

# CONTINUOUS SANDBOX PRESENCE



**B-52s returned to the Middle East for the first time in 25 years so the Air Force could set up regular bomber rotations.**

**U**nder a nearly full moon last Sept. 12, a small fleet of US aircraft joined up over Iraq, headed toward an industrial facility in Mosul. Led by a B-52, the armada included F-15Es, A-10s, F-16s, and F/A-18Ds.

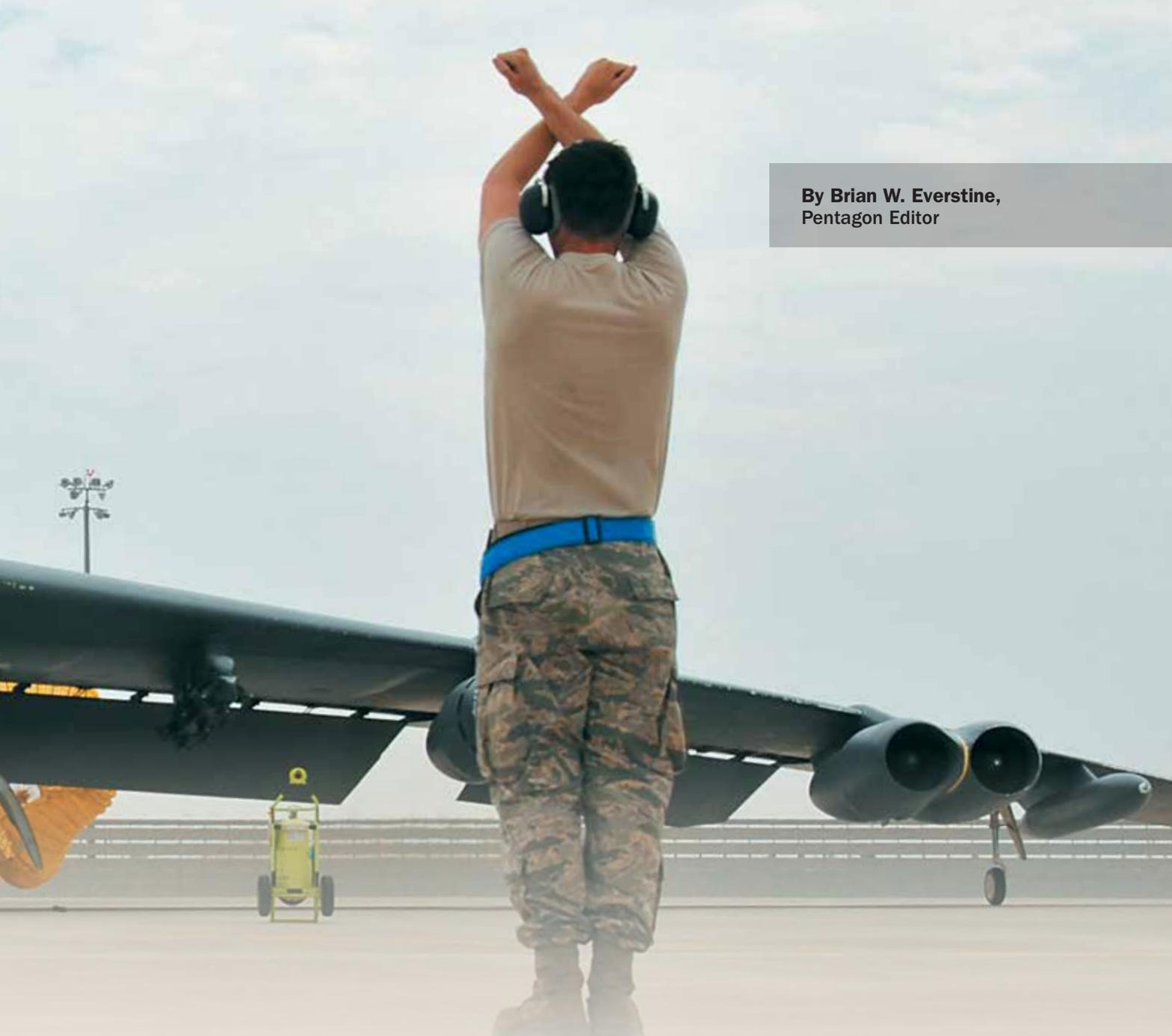
Intelligence and surveillance showed a massive pharmaceutical plant had been retooled by ISIS to produce chemical weapons, including chlorine or mustard gas.

