

61 FIGHTER SQUADRON



MISSION

Training for the 61 FS is a standard syllabus to get students their first look at the F-35 and prepare them to serve with active duty units. 'Top Dogs' mission statement is to 'Train world-class F-35 pilots.

LINEAGE

61 Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) constituted, 20 Nov 1940
Activated, 15 Jan 1941
Redesignated 61 Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) (Twin Engine), 31 Jan 1942
Redesignated 61 Fighter Squadron (Twin Engine), 15 May 1942
Redesignated 61 Fighter Squadron, 1 Jun 1942
Redesignated 61 Fighter Squadron, Single Engine, 28 Feb 1944
Inactivated, 18 Oct 1945
Activated, 1 May 1946
Redesignated 61 Fighter Squadron, Jet Propelled, 24 Apr 1947
Redesignated 61 Fighter Squadron, Jet, 14 Jun 1948
Redesignated 61 Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 20 Jan 1950
Discontinued and inactivated, 25 Jul 1960
Redesignated 61 Tactical Fighter Squadron, 12 May 1975
Activated, 30 Jun 1975
Redesignated 61 Tactical Fighter Training Squadron, 1 Jan 1980
Redesignated 61 Fighter Squadron, 1 Nov 1991
Inactivated, 12 Aug 1993

Activated, 1 Apr 1994

STATIONS

Savannah AB, GA, 15 Jan 1941
Charlotte AAB, NC, 26 May 1941
Charleston Muni Aprt, SC, 10 Dec 1941
Bridgeport Muni Aprt, CT, 15 Jan–27 Dec 1942
Kings Cliffe, England, 12 Jan 1943
Horsham St Faith, England, 5 Apr 1943
Halesworth, England, 9 Jul 1943
Boxted, England, 19 Apr 1944
Little Walden, England, c. 15 Sep–11 Oct 1945
Camp Kilmer, NJ, 16–18 Oct 1945
Selfridge Field (later, AFB), MI, 1 May 1946–25 Jul 1953
Ernest Harmon AFB, Newfoundland, 6 Aug 1953
Truax Field, WI, 17 Oct 1957–25 Jul 1960
MacDill AFB, FL, 30 Jun 1975–12 Aug 1993
Luke AFB, AZ, 1 Apr 1994

DEPLOYED STATIONS

Myrtle Beach, SC, Oct–Nov 1941

ASSIGNMENTS

56 Pursuit (later, 56 Fighter) Group, 15 Jan 1941–18 Oct 1945
56 Fighter (later, 56 Fighter Interceptor) Group, 1 May 1946
4708 Defense Wing, 6 Feb 1952
575 Air Defense Group, 16 Feb 1953
64 Air Division, 6 Aug 1953
4731 Air Defense Group, 1 Apr 1957
327 Fighter Group, 15 Oct 1957–25 Jul 1960
56 Tactical Fighter (later, 56 Tactical Training; 56 Fighter) Wing, 30 Jun 1975
56 Operations Group, 1 Nov 1991–12 Aug 1993
56 Operations Group, 1 Apr 1994

WEAPON SYSTEMS

P–35, 1941
P–36, 1941
P–39, 1941–1942
P–40, 1941–1942
P–47D, 1942, 1943–1945
P–47, 1946–1947
P–51, 1946–1947
P (later, F)–80, 1947–1950
F–86, 1950–1951

