



# **MILDENHALL, RACING TO THE FINISH**

By John A. Tirpak, Editorial Director

A Swedish JAS-39 Gripen flies off the wing of an RAF Mildenhall, UK-based USAF KC-135 during air refueling familiarization training over Hungary. US, Swedish, and Hungarian airmen participated in the 2015 training, which certified the Hungarian Gripen for tanker operations.

**USAF's big European tanker base is busier than ever, but slated to shut down for good.**



USAF photo by SrA. Kate Thornton

**D**ESPITE being busier than ever as the primary US aerial tanker capability for Europe, the 100th Air Refueling Wing at RAF Mildenhall, UK, is preparing to move permanently, ending what will be a 77-year US presence at the historic facility that began hosting American bombers just after World War II and a variety of missions ever since.

Mildenhall is one of the bases affected by the European Infrastructure Consolidation, announced by the Pentagon in 2015 as a way to save money by huddling military functions at fewer bases around the continent. Mildenhall's tankers will move to Ramstein AB, Germany; its 352nd Special Operations Wing MC-130s and CV-22s will go to Spangdahlem AB, Germany; and its other assorted missions will move piecemeal to other locations in Britain. Most will go to RAF Lakenheath, a mere five miles away—so close that the air traffic patterns practically overlap.

Lakenheath, by contrast, will grow considerably, as it prepares to receive the first contingent of F-35 fighters the US will deploy in Europe. Though Lakenheath's fence line will not expand, its contingent of US personnel is expected to swell by about 1,200 people and the base will host more than 100 American fighter aircraft.

Under the EIC agreement with Britain, though, Mildenhall's US missions won't be leaving until 2022, so the transition will happen gradually. Nothing irreversible has yet been done to begin the move.

"The locals cling to things like that," Col. Thomas D. Torkelson, 100th ARW commander, said in an interview last summer. Many British employees at Mildenhall who have made a career there are "nervously waiting out the time," hoping for a change in the plan, Torkelson said. But "this is not a US Air Force decision; this is a US government and UK government decision," and to all appearances, they plan "to see this

through." Torkelson said he's "a big believer in institutional momentum, and there's a lot of momentum in both nations." The base will revert to British use after the US departs.

To soften the blow, "we're trying to transfer as many jobs as possible over to Lakenheath to support the new missions there," he said.

Site activation task forces are already figuring out how other facilities will absorb functions that will move under the EIC. Other noteworthy bases used by the US since before the Cold War, such as RAF Alconbury and RAF Molesworth, will also revert to British use or close.

Torkelson is keen to preserve the Mildenhall heritage. Many of the ivy-covered buildings on the base date back to World War II, bearing plaques noting the history of the facility.

"We are the only Active Duty Air Force unit" with World War II markings on its aircraft, he said. The KC-135s of the "Bloody 100th" wear the "Square

D” that emblazoned B-17s operating from Thorpe Abbots, some 35 miles east of Mildenhall during the war with Germany. Air Force heraldry experts are trying to figure out a way to preserve the markings and unit history because the 100th will be folded into the 86th Wing when it moves to Ramstein.

Top USAF leaders in Europe “recognize the significance of that heritage,” Torkelson said. “I’ve even made it part of the EIC working group” to ensure the lineage is kept alive in the transition.

That heritage forms a strong bond between the Air Force and the community. The British appreciate the

“deep shared sacrifice” during World War II that has been a foundation of the “special relationship” between the US and Britain ever since, he said.

### WITHER MILDENHALL?

The UK government is trying to decide what to do with Mildenhall. The government has committed to free up public land for use as public housing, and there is a tentative plan to build 4,000 houses on the Mildenhall tract. Other plans suggest light industry usage or a mix of industry and housing.

However, US Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) officials said in a background

briefing for *Air Force Magazine* that any plans will have to wait until the British military services decide if any of them want the facility. The British Army is contemplating taking over the base, as there are nearby ranges it could use.

Despite the move of several hundred miles, US tanker capabilities in Europe should not appreciably change, 100th leaders said in interviews. Tankers will be an hour further away from aerial refueling missions in the Atlantic, but will be an hour closer to missions in the Middle East.

The European tanker operating tempo peaked in 2011, and it has scarcely re-



USAF photo by Capt. Jason Smith



USAF photo by SrA. Erin Babis



laxed since then. In 2011, the 100th supported operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector, the air campaign in Libya. Mildenhall-based tankers were asked to provide “maximum effort,” Torkelson said. The unit understood that to mean putting every one of its 14—now 15—KC-135s and aircrews into the fight.

“No other wing did that,” he said, noting that other units flew, at most, 80 percent of their allocated aircraft.

The 100th flew “exceptionally long” missions from its home station at Mildenhall for three weeks during the Libya operations, he said, until some

for the air campaign against ISIS. Torkelson would like to conclude that open-ended detachment because the situation has changed. Where once the Incirlik duty represented a good way to rapidly build hours and season aircrew, “those hours are so generic now and so canned that I don’t think they’re as good an experience as what we do here” at Mildenhall, he asserted.

