

Smaller, But Still the Best

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor



At AFA's Orlando Air Warfare Symposium, the top Air Force leaders said we're going back to the basics.

The Air Force is shedding aircraft and personnel in an attempt to preserve its potency and readiness as a global force. At the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla., in February, USAF leadership laid the groundwork for what this will mean and cautioned that the service must undergo deep changes to adapt to a new postwar footing.

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James used the opportunity to preview what she and Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III would present to Congress. "There are going to be some things that you like, and there are going to be some things that you don't like," she told the audience in Orlando about the forthcom-

ing budget choices. James made clear that so-called "vertical cuts" of entire fleets of aircraft (with the A-10 and U-2 among the proposed victims) were now necessary evils.

James also noted that over a decade of war USAF delayed some difficult choices in its investments, end strength, and capabilities. These decisions can't be put off anymore. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel has directed the services to begin balancing hardware, personnel, and long-range strategy, James said.

Alongside force structure reductions, USAF will soon be carrying out end strength reductions of up to 25,000 personnel across the force by Fiscal 2019. Much of the personnel reductions are set to come up front and then normalize

(along with the force structure) in future years, CMSAF James A. Cody said. The goal is to have most of the reduction programs in process by the beginning of next year, as USAF does not want to take five years to make the cuts.

There will be adjustments and refinements along the way. You have to prepare the force, Cody said, and give people the opportunity to consider the voluntary programs.

"I can tell you that although it might sound counterintuitive, it's actually better if you can ... get things done more quickly rather than more slowly," James elaborated. "It's easier on people that way because people will know what to expect. They can know about their choices."

The end strength reduction is just part of the major effort to retool the Air Force to survive sequestration—and beyond. "Let's go back to basics and rethink why we are doing it? Is it necessary? Can we stop?" James asked rhetorically.

Get Ready

This philosophy is what is also behind USAF headquarters reductions and staff reorganizations, tied to the Fiscal 2015 budget. "I'm telling you all of this now to get you prepared and ask for your help in helping us tell the total story of how we need to achieve these savings, sometimes in very unpopular ways," James said in her speech. Her message was echoed by Welsh and other senior leaders who emphasized repeatedly that USAF's plan would require a good deal of pain, but reductions would be reinvested into core service capabilities needed for the future—intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance, space, cyber, strike, and mobility modernization, among others.

Cutbacks will not be restricted to the enlisted force and will go as high as the general officer corps. Welsh confirmed the Air Staff is examining the reduction of three- and four-star general officer positions across the force. During a panel with the heads of the major commands, Welsh said USAF is about to hire the first of a new generation of majcom vice commanders who will be two stars rather than three-star generals.

While Congress recently granted some relief to readiness accounts, the fundamental problem for the service's solvency remain. Last year's Bipartisan Budget Act, though giving USAF a reprieve from sequestration, does not fix the problem. Funds can only go to activities in the next two fiscal years; thus almost all of it must go to readi-



An F-15E taxis to the runway before a training mission during Red Flag 14-1 at Nellis AFB, Nev.

USAF photo by SrA. Brett Clashman

Clockwise: 111 SSgt. Jerome Duhan inserts a hard drive into a server at the 97th Air Mobility Wing's network control center. 121 An A-10 peels away after taking on fuel from a KC-135 over Afghanistan. Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James said that due to budget cuts, eliminating entire fleets of aircraft—including the A-10—is a necessary evil. 131 USAF SrA. Frederick Riggans-Huguley (r) and Royal Australian Air Force Flight Sgt. Sean Bedford analyze missile defense systems data during Red Flag 14-1. Over the next few decades, USAF will be looking closely at the ratio between air, space, and cyberspace in its core missions.

ness activities—flying hours, training, weapons school classes.

And by 2017, the Air Force is back to the full burden of sequestration. The reduction plan now underway is based on the assumption that the cuts remain, as sequestration is indeed the law of the land and USAF must still train and maintain a capable force.

“How big can that force be and still remain trained?” Welsh asked. “That’s why we target these first couple of years to make the reductions, so that we can kind of balance our ability with our size by 2017 if nothing else changes in the budget.”

The changes by necessity are not limited to the Active Duty force, and in

the coming years the service aims to integrate its Air Reserve Components with its daily operations in an unprecedented manner. USAF just now is emerging from a long reexamination of its relationship with both the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Command, prompted by the sharp disagreements that arose from the Fiscal 2013 budget proposal.

This led to the stand-up of the Total Force Task Force (TF2), bringing general officers from Active Duty, the Air Guard, and AFRC together at the Air Staff level to hammer out a consensus. The work of TF2 directly influenced the long-term trades and priorities established in the 2015 budget, Welsh and others pointed out.



USAF photo by SrA. Franklin R. Ramos

Discord between the components emerged in the first months, but by the fourth month those inside TF2 had a good understanding of the positions of the others on long-term force structure choices facing the Air Force, officials said.