F-94, 1951-1954
F-89H, 1954
F-102A, 1957-1960
F-16A, 1980
F-16B, 1980
F-16C, 1994
F-16D, 1994
F-35

COMMANDERS

Unkn, 15 Jan 1941-unkn
Cpt Merle C. Eby, Feb 1943
Maj Loren G. McCollom, 27 Feb 1943
Maj Francis S. Gabreski, 9 Jun 1943
Maj James C. Stewart, 12 Jan 1944
LTC Francis S. Gabreski, 13 Apr 1944
Maj Gordon E. Baker, 20 Jul 1944
Maj Donovan F. Smith, 26 Sep 1944
Maj James R. Carter, 10 Jan 1945
LTC Gordon E. Baker, 3 May 1945-unkn
Unkn, 1-2 May 1946
Maj Donovan F. Smith, 3 May 1946
LTC John W. Gaff Jr., May 1947-unkn
LTC William D. Ritchie, by Jan 1948
Maj Ralph A. Johnson, by Dec 1948
LTC Albert S. Kelly, by Jul 1949
LTC Wallace B. Frank, 20 Jun 1951
Maj Warren S. Patterson, c. Jul 1952
LTC Max E. Wolfson, Dec 1952-unkn
Maj Phillip A. Rand, 6 Dec 1954-unkn
Maj Phillip Coady, c. 1957
LTC Lassiter Thompson, by Jan 1958
Maj William B. Myers Jr., c. 15 Jan 1959
LTC Lassiter Thompson, c. 15 Apr 1959
LTC John W. Singleton, Sep 1959
Maj Clay E. Herbst, c. Apr 1960
Maj Wilbur C. Schneider, c. May-25 Jul 1960
LTC James C. Woods, 30 Jun 1975
LTC Richard G. Fero, 1 Jun 1977
LTC Michael E. Ryan, 27 Apr 1979
LTC Milan Zimer, 20 Mar 1981
LTC Frederic E. McCoy II, 20 Aug 1982
LTC Edward B. Carter, 23 Nov 1983
LTC Harry C. Morgan, Nov 1985

LTC Dale C. Hill, Dec 1987
LTC Nicholas Holoviak, 14 Jul 1989
LTC Ralph B. Brown, 3 May 1991
LTC Donald B. Ellis, 10 Nov 1992-12 Aug 1993
LTC Ronald D. Woodward, 1 Apr 1994
LTC Thomas W. Hyde, 11 Aug 1994
LTC Daniel W. Jordan III, 11 Aug 1995
LTC Robert J. Locke, 7 Mar 1997
LTC Michael J. Carter, 26 Mar 1999
LTC Randel A. Lane, 6 Nov 2000
LTC Patrick W. Christopherson, 11 Jun 2002
LTC Jeffrey A. Hausemann, 30 Mar 2004
LTC Douglas R. Miller, 24 May 2006
LTC James Sears, 12 Jul 2007

HONORS

Service Streamers

World War II American Theater

Campaign Streamers

World War II

Air Offensive, Europe

Normandy

Northern France

Rhineland

Ardennes-Alsace

Central Europe

Air Combat, EAME Theater

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Distinguished Unit Citations

ETO, 20 Feb–9 Mar 1944

Holland, 18 Sep 1944

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards

1 Jul 1977–1 Jan 1979

1 Jul 1980–30 Jun 1982

1 Jun 1984–31 May 1986

1 May 1987–30 Apr 1989

1 May 1989–30 Apr 1990

1 May 1990–30 Apr 1991

1 Jul 1994-30 Jun 1996
1 Jul 1996-30 Jun 1998
1 Jul 1998-30 Jun 2000
1 Jul 2001-30 Jun 2003
1 Jun 2003-30 Jun 2005
1 Jul 2005-30 Jun 2006
1 Jul 2006-30 Jun 2007
1 Jul 2007-30 Jun 2008

EMBLEM



On a white disc, the caricatured face and head of an English Bull Dog, left eye closed, face tan, trimmed black expression depicting determination, wearing a brown aviator's helmet, ear phones black, and goggles proper, holding a golden orange lightning bolt in mouth, as per record drawing. **SIGNIFICANCE:** The bull dog represents the squadron's fighting spirit, while his expression indicates that he is ready to engage in combat. His flying gear signifies that the squadron is always on alert, and nothing escapes its sight. The Thunderbolt depicts the type of aircraft flown by the squadron.



On a Yellow disc, the caricatured face and head of an English bulldog, left eye closed, face Tan, trimmed Black, expression depicting determination, wearing a Brown aviator's helmet, ear phones Black, and goggles proper, holding a Golden Orange lightning bolt in mouth. The

emblem features a caricatured English Bulldog's head with pilot's helmet and goggles. The lightning bolt clenched in its mouth represents the aircraft type flown, namely the P-47 Thunderbolt.

Approved, 15 Sep 1943.

