In Europe, USAFE faced a brutal optempo—and that was before 10 percent of its troops deployed.

The One—Deep
The airmen of US Air Forces in Europe find themselves scrambling quite a bit these days. The service’s oldest major command has little to no excess capacity, so these troops are in constant motion. Moreover, its aircraft are old and require constant care and maintenance. USAFE is just like the rest of the Air Force, only more so.

The command’s forward-based airmen are full participants in Air Force operations worldwide, meaning the operating tempo is consistently high. This summer, nearly 2,500 USAFE airmen—almost 10 percent of the force—were deployed in support of the Global War on Terror, noted Lt. Gen. Robert D. Bishop Jr., commander of 3rd Air Force at Ramstein AB, Germany. The 3rd oversees USAFE’s daily operations in a 92-country area stretching from Iceland to South Africa.

With so many airmen gone, the other 90 percent of USAFE's force have had to carry out 100 percent of the already challenging “peacetime” mission—training for upcoming deployments, running a network of bases and operating locations, and maintaining an aged and cantankerous fleet of equipment.

“We are one deep in many areas,” said Brig. Gen. Michael A. Snodgrass, USAFE’s plans director at Ramstein. “That was a conscious decision the Air Force made after the [Berlin] Wall fell.”

USAFE has one air superiority squadron, at RAF Lakenheath, England, one air refueling wing, at RAF Mildenhall, England, and one squadron of close air support A-10s. “We have one base, Spangdahlem [Germany], that does suppression of enemy air defenses. We have two bases that give us precision guided munitions capability,” Snodgrass continued. “That’s not a lot, but it’s right-sized to the overall mission set here.”

Snodgrass said he would like to see another air superiority squadron in Europe and “a little more close air support capability,” but USAFE must make its case and compete for resources just like the rest of the Air Force. The tight fiscal environment throughout the Air Force means new assets are hard to come by.

The command is forced to lean heavily on its airmen. Roughly 3,500 USAFE positions are being cut to meet USAF’s downsizing requirements. Many of the personnel visited this summer expressed reservations about how this would affect USAFE’s long-term health.
The operating tempo is already causing some problems. "We are absolutely worried about it," said CMSgt. Gary G. Coleman, USAFE’s command chief master sergeant. The brutal tempo “is starting to manifest itself in security forces,” he said, adding that “re-enlistment rates have plummeted.”

The command is very closely watching its high-stress career fields. These also include transporters, civil engineers, explosive ordnance disposal technicians, tactical air control parties, forward air controllers, and combat weathermen. All of these groups are “running hard and stressed,” Coleman said.

The command is embracing Air Force Smart Operations 21 process improvements to help offset personnel shortages, but there is clearly a turbulent period ahead, as the command is asked to do more with less.

The idea behind AFSO 21 is to “reduce the workweek down to a reasonable level by doing things smarter,” Coleman said. “We can only maintain this pace for so long, because we clearly are surging.”

For an example of how the scrambling plays out, consider the case of the Carpathian Summer exercise in Romania.

Maj. Michael Sheldon didn’t like the news he was getting from Germany on June 27. Working a mobile phone from a makeshift office at Mihail Kogalniceanu AB, Romania, Sheldon had gotten word that the C-130E weapons training deployment he was coordinating might be falling apart.

The original plan called for up to six C-130s from Ramstein to deploy to the base on the Black Sea for realistic combat training.

The Real World

The real world was intruding, however. The demands of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the geriatric condition of participating C-130s had already caused planners to scale Carpathian Summer back to a two-ship deployment.

Now, Sheldon was learning, even that was in question. There might only be one Hercules available, with all the others needed in Southwest Asia or due for repairs.

Worse, the one available C-130 might be on “restricted” status—meaning it was so fragile it could not carry a full load, fly at low-levels, perform assault landings, or operate at night.

If this were the case, there would be little point in making the deployment other than to “fly around the flagpole” for public relations purposes.

Ultimately, it never came to that. Airmen scraped together two C-130s—one regular and one restricted. This allowed aircrews to perform a full range of missions—low-level flying, airdrops, night vision goggle operations, limited assault landings, “all the sorts of training you can’t get here in Germany,” said Sheldon. With some 120 airmen taking part, Carpathian Summer unfolded more or less successfully over two weeks in mid-July.

The health of USAFE’s aircraft is an everyday concern: Modernization timelines in Europe often lag behind those in other theaters. There are currently no plans for USAFE to base the F-22 or C-17 in Europe, and even the C-130J is coming later than needed.

It is also hard to get high-quality training on a densely populated continent with a massive amount of commercial air traffic, a wide range of flight and noise restrictions, limited range space, and frequently murky weather. During eight midsummer days recently spent in Germany, for
example, all but one day was hit by downpours.