The task force was able to run through a deep analysis of platforms and specialty codes and how much capabilities cost in each of the components. About half the service's force structure was examined by the time the 2015 budget was finalized. By USAF estimates, the in-depth analysis on the remainder will be completed for the 2016 submission.

Air National Guard Director Lt. Gen. Stanley E. Clarke III told Orlando

attendees the TF2 was a new way of approaching an old problem: how to integrate the Guard and Reserve into the Total Air Force. Clarke said that during a previous assignment of his at the Pentagon, most of the decision-making on Total Force integration was done at the major command level. "Now, we have a place to focus our efforts at the Air Staff level. There's more process, more insight," he said.

"Arguably some of the things we did in the past weren't done as well as they could have been," he said. Now, with TF2 institutionalized at the headquarters level as the "Total Force Continuum" with three one-stars to rotate in and out, TF2 will serve as

a permanent resource for Total Force issues at the Pentagon.

Cautions

Meanwhile, the National Commission on the Structure of the Air Force released its final report in January. While it came too late to advise the 2015 budget, USAF leadership largely had praise for the commission's work, noting many of its recommendations reflected similar issues tackled by the TF2.

However, both Welsh and Lt. Gen. James "J. J." Jackson, commander of Air Force Reserve Command, sounded a caution on specific recommendations: setting a percentage figure for force structure in the Active Duty and reorganizing AFRC command structures. While Jackson supported many of the commission's findings, he disagreed with their recommendation to disestablish AFRC and its numbered air forces.

Jackson noted the organizations were built up based on key lessons learned during both the Korean War and in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm. "I don't think we should go backward in time," he said.

James said there were recommendations in the NCSAF report "we don't fully understand" but added that USAF leadership would wait to get briefed on the methodology used before making final decisions.

The NCSAF report came back with a floor for Active Duty force structure, to boot: USAF should aim to put no less than 58 percent of the force structure in the Active Duty. "I'm not arguing that their numbers are wrong," Welsh said. He said the Air Staff wanted to engage in talks with the commission to see how they arrived at their conclusions. He said the Air Force began the TF2 process from the other end of the problem: trying to put as much force structure into the Air Guard and Reserve and not lose responsiveness.

Air Force leaders want to improve the mobility of personnel between components, but warn that this will not be easy. While it will be difficult in some regard, due to the part-time nature of the ARC, USAF needs to start thinking about how to develop senior leaders over time who have a good understanding of how the Total Force operates, Welsh emphasized.

The Air Force is now also reexamining how it plans, budgets, fulfills, and prosecutes its missions. In the long term, the Air Force must reconfigure how it adapts and adjusts its core missions to the national military strategy. Over the



USAF photo by MSgt. William Greer



USAF photo by S/A. Brett Clashman

years USAF has had a lot of guiding concepts, Welsh said, from strategic bombardment in World War II to nuclear deterrence after the Korean War, to Air-Land Battle in the 1980s all the way up to the counterinsurgency (COIN) wars of the last 12 years.

The Air Force must now ask itself what it needs to deliver more of to fulfill the national military strategy. “We’ve got to figure this out and we’ve got to figure it out quick,” Welsh said.

The 2015 budget set the Air Force on a path with various resource options. For example, USAF has worked out a classified resource strategy, Air Force 2023. Welsh was quick to say the effort was not a USAF strategy per se, but rather a resourcing guide, designed to get the service to the end of sequestration. A new USAF strategy is now in the works, Welsh stated, and will be released in June.

This strategy document will help the Air Force more closely track its capabilities, spending, and long-term goals and has three components.

First, a “30-year” plan element will examine threats, strategic priorities, and how USAF operates (in air, space, and

cyberspace). It must be updated every four years.

Second, a master plan will look at the service’s next two decades and take core function plans—from air superiority to mobility to space operations—and bring them together in one place. By examining all these in one place, leaders will be able to trade capabilities across portfolios and missions and build off-ramps to recognize programs or technologies that succeed or get out of ones that don’t.

Organizational Changes

The third element will institutionalize a 10-year resource-driven look, much like AF 2023, to make sure the service is keeping “reality in our funding streams ... down the road.”

To guide and plan for the service’s long-term health, leadership forecast organizational changes to headquarters staff in 2015 and beyond. Welsh confirmed that as part of headquarters reorganization and reductions efforts, the Air Staff’s A3/5 office (operations and plans) will be split up again, with A3 now left solely to focus on operations, while a new A5/8 office will be in charge of both strategic plans and programs and long-range resource

planning. Other organizational changes are in the works, too.

Even as USAF experiences great upheaval in its force structure (with some additional 300-some aircraft proposed for retirement in Fiscal 2015), leadership believes a close relationship between budgeting and planning will help the service articulate what it will become 10 and 20 years in the future.

