



## Chinese Aviation Academies Introduce Free Air Combat Training

**OE Watch Commentary:** Since 2011, the PLA Air Force has begun to place a greater emphasis on un-scripted air combat exercises, introducing unexpected elements, flying to unfamiliar areas and using tougher grading. However, the fact that what the Chinese are calling “free air combat” has only begun to be introduced at China’s top flight academy indicates how slow reforms are being implemented.

Following dramatic changes in China’s military command structure initiated in late 2015, China is currently in the midst significant reforms at the unit-level. This has involved major shakeups in unit composition, including aircraft types in the PLA Air Force. Additional reforms are targeted at consolidating and improving the rigor of technical and practical training throughout the PLA’s educational system. The rapid introduction of new equipment and China’s aspiration to link sensors, air defenses and pilots in a networked “system of systems” has created a gap between current capabilities and the necessary technical skills.

The introduction of free air combat training is another step in the PLA’s gradual adoption of more realistic, practical training. This has been a slow process and even combat units have not regularly held these types of exercises. For example, in August 2014, the PLA Air Force and PLA Naval Aviation Force held their first free air confrontation exercise. Chinese participation in international exercises such as Aviadarts with Russia and Shaheen with Pakistan can help introduce Chinese pilots to different scenarios and help become accustomed to encountering different types of aircraft, but the lack of unscripted training in the early stages of pilot training has erected barriers to building a more effective combat force. There are some assessments that in order for the PLA Air Force as a whole to affect the cultural changes needed to create a more effective, professional force capable of fighting in real combat scenarios, there will have to be the much broader adoption of unscripted training beyond Harbin Flight Academy. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

*“The Harbin Flight College is the pioneer among the flight academies of the PLA Air Force to include the free air combat training in its syllabus of air combat tactics.”*

**Source:** “Free air combat training course included in air force flight academy syllabus,” *China Military Online*, 6 February, 2018. [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-02/06/content\\_4804292.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-02/06/content_4804292.htm)

*Pilot cadets of the PLA Air Force Harbin Flight Academy received their first free air combat training...on January 30.*

*This is the first time that the PLA Air Force has introduced free combat training in pilot cadets’ training programs of flight academies, conveying a signal of further advancement of the real battle training in flight academies.*

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*The contents of the free air battle training course include the air combats with offensive position advantage, defensive position disadvantage and balanced positions, as well as other tactics the air force pilots will take in the real air battle. The fourth-year pilot cadets will be engaged in the free air combat training throughout the whole training session before their graduation. After completing the free air combat training, they will have the basic qualifications of an air force pilot.*



Guizhou JL-9 trainer.

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