There was a dip in activity in 2012, but “every year since, ... it’s been a slow ramp-up in quantity” of missions, Torkelson said. “We are more max-tasked than we ever have been,” now asked to fly every single asset on

supporting the transit of the President or Secretary of Defense into or through the European Theater.

To help, the Air National Guard or Air Force Reserve have started sporadically deploying a tanker to the base, and they will pick up some lower priority, nonkinetic missions, Torkelson said. At first, he feared the presence of the Guard or Reserve tanker would simply expand what was being asked of the wing, but “they help more than they hurt” in that regard.

“I would love to see more Guard and Reserve perpetual presence in this AOR [area of responsibility] that is so exceptionally busy.”



USAF photo by SSgt. Micaiah Anthony

**Clockwise from upper left: A French Mirage takes on fuel from a Mildenhall-based KC-135 over Africa in 2013. French fighters have flown combat missions over Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Iraq. / A pair of KC-135s sports the 100th Air Refueling Wing's Square D on the ramp at Powidz AB, Poland. The refuelers were preparing for Baltops 2016, a multinational maritime exercise around the Baltic Sea. / SrA. Kendall Bryant, a refueling boom operator, peers from a window during Tonnerre Lightning, an interoperability exercise with the US, UK, and France. / A British Tornado links up with a USAF KC-135 during Unified Protector. The 100th ARW refueled 325 aircraft during 2011 operations in Libya.**

of the tankers were moved to Istres, France, to be closer to the action. The French air force also operates KC-135s from Istres, located in France’s south-east coastal Mediterranean region, and there is now a two-ship detachment from the 100th stationed at the Istres base all the time, helping France’s anti-terrorism effort in Mali. The French call it Operation Serval, the US name is Operation Juniper Micron.

Mildenhall maintains a one-ship detachment at Incirlik AB, Turkey,

operational missions “35 to 40 percent of the time.”

In Fiscal 2015 the unit overflowed its budgeted program by 127 percent, he said. The wing is “routinely canceling” lower priority sorties “for higher priority missions because our percentage of priority ones has grown to 56 percent.” Typically, those high priority missions come with “late notice” and the lower priority ones just don’t get flown.

High priority missions can be anything from an emergency aerial tanking to

Another big booster of activity has been supporting the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), calling for frequent deployments to Europe of Stateside F-22, A-10, F-16, and B-52 units in theater security package missions. They alone account for 40 to 50 percent of the 100th’s load, Torkelson said.

The ERI “shows of force and presence” are “on the backs of our KC-135s,” he said. The deployments are typically for two weeks, so “we’re refueling all the time.”

The 100th is not the only tanker capability in Europe; Air Mobility Command (AMC) sends tankers through the AOR to destinations elsewhere all the time, and they pick up some of the load.

“All the desert swap-out tankers flow through here,” Torkelson observed.

Another AMC KC-135 detachment at Geilenkirchen, Germany, is typically slaved to refueling the NATO Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft.

The European air refueling mission is attractive to tanker pilots because “it is really diverse,” said 351st Air Refueling Squadron chief Lt. Col. Jason Barnes.

“We do a mix of everything,” he said. Coronet missions are those that support fighters coming across the Atlantic from the States. The wing supports the F-15s of the 48th Fighter Wing at Lakenheath, and there is a steady array of allied aircraft that get their fuel from US tankers. A KC-135 crew

During the interview with Torkelson, he received a call from USAFE headquarters dictating a high priority mission to South Sudan. Asked what it was all about, he could only answer, “You can Google it.”

The vast majority of European allies use the probe-and-drogue system of refueling, so the 100th crews are frequently tasked to configure with a basket on their booms, or use scarce wing pods—the Multipoint Refueling System—that deploy hoses and baskets. The 100th also refuels the 352nd SOW’s MC-130s. Attempts to directly refuel the CV-22 tilt-rotors from KC-135s have proved technically challenging and are not yet a normal procedure.

a lot of the bread-and-butter training work is done in the base’s simulator, run by contractors, Barnes said. France sends its KC-135 pilots to Mildenhall for simulator work, as does Turkey, also a Stratotanker operator. For pilot upgrades, most will go Stateside to the KC-135 schoolhouse at Altus AFB, Okla., he pointed out.

### TIP O’ THE HAT

For being a 50-plus-year-old platform, the KC-135s are holding up remarkably well, Barnes said.

“My hat’s off to our maintainers. They do a very good job ... and with a very high mission effectiveness rate.” He said he is not seeing an increase

USAF photo by SrA. Erin Trower



USAF photo by SSgt. Chad Warren



L-r: Airmen assigned to RAF Mildenhall review flight plans in 2016 at Istres-Le-Tubé AB, France. USAF supports French anti-terrorist operations in Mali and North Africa with airlift and air refueling. There is now a two-ship KC-135 detachment assigned to the Istres base at all times. SrA. Tyler Miller performs a preflight check on a KC-135 at Keflavik Airport in Iceland. The tanker provided air refueling to NATO fighters performing Icelandic air surveillance and policing missions in 2015. SrA. Daniel Lamey inspects a KC-135 in Istres. USAF has been supporting counterterrorism efforts there since 2013.

could easily see, in a week, Rafales from France, Tornados from Germany, and even Gripens from Hungary or Sweden. (When a US tanker refuels a partner country, the US is reimbursed for the fuel passed and a percentage of the cost of the mission, Torkelson explained.)

