



F-35 Lightning II Program

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THE F-35: RESERVISTS START NEW MISSION AT LUKE

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Citizen Airman/June 2014 -- When officials at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, celebrated the arrival of the base's first F-35 Lightning II aircraft with an unveiling ceremony March 14, the occasion signified the beginning of the 69th Fighter Squadron's involvement in an effort to train future pilots of America's newest fifth-generation fighter.

Eventually, 144 F-35s are scheduled to be assigned to Luke in six squadrons, all part of the active-duty 56th Fighter Wing. The base will serve as the F-35 pilot training center for seven partner nations, making it the world's largest fighter pilot training facility.

Air Force Reserve Command's 944th FW, of which the 69th FS is a part, is right in the thick of things, already being involved with the F-16 training mission.

"It's new, it's historic and it's representative of what's going to happen for years to come," Col. Kurt Gallegos, 944th FW commander, said in reference to the F-35. "It's going to be our next-generation fighter, and to be part of it here at the 944th FW is symbolic. A lot of growing pains are going to come along with that, but we've got the personnel and are ready for that new mission, and I'm excited."

With the welcoming of a new aircraft and the beginning of a new training mission also came the arrival of the 69th FS's first F-35 instructor pilot: Maj. Justin "Tang" Robinson. He, along with additional instructor pilots and other Reservists, will work alongside active-duty counterparts in the 56th FW in a classic associate unit situation. The aircraft will belong to the active duty, while the Reserve will provide people to fly and maintain the aircraft.

"It (being selected as the 69th's first instructor pilot) is an honor," Robinson said. "The significance of it is not lost on me. I'm humbled that they would entrust me with being the first one to represent the unit. I'm just hoping I live up to the expectations that the Reserve has of me and represent the Reserve in a favorable light with all the active-duty guys."

For leaders of the 944th FW and 69th FS, picking the first F-35 instructor pilot was a tough decision, considering the vast number of experienced pilots within the squadron. A selection board was formed to consider all of the candidates who volunteered.

"We have a massively talented and experienced F-16 instructor pilot cadre here at Luke," said Lt. Col. Gerry Brown, 69th FS commander. "The average IP has about 2,000 F-16 hours. Every guy who put in for the first IP position, from a talent and ability standpoint, can go fly the F-35 tomorrow."

"What tipped the scale in Robinson's favor was his experience as an operational test pilot up at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. That operational test experience, we felt, was an additional qualification on his resume that helped push him over the edge as the first guy."

Before joining the Reserve, Robinson served on active duty for 11 years. During that time, he had the opportunity to work with the 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron at Nellis, where he was exposed to the F-35 program.

"When I moved here, it was kind of a natural fit being one of the guys who knew a little bit about the program and what was happening," Robinson said. "I was able to move right in and just kind of keep working with the same people I knew at Nellis, Edwards AFB, California, and Eglin AFB, Florida."

"I have about 60 pilots who work here for me, and they are all superstars – great IPs," Gallegos said. "Tang was handpicked: one for his work, two for his personality and three for his background. He's done a great job. He's a Fighter Weapons School graduate. He's very well-respected above and beyond his peers. We are obviously going to pick our



Robinson pilots an F-16 as it escorts the first F-35 to Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, in March. (Jim Hazeltine)

top 1 percent to send off to school initially with our active-duty counterparts. So your first cadre of pilots is always going to be your best and brightest, and that's exactly what Tang brings to the table."

Robinson is appreciative of the opportunity and said he will have ample time to give back and contribute to the development of the F-35 program.

"I'm young for a Reserve dude, so I've got time for them to get their money's worth out of me in this new airframe," he said. "I'm excited. I think it's an awesome opportunity. A lot of guys only stay in one airframe their entire career. That's awesome, too, but I think going out and learning a new airframe and helping to bring it online offers the kind of challenge that is really appropriate for me at this point."

Having AFRC involved in the F-35 pilot training mission from the very beginning is important, Robinson said.

"I think it shows a commitment to TFI (total force integration) in general and, also, some wisdom on their (the active-duty's) part," he said. "I was on active duty for 11 years, and I had a different job every year and would move from one thing to the next to the next. There really wasn't much continuity. It was great for broadening my experience base, but in terms of the shop and the job I was doing, a place like this would really benefit from continuity within the organization."

Active-duty instructor pilots generally cycle through every three years. With that level of turnover, along with deployments being mixed in, oftentimes knowledge is not passed down, and the next guy starts at ground zero, he said.

"With Reservists providing more stability and continuity, we don't have that problem," Robinson said. "The knowledge continues to grow."

Brown said that regardless of their current airframe, Reserve F-16 instructor pilots will prove to be valuable assets because many of the lessons they learned in the Fighting Falcon will apply to the new airframe.

"A lot of those lessons and that ability to teach somebody a new skill in a fighter aircraft, they will carry forward in the F-35," he said. "So instead of those people leaving for a different assignment or getting out of the Air Force completely, we are actually able to keep them for several more years, building upon that experience base and maintaining continuity."

Gaining the F-35 mission will lead to growth for the 944th FW and bring back many jobs that were lost as a result of the 2007 base realignment and closure actions, when the 302nd FS was deactivated. The 302nd was later reactivated at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska.

"We lost the airplanes and a lot of people," Gallegos said. "Right now, we are starting to bring in maintainers. We are probably going to start off with 132 in the next year or year and a half. Then, from there, we are looking to shoot up to 200 to 250 Reserve maintainers. They will start working on the F-16s initially and then transfer to the F-35 down the road. We'll have close to 250 billets in the next four or five years."

While things begin to build up, Robinson is preparing for his school date later this year as many of his fellow Reservists anxiously anticipate seeing him fly the F-35.

"I can't wait to walk out and shake his hand when he climbs out of an F-35 for his first flight here at Luke," Brown said. "That will be a momentous occasion for the 69th FS. That's the next game-changer. He'll be wearing a 944th patch as he climbs out of an F-35, and he's based here. It'll be pretty special."