



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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## NELLIS PILOTS TAKE FIRST STEP TOWARD F-35 OPERATIONAL TESTING

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**EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AFNS)** -- Two officers from the operational test community are among the six pilots in the first F-35 Lightning II pilot training course after an Air Education and Training Command decision to start training here in January.

Lt. Col. Benjamin Bishop, the 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron director of operations, is one of the students who flew their first sortie in March. He will transition his F-15E Strike Eagle warfighting skills to the F-35 before he returns to Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., next month.



Airman 1st Class Lance Colbert gives a thumbs-up to the pilot and ground crew prior to marshalling out the F-35A Lightning II March 6, 2013, at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. Colbert is a crew chief with the 33rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo/Samuel King Jr.)

"It's exciting, an honor to be a part of the future of airpower," he said. "The aircraft performed as I expected. It's a different feel and a different aircraft to get used to but both are easy to fly. Like any new aircraft, it's a different system to learn and I'm getting used to the basic maneuvers."

According to Nellis AFB officials, four F-35s will begin arriving soon. The 422nd TES will add the F-35A to its list of aircraft they execute command-directed operational test and evaluation for like the A/OA-10 Thunderbolt II, F-15C Eagle, F-15E, F-16CM Fighting Falcon and F-22A Raptor hardware, software, and weapons upgrades prior to combat Air Force release. The squadron conducts tactics development, foreign materiel exploitation and special access programs to optimize system combat capability.

"We will develop the tactics and technical procedures for the F-35 and how it fits in the bigger airpower picture for the U.S.," said Bishop about the work ahead of him after graduating here leading OT for the fifth generation aircraft.

Capt. Brad Matherne is the other 422nd TES student transitioning to the joint strike fighter and he will return to Nellis AFB to lead the new F-35 division. The structure in their organization has a division for the five other aircraft.

Like other students at the F-35 pilot training course in the 33rd Fighter Wing's Academic Training Center, Bishop began his temporary duty here with an orientation to the world of the joint strike fighter and custom fitting for the high-tech helmet.

"I feel like I'm back," Bishop said during his first week at Eglin AFB. "It's a smooth transition."

He had been temporarily stationed here before with the 85th Test and Evaluation Squadron at the 53rd Wing.

"The academics section focused on the basic system of the aircraft and how it works - the hydraulics, electrical systems and avionics," said Bishop who had no exposure to the syllabus before coming to Eglin AFB.

The first half of F-35 pilot training courses remain in the classroom and virtual environment at the ATC until the pilots are ready to step to the aircraft for the first time. On the flightline, they are required to taxi the aircraft and fly six sorties

before completing their training. Combined in-class and in-air time is approximately three months.

Bishop's classmates, who are stationed at the 33rd FW, have been a part of the team building up the F-35 integrated training center and inevitably had more exposure to the syllabus before the first official class started.

"The simulators are our real success story," said Lt. Col. William Betts, 33rd Operations Support Squadron commander who has been on the initial cadre team since 2009. "It's refreshing to hear others say it is just like flying the F-35 (once they complete the first flight)."

Bishop echoed the same high fidelity of the full mission simulator here and said there is no comparison, especially when remembering his experience learning to fly the Strike Eagle.

"During my transition to F-15E, the simulator was like a black and white T.V. screen hooked up to a cockpit," he said. "It shows how far we've come in (pilot) training. It's humbling for me to be around this world class environment."

When Bishop returns to Nellis AFB, he will hone those flight hours as a student and develop a plan for his squadron to begin demonstrating the F-35's combat capabilities as software becomes available.

ACC's OT community has already paved the way for Bishop's team by standing up a unit at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., where developmental test of the aircraft continues concurrently in the joint strike fighter program. He was able to greet three pilots from that unit in the ATC halls as they arrived in March to be a part of the second class. This pace should continue for the 33rd FW throughout 2013 with an estimate of 36 pilots graduating the course by the end of year.

ACC was able to get in on the Air Force's acquisition life cycle early to build their expertise with the aircraft by sending operational test pilots through the first few courses at Eglin AFB. As the Air Force's declaration authority for F-35A Initial Operational Capability, the command will make a decision based on achieving sufficient levels of readiness in both capability and capacity.

Specific criteria established by the commander of ACC include the ability to conduct basic close-air support, interdiction, and suppression/destruction of enemy air defense missions, with the targeting, payload, and other performance characteristics that entails.

There is currently no specific time frame identified for anticipated IOC.

In July 2011, an Air Force Record of Decision proposed basing 36 F-35 fighter aircraft at Nellis AFB between 2012 and 2020; 12 jets for operational testing /force development evaluation, 24 for weapon school training. Flight activities will occur at the base and the Nevada Test and Training Range.