

Under an uncharacteristically gloomy Arizona sky, Col Matt Renbarger, 56th Operations Group commander, opens up with the F-35A's GAU-22 25mm cannon during a low-angle strafing run.



# DESERT STORM

Fighter pilots from across the US Air Force assembled at Luke AFB, Arizona, in March for 'Haboob Havoc' – a competition designed to enhance squadron camaraderie and culture.

REPORT AND PHOTOS **Joe Copalman**



**G**UNNERY COMPETITIONS HAVE long been an effective means of bringing fighter pilots from various communities together to pit their skills and tenacity against one another, while also building morale and encouraging the competitive spirit of aggression necessary for success in the profession of arms. The waning years of the Cold War were a heyday for such competitions, annual meets like 'William Tell' and 'Gunsmoke' giving combat aviators ample opportunity to face off against their peers. In times of fiscal austerity, however, activities not directly related to combat-readiness tend to be the first to be cut, with gunnery competitions being an easy choice for leaders to axe.

'Haboob Havoc', a gunnery competition named after Arizona's summer dust storms

and hosted by the 56th Fighter Wing at Luke AFB just outside Phoenix, is one of the few hold-outs when it comes to such events. Initially established in December 2011 by then-56th FW commanding officer Brig Gen J. D. Harris, 'Haboob Havoc' brings US Air Force fighter squadrons together for several days of competition in the form of one-on-one dogfighting and air-to-ground gunnery over the Barry M. Goldwater Range, as well as a golf competition and a hangar party.

While most of the units that have participated over the years have been based at Luke and nearby Davis-Monthan AFB, the competition typically brings participants from out of state, as well as the occasional involvement of joint force fighter squadrons. 'Haboob Havoc' ran consistently for three years, but was axed in 2014 in the wake of the 2013 budget sequester, which imposed crushing levels of austerity on the US military.

## Storm reborn

The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 signaled a thaw when it came to budget austerity for the US military, but what really brought 'Haboob Havoc' back to life was the efforts of the Fighter Country Partnership (FCP). The FCP is effectively a local 'booster club' of sorts for Luke AFB, comprising influential citizens and corporations from the surrounding communities who promote the mission of the base to the public at large and raise money to benefit the airmen living and working at Luke.

In 2018, FCP's leadership approached the 56th FW command staff proposing a resumption of 'Haboob Havoc', even offering to offset costs by paying for things like the hangar party at the end of the competition. Seeing the competition as not just an opportunity to foster competition and camaraderie, but as a possible means of revitalizing



fighter pilot culture and perhaps even assisting in pilot retention efforts, the 56th FW command staff approved the resurrection of the event in 2018. This year's competition ran from March 25-29.

### An all-components affair

Luke AFB is currently the largest F-35 base in the world, with four active-duty squadrons and one reserve training squadron teaching pilots from the USAF, as well as from Australia, Denmark, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, and Turkey. 'Haboob Havoc 2019' saw participation from all four of Luke's active-duty F-35 units (the 61st, 62nd, 63rd and 308th Fighter Squadrons) and one Air Force Reserve Command detachment (944th OG Det 2) in the air-to-air and air-to-ground events. With the exception of the 21st FS, which trains Republic of China Air Force 'Viper' pilots, all of Luke's remaining F-16 units (the 309th, 310th and 425th Fighter Squadrons) took part as well.

In addition to Luke-based units, 'Haboob Havoc' included participants flying A-10s from Davis-Monthan, and from four Air National Guard units visiting Luke AFB and operating from there. Both the Alabama ANG's 100th FS and South Carolina ANG's 194th FS brought F-16s to Luke for the competition, while the Louisiana ANG's 122th FS and the California ANG's 194th FS were in town with their F-15C Eagles. Overall, more than 30 aircraft joined in the contest. All squadrons were allowed to select their own pilots, though organizers suggested those with minimal experience in dissimilar air combat training (DACT) be selected to utilize the competition as a training opportunity as well.

### Head-to-head

The competition consisted of an air-to-air event, characterized by one-on-one dissimilar engagements, and an air-to-ground event that involved high-angle strafe and low-angle strafe on the manned ranges at the Goldwater Range. For the

air-to-air event, the focus was on dissimilar basic fighter maneuvering (BFM).

Explaining how these match-ups worked, Maj Alex 'Leeroy' Esson, 56th FW weapons officer and exercise organizer told *Combat Aircraft*, 'What we did was have two points that were 10-15 miles away from each other, so you show up at that point and you both turn in, and then you end up fighting whatever you get across from you. The whole idea was [to see] what is that other aircraft? Move in for a visual, decide what your advantages are, and see who could take better advantage of those.' All aircraft types taking part in 'Haboob Havoc' engaged in the BFM engagements — even the A-10s.

