

UNDER THE RADAR – U.S. AIR FORCE F-35

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Will a new super jet destined for Nellis turn out to be a super noise-maker?

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No jet fighter in history comes anywhere close to the U.S. Air Force's new F-35 Lightning II.

Painstakingly assembled from stealthy, high-tech materials and so far flown by only the gutsiest of top guns, this beefy jet looks more like a robotic hornet on steroids, with its sharp-cornered wings and tail fins jutting out at menacing angles.

Its single rear engine pounds out enough thrust to rocket the plane more than 1,200 mph; with in-flight refueling, the jet's range instantly expands to what pilots call "global reach."

So advanced, so integrated are the weapons systems that guide its 18,000 pounds of bombs and missiles that F-35 pilots don't even have to point the Lightning at a target to score a direct hit. An on-board array of computerized, still-classified targeting and guidance systems see to that while simultaneously monitoring every airborne, ground-based and ocean-faring target in the vicinity.

Which is why the reluctance of Nellis Air Force Base officials to discuss the arrival of a new F-35 training squadron is so puzzling.

With at least 30 F-35s scheduled to "bed down" there by 2012, Nellis will soon become ground zero for the instruction and training of many of the above-elite pilots chosen to fly the F-35. You might expect Air Force officials to trumpet the arrival of such a super jet, but Nellis officials are still largely reluctant to talk about it -- possibly because of a calamitous noise problem with the F-35 that some say could economically devastate surrounding communities and sour the normally amicable relations base officials and valley residents have shared for decades.

While the F-35 might be world's most advanced fighter, Air Force officials haven't bothered to mention to local residents that it's also the loudest.

The sound of freedom?

Government and private studies point out that the F-35 generates so much noise -- as much as four times that of an F-16 Falcon or an F-15 Eagle -- that residents unlucky enough to live under its flight path or in the vicinity of its home bases might end up moving away because of the nearly unbelievable levels of noise the jet produces. Residents like thousands of North Las Vegas families.

Some cities are so upset at potential F-35 noise pollution and its economically devastating effects that they've sued the military to delay or cancel the arrival of F-35 squadrons at bases near them. Many say they're upset that Air Force officials conveniently failed to mention the F-35 is so damned loud.

"The Air Force decided, without evaluating any alternatives, that they were also going to put the F-35 at Eglin [Air Force Base] ... but an EPA analysis and our own calculations indicated 40 percent of our city would be rendered uninhabitable because of the noise generated by that aircraft," says Doug Wyckoff, city attorney for Valparaiso, Fla., a bedroom community just outside the base in the Florida Panhandle.

Wyckoff sued the Air Force on behalf of the residents of Valparaiso about a year ago to try to force the military to reconsider stationing nearly 60 F-35s at Eglin. As part of a settlement reached about a month ago, Air Force officials have agreed to evaluate at least 18 alternatives to placing the jets at Eglin's main airfield -- a process slated for completion next fall.

Who's gonna make some noise?

Closer to home, however, almost no one in Southern Nevada is aware of either the jet's impending arrival at Nellis or of the ear-splitting noise that will soon be generated by the dozens of F-35s roaring over the Vegas valley.

So far, the only warnings about the potential damage inflicted by a squadron of fighter jets come from a singular May 2008 Environmental Protection Agency memo -- warnings largely ignored by Nevada environmentalists and local officials.

"The beddown of 36 F-35 fighter aircraft at Nellis Air Force Base would expose an additional 13,917 persons ... including 7 [sic] more schools, to noise levels of 65 Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) or greater. The Federal Interagency Committee on Urban Noise states that noise exposure greater than 65 DNL is considered generally unacceptable over public services or residential, cultural, recreational and entertainment areas," wrote EPA environmental review manager Nova Blazej in that memo.

The EPA also found the poor and minorities of North Las Vegas would suffer disproportionately under the racket from a new F-35 squadron, chiefly because they can't afford to live anywhere else. That EPA memo found 42 percent of minorities and 16 percent of poor people in North Las Vegas would bear the brunt of the record noise levels spit out by the F-35.

Nellis officials say they've completed an initial environmental impact statement on possible effects of the jet, and EPA officials say they're working closely with the base to monitor the progress of a final report. But base officials admit they won't even conduct a noise study on the jets until after they're already here.

"As always, the airmen of Nellis AFB appreciate the patriotism and support of the Las Vegas community and surrounding areas as they train every day in the world's greatest Air Force to fly, fight and win," said base officials at the conclusion of a brief statement issued last week. Nellis officials did not respond to interview requests from *CityLife*.

Keep an ear to the sky

Local city officials, however, could soon start demanding officials answers, too.

Although slow to initially recognize the threat posed by our own military technology -- records show former North Las Vegas Mayor Mike Montandon was warned about the F-35 by EPA officials in that memo nearly 18 months ago -- local city officials are beginning to sound like Valparaiso's Wyckoff when confronted with the environmental damage expected from these new F-35s.

"The city of North Las Vegas has not been formally notified of plans for the F-35 to be located at Nellis Air Force Base. The city and Nellis Air Force Base have enjoyed good-neighbor relations for decades. Given the anticipated noise level of these planes we are concerned about the potential impact on our community and look forward to discussing it further with Nellis officials," says city spokeswoman Brenda Fischer.

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(Possible Future Location – State of Arizona? Many Questions)