



Airmen prepare bombs at Whiteman AFB, Mo., on Jan. 18, 2017. B-2s flew for 16 hours from the base to carry out air strikes against ISIS training camps in Libya. Right: GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions arrayed inside the bomb bay of a B-2 before the mission.



# THE B-2 BODY BLOW

By Brian W. Everstine, Pentagon Editor



## Two bombers, 13 tankers, 85 bombs on target in the sands of Libya.

**F**ar above the ISIS training camp in the Libyan desert, some 30 miles southwest of the coastal city of Sirte, Air Force MQ-9 Reapers watched the group's tents for activity on the night of Jan. 18-19, 2017. This site was believed to be the terrorists' largest concentration of operatives outside of Syria and Iraq—a makeshift sanctuary for fighters attempting to secure control of territory in yet another nation with a weak government and minimally organized security forces.

For months, Reapers—remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs)—and Marine Corps jets had hammered ISIS in Sirte, forcing the group to retreat to the desert. Now, the coup de grâce was on its way from Missouri in the form of two B-2 Spirit stealth bombers.

Within 10 seconds of their planned time on target—and after about 16 hours of flight—the pair of bombers unloaded bombs on the camp. The entire ISIS tent city erupted. Video released the next day at a Pentagon briefing showed next to nothing left. ISIS had been dealt a severe blow just

as it was attempting to regroup for further Libyan operations.

The strike, launched in the waning hours of Barack Obama's presidency, was the culmination of seven months of US operations focused on ISIS. For the Air Force, it exemplified the concept of global precision strike.

USAF Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein told lawmakers in April, "These stealth bomber crews, refueled by 13 different tankers, delivered 85 bombs over two terrorist camps. Delivering precise, lethal effects" half a world away, at exactly the called-for time.

### TERROR BREEDING GROUNDS

In 2014, ISIS decided to expand its self-proclaimed caliphate beyond Iraq



**Backup plans: Munitions are readied for loading on Jan. 18. According to the head of Global Strike Command, Whiteman crews prepped five aircraft and some 400 weapons for the mission.**

and Syria, seeking a global presence. It saw good prospects for a foothold in North Africa, taking advantage of the near lawlessness that had engulfed Libya. The nation's Government of National Accord (GNA) could keep only a tenuous hold on the nation. Foreign fighters flowed into Libya, rising to a peak of almost 6,000 by April 2016.

"Anywhere you have a weak or unstable or no government, that's a breeding ground for ISIS," said Marine Corps Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser in March. He is commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM).

ISIS claimed the small seaside town of Sirte as its capital in Libya and soon began launching attacks within the



**Airmen from Whiteman's 509th Bomb Wing prepare a B-2 Spirit. The stealth bombers were tasked because range, payload, and surprise were essential.**

B-2 crews at Whiteman and Air Mobility Command tanker planners were put on alert in mid-January and given 96 hours to plan the mission.



**A B-2 takes off on Jan. 18. The mission's purpose was to help Libya's Government of National Accord reclaim territory around Sirte, a town ISIS was using as a base for attacks.**

country and planning foreign attacks from there. On Aug. 1, 2016, the US began kinetic action against the ISIS franchise.

President Obama, at the request of the Libyan government, approved the strikes on Sirte as an attempt to help Libyan forces reclaim territory in and around the city. The strikes came from

## BY THE TIME ODYSSEY LIGHTNING WRAPPED UP LAST DECEMBER, US AIRCRAFT HAD CONDUCTED 495 STRIKES.

USMC AV-8B Harrier II jets, stationed on the amphibious assault ship *USS Wasp* off the Libyan coast. USAF Reapers and Marine AH-1 SuperCobras joined the campaign. The first day, US aircraft hit one T-72 tank, one T-55 tank, two military support vehicles, an enemy fighting position, and two pieces of heavy engineering equipment.

The 2011 NATO operation to oust Libya's dictator Muammar Qaddafi was called Operation Odyssey Dawn. This new campaign was dubbed Operation Odyssey Lightning; it was expected to be quick—and harsh.

