

News story: F-35 jet and new batch of UK pilots cleared for Carrier take-off, Defence Minister tells Select Committee

A new group of UK pilots are trained and ready to fly the UK's cutting-edge F-35 fighter jet which is now cleared for take-off from HMS Queen Elizabeth following successful trials using the ski-ramp design featured on the UK flagship, Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin announced at the House of Commons Defence Select Committee this afternoon.

Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin said:

With a new team of British pilots completing their training and the F-35 cleared to fly from the carrier, the momentum continues for this game-changing jet. These milestones come as our pilots prepare to return from the States, ready for next year's unforgettable flight trials from the deck of the nation's new flagship.

The UK currently has 12 F-35 jets out in the United States where they are being tested ahead of flight trials from the Royal Navy's 65,000 tonne carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, next year. Two more aircraft are set to be delivered by the end of the year.

The UK's F-35s have been successfully tested on the ski ramp design at Pax Rivers, Maryland, in the US.

The Defence Minister announced that the F-35 Integrated Test Force, which includes five British pilots, has now successfully completed ski ramp trials. That milestone clears the aircraft for take-off from the deck of the Carrier.

Speaking about the jet, Squadron Leader Andy Edgell, part of that Integrated Test Force, said:

She's marvellous. She has an incredible amount of thrust but it's more than just brawn that makes her so fantastic to fly – it's the brains behind her as well.

She's a masterful piece of engineering and it makes her so effortless to fly. It's impossible not to be exhilarated every time. She's a beast when you want her to be and tame when you need her to be. She's beautiful.

The launch of the F35s from the HMS Queen Elizabeth is a once in a

generation historical event. To be the first to fly off the carrier, to have a front row seat, would be an absolute privilege. It wouldn't just be about the pilot – there are hundreds of people who have been working tirelessly behind the scenes to make this happen and the honour will be theirs too.

There are already 150 UK personnel out in the US working with the state-of-the-art jets, and the latest course of UK pilots have just finished their ground school training and are now ready to fly the F-35B at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort in South Carolina.

The cutting-edge F-35 fighter jet.

Amongst those to have graduated from that course are four pilots who started F-35 training straight from their advanced pilot training at RAF Valley, and Wing Commander John Butcher, who will be the Commanding Officer of the RAF's new 617 squadron.

The new home of 617 squadron, RAF Marham, continues to build towards the arrival of the jets next year, moving a step closer earlier this month when the runway intersection resurfacing was completed. 617 Squadron will be the first operational British F-35 unit.

And elsewhere, the Defence Minister also announced that last week, the first F-35 flight with the latest software was conducted on one of the UK's F-35Bs at Edwards Air Force Base in California. This software upgrade, technically known as Block 3F, represents the full warfighting capability the UK F-35s will have at Initial Operating Capability in December 2018.

UK industry will provide approximately 15% of the value of each F-35 to be built, more than 3,000, worth some £1 billion and generating around 25,000 British jobs. The programme remains on time, within costs and offers the best capability for our Armed Forces.

Find out about about the fifth generation F-35B Lightning and the important work of the Integrated Test Force [here](#).