

F-16 training center unveiled in South Burlington

\$18M site will be used to prepare pilots for combat situations

SOUTH BURLINGTON -- The U.S. Air Force's top strategic planner touched down in Vermont on Friday to help the Vermont Air National Guard open its new, \$18 million mission training center for F-16 fighter pilots.

Lt. Gen. Christopher D. Miller, the Air Force's deputy chief of staff for strategic plans and programs, said the state-of-the-art flight simulator center will help pilots prepare for combat situations, including instances where weaponry has to be deployed with extreme precision.

"Something like this center will help us do that," Miller told a gathering that included Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Maj. Gen. Michael Dubie, the Guard's adjutant general. Later, Miller joked he was glad to be in Vermont and "out of that five-sided building," referring to the Pentagon.

Dubie also spoke and made a connection between the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and the value of the new center, saying training pilots on the center's advanced simulators instead of on actual flights will save on the expense and environmental impact of using jet fuel.

"We're all watching what's happening in the Gulf," he said. "We are learning that we need to be less dependent on fossil fuels. It's the right thing to do and the responsible thing to do. This building can help us do that."

The 9,600-square-foot center, which went into operation a month ago, is expected to become a key training facility for F-16 fighter pilots from

around the country. Dubie said Leahy's involvement was critical in getting the funds to build the center.

If the Air Guard wins approval to shift its pilots from F-16s to F-35s, the center could be adapted to provide training for F-35 pilots, Guard spokesman Lloyd Goodrow said.

The equipment and technology inside the center itself were so high-tech that reporters who attended Friday's event were not allowed to carry cameras or cellular phones during a tour of the facility after Miller, Dubie and Leahy spoke.

During the tour, attendees watched as several life-like scenarios were played out on a bank of simulators and flat-screen TVs, including checking out a commercial aircraft struggling with an electronics problem over upstate New York and doing protective fly-overs for troops in Afghanistan.

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