MOTTO

Once a Top Dog Always a Top Dog
Top Dogs

OPERATIONS

The 61 Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) was constituted Nov. 20, 1940. It was activated Jan. 15, 1941, in Savannah, Ga., training in P-39 Airacobra and P-40 Warhawks. The 61 later moved to Charlotte, N.C., in May 1941 and again to Charleston, S.C., in December 1941, to help defend the East Coast.

On November 13th 1942, 63rd FS pilots Roger Dyer and Harold Comstock are tasked with checking out a new type of radio mast due to structural failures of the original type during high speed dives. From 35,000 feet and flying at over 400 mph the pair dive the P-47s and almost immediately both aircraft's control surfaces become jammed due to the effects of compressibility on the airframe. It's only when the aircraft reach the thicker air at lower altitude that the pilots are able to attain normal control of the aircraft. During the dives the cockpit speed indicators had shown a maximum speed of 725 mph. Faster than the speed of sound! While the actual speed was probably more in the region of 500mph, the Republic press office take full advantage of the opportunity to declare that the P-47 Thunderbolt had broken the sound barrier.

December 1942, the 56th Fighter Group is ordered to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to be ready for the move overseas.

6th January 1943, the 56th Fighter Group personnel are amongst almost 12,000 troops packed on the Cunard liner Queen Elizabeth which has been pressed into service as a high-speed troop transport ship.

12th January 1943, after six days at sea the Queen Elizabeth docks at Gourock in Scotland.

13th January 1943, the 56th Fighter Group arrives at RAF King's Cliffe in Northamptonshire. Due to insufficient accommodation being available the 63rd FS is allocated barrack space at nearby RAF Wittering.

29th March 1943, around this time white recognition bands are ordered to be painted around the P-47's cowling, rudder, and elevators to avoid the Thunderbolts being mistaken for the only other radial engine fighter in Europe, the German FW190. The three squadrons are allocated code letters. The 61 is HV, 62nd LM, and the 63rd UN.

9th June 1943, 61 FS commander Loren McCollom takes up the newly created position of Flying Executive Officer. Col Zemke makes Cpt Francis Gabreski the new squadron commander, deeming him more suitable to take command than the deputy commander due to his earlier combat experience with the RAF.

8th July 1943, The group moves from the comforts of the prewar buildings at Horsham to the new, and still unfinished Station 365 at Halesworth, Suffolk. The enterprising 62nd FS commander David Schilling takes possession of the abandoned High Trees farmhouse and turns it into the squadron headquarters. It soon becomes known as Schilling's Acres. Nearby Holton Hall, which has been standing empty, becomes the Officers' Quarters.

13th January 1944, Major James Stewart takes command of the 61 FS

15th February 1944, In another first for the 56th, the group adopts colored cowlings on its P-47's. Using the old squadron colours, from 1942 the 61 FS cowlings are painted red, 62nd yellow, and 63rd blue. A few weeks later, the red cowling would be adopted by the group as a whole with the squadron colours moving to the rudders.

13th April 1944, Major Gabreski takes command of the 61 FS. James Stewart is transferred to 8th Fighter Command.

20th July 1944, With his bags packed Francis Gabreski is due to leave Boxted, along with James Carter and begin his leave in the USA. The day's mission, a Ramrod to Russelsheim appeals to Gabreski and he decides to fly one more mission. His 166th. After leaving the bombers the 61 FS seek out targets of opportunity and strafe Bassenheim airfield. Streaking low across the airfield Gabreski gets just a little too low and hits the ground with his propeller which results in having to make a belly landing just outside the airfield perimeter. After a short period on the run Gabreski is captured and spends the remainder of hostilities in a POW camp. Gordon Baker takes over command of the 61 FS.

26th September 1944, Donovan Smith assumes command of the 61 FS.

3rd January 1945, The 56th begins to receive the new P-47M model. The 56th is the only group to fly the M model operationally and the group's individuality is furthered by each squadron adopting a unique paint scheme for its aircraft. The 61 FS aircraft wore all black upper surfaces, the 62nd FS aircraft took on a green/grey disruptive pattern while the 63rd FS also decided on a disruptive pattern using two shades of blue. All the aircraft retain unpainted lower surfaces.

