



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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## LUKE CONDUCTS FIRST F-35 TRAINING DEPLOYMENT

LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, AZ -- The 56th Fighter Wing performed the first F-35 training deployment from Luke Air Force Base April 4 through 18, sending 10 aircraft to Nellis AFB, Nevada, for two weeks to see how well the team could conduct operations elsewhere.

The 10 aircraft comprise half of Luke's current fleet of F-35 Lightning IIs.

"Operating away from Luke has been a huge success for the wing, Team Nellis and the F-35 program in general," said Brig. Gen. Scott Pleus, 56th Fighter Wing commander. "We are learning lessons that will be hugely important for our pilots and maintainers across the F-35 program."

Learning whether or not a team of F-35s can operate on the road is important as the Air Force looks to reach Initial Operational Capability during the fall of 2016. To reach IOC, a squadron must have 12 or more aircraft and Airmen trained and equipped to conduct basic interdiction, close air support and limited suppression and destruction of enemy air defense operations in a contested environment.

"Though Luke is a training base, we will continue to push the training here to be as close to the operational side as we can," Pleus said. "This helps us learn to be more efficient, which will set future operational bases up for success."

Luke's 56th FW will provide the training and cadre of pilots and maintainers to fill operational bases around the world.

"The objective of this event was to integrate F-35 pilots from Nellis, Eglin and Luke Air Force Bases and operate on the Nevada Test and Training Range, while executing off-station maintenance operations," said Lt. Col. Michael Ebner, 61st Fighter Squadron commander. "The lessons learned by pilots and maintainers will lay the foundation for future training and deployment operations. The entire squadron understood the significance of this event and stepped up to the challenges that presented themselves."

The scope of the deployment was unprecedented for the Lightning II.

"Until now, the Air Force F-35 program had not moved this many jets and conducted sustained operations at another base," Ebner said. "Nellis AFB was the perfect place to test this operation. Our maintainers fixed aircraft and generated sorties without any F-35 deployment templates. The pilots integrated and discussed tactics with not only other F-35 pilots, but also with pilots from other platforms such as the F-22 and F-16."

The wing's 61st Fighter Squadron received its first F-35 in March of 2014 and flew its 1,000th sortie last month. In as soon as 18 months, pilots and maintainers from that unit may be some of the first Airmen to fly operational sorties in combat around the world in the F-35A.

"I couldn't be more proud of how our maintainers and pilots worked to move the F-35 program forward," said Ebner, a prior F-15E and now F-35 pilot whose career includes more than 2,100 flight hours and combat sorties in Iraq and Afghanistan.



Senior Airman Patrick Murphy, 61st Aircraft Maintenance Unit Staff F-35 dedicated crew chief, and Staff Sgt. Jeremy Miller, 61st AMU integrated avionics craftsman, monitor an F-35 prior to take off April 15, 2015 at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Thomas Spangler)



A 61st Fighter Squadron F-35 taxis prior to take off April 15, 2015 at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. The Las Vegas skyline is in the background. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Thomas Spangler)



Staff Sgts. Leah Curtin and David Cruson, 61st Aircraft Maintenance Unit Staff F-35 dedicated crew chiefs, run through pre-flight checks of an F-35 Lightning II April 15, 2015 at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Darlene Seltmann)



A Luke Air Force Base F-35 stands by to take off as another 61st Fighter Squadron Lightning II soars into the Las Vegas skies April 15, 2015 at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Thomas Spangler)

The 61st FS now has 20 F-35s assigned, two of which belong to the Royal Australian Air Force, an F-35 pilot training partner nation. Italy and Norway are scheduled to join the Glendale, Arizona, base later this year. By 2024, Luke is expected to have six F-35 squadrons with 144 jets and will train pilots and maintainers from 11 countries.