

As of right now, everything else is a target.

First Flight

A new era in aerial warfare began on Sept. 7 when the first production version F-22 Raptor lifted off from Dobbins ARB and slipped into the north Georgia skies. During the 58-minute flight, the landing gear was retracted and basic handling was explored. F-16 chase planes had trouble keeping up with the F-22, which easily reached 15,000 feet in under three minutes.



Chief F-22 test pilot Paul Metz reported the Raptor handled "just like the simulator," an omen of good correlation between predicted and actual performance. The flight was the first of 50 that Raptor 01 will make before being joined by the second test plane at Edwards AFB, Calif.



The world's new top gun will undergo several years of testing before being cleared for real-world missions, but it will take that long to safely investigate its awesome capabilities, which dwarf those of any potential rival. Stealthy, able to cruise at supersonic speeds without afterburner, and equipped with cutting-edge sensor and computer power, the F-22 will rewrite the textbooks on jet combat. ■