



F-35 Lightning II Program

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LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. -- An F-35 Lightning II took to the skies over the West Valley on May 5 in what was the first local training sortie for the fifth-generation fighter jet. The jet, tail number LF 5031, is currently the only F-35 at the base. Additional jets are expected to arrive at Luke within the next few weeks.

"The ability to conduct local flight operations demonstrates the commitment by thousands of individuals who have worked to make this a reality," said Lt. Col. Michael Ebner, 61st Fighter Squadron commander. "Our first sortie this week represents a significant milestone in the F-35 program at Luke."

There are currently six F-35 pilots assigned to the 61st FS, which is the first F-35 squadron at Luke. There will eventually be approximately 30 by the time the squadron is up to full capacity.

The 61st FS coordinates with the 61st Aircraft Maintenance Unit, which maintains the aircraft, to fly the jet when it is available - which as of this week is approximately 1-2 times per day. That number could increase to 2-4 sorties a day by next month, when more jets are expected at Luke, Ebner said.

As F-35 operations ramp up, West Valley residents may notice a slight decrease in F-16 sorties, as jets from one of the F-16 squadrons, the 309th FS, are being transferred to Holloman AFB, N.M.

Construction, much of which is sub-contracted locally, continues on base to prepare for the arrival of additional F-35s. The Academic Training Center, which will house classrooms and 12 F-35 simulators, is under construction and is expected to be completed in late September. Construction is also underway on the combined Operations/AMU building for the second F-35 squadron.

Other projects, including the third Operations/AMU building, a maintainer training facility and a four-bay F-35 hangar are also in planning stages.



An F-35 Lightning II prepares to land at Luke Air Force Base May 6, 2014. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jason Colbert)