



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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*By Senior Airman Grace Lee, 56th Fighter Wing Public Affairs*

**LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. (AFNS)** -- A pilot with the Royal Australian Air Force made history May 14, by flying the first RAAF F-35A Lightning II sortie at Luke Air Force Base.

RAAF Maj. Andrew Jackson, the squadron leader for the 61st Fighter Squadron and the first F-35 senior national representative at Luke, was the first Australian pilot to fly the fifth-generation fighter.

Although this was another milestone for the RAAF, for Jackson, this flight was also about building his experience and competence in the aircraft over the short term.

"My focus is on representing the RAAF as a valuable partner in the F-35 enterprise," Jackson said. "Hopefully I can contribute in some way to the work that's already taken place to help ensure a smooth transition from the A-18 to the F-35A. It's very exciting to finally be at Luke with the 61st Fighter Squadron and to get to fly an RAAF F-35A. Whilst I'm told that all the F-35s are the same, it's awesome to finally go flying in a jet that has 'Skippy' painted on the side."

With the sortie completed, RAAF personnel can forge ahead and advance in their mission at Luke.

"This marks a major milestone for partner operations here at Luke, as the next phase of operations," said RAAF Maj. Nathan Draper, a 61st Aircraft Maintenance Unit participant maintenance liaison officer. "We have been on the ground supporting the mission with our jets and now one of our instructor pilots will also contribute to this team in one of our aircraft."

The RAAF's future goals include not only helping train future F-35 pilots and gaining experience in flying it, but understanding what goes into maintaining the aircraft.

"The future is promising with the F-35," Draper said. "With each new update to the ground based support systems comes enhanced capability and supportability features. We will continue to define and refine the baseline configuration and move toward initial operating capability for each of the partners and services."

With the anticipated sortie accomplished Jackson said he is glad to be at Luke.

"We're looking forward to training at Luke for a number of reasons -- it's been a long way to move with my family, but the phenomenal hospitality and generosity afforded to us by both the base and local community has made this move easy," Jackson said. "Combine that with the amazing weather, airspace and proud history of partner training at Luke and you have an unbeatable combination. There's nowhere that myself and the other Australian pilots would rather be training on the F-35A, than (at) Luke Air Force Base."



Royal Australian Air Force Squadron Leader Andrew Jackson, the 61st Fighter Squadron RAAF squadron leader, taxis out to the runway at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., May 14, 2015. Jackson is the first Australian pilot to fly the RAAF F-35A Lightning II at Luke. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman James Hensley)