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**F-35 FACES A CHANGING
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KEY



RED TAILS OVER ALABAMA

ALWAYS READY, ALWAYS THERE



Four F-16Cs of the 100th FS carry red tails to honor the unit's legacy with the Tuskegee Airmen.
USAF/SSgt Clayton Cupit

While Vermont became the first Air National Guard wing to receive the F-35, the 187th Fighter Wing at Dannelly Field in Alabama is gearing up to be the second. The wing will receive Lightning IIs in 2024 as it adds another chapter to the proud history of the 'Red Tail Heritage' of the Tuskegee Airmen.

REPORT **Dick Wels and Hans Drost**

THE MISSION OF the 187th Fighter Wing (FW) states: 'We deliver combat ready airmen and aircraft for rapid deployment anytime, anywhere.' The wing's resident

100th Fighter Squadron (FS) currently flies the F-16C/D, with the F-35A waiting around the corner for the next chapter in this remarkable unit's history. Lt Col Rob Stimpson, commander of the 100th FS, told *Combat Aircraft Journal*: 'One of the biggest challenges to our [anytime, anywhere] mission comes in the form of funding shortfalls. Whether it affects manning or resources, funding always seems to be a challenge,' he said. His squadron still manages to maintain an impressive 18 PAA (Primary Assigned Aircraft) strength — the number of aircraft allocated to a particular unit in order for it to perform its mission. As with most Air National Guard (ANG) units today, this is a



shared operation. Stimpson explained: 'We have a Total Force Initiative [TFI] squadron embedded into the 187th FW that is composed of active-duty personnel. There are approximately 50 maintainers and five pilots who comprise the 377th Fighter Squadron, which assimilates seamlessly into our operation at Dannelly Field.' The 377th is a so-called Active Associate Unit that is administratively assigned to the 495th Fighter Group, which is headquartered at Shaw AFB, South Carolina.

Tuskegee Airmen

The history of the 100th FS charts back to 1942 when it was activated at Tuskegee



“We are currently anticipating the flying of the F-35 to be in early 2024

Lt Col Rob Stimpson



Army Airfield, about 40 miles east of Montgomery, Alabama. The mission of the unit was to train African-American cadets in combat flying, preparing them for missions during World War Two. These first black fighter pilots within the US Army Air Force became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Their aircraft were

recognizable by a characteristic red tail. Lt Col Stimpson said: 'Our history stems locally in Alabama where the 'Red Tail Heritage' of the Tuskegee Airmen began. Against the backdrop of a racially divided nation, a small group of African-American men trained to become pilots at Moton Field, in Tuskegee, Alabama. During World

War Two, many lauded their successes in the skies over North Africa and Europe. These men conquered the racial barriers of the time, and we are honored to carry on that legacy today. As the story goes, they picked the red color to be easily seen. Boldness was the reason for the color and the pride felt in both protecting [bombers] and [escorting] the dangerous missions during the war.'

To keep the history alive, four F-16s of the 100th FS have received all-red tails. All the tails of the current F-16s also carry names of cities in Alabama. Stimpson explained: 'It is historically significant due in part to when the 100th Fighter Squadron, which used to be the 160th FS, changed from F-4s to F-16s. The new jets took on the namesake of the crew chief's hometown. Then it became a way for us to be connected to the people of Alabama and to show state pride.'

Above: Block 30/32 F-16 pilots now wear the Thales Scorpion helmet mounted sight, as seen here. **Dick Wels**

Left: A squadron like the 100th FS blends a lot of experience with new blood fresh from the training pipeline. **Dick Wels**





Primary mission

The 100th FS currently classes its primary mission as close air support (CAS), striking hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly ground forces, but Stimpson added: 'Our [remit] covers a myriad of tasks that include offensive and defensive counter-air.' The Designed Operational Capability (DOC) statement for a unit is a document prepared by the parent major command (MAJCOM). It contains unit-identification, mission tasking narrative, mission specifics, and resources. It provides commanders with a clear definition of their unit's wartime capability, based on the authorized manpower and materiel strength. Referring specifically to CAS, Lt Col Stimpson explained the special skills that are necessary to get the job done: 'When you fly CAS, you need to have good cockpit management and battle tracking skills. Keeping up with the

increased amount of mission materials in the cramped space of the cockpit can be a challenge. Pre-flight preparation of your mission materials, even to the level of how you fold a map, can mean the difference between quickly getting the information you need and not. When you are focusing all your efforts in support of ground operations, your attention to detail with regard to battle tracking requests, timelines, and bomb damage assessments — when required — all paints the picture of how well — or poorly — you are meeting the ground commander's intent.'

