

■ The F-35A Is Operational

The Air Force's top leadership celebrated its newest operational aircraft at the fighter's first main operational base. "The F-35 will soon become the quarterback of the joint force," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein said during an Aug. 5 ceremony at Hill AFB, Utah. The event celebrated the declaration earlier that same week that the F-35 has reached initial operational capability.

Hill is home to the 388th Fighter Wing and associated Reserve 419th Fighter Wing that are the first to fly the aircraft operationally.

Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said there is still work to do as the F-35 moves toward full operating capability, including keeping costs down so the Air Force can continue to strive for the total fleet goal of 1,763 aircraft.

(For more, see "F-35: Lightning Unleashed," p. 52.)

■ Flexing the Nuclear Muscles

The Air Force on Aug. 1 sent five nuclear-capable bombers on simultaneous nonstop flights from the continental US into the Polar Roar exercises. This was one of the biggest flexes of its nuclear might, US Strategic Command announced.

The aircraft—one B-52 from the 2nd Bomb Wing at Barksdale AFB, La.; two B-52s from the 5th Bomb Wing at Minot AFB, N.D.; and two B-2s from the 509th Bomb Wing at Whiteman AFB, Mo.—flew three different routes.

One B-52 flew from Nellis AFB, Nev., to the North Sea and Baltic Sea and back to Barksdale; two Minot B-52s flew around the North Pole and Alaska; and the Whiteman B-2s flew over the Pacific Ocean to Alaska's Aleutian Islands. These missions were supported by Canadian and US fighter aircraft, along with NATO partner aircraft in Europe. Some of the aircraft also conducted inert weapon drops at the Joint Pacific Alaska Range Complex, STRATCOM said.

■ No CAS Permission Slip

While it's "the right thing to do" for top Air Force leaders to explore a possible cheap-to-buy-and-operate close air support aircraft for "permissive environments," Air Combat Command chief Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle isn't so sure such a program would be a good investment.

Polar BUFF: A B-52 flies near the North Pole during Polar Roar, a strategic deterrence exercise. See "Flexing the Nuclear Muscles."

USAF photo by SrA. Joshua King





USAF photo by S/A. Areca T. Bell

They'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain When They Come: Firefighters from the 31st Civil Engineer Squadron rappel down the side of a building during a Rescue Technician One course at Aviano AB, Italy. The course taught airmen how to maneuver in small spaces and secure and remove patients. It also taught them to construct systems for rappelling when extracting patients or heavy loads from difficult-to-access areas such as the mountains near Aviano.

"I wonder," Carlisle told reporters at the Pentagon on Aug. 2, whether "in five, seven, 10 years, ... will there be any such thing" as a permissive environment? He said Russia's loss of multiple helicopters in Syria to unsophisticated weapons is an indication of "where we're going." State-sponsored terrorists, he said, "have access to state-sponsored weapons," and a low-tech CAS airplane might arrive just in time to be irrelevant.

■ Air Force Opens Next GPS III Contract Battle

The Air Force officially requested bids for the next GPS III satellite launch, giving SpaceX and United Launch Alliance until Sept. 19 to bid for the 2019 mission. Under the request, posted Aug. 3, the Air Force will award a firm-fixed-price contract that covers launch vehicle production, mission integration, and launch operations.

The Air Force in June released a draft request for proposals to industry to collect input before the final request was released, attempting to avoid a repeat of the April contract award where United Launch Alliance didn't bid.

■ Keeping F-22s Modern

It is critical to continue F-22 modernization to keep the fleet capable to sustain air superiority in the future, especially with the Raptor line staying closed, Air Combat Command boss Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle said.

Speaking at a House Armed Services subcommittee hearing on July 13, Carlisle said F-22s have shown their combat capability in Operation Inherent Resolve by targeting ISIS with Small Diameter Bombs and by penetrating "airspace that other airplanes couldn't." It is critical to continue to upgrade the capability of the 183-aircraft fleet. This includes taking lessons learned from the F-35, such as increasing the maintainability of the F-22's low observable skin.

Because the F-22's production line will in all likelihood stay closed, Carlisle said he wants to upgrade the F-22s assigned to the 43rd Fighter Squadron at Tyndall AFB, Fla., to combat-capable.

From Assurance to Deterrence

The requested quadrupling of European Reassurance Initiative funding will allow the US presence to change its role from assurance to deterrence, USAF Maj. Gen. David W. Allvin, the director of strategy and policy for US European Command, told lawmakers July 13.

“The first two years of the [ERI] were largely focused on assurance; ... however, as we continue to see a malign influence and a Russia acting to upset international norms, we have transitioned beyond purely assurance. We are planning and executing activities designed to serve as a stronger deterrent to Russian aggression,” Allvin told the House Armed Services Committee’s panel on oversight and investigations. Allvin said the increased funding will allow for more US troops, exercises with NATO and other allied nations, and pre-positioned equipment.

USAF May Need More Than 100 B-21s

Air Force Global Strike Command boss Gen. Robin Rand said his command needs a “minimum of 100” B-21s, but indicated strongly that it should have more of the Long-Range Strike Bombers to perform all of its missions.

