

The Luke Air Force Base Thunderbolt

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May 2, 2025
Vol. 24, No. 5

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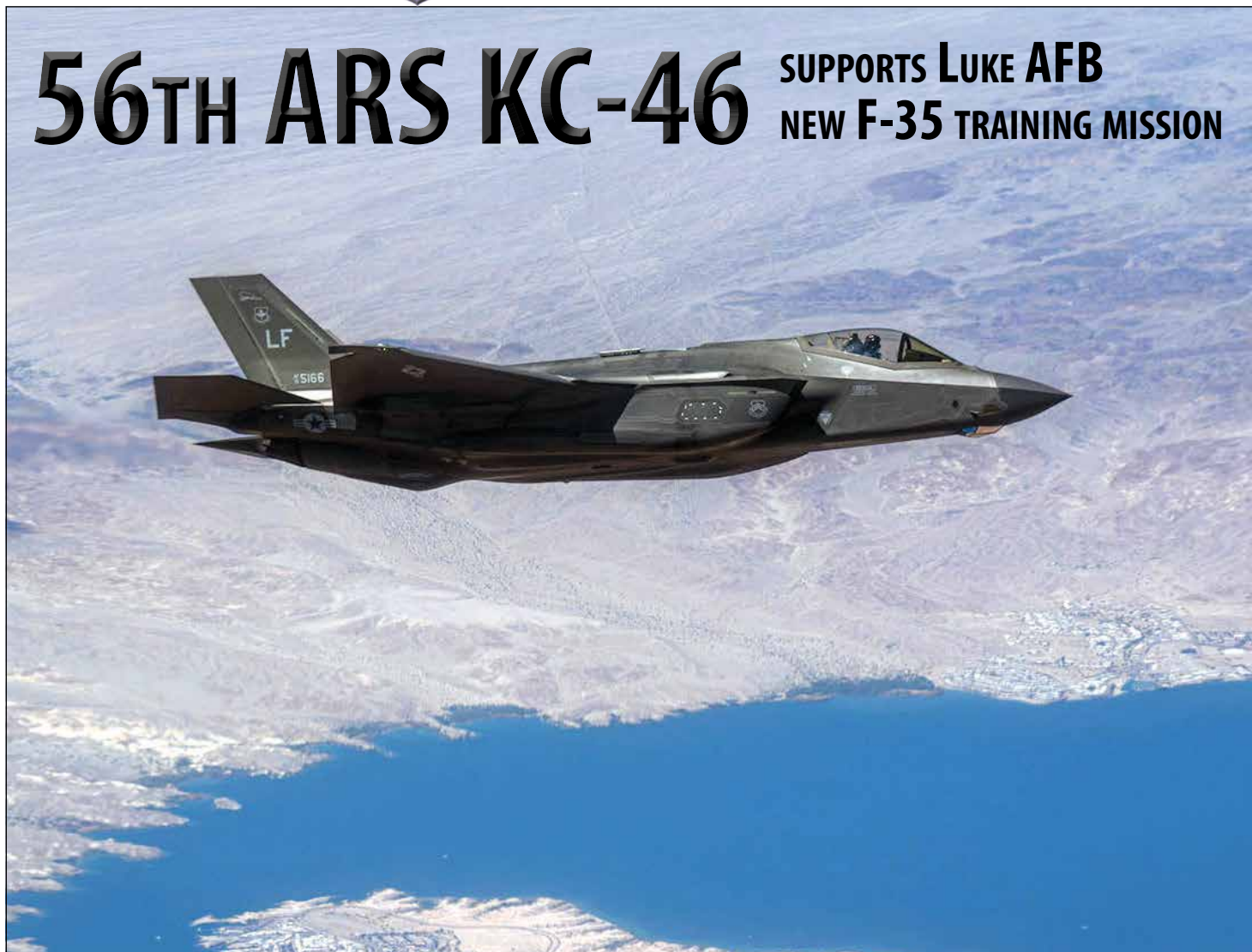
Airman 1st Class Mason Hargrove

HABOOB HAVOC 2025

See Pages 6 and 7

56TH ARS KC-46

SUPPORTS LUKE AFB
NEW F-35 TRAINING MISSION



U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Jonah Bliss

A U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II aircraft assigned to Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, flies alongside a KC-46 Pegasus assigned to Altus Air Force Base, Oklahoma, April 10, 2025. The KC-46 refueled the F-35s to extend their training mission and support aerial refueling qualification for new pilots.

