

Luke pilots picked for F-35 cadre

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LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz., January 23, 2009 — Two airmen of Luke Air Force Base's F-16 Fighting Falcon family were selected recently to become part of the initial training cadre for the F-35 Lightning II.

Lt. Col. Stephen Pieper, 310th Fighter Squadron director of operations, was selected to be a squadron commander and Maj. Chad Lewis, 56th Operations Support Squadron assistant director of operations in weapons and tactics, was selected to be one of the first instructor pilots for the Air Force's newest fighter aircraft.

Since only a handful of test pilots currently fly the F-35, the Falcon duo will need to learn to fly the aircraft from them, Lewis said.

"This initial qualification training ... will take approximately two to three months," he said. "Once we're qualified, we'll be responsible for training the next pilot in line. The United States Air Force plans to buy more than 1,700 of these aircraft, so we have a lot of pilots to train."

The two aviators will be part of the 10 initial instructors in the F-35 training program and will be responsible for training all the subsequent instructors. Along with FTU instructor responsibilities, the initial cadre will develop tactics and assist with systems development in future F-35 variants. They also will be developing methods of force application that will revolutionize warfare, the major said.

To find suitable applicants to become initial cadre, the Air Force sought pilots with A-10 Thunderbolt II, F-16, F-22 Raptor and F-15E Strike Eagle experience. Pieper and Lewis submitted applications through their chain of command to be assigned a rank order number. Once the applications left the base, they were reviewed by a selection board chaired by Maj. Gen. Anthony Przybyslawski, Air Education and Training Command vice commander.

The selection board evaluated multiple criteria, including flying hours and fighter experience. Lewis believes these areas gave him an advantage above other applicants.

"I am a weapons instructor course graduate with more than 1,500 F-16 Fighting Falcon and 500 instructor pilot hours," he said. "I also have combat experience in Operations Northern Watch and Iraqi Freedom. I think these are some of the biggest things that helped me get selected."