

FRISIAN FLAG 2023

ARTICLE BY PETER DE VOS AND BRAM MARIJNISSEN, LOWPASSAVIATION.COM



"The newspapers show us on a daily basis that peace and security are not obvious. A war is going on, a few hours away from our country. We, as the Royal Netherlands Air Force, exist to keep our country, Europe, and NATO countries safe. We do this on a daily basis, together with our NATO allies. But to be able to do this, we have to train. For that reason, we organize Exercise FRISIAN FLAG."

With these words, Commodore Johan "Cake" van Deventer, commander of Air Combat Command, announced Exercise FRISIAN FLAG 2023, which was

hosted by Leeuwarden Air Base from 2 to 13 October. The exercise normally takes place in March or April, but due to extensive runway repairs at Leeuwarden AB, the exercise was planned for October 2023.

History

The first exercise of its kind in Europe was staged at Leeuwarden in 1992. Originally, the exercise was called DIATIT, the first three letters coming from the word DIANA, 323 Tactical Training Evaluation and Standardization (TACTES) Squadron's nickname (the organizing unit), and the last three letters coming

from the words Tactical Integrated Training. In 1993, the exercise was renamed DIAWACS to emphasize the participation of an E-3 AWACS. DIAWACS reverted to its original name of DIATIT, following the cancellation of E-3 participation in 1997 and 1998. Due to growing international participation, the exercise evolved into a much larger force exercise dubbed FRISIAN FLAG in 1999. The name 'Frisian Flag' was chosen because 'Frisian' is named after the province of Friesland, the home of Leeuwarden AB, and because of similar 'Flag' exercises such as 'Red Flag' (U.S.) and 'Maple Flag' (Canada). Initially, the exercise was flown out of one

base, Leeuwarden, only. Nowadays, participants can take part in the exercise while making use of their home base.

On land, at sea and in the air

Exercise Frisian Flag is about gaining experience in flying large-scale aerial combat. Missions included in the exercise include:

- Air defense missions. The aim is to deny enemy fighter aircraft access to a specific area.

Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) F-35A *Lightning II* taking off at Leeuwarden AB. The aircraft has special markings to celebrate the 80th anniversary of 322 Squadron.

- ❑ Offensive (strike) missions.
- ❑ Missions to protect other aircraft.
- ❑ Missions to neutralise fixed and moving targets on the ground or at sea. Fighter aircraft operate independently or in concert with army or navy units (joint terminal attack controllers).

Organization

323 SQN/Air Combat Development Centre (ACDC) is responsible for the organization of FRISIAN FLAG, together with the expertise center, in the area of operations with (fighter) aircraft at Leeuwarden AB.

We had the opportunity to speak with Major Marcel "Fikkie" Burgers, Project Officer of FRISIAN FLAG 2023. The Project Officer for FRISIAN FLAG is responsible for organizing the exercise as efficiently as possible, in cooperation with the Staff.

About the organization of this year's exercise compared to previous years, Major Burgers replied "Invitations for the countries to take part in the exercise are made by the commander of LSK (Lucht Strijd Krachten). On the operational level, the Project Officer is responsible. Planning the exercise from start to finish takes approximately eight months. Invitations are normally sent in the summer months, the first meeting with the participating countries is in October. During this meeting, the goals and procedures of the exercise are discussed. Planning starts easy, but after the commitment date has passed, planning starts to get more intense. The commitment date (Final Planning Conference (FPC) and Site Survey (SISU)) is normally in January, but because this year's edition took place in October and the summer holidays were in between, the Final Planning Conference was moved to the end of July. Planning for the next edition of the exercise starts shortly after the current exercise, but due to operational reasons and the ongoing transition to the F-35 FRISIAN FLAG 2024 will not take place. The aim is to organize the next edition in March 2025."

The exercise has a baseline scenario, depending on the available air space available. This year, air space from northern Netherlands to Denmark and a small part of Germany is available in the first week. In the second week, the exercise takes place more to the south.

We noticed that not all the participants fly from Leeuwarden, what is the reason? Is it a space issue? "This year, several units use their home base as an operating base for the exercise. This is not due to available space at Leeuwarden, but is a decision of the participants. Preferably, we would like the participants

to fly from Leeuwarden, as the aircrews are not able to plan and debrief together when they use their home base. As a solution, video conferencing is used to plan and debrief and a liaison of every participant is at Leeuwarden during the exercise. On the other hand, during a real conflict coalition forces are not all flying from a base together."

What is new this year? "New in this edition of FRISIAN FLAG is flying in an LVC (Live Virtual Constructive) simulator environment, which can combine real-time situations with simulated scenarios. LVC training can be used to create highly challenging target situations and increase adversarial capabilities in air operations. From this simulator, an F-35 pilot flies the mission with the other aircraft in the exercise. He is visible on the displays of the other aircraft and aircrews via datalink and takes part in the mission as if he is in a real aircraft. The pilot also attends the briefing and debriefing of the missions. Also new, but unfortunately canceled, was the participation of MQ-9 Reapers in the exercise. The Royal Netherlands Air Force 306 squadron was invited to participate in FRISIAN FLAG 23, but because the squadron was not completely capable of taking part with the MQ-9 they had to decline the invitation. Planning is that they will participate in the 2025 edition."

