

## Three takeaways from the US Navy's first F-35C deployment

By [Megan Eckstein](#)



The U.S. Navy Blue Angels fly in the Delta Formation over the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) as it returns from an eight-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific region. (MC2 Cody Deccio/U.S. Navy)

ABOARD USS CARL VINSON, OFF THE COAST OF SAN DIEGO — Aircraft carrier Carl Vinson returned home Feb. 14 after a six-and-a-half-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific, in the U.S. Navy's [first deployment of the “air wing of the future.”](#)

The Carl Vinson Carrier Strike Group and its Carrier Air Wing 2 brought along an F-35C Joint Strike Fighter squadron in its first-ever operational deployment, and they worked with a detachment of CMV-22 Ospreys as the carrier onboard delivery aircraft.

The “air wing of the future” also included two additional EA-18G Growlers and one additional E-2D Advanced Hawkeye aircraft, bolstering the air wing's ability to sense the operating area and share data from those sensors across the CSG.

In an unexpected twist, the carrier strike group began moving towards U.S. 5th Fleet in the Middle East, but then stopped and turned around, remaining in U.S. 7th Fleet and in the Indo-

Pacific for the entire duration of its deployment, in what leaders are calling the start of a “shift” for the West Coast fleet’s operations.

The ships of the Carl Vinson CSG sailed more than 80,000 nautical miles while underway for 262 days — which included being scrambled to operate off Hawaiian waters in June, as a Russian naval exercise brought ships and aircraft within a couple dozen miles of the island chain, and then conducting final pre-deployment training and certification in July, ahead of an Aug. 2 start of the formal deployment.

During that time, the air wing conducted more than 15,000 flight hours and more than 15,000 combined carrier arrested landings and catapult launches. The air wing and strike group operated with at least five other U.S. and international strike groups and many more partners and allies — all this, of course, while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose challenges for the fleet, specifically around conducting port calls for crew rest.

### **A larger air wing of the future?**

Strike group commander Rear Adm. Dan Martin said Carrier Air Wing 2 showed “seamless integration” of the F-35C and the CMV-22 into the air wing.

Not only did it bring new and more capable aircraft into the mix, it was a larger air wing than usual — and Martin is advocating for it to grow larger still.

“This deployment, I think, showcased what would be a paradigm shift in the way that the aircraft carrier and the strike group deployed,” Martin told reporters embarked on the carrier as it sailed towards San Diego on Feb. 13. “Since I was a young lieutenant, we’ve been going to 5th Fleet and flying close air support missions for the Marines and the SEALs and Army on the ground, with air supremacy.”

“This is just a complete change, with a near-peer competitor, with activity that is in the air, on the surface of the sea and below the surface of the sea,” he added. “You have to shape the air wing to best handle that activity.”

Martin said the F-35 squadrons should “get bigger.”

“Right now, we’re probably going to go to a 14-aircraft squadron vice 10,” he said. “I’ve heard noise of us thinking around the possibility of going to a 20-aircraft squadron.”

Several crew members on the carrier told Defense News they struggled with the high “deck density,” or the number of aircraft given the amount of space on the flight deck and the hangar bay, early in the deployment.

But they said it got easier as they learned more about how to move the aircraft around. The F-35C, for example, is smaller than the F/A-18 Super Hornet, but the F-35 requires more and larger ground support equipment. Simply adding more F-35Cs without taking anything away would

definitely make it harder to tow aircraft around and manage the flight deck, but Martin said the new fighters add significant capabilities for the strike group.

“It’s a brand-new aircraft with advanced sensors, so we like to pair that with a Growler to complement each other. And when you fly around that theater ... they pull so much into the cockpit; the sensors onboard can see activity that other aircraft cannot,” he said.

Though his air wing already had two more Growlers than a typical air wing, Martin said “we’re advocating for more because we saw the value of that aircraft in theater.”