Phase-based training

There's a well-trodden path in modern fighter squadrons, balancing a slew of experience with new blood flowing in. Young arrivals on the pilot side are only qualified to fly the F-16 in a limited capacity, and they are far from



Left: The 100th FS uses the Litening targeting pod, and this example also carries BDU-33 practice bombs.
Hans Drost

Below: The 187th FW Block 30 F-16Cs are some of the oldest remaining in the air force.
Dick Wels



being 'mission ready' for a combat deployment. On arrival at Dannelly Field, new 'Viper' drivers go through Mission Qualification Training (MQT). This prepares them to integrate into the squadron as a basic combat mission-ready wingman. Lt Col Stimpson described what the unit does to prepare pilots for a real world mission: 'We train with a phase-based approach. We tend to focus on particular areas of interest depending on the deployment schedules as required, but for the most part, we follow a building-block approach when training. First we work on basic fighter maneuvering [BFM] in a 1-v-1 capacity. We then build to 2-v-1 air combat maneuvers [ACM]. Then into 2-v-2, 4-v-2, and 4-v-4 fights in the tactical intercept [TI] phase. After the air-to-air focus areas, we move to air-to-ground work as two-ship and four-ship formations. We culminate our training plan with opposed surface attack

[OPSAT] rides where we fight into an area, drop simulated ordnance and fight our way back out. Lastly, we incorporate large force exercises [LFEs], where we'll have multiple four-ships fighting adversaries in a full-up environment. We have great local airspace in which we conduct our flying training, mostly in western Alabama and eastern Mississippi. We also conduct over-water training off the coast of Louisiana and Alabama as well as the Gulf Coast of Florida. The number of missions flown per year varies, purely driven by Ready Aircrew Program [RAP] requirements for experienced and non-experienced pilots.'

In the last two years, the 187th FW has provided notable support to Operation 'Inherent Resolve' in southwest Asia, as well as various shorter-term LFEs in the US. One of its major commitments is 'Sentry Savannah', off the coast of Georgia, which sees extensive integration training with fifth-generation F-22s and F-35s.

Preparing for Lightning

In December 2017, the air force selected Truax Field Air National Guard Base, Wisconsin, and Dannelly Field, Alabama, as the preferred locations for the next two ANG F-35A bases. The then Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson said: 'As F-35As arrive at these locations, we will use the existing aircraft at these fields to replace the aging F-16s at other Air National Guard units.'

US Air Force Chief of Staff Gen David Goldfein added: 'Putting F-35s at these two Air National Guard bases continues our transition into the next generation of air superiority. It helps ensure we can always offer the commander-in-chief air power options and be ready to penetrate any enemy air defenses, hold any target at risk and go when and where the President tells us to go. The F-35 is critical to the family of systems we need to accomplish this mission for the nation now and in the future.'

This image: An F-22A Raptor, 100th FS F-16C Fighting Falcon and a Commemorative Air Force P-51C Mustang fly in formation in September 2018. **USAF/SSgt Clayton Cupit**

Right: The arrival of the F-35A at Dannelly Field will see the Alabama ANG shift its primary focus from close air support to suppression of enemy air defense. **Dick Wels**





Lt Col Stimpson added his views: 'We are currently anticipating the flying of the F-35 to be in early 2024. We anticipate the first training to start about a year to six months prior to the arrival of the new airframe. Not all pilots will make the transfer to the F-35, but the actual number of those who elect to make the transition from the F-16 to the F-35 is yet to be determined. Training will either be at Luke AFB, Arizona, or Eglin in Florida, depending on the availability of the classes.'

'The F-35 mission set is similar to the F-16. However, the increased SEAD [suppression of enemy air defense] mission will require a certain amount of increased training on the pilot side of the house. Learning a new airplane will certainly have its challenges, but the pilots of the 100th FS are definitely up for those challenges.'

The impact of the F-35 at Dannelly Field will be minimal, according to Stimpson: 'There will be an impact on the wing with regard to new construction in some small cases and re-construction and remodeling in others to accommodate the new airframe. However, this impact will be minimal as the 187th FW is well suited to take on the new airframe. Our wing is primed and ready for the arrival of the F-35. We have incredible support from our local population and civic leaders around Montgomery. We are ready to continue to carry on the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen with the 'Red Tails' flying the most advanced fighter in the air force inventory. We stand ready to deliver combat air power to anywhere at any time.' 🇺🇸

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