



F-35 Lightning II Program

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TOP DOGS DRIVE F-35 PROGRAM FORWARD

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Luke Air Force Base, ARIZONA -- The 61st Fighter Squadron at Luke Air Force Base is laying the groundwork for future F-35 Lightning II squadrons by launching a detailed pilot training program on the fifth generation aircraft. The training conducted at the 61st will help following F-35 squadrons become well-oiled machines like the F-16 Fighting Falcon squadrons currently training pilots at Luke.

The 56th Fighter Wing has a new mission now that formally includes F-35 training.

"Our squadron's mission is to train the world's greatest F-35 pilots," said Lt. Col. Matt Vedder, 61st FS instructor pilot. "The pilots who will complete training here will leave as the best F-35 pilots. In the 61st FS, we train U.S. and Australian pilots. This is a challenge in a way, because we execute training in a partner mission environment. But at the same time, it builds a better relationship between the nations."



Lt. Col. Matt Vedder, right, 61st Fighter Squadron instructor pilot, gives a step brief to pilots at the 61st FS at Luke Air Force Base. Step briefs cover the most-up-to-date information including wind, weather, airspace and airfield conditions.

The F-35 training doesn't refer only to the pilots but also the Airmen who will prepare the pilots and aircraft.

"We're laying the foundation for the initial F-35 pilot training here at Luke," said Airman 1st Class Christopher Long, 61st FS aircraft flight equipment journeyman. "We're the first F-35 training squadron with foreign partner nations at this scale. In comparison to the F-16 fighter squadrons at Luke, the mission is essentially the same but the technology is very different. The helmets, gravitational suits, jackets, all the gear is much more advanced." With so much new technology, Airmen can expect new challenges and a steeper learning curve.

"All the processes are completely new which create their own challenges, and we're essentially developing a brand new system of operations," Long said. "From some of our past experiences with the F-16, we make suggestions for improvements for the F-35. It's really a privilege to be a part of the first F-35 squadron at Luke, especially since only the best get selected to work here."

Training is geared toward making pilots as combat-ready as the aircraft will allow. To accomplish this mission they need the support of the community.

"It takes Team Luke to make the 61st FS," Vedder said. "Without them we can't produce the best F-35 pilots. Everyone plays an intricate role in this mission."