Thunderbolt

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Belgian air chief visits Luke AFB



U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Airman Katelynn Jackson

LEFT: Belgian Air Component Maj. Gen. Geert Decker (left), Belgium air chief, shakes hands with U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. David Berkland (right), 56th Fighter Wing commander, upon arrival at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona on April 3, 2025. The purpose of the visit was for Decker and his accompanying delegation to engage with personnel at the 312th Fighter Squadron, the Belgian F-35A Lightning II conversion unit at Luke AFB.



LEFT: Belgian Air Component leadership converse on the flightline, April 3, 2025, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The first BAC F-35A Lightning II arrived at Luke AFB in December of 2024, marking the beginning of Belgium's transition from the F-16 Fighting Falcon to the advanced F-35A.



Belgian Air Component Brig. Gen. Didier Palome, BAC director of transportation and Lt. Col. Pierre-Yves Libert, 312th Fighter Squadron senior national representative, discuss F-35A Lightning II capabilities on the flightline, April 3, 2025, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.



Belgian Air Component Brig. Gen. Didier Palome, BAC director of transportation, inspects a BAC F-35A Lightning II on the flightline, April 3, 2025, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Through international partner training, the 56th FW plays a vital role in amplifying the Air Force's strength through combining capabilities to deter potential adversaries and ensure global stability.



Belgian Air Component Brig. Gen. Didier Palome, BAC director of transportation, walks down stairs after inspecting a BAC F-35A Lightning II on the flightline, April 3, 2025, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The first BAC F-35A arrived at Luke AFB in December of 2024, marking the beginning of Belgium's transition from the F-16 Fighting Falcon to the advanced F-35A.

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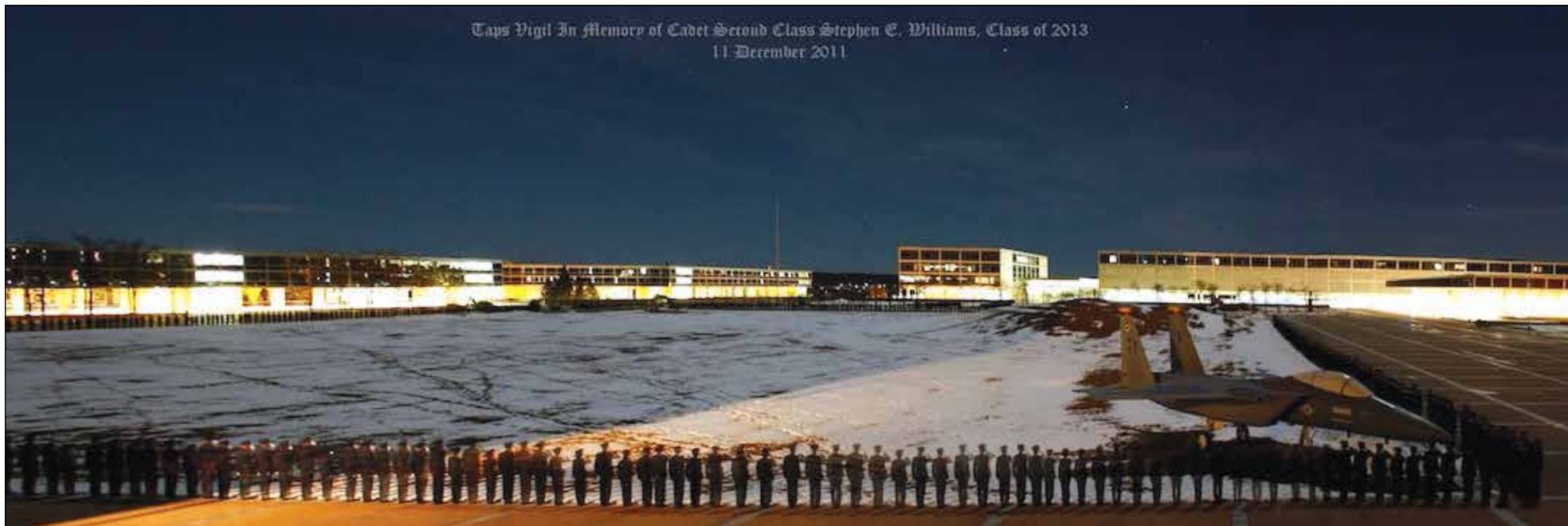
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Courtesy photo by U.S. Air Force Maj. Isaiah Alley

U.S. Air Force Maj. Isaiah Alley attends a memorial honoring his friend Stephen Williams, Dec. 11, 2011, at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado. Williams tragically lost his life in a car accident just before Christmas. In this photo, Alley captured the silhouettes of fellow cadets, their figures resembling ghosts, rendering a final salute to their fallen brother.

