



THE Air Force in December laid out a massive overhaul of its remotely piloted aircraft enterprise, calling for congressional support to adopt dozens of recommendations that stemmed from a months-long grassroots review of issues facing the RPA force.

Air Combat Command is calling for \$3 billion in additional funding over the next five years to double the number of pilots and sensor operators flying its unmanned aircraft, along with 75

additional MQ-9 Reapers to address manpower and capacity issues that have been more than 10 years in the making.

The RPA force has been stretched incredibly thin as demand for its work has skyrocketed, with continued operations across US Central Command, including a fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria that depends on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

“Our RPA enterprise was born in combat and recently surpassed 20 years

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By Brian W. Everstine, Pentagon Editor

The Air Force is taking dramatic steps to get its remotely piloted aircraft community on solid ground.

of service, many of which were executed at surge levels,” ACC Commander Gen. Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle said in a release announcing the roadmap. “We owe it to our airmen to remove the daily stressors that are responsible for the challenging environment they are operating in.”

ACC is also looking to overhaul the career tracks for officer operators and enlisted maintainers to address career development concerns within the force.

The Air Force will study the promotion and education tracks for RPA officers, as well as the feasibility of a single specialty code for RPA personnel. The service also is turning to the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard for help.

The Air Force’s remotely piloted aircraft fly across the globe, but many of the airmen who operate them are based in a few locations inside the United States, with the main operating hub at Creech AFB, Nev.



RNLA photo by Rine Klein

An MQ-9 Reaper in Afghanistan undergoes an inspection. Air Combat Command is looking to address career development concerns for RPA personnel, including ground crews.



A Reaper loaded with GBU-12 Paveway II and AGM-114 Hellfire missiles on a mission over Afghanistan. The RPA force has been stretched thin due to an unrelenting and steadily increasing operating tempo.



USAF photo by SSgt. Vernon Young Jr.



The Air Force wants to establish new MQ-9 operating locations at other bases, such as Beale AFB, Calif., Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., and JB Langley-Eustis, Va. These would be supplemented by other locations abroad, pending congressional approval and agreements with

host nation governments on possible foreign bases.

The Air Force will stand up a new wing focused on remotely piloted aircraft. This is a way to integrate “RPA operations and command and control or intelligence processing,” Carlisle

said. It will streamline the RPA effort, from the aircraft itself, to the video it collects, and the intelligence that produces. It should also pay some career advancement dividends for RPA airmen, who are today largely crammed into the super-wing at Creech and lack a number

of career advancement and leadership opportunities.

A FORCE STRETCHED THIN

Ten years ago, as the US had 100,000 troops in Iraq fighting fierce battles in cities such as Fallujah, the Air Force flew five combat air patrols, Lt. Gen. Robert P. “Bob” Otto, the deputy chief of staff for ISR, told reporters in October. Those five medium-altitude patrols, each providing around-the-clock surveillance coverage, met about 56 percent of CENTCOM’s requirements for full-motion video. Today, with Operation Freedom’s Sentinel in Afghanistan and Operation Inherent Resolve against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Air Force is flying 61 combat air patrols. However, despite this massive increase in ISR flights, the Air Force can only meet about 25 percent of CENTCOM’s mission requirements.

“So with 10 times the number of CAPs, we’re meeting less of their requirement,” Otto said. “What that tells me is, as we’ve learned how to use these assets, there’s a demand for them that’s virtually insatiable.”

last summer. The demand caused pilots to often fly a schedule of six to seven days on and one day off, and days of up to 13 hours, she said.

The service has been unable to train enough additional pilots to alleviate the stress, simply because it needs its pilots to be flying operational missions instead of taking time to be instructors. The Air Force has been able to train about 190 new drone pilots per year, but that is much less than the number of drone pilots who leave the service or transfer inside the Air Force to another job. Three hundred are needed.

