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F-15C Baz serial 802 is individually named *Panther* and carries four Syrian kill markings that date from June 1982.



KNIGHTS OF THE

NEGEV

Combat Aircraft ventures into the Negev Desert for Exercise 'Blue Flag 2017' at Ovda air base.

report and photos: **Stephan de Bruijn and Marco Dijkshoorn**

MULTI-COLORED ROCK FORMATIONS, wadis and sand dunes, all under the dome of a clear blue sky. Here, in the Negev Desert, a new era of multi-national maneuvers and a varied array of aircraft and squadrons congregated for the largest exercise Israel has seen in recent times.

The third biennial 'Blue Flag' exercise was hosted by the Israeli Air Force (IAF)

at Ovda air base from November 2-16. The aggressors of 115 'Flying Dragon' Squadron, part of the Advanced Training Center, acted as hosts, while Tel Nof's 133 'Knights of the Twin Tail' Squadron — operating the F-15A to D — was the lead unit. The hosts transitioned from the F-16A Netz to the F-16C Block 40 Barak in April 2017, but they retain their specialist Red Air enemy tactics mandate.

'This year's edition was larger than the two prior ['Blue Flag' exercises] and saw the participation of over 60 aircraft from

six foreign nations, plus one undisclosed participant', Lt Col Roi told *Combat Aircraft*. Acting as the operational support unit commander, Roi added that the main goal was to 'maximize combat-readiness



in combination with higher and better qualifications for the international aircrews. The mutual tactical learning curve during 'Blue Flag' will eventually result in improved joint operations. In today's world we have to be prepared for the unknown things to come.'

The overall message is very clear. 'Blue Flag' has a profound strategic meaning for Israel as well as the participating countries with regards to their strategic international co-operation.

The first week of 'Blue Flag' was dubbed 'BF1', and in typical large-force exercise (LFE) tradition it kicked-off with a familiarization (fam) phase. Ovda's twin parallel runways accommodated a pair of mass launches each day, the light winds meaning that the fighters often departed in opposite directions! This is apparently regular practice for Ovda's air traffic control team as it helps to reduce taxi times from parking spots on the airfield and gets aircraft into the air more efficiently.

After a defensive counter-air (DCA) phase with the Blue Air team working against the threat provided by the resident aggressors, things ramped up for week two. The various teams prosecuted complex targets in enemy territory. In parallel, the Red Air threat was increased, and at least three night missions

A French Air Force Mirage 2000D gets airborne from Ovda, while Italian Tornados wait to depart in the opposite direction.







were added, all of which culminated with an LFE.

An IAF ground control unit (GCU) coordinated the entire exercise, including the Red Air operations, much the same as ‘Blackjack’ does at Nellis AFB for ‘Red Flag’. The GCU also manages the ranges and the simulated ground-to-air threats; however, no live weapons were carried during this exercise.

Lt Col Roi reflected on the huge joint effort that it takes in order to realize an event such as this. ‘There were many challenges in the preparation and execution of the exercise and it’s a mixture of hard work, pride and fun. BF1 and BF2 contain 10 days of operational flying. Besides all aircrew, the participating countries brought some 1,000 groundcrews with them, all temporarily based at Ovda.’

Fight’s on!

The organizers were keen to point out that there is no winner at ‘Blue Flag’ — ‘the crew is the winner by participating’. Looking at the way the exercise is run, Maj Eran, an airspace controller in the GCU says, ‘Israel is a relatively small country and the ‘Blue Flag’ aircraft must integrate into busy airspace that is filled with small civil aircraft, commercial airliners, daily IAF operations and above all many migrating birds. The airspace, including all activities from Ben Gurion and Eilat International Airports, is fully under the control of the Israel Defense Forces. Pilots must identify themselves, and when everything is approved they can fly over almost the

whole of Israel. During the waves of ‘Blue Flag’, the whole southern part of Israel [south of Jerusalem], except a very small north-south corridor on the east side the country, is closed to all air traffic. Civil aviation flights to Eilat and Ovda are canceled. The GCU controls the area up to 50,000ft and approves all airspeeds. The missions over the Negev desert take up to 90 minutes and contain packages of up to 12 aircraft. After the mission, the return to Ovda is like any other airfield, approaching from one end [unlike the departure procedure], and both runways are in use.’

As one would expect, the post-mission debrief is both complex and critical. The crews all congregate in a large hall at Ovda where big screens show how the exercise played out in 3D, ensuring the maximum information is gleaned from the mission.

New participants

For the first time ever the German Luftwaffe deployed fighter aircraft to Israel. Four Laage-based Eurofighters were detached to Ovda, as were four French Air Force Mirage 2000Ds. It was the first time French combat aircraft had been on Israeli soil for many years.