“When asked to give my best military advice, I’ve said we should draw the line at 100 B-21s. Not a single one below that,” Rand told an AFA Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies forum on July 28. “What I haven’t been clear on is what is the ceiling on that, because we’re working our way through that.”

European Allies Want More US Air Force

US allies in Eastern Europe are growing increasingly concerned about “snap exercises” by Russia and are pushing for the US to make increased funding to work alongside them permanent, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said.

James recently returned from visiting eight European countries, including the Baltic states and Ukraine, to focus on how the Air Force can assuage allied concerns about the increasingly threatening stance of Russia in the area, particularly following the country’s incursion into Crimea.

“Those closest have the greatest concerns” about Russia, James said July 26, noting those are the countries making the NATO commitment of spending at least two percent of their gross domestic product on defense spending.

Estimates of how many B-21s would be needed have ranged from 80 to 100. “I’ve been very clear at what the floor should be,” Rand said. While others may think differently, as AFGSC commander, “we need a minimum of 100.”

The current number of strategic bombers, he said, is 156, a combination of the aged B-52s that are likely to be phased out and 20 of the newer B-2s.

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Smoke and Mirrors: Airmen from the Illinois Air National Guard’s 182nd Security Forces Squadron emerge from concealment smoke during training. The exercise taught the fire team communication and movement skills for combat.

ANG photo by SSgt. Leelan Bluehrer



By the Numbers

4,000

The total shortfall of maintainers currently in the Air Force. The service said it plans to erase this shortage by 2019 as long as Congress funds a requested manpower increase. Col. Pat Kumashiro, a maintenance expert on the Air Staff, said the service wants to access an additional 1,500 to 2,000 maintainers a year and retain experienced maintainers.



In the Middle of It: Airmen from the 52nd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Spangdahlem AB, Germany, work at the only F110 engine overhaul facility in US Air Forces in Europe.

■ Bones Return to Guam

Lancers headed to Guam for the first time in 10 years, as US Pacific Command replaces the nuclear-capable B-52s with conventional B-1s as part of the continuous bomber presence mission.

B-1Bs from Ellsworth AFB, S.D., touched down in late July at Andersen AFB, Guam, replacing B-52s from Minot AFB, N.D. The deployment includes 300 airmen. The B-1 fleet has recently undergone a large-scale upgrade program, which forced the Air Force to return the aircraft from its continuous presence in the Middle East.

The deployment marks the first time B-1s have deployed to Guam since April 2006 and the first time they have deployed to Andersen while aligned under Air Force Global Strike Command.

■ Air Force Allows Special Tactics Cross-Training

The Air Force is now allowing airmen to be released from their current jobs and attempt to cross-train into special tactics, provided they meet the standards for the new career fields.

Russia Vital But Not Trustworthy

US officials continue to condemn Russia's actions to support the Syrian regime, though President Barack Obama said there might not be an alternative to working with Russian leaders to reduce the violence in that country.

Obama, speaking Aug. 4 at the Pentagon following a meeting of the National Security Council, said Russia's actions to support Syrian President Bashar al Assad raise "very serious questions about their commitment to pulling the situation back from the brink." The US is prepared to work with Russia if that country can shift its focus to solely defeating ISIS, but "so far Russia has failed to take the necessary steps."

The country has been supporting "a murderous regime" and the US needs to be skeptical if it tries to broker an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin. "I'm not confident that we can trust the Russians or Vladimir Putin, which is why we have to test whether or not we can get an actual cessation of hostilities," Obama said. "That includes an end to the kinds of aerial bombing and civilian death and destruction that we've seen carried out by the Assad regime."

A few days before the President's comments, Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said he is "enthusiastic" about the possibility of working with Russia in the fight against ISIS, but he too acknowledged that Russia is "a ways" from "that frame of mind."

Secretary of State John F. Kerry recently visited Moscow to discuss closer cooperation against ISIS, and those negotiations are continuing.

Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said any possible agreement with Russia would include "specific procedures and processes" to protect US operational security.

This is a problem. Dunford said he is "aware of state actors, to include Russia," that have attempted to penetrate Defense Department networks.

Cybersecurity experts have accused Russian hackers of targeting myriad public and private US networks.

Carter emphasized that the State Department's ongoing negotiations with Russia are "not based on trust. They are based on a transaction and on mutual interest."

In the meantime, the US military's only contact with Russia is focused on safety in the skies over Syria, Dunford said during the July joint press conference with Carter.

The move, which comes from an April 25 policy memorandum, is an attempt to fill critically manned career fields in the special tactics community, such as special tactics officer, combat rescue officer, combat controller, pararescue, and special operations weather, according to a July 26 news release.

The new policy also lets airmen join the tactical air control party and air liaison officer career fields, though those require prior service in the conventional force. The airmen will now be able to cross-train to special tactics regardless of the manning levels in their prior career field. Under the new policy, an airman who does not pass initial qualifications for the special tactics career field will be reinstated into prior career field "without any prejudice," the release states. 🌟