



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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*By Senior Airman James Hensley, 56th Fighter Wing Public Affairs*

**LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, ARIZ. (AFNS)** -- The first ever F-35 Lightning II pilot training class was held at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, May 4.

Two F-16 Fighting Falcon instructor pilots and two A-10 Warthog instructor pilots were selected for the class, making them the first students to learn how to operate the fifth-generation fighter.

"Luke's Academic Training Center focuses on the academic and simulator training and the 61st Fighter Squadron will train on the flying piece," said Lt. Col. Matt Hayden, the 56th Training Squadron director of operations. "It's a buildup approach training, where we start with academics, move to hands-on training with the simulators, and finally to the aircraft. The F-35 is built in a way to introduce students to the basic overall aircraft handling of its systems and what makes up the F-35."

The students will learn various systems throughout the aircraft and how they work together. Hydraulics, electrical, engine and flight controls are systems every pilot must understand prior to taking their first flight.

"Initially the training will be focused on understanding the airplane: how to take off, land, fly formation and how to interact with all the sensors on the aircraft," Hayden said. "As the training progresses we look at a tactical approach, as far as how to employ the airplane air-to-air, air-to-ground, what the capabilities and limitations of the aircraft are, and how to communicate.

"The tools in the ATC are set up to help immerse the students in the aircraft environment in an academic way," Hayden said. "The student stations in each of the classrooms have large monitors and a stick and throttle. In addition to that, the instructor at the front of the classroom has a couple of projectors which enable him to bring up a console, or any of the students' consoles, to talk about what the student sees on the displays."

The displays are a panoramic touch screen and can be customized to every scenario.

"The displays can also be manipulated using the stick and throttle which gives students a way to familiarize themselves with the glass display and build comfort with the 'switch-ology' of the aircraft," Hayden said. "We want to get the students familiarized with all of these things long before they get into the aircraft or even the simulator. It helps them understand how that interface works between the pilot and the airplane."

The training in total, from academics to simulators to flightline, takes approximately three months. This first class is training to become flight ready with the F-35, but to also become instructors upon completion of the course.

"The pilots going through the training right now are going to be staying here at Luke to be instructors," Hayden said. "When they graduate they may very well turn around in a matter of days to instructing students in what they just learned, which is why we chose previous fighter pilot instructors to be in the first class to have that tactical experience."

The students have many challenges ahead of them to become F-35 pilots, as well as become knowledgeable enough to lead and instruct future classes.

"It's exciting to be the first class at Luke," said Maj. Eric Puels, a 944th Operations Group Detachment 2 student. "A couple of us have been part of this program since 2008 and we're looking forward to hitting the ground running. It was extremely competitive to apply to become an F-35 pilot, let alone to be accepted. My father was a fighter pilot, he flew F-4 Phantoms, so I always wanted to fly the best fighters and the F-35 is the best."



Travis Byrom, a Lockheed Martin instructor pilot, briefs students in the first F-35 Lightning II training class May 5, 2015, at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. Upon completion of training, the students will assume the role of instructor to teach future classes of F-35 students. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman James Hensley)