5th January 1945, Flying the last mission of his second tour today is 61 FS commander Donovan Smith. James Carter takes over and becomes the last combat commander of the 61 FS. Today's mission also turns out to be Col Schilling's last combat flight.

During January 1945, the 61 FS becomes the first of the group's squadrons to convert to the P-47M. Engine and ignition problems begin to plague the new fighter, preventing the 61 from flying any missions in the M during January and early February. Having transferred out its old D models, the 61 was reliant on using P-47Ds from the other two squadrons.

3rd February 1945, The 62nd FS begins to convert to the P-47M but unlike the 61 it retains some of its D models.

13th March 1945, 61 FS pilots Luther Hines and Richard Tuttle are killed following a collision during a training flight.

During 1943 to 1945, the 61 produced 19 Aces, destroying 248 aircraft in the air and 67.5 aircraft on the ground. It was inactivated October 1945 at Camp Kilmer, NJ and reactivated at Selfridge Field, MI training in P-47's while transitioning to P-51s.

In April 1950, the 61 transitioned to the F-80 Shooting Star and later was the F-86A Sabre. The 61 was inactivated July 25, 1960, at Truax Field, WI flying the F-102 Delta Dagger.

In June 1975, the 61 was reactivated at MacDill AFB, Fla., flying the F-4 Phantom.

In April 1980, the flying mission changed to the F-16A/B. The 61 transitioned in June 1988 to flying the F-16C/D and the squadron was inactivated at MacDill AFB in January 1994.

The squadron was reactivated on April 1, 1994 at Luke AFB, Ariz., replacing the former 314th Fighter Squadron flying the F-16C/D. The squadron's current mission is to train the best F-16 pilots in the world.

Officials at Luke AFB, Ariz., activated the 61 Fighter Squadron, the first of six such units at the base that will train pilots to fly the F-35A strike fighter. The activation ceremony took place on Oct. 25. The unit, dubbed the "Top Dogs," is expected to receive its first F-35A in January; at full strength in about two years, it will have 24 F-35As. Initially, the squadron will train the pilots who will serve as instructors at Luke. By 2015, the instructors are expected to begin training pilots who will go on to serve in F-35A combat-ready units. Overall, the Air Force plans to station up to 144 F-35As at Luke for the pilot training. The 61 FS traces its heritage back to 1941. From April 1994 to August 2010, the unit trained F-16 pilots at Luke before the Air Force inactivated it when the service retired some older F-16s in the inventory. 2013

Luke Conducts First Local F-35 Training Sortie Airmen at Luke AFB, Ariz., completed the base's first local training sortie with the F-35A strike fighter. "Our first sortie on May 5 represents a significant milestone in the F-35 program at Luke," said Lt. Col. Michael Ebner, commander of the base's 61 Fighter Squadron. "The ability to conduct local flight operations demonstrates the commitment by thousands of individuals who have worked to make this a reality," he said. Luke in March received the first of up to 144 F-35s slated for beddown there as part of the F-35A

schoolhouse standing up. This airframe flew the maiden training sortie; it's still the only F-35 currently at Luke, which is transitioning from operating F-16s to F-35s. More F-35s are expected to arrive within the next few weeks. 2014

A Royal Australian Air Force F-35 Lightning II touched down at Luke AFB, Ariz., becoming the first international F-35 partner to join the pilot training schoolhouse there on Dec. 18. "Today, we take another tremendous step forward in our transition to the F-35 here at Luke," said 56th Fighter Wing Commander Brig. Gen. Scott Pleus. "Australia is the first of 10 nations. Welcoming our first Australian F-35 is a special day for Luke and the community that has been so supportive of us, he added. RAAF F-35 pilots will train with the wing's 61 Fighter Squadron, as well as Italian and Norwegian F-35 pilots whom are slated to begin training under the auspices of Luke's future 62nd FS by next June. Dutch and Turkish F-35 partners also will eventually train at Luke, in addition to current and potential foreign military sales customers. 2014

