

Adm. James Winnefeld, the new NORAD and NORTHCOM boss, closely monitors what's needed to defend North America.

USAF photo by James Haseltine



Air Sovereignty Never Sleeps

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor

The nation's air sovereignty alert fighter force is predominantly composed of older F-15s and F-16s in the Air National Guard, many of which are approaching the end of their service lives. Particularly troublesome are the ANG's F-16 Block 30 aircraft; most will leave the inventory by Fiscal 2018—before the Guard units are scheduled to receive F-35s.

"I rely on the [Air Force] to make sure that the capabilities that I require, that I ask for, that I need, are filled," said Adm. James A. Winnefeld Jr., commander of NORAD and US Northern Command. "So far ... they've given me the assurance that we will have an adequate fighter fleet to conduct this mission."

The ASA mission, as performed today, has a skilled core of personnel carrying out sorties daily, and NORAD wants to keep that capability in place. "They are very experienced pilots, by and large—real veterans," Winnefeld said. "Many of them are airline pilots and they understand very well the airspace system inside our country."

NORAD is responsible for 18 airborne alert sites that can launch interceptors at a moment's notice. "I'm confident if we had had that in place on 9/11, that we would have at least stopped three" of the hijacked airliners, said Winnefeld, who spoke to reporters in Washington, D.C., in September.

The ASA mission is unique in terms of tactics, techniques, and procedures

used to intercept aircraft that might be lost or have "evil intent," Winnefeld said. "It's a very good fit to have the Air Guard flying this mission for us."

NORAD watches the air sovereignty fleet health closely, but Winnefeld has a high level of confidence the Air Guard will receive the appropriate aircraft to carry out the mission.

"There is a lot of analysis going on on those airframes by the Air Force ... to see if we can eke a little bit more time out of those," he said of the F-16 Block 30 fleet. "Some are optimistic

Two Air National Guard F-16s power over the Grand Canyon during an Operation Noble Eagle sortie. The Air Force is trying to eke out more life from the F-16 fleet.

that they're going to get ... more life out of those airplanes."

Before he came into the job as NORTHCOM and NORAD boss, Winnefeld said he talked with Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, who assured him the ASA mission is being taken "very seriously" and promised the Air Force is "going to make sure there are adequate airplanes to fly it."

Winnefeld believes, though, some gaps exist in the ASA mission, such as in the ability to defend against low, slow-moving aircraft.

An F-16 can get somewhere in a hurry and engage a target, Winnefeld said, but Vipers don't go low and slow easily. As a result, NORTHCOM and NORAD are examining options for obtaining something smaller and slower, such as a light fighter-type aircraft, Winnefeld said.

"I think if there's going to be a requirement, I would want to try to get at it in the next year," he said, adding he needed to address feasibility with the Air Force and other agencies.

"If I have a little defended area or something like that, you can visualize, say, a large outdoor athletic event or a political convention—things like that, the kinds of things that I routinely try to provide defense for—I potentially could have the ability to provide better defense for that if I have the smaller

aircraft," Winnefeld said. He noted the incident in February, where an Austin, Tex., man crashed his small aircraft into an Internal Revenue Service building, killing himself and an IRS employee.

"I think it's due diligence on my part to look to the future at what potential threats are out there, in addition to the threats that we've already seen in the past," Winnefeld said.

In the near term, however, Winnefeld expressed caution about any attempt to perform air defense with unmanned assets.

A Mission for Fighters

While "there are a lot of missions that we're finding that can be transitioned to unmanned aircraft," he said, "there's a lot of very careful human analytical thought that has to be applied when you intercept an aircraft." A pilot must be able to discern what the pilot of a civilian aircraft is up to and his intent and then perform maneuvers to get his attention, and potentially divert him off a course. "It's something I don't think we're ready to do with an unmanned aircraft," he added.

NORTHCOM's area of responsibilities stretch across Mexico and parts of the Caribbean and up north to the Arctic, where receding sea ice is opening lanes of transit. Old territorial disputes have

been reanimated as natural resources become more accessible. Nations such as Russia and Canada have moved to increase resources for their respective Arctic operations.

