

Once, the Royal Netherlands Air Force maintained the largest F-16 fleet outside the US Air Force. The 213 Fighting Falcons were acquired to fight the forces of the Warsaw Pact in a Cold War that never turned hot, but they did go on to see intense action elsewhere after the end of that conflict. Today, Volkel is the stronghold of the Dutch 'Vipers'.

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ALTHOUGH THE F-16 is perhaps the most valuable Royal Netherlands Air Force (RNLAf) asset, this has not prevented politicians from decimating the force in several rounds of cutbacks. Nowadays, the extensively modernised but small fleet faces issues relating to ageing, while the acquisition of its preferred successor, the F-35, is in clearly jeopardy.

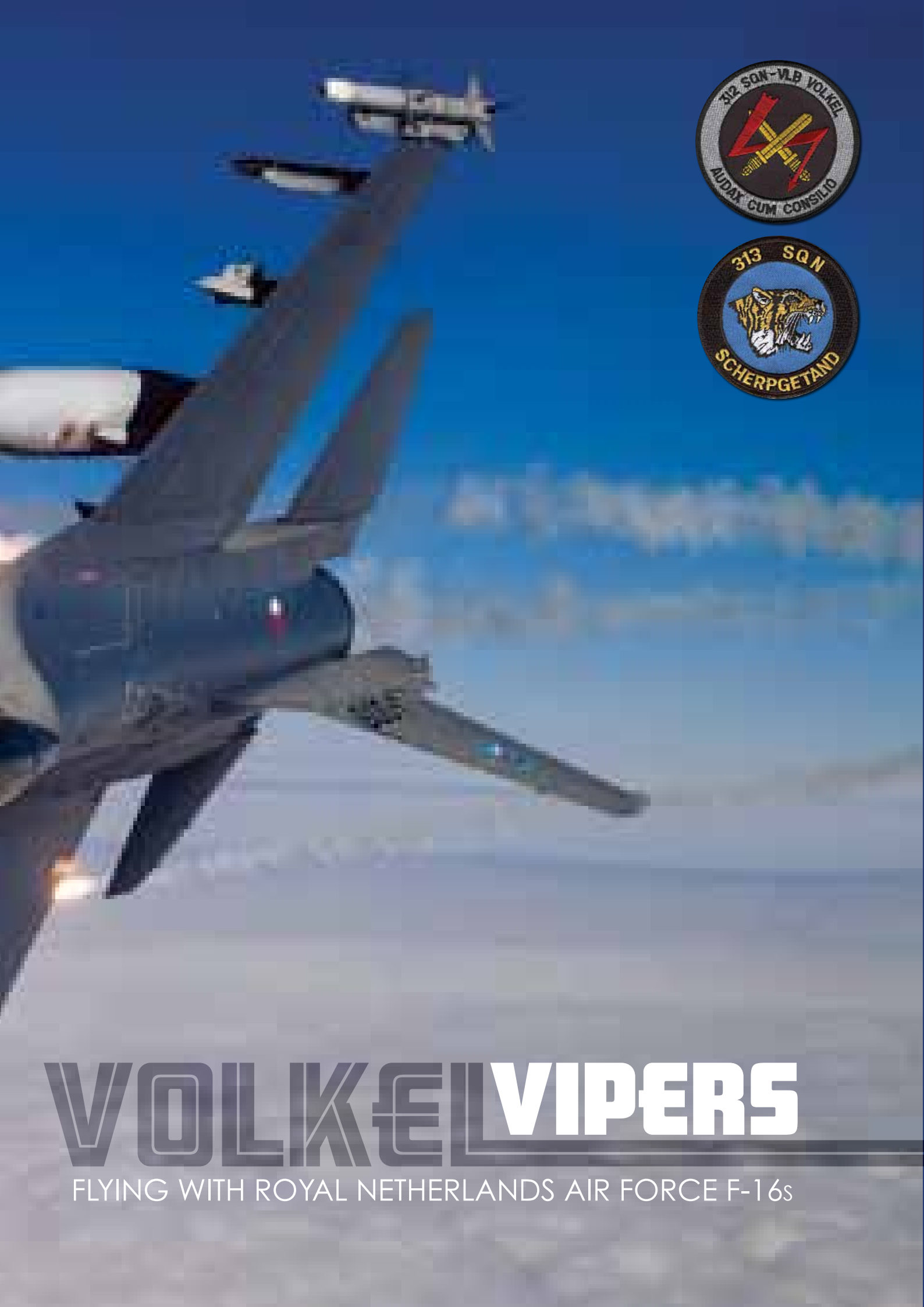
The '1st Fighter Wing' is the unofficial name for the Volkel-based F-16 squadrons of the RNLAf. The Air Force does not have a wing structure and squadrons report directly to the base commander. The name originates from the 1950s when Volkel became the first tactical air base, with 311 Squadron as its first and 312 Squadron as its second tactical squadron. The name was never official and was soon forgotten until it emerged again at Villafranca in Italy in 1993, when elements of all three Volkel-based squadrons (306, 311 and 312) deployed for Operation 'Deny Flight' over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since no particular squadron was deployed in its entirety, the '1st Fighter Wing' identity once again returned to use.