“The traditional European civilian aircraft environment has drastically constrained our ability to train” in Western Europe, said Gen. William T. Hobbins, USAFE commander. Noise restrictions also limit flights, and sometimes prohibit the Air Force from flying at low levels over ground forces.

USAFE has only five main operating bases, down from a Cold War peak of 25, and only 27,000 airmen, down from the 65,600 that were in place at the end of the Cold War. Hobbins envisions additional small consolidations to bring isolated units together with stable facilities. For example, there are still stand-alone hospitals, schools, and housing units near Ramstein and Spangdahlem air bases that could be integrated with those recently expanded facilities.

Additional large-scale closures are unlikely, however, because the Air Force still desires a “presence” in important nations such as Germany and Britain. These are strong allies of long standing, and they offer enormous support to the bases located on their soil.

Officials say USAFE’s “center of gravity” will remain solidly in Western Europe, even as attention shifts south and east.

The training situation in what former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld once derisively referred to as “old Europe” is not expected to improve. The airspace constriction problem will “only get worse,” said Hobbins, as commercial air traffic on the Continent continues to expand.

USAFE must monitor and live with some 5,000 airspace regulations in Europe, some of them severe, said Lt. Col. Jim Burton. Europe has the same air traffic as the United States crammed into one-third the area, added Burton, who is with the 603rd Air Operations Center’s Air Mobility Division at Ramstein.

“As we migrate our training locations eastward, we can strengthen our coalition interoperability,” Hobbins noted. This reduces USAFE’s reliance on “expensive deployments to Stateside locations” which is “not optimal nor is it cost-effective.” Consequently, the US recently signed long-term agreements with both Romania and Bulgaria to allow deployments into the former Warsaw Pact nations.

“We really need training airspace,” said Snodgrass. “We need to deploy.”

Meeting part of the need in recent years, Turkey has hosted a series of Anatolian Eagle exercises modeled after USAF’s Red Flag. The Air Force has been a regular participant, but needs additional options. This brought USAFE to Mihail Kogalniceanu, 1,000 miles east of Ramstein.

MK is local by European standards and allows training with a nation that flies different aircraft—Romanian MiG-21s. More importantly, the airspace range around MK is excellent, equivalent to the Nevada Test and Training Range (Nellis Range). It boasts plains, mountains, over-water areas, landing and drop zones, and ground maneuver space that allows aircraft to train with ground units.

“There are not many places [where USAFE] can do joint and combined training with a lot of airspace,” said Snodgrass.

The “vision looking forward is for large force-package exercises” to take place in the Romanian airspace, added Lt. Col. Stephen P. Ritter, head of USAFE’s MK Integration Branch. “This airspace is world-class, and when countries hear about it, they’ll want to come,” Ritter said. “They’ll be lining up.”

**Fresh Air**

Romanian Air Force officials cited numerous benefits of having the Americans visit MK. These range from the mundane (an opportunity to use English) to the sophisticated (a chance to leverage US wartime experiences to develop realistic common training scenarios).

The expanding opportunities to fly and train in Romania are “like a breath of fresh air” compared to the tight restrictions in Western Europe, said Maj.
Michael J. Dean, F-16 functional area manager at USAFE headquarters.

In June, USAFE planners were in Bucharest coordinating the Carpathian Summer C-130 deployment and August’s Common Quest special operations exercise. Common Quest was scheduled to feature MC-130 Combat Talon and MH-53 Pave Low aircraft from RAF Mildenhall performing rescue and recovery operations.

The 352nd Special Operations Group’s deployment was to be at the same time that US European Command has a 1,000-man “proof of principle” deployment going on at the base. EUCOM’s new Joint Task Force-East is based at MK, to coordinate training operations in the Black Sea nations. In June, US Army Europe was well on its way toward finishing new barracks buildings to house deploying soldiers. The areas of the base being used by the Army were readily identifiable by their generous use of concertina wire.

Ritter said the Army’s presence and the ground maneuver ranges below the MK airspace offer the potential for urban close air support training, exercises with joint terminal air controllers, and other joint air-land operations hard to achieve in Western Europe.

USAFE has sponsored its own construction at the base, although the Air Force is thinking of permanently basing only about 10 airmen at MK. New storage buildings near the flight line house 19 pieces of “low maintenance” aerospace ground equipment such as tow bars, jack stands, and the aircraft maintenance stands typically needed by deployed flying units.

USAFE doesn’t want to “flood” the base with equipment yet, because the long-term mission there is still undetermined, said MSGt. Mark A. Fleenor, logistics action officer for the MK team.

Some equipment needs are obvious, however, and in an adjacent building an Air Force fire truck, runway sweeper, and fuel truck sat in storage after being flown in for an F-15 deployment. Fleenor said keeping these vehicles at MK for the summer saves $20,000 to $80,000 per exercise.

