
Poland's "Peace Sky" at Home in Arizona

By
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In the transition from Soviet-built MiG-29s and Su-22s to American-built F-16s, Poland takes on one of North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) most aggressive fighter up-starts known as "Peace Sky."

A new generation of Polish Air Force pilots are learning how to fly their country's most advanced fighter, the F-16C/D "Jastrząb" or "Hawk" as it is called, from the Arizona Air National Guard. To date, the central European country has received 41 of the 48 F-16s it has on order and is rapidly increasing its number of qualified pilots with help from seasoned instructors at the 162nd Fighter Wing based at Tucson International Airport.

When the program started here in 2004, we were training Poland's senior pilots and Squadron Commanders. These days we are training their junior pilots, said Lieutenant Colonel Will Johnson, an instructor pilot in charge of the wing's Polish program. We have graduated about 34 Polish pilots so far, and we anticipate that there will be more to come.

Polish fighter pilots undergo a rigorous selection process at home to fly the F-16, the future of their country's Air Force. The Su-22 Fitter, for example, is scheduled for retirement in 2012 prompting more pilots to apply for the Peace Sky program.

First Lieutenant Adam Jantas is one of seven Polish Air Force pilots currently half-way through the initial F-16 course. He is a graduate of Poland's Air Force Academy and has eight years of fighter pilot experience in the Su-22.



It was my goal to train in the U.S., said the Lieutenant. I have been here for two years. I started at language school at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, and then I went to T-38 training at Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi. My final phase is here.

Jantas flies an average of two or three times per week; but in the first months, he flew as much as five times per week.

In the beginning it was good to fly often, so I could practice. Sometimes long breaks are not good when you are learning something difficult, and repetition is very important, he said.

Jantas and his countrymen are not only learning a new aircraft, but also a new way to fly. "Take offs and landings I can do, but all the other stuff in the F-16 is very difficult," he said.

With 40 F-16 hours under his belt, Jantas observed that the F-16 inflicts more G forces and requires more aggressive flying.

The airplane's fly-by-wire system and computer keeps us from exceeding the limitations of the fighter, he said. Before, I had to be more careful not to exceed [the Su-22's] limitations."

According to Colonel Johnson, the goal is to get the Polish Air Force to fly like the U.S. Air Force.

We teach Polish students that fighters can be flexible, said Johnson. We teach them that when you make a flight plan, that is a good starting point, that is where we are going to deviate from. We teach them to adapt, and they like it. They like to have the ability to take off and make decisions.

Since Poland adopted the F-16, it is changing its ways. Pilots are learning to plan the mission prior to take off, which gives their sorties added flexibility.

At home I would spend two or three days planning sorties and then go fly several in a day, said Jantas. I knew exactly what I was going to do in those sorties, but here it changes everyday. Just when you think you have learned something, you will also be introduced to something new at the same time.

The real learning begins at debrief when student and instructor review video from the flight and all questions are answered.

Our instructors are like mothers who love you and are eager to correct you when you do something wrong, but they do it because they care about you and they want to help you, he said. They know what they are doing, and I see that they have a lot of experience and a lot of patience. They just calmly say, Ok, do not do that again.

When Jantas and his compatriots graduate this winter, they will return to flying squadrons in Poland. Their instructors know they will see them again.

We have been sending our members to a base in Poznan for the last two years as mobile training teams, said Colonel Johnson. The teams consist of three pilots; and they spend three months at a time assisting Polish F-16 pilots, keeping them current on their training.

Johnson himself has visited the country nine times to assist former students. Colonel Johnson stated the following:

It is a great country. The people are nice, and the food is great. As a former Soviet republic, they have really adopted capitalism. They have joined the West from a free market standpoint, and they are good allies for our country.

The unofficial motto of the Peace Sky program is "We are more than allies; we are friends." Everywhere U.S. troops are deployed in the War on Terror, Polish troops are there also.

Seeing them succeed gives me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, said Johnson. We will continue to build our alliance with them, and it is a great feeling knowing that the work we do here in Tucson is translating into a safer environment in other parts of the world.