



F-35 Lightning II Program

Public Affairs Release – 2013 05 21

F - 35 A I N S T R U C T O R P I L O T S Q U A L I F Y I N A E R I A L R E F U E L I N G

by Maj. Karen Roganov
33rd Fighter Wing Public Affairs

EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. (AFNS) -- The initial cadre of F-35A Lightning II instructor pilots qualified in aerial refueling last week, adding another capability for student pilot training at the 33rd Fighter Wing's F-35 Integrated Training Center here.

"Eleven pilots had flown 14 refueling missions across the boom with the help of a KC-135 Stratotanker based here all last week," said Col. Andrew Toth, the commander of the 33rd Fighter Squadron. "Prior to this, only test pilots had done so."

The pilots discovered refueling the F-35 was an easy process, given the stability of the jet in flight and the preparation they received flying aerial refueling missions during ground school with the high-fidelity F-35 full-mission simulator.

Pilots have said there were times they forgot they were in a simulator, given its realistic feel amplified by a 360-degree view of the air and ground projected around the pilot.

"This was the easiest tanking event I've had in my career," said Toth, who besides spearheading efforts for three branches of service and internationals here is also an F-35 instructor pilot. "The aircraft is very stable and smooth, making it easier to connect with the boom than I had experienced with flying other weapons systems."

Toth said he foresees the new lieutenants, fresh out of initial pilot training, to have the same positive experience one day as well -- But for now, the seasoned operators and maintainers are carrying the load.

Laying in a pod in the belly of the KC-135, the operator maneuvering the boom to offload gas to formations of fighters chimed in with the same observations about the Lightning II and the pilots' performance.

"He basically parked the aircraft 50-feet behind us at 310 knots," said Staff Sgt. Joe Parker with the 336th Air Refueling Squadron at March Air Reserve Base, Calif.

Parker has refueled about 30 different aircraft, ranging from "F-16 (Fighting Falcon)s to C-5 (Galaxies) and everything in between," in his almost 10-year career. This includes the F-35s performing test missions at Edward Air Force Base, Calif.



An F-35A Lightning II approaches a KC-135 Stratotanker during aerial refueling May 13, 2013, near Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. The initial cadre of Air Force F-35 instructor pilots at the 33rd Fighter Wing recently qualified in aerial refueling for the joint strike fighter. The 33rd FW is responsible for F-35 A/B/C Lightning II pilot and maintainer training for the Marine Corps, the Navy, the Air Force and, in the future, at least eight coalition partners. The KC-135 is assigned to the 336th Air Refueling Squadron, March AFB, Calif. (U.S. Air Force photo/Master Sgt. John Nimmo)

"The F-35 is like a breath of fresh air when they come up to refuel because I know they are going to be an incredibly stable platform in the air refueling envelope," he said.

With the instructor pilots trained, the 58th Fighter Squadron has incorporated the aerial refueling capability into F-35A Student Pilot Class Number 4, which began training May 20, and is anticipated to be complete in approximately two months, Toth said.

Students execute the flying curriculum in the latter month. Those F-35A pilots who have graduated will get top-off training to fly aerial refueling at their unit -- just like the test pilots who recently graduated from Eglin AFB and are assigned to Edwards AFB.

For the future, flying unit members here said they welcome the new capability because they can now train longer and in essence "knock out two training sorties," Toth said.

"A formation can conduct air-to-air combat training, go to the tanker, get gas and conduct an air-to-air or air-to-ground training mission," he said.

Pilots and other aircrew alike seem to be impressed with the expanded training events and the performance of the joint strike fighter.

"It's always a privilege to work with any new airframe," Parker said. "I am fortunate enough to also be a part of F-35 flying."