

FORCE

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First Female F-35 Pilot takes Flight at Eglin Air Force Base

The United States department of defence welcomed its first female F-35 Lightning II pilot on 5 May 2015. Lt Col. Christine Mau, 33rd Fighter Wing Operations Group deputy commander, completed her first training flight in the single-seat fifth-generation fighter following 14 virtual training missions in the full mission simulator at the F-35 academic training center.

"It wasn't until I was taxiing to the runway that it really struck me that I was on my own in the jet," said Mau, formerly an F-15E Strike Eagle pilot. "I had a chase aircraft, but there was no weapons system officer or instructor pilot sitting behind me, and no one in my ear like in simulators."

And with that, like the other 87 F-35A pilots trained over the last four years at Eglin, Mau thundered down the runway and was airborne as the first woman in the air force's premier fighter.

"It felt great to get airborne. The jet flies like a dream, and seeing the systems interact is impressive. Flying with the Helmet Mounted Display takes some adjusting, but it's an easy adjustment," said Mau. "The training missions in the simulator prepare you very well, so you're ready for that flight."

The initial flight in the F-35 training syllabus is designed to orient pilots with the physical aspects of flying the F-35 compared to other fighters

they've flown previously, such as the F-15E Strike Eagle, F-15C Eagle, F-16 Falcon, A-10 Warthog or F-22 Raptor.

Mau acknowledged that although she may be the first female in the F-35 programme, her gender has no bearing on her performance as a fighter pilot. Mau joked that the only difference between her and her fellow F-35 pilots is the size of her G-suit and face-mask. They are both extra-small.

"Flying is a great equaliser," said Mau. "The plane doesn't know or care about your gender as a pilot, nor do the ground troops who need your support. You just have to perform. That's all anyone cares about when you're up there - that you can do your job, and that you do it exceptionally well."

Mau's combat experience and technical prowess in the cockpit were the primary draws for her selection to her position with the 33rd Operations Group.

"Lt Col. Mau brings a valuable level of combat and operational knowledge to our team," said Col. Todd Canterbury, 33rd Fighter Wing commander. "We're nearly a year out from declaring Initial Operational Capability with the F-35. We need battle-tested pilots to help us put the F-35A through its paces and ensure we have a trained and ready force of F-35 pilots to feed into our combat air forces. II