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Second F-35C Crash in 2025 Renews Concerns Over Costly U.S. Fighter Program

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A U.S. Navy F-35C Lightning II fighter jet crashed near Naval Air Station Lemoore, California, on the evening of 30 July 2025. The pilot safely ejected and no other injuries were reported. This incident marks the second crash involving the F-35 programme this year and has once again raised questions about the aircraft's long-term performance and financial burden.

According to official reports, the crash occurred at approximately 6:30 p.m. local time. Early coverage suggests the aircraft may have been attempting an emergency landing when it became engulfed in flames, though the U.S. Navy has yet to confirm this detail. An investigation into the cause of the crash is ongoing.

The F-35 involved was an F-35C, the variant designed specifically for aircraft carrier operations. Operated by Strike Fighter Squadron 125 (VFA-125), also known as the “Rough Raiders,” the jet went down shortly after take-off. This is the first F-35C crash of 2025. The earlier incident, which took place in January, involved an F-35A variant at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska.

The F-35 programme remains the most expensive weapons initiative in Pentagon history. Annual expenditures on the programme, which include procurement and operations, are estimated at \$10–12 billion. The lifetime cost of the programme—including development, acquisition, and sustainment—is projected to exceed \$2 trillion. While these costs are often defended as necessary to ensure advanced capabilities across multiple service branches, continued setbacks have prompted calls for greater oversight and cost-control measures.

Technical issues have plagued the programme for years. The latest delivery delays are tied to the Technology Refresh 3 (TR-3) upgrade, which is intended to modernise software, processors, and electronic warfare capabilities. However, delays in the TR-3 rollout have led the U.S. Department of Defense to halt acceptance of new aircraft temporarily, further affecting operational readiness.

Though promoted as a fifth-generation stealth fighter with advanced sensor fusion, the F-35C’s challenges have cast a shadow over its reputation. Critics argue that while the aircraft offers improved situational awareness and versatility, maintenance complexity, software bugs, and logistical hurdles limit its full potential. The programme’s Autonomic Logistics Information System (ALIS), now replaced by ODIN (Operational Data Integrated Network), has also contributed to budget overruns estimated in the tens of billions.

Despite these issues, over 1,000 F-35 aircraft have been delivered to the United States and allied countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan. The platform remains central to long-term NATO airpower strategy, particularly as global security dynamics evolve.

Military officials have confirmed that no civilians were harmed in the California crash and that the pilot’s successful ejection is a testament to training and safety systems in place. Updates on the cause of the crash will follow pending the conclusion of the official investigation.