



Intermediate Flight Training Shifting to Aviation University

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Introduction

In June the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) broadcast a television news report showing students at the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) Aviation University training in an intermediate flight trainer. The university previously only conducted basic flight training, whereas intermediate flight training was conducted at one of the PLAAF's three flight



The JL-8 intermediate trainer.

Source: http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16349263.html

academies. However, this and a few earlier reports indicate that some pilot candidates are undergoing a program of compressed basic and intermediate flight training at the university. It is possible that intermediate flight training will eventually be shifted entirely to Aviation University, thereby shortening all prospective fighter pilots' initial training to three years.

Initial Pilot Training Program

Until 2020, fighter pilot candidates proceeded through initial pilot training in four steps. The first step was one year of basic flight training at Aviation University in the CJ-6 basic trainer.¹ After graduating from Aviation University, pilot candidates would take their second and third steps of initial pilot training at one of the PLAAF's three flight academies in the cities of Shijiazhuang, Harbin, and Xi'an.² The second step was one year of intermediate flight training in the JL-8 intermediate trainer and the third step was one year of advanced flight training in the JJ-7 or JL-9 advanced trainers, the latter of which had largely replaced the former by the end of the 2010s.³ Those who graduated from a flight academy would earn their wings and be assigned to an operational unit where they would undergo the final, fourth step of their initial training: one year of training to transition to a combat aircraft.⁴

In 2020 the PLAAF began eliminating one step in the initial pilot training program for increasing numbers of prospective pilots. In 2020 the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy introduced the JL-10 advanced trainer to at least one of its training brigades.⁵ Because the JL-10 is a superior trainer, those who were assigned to a JL-10 training brigade at Shijiazhuang would “skip” the second step of intermediate flight training, resulting in those students only undergoing one year of advanced flight training before proceeding to an operational unit.⁶ (Some intermediate flight training subjects were undoubtedly included in that year of advanced flight training.) The Harbin Flight Academy later introduced the JL-10 and eliminated intermediate flight training for some of its pilot candidates, too.⁷ Consequently, at both academies some pilot candidates would graduate in one year while others would graduate in two years.

The elimination of intermediate flight training for all the PLAAF’s prospective pilots seemed to be proceeding rapidly. In 2024 the last cohort of pilot candidates to undergo intermediate flight training at the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy completed their training.⁸ Thereafter the academy would no longer conduct intermediate flight training and the academy’s JL-8s would be retired.⁹ This seemed to indicate that all the academy’s training brigades had transitioned to the JL-10, and because the Harbin Flight Academy had introduced the JL-10 one year after Shijiazhuang, it was assessed that Harbin may similarly eliminate intermediate flight training in mid-2025.¹⁰ Moreover, it seemed that the JL-8 indeed disappeared from news about the Harbin Flight Academy over the next year.

Shift of Intermediate Flight Training

However, contrary to expectations, the elimination of intermediate flight training at the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy was not a harbinger of the elimination of that step in pilots’ initial training program. In June 2025 the PLA’s flagship television news program, *Military Report*, broadcast a segment about a group of female students at Aviation University, showing them conducting formation flight training in the JL-8 during their final months at the university.¹¹ Much earlier, in July 2024, another PLA television news program, *Morning Report on National Defense and Military Affairs*, broadcast a segment showing a group of pilot candidates at Aviation University training in the JL-8.¹² The segment never mentioned “intermediate flight training,” but the pilot candidates were undoubtedly undergoing intermediate flight training because they were shown learning basic fighter maneuvers.¹³ This group was reported to have been the first cohort to train in both the CJ-6 and the JL-8 at the university, doing so on a compressed schedule of one year.¹⁴ Then in March 2025 *Military Report* broadcast another segment showing pilot candidates at Aviation University conducting their first solo nighttime flights in the JL-8.¹⁵

Although the news about the elimination of intermediate flight training at the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy and about the first pilots to train in the JL-8 at Aviation University nearly coincided, the introduction of the JL-8 and, presumably, intermediate flight training, to Aviation University seems to have preceded the aircraft’s retirement from service at Shijiazhuang by one

year. The academic year at Aviation University begins in September, so the first cohort of pilot candidates to train in the JL-8 at Aviation University, who were featured on *Morning Report on National Defense and Military Affairs* in July 2024, must have begun their flight training in September 2023. The available evidence gives no indication of how long basic and intermediate flight training at Aviation University last, but it is possible that these steps are distributed almost evenly throughout the year, so basic flight training could last from September to February while intermediate flight training could last from February to July.

Significance of the Shift

The PLAAF's shifting of intermediate flight training to Aviation University seems to be in-process. Even though the JL-8 seems to have disappeared from news reports about training at the Harbin Flight Academy, there is no conclusive proof that intermediate flight training there ended. There are indications that intermediate flight training continued throughout the 2024-25 academic year at the Xi'an Flight Academy, which has yet to introduce the JL-10.¹⁶ Therefore, it seems that not all pilot candidates at Aviation University are undergoing intermediate flight training there. Naturally, this raises the question of who is undergoing the training.

It is possible that pilot candidates who will not undergo intermediate flight training at a flight academy, i.e., those who will undergo advanced flight training in the JL-10, are undergoing intermediate flight training at Aviation University. In other words, intermediate flight training has been reintroduced to their initial flight training program. Those who will undergo intermediate flight training at a flight academy would undergo a full year of basic flight training at Aviation University as before.