USAFE would like to operate from the base on “approximately a half the year basis”—what we call a .5 presence,” said Snodgrass. “The game plan after the next year or two is to have an AEF [air and space expeditionary force deployment] into MK for training and presence.”

It is important to build a program of “focused” theater security cooperation, said Bishop. There are 10 new NATO members for USAFE to build partnerships and interdependence with, but the command must keep at it.

“We don’t want to, nor do we have a need to, engage with all 92 countries” in the AOR, Bishop said. “If you really want to make progress, you need to engage, and then you need to re-engage.”

That’s what the long-term agreements with Romania and Bulgaria offer. Bishop said that after a recent C-130 deployment to Bulgaria, the pilots were “beside themselves,” saying, “This is the best flying we ever had—300 feet above the ground, in and out of mountainous terrain.”

Yet the Ramstein C-130s participating in these deployments are a prime example of USAFE’s old airplane problem. A case can be made that the 86th Airlift Wing’s 42-year-old C-130Es are the Air Force’s most decrepit fleet.

The wing is keeping four of its healthy, “unrestricted” airlifters forward deployed for US Central Command, but even there things don’t always go as planned.

“We just discovered another doggone crack” in one of the nominally healthy, forward-based C-130s, said Brig. Gen. Richard C. Johnston, commander of the 86th AW. “That grounded that airplane”—out in the desert. The 86th was sending another airplane out the same
day to replace it, because combat requirements come first, and four “healthy” C-130s from Ramstein are needed in the sandbox.

This particular airlifter had just been through depot last year. CMSgt. Reginald Glover said that crews were scheduling C-130s for the next day’s missions while the airlifters were “still in the air,” on the hope that no mission-critical components would return broken. When surprises such as the one in the forward-based C-130 occur, the crews must do whatever is necessary to get the aircraft ready to fly, but sometimes it is simply not safe to do so.

No Hyperbole

The damaged Hercules—which developed a crack never before seen in the C-130 fleet—will need a waiver to fly back to Ramstein. Glover said the deployed aircraft typically fly four times as much as home station C-130s, and the “tactical landings” used downrange stress the airframes and brakes. Once back, the cracked Hercules “will sit on the ramp here, probably for quite some time,” said Johnston.

This is not hyperbole. Until June, another one of the 86th’s airlifters “hadn’t flown in five years, because we just didn’t think it was airworthy enough,” said Johnston. Simply put, C-130 No. 68-10947 had exceeded its life expectancy. Nonetheless, maintainers at Ramstein kept it in flyable condition for five years, as required. Then, enough was enough.

In early July, that aircraft was stuck in Barbados, on its way to the Boneyard at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.

Flying in daylight only, No. 0947 finally made it to the Boneyard and has now been officially decommissioned.

The 86th struggles with readiness problems caused by Vietnam-era C-130s. Of a fleet of 16 aircraft, two were considered “good,” three were under restricted flight status, four were forward deployed, and seven were in depot.

Tail No. 1835 is illustrative. It was supposed to have been in depot for six months’ worth of refurbishment. It will be 480 days—16 months—before the wing gets it back.

“Forty percent of my airplanes are in depot,” said Johnston, slightly understating the problem. “That’s ridiculous. We should have two airplanes [there].”

Help is on the way, but not until 2009 when the first C-130J replacements are scheduled to arrive at the base. In the interim, “we won’t be able to maintain 100 percent crew currency, we know that now,” said Johnston, so the wing is looking to mitigate the problem by focusing training on the most likely and critical capabilities.

“We recognize that we won’t be as capable until we get those” C-130Js, he concluded.

To help perform its mission, Ramstein depends on a regular rotation of four Guard or Reserve C-130s assigned to temporary duty at the base. Despite the equipment shortcomings, USAFE is “getting more and more mobility minded,” Hobbins said, and the facilities modernization programs at Ramstein and Spangdahlem stand in stark contrast to the health of the C-130s.

The bases are on the route to Iraq, and midway between the US and Afghanistan, making them key waypoints for troops and materiel. Ramstein also receives the injured troops headed to the massive Landstuhl medical center. Johnston noted that 95 percent of the aircraft going through the base are supporting a combat mission.

Many facilities are from the 1950s, noted Col. Earl D. Matthews, commander of Ramstein’s 435th Air Base Wing. With the base increasingly busy and at the center of a 55,000-person American community, infrastructure improvements are designed to both increase combat capabilities and ease long-standing quality of life concerns.