The two possible means of achieving victory in the air-to-air engagement were either a two-shot radar missile 'kill' or a guns 'kill'. Though all aircraft had the capability to carry the AIM-9 Sidewinder infra-red-guided missile, Esson deliberately excluded it as an option during 'Haboob Havoc 2019'. 'I took Sidewinders out of it because then all the units who came in would have had to bring flares, which is annoying because flying over the continental US, you need to get permission for ordnance transfers. The whole point of the competition was to make it easy and fun. The other reason I did that is because it makes the fights a little bit more pure BFM. If you're going to be fighting a Sidewinder that has a really high off-boresight capability, you have to fight a very different fight, and it's not quite the raging BFM that would happen from only radar missiles and guns.'

### Moving mud

During the air-to-ground portion of 'Haboob Havoc', competitors made

**Above left:** Dust kicked up by a direct 25mm high-angle strafe hit from an F-35A on a mangled armored vehicle.

**Below left:** Though the F-15Cs participating in the competition did not make any low-angle strafe passes, a few high-speed, low-altitude passes were major crowd-pleasers for the airmen observing the range events and cheering on their squadrons.

**Above right:** A pilot from the Louisiana Air National Guard's 122nd FS 'Bayou Militia' makes a high-speed pass on the tower at the Barry M. Goldwater Range.

**Right:** A 20mm round from the M61 Vulcan 20mm cannon of this 310th FS 'Tophats' F-16D streaks past the canopy during a low-angle strafe pass.

“ The whole point of the competition was to make it easy and fun

Maj Alex Esson





multiple high-angle strafe passes against a truck target and low-angle strafe runs against a 'rag' — an enormous cruciform fabric target strung up vertically between two tall posts. While it comes as no surprise that an A-10 pilot from Davis-Monthan AFB took top honors in both the high-angle and low-angle events, one F-15C pilot raised eyebrows by placing in the top three in high-angle strafe (the F-15s did not fly the low-angle strafe). As Esson recounted, 'They had one pilot from the Louisiana Air National Guard, and they're a really pushed-up unit. Most C-model units don't strafe a lot, but they do it just to make sure their guns are actually working. They had one guy who had been a Strike Eagle pilot who switched over to the C-models, and he had the third best pass of the entire competition.'

Though Luke's F-35 squadrons participated in last year's 'Haboob Havoc', the type was not cleared for live gun employment at the time, restricting them to the BFM event. This year, all F-35 squadrons involved in the competition joined in the strafing events, a new development as Luke's F-35s only started live training with the GAU-22/A 25mm cannon in December 2018.

### Culture shock therapy

In addition to the fighter pilots who came to Luke from out of state, the 56th FW hosted a few dozen instructor pilots from training bases all across the US. Most of these pilots were FAIPs (first

assignment instructor pilots) who the training command retains as instructors once they complete their basic pilot training, instead of sending them on to type conversion for the front line. The FAIPs invited to Luke for 'Haboob Havoc' were those nearing the end of their instructor tours, ready to 'un-pause' their careers and enter operational units. Esson asked these instructors along for a good reason. 'Most of those guys look at a FAIP tour [as pausing their] life for three years, so we put a lot of effort into making sure they understand what they're about to get into.'

Part of Esson's motive for bringing the FAIPs to Luke was to aid pilot retention efforts, specifically in the fighter community. Addressing how the 'Haboob Havoc' invite ties into this, Esson says, 'There's such a shortage of fighter pilots that we're lucky to have maybe one or two pilots from each of those training bases. We have very different personalities than the C-130 or C-17 guys, and if you don't understand that, for lack of a better term, we can come across as jerks because we're fairly aggressive. So we're trying to let them see what we're all about.' Along with being bussed out to the ranges to observe the air-to-ground events, the FAIPs had opportunities to get tours of the participating aircraft, listen in on student briefs at the various training squadrons based at Luke, visit the different fighter squadron bars and even get back-seat rides in 56th FW F-16Ds. 📧

## AFTER THE DUST SETTLED

When all the scores from the two days of range events were tallied, the results were unsurprising. The air-to-ground specialists from Davis-Monthan dominated the strafe events, while the air-to-air specialists from the Louisiana ANG had the highest 'kill' ratio in their F-15s. The F-35 still made a good showing, executing the fastest gun kill of the competition.

#### Fastest gun 'kill':

Lt Col Daniel 'Chip'n' Daehler  
944th OG Det 2, F-35A, 34 seconds versus an F-16C.

#### Fastest two-shot radar missile 'kill':

Maj 'Boar' Baughman  
100th FS, Alabama ANG F-16C, versus an F-35A.

#### Best low-angle strafe:

Maj Ryan 'Swipe' Goldney  
354th FS, A-10C, 98 per cent of bullets hitting the 'rag' target.

#### Best high-angle strafe:

Maj Ryan 'Swipe' Goldney  
354th FS, A-10C, target judged as destroyed with most bullets in the grouping impacting the truck.

#### Best air-to-air 'kill' ratio:

4:1, 122nd FS Louisiana ANG, F-15C.

