

Increased deployments and a smaller force have combined to generate new worries about readiness.

# Readiness at the Edge

Staff photo by Guy Aceci

By Peter Grier



*The Air Force is as busy as it has ever been in peacetime, but patrolling the skies over Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq is no substitute for high-quality combat training. Instructors at the Air Force Weapons School (above) have noticed a decline in piloting skills, especially in basic fighter maneuver skills.*

**A**T THE Air Force Weapons School, located at Nellis AFB, Nev., instructors say that the students aren't what they used to be.

The Weapons School continues to provide the air-combat equivalent of an Ivy League graduate education. Each pilot (and specialist) who passes its rigorous, five-and-a-half-month course earns a coveted patch and special personnel code that marks him or her as an expert for an entire career.

Even so, increasing numbers of incoming pilots require remedial flight training. School officials say they have noticed a drop in new student basic fighter maneuver skills. In 1995, the bust rate for BFM sorties at the Weapons School was 21 percent. In 1996, the rate almost doubled, to 37 percent.

The principal reason, said instructors, is simple: Many pilots have spent long tours flying dozens of sorties over Bosnia-Herzegovina or Iraq in support of Air Force contingency operations. These patrol flights, while important to the execution of US global strategy, actually provide poor training.

"We are almost certain that [these] sorties . . . are not enhancing basic aviator combat skills," said Brig. Gen. Teed M. Moseley at a recent Congressional hearing. The General is commander of the Air Force's 57th Wing, also at Nellis.

The General was making a point that many service officials have made in recent months—the US military's heavy load of operational commitments, combined with years of budget

cuts and force reductions, is beginning to take a toll on unit readiness.

The situation has become bad enough to worry some important members of Congress's defense establishment. Rep. Floyd D. Spence (R-S. C.), chairman of the House National Security Committee, has said he believes readiness problems have pushed the nation's armed forces near their "breaking point."

On April 9, Spence and other House Republicans published "Military Readiness 1997," a scathing research report that flayed the Clinton Administration for running US forces into the ground. The key passage claimed, "The expanding demands of . . . peacekeeping and humanitarian operations . . . are placing at risk the decisive military edge that this nation enjoyed at the end of the Cold War." Moreover, it said, "high personnel and operational tempos have all but obscured the reality that the nation's ability to deploy and sustain large military forces during war has been placed in jeopardy or, in some cases, has clearly been lost."

In a personal introduction to the report, Spence said, "Indicators of a long-term systemic readiness problem are far more prevalent today than they were in 1994," when he first began to raise concerns about the direction of



Staff photo by Guy Acazo

**When USAF assets, such as this F-16 launching for a sortie over Iraq, are deployed, not only do the pilots miss training, but the aircraft cannot be as well maintained, cutting mission capable rates and increasing cannibalization rates.**

force readiness. He added, "Declining defense budgets, a smaller force structure, fewer personnel, and aging equipment, all in the context of an increase in the pace of operations, are stretching US military forces to the breaking point."

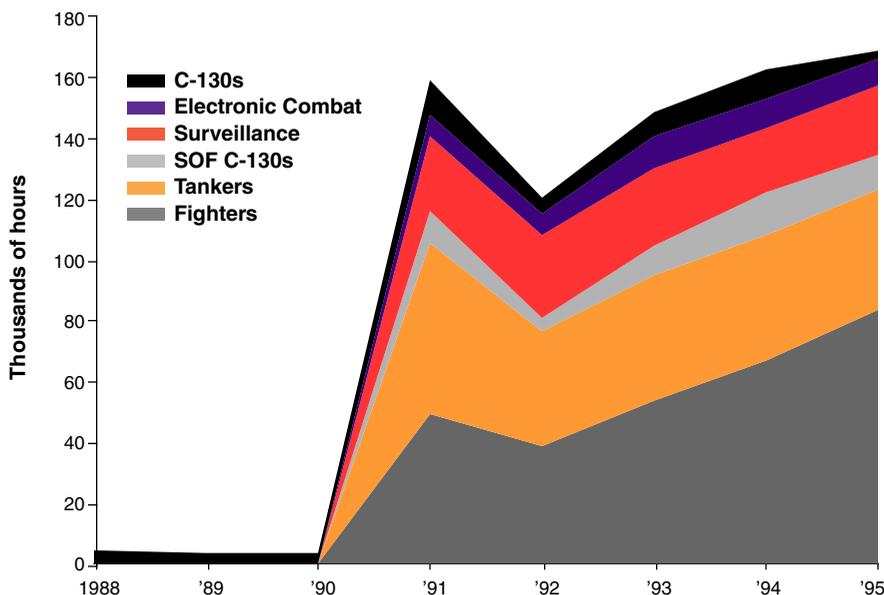
The focus of concern is the US military's escalating involvement in peace and humanitarian operations.

