



Volkel Air Base and 312 Squadron

Volkel Air Base was built in 1940-1941 by the German Army, as a so called Nachtlandeplatz for aircraft of the Luftwaffe. In 1942 Fliegerhorst Volkel became operational. Originally grass runways were used, but as a result of the soggy surface two crossing hardened stone runways were built, with an additional third grass runway. During 1943 and 1944 several units used Fliegerhorst Volkel, flying the Messerschmitt Bf 109, Junkers Ju88, Messerschmitt 262 and Arado 234.

Allied bombardments on August 15 and September 3 1944 caused severe damage to the infrastructure of the Fliegerhorst, ending the operational use of the airfield for the Luftwaffe.

After the war Volkel became homebase to allied bombers and tactical fighters, after which it was used as training centre for personnel of the Royal Netherlands Navy and Marine Corps from 1946 to 1951. The airfield was used for carrier-deck exercises for the Fireflies of HrMs Karel-Doorman,

the Royal Netherlands Navy aircraft carrier. On 1 April 1950 the airfield officially became Volkel Airbase for the Netherlands Air Force (which became Royal Netherlands Air Force in 1953). The first occupants were Gloster Meteors of 327 and 328 squadron. In 1952, the 1st Tactical Fighter Group was founded, existing of 311 and 312 squadron. In 1953 313 squadron was founded at Volkel. The task of 313 squadron was to train new pilots for European navigation and weather conditions. Since 1958 313 squadron moved to Woensdrecht. Since 1960 the strike task was added to the air defence, ground-attack and ground-troop support tasks, followed by a 24/7 QRA task since 1962.

In 1964 311 squadron was the first Volkel based unit to receive the first supersonic aircraft of the Royal Netherlands Air Force, the F-104 Starfighter, followed by 312 squadron in 1965. In 1969 hardened aircraft shelters were built at the air base. In that same year 306 squadron moved from Twente Air Base to Volkel. The squadron, which used the RF-104G since 1962, flew its exercises from de Peel Air Base, close to Volkel.

In 1982 the first F-16 entered service with 311 squadron, followed by 306 squadron in 1983 and 312 squadron in 1984. In 2005, 313 squadron, now





equipped with the F-16, returned to Volkel as an operational fighter squadron. The training task of the squadron was transferred from 313 squadron to 306 squadron in 2001. In 2007, 306 squadron moved to Springfield, Ohio, to act as a training unit for future F-16 pilots. The unit was disbanded in 2010. In September 2012, 311 squadron was disbanded, due to budget cuts.

Present and future users of Volkel Air Base are 312 squadron and 313 squadron. At the time of writing of this article, 313 squadron is transitioning to the F-35A, leaving 312 squadron as the sole F-16 operator at Volkel Air Base and the Royal Netherlands Air Force.

312 squadron, Sons of Bonzo.

The squadron introduces itself to the public as: “We deliver worldwide airpower at discretion of the Dutch government. We are

dedicated to strike hard when needed using the latest available tactics and capabilities. We now operate the F-16A MLU (Mid Life Update), which is constantly updated to enable international integration and to keep up with modern threats and demands.”

The motto of 312 squadron is *Audax Cum Consilio: Bold and Discreet*. The nickname of the squadron is *Bonzo*, derived from the name of the dog of the commander of 327 squadron, the first Netherlands Air Force squadron which had Volkel as its homebase. The name was chosen by the first commander of 312 squadron, Captain van de Akker.

The squadron logo is two crossed golden swords interlaced with a red lightning strike. The markings consist of a red and white checkered tailband with the squadron’s logo in the middle of the tail. The only difference in this format is the absence of the tailband or the toned-down version of this scheme.



