



F-35 Lightning II Program

Public Affairs Release – 2016 02 02

LUKE PILOT FLIES 500TH HOUR IN F-35

A 61st Fighter Squadron pilot made history Feb. 2 as the first Luke Air Force Base pilot to achieve 500 flight hours in an F-35 Lightning II.

Lt. Col. Matthew Hayden, also the 56th Fighter Wing chief of safety, achieved this milestone flying his 270th sortie, a routine training mission.

“This is a testament to Luke and all the work we’ve done here to build up our experience and operations,” Hayden said. “This is a reflection of our efforts to set up a high-quality training program for new pilots.”

Hayden is one of the most experienced F-35 pilots in the world, and has flown and instructed new pilots at Luke AFB since the inception of its program.

“The (61st FS) Top Dogs are incredibly lucky to have an F-35 instructor pilot who has been with the program since the beginning flying with us on a daily basis,” said Lt. Col. Aaron Jelinek, the 61st FS director of operations. “Lt. Col. Hayden’s depth of knowledge when it comes to both F-35 systems and tactics add incredible value to squadron operations each and every day.”

As Luke AFB transitions from its mission of training F-16 Fighting Falcon pilots, maintainers and support specialists to training equivalent Airmen in operation of the new F-35 platform, Hayden’s 500th hour in the air marks a significant leap of progress in the development of the base’s F-35 program.

“When our most experienced instructor pilot only has 500 hours in the plane, it goes to show the F-35 program is still young,” Jelinek said. “However, it also shows that we are reaching a point where operations are normalizing, and we are able to transition our syllabus from training initial cadre to training less experienced fighter pilots.”

Luke Airmen are among the first in a global generation of pilots to fly the F-35, and will continue to reach milestones such as this for the duration of the aircraft’s development.

“The fabulous thing about this is that there are a lot of guys who are right behind me, who are really close to getting the same kind of milestone in their flying experience,” Hayden said.

As today’s pilots become more experienced with the F-35 platform, they position themselves to become the instructors and mentors of future generations of pilots flying more advanced versions of the fighter jet as they are developed and produced.

“As we build our cadre of instructors here, they’ll be able to look back at their experience flying the airplane and have credibility and a solid background that they can use to teach their students,” Hayden said.



Lt. Col. Matthew Hayden, the 56th Fighter Wing chief of safety and pilot attached to the 61st Fighter Squadron, inspects his F-35 Lightning II before entering the cockpit and beginning takeoff procedures Feb. 2, 2016, at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. Hayden became the first Luke AFB pilot to achieve 500 flight hours in an F-35. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Ridge Shan)