Maj. Alley's evolution to lethal F-16 pilot

By A1C
Belinda Guachun-Chichay

56th Fighter Wing

Editor's note: The March edition of Thunderbolt ran photos of U.S. Air Force Maj. Isaiah Alley's Feb. 19, 2025, final active-duty F-16 flight at Luke AFB. This is the story of his U.S. Air Force journey. He now flies with the Air National Guard in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

The cockpit hummed with a steady vibration, the scent of jet fuel thick in the air as U.S. Air Force Maj. Isaiah Alley, 309th Fighter Squadron director of operations and instructor pilot, tightened his grip on the flight controls. The Arizona sun cast long golden streaks of light across the Luke Air Force Base tarmac.

It was a sight he had seen countless times before: first from the ground as an enlisted maintainer, hands buried in an F-16 Fighting Falcon, and now from the cockpit, leading the next generation of fighter pilots into the skies.

Alley's love for aviation was sparked in childhood, growing up in a household where both parents served in the U.S. Army. His father, a medevac helicopter medic, introduced him to the world of flight.

On the vast expanse of Fort Hood, Texas, the skies above him would often come alive with the rhythmic thrum of rotors and the distant roar of cargo aircraft like the C-17 Globemaster III and KC-130J Super Hercules.

Some of Alley's earliest memories were spent in the sweltering Texas heat, floating in a pool near the runway, where he could watch the massive machines carve through the sky. The way they defied gravity fascinated him, embedding a passion that would shape his future.

By his teenage years, his bedroom shelves became a shrine for aviation, lined with meticulously built model planes, each one a tribute to his growing fascination.

His curiosity for mechanics extended beyond the air—he bought an old, beat-up car in high school, spending countless hours under the hood, hands stained with grease as he coaxed life back into the machine. This hands-on passion naturally steered him toward a career as an aircraft mechanic in the military.

Although Alley knew he wanted to join the U.S. Air Force, finding a recruiter was complicated. "Coming from a small town in Ohio, there weren't any Air Force recruiters in my area," said Alley. As a result, he began the enlistment process through a nearby U.S. Navy recruiter, completing his entry paperwork through them.

When it came time to sign into the Delayed Entry Program at the Military Entrance Processing Station, the last phase of the enlistment process, he had an unconventional plan. "I



U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Belinda Guachun-Chichay
U.S. Air Force Maj. Isaiah Alley, 309th Fighter Squadron director of operations, taxis a U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon, Feb. 19, 2025, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. A former enlisted F-16 crew chief, Alley's hands-on maintenance experience gave him a unique understanding of the aircraft, enhancing his capabilities as a pilot. As part of the 56th Fighter Wing, he contributed to its mission to train the world's greatest fighter pilots and combat-ready Airmen.

walked straight into the Air Force recruiter's office," Alley said. "The crew chief-turned-recruiter looked at my ASVAB scores and said, 'You can pretty much do whatever you want.' And I told him, 'I want to be a crew chief.'"

The recruiter was not convinced. "He looked at me and said, 'No, you don't,'" Alley recalled. "He had been an F-15 crew chief himself and knew how tough the job was. But I didn't care. I told him, 'That's really what I want to do.'" Alley smirked, recalling the moment. "It was a little awkward getting back on the Navy bus after that," he said. "My recruiter was pretty disappointed, maybe even a little mad. But it didn't matter."

In 2006, mere months after meeting with a recruiter, Alley embarked on his military journey at Basic Military Training. It wasn't until his first duty station at Luke AFB that he truly got his hands on the F-16.

As he was warned, the life of an F-16 crew chief was relentless, with 12-hour shifts under the scorching desert sun, the scent of jet fuel permanently embedded in his uniform. Pre-flight inspections were a meticulous dance, where every bolt, every hydraulic line, and every panel had to be checked with precision. The seasons dictated their mechanical headaches—temperature fluctuations wreaked havoc on aircraft components, leading to long and frustrating nights of troubleshooting failing systems.