The 100th is the only air refueling wing directly supporting Air Forces Africa, so in addition to tanking French fighters going to and from Mali, the wing refuels aircraft striking ISIS targets in Libya and other locations.

“The procedures are aircraft-specific,” Barnes said, so pilots and boom operators alike rarely get into a rut of doing the same old, same old. The European Theater requires diplomatic clearances needed for overflight of its many countries, Barnes said. The European airspace is dense with air traffic and is “challenging airspace to fly in,” he said.

Even though there are always more tanking missions to do than there are tankers available, the unit still does some missions strictly for training. But

in aborts or mechanical problems in the last few years, despite the higher operating tempo.

The KC-135 maintenance team helps with some of the back-shop maintenance needs of RC-135 Rivet Joint intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft that operate from the base, including one—called Airseeker—that belongs to Britain.

Torkelson said the Airseeker is visiting from RAF Waddington, where the runway is being rebuilt.

“The UK doesn’t like Waddington as a long-term solution for their Rivet Joints, because the runway is too short and they require a tanker for every mission from there. And so they’ve been waiting for our basing decision [for the location of US Air Force RC-135s in Europe] to see if they might be able to potentially

pile onto that and maybe put their UK Rivet Joints there,” Torkelson explained.

As the principal engine of US aerial refueling in Europe, the 100th has been trying to build partnerships with other countries having a refueling capability, according to Maj. Steve Briones, the wing’s chief of operations group plans, strategy, and exercises.

He helped organize the European Air Refueling Symposium, held at the base last spring. The conference drew air refueling practitioners from eight countries, he said, and they were not all NATO members.

“Everybody told their story of what they do and have been doing” since the 2014 meeting, he said.

tankers, “as proof of concept that we can do it.”

Another “hot topic” of the symposium, Briones reported, was how to successfully bring new tanker capabilities into NATO and the European Union. New countries are “looking to get into the refueling business” and are buying aircraft like the Airbus A330 Multirole Tanker Transport (MRTT). In the “not-too-distant future” such aircraft will be in more European fleets, he said.

There was agreement to expand the conference from two days to two weeks, to have it annually instead of every other year, to include more countries, and to have live-fly exercises,

Though Mildenhall’s closure will leave no resident US tanker capability in Britain, the Royal Air Force has its own robust refueling capability, fielding MRTTs at RAF Brize Norton, the RAF’s mobility hub. There will be no tanker deficit after the Mildenhall closure.

Asked what the tanker mission in Europe needs that it doesn’t have, Torkelson said that any wing commander would answer, “Manning.”

“No one asks for better working or living conditions,” Torkelson said. “Everyone asks for bodies,” but he recognizes that even though USAFE is requesting more airmen, they may not arrive quickly. The better answer



USAF photo by SrA. Erin Trower

At Torkelson’s direction the 100th is encouraging standard tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) among the European countries that do air refueling. Some of their TTPs, Briones said, are quite different from US Air Force standards.

Other countries “fly really close to each other” when doing refueling operations, he said, and USAF doesn’t see a good reason to do that. Although Briones didn’t say the close formation tactic is unsafe, “we’ve actually had to cancel and say no to formation flying because their TTPs are not as conservative as ours.”

One of the action items from the May meeting was to start doing mixed formation flights that the US can say yes to, and plans are being made to fly formation with German and Spanish

Briones said. There will be work done to better coordinate between USAF and European Air Transport Command and the Movement Coordination Center in Europe, both located in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Briones likened them to a European version of US Transportation Command and Air Mobility Command.

More cooperation will make it possible to better distribute available tanking assets and render assistance if a tanker is needed for an emergency.

Up until now, “the US has not been ... heavily involved” in European tanking operations “on a tactical level,” Briones said. On a strategic level, however, “that is happening.”

All this partnership activity “is a critical step forward if we do end up doing something like [Operation Unified Protector] again in the future.”

to the question is an ability “to bear the burden better. ... Give us broader shoulders.” He said that calls for fixing “internal processes, internal scheduling, to minimize waste, redundancy, minimize aircraft generation that doesn’t lead to anything. That makes us able to bear the burden more.”

Torkelson said he’s “agnostic” about the relocation of the 100th to Ramstein, but feels strongly that a permanent US tanker presence is definitely needed in Europe.

“You’re flying through all these different nations, ... all the voices and accents on the radio, from here to Bulgaria, all ... distinct. It’s such a unique place to project and employ airpower.” Helping the allies “be interoperable and more capable because of our routine presence is satisfying.” ✪