



By Michael C. Sirak, Special Content Director

MOBILITY CREATIVITY

Officials must think outside the box when they design a next generation tanker and even the VC-25 (Air Force One) presidential aircraft replacement, said Gen. Darren W. McDew, head of Air Mobility Command, at the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla.

KC-Z, the Air Force's designation for the third and last portion of USAF's tanker recapitalization decades from now, "must be a revolution" and not just an evolution in aerial refueling technology, McDew told reporters during the symposium.

This platform will feature "things that don't exist today that we have got to start dreaming," he said. It "needs to be autonomous or semi-autonomous. It must be dual-role, but maybe those roles aren't cargo and tanker. Maybe it's tanker and [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance]. It could be smaller, lighter, more agile, but it has to be persistent with a great [fuel] offload capability."

The Air Force is still in the early stages of the KC-X program, the first part of the tanker recap, to replace its oldest KC-135 tankers with 179 Boeing-built KC-46As by 2028.

Gen. Darren McDew, head of AMC, says USAF must think boldly in planning capabilities in tankers and Air Force One.

The second portion, KC-Y, will follow to continue replacing KC-135s. The KC-Y aircraft "could be an evolution of the KC-46," perhaps a "KC-46B" model, or it may end up being another aircraft type, said McDew.

"It probably won't be autonomous or semi-autonomous," and it will likely incorporate technology that exists today but just hasn't been part of a tanker before, he said.

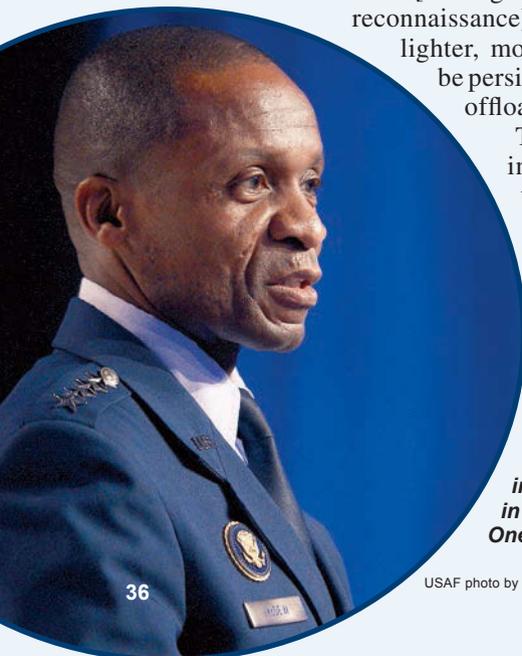
AMC's commander emphasizes innovation in future tankers and the next Air Force One.

Thereafter will come KC-Z. When all is said and done, the Air Force expects that it will field up to 479 new tankers, said McDew.

AMC must take a similarly bold approach with the next presidential aircraft, said McDew. It must be more than a conveyance, he said. This airplane, a modified version of Boeing's 747-8 configuration, is scheduled to enter the inventory in 2023.

"We have got to think of it differently," said McDew. "Think about the leaders who will inherit this airplane. If I were to make myself a standard leader today, I am OK with being disconnected and being connected when I need to be connected. My aide over there is of a generation [that] can't envision not being connected. He is the leader who will inherit this airplane."

Accordingly, McDew said the platform must also be a communications node and part of the command and control structure for national security wherever the President is. "That is the way that I think about that airplane," he said.





A 777-based tanker refuels a KC-46 in this illustration. All together, the KC-46 and the follow-on KC-Y and KC-Z will number just under 500 aircraft.

Beyond recapitalization, McDew said “deliberately developing” mobility airmen is a command priority in 2015. This theme is not limited to AMC, as CMSAF James A. Cody also discussed it at the symposium as being an Air Force priority. Career development must be a priority for all airmen.

“I am going to dive deeper this particular year into airmen,” said McDew. The goal is to help them be better airmen and leaders, partly by making sure they have the right kind of assignment and educational opportunities, he said.

For example, AMC is joining forces with Air Force Space Command for an officer exchange program, said McDew. “I am going to bring in a cyber-smart, space-smart [colonel] into the Tanker Airlift Control Center [at Scott AFB, Ill.] in a senior position to bring that kind of knowledge in,” he said.

In return, AMC will send one of its officers to share mobility know-how with the space cadre and gain exposure to other Air Force core competencies.

MORE BALANCE NEEDED

Another aspect of the deep dive is bringing more diversity to AMC, said McDew. For example, he said he wants to look into why the command does not have more female wing commanders.

“I have got more women in Air Mobility Command who fly airplanes than anybody else in the United States Air Force. Therefore, I should have more female wing commanders. ... I do not have that today,” he said.

McDew said he also wants airmen across the airlift and tanker fleets to be represented across the command. Today, he said, the culture is “a bit unbalanced,” weighing more heavily on the C-17 side.

McDew wants the command to “engage with the American public” more. “I don’t remember any time in our history with the American public being as supportive ... and I am

At the symposium, McDew and CMSAF James Cody (right) stressed career development for mobility airmen.

USAF photo by Scott M. Ash

eternally grateful,” he said. “But what I think we may have missed along the way is a level of understanding of who our airmen are,” he said.

Re-establishing airmen as “a fabric of the community” will strengthen that understanding, said McDew. “The Guard and Reserve have kept that going, but the Active Duty hasn’t been as much a part of that.”

Air mobility operations are still at a high tempo, said McDew. While there has been some drop in airlift activity since the conclusion of the combat mission in Afghanistan, he said, there really hasn’t been any letup in the high operations tempo for tankers in US Central Command’s area of responsibility, given the US-led anti-ISIS air campaign in Iraq and Syria.

Plus, those mobility assets that left Southwest Asia have been needed elsewhere, such as supporting the recently completed mission to thwart the spread of the Ebola virus in West Africa.

“So we came out of Afghanistan, [but] that airlift went to Ebola and other places,” said McDew. “So I would say the airlift [fleet] has had a bit of a turndown, a bit. The tanker fleet—not.”

