

From Thunderbolt to Lightning: 188th Fighter Wing's Spohn only Air National Guard pilot selected to first F-35 cadre

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11/12/2009 - **FORT SMITH, Ark.** -- Since Maj. Jay Spohn joined the Air National Guard in 1999, he has taken the skies by storm.

Spohn, a pilot with the Arkansas Air National Guard's 188th Fighter Wing, will transition from thunderbolt to lightning.

Spohn, currently an A-10 Thunderbolt II "Warthog" pilot, was the lone Air National Guardsman selected to join the initial cadre of aviators in the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter program.

Spohn said the F-35 program will be initially comprised of 12 pilots from the Air National Guard, Air Force Reserves and active duty Air Force.

One pilot from the ANG, one from the Air Force Reserve and 10 active duty Air Force aviators were selected for the F-35 program on three separate review boards.

"We're extremely proud of Maj. Spohn," said Col. Tom Anderson, 188th Fighter Wing commander. "Since he came to this unit he's been a vital asset. He was instrumental in our aircraft transition and was a key member of this unit. The F-35 has exceptional air-to-air capability compared to the A-10. And for Maj. Spohn, who has flown the A-10 his entire career, to be selected for this prestigious position is a stellar achievement and speaks volumes of his capabilities as a fighter pilot. Maj. Spohn is an intelligent, talented pilot and we have the utmost confidence he will succeed in his new role."

Spohn, who functions as the chief of weapons and tactics at the 188th, said a four-person board was responsible for selecting one Guardsman from the group of finalists. Interviews were conducted at Florida State Headquarters in St. Augustine, Fla.

"I've always wanted to be a pilot for as long as I can remember," Spohn said. "From the time I knew what fighters were, I wanted to be a fighter pilot and from the time I joined the Air Force, I wanted to be a weapons officer. So it has all worked out."

The key qualification for applicants included instructor time in the F-15, F-16 or A-10 with a minimum of 1,000 flight hours. Application packages were submitted to the National Guard Bureau in Washington D.C. The National Guard Bureau narrowed the list to four interview candidates.

Brigadier Gen. Joseph Balskus, Florida Air National Guard commander, served as the board's president. Other members of the board were: Col. David Silva, Florida Air National Guard Headquarters Detachment 1 commander; Col. Scott Studer of the 125th Fighter Wing; and Lt. Col. Mark Hansen, National Guard Bureau/A3O.

Phase I of F-35 training will be conducted at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.



Maj. Jay Spohn, a pilot with the 188th Fighter Wing Arkansas Air National Guard, based in Fort Smith, Ark., stands in front of one of the unit's A-10 Thunderbolt II "Warthogs" Nov. 7. Spohn was the only Air National Guard pilot to be selected to fly the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter in the program's initial cadre. Spohn was selected Nov. 4, 2009. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech Sgt. Stephen Hornsey/188th Fighter Wing Public Affairs)

"The Eglin Integrated Training Center will turn out pilots and maintainers who are fully mission qualified," said Eric Branyan, Lockheed Martin vice president and F-35 deputy program manager. "The center features a full mission simulator that will be networked to other trainers on site, enabling formation flying and virtual war gaming."

Spohn, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in engineering from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Fla., will be a member of the Florida Air National Guard while completing his training at Eglin AFB.

"I've loved living in Arkansas and my time here at the 188th," Spohn said. "If there was a negative about this new opportunity, it's that I have to leave a great unit in the 188th to go do my new job. I'm absolutely going to miss being a member of the unit."

Spohn, a native of Folsom, N.J., was notified of the board's decision six hours after his hour-long interview on Nov. 4. Spohn will begin training on Dec. 9. He will first qualify on the F-15C Eagle while he awaits the arrival of the F-35s, which are slated to be delivered to Eglin in August 2010.

"For the next year, I will need to continue to fly while I await F-35 training so I will fly F-15C at Tyndall Air Force Base [Fla.] just about an hour away," Spohn said. "The A-10 is almost exclusively air-to-ground while the F-35 is a multi-role fighter. The F-15C will give me chance to gain valuable experience and expertise on the air-to-air mission from the guys who are the best in the business."

Spohn said once he initiates F-35 training, he will no longer fly F-15Cs. In August 2010 test pilots from Edwards Air Force, Calif., will venture to Eglin to qualify two instructor pilots from the 12 selected candidates. The two chosen instructor pilots will then qualify the remaining 10 pilots from the cadre.

Spohn said he anticipates the process for F-35 qualification to take 12-14 months.

"I've learned a great deal from this experience and I was honored and humbled that I was selected over some outstanding and qualified candidates," Spohn said.

Spohn began his Air National Guard career in April 1999 when he joined the 111th Fighter Wing, based in Willow Grove, Penn. He was commissioned through the Academy of Military Science in October 1999.

Spohn attended U.S. Air Force Weapons Officer Training at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. Soon after graduation from weapons school, Spohn joined the 188th in March 2007 and was instrumental in the 188th's aircraft transition from F-16 Fighting Falcons to A-10 Thunderbolt II "Warthogs."

"I believe my time at the 188th prepared me for this role and enabled me to get selected," Spohn said. "I've been a weapons officer on the F-16 and A-10 since I've been here. I've flown the A-10 my whole life. I was able to assist the 188th in the transition and they entrusted me to provide instruction. I certainly benefited from that valuable experience."

Spohn was also key in the 188th's modification to A-10C models, a process that included multiple aircraft software upgrades and intense pilot erudition and practical application.

"The challenges I was able to surmount all helped to prepare me for this new role," Spohn said. "A lot of the same challenges that we faced at the 188th transitioning from the F-16 to the A-10 is what we will face at Eglin as we stand up the F-35 there."

While Spohn expressed his fervor for exciting new adventures ahead, he also harbored a sense of sadness for not having the opportunity to observe first-hand the toil of so many 188th members when the unit ventures to Afghanistan for its Aerospace Expeditionary Forces rotation this spring.

"I'm going to miss seeing the end result of this aircraft conversion," Spohn said. "A lot of us worked very hard from operations, maintenance, logistics. We've all worked hard to convert from F-16s to A-10s and we're just now getting to a place where we can see the fruits of our labor. I'm going to miss seeing the end result when the 188th gets to show what it's made of in Afghanistan."

For additional information on the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter program visit www.jsf.mil. For more information on the 188th Fighter Wing please visit www.188fw.ang.af.mil.