Squadron commander Lt. Col. Patrick “Naish” Vreeburg

The commander of 312 squadron is Lt. Col. Patrick “Naish” Vreeburg. He is married, has two daughters and is an experienced F-16 pilot and active in the Royal Netherlands Air Force since 1995. In that year he started his career at the Koninklijke Militaire Academie (KMA, Royal Military Academy). After completing these four years he went to Woensdrecht Air Base for the Elementary Flying Course, followed by the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training at Sheppard Air Force Base from 1999 to 2001. He graduated as a member of class 00-08 and earned his wings after completing the training. He moved on to Tucson in Arizona to have his F-16 training, after which he returned to the Netherlands to be stationed at Twente Air Base. After moving to Volkel Air Base he was flightcommander at 312 squadron from May 2010 to June 2013. In this period he followed the Instituut Defensie Leergangen Middelbare Defensie Vorming, an education preparing officers for functions in policy preparing and policy executing functions.

In July 2013 he started Project Officer Replacement F-16, followed by the function of Project Officer CLSK F-35 Transition Team, both in Breda at the headquarters of the Royal Netherlands Air Force. The next step in his career was made when he became Director of Operations with 313 squadron at Volkel Air Base in July 2015. Starting in August 2017 he was assigned to the Ministry of Defence in Breda, as student Advanced Command and Staff Course. The following two years he was Chief Air C2 Cell Commando Luchtstrijdkrachten (Air Force Command). Since December 2020 “Naish” is commander of 312 squadron at Volkel Air Base.

Numbers

Over the years the F-16 fleet in the Netherlands was strongly reduced. In total 213 aircraft were received, to be based at Leeuwarden, Gilze-Rijen, Twente, Eindhoven and Volkel. In 1994, 316 squadron was disbanded resulting in 18 aircraft taken out of the inventory. In 1995 314 squadron was disbanded, followed by 315 squadron in 2004, 306 squadron in 2010 and 311 squadron in 2012. This left only 322 and 323 squadron at Leeuwarden Air Base and 312 and 313 squadron at



Volkel Air Base. All together a total of 61 airframes were allocated for use with these three squadrons. Surplus airframes were sold to Chile and Jordan. Chile received a total of 36 aircraft, of which 29 were F-16AMs and 7 F-16BMs. Jordan received a total of 21 F-16, consisting of 13 F-16AMs and 8 F-16BMs.

Hours on the clock

The F-16 fleet is over 40 years old and with the current task (securing the east flank of NATO), will the remaining flying hours, which they have left, be reached sooner than the expected life time? “The flights we make for our current task are long, but as the pandemic forced us to reduce the flight hours for the last two years, over all the life expectancy of the airframes will be as planned.” During our visit to Volkel Air Base a total number of 35 F-16s were operational. This number will be decreased over the coming years. As “Naish” stated, the last F-16 will leave the Royal Netherlands Air Force around October 2024.

Decision making

Is the F-35 the aircraft wished for by the air force or would an upgraded version of the F-16 have been an option? “I was a member of the team responsible for research of the F-16 successor in 2013-2015. The choice was made, assessing the threat in the world and which tasks NATO and our government wanted us to perform. Based on these data several aircraft were compared, and finally only one aircraft could be selected being able to perform these tasks, which is the F-35. It is capable to perform in a heavy threat environment with advanced aircraft systems, like the Russians and the Chinese have. It was said that we would

only like to have the F-35, but we assured that, based on the demands and capabilities of the other possible aircraft to replace the F-16, only one aircraft was right for the job. Diminishing the tasks could have led to a less advanced and capable aircraft, but that was no option. An advanced version of the F-16 would have given us more capabilities in some ways in comparison to our current F-16, but the design of a fifth generation fighter like the F-35 is, being able to perform in a threat environment like we have now, cannot be solved by modifications to a fighter like the F-16, even equipped with more and more advanced sensors and other electronic modifications. Stealth capabilities like the F-35 has, is one of the functions that cannot be solved with an upgrade to the F-16.”

Is the decision to choose the F-35 based on political issue or did the air force decided

they wanted to have the F-35? “We did not decide, but we advised. But one cannot argue with facts. Of course politics is an issue, like the choice for the F-16 in which Fokker had a part in manufacturing, or the Cougar and NH-90, in which politics played a part. In these examples other factors than only mission capability were also an issue in the decision making.”