Through it all, the camaraderie among maintainers was

unshakable. They worked together, backs aching, hands numb with cold, or foreheads slick with sweat. They were all driven by the same unyielding mission: to keep the jets in the air.

After two years as a crew chief, Alley set his sights on the cockpit.

"I didn't know where to start," Alley admitted. "There were so many programs—ROTC, the Air Force Academy, scholarships, testing out of courses, and so much more. It was very overwhelming." Lacking the wealth of online resources available today, he decided to tackle what he considered the most challenging task first, which was attempting to secure a spot at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado.

When approaching his officer in charge about applying, he was met with immediate resistance. "Leaving early would be a disservice to the Air Force," Alley was told. "We are relying on having a crew chief for six years, and departing early would mean we'd be one short of what we had contracted for." It was a bogus excuse.

Undeterred, he waited. A new OIC, one who had been prior enlisted, had a complete opposite response. "He was all in," Alley said. "He did everything he could to get the ball rolling." Winning the 2008 Crew Chief of the Year in the squadron level was the final push.

"That award got me dinner with Brig. Gen. Noel T. Jones, 56th Fighter Wing commander, at the time" Alley said, grinning. "I asked him if he'd sign my academy application, and he said, 'yes.' I think his signature was the final push my application needed. Timing and luck just lined up."

Enrolling in the rigorous five-year program, including a preparatory school year, Alley found himself facing new challenges. The Academy's academic demands were brutal. "It was relentless," Alley said, shaking his head. "Going from a high-tempo, structured maintenance life to studying for exams—it was a total 180."

He began to find his footing in his new life at the Academy, until Sophomore year delivered a blow Alley never saw coming. His best friend and fellow cadet, Stephen Williams, was killed in a car accident just before Christmas. "I was at my breaking point," Alley admitted. "I was ready to walk away."

His girlfriend, now wife, convinced him otherwise. "She reminded me of everything I'd worked for to get here," Alley said. "Quitting meant a lifetime of 'what-ifs.' I couldn't live with that."

To honor Stephen, Alley and his friends built a cross, ensuring his memory lived on. They gathered for memorials, posted heartfelt messages on his Facebook page, and visited his grave. The most powerful tribute came in an unexpected way—a photograph Alley captured during a memorial ceremony at the Academy.

See ALLEY, Page 4

ALLEY

(from Page 3)

The final image revealed a haunting yet beautiful sight: cadets' shadows cast in a way that resembled ghostly salutes to their fallen brother. This image, framed and signed by Stephen's closest friends, was gifted to his family at the funeral in Pennsylvania. A final salute.

Emerging from grief, Alley earned his commission, securing a coveted pilot slot. Determined to succeed, he threw himself into training, outworking natural-born talents who underestimated him. He proved that perseverance and sheer willpower could outmatch innate ability.

"To anyone hesitant about chasing their dreams, I say this: If you want it badly enough, outwork everyone," said Alley. "If one person says no, ask someone else. Keep going until you get a yes." After graduating from the Academy in 2013, he was stationed at Holloman AFB, New Mexico, for F-16 training.

His time as a maintainer gave him a unique edge. "I understood the jet inside and out," he said. "But more than that, I understood the maintainers." It was not just his technical knowledge that set him apart—it was his deep respect for enlisted Airmen.

At Holloman, he noticed a disconnect between young pilots and their crew chiefs. Many lieutenants hesitated, unsure how to interact with the maintainers responsible for their jets. "I told them, 'Start with something simple. Ask how their day's going.' It builds trust," Alley said.

Beyond social connections, he helped pilots understand the intricate world of aircraft maintenance. "A lot of pilots see maintenance as one big group," he explained. "They don't realize there's a crew chief, an avionics specialist, a hydraulics expert, a weapons technician—each with their own job and expertise. I became the translator, making sure pilots knew exactly who to go to for the right technical issues."

Years later, flying over the Pacific during Cope North, a multinational exercise, Alley experienced a defining moment. That morning, the sky was an unbroken expanse of deep blue, stretching endlessly above the vast ocean. Below, sunlight



U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Belinda Guachun-Chichay
U.S. Air Force Maj. Isaiah Alley, 309th Fighter Squadron director of operations, prepares for his final active-duty flight, Feb. 19, 2025, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. His career has come full circle, concluding his active-duty service at the 56th Fighter Wing, the same base where he began his career. Alley now serves in the Air National Guard in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

fractured into thousands of glimmering shards on the water's surface, an endless mirror reflecting the sky.

