



F-35 Lightning II Program

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Luke 1 Completes F-35 Fini-Flight

LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. -- Brig. Gen. Scott Pleus, 56th Fighter Wing commander, flew his final flight in an F-35 Lightning II June 27, 2016. His two-year tenure as commander was filled with change as the wing shifted its mission to include the F-35.

When Pleus accepted the guidon in June 2014, Luke's primary mission was to train the world's greatest F-16 pilots. He was presented with the task of integrating the Air Force's newest fifth-generation fighter. During his change of command, he spoke about the challenges ahead.

"We are here at a great time -- a crossroads if you will -- as we transition from the Viper to the F-35, the most capable fighter aircraft ever built," Pleus said.

The challenge, he said, is simple: how do we build fifth-generation fighter pilots?

The program took off from there. A few months later, Luke launched its 100th F-35 sortie. The program is now at more than 5,000 sorties.

In December 2014, Luke received its first partner nation aircraft. The arrival of an Australian F-35 brought the Luke fifth-generation fighter total to 18. Pleus spoke during the arrival.

"Today, we take another tremendous step forward in our transition to the F-35 here at Luke," he said. "Australia is the first of 10 nations that will not only become part of the Luke community, but will share in calling the West Valley a home away from home."

Luke welcomed the 2015 New Year with another big milestone. A 61st Fighter Squadron four-ship successfully conducted the first-ever flyover during the 2015 Pro Bowl.

A few months later, the 56th FW officially began training new F-35 pilots when the first student, Pleus, flew the Wing's first training sortie. While a big deal for Luke, the flight brought Pleus back to his roots.

His very first F-16 flight was in a 61st Fighter Squadron jet assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing, when the Wing was assigned to MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla. His first F-35 flight was in a 61st Fighter Squadron jet assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing here at Luke.

"This is another step forward for Luke, the 56th Fighter Wing, and our Air Force," Pleus said. "The F-35 is going to be the backbone of the Air Force's fighter fleet for decades to come and Luke will play a vital role in producing the world's greatest, most lethal F-35 pilots."

A few weeks later, Luke made history again by becoming the fastest F-35 wing to reach 1,000 sorties in the Department of Defense.

In May, pilot training class began for the F-35 which included two F-16 Fighting Falcon instructor pilots and two A-10 Warthog instructor pilots. Days later, Luke announced its new mission statement, officially including the F-35.

"Beginning today the mission of Luke Air Force Base is simple - train the world's greatest F-35 and F-16 fighter pilots," Pleus said.

As 2015 came to a close, Luke issued its first Generation III helmet, the Norwegian and Italian Air Forces arrived and began flying as partner nations, the F-35 competed in its first load competition and Luke announced the first-ever F-35 Heritage Flight Program.



Brig. Gen. Scott Pleus, 56th Fighter Wing commander, flew his final flight in an F-35 Lightning II June 27, 2016.

"The F-35 will be the backbone of the USAF fighter fleet and represents the future for the U.S., our partners and allies," Pleus said. "Being a part of these heritage flights provides a unique insight into the past and the future."

Pleus' final six months began with Luke receiving its 34th jet and the F-35 program reaching 3000 sorties. A few months later, a Luke F-35 dropped its first munition, signaling another huge step toward Initial operational capability.

"We were able to execute one of the primary missions of this multi-role fighter and successfully employ air-to-ground weapons," said Lt. Col. Gregory Frana, 62nd Fighter Squadron commander. "As we execute the mission of training the world's greatest F-35 pilots it is critical we make our training as realistic as possible."

Pleus' tenure saw Luke AFB go from two to 39 F-35s. Luke is scheduled to have six fighter squadrons and 144 F-35s by 2024. In the next few years, 10 countries are planning to conduct F-35 training at Luke, this will include, Turkey, Netherlands, Denmark, Canada, Israel, Japan and South Korea. Australia, Norway and Italy are already training here.

"We will continue to add all our other partner nations over the next few years as their airplanes start to roll off the assembly line," Pleus said. "We will continue to grow and create this international coalition."

It takes thousands of Airmen, both on and off the flightline, to support the mission of training the world's best F-35 pilots. Pleus is proud to have watched his team actively take on this new mission and drive it forward into the future.

"We've taken tremendous steps forward the last two years developing the Joint Strike Fighter program and made history as we hit important milestones for the F-35," Pleus said. "From training our first class of F-35 student pilots, to welcoming new international partners at Luke, the hard work and ingenuity of our Airmen and the overwhelming support of the community has made these successes possible. Thanks to all the people who come to work each and every day just to make this mission happen, there is nothing that keeps me up at night."

Pleus will pass the guidon over to Brig. Gen. Brook Leonard, senior military assistant to the secretary of the Air Force, on July 13, 2016. Leonard will carry on the task Pleus began, training the world's greatest F-35 pilots.