The 56th Fighter Wing at Luke AFB, Ariz., conducted its first training deployment with the F-35A strike fighter, sending airmen and 10 of its jets to Nellis AFB, Nev., for two weeks. The Luke F-35As flew training sorties alongside F-35s assigned to Nellis and Eglin AFB, Fla., over the Nevada Test and Training Range from April 4 to April 18. This exercise was an important indicator of the Air Force's state of progress toward having its first unit of combat-ready F-35As available for combat around fall 2016. "Until now, the Air Force F-35 program had not moved this many jets and conducted sustained operations at another base," added Lt. Col. Michael Ebner, commander of Luke's 61 Fighter Squadron "Operating away from Luke has been a huge success for the wing, Team Nellis, and the F-35 program," said 56th FW Commander Brig. Gen. Scott Pleus. Luke, home to the F-35A schoolhouse, currently hosts 20 F-35As, including two Australian jets. 2015

Italian air force pilots flew their first F-35 training sortie from the schoolhouse at Luke AFB, Ariz., Nov. 5, becoming the first Italian air force pilots to fly the Lightning II. "Every aspect of today's operation was a multinational effort," said 61 Fighter Squadron Commander Lt. Col. Michael Gette. One of the Italian pilots flew a Royal Australian Air Force F-35A, coached by an Air Force Reserve Command instructor pilot, launched by a mix of contractor and RAAF maintainers, "It was a great example of how all the partner nations are cooperating to make this program a reality and shows how Luke ... is becoming the international training hub for the F-35," added Gette. Student pilots began training sorties at Luke in March, and the 56th Fighter Wing activated a second F-35 training squadron early this summer. This year, the RAAF launched international training at Luke, and Norway's first F-35A is slated to arrive at the schoolhouse. Luke will also eventually host Canadian, Dutch, and Turkish students, and a fleet of 144 Lightning IIs. 2015

LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. (AFNS) -- The 61 Fighter Squadron made history graduating the first F-35A Lightning II initial qualification course Aug. 5, 2017. After eight months of tremendous teamwork from across the 56th Fighter Wing, Luke Air Force Base produced six F-35A fighter pilots ready for the combat Air Force. During the ceremony, Lt. Gen. Darryl Roberson, commander of Air Education and Training Command, spoke to graduates. "This is a history

making moment,” said Roberson. “From my perspective there will be people 20 to 30 years from now who will remember that you were in the first (F-35A Lightning II initial qualification course). It is really important for you to know that the F-35 is the future.” During the course, Lockheed Martin instructor pilots taught the academic phase of training, consisting of more than 156 events totaling 308 hours. Academics focused on learning the basic aircraft systems, emergency procedures, local area procedures, mission systems, weapons and tactical employment.

Prior to the first flight in the Lightning II, each student completed 16 simulator events. The F-35 simulator provides a highly realistic and immersive experience that prepares each pilot for their first sortie in an aircraft. “Each student flew at least 48 sorties totaling 77 hours,” said Lt. Col. Rhett Hierlmeier, the 61 FS commander. “Starting with the basics of taking off and landing, continuing across the full spectrum mission sets, and culminating in our Capstone phase of high-end employment. Along the way, our students dropped inert and live laser-guided GBU-12s, refueled from a KC-135 day and night and flew low-altitude step-down training.” During the graduation, the six pilots were presented several awards including the Academic Award, presented to 1st Lt. Brett Burnside. The Academic Award is presented to the student with the highest average test score over five tests taken throughout the course.

“For B-Course graduates, you are going to be the one that everyone turns to,” said Roberson. “It won’t be long for the B-Course group to turn to you to find the answers about that airplane. You need to be the ones that step up and know the answers on a higher level. Don’t be shy, we need you to push the envelope on how to fly the F-35. We are teaching you everything we know about the F-35, you’re going to take us to another level.” Hierlmeier gave a charge to the newly minted pilots as they move forward in their careers.

“I salute you for your hard work and commitment to excellence,” said Hierlmeier. “You have earned the title ‘F-35 fighter pilot,’ and you make us proud. You represent the hard work of the 56th Fighter Wing and (Luke AFB Airmen). Continue to learn and sharpen your sword, for there will likely be a day, sooner rather than later, when you will be tested. As you move on to your operational assignments remember that you wear our brand. Stay humble, fly, fight and win!”

2017

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORIES

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency, U.S. Air Force, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.

The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

Air Force News. Air Force Public Affairs Agency.