

The first of the UK's next generation stealth combat aircraft has today been handed over to the MoD. At a ceremony in Fort Worth, Texas, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond formally accepted the first jet which will be known as Lightning II. The aircraft are Short Take Off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, manufactured by Lockheed Martin. After the ceremony, the UK's new Lightning II jet took to the skies, flown for the first time by RAF Squadron Leader Jim Schofield, the UK's lead test pilot. The UK is the first country outside the US to receive these aircraft and Mr Hammond today announced that the MoD intends to order a fourth Lightning II aircraft next year to add to the three already on contract. The RAF and Royal Navy will conduct flight trials of the jets which will operate from land bases and from sea. Lightning II will be operational from land based airfields from 2018, when it will also commence flight trials off the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier. Mr Hammond announced that the jets are likely to be based at RAF Marham, Norfolk, but that no decision has yet been made. The UK will benefit from interoperability with the US Marine Corps which operates STOVL aircraft similar to the Lightning II. The multi-role jet features the latest stealth and Intelligence, Surveillance Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) technology and represents the cutting edge of combat aircraft design. Fifteen per cent of Joint Strike Fighter work is carried out in the UK and over 130 British companies contribute to the supply chain. It is worth over £1Bn to UK industry each year and will support around 25,000 British jobs over the next 25 years. After the acceptance ceremony, the Defence Secretary toured Lockheed Martin's production plant with representatives of major UK sub-contractors on the programme, including BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce. Mr Hammond said: "This hugely capable combat aircraft is now officially British and in the hands of our expert pilots. Highly skilled British aerospace workers are also playing a vital role in the delivery of Lightning II with UK companies involved in 15 per cent of the production and 25,000 British jobs sustained as a result." "Having taken decisions on the final designs of our new aircraft carriers and balanced the MoD's budget we can now proceed confidently to regenerating our carrier strike capability with these cutting edge stealth combat aircraft." The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Dalton, said: "The delivery of the United Kingdom's first Lightning II marks the beginning of a new era in our ability to project Air Power from the land or sea. Alongside our increasingly capable combat-proven multi-role Typhoons, the Lightnings provide an additional complimentary capability to our growing Combat-ISTAR force." Royal Navy Fleet Commander, Admiral Sir George Zambellas, said: "Jets at sea offer unmatched persistence and can guarantee the delivery of airpower around the globe. With the advent of Lightning II, UK Defence has its opportunity to maximise the utility of our carriers and this extraordinarily capable aircraft through a range of sea and land basing options. The result will be a strategic capability which will deliver for many decades to come." RAF test pilot, Squadron Leader Jim Schofield, flew the Lightning II in Texas today. He said: "The aircraft flies exceptionally well and I'm very excited about the capabilities it brings to the UK. It boasts the world's best sensors which allow the pilot to find and target anything that's out there and a stealthy signature which means the enemy can't do the same to you. This revolutionary combat aircraft will provide the best protection for our soldiers, sailors and airmen for the next 35 years." The Joint Strike Fighter was officially named 'Lightning II' in 2006 in honour of both the US Air Force's Lockheed P-38 Lightning from World War II and the Royal Air Force's English Electric Lightning of the Cold War. The total number of Lightning II to be procured by the MoD will be confirmed in the 2015 Strategic Defence &

Security Review.</p>