Final Assembly Of First F-35 Under Way At Lockheed Martin

Workers at Lockheed Martin joined the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter's 35-foot-wide carbon- fiber composite skinned and metal structure wing to the aircraft's fuselage on Monday, uniting three of the F-35's four major sections -- the forward fuselage, the center fuselage and the wing. The assembly milestone was completed on schedule, and marks the beginning of F-35 final-assembly activities.

"We knew that the F-35's completely digital design and manufacturing process would yield impressive results, but the precision and accuracy in the way the pieces of this first airplane fit together is almost beyond imagining," said Bob Elrod, executive vice president and F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program general manager. "It's just about perfect, and it is helping us stay on schedule for first flight next year."

With affordability as its cornerstone, the F-35 is designed for fast, streamlined production with extremely high standards for assembly precision and quality. At peak production, the Lockheed Martin factory in Fort Worth will produce one F-35 each working day.

"The F-35 team is committed to delivering an aircraft that brings major advances in performance, but at a cost comparable to that of existing multi- role fighters. It's becoming clear that we are on the path to achieving the efficiencies that will enable us to do just that," said Ralph D. Heath, executive vice president of Lockheed Martin's Aeronautics business area.

The F-35 is a next-generation, supersonic, multi-role stealth aircraft designed to replace the AV-8B Harrier, A-10, F-16, F/A-18 Hornet and the United Kingdom's Harrier GR.7 and Sea Harrier. The first F-35, a conventional-takeoff-and-landing (CTOL) variant, is scheduled for completion at year's end.

The F-35's aft-fuselage, built by BAE Systems in Samlesbury, England, will be delivered to Lockheed Martin officials on May 17 and shipped to the Fort Worth plant, where it will become the final major subassembly joined to the rest of the aircraft. The horizontal and vertical tails, also made by BAE Systems, will be completed and delivered a short time later. The center fuselage, produced by Northrop Grumman in Palmdale, Calif., arrived in Fort Worth on May 3, and was immediately mated to the Lockheed Martin-built forward fuselage.

Three versions of the F-35 are planned: a CTOL, a short-takeoff/vertical landing (STOVL) and a carrier variant (CV). Each is derived from a common design, and will ensure that the F-35 meets the performance needs of the U.S. Air Force, Marine Corps and Navy, the U.K. Royal Air Force and Royal Navy, and allied defense forces worldwide, while staying within strict affordability targets.

Headquartered in Bethesda, Md., Lockheed Martin employs about 130,000 people worldwide and is principally engaged in the research, design, development, manufacture and integration of advanced technology systems, products and services. The corporation reported 2004 sales of $35.5 billion.

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