306 Squadron has since been disbanded, and, with the closure of Twenthe air base, 313 Squadron moved to Volkel in 2005. It is now one of two F-16 squadrons based here, alongside 312 Squadron. 311 Squadron unfortunately fell victim to the recent draw-down of the F-16 force from 84 to 68 aircraft and is no longer a flying unit, having officially disbanded on 27 September 2012.

Once, the RNLAf boasted nine operational F-16 squadrons equipped with some 18 aircraft each. Several rounds of force reduction then decimated the inventory, and today only four operational squadrons are left. Those at Volkel aside, the other two are stationed at Leeuwarden, both bases having 29 aircraft. The four squadrons share the same missions: air-to-ground, air defence, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). All operational pilots (68 in total) perform >

A Litening pod-toting F-16AM from 313 Squadron punches out decoy flares as the pilot rakes the jet into a punishing diving turn.





VOLKELVIPERS

FLYING WITH ROYAL NETHERLANDS AIR FORCE F-16s



'I fired one AMRAAM at a distance of 15 miles. I knew it had hit the target because after the missile exploded I saw burning pieces of the wreckage fall down to earth'

Col Peter Tankink



Left top to bottom: **With the drastic reductions that have hit the Dutch F-16 force over recent years, pilot slots on the 'Viper' have become highly-prized.**

F-16AMs from 312 and 313 Squadrons make a low pass over the Vliehors (Cornfield) range on the North Sea coastline.

A young F-16 driver inspects BDU-33 drill rounds during his pre-flight walk-round check inside the hardened aircraft shelter at Volkel.

the three missions but 323 Squadron at Leeuwarden also has the additional Tactical Training Evaluation and Standardisation (TACTES) task.

MiG-killer

Col Peter Tankink is the Volkel commander and in this capacity is responsible for the air base and its squadrons. Tankink achieved fame on 24 March 1999 when he shot down a Serbian MiG-29 in the early days of Operation 'Allied Force'. He was the only non-US coalition pilot to down another aircraft in that campaign. 'I was flying a combined sweep/escort night mission for a large strike force when the 'Fulcrum' appeared, heading towards a flight of Canadian CF-188s to the side of us. I fired one AIM-120 AMRAAM at a distance of 15 miles. I knew it had hit the target because after the missile exploded I saw burning pieces of the wreckage fall to earth'. The MiG-29 pilot survived.

The shoot-down was remarkable in other respects. NATO was short of F-15s and only Dutch F-16AMs were considered capable enough to perform the sweep and escort missions. The Mid-Life Update (MLU) was the most modern F-16 in theatre, and at that time only the RNLAf was flying this variant operationally. The MiG kill was, according to Col Tankink, the first and only non-US AMRAAM victory to date. Coincidentally, Tankink's F-16 for that mission, serial J-063, was the very same aircraft he had flown on his first mission over Bosnia six years earlier.

Current operations

The late 1990s and the first decade of this century were heydays for the RNLAf. The air arm transformed from a Cold War 'stationary' air force to an expeditionary force much better suited to changing strategic challenges. The Netherlands wanted to play an active role in the new world order and to do that

with the best equipment and training. New helicopters and transport aircraft were introduced, while the RNLAf had just started to exploit the enormous potential of the MLU programme.

