

First exercise for the RAF's F-35 Lightning

Royal Air Force F-35B Lightning jets have passed another significant milestone by conducting their first exercise with UK-based American F-15s and French Air Force Rafales, over the skies of East Anglia and the North Sea. This was reported by the (UK) Ministry of Defence on 28 November.

The 617 Squadron jets joined over 40 other aircraft from the RAF, the United States Air Force and the French Air Force on Exercise Point Blank. This exercise was a first both for the F35s and the French Air Force and gave an opportunity for the three air forces to work together in a peer-to-peer scenario.

For the pilots of the F-35s the exercise gave an opportunity to continue to develop procedures to integrate 4th and 5th generation fighter aircraft. This exercise also aimed to improve the operational capability within the established trilateral framework of RAF, USAF, French Air Force cooperation.

Explaining the significance of the exercise Air Commodore Jez Attridge the RAF Joint Force Air Component Commander said: *'The first point of an air force is to be able to defend the country so you have to recognise the threats out there.*

'We can see the environment is changing, we can see the challenge that Russia is giving to the international rules-based order so we are the insurance policy and we are recognising that through the scenario that we've got, the non-permissive environment, and our ability to operate with our allies, the French and the Americans, is paramount.'

He added: *'It really is a case of us staying ready so that we can be used if we are needed, It is a great insurance policy.'*

The United States Air Force and French Air Force jets have been operating from RAF Lakenheath the home of the US Air Force's 48th Fighter Wing for the exercise. The US F-15s and French Rafale fighter jets in addition to the F-35s joined RAF Typhoon, Hawk and Voyager aircraft to simulate air-to-air and air-to-ground conflict. The RAF also deployed simulated air defence systems to test the pilots during the exercise.

Wing Commander John "Butch" Butcher, the OC of 617 squadron, commented: *'This particular exercise is different to any ones that we have done previously because of the threats that are out there. It is the first time we have done a peer exercise and that we have worked alongside French and US partners.'*

Explaining the importance of the exercise for 617 Sqn RAF, Wg Cdr Butcher added: *‘Things are progressing well with the aim of declaring initial operating capability for the F-35s by the end of the year.’*

Exercise Point Blank is the latest exercise conducted within the framework of the Trilateral Strategic Initiative that was originally signed by the then US, UK and French Air Force Chiefs in 2011 and was renewed in 2017.

For period 2018/2019 the Air Force Chiefs have agreed that Command and Control, information sharing and future basing would be the focus for tri-lateral activities including exercises.

Picture caption

Two Royal Air Force F35 aircraft from 617 Squadron, RAF Marham, are seen here refuelling from a Royal Air Force Voyager aircraft.

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