### THE NEW ODYSSEY

Odyssey Lightning launched almost daily air strikes, supporting GNA forces as they advanced throughout Sirte. AFRICOM released daily summaries, detailing what was hit, usually with pictures of USMC aircraft launching from *Wasp*.

For the campaign, the US deployed special operations forces in the vicinity. They worked in "operations centers" near the front line to help direct strikes.

Their task called for precision air strikes and close air support in an urban environment, with rules of engagement calling for no civilian casualties and minimal destruction of nearby infrastructure, Waldhauser said.

"I don't think you can do an operation like that without somebody on the ground," he explained. "You have to have that contact; you have to have that face to face." With strikes coming from RPAs flown by crews half a world away and commanders making decisions in still other far-flung locations, "you need to have somebody on the ground talking to these people to make sure we can do it with this skill and precision that's required."

From the beginning, AFRICOM set out to be as careful as possible and



**In the late hours of Jan. 18, a 100th Air Refueling Wing KC-135, from RAF Mildenhall, UK, refuels a B-2 from the 509th Bomb Wing. Thirteen tankers refueled the stealth bombers.**

created a strike approval process optimized for speed. Libya was deemed an active area of hostilities. This gave the command the ability to promptly approve strikes. Teams on the ground needed to ensure that only ISIS fighters were hit, Waldhauser said.

“We had to know what we were shooting at,” he maintained.

While AFRICOM offered pictures of Marine Corps assets—Harriers—taking off for strikes and spoke publicly about SuperCobras in the operation, the Air Force’s involvement largely stayed under wraps. That was the case until early this March, when the head of Air Combat Command’s main

remotely piloted aircraft wing was permitted to detail its involvement. He did so at AFA’s Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla.

By the time Odyssey Lightning wrapped up last December, US aircraft had conducted 495 strikes. Sixty percent of those came from MQ-9 Reapers, flown by crews at Creech AFB, Nev., and at Air National Guard bases in North Dakota and Tennessee, said Col. Case Cunningham, commander of the 432nd Wing at Creech and the 432nd Air Expeditionary Wing.

The RPA crews at the bases coordinated directly with special operators in Libya. Seventy percent of the Reaper

strikes were conducted within “danger close” range of GNA forces, some less than 100 feet away.

Cunningham said that at times, RPA operators fired Hellfire missiles into specific windows of structures in Sirte to take out a sniper, but left the rest of the building intact.

On Dec. 19, 2016, AFRICOM officially closed out Odyssey Lightning as Libyan GNA troops reclaimed Sirte from ISIS. But that didn’t mean the end of US air strikes in the country.

Fleeing the town, ISIS fighters went south into the desert to regroup, forming a makeshift training camp. Even as they did so, US intelligence, sur-

# THIS WAS “NOT SOMETHING THAT B-2 PILOTS TRAIN FOR ON A REGULAR BASIS.”

—Capt. Nathan Mueller  
Mission flight lead



veillance, and reconnaissance aircraft overhead kept watch. US intelligence learned the group was attempting to plan attacks outside of Libya, including in Europe.

“We need to strike [ISIS] everywhere they show up,” then-Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said Jan. 19. “That’s particularly true in view of the fact that we know some of the [ISIS] operatives in Libya were involved in plotting attacks in Europe to our friends and allies there.”

In mid-January, B-2 crews at Whiteman AFB, Mo., and tanker planners in Air Mobility Command were put on alert. They had 96 hours to plan a strike in Libya to take out the ISIS camp.

Despite the fact that the targets were tents in the desert, USAF chose the formidable B-2 because its specific capabilities were required, Goldfein told reporters in February. Range, payload, and surprise were essential.

“Here’s the mission we’re given, and what is the family of systems required?” Goldfein asked. “That was the best weapon system we had for that mission.”

