructure at the base, including delivery of the Autonomic Information Logistics System (ALIS) Block 1.03. Last month, Maj. Gen. Christopher Bogdan, F-35 deputy program director, pointed out that the squadron will not be able to properly stand up without this system. ALIS is a comprehensive system of hardware and software used to manage the F-35, including health and diagnostics of each aircraft, supply tasks and mission planning. The 1.03 release is critical for Yuma because it includes the security features needed to conduct classified operations; Killea notes that Eglin is using ALIS 1.02 because the training base doesn't need to access classified flight data. An operational squadron, however, cannot function without it.

Lockheed Martin has had problems with ALIS 1.03 owing to security vulnerabilities. Killea says that the work "has come a long way in the last couple of months," and what could have been a six-month slip was compressed to allow for standup of the squadron next month.

The Marines still decline to outline a specific initial operational capability (IOC) date for the F-35B. IOC will require 10 F-35Bs available for ship- or land-based deployment and surge options. That also will include the appropriate number of pilots and two-shift maintenance operations, Killea says.

IOC is tied somewhat to release of the Block 2B F-35 software. But Killea says the Marines will withhold an IOC declaration until all of the needed capabilities—such as basic close-air-support and interdiction activities as well as initial air-to-air and data-linking—are delivered, whether they are included in Block 2B or a subsequent release.