

OC 617 Squadron Royal Air Force flies F-35B

The new Officer Commanding Number 617 Squadron, Wing Commander John Butcher, Royal Air Force, has taken his first flight in an F-35B Lightning, the UK's new multi-role stealth combat aircraft. 617 Sqn (The Dambusters) is designated as the first front line UK F-35B Lightning squadron and will return to RAF Marham in Norfolk next summer. The flight was made at the US Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, South Carolina.

Speaking after his flight Wg Cdr Butcher said: 'This was a memorable day and climbing into the cockpit for the first time felt really familiar as the simulator in which I have been training is so realistic. This flight certainly marks the beginning of the end for 617 Squadron's time at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort as we already look forward to our arrival back at RAF Marham in the summer of next year.

'It was a real thrill to finally fly this aircraft and it certainly exceeded my expectations. The capabilities and potential of this aircraft are immense and this is a very exciting time to be a fast jet pilot.'

The first flight followed weeks of ground school training and during his flight Wg Cdr Butcher flew over the Atlantic Ocean where he was able to explore how manoeuvrable the aircraft is before conducting some approaches at Beaufort.

Both Royal Air Force and Royal Navy pilots, maintainers and ground crew are currently training on the F-35 in South Carolina ahead of the return of 617 Squadron to RAF Marham in Norfolk next summer.

US Marine Corps and British aircraft are operated on a pooled basis to train pilots from both countries. This training will continue in the USA until the summer of 2019 when 207 Squadron, which will form in 2019, will also return to Marham and start to train UK Lightning Force personnel autonomously.

The F-35 Lightning is an advanced, next generation aircraft procured to operate alongside the RAF's Typhoon. The aircraft will be able to operate with equal capability from land and sea, and will form an integral part of Carrier Strike from the Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers.

Wg Cdr Butcher is no stranger to America having served at MCAS Miramar (San Diego, California) in 2009-2012 as an instructor on the F/A-18 Hornet. He subsequently worked as the UK Requirements Manager at the Joint Strike Fighter Programme Office in Washington DC before joining the Lightning Force HQ as Chief of Staff.

Picture captions

Pic 617 A

Pictured is Wing Commander J R Butcher, OC 617 (Dambusters) Squadron, taxiing an F-35B Lightning aircraft at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort. Wg Cdr Butcher had just returned after completing his first flight in the aircraft type.

Photo credit: US Marine Corps ©.

Pic 617 B

Wing Commander J R Butcher, OC 617 (Dambusters) Squadron, is congratulated by a fellow RAF pilot after conducting his first flight in an F-35B Lightning at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort.

Photo credit: US Marine Corps ©.