



Raptors to take to the air Wednesday after precautionary grounding

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POSTED: 03:19 p.m. HST, Sep 20, 2011

The Hawaii Air National Guard's F-22 Raptors are expected to take to the skies Wednesday for the first time since the entire Air Force fleet was grounded on May 3 as a safety precaution, officials said.

Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley and Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz approved a plan for the stealth fighters to return to flight as of Monday without detailing exactly what went wrong with the costly planes or what was done to fix the problem.

The Air Guard, which flies and maintains the Raptors in partnership with the active-duty Air Force, has seven of the twin-tailed jets.

The grounding over "hypoxia-like symptoms" — meaning not getting enough oxygen — experienced by pilots elsewhere led to the fleet grounding. The Air Force has fielded 170 of the jets, considered the Air Force's most advanced weapons system.

The grounding delayed the scheduled arrival of the remaining 13 Raptors the Air Guard will fly in Hawaii.

Hawaii National Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Chuck Anthony said the Air Guard plans a "couple of go-arounds" Wednesday morning and afternoon "just to wring them out a little bit."

Two of the jets probably will take part in each of the flights, Anthony said.

Anthony said no hypoxia symptoms were reported by Hawaii pilots.

The "stand-down" of the Raptors was ordered as a safety precaution following 12 separate incidents of hypoxia-like incidents reported by pilots, the Air Force said. The incidents occurred over three years starting in April of 2008.

The Air Force said in a news story Monday produced by Air Combat Command that "officials remain focused on the priorities of air crew safety and combat readiness," and the return-to-fly plan includes "mitigation actions" such as rigorous inspections, training on life support systems, and continued "data collection."

"We now have enough insight from recent studies and investigations that a return to flight is prudent and appropriate," Schwartz said in the news story. "We're managing the risks with our aircrews, and we're continuing to study the F-22's oxygen systems and collect data to improve its performance."

Portions of an ongoing safety investigation board investigation are expected to be released "later this year," the Air Force said.

The Air Force also said the entire fleet would undergo an "extensive inspection of the life support systems before returning to flight." Pilots will use unspecified "additional protective equipment" and undergo baseline physiological tests.

Concerns had included potential high-altitude oxygen delivery issues, but the Air Force said Monday that the aircraft is capable of and authorized to fly above 50,000 feet.

The stealthy F-22 is the most expensive fighter ever built. The Cato Institute in 2008 said the cost per jet was \$355 million.

The Raptor, which entered service in 2005, has deployed to Guam and Asia, but is not believed to have flown in combat in Iraq or Afghanistan.