

No Carrier, No Problem

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The *Dwight D. Eisenhower* carrier battle group departed the Middle East in December 2016 and returned home to Norfolk, Va., after completing a seven-month combat tour. *Ike's* replacement, the *George H. W. Bush* battle group, departed Norfolk for the Middle East three weeks later, on Jan. 21.

By Feb. 6, *Bush* was making a port call at Souda Bay, Greece. More than six weeks passed without a US aircraft carrier in the Middle East, a fact that generated considerable national media attention.

The gap "comes at a particularly inopportune time," read *Defense News*, reflecting a common opinion. "Numerous media reports indicate intelligence organizations and analysts are on the lookout for provocative actions by potential antagonists—in particular Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, or ISIS. Terror alerts ... are high in many regions ... due to a confluence of factors—the new year, ISIS' diminishing power in the face of counterattacks in Iraq and Syria, and a natural tendency to test a new administration."

The Navy's carrier groups had repeatedly surged to meet combat demands in recent years, which took a toll on the flattops. *Bush* needed a longer-than-expected overhaul before returning to the high seas, and there were no other carriers available to fill in for it in the waters around the Middle East.

Besides the carrier gap, other January operations also generated considerable attention. That month saw a successful B-2 strike against ISIS training camps in Libya and an airpower-supported raid against al Qaeda facilities in Yemen, an attack that left Navy SEAL William "Ryan" Owens dead and an MV-22 Osprey destroyed.

But an interesting thing happened while there was no carrier available to support combat operations in the Middle East: The US-led coalition air campaign attacking ISIS delivered a record amount of ordnance and continued to grind down ISIS. The flexibility and versatility of airpower allowed other units, including an Air National Guard detachment from Vermont, to overcome the carrier gap and continue Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) at a record pace.

This fact generated considerably less media attention.

Coalition air forces released 3,606 weapons against ISIS targets in January 2017, according to the Combined Air and Space Operations Center (CAOC) at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. This was fully 10 percent more weapons delivered than in any previous month of the war on ISIS.

Lest anyone fear activity masks a lack of progress, the CAOC noted airpower is helping "overwhelm [ISIS] in its last major strongholds." By Jan. 31, ISIS had lost 60 percent of its territory in Iraq, while in Syria, Raqqa ("the nexus of [ISIS'] external operations") is increasingly isolated.

In all, officials wrote, "we've disrupted their command and control apparatus and imposed an incredible strain on their leaders, industrial base, financial systems, and communication networks."

The war on ISIS reached a new high while the Middle East experienced a "carrier gap."

For example, over Syria, "the coalition in the last 24 hours conducted 10 air strikes," hitting tactical units and the oil infrastructure ISIS depends on to finance its operations, Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said Jan. 5. Coalition forces conducted eight air strikes supporting anti-ISIS operations in Mosul, Iraq, the same day.

On p. 12, Jennifer Hlad has the story of the Vermont Air Guard's 134th Fighter Squadron deploying to an undisclosed forward base to battle ISIS.

Airmen and a squadron of F-16s deployed on a month's notice, although Guard deployments of this scale are typically planned a year in advance. The 134th began flying combat missions 15 hours after touching down. "The presence of the F-16s demonstrates the Air Force's flexibility to meet the dynamic requirements of the warfighting commanders," US Air Forces Central Command officials observed.

"The CAOC is continuously evaluating airpower requirements and making adjustments as necessary to ensure we have the right amount of combat airpower overhead," added Lt. Gen. Jeffrey L. Harrigian, the Inherent Resolve air commander.

Operations were similarly aided by a surge in coalition sorties and the presence of the Marine Corps' 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit centered on the large-deck amphibious assault ship *Makin Island*. "Amphibious forces at sea provide a formidable presence ... although they might not be as noticed or tracked as the larger nuclear powered carriers," wrote *US Naval Institute News* in January.

It is no surprise the lack of a carrier generated more attention than airpower's ability to step up and deliver the greatest single month of attacks on ISIS. Carriers occupy a unique place in the American psyche. But the events of early 2017 reaffirmed how airpower destroys enemies and defends friends—whether there is a carrier available or not. ★



USAF photo by Msgt. Benjamin Wilson

An F-16 from the 134th Fighter Squadron on a Southwest Asia flight line at sunset in February.