Another historical first was the participation of the Indian Air Force in the shape of a C-130J Super Hercules that transported a group of ‘Garud’ special operations forces (SOF) troops. The Indian C-130J unit, which bears the motto ‘Kill with stealth’, specializes in the rapid mobilization of SOF in all weather conditions — be that via air-drops or using austere airstrips. They spent the first

Anti-clockwise from above: **One of two white-painted Nachshon Shavits that arrived late in the afternoon at Ovda after each day’s flying.**

A 115 ‘Flying Dragon’ Squadron aggressor F-16C heads out for a mission.

A ‘Knights of the Orange Tail’ F-16I Sufa taxis to parking.

A 510th FS F-16C blasts out of Ovda during ‘Blue Flag’.

F-15B Baz serial 113 Lone Wolf taxis at Ovda. This was the eighth F-15B built and is almost 45 years old, having previously served with the USAF as a trainer.

week of the exercise at Nevatim to train alongside 103 ‘Elephants’ Squadron and Israeli special forces, while in the second week they came to Ovda.

The most elusive participant by far was the Royal Jordanian Air Force, which sent four F-16A/Bs that were kept well away from the media and were not officially acknowledged. There were also the returning visitors: the US Air Force, the Hellenic Air Force, the Italian Air Force and the Polish Air Force, all of whom had participated in both the 2013 and the 2015 exercises.

Notable Israeli participation came in the form of at least two (possibly three) Gulfstream Nachshons — appropriately assigned to 122 ‘Nachshon’ Squadron, recently renamed from ‘Dakota’ Squadron. The Nachshon Shavit is used for electronic intelligence and reconnaissance missions, while the Nachshon Eitam is used for command and control.

During the two-week exercise, observers and officials from Austria, Canada and the United Kingdom came to see the action. Also of note was the fact that during the first few days of the exercise, the IAF executed combat operations in Syria from its northern bases. Tensions in the region are running high, but this demonstrates the Israeli flexibility and professionalism that enabled it to continue with a major international exercise at Ovda. Most countries would have undoubtedly swiftly cancelled any media activities in the same situation — a huge credit to Israel’s forward-looking operational stance.



The comparisons with other large exercises are clear. Indeed, the IAF will head to the US soon for a similar LFE. 'Blue Flag' will return in 2019 and already new elements are planned. Lt Col Roi referred to the new F-35I Adirs that will soon become operational in Israel. 'Many would love to see the Adirs taking part in this year's 'Blue Flag', but this edition came too early for their participation. 140 'Golden Eagle' Squadron is currently undergoing an operational integration process. The first night flights occurred and non-combat operations [have been] flown with IAF fighters and one of the last flight tests that took place involved a series of aerial refuelings with IAF Boeing 707 Re'em tanker aircraft. 'Blue Flag 2019' will be at least as large as the 2017 edition, and 2019 will see participation of the F-35I and most probably F-35 Lightning IIs of the USAF too! 🇺🇸

EXERCISE 'BLUE FLAG 2017' FLYING PARTICIPANTS

Country	Type	Unit	Home base
Israel	F-15A/B/D Baz	133 'Knights of the Twin Tail' Squadron	Tel Nof
	F-15C Baz	106 'Tip of the Spear' Squadron	Tel Nof
	F-16C Barak	101 'First Fighter' Squadron	Hatzor
	F-16C Barak	109 'Valley' Squadron	Ramat David
	F-16C Barak	115 'Flying Dragon' Squadron	Ovda
	F-16I Sufa	107 'Knights of the Orange Tail' Squadron	Hatzerim
	Nachshon Shavit/Nachshon Eitam	122 'Nachshon' Squadron	Nevatim
	C-130J Shimshon	103 'Elephants' Squadron	Nevatim
France	Mirage 2000D	EC 3	Nancy-Ochey
Germany	EF2000	TaktLwG 73 'Steinhoff'	Laage
Greece	F-16C/D	335 Mira 'Tigers'	Araxos
India	C-130J	77 Squadron 'Veiled Vipers'	Hindon
Italy	Tornado IT-ECR/IDS	6 ^o Stormo	Gheddi
Jordan	F-16AM/BM	1 Squadron	Azraq
Poland	F-16C/D	31. BLT	Poznań-Krzesiny
United States	F-16CM	510th FS 'Buzzards'	Aviano

Above: **A smart Hellenic Air Force F-16C from 335 Mira at Araxos.**

Below: **The Luftwaffe's participation with four Eurofighters was something of an historic event — the first time German fighter aircraft have been in modern-day Israel.**

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