The Defense Department and Air Force took steps in early 2015 to try to relieve some strain. In April, Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter approved a reset of combat air patrol guidance to let the Air Force fly 60 patrols, five fewer than it was previously tasked with. The Pentagon called on additional support from the Army, flying 16 combat air patrols with its MQ-1C Gray Eagle, and another 10 patrols from government-owned, contractor-operated aircraft.

“That’s a heck of a lot better than telling the Air Force you need to go to

RPA pilot aviation pay to \$1,500 per month from \$650, along with developing a long-term RPA retention bonus of \$15,000 for five- and eight-year commitments.

FORCE MORALE

Still, there were issues of morale across the force and concerns about the long-term health of the airmen in the career fields. To address this, the Air Force used a model from another force that faced strain and morale problems: the nuclear missile community.

In February 2014, the Air Force launched the Force Improvement Program in Air Force Global Strike Command to address areas that first came to light the year before. Dozens of officers had been caught cheating on exams at Malmstrom AFB, Mont., and during the investigation, several serious morale issues in the ICBM community came to light. The service launched the FIP, consisting of both Air Force and outside experts interviewing hundreds of airmen at its missile bases to find out what they thought about their careers and what could be done to address the challenges. The program led to dozens of changes.

Air Combat Command decided to follow suit, and in August launched its Culture and Process Improvement Program, CPIP, for the remotely piloted aircraft community. The program included 3,366 surveys sent to officers and enlisted airmen, along with two teams that visited 12 bases to conduct meetings as a way to follow up on the surveys.

“We’re seeing problems in the MQ-1/9 community at both the major command and base levels that can be solved quickly,” Col. Troy Jackson, the C2ISR Operations division chief and officer in charge of the CPIP, said in announcing the program. “Airmen in this career field are being exhausted with no end in sight; we want to fix this.”



This demand has had a dramatic impact on the airmen who operate the aircraft. The Air Force’s RPA pilots are currently flying four times the hours that manned pilots do, and log an average of 850 to 900 flight hours annually, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said

86,” Otto said. “If we’re going to do more of this kind of full-motion video, I think that’s a good approach to it.”

Air Force leadership also took steps to try to help the overworked pilots of the aircraft, starting with pay. In January, James approved a plan to increase

Far left: A Reaper pilot flies a mission from Creech AFB, Nev. Creech is the main Reaper hub, but USAF wants to add more bases to the mix. Left: Airmen at a Distributed Common Ground Station. Last year, airmen in DCGS centers processed nearly 400,000 hours of full-motion video focused on 490,000 targets. Airmen at the JB Langley-Eustis, Va., DCGS often worked 14-hour days, six days straight.

WHAT AIRMEN WANT

Carlisle said the review brought to light three main things airmen want. First, RPA airmen want time—time to visit family, to go to school, to have “different jobs,” to take a vacation, etc. Airmen throughout the Air Force are busy, of course, but the service has done a better job creating sustainable schedules in other career fields, Carlisle said.

Airmen want a “strategic plan for the enterprise”: a real idea of what the future of the MQ-9 Reaper mission will be.

And finally, he said, airmen want to know the Air Force and Defense Department leadership is listening to them.

The initial result of the program was the Dec. 11 announcement, a step Air Force officials say shows the service is serious about going forward with addressing issues airmen highlighted. Ultimately, the Air Force will take 140 actions to improve its RPA operations.

“We’re operating on more than 70 years of training the best pilots on Earth, and that knowledge and experience goes into every airman in the remote aircraft career fields.”

Having additional airmen would help the service eventually climb back to its requirement of 65 combat air patrols. However, USAF wants to create a “stabilized deployment schedule” for airmen and not have a deploy-to-dwell ratio below one-to-two. Personnel should not be forward deployed for launch and recovery operations or staff jobs for more than six out of every 18 months, Newell said. Also, the combat-to-dwell ratio for RPA personnel should not be below two-to-one, so for every two days an aircrew flies combat missions, they should spend one day in training or reconstitution.

