

# F-35 Fighter Plan Was 'Acquisition Malpractice', Pentagon Official Says

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## US Weapons Man: F-35 Fighter Plan Was 'Acquisition Malpractice'

- By Lee Ferran

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Tom Reynolds/Lockheed Martin

Pilot Mark Ward takes the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter for its first night flight at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., Jan. 18, 2012.

The man now in charge of buying weapons for the U.S. military said that the stealth F-35 Joint Strike Fighter -- one of the most expensive defense programs in U.S. history at three quarters of \$1 trillion -- was put in production so prematurely the error amounted to "acquisition malpractice."

"I can spend quite a few minutes on the F-35, but I don't want to," Frank Kendall, the Pentagon's Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics, said Monday. "Putting the F-35 into production years before the first test flight was acquisition malpractice. It should not have been done, OK? But we did it, OK?"

Kendall, who was speaking at an event hosted by the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), said that the early production decision was due to "optimistic predictions" based on design tools, simulations and modeling. But he said the design tools weren't perfect, the models weren't precise enough and now the military has found problems in all three variants of the F-35.

"Now we're paying the price for being wrong about that," he said. Kendall was not with the Defense Department's acquisitions office when the F-35 deal was inked with defense contracting giant Lockheed Martin in 2001.

While the F-35's counterpart, the [beleaguered F-22 stealth fighter](#), has a higher [price tag per plane](#), the F-35 is one of the Pentagon's biggest ever acquisition programs at an [estimated \\$379.4 billion](#) for over 2,400 jets. Over the next half-century, the Pentagon plans to spend up to \$1 trillion in operating costs for the planes. A new [report from the Government Accountability Office](#) says every hour of flight in the jets costs nearly \$30,000.

When planning the F-35 program, the Pentagon's acquisitions department took a "concurrent" strategy with the F-35 production, meaning the government, along with Lockheed Martin, planned to test the planes as production was ongoing, fixing problems on the assembly line as they're found and getting more planes in the air faster. Production on the F-35 began in 2003, three years before the first official test flight was completed.

The problem, a Department of Defense official told ABC News, is that sometimes critical issues with the jets were found after several of the planes had already been delivered to their military customers. The Pentagon already has nine non-test production jets in its hangers, but the first ever F-35 night flight test was completed just last month.

In fact, the planes are only 20 percent through testing and aren't expected to complete it until 2016, the official said.

Kendall called the errant strategy an "extreme example" of the Pentagon's tendency to put a program into production too early.

Still, both the Defense official and Kendall said the Pentagon remains committed to the F-35 program and that it has been making progress. The F-35 team [recently celebrated](#) the program exceeding flight test goals for 2011, according to Lockheed Martin.

"It is the future of tactical air for the Department of Defense for all three services it supports," Kendall said.

[LISTEN: Frank Kendall Speaks on the F-35 Acquisition](#)

The F-35 has had its [share of delays](#) and [technical issues](#), especially the Marine Corps' variant of the jet which is designed to take off on short runways and land vertically like a helicopter. The problems with that technically complex variant, known as the F-35B STOVL, got so bad that in early 2011 then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates put it on a two-year "probation."

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"If we cannot fix this variant during this time frame and get it back on track in terms of performance, cost and schedule, then I believe it should be canceled," Gates said before the Senate Appropriations Committee in July 2011.

The probation was lifted early, however, by new Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta last month. In his decision, Panetta said there was "real progress towards fixing some of the known problems that we had with STOVL."

"We now believe... that the STOVL variant is demonstrating the kind of performance and maturity that is in line with the other two variants of the JSF," [Panetta said](#).

Two top-ranking senators on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. John McCain (R.-Arizona) and Sen. Carl Levin (D.-Michigan), reportedly penned a letter to Panetta in which they questioned his decision on the same day Kendall shared his thoughts on the F-35 program.

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"When Secretary Gates originally decided to put the F-35B on probation, he intended his decision to invoke specific courses of action by Lockheed Martin and the program management office to help ensure that the F-35B program established technical maturity and design stability in several key areas. Have these actions been taken?" the two wrote Monday, according to [Defense News](#). "If not, your decision may have foregone a valuable opportunity to continue driving desired improvements through the still-nascent, enormously challenging program to develop the F-

35B."

A spokesperson for the Marine Corps did not immediately respond to a request for comment concerning the letter from McCain and Levin.

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## F-22 Raptor Pilots Suffer More Apparent Oxygen Problems

- By Lee Ferran

Jan. 13, 2012

Pilots for the F-22 fighter plane have reported several new instances of experiencing "hypoxia-like" symptoms while at the controls of America's most expensive and sophisticated stealth jet, the Air Force said, an apparently rare but potentially deadly oxygen problem that has stumped the military for the last four years.

From 2008 to 2011, pilots for the \$143 million-a-pop stealth jet reported at least 12 incidents of experiencing the "hypoxia-like" symptoms, prompting the full fleet of F-22s to be grounded in May 2011 while the Air Force investigated. After an intense, nearly five-month investigation, the Air Force said it could not figure out what could be making the pilots feel the effects of hypoxia and cautiously [sent the birds back into the skies](#) in October.

But the Air Force told ABC News the problem persists -- in the 6,000 sorties flown since the grounding, pilots have reported another eight instances of suffering "hypoxia-like symptoms." In each of the new cases, the pilot followed proper procedures, returned to base and landed "without incident," the Air Force said.

"The Air Force has not yet identified a root cause or a single mechanical deficiency, but through a range of both engineering and physiological actions we can mitigate the risk; this includes rigorous inspections, enhanced safety procedures, new training on life support systems, improved physiological monitoring, and continued data collection," Air Force spokesperson Capt. Jennifer Ferrau said in a statement to ABC News.

*[READ: F-22, World's Most Expensive Stealth Fighter, to Fly Again](#)*

Hypoxia occurs when the brain does not receive enough oxygen and can cause dizziness, confusion, poor judgment and inattentiveness, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#).

The F-22, though America's most expensive per-jet fighter, has never gone to war since going combat ready in 2005. In every major air combat operation, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Libya, the Air Force said the highly advanced fighter was not an operational necessity.

*[READ: The \\$77 Billion Fighter Jets That Have Never Gone to War](#)*

### **Air Force Blames Oxygen-Deprived Pilot in Deadly F-22 Crash**

Two months after pilots began taking the Raptors back in the sky, in December the Air Force published its investigation into the death of Capt. Jeff Haney, a veteran F-22 aviator who died after a malfunction caused his oxygen system to fail.

The Air Force said a problem with the plane's bleed air system, a system that draws air from the engine for other vital systems including the pilot's oxygen, prompted the oxygen shut down, leaving Haney to experience "a sense similar to suffocation."

*The Air Force provided computer-generated models of the plane's descent in its report.*

Though they acknowledged the oxygen failure, Air Force investigators said the crash was Haney's fault for being too distracted by not being able to breathe and failing to either reduce altitude and take off his oxygen mask or to activate the emergency backup oxygen system.

"By clear and convincing evidence, I find the cause of the mishap was the [pilot's] failure to recognize and initiate a timely dive recovery due to channelized attention, breakdown of visual scan and unrecognized spatial disorientation," the president of the investigation board, Brig. Gen. James Browne, said in conclusion.

[READ: Air Force Blames Oxygen-Deprived Pilot in F-22 Crash](#)

The Air Force has no plans to ground the F-22 again as they cautiously monitor their pilots in the sky and continue to look for answers, another Air Force official told ABC News.