When the task force left the area, more than 50 targets in the plant com-

plex lay destroyed. Every bit of the fleet's payload capability, especially the massive 70,000-pound load of the Stratofortress, was needed to deal this crushing blow to ISIS. Black and white video of the strike showed the massive plant light up with dozens of explosions, precisely on target.

There was "a pretty significant number" of points of interest in the complex, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey L. Harrigian, head of US Air Forces Central Command (AF-CENT), said of the Sept. 12 strike, and most required specific kinds of weapons,

USAF photo by TSgt. Terrica Y. Jones



By Brian W. Everstine,  
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delivered by specific platforms. “We needed that many jets to be able to take out the breadth [of] that facility.”

Air Force B-52s, often called BUFFs—for Big Ugly Fat [Fellas]—returned to the US Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility for an extended deployment in April 2016. It was the B-52’s first such deployment in 25 years.

The deployment with bombers from Barksdale AFB, La., replacing B-1B Lancers that had been in CENTCOM since 2001, represents a new initiative by the Air Force. Much like the continuous bomber presence mission in the Pacific, the Air Force has set up a new permanent bomber rotation to the Middle East.

“Our plan ... is to continue having a bomber presence, and it will be a combination of a B-1 and B-52 rotation,” Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein said in announcing the initiative during a “state of the force” briefing last August. The Air Force’s overall bomber inventory will be managed to sustain a forward bomber presence in CENTCOM and the Pacific, he said.

### **BONE HOME**

Since the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve in 2014, Air Force B-1Bs—called by their crews “Bones,” for B-Ones—have carried the load. The swept-wing bombers, with their massive weapons payload, set records

**A crew chief marshals a B-52 at Al Udeid AB, Qatar. The US is part of a 19-nation airpower coalition fighting ISIS in the Middle East.**



USAF photo by SrA Miles Wilson

**At top, Joint Direct Attack Munitions in a warehouse at Al Udeid Air Base. Here, an airman inspects a JDAM before it is loaded onto an aircraft for Operation Inherent Resolve.**

for the amount of bombs they dropped on ISIS.

In one six-month deployment, B-1Bs from Ellsworth AFB, S.D., flew 490 sorties and dropped 4,850 bombs.

In one month, they dropped 2,224 bombs—the most of any B-1B unit that had deployed to CENTCOM. The previous record was less than half that amount.

Starting in January 2016, the B-1s had to go home to receive a much-needed modernization package. Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) is installing the Integrated Battle Station upgrade on the sleek bombers, one of the most comprehensive improvements in the Lancer's history. The program upgrades the aircraft's avionics and data links and adds a self-diagnostic test system. The project is about 40 percent complete, according to AFGSC.

The rapid pace of air strikes on ISIS meant heavy bombers were still needed, though, and that's where the B-52 came



USAF photo by TSgt. James Hodgman

USAF photo by TSgt. Nathan Lipscomb



A maintainer inspects a B-52 from Barksdale AFB, La., at Al Udeid. B-52s based there have been in the fight against ISIS for a year.

in. Global Strike boss Gen. Robin Rand worked with the CENTCOM chief, Army Gen. Joseph L. Votel, to ensure a continuous presence, Goldfein said. That meant changes to the flight line at Al Udeid AB, Qatar.

Air Forces Central Command needed to do extensive work to get the base ready for B-52 operations, causing a slow start to their deployment, said Lt. Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., AFCENT chief at the time. The runway at the base had to be extended to allow the B-52 to take off and land normally. Other logistics support had to be upgraded to “make sure they’ve got everything they need,” he said.

The first B-52s touched down at the base on April 9, 2016, deploying their drag chutes. Just nine days later, a B-52 conducted its first strike inside Iraq, hitting an ISIS facility near Qayyarah.

While the BUFF is nuclear-capable and known for massive carpet-bombing campaigns such as the legendary Line-



AFCENT graphic

backer II missions in Vietnam, the aircraft have been heavily upgraded over the years. Rather than just the biggest bombs, they can now carry smaller munitions with adjustable yields such as laser guided GBU-12s and satellite guided GBU-31s.