About the tankers involved in the exercise, Major Burgers was asked about the capacity this year. Tanking capability is normally provided by aircraft taking part in the EART Exercise from Eindhoven. "This year, EART was not scheduled, but we managed to get a tanker from the MMU, the United States Air Force 100ARW from RAF Mildenhall, and the Royal Air Force provide tankers."

The navy is also involved in FRISIAN FLAG. In what way? "In the second week of the exercise naval assets participate in the exercise. The Royal Navy provides an aircraft carrier with Royal Air Force F-35s. The Royal Netherlands Navy will also be integrated into the exercise. On two days a frigate will control the Red Air Force, furthermore, they will simulate hostile radar scenarios."

This year's edition of FRISIAN FLAG has fewer participating aircraft than previous editions. In previous editions about 60 aircraft were present for the exercise. Is there a particular reason for this lower number? "This is due to several facts. This summer, a few very large exercises took place in Europe. Large detachments participated in these exercises, putting a large strain on the participating countries. On the other hand, invited countries like France and Italy had operational commitments forcing them to decline the invitation. The positive about having



RNLAF F-35A *Lightning II*s assigned to 322 Squadron taxiing to the end of runway for take-off.

fewer aircraft in the exercise is planning-wise. Less aircraft means quicker planning. Another positive fact is that we can fly different types of missions. This year, we can fly a personal recovery mission, in which we simulate the recovery of a downed aircrew from enemy territory. We also fly a NEO mission. Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) is the ordered (mandatory) or authorized (voluntary) extraction of civilian noncombatants and nonessential military personnel from danger in a country to a designated safe haven. Evacuations could occur under a variety of circumstances, including civil unrest, military uprisings, environmental concerns, and natural disasters."

On the question, if he had any wishes on aircraft to take place in the exercise (like participating Red Air), the Major replies that he cannot think of anything. "Red Air" is provided this year by Top Aces, hired



by USAF and flying from RAF Lakenheath with A-4 Skyhawks and Alpha Jets. They take part in the exercise for five days." On other items on the wish list, he replies that "it is possible to simulate any aircraft and scenario. A lot of things the public does

not see is taking place in the exercise."

On how the exercise will be impacted in the future, and if it will be a completely simulated exercise, he replies "Will there be manned aircraft 25 years from

now? Maybe, drones will take part. It all depends on the changing battlefields. We react to developments and according to these developments, we adapt the scenarios. Time will tell. At this moment, this is a question you can't answer."

Will other, maybe more exotic countries be invited to the exercise? "In principle, we invite northern European countries to FRISIAN FLAG. These are the countries we fly and train with on a daily basis. Another fact is that we look at the geographical





position of a particular country. It would be unwise to make a participant travel long distances to take part. We have had exceptions in the past, like the Canadians last year. They were invited this year but they didn't manage to participate."

As we know, the war in Ukraine is still going on, is it influencing the contents and scenarios of FRISIAN FLAG? "This war brings new aspects we can't simulate, like the use of drones in an offensive use. On the other hand, we intend to use cyber warfare in the simulations. The Ukraine war proves that is and remains necessary to train. For now, we provide air policing in the eastern part of Europe, but when things escalate, we can act. To act we train."

A large exercise like FRISIAN FLAG has much

impact on the population close to the airbase. How do you cope with complaints about sound? "We are well aware that we have an impact on the living conditions during the exercise. We try to keep noise and nuisance as low as possible, in good consultation with local authorities and residents. The flight times are only during daylight hours and we do not fly during the weekends. On the other hand, the exercise has a positive economic impact in the area. All the participating personnel have to stay in the area, using hotels, and restaurants, and spend their spare time around Leeuwarden or elsewhere in the country."

Voodoo

One of the F-35 pilots of the 493rd Squadron of the United States Air Force is Lieutenant-Colonel Greg

"Voodoo" Schroeder. As commanding officer for his unit during FRISIAN FLAG 2023, he is very pleased to take part in the exercise. "The possibilities offered by the Netherlands are exceptionally good. The airspace above the North Sea is great", and he thinks the training scenarios used in the exercise make training valuable. "By working together with other NATO partners, our pilots can experience how pilots from other countries work. This is certainly educational for less experienced pilots." As an F-35 pilot, Lieutenant-Colonel Schroeder is on his second Frisian Flag. The first time he participated was in the F-15C Eagle, also from 493rd Squadron from RAF Lakenheath. "This time, flying the F-35, it is a totally different experience for us. The F-15 was an air-to-air platform. Its sole task was gaining air superiority and it was made for

dog fighting and air-to-air kills. The F-35 on the other hand, is a multirole fighter. It can act in different roles, and for this reason, this exercise is very valuable to us. Working together with other generation fighters (the F-35 is a fifth-generation fighter, and the F-16 and F-18 are fourth-generation fighters) gives us a good insight into the tactics and possibilities we can use. As the F-35 is a very complex weapon system it takes time to gain experience in all the different missions the aircraft can handle."

