F-35C Lightning II Completes First Launch And Recovery Aboard A Gerald R. Ford-Class Aircraft Carrier

PATUXENT RIVER, Md., Nov. 19, 2026 – On the U.S. Navy's birthday this year, Oct.13, Lockheed Martin's F-35C Lightning II marked a new chapter in naval aviation, completing its first recovery aboard the Gerald R. Ford-Class aircraft carrier PCU John F. Kennedy (CVN 79). The milestone connected the Navy's 251-year legacy of innovation with the next generation of naval airpower.

Testing aboard the Kennedy marked the F-35Cs' first shipboard compatibility testing on the Navy's newest aircraft carrier, demonstrating its ability to safely launch and recover from the new flight deck while generating critical data to support future carrier operations. Over 11 days of testing, two F-35Cs from Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Maryland, completed 34 flights, 122 catapult launches and 122 arrested landings using the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) and Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG), both of which are the latest in technological advancements for carrier-based fixed-wing operations.

"This is a critical event for the F-35C, Kennedy, and the United States Navy," said Sean Jackson, vice president, Lockheed Martin's F-35 Development Program. "For the first time, the aircraft has demonstrated launch and recovery operations from a Gerald R. Ford-Class flight deck, advancing the integration of fifth-generation fighter capability with the world's most advanced carrier technology. With the completion of this test phase, the Navy has now cleared the F-35C for operations across its entire fleet of aircraft carriers."

A New Carrier Environment

Ford-class carriers introduce a fundamentally different operating environment, including:

- **Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS)** for smoother, more precisely controlled aircraft launches
- **Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG)** designed to support a broader range of aircraft recovery conditions
- **A redesigned flight deck and island** that changes airflow, exhaust dynamics and deck operations

Testing Delivers Critical Data

The effort followed shore-based trials conducted between January 2024 and May 2025. At sea, the integrated test team collected essential data to support:

- Verification of EMALS and AAG software and shipboard installations
- Validation of the F-35Cs' loads and structural models for launch and recovery
- Development of Aircraft Launch Bulletins and Aircraft Recovery Bulletins for Ford-class carriers
- Confirmation of mission-systems software stability – initial Block 4 software usage in a carrier environment
- Assessment of aircraft supportability in the new carrier's environment

Advancing 5th Generation Carrier Capability

This milestone confirms the F-35C's compatibility with and capability to operate from America's next generation of carrier decks. Its stealth, advanced sensors and data-sharing capabilities provide a powerful foundation for future maritime and joint-force operations.

The F-35C's successful Ford-Class testing moves the program closer to full operational integration aboard the fleet's newest carriers.

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Media Assets

Photos: NEW High-resolution imagery from the Sea Trials available here.

Media Kit: Find supporting information on the F-35 program here.

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