"Some people have the impression that suddenly all the ice is melting and there's an enormous amount of traffic flowing back and forth across the Arctic, and that's just not the case right now," Winnefeld said. "But it will be opening more and more ... so it's wise for us to look ahead to that rather than react to it."

Winnefeld noted that military-to-military cooperation amongst Arctic allies is "very good," noting US participation in Operation Nanook in August. Nanook saw Canadian, Danish, and US Navy and Coast Guard personnel conducting disaster response training and patrols in Canada's territorial waters, and it was the first time foreign militaries participated in the event. "There's no alliance or anything like that, but it's a collegial relationship," he said.

NORTHCOM benefits from the close relationship with Canada. Winnefeld's predecessors in Colorado Springs, Colo., have largely integrated the staff at NORTHCOM and NORAD so that

An F-15 Eagle takes off from Barnes Arpt., Mass. The Air National Guard mans 16 of the CONUS alert sites.



USAF photo by MSgt. Mark Fortin



strategy and policy have US and Canadian personnel working right alongside each other.

“We gain the benefit of having Canadian expertise as we start to work our way through what our push to security could be in the Arctic,” he noted. This arrangement also reassures the Canadians the US is not doing things running “counter to their interest.”

Winnefeld agreed with his predecessor, Air Force Gen. Victor E. Renuart Jr., who said prior to his retirement that national Arctic policy needs to be updated and reflect lessons learned from DOD’s Antarctic operations.

Winnefeld’s command also has responsibility for cooperation with Mexico—something taking up an increasing amount of attention as that country’s government is locked in battle with powerful narcotics cartels.

The US is assisting the Mexican government inside Mexico, while being cognizant of the long-running sovereignty issues between the two countries.

“I work closely with my counterparts down there, the commander of their Army and Air Force and also the commander of their Navy, in trying to help provide capability, to do shared experiences, subject matter expert exchanges, some training here and there,” Winnefeld said. Under the Merida Initiative agreement, the US

also is supplying technical capabilities, such as helicopters, night-vision tools, and ion scanners to help with drug and weapon detection at the country’s ports.

NORTHCOM also is directing efforts at unpacking one of the trickier issues confronting the Department of Defense: the roles and responsibilities for conducting cyber defense and offense.

Cyber Attack

“It’s new territory for a lot of people in our business,” he said. “I have a very ambitious staff, and they would like nothing more than to own all of the cyber response inside North America, ... but I’ve told them this is why we created [US Cyber Command], to be the real technical experts in how to operate and defend our networks.” CYBERCOM was created as a four-star subunified command under US Strategic Command. It is collocated with the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Md.

A question remains, however: What happens when a major cyber attack occurs against the US? How would NORTHCOM be tasked, and what responsibilities would it have? Discussions between CYBERCOM, STRATCOM, and NORTHCOM have occurred on this subject, Winnefeld said, and the issue is being worked out.

If a cyber attack on the nation’s electrical system occurred, he posited,

An F-22 intercepts a Russian Tu-95MS Bear bomber near Alaska in 2007.

NORTHCOM would be tasked to assist the Department of Homeland Security and help civil authorities in a “supporting role,” in recovering from the attack. Its mission would be to ensure public infrastructure was functioning properly, and, if not, to make sure it recovers.

Winnefeld also is focused on cruise missile proliferation. “However small and limited, it would be quite a shock, I think, if a cruise missile came whistling into Washington, D.C., from off the coast of Maryland, or something like that,” he noted. NORTHCOM is contemplating a “comprehensive look at our ability to do aerospace warning,” Winnefeld said. This would include not just threats from airliners and small, low-flying aircraft, but also cruise missiles.

Tracking fast-moving targets, such as cruise missiles, at low altitude is a difficult task, technically speaking, he pointed out.

However, “if it were to come down to no-kidding intelligence that we thought this might happen, we do have capability that we can put into play that would help us detect such a threat and engage it,” he concluded. “But it’s a tough problem.” ■