Top Gun veterans learn to fly RAAF’s F-35 Joint Strike Fighters

by: Neil Keene
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Squadron Leader Andrew Jackson and Squadron Leader David Bell have been selected to be the first RAAF pilots to fly the F-35 fighter jets. Picture: Craig Greenhill
Source: News Corp Australia

SAY hello to Top Gun 5.0. Veteran fighter pilots Andrew Jackson and David Bell are the two men at the tip of the spear as the RAAF shifts towards its next-generation combat aircraft, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

The two Squadron Leaders, based at RAAF base Williamtown near Newcastle, will be the first Australians to fly the multi-billion dollar machine, billed as the most tech-heavy fighter plane on the planet.

They will spend four years at Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona, first learning how to fly the fifth-generation fighters.

They will then instruct other Aussie pilots as they filter through in the lead-up to the F-35’s gradual deployment here from 2018.
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Source: News Corp Australia

Listen to defence chiefs talk excitedly about the new aircraft and it would be easy to think they were discussing a new computer or mobile phone, not a war-fighting machine.

But that, according to Air Vice-Marshal Kym Osley, the RAAF’s head of capability transition, is just the point.

“Look at it like this: the F-111 was a landline; a telephone connected to the system made out of black plastic,” he said.

“The F/A-18 is a huge brick mobile phone, but the F-35 is like the latest iPhone.”

This iPhone can drop bombs, evade enemies using stealth technology and “sees” the battlefield in real-time below, stretching out for hundreds of kilometres in any direction. Sqn Ldr Bell, 34, saw it as “a game-changer”.

“We’re going to have to adapt the way we think about air combat to be able to utilise the F-35 to its full potential,” he said.

“To get in on the ground floor and be one of the first guys to start doing that is a real privilege.”

AVM Osley said the new machine would trigger a “generational change” in the way the RAAF approached air combat.
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“You’re talking about an aeroplane that has more lines of code in it than any other combat aircraft in the world,” he said.

“It will give that god’s-eye view to the Australian defence force; not just other to other fighter jets but to air warfare destroyers and airborne early warning and control aircraft.

“You’ll be able to put an F-35 anywhere on this planet and it will be able to tell you what is happening within hundreds of kilometres of it and then convey that back to us in near real-time.”

AVM Osley, a veteran fighter pilot himself, said older aircraft required up to 90 per cent of a pilot’s concentration and effort, both to fly and interpret incoming information.

He said the F-35 would take less than 10 per cent, leaving pilots more time to make strategic decisions.