The effort extended outside of the RPA control centers, with airmen across the ISR community surveyed. CPIP survey teams visited airmen

working at a surge capacity in recent years, with a 1,900 percent increase in missions since 2001, said Col. Timothy D. Haugh, commander of the 480th Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Wing at Langley. In Fiscal 2015 alone, airmen in the Air Force DCGS centers processed 381,000 hours of full-motion video focused on 490,000 targets.

This has meant long hours. Until recently, airmen at the Langley facility worked up to 14 hours per day, for six days straight. After a few days of this schedule, the airmen’s skills and ability to think critically about the images and videos they were following began to deteriorate, another analyst at Langley said during a recent visit by *Air Force Magazine*.

On Oct. 1, the leadership at Langley changed the schedules for the airmen in the center. They no longer can work more than 10 hours per day, for four days of operations. The change immediately increased morale, and



USAF photo by TSgt. Ricky Best



If approved and funded, the Air Force’s RPA community would massively expand with 3,000 new pilots over five years, adding 17 new squadrons. However, standards would not change to get these new airmen in.

“Training standards for airmen are not based on manning, but rather on mission,” ACC spokesman Ben Newell said. “The standards for RPA airmen would remain as they are unless mission requirements dictate change. ...

assigned to the Distributed Common Ground Station at Langley after calling on the RPA bases. The surveys were all voluntary, said a staff sergeant analyst in the DCGS at Langley. (For security reasons, the Air Force does not release the last names of airmen in the intelligence fields.)

The airmen who process the full-motion video from MQ-1s and MQ-9s and the high-altitude still photography from U-2s and RQ-4s have been

Haugh said the airmen were fresher and more capable when they were better rested and able to spend more personal time outside of the center.

Each DCGS in the Air Force focuses on a specific area of responsibility, with Langley airmen concentrating on US Central Command. However, to watch daylight in the Middle East, they must work through the night in Virginia. Some were rarely able to see daylight at times because of long hours and extended



An MQ-9 on the ramp at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. Operations Freedom's Sentinel and Inherent Resolve keep the Reaper in constant use.



USAF photo by TSgt. Robert Cloys

Far left: A student pilot and a sensor operator control a Reaper during a training mission. Above: A technical sergeant weapons load crew member runs a system check on a Reaper.

shifts. Following the change, one airmen said, "I get to see the sun. This is awesome. I'm just going to walk around."

Other simple changes have taken place at Langley for the airmen in the DCGS. There's an updated vending machine. Previously, the airmen in the

community saw some of the highest rates of dental problems in the Air Force because of their reliance on energy drinks, according to wing leadership. The fitness center is now open 24 hours, where previously the airmen in the DCGS relied on a makeshift facility in an empty room full of donated weights, noted an analyst.

ENLISTED PILOTS ON THE WAY

A week after the initial CPIP announcement, the Air Force decided it would make a change many in the force had been asking for: using the enlisted force to fly RPAs. After months of saying the idea was in review, the Air Force announced Dec. 17 that enlisted airmen would be able to fly the RQ-4 Global Hawk.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III said in January the service should look at the enlisted force as a potential approach and that he would come up with a recommendation.

Service leadership ordered ACC to use the first six months of 2016 to lay out entry requirements, training plans, career path development, delineation of duties, compensation details, and the appropriate force mix. The move is necessary to alleviate strain on RPA

crews, though enlisted airmen will still be unable to fly armed remotely piloted aircraft such as the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper.

"Our enlisted force is the best in the world and I am completely confident they will be able to do the job and do it well," James said in announcing the decision. "The RPA enterprise is doing incredibly important work and this is the right decision to ensure the Air Force is positioned to support the future threat environment."

While the CPIP review is over and the initial steps have been announced, the program led to many initiatives and recommendations that are still under discussion and analysis, Newell said, adding there will be more to come.

"RPAs have changed the game on the battlefield with their persistence and ability to both build situational awareness and close the kill chain," Carlisle said. "Ultimately, CPIP is about establishing a coherent, Air Force-wide strategic plan that enables us to continue to provide this incredible capability to the joint force by moving the RPA community toward the sustainment model we've established for other Air Force weapon systems." ★