Reintroducing intermediate flight training to the initial pilot training program would not be the step backwards that it may seem to be. Reintroducing it in this way would not lengthen pilots' initial training program. Moreover, doing so should enable the flight academies to replace some intermediate-level subjects in advanced flight training, such as basic fighter maneuvers, with more advanced ones. It was reported that instructors at Aviation University worked with instructors conducting intermediate flight training, presumably at the PLAAF's flight academies, as well as instructors conducting training to transition pilots to fourth-generation fighters, in order to design a curriculum for the university's flight training that better integrates with the curricula elsewhere.¹⁷ This effort likely reflects a desire to better integrate the different steps in the initial pilot training program, eliminating redundant or impractical subjects and developing a more holistic progression.

However, this raises the question of how pilot candidates would be selected for Aviation University's compressed basic and intermediate flight training program. It is unknown how pilot candidates were selected for advanced flight training in the JL-10 versus intermediate flight training in the JL-8, but it is likely that one's performance, evaluated over the year of basic flight training, was the primary factor. Selection for Aviation University's compressed flight training

program would almost certainly have to occur before anyone begins basic flight training, so the university would have to find some other criteria for making the selection.

It is also possible that the PLAAF is shifting intermediate flight training to Aviation University before all the flight academies' training brigades transition to the JL-10. In other words, the PLAAF intends to eventually make all prospective pilots, including those who will not undergo advanced flight training in the JL-10, complete the compressed basic and intermediate flight training program at Aviation University. This would shorten all pilots' initial training to three years, not just for those who train in the JL-10. The JL-10 has been key to the reform of the initial pilot training program, but it is not necessarily essential. Its acquisition is likely very costly, and despite the JL-10's superiority to the JL-9, the PLAAF may hesitate to quickly replace the JL-9 because the JL-9 was only introduced in the mid-2010s. Reforming basic and intermediate flight training, and shifting the latter to Aviation University, could represent a middle path that achieves significant gains in the efficiency of the PLAAF's initial pilot training program without incurring unacceptable expenditures.

Conclusion

These two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that the PLAAF is for now only making a certain group of pilot candidates, such as those who will undergo advanced flight training in the JL-10, complete the compressed basic and intermediate flight training program at Aviation University, but that it intends to have all prospective pilots eventually do the same. Either way, the PLAAF's shifting intermediate flight training to Aviation University calls the previous assessment into question. It was previously assessed that the Harbin Flight Academy would replace its JL-9s with JL-10s in 2026 and that the Xi'an Flight Academy would retain its JL-8s and its intermediate flight training program beyond 2026.¹⁸ While the pace of the PLAAF's acquisition of JL-10s may have been overestimated, if the PLAAF is seeking to shorten all prospective pilots' initial training with or without the JL-10, then the elimination of intermediate flight training at the Harbin and Xi'an Flight Academies could occur sooner than previously assessed—and in the case of Harbin, it may have already occurred. This would not increase the number of fighter pilots that the PLAAF produces every year, but it would shorten the time that is required to produce them, a goal that the PLAAF has sought to achieve for well over a decade.

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.

Endnotes

- ¹ Derek Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, November 18, 2024, 1, accessed September 5, 2025, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Articles/Article-Display/Article/3967559/modernization-of-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force-proceeds-apace/>; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 16, 2021, 2, accessed September 25, 2025, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.
- ² Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 1; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” 2.
- ³ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 3; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” 3.
- ⁴ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 1; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” 2.
- ⁵ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 2-3; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” 3-4.
- ⁶ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 2-3; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” 3-4.
- ⁷ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 3; Derek Solen, “Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force,” 4.
- ⁸ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 3.
- ⁹ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 3.
- ¹⁰ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 3.
- ¹¹ “空军航空大学：‘双学籍’女飞行学员逐梦蓝天” [Air Force Aviation University: ‘doubly enrolled’ female pilot candidates pursue their dreams in the blue sky], 刘有权 [Liu Youquan], 贾伟艺 [Jia Weiyi], 高伟 [Gao Wei], et al., 军事报道 [Military Report], aired June 22, 2025, on CCTV-7, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://tv.cctv.com/2025/06/22/VIDEydlPkIfvmvqtXaEbN2aQ250622.shtml>.
- ¹² “加速 飞行教员潜心研战提升课堂‘含战量’” [Accelerate: flight instructors devote themselves to the study of war, raising the ‘war content level’ in the classroom], 国防军事早报 [Morning Report on National Defense and Military Affairs], aired July 8, 2024, on CCTV-7, accessed May 22, 2025, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/07/08/VIDEWVQpUhTfaPsUZnYWxjz240708.shtml>.
- ¹³ “Accelerate: flight instructors devote themselves to the study of war, raising the ‘war content level’ in the classroom.”
- ¹⁴ “Accelerate: flight instructors devote themselves to the study of war, raising the ‘war content level’ in the classroom.”
- ¹⁵ “空军航空大学：飞行学员展开夜航单飞训练” [Air Force Aviation University: pilot candidates commence nighttime solo flight training], 毕春胜 [Bi Chunsheng], 吕相昊 [Lv Xianghao], 张永琪 [Zhang Yongqi], et al.
- ¹⁶ 张龙 [Zhang Long] and 刘其涛 [Liu Qitao] “雏鹰振翅破云雾” [Young hawks flap wings, pierce clouds and mist], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], November 4, 2024, accessed September 8, 2025, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqx/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-11-04&paperNumber=02&articleid=942693; “空军西安飞行学院某部开展节后飞行训练” [A certain unit of the air force’s Xi’an Flight Academy commences flight training after the holiday], 中国新闻网 [China News Online], February 16, 2025, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/tp/hd2011/2025/02-16/1140833.shtml>.
- ¹⁷ “Accelerate: flight instructors devote themselves to the study of war, raising the ‘war content level’ in the classroom.”
- ¹⁸ Solen, “Modernization of Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force Proceeds Apace,” 3.