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Former Thunderbird Pilot Assumes Command of Kadena's 18th Wing as Air Force Prepares for Fighter Upgrade

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KADENA AIR BASE, Okinawa A seasoned former Thunderbird pilot, Brigadier General John Gallemore, has taken the helm of the 18th Wing, the United States' largest fighter base in the Western Pacific. With over 4,300 hours piloting aircraft such as the F-16 Fighting Falcon, F-15E Strike Eagle, T-38 Talon, and T-37 Tweet, Gallemore brings a wealth of experience to

his new role. He assumed command from Brigadier General Nicholas Evans during a ceremony on Monday, attended by over 500 airmen and guests in a hangar on Kadena's flight line, despite the damp and rainy Okinawan morning.

The event also saw Command Chief Master Sergeant William Cupp take over as the wing's senior enlisted leader, succeeding Chief Master Sergeant Brandon Wolfgang. Evans, who will now serve as commandant of cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, was lauded by Lieutenant General Stephen Jost, commander of U.S. Forces Japan and 5th Air Force. "Their leadership has been nothing short of exemplary," Jost said of Evans and Wolfgang during his keynote address. Reflecting on his tenure, Evans told the audience, "For the past two years, Wolf and I have worked to ensure the 18th Wing is both a steadfast ally and a respectful neighbour." He also extended thanks to local Japanese officials, including the mayors of Chatan, Kadena, and Okinawa City, delivering his gratitude in their native language.

In July 2024, the U.S. Air Force confirmed that 36 F-15EX Eagle II fighters will be permanently stationed at Kadena, with arrivals expected to begin in late 2026. Speaking to reporters in March, Evans noted the significance of this transition. On Saturday, two F-15EXs from the 85th Test and Evaluation Squadron at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, landed at Kadena for temporary integration and familiarisation training, according to an 18th Wing news release. The wing, however, declined to provide further details on the training when contacted on Monday.

The ceremony showcased an array of aircraft, including an F-15E, an F-35A Lightning II, and an MQ-9 Reaper, the latter marking a milestone as Kadena began hosting Pacific Air Forces' first MQ-9 unit in late 2023. Jost credited Evans with overseeing this development, stating, "The wing's ability to manage complex force changes across 32 squadrons while sustaining hundreds of rotational forces is a testament to your exceptional leadership and expertise."

Evans' tenure was not without challenges. A series of criminal incidents involving U.S. service members on Okinawa sparked local discontent. In December, a Japanese court sentenced Senior Airman Brennon Washington to five years in prison with labour for the sexual assault of a 15-year-old Japanese girl. Washington was among four U.S. service members charged with sexual assault or attempted sexual assault on the island since March 2024. These incidents prompted public outcry, formal complaints from local

authorities, and apologies from U.S. military and diplomatic leaders. In response, liberty policies for U.S. troops in Japan were tightened in October.

Gallemore, a veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, previously served as inspector general of Air Combat Command at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia, and led the 8th Fighter Wing at Kunsan Air Base, South Korea, from 2021 to 2022. This marks his first command in Japan. Addressing the audience, he outlined a clear vision: “Our mission is straightforward but demanding. We will establish deterrence through strength, advance our warfighting capabilities, and, if deterrence fails, defend this base and Japan.”