

The View From Langley

By John A. Tirpak, Editorial Director

Airpower isn't getting enough credit for what it's achieving in the anti-ISIS fight being waged in Iraq and Syria. Airpower is in fact inflicting mortal damage on the terror group, according to Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle, head of Air Combat Command. This air campaign, however, is the most challenging ever conducted, demanding extreme care in distinguishing among friends, noncombatants, and enemies in the extremely factionalized Levant, he said.

Speaking at an Air Force Association-sponsored Air Force event in June, Carlisle offered a progress report on Operation Inherent Resolve and his perspective on some key modernization programs the Air Force is undertaking with its combat air forces.

Airpower in the Anti-ISIS Fight

Though it's "not highly publicized," Carlisle said, coalition airpower has "taken out [ISIS'] cash cows. Their best way to make money was oil collection and refining capacity, and we've taken out about 90 percent of that." Airpower alone has done "significant work" in destroying ISIS' "ability to finance what they're trying to do."

taken to err on the side of safety, and Carlisle acknowledged that many missions return to base without releasing munitions. (Lt. Gen. John W. Hesterman III, the combined force air component commander for US Central Command, said in a June 5 press conference that this happens as much as 75 percent of the time.)

The air campaign is simply the most precise and accounts for the lowest number of civilian casualties in history, Carlisle asserted. Though there has been a drumbeat of impatience from some in Congress and elsewhere to step up the effort, "we can't afford to do anything different," he insisted. Given factors "within our control, ... our airpower is doing everything we can do, and [the coalition air partners are] being amazingly successful."

He emphasized the care being taken in selecting targets—sometimes requiring pilots to wait a while for approval before weapons release—saying "about 50 percent of the time" initial reports identifying a potential enemy have been wrong, "and think what would have happened if we had acted on those reports."

In the siege of Kobane, the coalition "had airplanes overhead continuously for three-and-a-half months, every minute of every day. Pretty impressive," Carlisle said.

The air campaign has forced ISIS to change its tactics and methods of fighting. The terror group doesn't "march down the

The ACC commander presented unvarnished thoughts on war and the future at a recent Air Force Association-sponsored event.

Carlisle said airpower has taken "a serious toll on their morale and capability," having racked up 4,200 strikes and 14,000 weapons dropped by the beginning of June.

"We've taken about 13,000 enemy fighters off the battlefield since the September/October time frame, and despite what has been [reported], we have regained territory, about 25 percent" of what ISIS had seized by the end of last summer, Carlisle asserted. Some 1,000 enemy combat vehicles have been destroyed, "to include tanks, armored personnel carriers," and other military vehicles.

The Air Force and its partners have delivered 1.4 million tons of aid to refugees and supplies to Iraqi forces for distribution. This action "prevented what would have been a horrendous human disaster," he said.

Carlisle characterized the battlefield as "incredibly complex," posing grave difficulties in determining "who's fighting who, who's a good guy, and who's a bad guy." Part of this is due to the fact that ISIS wears captured Iraqi army uniforms and operates captured Iraqi equipment—the same kinds of gear in the hands of Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, who are allies. The battlefield also includes forces from other factions and nearby nations, such as "Shia, ... moderates, Iranians, ... tribal, militia, Sunni extremists," and more.

"We can't afford" to cause deadly collateral damage, Carlisle said, because that would undermine support for the Iraqi army and the coalition among those under siege. "Our ability to prevent civilian casualties and not do unintended harm is critical to our success," he said. Consequently, every precaution is being

middle of ... any towns, anymore," and the air campaign has eliminated ISIS' ability to mass forces. It has also "changed their hierarchy" by killing key leaders, including a top financier, he said.

Airpower has its limitations, though, and the Iraqi army has its hands full on the ground. "Remember what it was like for the Americans" in Anbar province of Iraq seven years ago, he said.

Despite the level of effort, which Carlisle said is about as much as can be sustained, he offered his personal opinion that "this is a five-to-seven-year conflict."

One of the suggestions routinely made is that the US should send in joint terminal attack controllers to speed up air strikes and make them more efficient. Carlisle said the decision to send in such troops—in actual combat, as opposed to serving as advisors—is "a great discussion" to have, but he's not sure JTACs would make a huge difference.

"What we've discovered, even when we do have confident, capable folks on the ground, [is] it's hard to tell who's who," he said.

A Pentagon spokesman said later that Carlisle was referring to indigenous forces trained to call in air strikes.

To put US ground troops into the mix means "you have to protect them, you have to support them, ... and then the question is, what's next?" In his opinion, "you start putting American soldiers back on the ground, you own it. Are we ready for that?"

Carlisle said "we need to think long and hard" about deploying US ground troops in the middle of such a "complex, challenging environment." Doing so will require "a big discussion" nationally.

An F-22 takes on fuel from a KC-10 before strike operations in Syria.

Those pushing for a US-led ground offensive “need to understand what it looks like on the ground today.”

The Air Force is pouring a tremendous effort into intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in the anti-ISIS fight, Carlisle said, and it pays off in sometimes unconventional ways. Combing through Facebook posts, Air Force analysts found an ISIS operative “bragging about command and control capabilities” for ISIS and posting a photo of himself in front of the command building. “So they do some work.

