

## A-10 redux; Aging aircraft; Sequestration's awful aftermath; What maintainers?; Our biggest problem; ....

### HIT ME AGAIN

The Air Force is doubling down on its Fiscal 2015 request—which was denied—to retire the venerable A-10 attack jet, seeking in its Fiscal 2016 budget to phase out the fighters by 2019. Paradoxically, the reason to keep pushing the Warthog's retirement is because the world is getting more dangerous, not less, according to Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III. Money spent on the A-10 robs funds from new jets that can do more kinds of missions and survive the modern battlefield, he said.

When asked what new argument the service can offer to retire the A-10—after Congress responded with a loud, unambiguous “no” to the idea last year—Welsh told *Air Force Magazine* the world “looks different” this time.

“Operations in Iraq and Syria are new, operational tempo

solite airplanes while adversaries in China, Russia, and elsewhere field new gear that increasingly matches or surpasses what USAF has is “not a formula for success over time.”

He also observed that “air forces that fall behind the technology curve ... fail.”

Welsh said he understands Congress has “other factors that weigh” in its decisions. However, “we’ve done the operational analysis, we’ve compared it to multiple options, and this”—retiring the A-10—“is the best option in that particular portfolio.” He warned that if Congress fails to repeal the BCA, “we’re going to have discussions about lots of other things that will have to go away. And those discussions will be just as difficult.”

In the service’s budget documents, released Feb. 2, it said sequester, if it goes back into force in Fiscal 2016, will

USAF photos



*If B-17s (l) had been used in the 1991 Gulf War, they would have been younger than the B-52 bombers (r) still in use today.*

hasn't come down, we haven't been able to reset after coming out of Afghanistan, as we had anticipated. ... Eastern Europe looks different,” and the service’s funding is dropping to sequester levels dictated by the Budget Control Act.

Isn't that all a good reason to hang on to as much force structure as possible?

“We'd love to keep force structure. We don't have the money to keep it all,” Welsh said. Hanging on to squadrons that can't all be flown, maintained, and updated at optimum levels simply subtracts from all USAF accounts, he said, especially those that pay for modernization. Renewing the service's gear—postponed in 2000, again in 2005, and again in 2011 because of pressing wartime priorities—can't be put off any longer, he said.

“We have fleets of aircraft that are getting increasingly older and older,” Welsh said, observing that if World War II-vintage B-17s had been used in the 1991 Gulf War, they would have been younger than the KC-135 tankers, B-52 bombers, and U-2 spyplanes the service is flying today. Moreover, USAF is smaller than it has been since its 1947 founding, but combat demands continue to mount.

“Nobody's complaining about that,” he said of the stresses. “We're just stating facts.”

The Air Force “can't keep holding on to everything we've had in the past if it's costing us the ability to modernize and recapitalize,” he insisted. Continuing to patch up ob-

compel the Air Force to also retire the KC-10 tanker, RQ-4 Global Hawk Block 40 fleet, and delete a squadron's worth of F-35 fighters from its buying plans, along with thousands of munitions and research into a new, more powerful and fuel-efficient engine. In addition, USAF would eliminate modifications to the Global Hawk Block 30 force.

“Sequestration means ... we have to make difficult decisions,” Welsh said.

Retiring the A-10 over time offers a way to “hedge our bet a little,” given the rising instability in the world, he added. “If there's a way” to do that, “why wouldn't we?”

He also acknowledged that Congress, in forbidding the service from retiring the A-10s last year, at least provided the funds needed to continue operating them, instead of forcing USAF to raid other accounts to pay the bill.

“Which is great. As long as we have the airplane, we're going to use the airplane,” Welsh said.

The A-10 went into battle against Islamist jihadists in Iraq late last year—a fact trumpeted by the save-the-A-10 community as proof positive of the jet's enduring value. Welsh said he was not pressed into sending the A-10 to the fight, however.

US Central Command “requested capability in that particular mission area,” he explained. The capability requested was in strike, close air support, and personnel recovery. But CENTCOM did not “specifically” ask for the A-10 by name, he said.

In mid-January, at a Pentagon press conference, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said she did not regret proposing the A-10's retirement, despite the strain it put on USAF relations with Congress.

"The A-10 is a great contributor" to the anti-ISIS fight, she said, "but so are the other aircraft" that have been performing strike missions in Iraq and Syria, such as F-15s and F-16s.

Welsh, at the same press conference, said, "For the Air Force, it's not an emotional issue. It's a sequestration-driven decision."

## THE CASE OF THE MISSING MAINTAINERS

Congress' funding of A-10 operations didn't solve all the Air Force's A-10-related problems. The Air Force 2015 budget was an interrelated scheme that intended to transition about 800 maintainers from the A-10 enterprise to become the seasoned crew chiefs on brand-new F-35s entering the inventory. If the A-10 doesn't go away, the Air Force doesn't have a source of manpower for F-35 maintenance.

