

The F-35 Strike Fighter. Technical Failures of the World's Most Expensive Weapons System

F-35 Burns on Runway During Testing. Plane leaks oil, Another Bursts into Flame

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Troubles never seem to end for the F-35 Strike Fighter. Not yet fully operational, the nuclear-capable fighter-bomber recently had different test versions either leak oil in flight or burst into flames on takeoff.

The F-35 is the world's most expensive weapons system - \$400 billion and counting. The estimated [lifetime cost](#) of this military-industrial project is \$1.5 trillion. The F-35 is already close to a decade behind schedule and its cost is already more than twice the original estimate. The Pentagon has lowered its performance specs and it's still years from being operational.

According to [Motley Fool](#), the estimated *additional* cost to operate and maintain the F-35 for 55 years is another \$1.1 trillion. At more than \$2 trillion, the F-35 is projected to cost more than half the entire Iraq War, so far.



The first F-35A Lightning II to land at Hill Air Force Base, Utah, arrives Sept. 13, 2013. (Alex R. Lloyd / US Air Force)

On June 22, at the Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, an F-35A was taking off on a routine training flight when part of the engine went through the fuselage and the tail of the plane burst into flame. The pilot aborted the takeoff and escaped from the cockpit. A ground crew extinguished the fire with foam. There were no injuries, but \$100 million the plane was possibly destroyed, according to officials.

All 26 F-35s at Eglin were grounded after the fire, while the Air Force tried to [figure out why](#) the plane ignited. Air Force spokesperson Lt. Hope Cronin called the fire "significant," but the cause is yet unknown. F-35s at other bases continued to fly until June 27, when the Air Force [grounded all F-35s](#) around the country and continued to seek the cause of the fire.

Earlier this month, on June 13, the entire F-35 fleet (more than 100 planes at this point) was grounded because an F-35 was leaking oil in flight. The Air Force, the Marines, and the Navy each has a variation of the F-35 that range in estimated cost from \$98 million (Air Force) to \$104 million (Marines) to \$124 million (Navy). According to [Lockheed Martin](#), the lead contractor on the F-35, the plane costs \$98 million *without the engine*.

So far, this story has been managed by the Air Force and, to a lesser extent, Lockheed

Martin. Early reporting came from military-industrial-friendly outlets such as the [U.S. Naval Institute News](#) or [Defense News](#). [According to](#) the former, “This is the first incident this severe for the JSF [F-35] during the life of the tri-service program.”

When the [L.A. Times](#) told the story, the paper used only official information. The [Motley Fool](#), referring to corporate hopes that F-35 sales would “catch fire,” took a more irreverent view with this headline:

Lockheed Martin Corporation’s F-35 Fighter Jet Catches Fire — in a Bad Way

Lockheed Martin hopes to sell more than 5,000 F-35s to the U.S. and other governments. In the past two years, several of those other governments have expressed concern about the plane’s value, with some governments cutting back or cancelling orders. As Motley Fool analyzed it:

What is clear is that the news out of Florida constitutes a significant PR snafu for Lockheed — and potentially a setback to a program that’s expected to eventually produce [upward of \\$1 trillion in revenues](#) for Lockheed Martin.

To make those potential revenues actual, Lockheed Martin must spend more time building new aircraft, and less time helping the Air Force fix problems with the aircraft it’s already bought and paid for. And with nearly 40% of all potential worldwide sales of the aircraft expected to come from international customers, getting revenues flowing will also require Lockheed to maintain enthusiasm for the plane among potential buyers.

Even though the F-35 has been in production since 2006, the plane is still in its test phase. Lockheed Martin is the prime contractor for the F-35, but these recent problems suggest the company is having quality-control problems with subcontractors.

The tail fire is thought to have started in the F-35 tail engine, designed by Pratt & Whitney (a unit of United Technologies).

The oil leak, found on at least three F-35, stems from an oil flow management system produced by United Technologies, which also assembles the engine.

British debut for F-35 scheduled for July 4

Bad enough to have the world’s most expensive weapons system still dysfunctional after more than a decade, but these particular dysfunctions have come uncomfortably close to the F-35’s first overseas performance before Queen Elizabeth at the official naming ceremony of a new British aircraft carrier, the HMS Queen Elizabeth, on July 4. To make their first overseas appearance, three F-35s will be flying across the Atlantic Ocean.