Inside the cockpit of his F-16 Fighting Falcon, the rumble of the engine pulsed beneath his fingertips, a steady, powerful heartbeat of warfighting capability. Alley and his wingmen locked into a perfect V formation, their aircraft slicing through the air like birds of prey. The radio crackled, a command echoed, and time itself seemed to stand still.

Then, after a moment of too-quiet silence, missiles tore free from their rails. Uninhabited islands standing as silent tactical grounds for air superiority in the Pacific shook from the impact of the dropped ordnances.

A surge of patriotism swelled in Alley's chest. This was it. This was why they trained. "This wasn't just flying, it was executing the mission," said Alley, his voice resolute. "Every move was calculated, every decision mattered." Flying alongside pilots from allied nations, Alley said that it gave him an undeniable perspective that the U.S. Air Force stood out.

"The way we train, the level of discipline—it's unmatched," said Alley. "We don't just meet the standard; we set it." In the field of airpower, learning never stops. Whether mastering new aircraft systems, refining mission tactics, or adapting to cutting-edge technologies, fighter pilots exist in a state of perpetual evolution. Training is relentless because it has to be.

"We spend a day and a half planning for a 90-minute flight, only 40 minutes of which is actual combat training," said Alley. "That's the level of preparation it takes."

After being stationed as an instructor pilot at Luke AFB's 309th Fighter Squadron, Alley carried that same intensity and grit into the training of future F-16 pilots. "Master the basics, because in combat, there are no second chances," Alley said directly. "You can't afford to learn some lessons the hard way. Some mistakes don't leave room for a debrief."

With the 309th FS transitioning from training the F-16 to the U.S. Air Force's latest fifth-generation fighter, the F-35A Lightning II, Alley is preparing for his next chapter—joining the 177th Fighter Squadron in the Air National Guard in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

"I've worked so hard to get here, and I didn't want to restart with a new aircraft," said Alley. "I have so much history with the F-16, so it means a lot to me to stay in it."

His transition to the U.S. National Guard allows him to continue flying while considering future opportunities in civilian aviation. Moving to the East Coast will be a new adventure for his family, but they embrace it with open arms.

As Alley prepares to take off on a new journey, his legacy at Luke AFB remains. A maintainer turned fighter pilot, an instructor shaping the next generation, and a leader dedicated to the U.S. Air Force's ultimate mission: to be lethal and always maintain warfighting readiness.

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Haboob Havoc 2025



Community leaders observe from an air traffic control tower at range two during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, at Barry M. Goldwater Range, Arizona.



Above: A U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing, performs a steep climb, observed by community leaders during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, over Barry M. Goldwater Range, Arizona. Haboob Havoc is a total force competition that provides a way for pilots to demonstrate their skills across a range of aircraft while also testing their abilities in different mission sets such as dogfighting.

LEFT: Community leaders watch a U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing, perform evasive maneuvers during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, over Barry M. Goldwater Range, Arizona.

25



U.S. Air Force Airmen assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing and community leaders stand for a group photo during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, over Barry M. Goldwater Range, Arizona. Haboob Havoc is a total force competition that provides a way for pilots to demonstrate their skills across a diverse range of aircraft while also testing their abilities in different mission sets such as dogfighting and gun runs.



U.S. Air Force Capt. Meg Guerro, 310th Fighter Squadron F-35A Lightning II student pilot, speaks to community leaders during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, at Barry M. Goldwater Range, Arizona.

Below: A U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing, performs a strafing run for community leaders during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, over Barry M. Goldwater Range.



Above: U.S. Air Force Airmen from the Explosive Ordnance Disposal flight assigned to the 56th Civil Engineer Squadron put an EOD bomb suit on a community leader during Haboob Havoc, March 29, 2025, at Barry M. Goldwater Range, Arizona.



Senior Airman Katelynn Jackson
a strafing run for
ge, Arizona. Haboob
ills across a diverse
ghting and gun runs.

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Proposals due May 15 for Airmen Immersive Learning Challenge

By Dan Hawkins

Air Education and Training Command Public Affairs

JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-RANDOLPH, Texas —

Lt. Gen. Brian Robinson, commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC), has issued a challenge to Airmen: revolutionize how we train and educate the force with immersive learning technologies.