The commanders future

Do requirements for fighter pilots differ as the F-35 is entering service? “Fighter pilots now in service with the air force are in principle capable to transition to the F-35. In the decision making which pilots go to the F-35, there is one issue, being age. In my case, I also have to make my own plans and find out how I see the rest of my career. I am very much interested in the organisational part of my job, so my future for now is unclear. I still love flying, but when I do not transition to the F-35 it will be hard to find a seat. Time will tell.”

“Oscar”

Even if 312 Squadron is the last RNLAF F-16 unit, the aircrews are relatively young, with many having only recently joined the ranks after the graduation from the B-Course in Tucson, Arizona. 1st Luitenant “Oscar” is one of the young pilots in the squadron. He joined the Royal Netherlands Air Force in 2015, starting the short military training at the Koninklijke Militaire Academie in Breda. After completing this, he started basic flight training at Woensdrecht Air Base, as a student of the



Elementaire Vlieger Opleiding (EMVO, Elementary Flying Training). In this stage student pilots learn the basic of flight in the PC-7 basic trainer. As “Oscar” says, “This part of the training results in less students have to leave the flying course in the United States, as the skills needed for pilots are tested and trained here. Students who don’t have the basic skills fail here, and those who pass make a much better chance to complete the following course. The PC-7 is a rather fast aircraft to start with. From the beginning it is difficult to keep up with it. I had some glider experience, but that is just a very small advantage” The next stage of the training is at Euro NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training at Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas, USA for 1.5 years. Here the students fly the Beechcraft T-6 Texan II. “The Texan is more powerful than the PC-7, it has a more digital cockpit and an ejection seat and makes you work harder, as things happen faster. The first period is in fact a repeat of the EMVO. After the basic flying, the first steps in formation flying are made and a beginning is made with low-flying training at 500ft. More speed and faster decision making comes when the students go to the next step of pilot training, the twin-jet powered T-38 Talon, also at Sheppard Air Force Base for a year. Now things really speed up. Introduction

to Fighter Fundamentals. In this stage we start using radar for navigation, and learn to use the aircraft for military purposes. After completing this part, I received my wings and went on to the next step, F-16 training at Tucson. The fourth flight in the F-16 is already a solo flight. This seems fast, but the F-16 is less difficult to fly than the T-38, because of the usage of fly-by-wire. Also new in this stage is the usage of radar, which the T-38 doesn’t have. Also live ammunition is used for the first time”. After returning to the Netherlands the F-16 pilots have additional training for the period of one year. When this year is completed, the pilot is combat ready. “Oscar” flew with 322 squadron at Leeuwarden AB for one year, and after this he joined 312 squadron at Volkel AB and is now still full in the learning curve.

70 Years 312 squadron

312 squadron was formed on 1 December 1951 and on 1 December 2021 the squadron celebrated its 70th anniversary, but due to the Covid-pandemic a proper celebration could not be organised. However, F-16AM J-197 received a special tail, marking 70 years of 312 squadron. As things are planned now, the official celebration will be held at Volkel AB on 20 May 2022.

The F-35 era

The successor of the F-16 at 312 squadron, the Lockheed Martin F-35A, will arrive at Volkel Air Base in June 2022. The first 6 aircraft will be transferred from Leeuwarden Air Base, where the aircraft will be delivered to from the factory in Italy. The first batch of 15 aircraft will be placed at 313 squadron. After completing deliveries to 313 squadron, the first F-35 will be delivered to 312 squadron. As the order is now, 312 squadron will receive 9 aircraft. Goal is to extend this number to 16 aircraft.

The tasks of the squadrons within the Royal Netherlands Air Force will remain equal to the current tasks. “Naish” explains: “QRA, the Quick Reaction Alert duties to secure the skies and to intercept incoming unidentified or hostile aircraft is and will be a task for all squadrons. 322 squadron at Leeuwarden and 313 squadron at Volkel will be the first to perform QRA duties, while 313 squadron will be responsible for the strike role. When 3ZZ, which will most likely be 312 squadron, is fully equipped and operational with the F-35, I expect that the strike task will be placed with 312 squadron.”

We would like to thank Lt. Col. Patrick “Naish” Vreeburg, 1st Lt. “Oscar” and Adjutant Piet van Dijk for their hospitality and for making this visit possible. 🇳🇱

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