

# History, current and future of Ala23, Spain



**I**t was in the 1930s when the city Badajoz had its first aerodrome which was located on the “Las Bardocas” estate between the Gevora and Guadiana rivers, which periodically subjected it to flooding. During the Spanish



war and the following years this airfield served as an elementary school for pilots but shortly after the end of the war the search began for a new location for the airfield. The new location which was chosen as the most suitable is the current Talavera la Real airbase in the region Extremadura near the city of Badajoz. In the early 1950s work began on the so called Reactor School which entered into service in 1953. The works continued for several years, during which the facilities and buildings necessary for the performance of the teaching tasks entrusted to the unit were completed and which have remained unchanged throughout its history.

On 12 September 1958 Talavera la Real airport was opened to national air traffic, with the Madrid–Badajoz airline being operated by the company AVIACO. In June 1959 the Aeronautical easements of Talavera were established which were modified in 1968. On 14 July 1976 the first regular airliner from Iberia was inaugurated and the facilities of the airbase were used to handle the passengers. The problems arising from the joint use of the



airbase made it advisable to build a terminal building and an aircraft parking platform on the opposite side of the runway. The construction works began in 1981 and were completed in 1983 although the terminal was not opened until 1990 when two daily flights were established with Madrid and two flights per week with Barcelona. At the moment the airport has regular flights with Madrid and Barcelona throughout the year and are expanded in the summer and includes other tourist destinations.

## History, current and future of Ala23

On 10 December 1953, Jet School was founded with its first commander Lieutenant Colonel Jose Ramon Gavilan y Ponce de Leon. Its purpose was to provide Air Force pilots with the necessary training so that their adaptation from conventional piston aircraft to the new jets, that would soon arrive from the United States as a result of the Cooperation Agreements, would be completely satisfactory. The first training aircraft for the school that arrived in March 1954 were Lockheed T-33As and the first flight for the school was performed on 24 March 1954. In October 1958 the Reactor School received the North American F-86F Sabre and the Application and Shooting Squadron was founded. In this way the unit provided training to the pilots in the same aircraft that they would fly in their later destinations in different Fighter Wings within the Air Force. In April 1965 the squadrons Jet School and Application and Shooting Squadron were renamed 731 and 732 squadron. The last flight with the F-86F Sabre was on 26 June 1969, in total the F-86F has flown 27.029 hours with 356 students and 29 instructors. A few months later, on 3 November 1969 the Reactor School reached the historic figure of 100.000 flight hours.

The Northrop Casa F-5B joined the unit on 12 December 1970 and it represented a significant leap in the training provided by the school. The last flight with the T-33 was on 28 May 1973 after twenty years of operational service. In total the T-33s have flown 79.297 hours with 535 students and 105 instructors. On 23 March 1987 the Reactor School was renamed to 23rd Fighter and Attack Training Wing

and its squadrons became 231st and 232nd squadron known as “Patas Negras”. Patas Negras is a symbol of excellence because Extremadura is home to a pure-bred Iberian pig, which has black nails, from which is produced a world renowned cured ham.

The instructors are assigned to 231 squadron and the students are assigned to 232 squadron. At the moment 231 squadron consists of 11 instructor pilots from the Spanish Air Force and 1 instructor pilot from the Argentine Air Force, which is here for two years. In 2023 the squadron existed for 70 years and a SF-5 received a special tail to mark this anniversary. The Northrop Casa F-5B has proven to be an excellent training aircraft and during the years it received two midlife update programmes, the first one started in 1991 and extended the lifetime of

the airframe with 3.000 flight hours. The second midlife update in 2000 was assigned to Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) and subcontracted to EADS/CASA which brought the aircraft to the SF-5M standard. The main focus on the second update was on the avionics, installation of a glass cockpit, Head-up display (HUD), Hands on Throttle and Stick System (HOTAS), virtual radar and new navigation and communication systems. Also the wingtips have been modified in order to accept the AIM-9 Sidewinder and the new Martin Baker Mk-16L, a zero-zero ejection seat, has been installed so the pilots don't need to strap themselves on their parachute before entering the cockpit.

This transformed the SF-5M in a lead-in fighter trainer perfectly tailored to prepare the pilots to their final assignment. Due to this update the lifetime of the airframes has been extended to 2027. Nowadays the squadron is operating 19 SF-5M training aircraft. In total on all aircraft types the squadrons have more than 250.000 flight hours flown by around 1700 students and 300 instructors.

## Squadron and second Base Commander Lieutenant Colonel Alfredo Lago Linas

I joined the Air Force in 1995 in the 51st Air force Academy Class (the best) and graduated in 2000 with the







rank of first lieutenant. During my years in the academy I flew approximately 50 hours on the T-35 Tamiz and approximately 150 hours on the C-101 Aviojet. After my graduation I was assigned to the 14th Wing in Los Llanos Air Force Base, which is located near the city of Albacete, and flew during my 6 years stay a total of 920 flight hours on the Mirage F-1. In 2006 I was assigned to the 23rd Wing located in Talavera la Real Air force Base, which is located near the city of Badajoz. I was there until 2015 with the ranks of Captain and Major. After that an 8 year non flying period followed with different assignments within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Air Force Headquarters in Madrid.