F-16s have been deployed for real-world operations almost continuously since 1993. Up until 2000 they were involved over the former Yugoslavia, flying first from Villafranca and later from Amendola in Italy. In 2003 they started operations in support of Operation 'Enduring Freedom', from Manas in Kyrgyzstan. The jets were relocated to Kabul, Afghanistan in 2004 and in 2006 they moved to Kandahar. Currently, the RNLAf is still supporting ISAF with four F-16s, stationed at Mazar-e Sharif since 2011.

The main mission at Mazar-e Sharif is air support for ISAF ground troops through reconnaissance and armed overwatch. Reconnaissance is primarily focused on finding improvised explosive devices (IEDs). >



‘Actually, we support the tracing of IEDs because we cannot do it alone’, says Col Tankink. ‘With our Rafael RecceLite pod we look for signs in the terrain that indicate the possible presence of IEDs. We can see details on the ground as small as a little bottle of water. Analysts search the RecceLite images based on their knowledge of IEDs such as, for instance, what the insurgents use to fabricate them and where they usually bury them.’

The F-16 pilots are ordered to reconnoitre certain routes and give attention to those spots where IEDs could have been placed, such as a bend or hole in the road. Col Tankink likens it to a game of cat and mouse. ‘We are not the only parties that search for IEDs but we are often the first to go. Since we started using RecceLite in 2009 we have found a couple of dozen IEDs’. The colonel notes proudly that not a single IED has been detonated on routes that Dutch F-16s have reconnoitred.

The Dutch F-16s also perform non-traditional ISR (NTISR) missions. ‘We do this kind of mission with our Northrop Grumman Litening Advanced Targeting Pods (ATPs)’, Col Tankink continues. ‘We

do surveillance for ground troops such as convoys and patrols and report any suspicious activity in their neighbourhood.’

Libya

Reconnaissance was also performed in Operation ‘Unified Protector’ (OUP) over Libya. Changes to the political climate resulted in a situation in which the RNLAf was prohibited from attacking any ground targets. The initial tasking was air defence. The F-16s deployed to Decimomannu in Italy within a couple of days and were operational within 24 hours. ‘The first days, we literally worked from picnic tables and folding chairs’, recalls Col Tankink. ‘We had brought with us only a minimum of equipment to plan missions and do maintenance. All the other stuff arrived later by truck. As a result of the many deployments and exercises in the past 20 years, we know exactly what we have to bring and what we have to do when we deploy to a new destination.’

While the initial mission was air defence, reconnaissance was soon added. ‘In the early days we did about 90 per cent air defence

and 10 per cent recce with the ATP. The RecceLite pod was not used. Later in the conflict the division was 50:50. We often did recce in the form of non-traditional ISR in combination with air defence.’

Col Tankink acknowledges the challenges of ISR in Libya. ‘In the beginning Gaddafi’s troops used heavy military vehicles whereas the rebels drove in pick-up trucks. Later on, the Gaddafi troops started to use pick-ups too, so that identification became harder. We orbited over certain areas and in view of certain patterns we could determine who was who’. Knowledge of equipment was in any case very important and one of the lessons learned during the campaign. ‘Identification of armoured vehicles has been neglected since the end of the Cold War but was essential in OUP. Gaddafi troops had modern equipment, and the equipment of the rebels was ageing, but you need to know what is what.’

Maintenance

With the successor to the F-16 delayed by at least three years, the RNLAf is being forced to fly the Fighting Falcon longer



This photo: **The Royal Netherlands Air Force’s F-16 solo demonstration aircraft is serial J-015 — sometimes referred to as the ‘Orange Lion’. Based at Volkel, the aircraft is pictured taking on fuel from a KDC-10 producing a dramatic shockwave as it enters a turn.**

Far right: **Looking for trouble — Volkel F-16s regularly ‘play’ with NATO allies during dissimilar air combat training (DACT).**

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COL PETER TANKINK

Although he is the commander of Volkel air base, Col Tankink has spent most of his flying career at Leeuwarden. After passing out of the Royal Military Academy in 1986 he went to Sheppard AFB, Texas, for flight training. He graduated in 1987 and remained there as an instructor until 1990. From 1990 to 1999 Tankink was an operational F-16 pilot with 322 Squadron, being operations officer (deputy squadron commander) for the last three years of that period. He went on to become the Chief Ready Team for the F-16 Mid-Life Update (MLU) programme at Leeuwarden between 1999 and 2001. This team introduced and supervised the MLU within the F-16 squadrons.

