



F-35 Lightning II Program

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FIRST INTERNATIONAL STUDENT-PILOT FLIES F-35

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. - The first international student aviator at the 33rd Fighter Wing, training to be an F-35B Lightning II instructor pilot, completed his first sortie in the joint strike fighter here March 19.

United Kingdom Royal Air Force Squadron Leader Frankie Buchler flew with Marine Fighter Attack Training Squadron-501.

"There were no surprises, the jet was fun to fly and the flight went as expected," said Buchler. "The ground school training package at the Academic Training Center with the flight simulators prepared me for smooth flying."

The ATC is part of the F-35 Integrated Training Center hosted by the 33rd FW. It is the hub for U.S. and international partner operators and maintainers of the joint strike fighter.

"We couldn't have picked a better spring day on the beautiful Emerald Coast to set another milestone for the F-35 program," said Col. Andrew Toth, the 33rd FW commander. "Frankie and the entire team at Eglin continue to make great strides in establishing the foundation of formal maintenance and pilot training for our services and partner nations."

Marine Capt. Daniel Flatley was Buchler's instructor pilot who flew wingman in another F-35B during the late afternoon sortie.

Watching Buchler's technique in the traffic pattern over the base was key along with him getting familiarized with the jet, he said.

"It was a clean flight ... he's a very experienced aviator who took to the F-35 naturally," said Flatley.

It takes ten flight hours, or about six to seven sorties, for a student pilot transitioning from other aircraft to become a qualified F-35 pilot. Buchler's last time flying was a year ago, coming from a background with the Sepecat Jaguar and Eurofighter Typhoon.

Wing Commander Jon Millington, the senior UK officer at the 33rd FW, and a handful of British maintainers training within the Marine squadron were on the flight line to witness the historic event for both countries.

The UK team is fully integrated in the Marine unit and flying each other's jets interchangeably according to the vision of VMFAT-501 commander, Lt. Col. David Berke. In the near future, Marine pilots can be trained by UK pilots.

Buchler is scheduled to complete his training sorties by early April and is excited about the way ahead for the joint strike fighter.

"The potential I see in this aircraft is all the sensors for information sharing. The F-35 has enormous potential and will be a great compliment to our Typhoons," said the UK pilot.

His team is hopeful for the future when a team of 12 Royal Air Force and Navy maintainers and UK two pilots transition from Eglin to Edwards Air Force Base Calif., to perform operational testing on the jets in 2014.

"In 2018, the plan is for UK's F-35 team to achieve initial operating capability in a land-based role and aboard the future HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier in 2020."

Until then, the British element will continue to grow their skills in learning to maintain and fly the Lightning II.

Their next milestones in the program include a third UK F-35B to be delivered to Eglin this spring and the second British pilot's first flight in two weeks.