This initiative, inspired by a visit to Arizona State University's (ASU) cutting-edge Dreamscape Learn facility, aims to propel AETC's training into the 21st century and equip Airmen to thrive in future conflicts.

"Traditional training methods, while valuable, often fall short in replicating the complexity of the modern battlespace," said Robinson. "We must embrace innovative solutions that accelerate learning, enhance decision-making, and cultivate the critical thinking skills our Airmen need to be a highly proficient and adaptable force ready for complex, multi-domain operations."

The Commander's Challenge calls upon AETC units to develop innovative proposals that leverage immersive learning technology, like Dreamscape Learn, to transform their training programs. Submissions are due via email to AETC.ELE.Workflow@us.af.mil NLT 15 May 2025.

The goal?

"To bridge the gap between traditional training and real-world operational environments," Robinson said.

The Challenge:

AETC units are invited to submit proposals outlining how they would utilize immersive learning technology to enhance their training programs. Ideal proposals will:

- **Identify a specific training need:** Detail a current training gap that can be effectively addressed through immersive learning.



U.S. Air Force photo by Dan Hawkins

The Commander's Challenge calls upon AETC units to develop innovative proposals that leverage immersive learning technology, like Dreamscape Learn, to transform their training programs. Submissions are due via email to AETC.ELE.Workflow@us.af.mil NLT 15 May 2025.

- **Present a compelling use-case:** Clearly articulate how the technology will be integrated into the curriculum and the specific learning objectives it will achieve.

- **Outline a comprehensive implementation plan:** Address key aspects such as IT infrastructure, staffing, sustainment, and data analytics and security.

A panel of subject matter experts will evaluate submissions and select finalists to participate in a virtual Pitch Day.

The Stakes:

This challenge presents a unique opportunity for AETC units to:

- **Be at the forefront of training innovation:** Pioneer the use of cutting-edge technology to enhance Airmen readiness.

- **Secure funding and resources:** Receive support to implement their proposed immersive learning solution.

- **Make a lasting impact:** Shape the future of Air Force training and development.

The Commander's Challenge stems from a shared vision between AETC and ASU, who have collaborated since 2019 to pioneer educational innovation. Dreamscape Learn, a cutting-edge immersive learning platform, blends advanced pedagogy with the immersive power of the entertainment industry.

"This technology has the potential to redefine how we teach and learn," explained Lt. Gen. Robinson. "By immersing our Airmen in realistic, dynamic scenarios, we can accelerate their learning, close training gaps, and better prepare them for the complex challenges they will face."

The Future of Training:

"By embracing these technologies, we can empower our Airmen with the knowledge, skills, and experience they need to function implicitly in wicked operational environments," Robinson affirmed. "This challenge is a call to action for all Airmen to be part of building the future AETC training ecosystem."

Eligibility requirements

- Units must be within Air Education and Training Command to participate.

- Units must meet the minimum standards outlined in the technical specification document as far as power, IT infrastructure, connectivity, etc.

- Units must commit to continuity of contracting or staffing required to maintain the system and the scenarios.

- Units must share progress on implementation and integration with their operations and provide examples of improvements that have been made to the learning environment in conjunction with the incorporation of experiential development into their curricula.



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Luke participates in Military Appreciation game



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Michelle Gagnon, 607th Air Control Squadron plans and programs flight chief, sings the National Anthem during the 2025 Military Appreciation game, Mar. 23, 2025 at the Camelback Ranch baseball complex, Glendale, Arizona.



U.S. Air Force Capt. Adam Munekata, 308th Fighter Squadron student pilot, yells the ceremonial "Play Ball!" at the 2025 Military Appreciation game, Mar. 23, 2025, at the Camelback Ranch baseball complex, Glendale, Arizona.



U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Airman Jakob Hambricht

U.S. Air Force Honor Guardsmen assigned to the 56th Fighter Wing present the colors during the 2025 Military Appreciation game, Mar. 23, 2025, at the Camelback Ranch baseball complex, Glendale, Arizona. Airmen from Luke Air Force Base and the greater Phoenix area participated in the day's activities as the Arizona Diamondbacks faced the Chicago White Sox.

LEFT: U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. David Berkland, 56th Fighter Wing commander, throws out the first pitch during the 2025 Military Appreciation game, March 23, 2025, at the Camelback Ranch baseball complex, Glendale, Arizona.



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