Col Tankink was squadron commander of 323 Squadron from 2002 to 2005, followed by a tour as deputy air base commander of Leeuwarden until 2008. That year he became the Chief of Fighter Operations at RNLAF Headquarters until he took command of Volkel in 2011.

During his career Col Tankink has completed the Dutch Weapon Instructor Course in 1993, the NATO Tactical Leadership Programme in 1994, the NATO Flying Supervisor Course at RAF Cranwell in 1994, the Commander Safety course in 2002 and the Joint Doctrine Air



Campaign Course at Maxwell AFB in 2003. He has made seven combat deployments:

- Operation 'Deny Flight' (Bosnia), October 1993 to April 1994.
- Operation 'Deliberate Force' (Bosnia), April to October 1995.
- Operation 'Deliberate Guard' (Bosnia),

October 1996 to April 1997 and October to November 1998.

- Operation 'Allied Force' (Kosovo), January to April 1999.
- Operation 'ISAF' (Afghanistan), June to October 2005 and October 2009 to February 2010.



The 'Orange Lion' leads a section of Volkel wing F-16s in a smart line-abreast formation for the camera.



than anticipated. That means increasing maintenance and operational problems that need to be addressed. Consequently, the Air Force has set up programmes to improve the type's operational usability until retirement, which is currently scheduled for 2025.

'The F-16s are wearing out', says Col Tankink. 'We often need to do inspections in places we did not need to look before. So it takes more time. Secondly, many electrical problems originate in the wiring. Those are not the classic maintenance complaints that can be found in maintenance manuals. It is a problem of ageing and is often caused by the internal vibrations over years of flying. New wiring is often not available and has to be custom made. It costs a lot of time and is expensive and the jets are grounded longer. These complaints will increase the older the jets get'. In June 2012 the first Dutch F-16 to reach 5,000 flight hours was serial J-199.

The greater part of the operational improvements is being driven by the proliferation of advanced surface-to-air missile systems such as the SA-10 and SA-20 family. 'These systems are constantly being improved so our defensive systems need to follow that development. Over Libya we already had to adjust our tactics because of limiting capabilities', admits Col Tankink. 'The updates incorporate the whole electronic warfare systems.'

Updates are being planned for the electronic countermeasures system (AN/ALQ-131), the radar warning receiver, chaff/flare dispensers (to double the capacity), Electronic Warfare Management System (EWMS) and Litening ATP, as well as the presentation of threats through the installation of the Advanced Threat Display (ATD), and acquisition of towed decoys.

The ageing LANTIRN targeting pods will be disposed of. They are no longer used operationally and nowadays only serve for training. Seven additional ATPs will be acquired as replacements to bring the total number of these pods to 29.

Acquisition of new air-to-air and air-to-ground weaponry is at an advanced stage. The AIM-9L/M Sidewinder is at the end of its operational life and will be replaced by the modern AIM-9X. The air-to-ground arsenal is due to be expanded, with improved laser- and GPS-guided weapons including a stand-off missile that will enhance the survivability of the F-16 against well-defended targets. Other improvements include the Mode 5 IFF (identification friend or foe) and software (M6.5 tape).

Training

In the coming years the RNLAf will implement a reduction in manpower but this, according to Col Tankink, will have no effect on the annual training

programme. 'However, it will probably put more pressure on personnel because fewer are available to do the same job', he says. 'We will participate in 'Red Flag' at Nellis AFB in January 2013, probably followed by a training period at MCAS Yuma. At Yuma training opportunities are ample. We can train with our Dutch ground troops as well as with the US Marine Corps. We will also train with USMC F/A-18s, AV-8s and F-5 aggressors. Apart from that, it will be a nice opportunity to talk with the Marines about the F-35.'

As regards the F-35, the future of the Dutch fighter force is uncertain. Years ago the RNLAf expressed its preference for the F-35A. Two 'test' aircraft have already been ordered. The first was flown in August 2012, and the second will follow in spring 2013. However, the Joint Strike Fighter programme has been a controversial political issue from the outset. The current situation is that a political majority in the Netherlands is opposed to purchasing the aircraft and the jet is now a major electoral issue. The possibility exists that the new government will cancel Dutch participation in the programme. A new request for proposals for an F-16 replacement is one of the options, the consequence of which would be yet more delays in fielding a successor. 