An F-35C Lightning II, assigned to the “Argonauts” of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 147, recovers on the flight deck of Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70), Jan. 2, 2022. (Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Apprentice Micheal Mensah/U.S. Navy)

The Navy has started reducing the number of helicopters it sends in an air wing, Martin said, which could free up room for more jets — but he said he had 19 helos and “we needed all of them.” Martin said he sent his MH-60s on long flights for anti-submarine warfare, surface warfare, search and rescue and other missions.

Despite the larger air wing, Carl Vinson Commanding Officer Capt. P. Scott Miller said in an address to the crew on the 1MC “we had no aircraft-to-aircraft crunches throughout the entire

deployment ... in either the hangar bay or the flight deck,” a safety feat no one on his staff could recall achieving in other deployments.

Martin acknowledged the challenges that would come with adding more aircraft into finite hangar and flight deck space, but said it’s important for the Navy to “shape the air wing that’s relevant for the threat.”

### **Focus on 7th Fleet**

For the West Coast carrier fleet, the threat is now China.

Whereas previous Pacific Fleet carrier strike groups could expect to sail through 7th Fleet on the way to 5th Fleet — maybe stopping for an exercise or two on the way there or back — this deployment focused entirely on the region that’s the top priority under the National Defense Strategy.

Miller said in a separate interview with reporters “we did start heading in that direction, and then turned around as it closed,” referring to the end of the mission in Afghanistan that has required so much naval aviation support over the last 20 years.

“It’s more of a mission of presence and being prepared to project power if required, as opposed to an active operational power projection mission,” Miller said of 7th Fleet compared to 5th Fleet.

“There’s a different shift in mindset for sure when you know you’re going to go drop bombs ... in a long-running conflict, [compared to] operating in or near specifically the [People’s Republic of China] and not wanting to do that but needing to be prepared to respond in an appropriate manner at any moment,” Miller added.

U.S. 3rd Fleet Commander Vice Adm. Steve Koehler, who flew out to the carrier on Feb. 14 as it headed toward the North San Diego Bay, told the crew over the IMC its work was strategically important to the Navy and the U.S.

“It’s the first deployment in a long time where the aircraft carrier and the strike group has stayed in the South China Sea, in the Philippine Sea, and in the 7th Fleet [area of responsibility], and it’s indicative of the competition amongst great powers,” he said. “In the end, to compete, you’ve got to be on the court to win. And you all spending all that time in the 7th Fleet AOR is indicative of that competition.”

Martin said that competition was evident to the carrier strike group.

“Once you even get close to the South China Sea, you can bank on Chinese ships coming out to meet you and escort you in. You never make a move without an escort, which is why we try to make some moves that are unpredictable to try to scrape off some escorts,” he said, adding that he tried to keep the carrier traveling at 25 knots or faster through the South China Sea to remain unpredictable.

“In that sea space, you’ve gotta move fast.”

Still, he said it takes a toll on the crew.

“All these sailors and all these young officers learned how to operate with a persistent presence of the PRC, day and night, so that meant standing alert, watches are fully energized throughout the night. And they figured out the resiliency piece of always being on edge, of moving the strike group quickly, keeping your speed up and being unpredictable.”

### **Operating amid COVID**

Martin said the deployment was also made tougher by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Even as the crew was working at a high operational tempo in a tough operating area, they only made two port visits to Guam and one to Yokosuka in Japan for rest and maintenance.

Each port visit led to a couple COVID-19 cases among the crew, he said, but “we proved to the Navy, and I hope it goes beyond that, that we can fight through it.”

“We’d pull into port — we didn’t get very many port visits — but we’d pull out with some cases, and we’d see our numbers climb a little bit, and plateau, and then drastically fall,” Martin added. “Over the course of about two to three weeks, we could beat it back down to zero.”

Martin said the COVID-19 cases never affected the strike group’s ability to operate or stand watch, and he said it proved the Navy’s protocols work in a self-contained environment like a CSG on deployment.

About [Megan Eckstein](#)

Megan Eckstein is the naval warfare reporter at Defense News. She has covered military news since 2009, with a focus on U.S. Navy and Marine Corps operations, acquisition programs, and budgets. She has reported from four geographic fleets and is happiest when she’s filing stories from a ship. Megan is a University of Maryland alumna.