



Right: The patch worn by the crew of No 207 Squadron, complete with the motto *Semper paratus*, 'Always prepared'. The unit was formally stood up on August 1 and the first F-35 pilot course at Marham will commence in early September.

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The UK's latest Lockheed Martin F-35B unit returned to RAF Marham on July 16. No 207 Squadron is the Operational Conversion Unit (OCU) and **Jamie Hunter** was there for the arrival.



Back in the UK

Left: Reflecting the joint nature of the Lightning Force, RAF (left) and Royal Navy maintainers await the pilot of ZM149 to dismount his jet after the flight from MCAS Beaufort. All photos Jamie Hunter



Having made the eight-hour transatlantic crossing from MCAS Beaufort, South Carolina, six F-35Bs arrived in the overhead at RAF Marham at dusk on the evening of July 16 in sharp four-ship and pairs formations. This was the third wave of British F-35s to touch down on UK soil in order to begin sovereign operations, with 15 jets now at the Norfolk base out of a total of 18 that have been handed over to date.

After the six aircraft were ensconced in their new shelters in the bespoke new operations area on the southern side of the airfield, the pilots shut down the engines and climbed down to meet awaiting families. Wg Cdr Scott ‘Mox’ Williams, officer commanding No 207 Squadron, led the formation and was still in his flying gear and immersion suit after the long flight when he kindly spoke to *AFM*. “We took off just after 0600hrs local time this morning at MCAS Beaufort, climbed up to about 26,000ft, met up with the tanker, which came out of [MCAS] Cherry Point. Then we plugged [for

fuel] a couple of times as we flew up the US east coast, got abeam Halifax/Gander – that sort of area – and two other Voyager tankers met us and we jumped onto those two. We split, two F-35s on one and four on the other, and we all flew across the Atlantic and they dropped us off at Land’s End. We did eight refuellings each; some were close together because you want to keep your fuel high – so you can go in an emergency as far as possible – and it went pretty much on rails.”

Last active as a Tucano T1 operator at RAF Linton-on-Ouse, North Yorkshire until it disbanded in January 2012, No 207 Squadron was identified as the UK Lightning training unit in July 2017, chosen as it reflects the heritage and joint approach to the Lightning Force of both the RAF and Royal Navy.

Semper paratus, ‘Always prepared’

The No 207 Squadron motto is a statement of how they intend to operate in their

new home station – rapidly becoming ready for the training job in hand. The unit has been embedded with VMFAT-501 ‘Warlords’ at Beaufort for training until now, with the return to the UK signalling the start of organic training operations.

“We are in a big period of growth, which we’ll see over the next couple of years,” said Wg Cdr Williams. The UK has now received all 18 aircraft that were initially ordered, with a further 17 F-35Bs now on contract to be delivered between 2020 and 2022. The newest UK F-35B (ZM152/BK-18) was handed over shortly before the latest ‘trail’ back to the UK and was one of the six aircraft that arrived at Marham on July 16. The remaining three jets are with No 17 Test and Evaluation Squadron at Edwards Air Force Base, California for ongoing operational testing.

With just one UK student pilot remaining at Beaufort, No 207 Squadron planned to start operations from Marham alongside No 617 Squadron almost immediately, ▣

steadily increasing its flying rates so that it's ready to begin training its own students at the beginning of September.

Wg Cdr Williams previously told *AFM*: "We don't have any ab initio UK pilots on the courses right now.

The first [and last] of these went through VMFAT-501 in late 2017 and are now flying on 617 Squadron at Marham."

The first ground school course at Marham started on July 1 and will

include the next two ab initio students. A flying phase will begin a couple of months later.

A joint approach

The Marham-based Lightning Force will maintain a pooled fleet of aircraft shared between Nos 207 and 617 Squadrons – to be joined by the Fleet Air Arm's 809 Naval Air Squadron (NAS), which will be established at the base in 2023. A new lightning bolt tail marking is being applied to all British jets, and Wg Cdr Williams was clear that this isn't a No 617 Squadron marking, it's "Lightning Force". He said: "We're going for a 'wing' approach to producing aircraft



Above: Wg Cdr Scott Williams steps down from the cockpit of ZM151 after his transatlantic flight. The trip took ten hours and the first jet landed at RAF Marham around 1950hrs local time.



Above: A pair of Lightnings in a refurbished hardened aircraft shelter (HAS) on the site that was formerly home to the Tornados of No 13 Squadron. As part of Project Anvil, work has been undertaken to bring 12 HASes up to standard for the F-35B. **Above right:** Wg Cdr Scott Williams speaks to the media after his flight. In a tweet a few days later, 'Mox' reflected: "No in-flight movies, no food service, no pillows, no loo. And the seatbelt sign never goes out. Brilliant nonetheless!"



to meet the daily and weekly needs of not just the operational squadron but the OCU as well. There are a lot of other factors that need considering beyond just the flying, so coming up with an optimised and sustainable flying schedule is a key part of the synergy we will generate by combining both 207 and 617 Squadrons' engineering output."

No 207 Squadron has slotted straight in alongside No 617 Squadron 'Dambusters', making use of its facilities, although the

latter is very much an operational unit. "Our core business is fundamentally different and only the OCU's F-35B qualified flying instructors will teach new students," explained Williams. No 617 Squadron will also train on a daily basis, but the OCU will be following a dedicated syllabus that encompasses all F-35B missions and capabilities. It is also planned for No 207 Squadron to establish post-graduate courses, including the Qualified Weapons Instructor

(QWI) and Flying Instructor courses.

Ultimately, the OCU will feed new Lightning pilots and core expertise into both No 617 Squadron and 809 NAS. Williams said:

"We will train every OCU student in all the missions and give them all the knowledge they need to be tactical frontline pilots on either 617 or 809 Squadrons. We'll also be giving students their carrier qualification as we plan to embark twice a year in HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales*."

Summing up, Williams said: "It's a huge privilege to know that I've got the challenge of getting us up and running with the training as soon as possible." **AFM**



Left: Serial ZM149 taxis after touching down in the UK for the first time. Britain has now received all 18 of the F-35Bs originally ordered, although three jets remain with No 17 Test and Evaluation Squadron at Edwards AFB, California.

Below: All six jets from the July 16 'trail' in the new shelter at Marham. Meanwhile, the new Integrated Training Centre (ITC) will provide UK Lightning maintainer training and house the full-mission simulators.

"We are in a big period of growth, which we'll see over the next couple of years"