“My father ... flew B-52s in the late 1960s and early 1970s,” said Maj. Gen. Peter E. Gersten, then deputy commander of operations and intelli-

**A flight camera records the destruction of an ISIS improvised weapons facility near Al Haditha, Iraq, in October 2016. The strike package on this mission included B-52s and aircraft from other coalition members.**

gence for Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, in a briefing. “I’d also like ... to clean up any misperceptions about what the B-52 is capable of. ... This is not my father’s B-52. It’s a highly upgraded B-52, [an]

“THE B-52 IS A PRECISION STRIKE WEAPON SYSTEM. ... IT WILL CONDUCT THE SAME TYPE OF PRECISION STRIKES THAT WE’VE SEEN FOR THE LAST 20 MONTHS.”

MAJ. GEN. PETER E. GERSTEN  
Then-deputy commander of operations and intelligence  
for Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve



Here, airmen prepare to marshal a B-52 in Southwest Asia in January. Above right, SrA. Matthew Krahn works on the engine cowls on a BUFF at Al Udeid. Maintainers work day and night to keep them available for missions against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.



extraordinary platform that strikes with the same accuracy and precision that every other coalition asset has struck [with] in the recent past.”

During the B-52’s first mission in April, the bomber attacked a weapons storage facility as part of Operation Valley Wolf, an effort by Iraq to clear ISIS terrorists from villages south of Mosul. Video of this strike shows the facility being destroyed, while nearby structures remained intact.

“There are memories ... in the collective [consciousness] of B-52s decades ago doing ... less discriminate, arguably indiscriminate, bombings,” then-coalition spokesman Army Col. Steve Warren said at the time. “I guess that’s where the phrase ‘carpet bombing’ originally came from, back in the Linebacker days.”

“Those days,” Warren said, “are long gone. The B-52 is a precision strike weapon system. ... It will conduct the same type of precision strikes that we’ve seen for the last 20 months here in this theater. So it is simply a replacement for the B-1. Obviously, the B-52 does have a long and very illustrious history. So we do like to talk about it. But really, it’s ... simply another platform from which we can launch our precision strikes.”

The pace has definitely picked up since. As of late December, B-52s had flown 430 sorties and dropped 2,565 weapons against ISIS targets. They’ve provided a large portion of the air support to Iraqi forces as they moved on the ISIS-held city of Mosul and have flown

USAF photo by SrA. Miles Wilson



USAF photo by TSgt. Carlos J. Treviño



**A B-1B banks away after refueling from a KC-135 over Southwest Asia. B-52s replaced the B-1s in theater as the Bones underwent badly needed upgrades.**

alongside a wide variety of coalition aircraft, including Marine Corps EA-6B Prowlers, a French Dassault Rafale, and Royal Danish Air Force F-16s.

“We got the B-52 back into the fight in Afghanistan and Iraq,” Goldfein said during a visit to CENTCOM in August. “We have the B-52 contributing to a significant ground effort and employing weapons in close proximity of friendly troops who are under attack.” The B-52s are “preparing the battlefield in new ways.”

The mission against ISIS is not expected to slow as the fight moves farther into Mosul and the group’s main capital of Raqqa, Syria. Coalition aircraft dropped 30,743 bombs in 2016, up from 28,696 the year before.

B-52s have also contributed to the ongoing fight in Afghanistan, flying four

sorties and dropping 51 bombs in that theater, according to AFCENT.

#### **YEAR OF THE B-52**

The B-52s are slated to continue fighting in Iraq and Syria for all of 2017 as the B-1B upgrade progresses, while the Bones are projected to return to CENTCOM in 2018. However, the first upgraded B-1B is scheduled to deploy to the Pacific in the near future. A specific date for that deployment hasn’t been set, according to Global Strike Command.

“This period of B-52 support to CENTCOM, their first extended presence there since 2005, has shown to be very positive both for the B-52 community executing their mission and for the B-1 community currently undergoing significant upgrades,” AFGSC spokeswoman Linda Frost said.

In addition to operational missions in the region, B-52s are conducting training while deployed. In May 2016, just about a month after arriving in theater, B-52s flew alongside Royal Jordanian Air Force F-16s in Exercise Eager Lion 2016 and dropped live ordnance in close air support training.

While maintaining two continuous bomber presence missions seems like it would tax Global Strike crews with more deployments, it has had the opposite effect so far, Frost said.

“It allows us to bring more aircraft to support the CENTCOM area of operations,” she said. “Instead of one airframe and two bases providing forces, we can now look across our entire B-1 and B-52 fleet to determine who’s right for the job required and who needs to rest and recoup.”

Sharing the load between the two bomber fleets and their seven operational squadrons evens out the deployment time among crews “as well as the cycling of aircraft through upgrades,” Frost said.

USAF photo by SSgt. Sandra Welch