The cyber mission, a growth area for the service, is a prime example. Air Force Space Command’s Gen. William L. Shelton said seven of USAF’s cyber capabilities have been declared official “weapons systems”—much like any aircraft—and include cyber defense programs, the “vulnerability assessment system,” and unnamed “offensive cyber capabilities.”

The Air Force will add thousands of airmen in the coming three years to focus on cyber defense, combat support, and other activities through US Cyber Command. “We have tremendous opportunity ahead, but it will require us to rethink how we do business in cyberspace,” Shelton said.

Welsh said it is important for all airmen to understand the cyber domain, rather than a mission, is a vehicle for USAF’s five



Lockheed Martin photo

core missions: air and space superiority, ISR, global mobility, global strike, and command and control. “I believe very firmly that if we look at the missions, ... we will see corollaries that we can do in both space and cyber,” he said, noting USAF already does ISR through space, and someday it may even perform strike from space. “Someday, ... we’ll be doing armed escort of information in the cyber domain,” he said. “This isn’t that cosmic if you understand the roles we play to a joint commander and to the nation.” Over the next 20 to 30 years, the Air Force will be looking closely at the ratio between air, space, and cyber in all its core missions and at how to create the best effect overall.

Change is already taking place in many mission sets. The end of F-22 production meant the F-35 is now being adapted to perform air superiority missions, and this involves improving weapons and sensors.

Two of the Air Force’s greatest mission successes are undergoing change: ISR and global mobility. Air Mobility Command’s Gen. Paul J. Selva stated that the collective global mobility capability of USAF is largely built on studies and projections performed in 2012. “We’ve advocated [that] we ought to take a look at emerging [operations plans] from our combatant commanders and look forward to the early 2020s,” he said, to get some sense for what the needs of a future force will be, as they will likely not reflect the capability now fielded.

The same can be said of ISR. In the Gulf War, “nobody knew what ISR was,” Welsh said, and today, at the NCO level, USAF has experts on a range of ISR operations. “The game has changed,” he said. “It has changed principally because the Air Force has built the system, and we ... can move this kind of data all over the world at the speed of light. ... It is a stunningly effective example of American military power,” he said.

No More Soda Straws

As the service adapts from an architecture set up to support a large footprint COIN campaign to aid future fights, the question needing an answer is how USAF integrates all the ISR tools it has built up across domains, from signals intelligence to audio and imagery. The era of a fleet of soda straw-limited views on Predators and Reapers pulling up volumes of full-motion video has to give way to a better method to collect, manage, and disseminate information around the world for combatant commanders, Welsh said.

As adversary capabilities increase,

challenges will emerge for both targeting and command and control—as coordinating operations at a theater level, among allies, will get harder in an environment where an enemy is actively trying to deny goals. Some tools that will become more important in this domain include self-healing networks and better situational awareness, including, in space and cyberspace.

With the change rippling across the force, some are sanguine about the risks being shouldered by the reductions. “We will still be the best, most capable air force in the world,” said Heidi H. Grant, deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for international affairs. USAF’s partners around the world understand, however, that the US is taking “potential risk” in capacity. In the future, the US may not be able to have the depth to accomplish a full range of operations like it did in March 2011, Grant said, when the Libya campaign kicked off, Operation Tomodachi in Japan commenced, and wars still needed support in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“In the future, the question is, will we be able to? And that’s where our partners come in,” Grant said. Allies will be increasingly important to organize and respond and must build up

complementary capabilities in areas such as ISR and airlift for when USAF will not be available.

Col. Anton Den Drijver, Royal Netherlands Air Force’s air attaché at the Dutch Embassy in Washington, said the Netherlands realized after the 2011 Libya campaign that many allies needed to wean themselves from reliance on key US capabilities. “That’s a big challenge with [the] US and Europe. There are a lot of countries facing this,” Drijver said. The Netherlands has moved to increase procurement of joint programs, such as the F-35 and MQ-9, and to reach out to allies to help build consortiums.

“At the end of the day, it’s nice to have the same pallet configurations in the back of a C-17, ... the same weapons that load up and talk on the same 1760 [data] bus,” said Assistant Vice Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Stephen L. Hoog, on a panel of air attachés. “All of this interoperability we sometimes take for granted is absolutely essential to the effective integration of airpower, ... and it can go away.”

On one point the leadership was clear, however: “Our ability to respond is going to diminish,” Welsh said, “but when we respond, we’ll still be the best in the world when we arrive.” ■



Left: The U-2 fleet is one of the proposed victims of “vertical cuts” that US Air Force leaders say are necessary to meet budget limits. **Above:** Gen. Mark Welsh, USAF Chief of Staff, and James acknowledged the harsh budget realities that will lead to a smaller force, but they are confident the US Air Force will remain the best in the world.