In the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress did allow 36 A-10s to be put in "backup inventory status" to help with the problem—keeping the jets out of the "Boneyard" but not assigning regular flight and ground crews to them—but that still left the service 700 maintainers shy of its need.

Outgoing Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel wrote to Congress Feb. 2, saying he was taking advantage of the authority to put the 36 A-10s in "a lower flight status" because the maintenance manpower shortage "is already degrading fighter fleet readiness and the planned fielding of F-35A aircraft."

He also said that a quick-turnaround study by the Pentagon's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation shop about how to address the A-10-inflicted F-35 maintainer shortage looked at eight options, and by far, the best thing to do is follow the original plan.

The CAPE concluded "the transfer of A-10s would be the most effective alternative available to close [the] Air Force's significant shortfalls in experienced maintainers," Hagel wrote, but even that wouldn't "fully eliminate" the shortfall.

Welsh, in his interview with *Air Force Magazine*, said the options looked at included taking some maintainers from the reserve component or hiring civilians to do some of the work.

The problem with those approaches, he said, is that the reserve component needs their experienced maintainers "as badly as the Active Duty component ... so there will continue to be a shortfall there, although it will help a little bit." Contracting the work "doesn't help ... build our internal maintenance force, which will be required for deployments and contingency requirements over time." Another source is to rob the maintainers from other Active Duty platforms, but that in turn will hurt the readiness of those systems.

"It's going to be a kaleidoscope of things to make it work," Welsh said, "and the problem will be volume. If you don't take squadrons down to bring on new squadrons, then it's got to come out of hide."

The Air Force asked for a few thousand additional airmen in its Fiscal 2016 budget, but they are not meant to fix the maintainer shortage alone.

Some of the increase—blessed by Defense Department leaders even as the Army shrank and the Navy's end strength remained flat—"is for mission areas that we just did not divest" because of Congress' objection, Welsh said. "Some of it is to help with [remotely piloted aircraft] manning, some of it is to 'plus-up' maintenance manpower [and] security forces

manpower," as well as "intelligence units, where we are really stressed, and have been stressed for a while."

## PICK YOUR FIGHTS

More is riding on the Fiscal 2016 budget than just the number and timing of new hardware programs. It's the whole national military strategy, and if the armed forces can't be predictably funded at an adequate level, it simply won't be able to do all the things the nation asks.

Introducing the Fiscal 2016 budget at a Pentagon press briefing Feb. 2, Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chairman Adm. James A. Winnefeld Jr. noted that in the last few years, defense resources have shrunk while the world has become "more chaotic" and "potential adversaries are eroding our technical advantages."

However, "there's been no corresponding change in the ends of the strategy that we're trying to serve," Winnefeld pointed out. Consequently, if the budget proposed for Fiscal 2016 isn't enacted largely intact, the "best military advice" of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is to change the strategy to something less demanding.

"Any decrease below the [President's Budget 2016] request ... will require adjustments to our defense strategy to restore balance. It doesn't mean the strategy completely breaks, but we will have to make adjustments to that strategy if we're going to stay in balance," Winnefeld explained.

That will mean, ultimately, "reduced American leadership and freedom of action, and that's, of course, an option, but not one that I think most of us would prefer." He also said that while he respects Congress' role in deciding "not only how much money we spend, but how ... unfunded changes to this submission are the same as a reduction and would require adjustments to that strategy as well."

Less than a week after the budget was released, the White House unveiled a new national defense strategy, though it's not a significant departure from the 2010 strategy.

Welsh, in his interview with this magazine, said, "The biggest problem that we, ... the Air Force, specifically, has ... in meeting the strategic guidance is the concept of simultaneity: the idea that ... we are required to be able to defeat one adversary, deny a second adversary, and defend the homeland" all at once.

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and aerial refueling, for example, "are stressed in every one" of the potential scenarios, "and so if you have multiple things going on around the world, and a large scenario arises, we're going to have to make choices" about where, when, and how much the nation will fight, Welsh asserted. "We just don't have the force structure anymore to do otherwise. We've been cutting force structure now for 30 years, and we're at a point now where there is no bench to go to."

Welsh pointed out that when the Air Force was called to the first Gulf War in 1991, it had "188 fighter squadrons," leaving plenty of capacity for other contingencies. "This budget will take us to 49" fighter squadrons in total. "That's an incredible change," he said.

The 2016 budget proposal would fund a long-term effort to get USAF back to adequate readiness levels by 2023: 80 percent across the board. Welsh said he and James have made restoring readiness a priority, and two years after the damaging sequester, which sidelined dozens of squadrons for months, the service is starting to crawl out of the readiness hole.

As a result of tight focus on readiness since then, "in our combat-coded squadrons, the percentage ... that is currently fully combat-ready has improved to over 40 percent," Welsh asserted. Asked what the level was before then, he would only say, "lower than that." ★