Finnish looking at the future

A detachment of three F/A-18 Hornet fighter aircraft of the Finnish Air Force and a small staff of the Satakunta Air Command were active from Leeuwarden AB. The Finnish Air Force has been able to train interoperability



between the 4th and 5th generation fighters and expand the know-how of the Finnish Air Force on the F-35s. "Our goal here is to test the cooperation of F/A-18 and F-35 aircraft in air operations. The performance of the F-35 is very impressive, and with the situational awareness it possesses, it can support the Hornets. The Hornet, in turn, can carry a significant weapons load, so the different fighters support each other. The lessons learned here will be important for us as we will operate simultaneously with the Hornets and F-35 in Finland between 2026 and 2030. Of course, cooperation between 4th and 5th generation fighters will continue in NATO into the 2030s", says Lieutenant-Colonel Juuso Ilkka, the Detachment Commander.

the Dutch Wadden Islands to Denmark. Aircraft and helicopters from seven countries participated in FRISIAN FLAG. Most of these operated out of Leeuwarden AB, while others used their home base. A few ships also took part in the exercise.

The authors of Lowpassaviation.com would like to thank Team Communications & Public Affairs of Air Combat Command Leeuwarden AB, special thanks goes to Captain Jayme Tol and Major Marcel "Fikkie" Burgers for their help and hospitality.

Participating countries and aircraft

Approximately 40 aircraft and helicopters participated in training missions, which took place mainly over the North Sea, from



USAFE F-35A Lightning IIs assigned to 493 Fighter Squadron.



Finnish Air Force F/A-18C *Hornet* assigned to HävLLv 11. The unit is based at Rovaniemi AB.

PARTICIPATING AIRCRAFT

Air Force	Unit	Type of aircraft	Operating base	Home base
RNLAF	301 Sqn	AH-64DN	Leeuwarden	Gilze-Rijen
RNLAF	312 Sqn	F-16AM	Volkel	Volkel
RNLAF	313 Sqn	F-35A	Leeuwarden	Volkel
RNLAF	322 Sqn	F-35A	Leeuwarden	Leeuwarden
RNLAF	860 Sqn	NH90-NFH	De Kooy	De Kooy
BAF	350 Sqn/2 Wing	F-16AM	Leeuwarden	Florennes
RDAF	Skrydstrup Wing	F-16AM/BM	Skrydstrup	Skrydstrup
FinAF	HävLLv 11	F/A-18C	Leeuwarden	Rovaniemi
GAF	TaktLwG 31	EF2000(T)	Leeuwarden	Nörvenich
RN	617sq	F-35B	Aircraft Carrier	RAF Marham
RAF	10/101sq	Voyager KC2/KC3	RAF Brize-Norton	RAF Brize-Norton
USAFE	493FS/48FW	F-35A	Leeuwarden	RAF Lakenheath
USAFE	351ARS/100ARW	KC-135R	RAF Mildenhall	RAF Mildenhall
Multinational	MMU	A330MRTT	Eindhoven	Eindhoven / Köln-Bonn
Civil	Top Aces	A-4N / Alpha Jet	RAF Lakenheath	Wittmund
Civil	AEC Skyline	Learjet 36A	Leeuwarden	Groningen Airport Eelde

The Royal Danish Air Force and Royal Air Force only participated in the second week of the exercise.

Top Aces conducted Red Air missions out of RAF Lakenheath, United Kingdom. They flew under American flag and the participation of Top Aces was financed by the United States Air Forces Europe.

PARTICIPATING SHIPS

Navy	Registration	Name	Operating area	Homeport
RNLN	F-802	HNLMS De Zeven Provinciën	North-Sea	Den Helder
RN	R08	HMS Queen Elizabeth	North-Sea	HMNB Portsmouth

Abbreviations

BAF	Belgian Air Force	RDAF	Royal Danish Air Force
FinAF	Finnish Air Force	RN	Royal Navy
GAF	German Air Force	RNLAF	Royal Netherlands Air Force
MMU	Multination MRTT Unit	RNLN	Royal Netherlands Navy
RAF	Royal Air Force	USAFE	U.S. Air Force Europe



Three German Air Force Eurofighter EF2000s of the Taktisches Luftwaffengeschwader 31 (TaktLwG 31) at Nörvenich AB lined-up on runway 23 waiting for take-off clearance.



Top: Eurofighter EF2000(T).
Above: Eurofighter EF2000.
The aircraft are assigned to TaktLwG 31 of the German Air Force.







Belgian Air Force F-16AM *Fighting Falcon* assigned to 2 Wing/350 Squadron at Florennes AB.

