

Change of command for RAAF's first F-35 squadron

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The RAAF's first Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II squadron has seen its first change of command since converting to the aircraft in 2018.

Following the closure of 3SQN at RAAF Williamtown and the withdrawal of its F/A-18A/B Hornets in late 2017, WGCDCR Clare became the RAAF's first F-35 squadron commanding officer, and re-established 3SQN at [Luke AFB in Arizona](#) in early 2018.

"When I got the phone call to tell me I was not only going to fly the F-35 but command the first squadron, I was sitting in a taxi with my family about to head on a holiday," WGCDCR Clare said in a release. "The excitement didn't lessen on the day I went for my first flight in the F-35. The moment signified a key milestone for me as I had reached a long-held career goal."

At Luke AFB, 3SQN was initially integrated with the USAF's 56th Fighter Wing (FW) at the F-35 Integrated Training Center (ITC) where its growing cadre of pilots and lead elements of its maintenance workforce trained RAAF, USAF, and JSF program international partner nation pilots and maintainers.

WGCDCR Clare brought one of the first two [F-35As back to Australia](#) in late 2018, where the squadron commenced a two-year validation and verification (V&V) process to ensure the aircraft can be integrated into the Australian environment and can operate effectively with other ADF capabilities. This V&V process culminated in Exercise Lightning Storm, and the results of the V&V will now be assessed prior to the F-35A being granted an initial operational capability (IOC) by the end of 2020.

WGCDCR Clare was the third RAAF pilot to convert to the F-35A, and during his nearly three years in command of 3SQN, he logged some 350 hours on the jet, including three ferry flights from the US to Australia.

"The men and women of 3SQN take a lot of pride in their work and that is what has driven the ongoing success of the capability," WGCDCR Clare said in a release. "The Air Force is in the middle of a significant transition right now. We are operating a retiring platform as well as learning the tricks to the new one, all the while operating with the same number of people and without reducing the level of air power capability."

"It is humbling to see what the team have been able to achieve," he added. The results have been because of careful planning, ongoing collaboration, and ingenuity of our personnel. We are conducting the kind of high-level pilot training that produces combat-ready pilots, as well as carrying out maintenance on-the-job training, which has reduced the burden of sending technicians overseas to undertake training.

"While we are all a little sad to see the classic Hornet retire, I have no doubts that the F-35A capability will continue to move ahead in leaps and bounds because, in no small part, of the high

calibre of the people that are already supporting the platform and those that continue to transition across.”

WGCDR Harper was originally an F/A-18A/B classic Hornet pilot and a graduate of the RAAF’s elite fighter combat instructor (FCI course). He completed the RAAF’s first F-22A Raptor exchange with the USAF before converting to the F/A-18F Super Hornet as executive officer (XO) of 1SQN.

The RAAF currently has 23 F-35As at Williamtown with 3SQN and 2OCU, while a further three aircraft are at Luke AFB preparing to be ferried to Williamtown. 77SQN is due to relinquish its classic Hornets by the end of 2020 and start taking delivery of its first F-35As in early 2021, while the final classic Hornet unit – 75SQN – will follow at the end of 2021.