Long story short, about 22 hours later, through that very building, three JDAMS take that entire building out.” From the social media post of the “moron” to “bombs on target” was less than one day, Carlisle said.

“It was incredible work, and incredible airmen are doing this sort of thing.”

F-22s in the Fight

The F-22 continues to demonstrate its value in Operation Inherent Resolve, often swinging from one crucial mission to another on the same sortie. Carlisle praised the F-22’s “ability to enhance everybody else” because of its situational awareness, its “ability to get there, its sensor suite, its ability to pass information [and] lead the entire fight.” He gave an example of one F-22 mission where the pilot flew for more than 12 hours. “He re-rolled about five times, went to the tanker about seven times, did strikes, escort, ... he did redirect, did ISR and passed data. I mean, it’s amazing what that airplane can do.”

The Need for More F-35s

The Senate has tasked the Pentagon to re-evaluate its target F-35 inventory, as the number was set 20 years ago. Since then, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and South Asia have all seen increasing conflict or tensions.

Though “we’re looking at it hard,” Carlisle said the 1,763 figure the Air Force has stuck to since the F-35 program’s inception is probably right. It’s “a number that’s got rigor behind it,” he said,

and the only thing that would change it is if there’s a shift in national strategy.

The 1,763 figure supports “the potential to be in conflict in potentially two theaters, and then there is a rotational demand” to have some at rest and in repair while others are on the front lines. He allowed, however, that demand for airpower was supposed to decline after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were over, but “it has stayed high and in some cases it has gone up.” The F-35 buy objective will also be affected by how many Long-Range Strike Bombers the Air Force gets to buy, since they both deliver “capacity in global attack.”

LRS-B Secrets

When the Air Force announces the company or team that has won the contract to build the Long-Range Strike Bomber, the service will probably reveal “more information” about the classified aircraft and its role in the long-range strike “family of systems,” Carlisle said. So far, the service has kept largely mum about the capabilities for the airplane, but he revealed that it does indeed play a role in the Pentagon’s overall electronic warfare strategy, particularly because of its “penetrating capability.”

More details will probably follow “over time,” he said, but he cautioned reporters not to expect a fulsome description of the bomber’s full capabilities “all at the same time.”

Not One Less CRH

While ACC sees merit in the idea of buying CV-22s for the combat search and rescue mission, the bigger priority is capacity, and that’s why buying 112 Combat Rescue Helicopters is an “absolute minimum,” Carlisle said. “I could not see” trading away any CRHs to buy more CV-22s, he insisted,

Right: B-1B bombers were part of a large coalition strike package that engaged ISIS targets in Syria last fall. Below: Gen. Hawk Carlisle answers questions at the AFA-sponsored event.



USAF photo by SSgt. Ciara Wymbis



USAF photo by SrA. Hailey Haux

might work.” However, “we have to get” 112 CRHs, he said, because, since the end of the war in Afghanistan, the demand for pararescue forces “has not gone down at all. In fact, it’s gone up.”

Cluster Bomb Closeout

The Pentagon has agreed, by international treaty, to phase out cluster bombs by 2018, but Carlisle said there is still a need for similar weapons on the Korean Peninsula.

The Air Force has a “pretty good plan” to replace the weapons, he said, explaining “we’re making advances and I don’t think we’ll have any problem” closing out the inventory by 2018. In Korea, “we need volume,” he acknowledged, but the inventory of cluster bombs is already well-diminished.

He said a new fragment-firing weapon that can cover a wide area is in the pipeline. Despite their utility against massive formations of troops and against targets like radars, old-style cluster bombs are being retired because those that don’t explode stay live for long periods of time, and can be stepped on, long after a battle is over, by noncombatants—often with tragic result.

Replacing JSTARS

The Air Force is trying to prod the Pentagon acquisition system to be “more reactive” to its plan to rapidly replace the E-8C JSTARS fleet. “Speed to ramp is incredibly important to us,” Carlisle said, so USAF is looking at mature technologies only, with a technology readiness level of 6 or better. “We want, ... basically, current capabilities on a sustainable platform that has ... growth potential” and the means to add in new capabilities in the future.

“We just have to get it through the acquisition process,” Carlisle said. The Air Force wants the first JSTARS replacement aircraft in service by 2023.

Son of CALCM

“We’re down to very few CALCMs,” the conventionally armed version of the AGM-86B Air-Launched Cruise Missile, Carlisle noted, and DOD has decided that this mission will be filled with the AGM-158B JASSM-ER, the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile-Extended Range.

As the Lockheed Martin-built weapon “comes online and we finish the testing,” the Air Force will acquire “an appropriate number” to replace the CALCM, which saw its first combat use in Desert Storm in 1991. ★

because there must be enough rescue helicopters to recapitalize today’s aged fleet and go around to all the regional commands.

If there is more money made available later, Carlisle said the CV-22 would be a good add to the CSAR mix, particularly in Africa and other places characterized by long-haul distances beyond the CRH’s range. He said ACC is “looking hard” at places where a CRH/CV-22 “mixed fleet

USAF photo by SrA. Matthew Bruch



An F-15E flies over Iraq in September 2014 after conducting air strikes on ISIS targets in Syria.