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Here Comes the New Su-25: Russia's 'Flying Tank' Set for a Lethal Upgrade

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The Russian air force is set to begin operational testing of its upgraded Sukhoi Su-25SM3 Frogfoot close air support aircraft this April.

Assuming the modernized jets are approved for fielding, the first operational Su-25SM3 aircraft are expected to enter service before the end of the year. The Russian air force is expected to upgrade more than forty Su-25s at the 121th Aircraft Repair Plant in Kubinka—just outside Moscow.

“Comprehensive testing of Su-25SM3 will begin in April of this year,” a Russian Aerospace Forces official told the Russian-language daily *Izvestia*. “We expect that the first modernized attack aircraft will arrive in troops before the end of this year.”

The modernized Su-25SM3 incorporates a host of sensor and defensive systems upgrades that the Russian military hopes will enable the flying tank to operate over the modern battlefield. Central to the modernization package is the *Vitebsk* defensive avionics suite, which was developed by the Samara Research Institute.

The *Vitebsk* incorporates a radar warning receiver, ultraviolet missile warning system and a powerful jamming suite. According to sources cited by *Izvestia*, the defensive countermeasures suite incorporates not only a radar jammer, but also a system to blind infrared-guided missiles—similar to the Northrop Grumman Common Infrared Countermeasures [6] suite—in addition to flares. The system is designed to protect the Su-25SM3 from everything from man-portable Stinger missiles to Patriot missile batteries.

According to *Izvestia*, the *Vitebsk* is also designed to automatically identify and precisely geolocate threat emitters. Those coordinates can then be passed onto a weapon system such as a Kh-58 anti-radiation missile to eliminate the threat. Potentially, that could give the modernized Frogfoot some ability to perform the suppression of enemy air defenses mission if needed.

The Su-25SM3’s offensive capabilities are also being enhanced. The Russians are equipping the warplane with a new electro-optical targeting system called the SALT-25. The new new sensor will allow the Su-35SM3 pilot to detect and track enemy ground forces at a range of “several kilometers”—day or night even during rain and snow storms. According, to *Izvestia*, the Russians seem to have incorporated a real-time video downlink capability on the Su-25SM3—giving the jet capability similar to the Pentagon’s ROVER system found on most upgraded U.S. fourth-generation fighters.

The modernized jet will also carry a host of new armaments—including a new generation of Russian precision-guided weapons. [7] Among those new weapons is the RBC SPBE 500-D—which was recently used in Syria onboard Russia’s Su-24 Fencer supersonic bombers. The weapons is a standard Russian 500Kg cluster bomb fitted with smart SPBE-D submunitions. Each submunition is an infrared-guided, anti-tank bomblet fitted with an explosively formed penetrator warhead that is capable of punching through 150-160mm of rolled homogenous armor—or enough to punch through the roof of a tank. Each RBC SPBE 500-D is fitted with six SPBE-D submunitions.

Thus, the Soviet-era Frogfoot is likely to serve well into the 21st Century even while its American counterpart, the Fairchild Republic A-10 Warthog, is phased out of U.S. Air Force service by 2022.