- An airfield equipment maintenance complex, indoor pool, and new townhouse-style housing community are all in progress.
- A second runway is nearly completed. Ramstein recently became DOD’s only airfield with a CAT III instrument landing system that allows aircraft to land in very low visibility conditions.
- “Building 530” has been gutted and is being renovated for the 24th Intelligence Squadron—with more than 40 miles of fiber-optic cable running under its floors.
- A new munitions maintenance complex with foot-thick concrete walls is under construction at the end of Ramstein’s enormous weapons storage area. Weapons storage and maintenance capabilities on base are “exhausted.” The facility is needed so wartime operation is not hampered.
- More than 12,000 “patient movements” have gone through the 435th Contingency Aeromedical Staging Facility’s new building in the past year. The 435th receives wounded and sick troops from the war zone, and either
The K-Town Community Center

The Kaiserslautern Military Community Center, a program to bring together scattered shopping, lodging, and other services under one roof near Ramstein’s passenger terminal. The project has become “every bit a nightmare,” one official said, and is currently 18 months behind schedule.

This is unusual at Ramstein, where most of the myriad improvement projects currently in progress have stayed on schedule.

“Significant problems urgently confront the KMCC,” said Brig. Gen. Danny K. Gardner, in June testimony. Gardner, USAFE’s director of installations and mission support, said this project “presents few clear, easy choices.”

KMCC has suffered from the lack of an overall contractor, inadequate quality control, and ineffective contract management. “The most prominent example of poor enforcement of quality ... is the deficient roof that now requires nearly complete replacement,” Gardner testified.

and go” services for aircraft headed downrange, said Lt. Col. James Kirk, commander of the 726th Air Mobility Squadron. Aircraft are typically on the ground for less than four hours to get fuel and a new crew, he said, adding “mission velocity is key.”

For a period this summer, however, mission velocity was almost nonexistent at Spangdahlem, as the runway was closed for major repairs and its operational aircraft dispersed throughout the world for the months of June and July.

One squadron of F-16s deployed 40 miles up the road to Buechel Air Base, a Tornado base for the Luftwaffe. This local deployment allowed airmen to spend their evenings and weekends at home, but added an hour-long bus ride to the workday.

A second Viper squadron spent the summer in Nevada, at Nellis Air Force Base. Roberson noted that it participated in a Green Flag exercise, preparing for its upcoming AEF deployment.

Spangdahlem’s third fighter squadron, the 81st, spent much of the summer in England, at RAF Lakenheath. The A-10 crews are benefiting from the “much better” training airspace available there, said squadron commander Lt. Col. Keith McBride. Realistic training is important for a squadron that has deployed to Afghanistan three times in the past four years.

Hobbins also lauded the training ranges in the UK, saying that the airspace is “wide open” off the coast.

The USAF operating locations in England are leading candidates to receive Joint Strike Fighters when the F-35 becomes available for overseas basing.

Hobbins said he would “love to” see the F-35 based in England. The logistics there are good: McBride noted that Lakenheath had the space and equipment in place to easily absorb his squadron’s 18 A-10s for the summer.

These are the only A-10s permanently based in Europe, which points to USAFE’s lack of depth.

Even the command’s newer equipment isn’t trouble-free, and several officials called attention to the workloads that maintainers and crew chiefs are bearing. At Spangdahlem, some crew chiefs stayed at the base when most of the aircraft shipped out, so they could work on broken aircraft. SrA. Jose L.C. Ramos said that nine of the wing’s F-16s stayed behind while the runway was closed.

Ramos and SSgt. Christopher L. Hatten expressed their frustration with one F-16, No. 91-344. The problems began when a stuck throttle made for an exciting engine start-up.

The airmen discovered a problem with the throttle cable, which runs from the cockpit to the back of the aircraft. Replacing it required removing the pilot’s seat and numerous panels, and Hatten said it was a “full day’s work to get it out.”

After waiting for the replacement cable, another day was spent reinstalling it and reassembling the F-16.

The new cable was also defective.

On June 25, this particular Viper was still torn apart, sitting in its hardened aircraft shelter, waiting for another replacement cable.

“We need to recapitalize the force ... because we’re on borrowed time,” said USAFE command chief Coleman. “The innovation and expertise of these airmen who are serving us has its limits,” he said. “I clearly sense that we are getting there.”

The pace of the manpower reductions “may go faster than the pace of the new initiatives and ways of doing business that will allow us to absorb the impacts,” said Snodgrass. “We ought to all be concerned about that.”

Commanders are taking care that they “don’t increase the burden on [airmen] and call that making it better,” said Coleman. “Our APSO 21 program here in the command is really sensitive to that” and careful not to “play the shell game” by simply moving jobs from one area to another.

Ramos said one thing that keeps the airmen going is the desire to accomplish their mission, by seeing an aircraft return to service. An aircraft won’t fly until it is ready, he said—but the airmen will keep at it until it does.