F-35 Makes First Appearance in South America

The F-35 celebrated another first this week when it made its debut appearance in South America. Two F-35As assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing landed in Santiago, Chile for the 2018 Feria Internacional del Aire y del Espacio (FIDAE). According to the U.S. Air Force, bringing the F-35 to FIDAE helps meet training needs for the aircrews and maintenance personnel for various operations--including long-range flights and air-to-air refueling. The engagement also provides an opportunity to strengthen military-to-military relationships with regional partners.

Capt. Andrew “Dojo” Olson, who is the F-35 Heritage Flight Team commander, flew the plane that touched down in Chile, where it is on static display throughout the air show this weekend. It's great to see the F-35 Heritage Flight Team taking the aircraft to new locations and build excitement for the aircraft around the globe. Giving the people in South America the chance to see the most advanced, transformational 5th generation fighter in the world allows us to expand our global reach and build excitement for the fighter in new locations.

2017 National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) Tester of the Year

Each year the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) presents several awards to recognize outstanding achievements within the defense industry. And this year, Lockheed Martin’s own Chris Dowell will be recognized by NDIA as a 2017 Tester of the Year, one of three awards presented to outstanding individuals in the field of Test & Evaluation.

Chris is an F-35 Flight Test Engineer at the Pax River ITF and works hard every day to ensure the Pax River team is effectively completing safe and efficient F-35 flight test operations. Chris will be honored at the 2018 NDIA Test and Evaluation Conference next month.

Congratulations, Chris, on this incredible honor and thank you for your dedication to the F-35 flight test program!
Transitioning from the F/A-18C: VMFA-122 Initial Flight Operations

The U.S. Marine Corps Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 122 achieved an important milestone this week when it carried out its first flight operations in the F-35B. The squadron, known as the “Flying Leathernecks,” completed the operation at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma in Arizona.

According to USMC, this milestone marked the end of the first phase in the transition from a legacy F/A-18C Hornet squadron to an F-35B squadron. The F-35B has been at MCAS Yuma since it left MCAS Beaufort in South Carolina last October.

“Starting over, all of our programs have to be rebuilt and reestablished here on MCAS Yuma with a whole new group of people,” said Maj. John Dirk, the executive officer of VMFA-122. “This is the culmination of that first part and going forward we get to maintain and improve them so we can make the squadron have full combat capability.”

Milestones like this are a testament to the continued momentum of the F-35 program. I’m incredibly proud to work on a team that is doing such important work to deliver for our customers and ensure that the F-35 is mission ready to support their operational needs.

Tribute to a Thunderbird

Lastly, I’d like to close with a tribute to Major Stephen “Cajun” Del Bagno who sadly lost his life in the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team’s training incident earlier this week. Major Del Bagno, the team’s #4 “Slot” pilot, was killed in a training accident at Creech AFB, Nevada.

Major Del Bagno has a special place in the F-35 community – “Cajun” was the team’s first F-35A pilot, having joined the Thunderbirds this season from the 58th Fighter Squadron at Eglin AFB, Florida where he served as an F-35A stealth jet evaluation pilot and Chief of Standardization and Evaluation. Major Del Bagno was previously a civilian flight instructor, corporate pilot, and banner tow pilot who graduated in 2005 from Utah Valley State University. He was commissioned two years later from Officer Training School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama.

The Thunderbirds are known for their breath-taking maneuvers and precision airmanship, bringing joy to thousands each year through the air show season and we recognize this loss will be incredibly difficult for them. I know I speak on behalf of the full F-35 enterprise, in sending our deepest condolences to Major Del Bagno’s family and friends and the full Thunderbirds team.