

National Guard: F-16 unit performs final inspection amid F-35 transition

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MADISON, Wis. — As the 115th Fighter Wing continues its transition from the F-16 Fighting Falcon to the F-35 Lighting II, Airmen on base find themselves doing the jobs they have grown to love for the very last time.

Airmen performing phase maintenance worked their final inspection on an F-16 during the My 13-14 drill weekend.

“This particular jet just got back from deployment,” said Master Sgt. Tyler Graff, a phase dock work leader assigned to the 115th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. “It didn’t have as many items on it to inspect, so we finished it ahead of time.”

During a phase inspection, the jet is broken down into 12 different areas and each area is inspected individually. The Airmen check for chafing, cracks and missing or broken parts. They then fix or replace any issues they find, and send the jet back to the flight line as soon as it is safe for flight.

“The amount of time a jet is down for depends on what we find during the inspection,” Graff said. “A jet could be down for three weeks or two months — it depends how the inspection goes.”

Tech. Sgt. Tyler Gates, a tactical aircraft maintenance specialist assigned to the 115th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron’s phase dock, is one of the Airmen on Graff’s team.

“Master Sgt. Graff has been my trainer since I got here eight years ago,” Gates said. “It’s been great learning from him and getting better exposure on the jet.”

Gates was young when he determined this was the career he wanted.

"I knew I wanted to wrench ever since I was 15 or 16 years old," Gates said. "I took a tour of this base and a couple different shops, but this one intrigued me the most. Being able to dig in and learn the internals of the aircraft and actually be a systems expert in some of the components was right up my alley."

With approximately 20 people in the phase hangar, their experience levels vary.

"There are people like me in the shop who've been here for eight or nine years and then others that have only been in the shop for a year or two tops," Gates said. "Knowing the end is coming as we transition is a little bittersweet. Am I happy to work a new aircraft? Yes. But it's also kind of sad to see the expertise and experience I've learned growing with everyone I work with kind of just go."

Graff feels the same way.

"A lot of the people here now had just joined when I got to this unit, so they were fresh to the jet," said Graff. "It's been kind of cool to watch them grow and teach them and train them. We work so well as a team. It's going to be hard to see that disappear."

As doors close, new doors open. Since there are not any phase requirements for the F-35, several of the phase Airmen will be transitioning to the flight line.

"I'll be going out to Luke Air Force Base for three months to do initial cadre training," Graff said. "Then I'll return to train the other Airmen. It'll be nice to learn something new since I've been working on the same jet for almost 10 years."

As they part ways in their new endeavors, their training and learning will continue.

"It's always been fun for me to see the new people come in, teaching them from the ground up how to do this and watching them grow," Gates said. "That's something that we'll continue to experience, in a different way, with the new jet. It should be a lot of fun."