

Dept. of Military Affairs: 115th Fighter Wing gains firsthand F-35 knowledge during Lockheed Martin

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FORT WORTH, Texas — In 2017, the Wisconsin Air National Guard's 115th Fighter Wing in Madison, Wisconsin was selected to be the second operational Air National Guard unit to fly the F-35 Lightning II.

Since that time, the base has been busy divesting their equipment, constructing new buildings and preparing for the first F-35 aircraft arrival in early May.

Much like the 115th, the team at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics has been producing roughly 158 F-35s on the manufacturing line per year, several of which are scheduled to arrive at the 115th Fighter Wing in 2023.

As the first arrival date draws near, a handful of Wisconsin Air National Guardsmen involved in the aircraft conversion were able to tour Lockheed's manufacturing facility, witness the beginning phases of what will be 115th aircraft and even sign one of the aircraft.

"From the beginning of this visit, it was clear how different the F-35 is from the F-16 and other 4th gen aircraft," said Col. Willa Panzer, the commander of the 115th Maintenance Group. "I think it is now easier to comprehend how our roles need to change to adapt to a new weapons system, new maintenance methods, new supply system and new government-contractor relationships."

While the maintenance group is nearly doubling their manpower, the F-35 requirements will bring significant change to many of the sections across the base.

"Understanding that with a new weapons system comes a new supply model is one

of the biggest takeaways for F-35 logistics,” said Lt. Col. Meghan Robbins, the 115th Logistics Readiness Squadron commander. “Adjusting to that is going to require an open mind and a lot of trust in a new system that hopefully proves itself in short order.”

For others visiting the facility it meant more than just getting first-hand knowledge from the manufacturer on capabilities, requirements, and readiness.

“My granddad used to work at the same factory back when they were making F-16s,” said Tech. Sgt. Scott Catlin, the conversion infrastructure Big Cat assigned to the 115th Communications Flight. “Our F-16s came from this facility and now our F-35s will be coming from this facility, so the legacy of that was very interesting for me.”

As the 115th Fighter Wing legacy moves forward, Airmen assigned to the wing during the conversion gain insight into a process that many Airmen will never experience.

“This is a group representative of our future leaders and having them receive this knowledge and take it back home is key to our future as a 5th generation fighter unit,” said Col. Bart Van Roo, the commander of the 115th Fighter Wing. “We truly appreciate all the time Lockheed has dedicated to our team.”