



F-35 Lightning II Program

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AETC DECLARES EGLIN READY FOR F-35 TRAINING

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AFNS) -- Following an independent evaluation of Eglin's capability to conduct F-35A Lightning II pilot training, Air Education and Training Command announced Dec. 17 that the 33rd Fighter Wing can do so starting January 2013.

"The preliminary results provided by the Joint Operational Test Team show the F-35A aircraft and its pilot training and sustainment systems, are robust enough to conduct the planned pilot transition and instructor upgrade courses," said Air Education and Training Command commander, Gen. Edward A. Rice Jr.

AETC will initiate syllabus training in order to meet Air Force-defined requirements. A deliberate process will be used that continues to validate the training system's effectiveness through advancing training blocks as they are made available by the military's F-35 Program Office and Lockheed Martin.

The Operational Utility Evaluation, which started Sept. 10 and was slated to last 65 days, encompassed intensive classroom and simulator training along with six flights, for four primary and two backup upgrading student pilots.

With favorable conditions to include "good weather, an accomplished maintenance team and talented instructors to train the pilots, the OUE process lasted only 46 training days," said Col. Andrew Toth, 33rd Fighter Wing commander, an F-35A instructor pilot who spearheads the joint and international F-35 efforts at Eglin.

"You are here making a lasting impression on how the team will execute F-35 both flying and maintenance training over the next 50 years," he said during conversations to wing members following the successful OUE.

During the OUE, experienced pilots transitioned from the F-16 and A-10 aircraft, to the world's first multi-role stealth fighter. Two pilots, Maj. John Wilson and Maj. Matthew Johnston were from Eglin's 58th Fighter Squadron and two, Lt. Col. Brian O'Neill and Maj. Joseph Scholtz and were from operational test units at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., and Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

"Their performances were superb... that smile each student had after landing his first flight showed they were well prepared and the jet was easy to fly just as I had experienced with my first flight," said Lt. Col. Lee Kloos, 58th Fighter Squadron commander, who is charged with overseeing the squadron's daily flying operations. He is also the first non-developmental test pilot to fly the F-35.

The OUE was initiated by the Joint Strike Fighter Program Executive Officer based in Wash. D.C. and was intended to best arm the AETC commander with comprehensive data from an independent source so Rice could decide how to proceed with future F-35A pilot training at Eglin.

"The OUE showed the men and women at Eglin are ready," said Rice. "I'm very proud of both those in uniform and the contracted support who put in years of hard work. The culmination of those labors was successfully demonstrating the Integrated Training Center can conduct safe and effective flying operations in addition to academic training."

Training is slated to begin Jan. 7 with four 58th Fighter Squadron pilots and two operational test pilots.

The focus of the OUE evaluation team was on the ability to conduct pilot training but leadership agree they couldn't do it without their maintainers.

"The maintainers are the backbone of the flight operations. Had they not performed the way they did, we could not have finished the OUE about two weeks ahead of schedule," said Toth pointing to his skilled team in the 58th Aircraft Maintenance Unit and Lockheed Martin contracted logistics support.

With RFT declared, the wing's integrated training center gets closer to running at full capacity of 100 military pilot students a year along with the 2,100 maintenance students.

"We look forward to 2013 as we integrate the Navy's 'Grim Reapers' and F-35C into our flying operations along with our international partners, the Dutch and UK. The pace of operations will not slow as we continue to grow and we are ready for the new challenges next year will bring to wing personnel and it's F-35 Integrated Training Center."

Approximately 36 Air Force pilots are expected to go through the training program next year.

"The team at Eglin went through a rigorous process to lead the way for F-35A training. We look forward to starting off the new year with more history in the making as they put the JSF Integrated Training Center to task to provide a world class training program," said Rice.