

Dept. of Military Affairs: Wisconsin Air National Guard receives first F-35s

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MADISON, Wis. — The Wisconsin Air National Guard's 115th Fighter Wing received their first F-35 Lightning II aircraft April 25, making it only the second Air National Guard unit with the advanced fighter.

The fifth-generation fighters flown by pilots Capt. John Lorbiecki, Maj. Jacob Jerzewski, Maj. Joe Pavela and Lt. Col. Michael Koob were greeted by members of the 115th Fighter Wing, friends, and state and community leaders as they landed for the first time at Truax Field.

"It's with great joy and obligation that we accept this challenge today of becoming the second Air National Guard fighter wing with the F-35," said Col. Bart Van Roo, the 115th Fighter Wing commander. "As we take on this new challenge, with so much national and international importance, we look forward to working with you all to continue to maximize what we bring to our communities for decades to come."

While Burlington, Vermont's 158th Fighter Wing was the first Air National Guard unit to receive the F-35 in 2019, being selected as the second Air National Guard unit was no easy feat — the result of an effort more than 10 years in the making.

"Our team effort was built on three pillars," said Brig. Gen. David May, Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Air. "The stellar and well-deserved reputation of the 115th Fighter Wing with years of great leadership and vision got us in the game, the airspace and ranges of Volk Field, Hardwood and Fort McCoy rounded out our unique training complex, and the 128th Air Refueling Wing ensured ready support for extended training and real-world missions. The three Wisconsin air bases were a

potent combination of talent, will and desire for us to be selected for conversion.”

With the first F-35 aircraft arrival at Truax Field, the Wisconsin Air National Guard is now part of a vast fleet of F-35s across the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps as well as many partners and allies.

“We find ourselves now in an age where national borders are no longer recognized, and the international order as we know it is being tested,” said Maj. Gen. Paul Knapp, Wisconsin’s adjutant general. “As we engage in this new era of great power competition, the ability of this fighter wing to deliver reliable F-35 combat airpower is vital to the defense of our nation.”

While the citizen-Airmen and all-voluntary military force of the 115th Fighter Wing are prepared to deploy anywhere, at any time to support the community, state and the national defense of this nation, they would not have been able to convert to the advanced fighter without the help of the local community.

“To the Badger Air Community Council, the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, our hometown construction companies, community leaders and of course Lockheed Martin, thank you and congratulations for being a part of this effort,” May said. “You’ve had an enormous impact on the security of our great nation and the preservation of peace.

“To those less than excited about the arrival of the F-35, know that we will continue to be responsible and honest members of the community,” May continued. “The community where we work, live, worship and raise our families as faithful Wisconsinites as we continue the proud legacy of Truax Field that started over seven decades ago.”

While the ceremony’s main focus was on the future mission of the 115th Fighter Wing, Maj. Gen. Knapp took a moment to honor the great legacy of the Wisconsin National Guard and the 115th Fighter Wing.

“Today marks yet another achievement for the 115th Fighter Wing and I have every faith in your ability to execute your mission and keep the skies of our state and nation safe,” Knapp said. “We’re 386 years and counting of being ‘Always Ready, Always There,’ and I’m so proud and honored to be standing here before you today knowing that the best is yet to come.”