And while “we think about the Libya strike as a B-2 strike, let’s not forget, there were a bunch of tankers that had to get them there. There were all of the maintainers that had to get them loaded. There were all those loaders who had to build those weapons and load them. There’s a family that’s required to be able to get that B-2 finally on target.”

At Whiteman, crews prepared five

aircraft and loaded about 400 weapons, Air Force Global Strike Command chief Gen. Robin Rand said at the AFA symposium in March. The 509th Bomb Wing picked its best aircrews for the mission: officers who had graduated from the US Air Force Weapons School. “It was a very humbling experience when my squadron commander told me that I would be flight lead” for what would become the B-2’s only participation in Odyssey Lightning, 13th Bomb Squadron flight leader Capt. Nathan Mueller—call sign Shatter—said in a Whiteman press release. “The dynamic targeting and inherent integration that took place en route to Libya is not something that B-2 pilots train for on a regular basis.”

Air Mobility Command planned the refueling, preparing an air bridge of KC-10 Extenders and KC-135 Strato-

**This was the first combat mission for the B-2s since their 2011 strike on Libya. It took a big team to carry it out: tankers from three commands, maintainers, weapon loaders, and RPA crews, to name a few.**

tankers from New Jersey and Europe to get the bombers to the target.

AMC chief Gen. Carlton D. Everhart II told *Air Force Magazine*, “As soon as the requirement hits from Transportation Command, we start working those requirements. At Air Mobility Command, we’re very used to doing the pickup game.”

18th Air Force and the 618th Air and Space Operations Center at Scott AFB, Ill., looked across the air refueling enterprise to find tankers to perform the mission from US Northern Command, US Air Forces in Europe, and US Central Command.



**Surveillance of ISIS fighters unloading weapons from vehicles in Libya at a training camp near Sirte.**

Photos: SrA. Joel Pfeister; SSgt. Kate Thornton; USAF video



**A crew chief marshals in a B-2 at Whiteman on Jan 19. The aircraft's range, payload, and stealth capabilities made it the weapon of choice.**

"It's a big team that has to execute things on time to make it work right," said Col. Darren R. Cole, commander of the 305th Air Mobility Wing at JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J. His wing's KC-10s made some of the first refuelings of the three B-2s sent on the mission. "It's pretty impressive to be able to hit a target globally at a moment's notice with so many people participating."

On the night of Jan. 18, three B-2s launched from Whiteman with aircrews and cameras looking on. It was the first combat mission for the bombers since the previous strike on Libya, in 2011, which began Odyssey Dawn. The Spirits launched shortly after President Obama approved the mission. It was the final full day of his presidency.

A number of MQ-9s watched as two B-2s—the spare turned back before the target—dropped 85 weapons on the training camp. The camp was destroyed, and more than 100 ISIS fighters were killed.

"Importantly, these strikes were directed against some of [ISIS'] external plotters, who were actively planning operations against our allies in Europe," Carter said in revealing the mission. "These were critically important strikes for our campaign and a clear example of our enduring commitment to destroy [ISIS'] cancer—not only in Iraq and Syria but everywhere it emerges."



**Brig. Gen. Paul Tibbets IV, center, 509th Bomb Wing commander, welcomes two B-2 pilots home. The wing picked its best airmen for the mission.**

While the Jan. 19 strike was a blow to ISIS, it did not eliminate the group from Libya.

"The status of ISIS in Libya is, they ... are regrouping," Waldhauser said. "They've scattered" into "small numbers, small groups." The US is continuing to develop intelligence on their locations and activities.

While the Libyan government is relatively weak, it has been able to join with others such as the Misrata militia because "one [thing] that unites them"

is their shared desire that ISIS not be a force inside Libya, Waldhauser said. Given the volatility there, those groups will have to unite to avoid a civil war, he added.

As of late March, AFRICOM estimated that 100 to 200 ISIS fighters remain in Libya. US aircraft continue to ply the skies there, Waldhauser said. "We continue to observe, to develop intelligence." If the Government of National Accord asks for assistance again, "we'll provide that." ✪