



F-35 Lightning II Program

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FIRST DUTCH F-35 PILOT TAKES TO SKIES

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EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. -- The first Netherlands pilot took to the skies here in the F-35A Lightning II, making the Netherlands the second partner country to operate the fifth-generation multirole fighter.

Maj. Laurens J.W. Vijge, Royal Netherlands Air Force F-35 Integrated Training Center training lead, completed his first flight after 210 hours of classroom training and 13 flights in the simulators.

"The jet handles great and is very easy to fly," said Vijge. "I could not have been better prepared than I was for this flight, and it's all thanks to the hard work and dedication of people working in the F-35 Academic Training Center."

The Netherlands currently has two aircraft stationed here where they will continue to train pilots for operational testing and evaluation of the aircraft starting 2015. The Netherlands' aircraft and personnel are incorporated into the U.S. Air Force's 58th Fighter Squadron at the 33rd Fighter Wing.

"It was incredible - not only was my first flight in the first Dutch F-35, but I also got to fly this historic mission with Lt. Col. Matthew Renbarger (the 58th FS commander) as my wingman," said Vijge, who is an experienced F-16 pilot with more than 2,500 flying hours. "It was truly amazing to start this day knowing that a lot of people, both in the U.S. as well as back in the Netherlands, have worked very hard to make this possible."

The F-35 is designed to penetrate air defenses and deliver a wide range of precision munitions. This modern, next-generation aircraft brings the added benefits of stealth, increased interoperability with our allies and cost-sharing across U.S. services and partner nations.

"This first flight marks the start of an essential training program our pilots require, and it is a great example of the solid partnership between the Royal Netherlands Air Force and the United States Air Force," said Lt. Col. Albert J. De Smit, Netherlands senior national representative for U.S. F-35 operations.

"The F-35 OT&E will be a cooperative effort with the United States Services and the United Kingdom. This is another example of the cooperative nature of the F-35 program," added De Smit.

The F-35 program completed approximately 7,400 flights and 11,600 hours to date. More than 3,200 flights and 4,250 hours of the F-35 program were completed at Eglin Air Force Base's F-35 Integrated Training Center within the last two years.

The F-35 Lightning II is a fifth-generation fighter, combining advanced stealth with fighter speed and agility, fully fused sensor information, network-enabled operations and advanced sustainment. Three distinct variants of the F-35 will replace the A-10 and F-16 for the U.S. Air Force, the F/A-18 for the U.S. Navy, the F/A-18 and AV-8B Harrier for the U.S. Marine Corps, and a variety of fighters for at least 10 other countries.



Maj. Laurens Vijge, a Royal Netherlands Air Force pilot, makes adjustments while in the seat of an F-35A Lightning II prior to his first flight in the aircraft Dec. 18 at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. Vijge became the first RNLAf pilot to fly the joint strike fighter and the flight marks the first sortie for the RNLAf here. (U.S. Air Force photo/Samuel King Jr.)