According to a “Marine Corps centric blog,” [SNAFU](#), it’s a “zany idea to fly prototype F-35B airplanes across the Atlantic for a ceremony.” But it explains:

The Brits want the F-35B as part of the ship’s complement. The United Kingdom is the only “tier one” partner on the F-35 development program, which means it’s kicked in some serious money for the F-35 development which started in 2001. They’ve also gained about fifteen percent of the manufacturing pie, with BAE Systems having completed the manufacture of

150 F-35 rear fuselages and tail sets already....

Originally the UK wanted 138 planes, but that has been [decreased to 48](#) probably for cost reasons as with others. The UK owns (sort of) three F-35B now, and has been [planning to order](#) 14 more since at least last October.... Now we hear that this fateful announcement for the UK to “order” fourteen more (they have three) faulty F-35B prototypes will be made at the HMS QE naming ceremony where F-35B will be part of the ceremony! Ta-da....

But it’s not funny. No matter who originated the idea for this cheap political stunt, it has no doubt affected the decision not to ground the F-35 fleet after the fire at Eglin, even as they seek the root cause. This puts other pilots at risk.

For all its technology, the F-35 cannot fly in bad weather

Even before the recent oil leak and fire episodes, the F-35B (Marine edition) was scheduled to fly [for the Queen](#) only if the weather was good. (Another of the plane’s shortcomings is that it can’t fly with complete safety in the rain.) Pushing for the F-35’s presence was BAE Systems, one of the plane’s subcontractors and the prime contractor for the new carrier. F-35s aren’t expected to fly to or from the Queen Elizabeth itself before 2018 at the earliest.

Assuming the F-35 fly-by at the carrier naming ceremony comes off without a hitch, the F-35 is scheduled to participate in two subsequent British air shows, the Royal International [Air Tattoo](#) (July 11-13) and the Farnborough [Air Show](#) (July 14-20). Then the planes will fly back across the Atlantic. These [appearances](#) were [announced](#) in April.

After taking all this into account, SNAFU wonders:

After this fire [at Eglin], so soon after the grounding of the fleet [for the oil leak], the question becomes clear. Why is the Pentagon ignoring common safety measures all for a publicity stunt in Europe?

Is the program on such shaky ground in the UK that a cancellation of the performance would kill the UK buy? Is the defense ministry so desperate that they would endanger their pilots for an air show?

The answer appears to be yes. Tech is now more important than the lives of our pilots.

[NOTE: the Pentagon announced cancellation of the carrier flyby in July, but held out hope that the F-35 would be able to do the air shows.]

Some skepticism is available from an Australian paper

In Australia, where the government is also expected to buy F-35s, the [Herald Sun](#) refers to the F-35 as “our [trillion-dollar](#) turkey” and treats the plane’s recent difficulties disdainfully as just more of the same. But the paper also reports that shortly before the F-35 caught fire, so did another, unrelated stealth aircraft. Earlier in June, a prototype Sukhoi T-50 Russian fighter had one of its two engines catch fire in flight, but managed to land safely. The right engine burned away part of the plane’s fuselage.

On June 26, the Project on Government Oversight ([POGO](#)) issued a report on the 2015 [defense spending](#) bill passed by the House recently. The report criticized \$6 billion more in

spending on the underperforming F-35 and supported spending on the relatively cost-effective A-10 Warthog (for close air support to ground troops) that the Obama administration wants to cut.

The F-35 has long been controversial [in Vermont](#), where [Stop the F-35](#) activists have spent years trying to keep the Pentagon plane from basing the plane in the middle of Vermont most populous and only urban area. Nevertheless the [Air Force](#) has decided to bring the plane to Burlington, with the full backing of Vermont's Democratic leadership and no dissent from Republicans or even Independent Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. Vermont Democrats from Senator [Patrick Leahy](#), Representative Peter Welch, Governor Peter Shumlin, Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger, legislative leaders and members, with few exceptions, have [goose-stepped](#) in locked formation in support of this [Pentagon wet dream](#) of having a single flying computer of a plane that can accomplish any mission the Army, Navy, or Marines can dream up.

Republican Senator John McCain, not exactly averse to American weapons of mass destruction, calls the F-35 "one of the great, national scandals that we have ever had, as far as the expenditure of taxpayers' dollars are concerned."

And speaking of taxpayers' dollars, the [BBC reported](#) on June 26 that Iraq had bought 36 U.S. F-16s for its skimpy Air Force, but that the U.S. had been slow in delivering them. Now, running out of patience and wanting airstrikes against its rebels, the Iraqi government has bought "a number of used Sukhoi fighter jets from Russia and Belarus." Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki said the planes could be flying missions within a few days.

The Sukhoi fighter is no F-35, for which Iraq should probably be grateful.

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