In 2023 I came back to the 23rd Wing as the Chief of Training and Squadron Commander. During all those years in the 23rd Wing I flew 2,000 hours on the Northrop F-5. During my career I've been deployed twice to Afghanistan, 3 months each deployment, as a JTAC and once to Djibouti for 4.5 months as the Chief of Air Operations of the Spanish Detachment in Atlanta Operation.

**Fighter Pilot Training Course**

When a person applies for the Air Force he or she must be between 18 and 21 years old, not older! The younger the pilot, the more years to fly. At this moment the oldest pilot within the Air Force is 45 years old. After that they become instructors, squadron commander or will have an office job. The future pilots undergo an education

programme which lasts five years. The first two years are basic military training and then three years of flying in four phases. During the third year of the education they start with phase 1 at San Javier and contains learning the basic flight maneuvering and visual navigation on the PC-21. A total of 35 flight hours are being made during this phase.

If a student fails for this phase the only option within the Air Force is to become a drone operator. The fourth year of education contains phase 2 which is also at San Javier and contains instrumental, navigation, formation and night flights, all in the PC-21. Also navigation trips





Javier but nowadays this part of the education is flown in the PC-21 as the T-35s are withdrawn from use and the Casa 101s are only used for acrobatic demonstration flights.

At the moment the first class is graduating by flying only on the PC-21 in phase 1 and 2. The PC-21 has made basic flight training more modern and efficient given the advanced capabilities of the aircraft and also of the new simulator. The PC-21 is a newly build aircraft which flies very smooth and is easy to fly in but the F-5 is an older aircraft and is difficult to fly, but this helps them in the future. The first F-5 arrived in Spain in 1970 and received two midlife update programmes so at the moment there are talks about making money free for another midlife update to keep the F-5 flying for another 5 till 10 years or replacing

are made during this phase. A total of around 80 flight hours are being made during this phase. During the fifth and final year of education, phase 3 and phase 4 will take place at Talavera la Real. This last part of the training starts in September and lasts until June the next year and after having completed the flying course the students go back to the academy to complete their studies and graduate in July. The first flight in phase 3 at Talavera la Real is called the Dollar Flight which is a tradition within Ala23. The instructor pilot is seated in the front while the student pilot takes the back seat and the instructor treats the student to a flight in which the boundaries of the capabilities of the F-5 are explored including the students first introduction to a supersonic flight!

The student gives his instructor a special silver dollar which they will receive back once the training has been successfully completed and the student is transferred to an operational squadron, that's why this flight is called the Dollar Flight. Phase 3 is the same as phase 2 but the flights are more advanced and they're flying in the F-5. Also Air to Ground flights are part of phase 3.


During phase 3 it becomes clear for which type of fighter aircraft the future pilot is capable, the EF-18 Hornet or the EF-2000 Typhoon. During phase 4 the flights are becoming more advanced and also Air to Ground and Air to Air flights are being made. The difference between phase 3 and phase 4 is that in phase 3 you learn how to fly the aircraft and in phase 4 you learn how to use the aircraft. During phase 3 and phase 4 a total of 40 hours are being made on the simulator and around 115 flying hours are being made in the F-5, so in total around 230 flight hours are being made during the flying course of their education.

At Talavera la Real is also a virtual reality cab which is not obliged but is a good extra practice for the future pilots. Phase 4 is also including a two week exercise to Zaragoza for Air to Ground training missions with practice bombs. During this exercise each future pilot flies 8 sorties. In the past the future pilots flew in the T-35 and Casa 101 at San

them by another type, but which type? At the moment a total of 60 students are trying to complete their education and becoming pilots within the Spanish Air Force and they are divided into 30 for transport at Salamanca, 10 for helicopters at Granada, 10 for fighter aircraft at Talavera la Real and 10 for paratroopers at Zaragoza/Alcantrilla. After completing the 4 flying phases the students go back to Murcia to complete their education and then they decide where they want to continue their career. The pilot with the highest rates will be the first to choose which vacancy he or she will fill, so not everyone gets where he or she wants!

## Maintenance

Regular and daily maintenance checks are performed at Talavera la Real itself, like the tires, engines and small failures. After 25 flight hours the F-5 needs small maintenance and after 150 hours the F-5 gets a revision in the hangar which takes a week time. After 500 flight hours the F-5 needs large maintenance which is being done by Maestranza Central de Aviacion at Albacete Air Base. After 1,000 flight hours a major overhaul is performed and involves a complete review of the aircraft and its integrated systems. During this overhaul the entire aircraft is stripped down and the airframe's integrity is investigated, checked for metal cracks and all systems are tested. After the re-assembly of the aircraft it must pass the acceptance test which is performed by an experienced instructor pilot from Ala23.

*The authors of Lowpass Aviation.com would like to thank all the involved personnel of Spanish Air Force for their hospitality, time and help during our visit at Ala23, Talavera la Real.* 

**Article and photos: Lowpass Aviation-Bram Marijnissen and Rene Slegers**  
[lowpassaviation.com](http://lowpassaviation.com)  
[instagram.com/lowpassaviation.com.nl](https://www.instagram.com/lowpassaviation.com.nl)