A recent RAND report, *Preparing the US Air Force for Military Operations Other Than War*, concluded that the operations tempo generated by "MOOTW" is putting great stress on USAF personnel and equipment and making it difficult for Air Force units to prepare for the demands of major regional conflicts.

RAND's authors—Alan Vick, David Orletsky, Abram Shulsky, and John Stillion—said peace operations cause special problems for the Air Force. They are large, long-lasting, overlap each other, and generate high demand on scarce, specialized aircraft (such as the E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft and RC-135 surveillance craft) and on the fighter force [see chart at left].

Though peace operations represent only nine percent of all MOOTW operations, they account for 90 percent of MOOTW sorties flown, the RAND study said. Moreover, these long deployments have cut into time and resources available for combat training. In USAFE and Air Combat Command, operational training flying hours have been cut by as much as 20 percent.

**USAF Peace-Operations Flight Hours, 1988–95**



**After the Cold War, fighter, tactical airlift, and other aircraft experienced a profound rise in flying hours devoted to peace operations—from virtually zero in 1990 to some 170,000 in 1995.**

Source: *Preparing the US Air Force for Military Operations Other Than War*, by Alan Vick, David Orletsky, Abram Shulsky, and John Stillion, RAND's Project Air Force, 1997.

skills—the signs of strain are beginning to show.

The current pace of operations has resulted in some short-term readiness degradations, Maj. Gen. Stephen B. Plummer, Joint Staff director for Operations (Current Readiness and Capabilities), told a House readiness panel in March.

The operations tempo has been particularly brutal on units and skilled personnel who are in both short supply and high demand for overseas operations. Air Force officials say they have tried to lessen the work load for some of these high-demand/low-density (HD/LD) systems, such as U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. The Air Force may actually increase the numbers of some other HD/LD systems, such as the RC-135 Rivet Joint electronic intelligence aircraft.

The strain on today's Air Force can be seen in hard statistics: Since the end of the Cold War, the service has seen a fourfold increase in the number of personnel deployed away from base at any given time, from an average 3,500 a day in 1989 to an average 13,700 a day in 1996. This has occurred despite the fact that Air Force end strength is 32 percent lower than it was in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down.

Peacetime contingencies that have grown out of recent regional conflicts remain nearly as demanding as the original combat operations themselves. As of the beginning of 1997, the Air Force had flown more than 5,000 sorties over Bosnia, a place virtually unknown to many airmen early in the 1990s. Operation Southern Watch, the coalition air operation to enforce a no-fly zone over southern Iraq, generated 28,800 US sorties in 1996. A similar operation in northern Iraq, called Provide Comfort, generated another 4,500 sorties.

This work load makes it difficult for the Air Force to keep certain units within the planned limit of 120 days deployed away from home per year.

The service's strategy for meeting the 120-day TDY goal has three main facets: First, spread the burden of increased work across all of the major commands as much as possible; second, find alternative capabilities; and third, use Air Force Reserve Command and Air National Guard units wherever possible.

Participation of the Reserve and Guard in contingency operations and

joint exercises is now so high it almost matches the level at which these citizen-airmen participated in the 1990 Operation Desert Shield mobilization. For example, Maj. Gen. Donald L. Peterson, assistant deputy chief of staff, Air and Space Operations, told Congress in March that the Air Force has established a Reserve Associate unit for the E-3 AWACS wing at Tinker AFB, Okla., to reduce personnel tempo in that highly tasked system.

The three-pronged strategy has brought some relief to some units, but many still find that keeping their operations tempo down is a struggle.

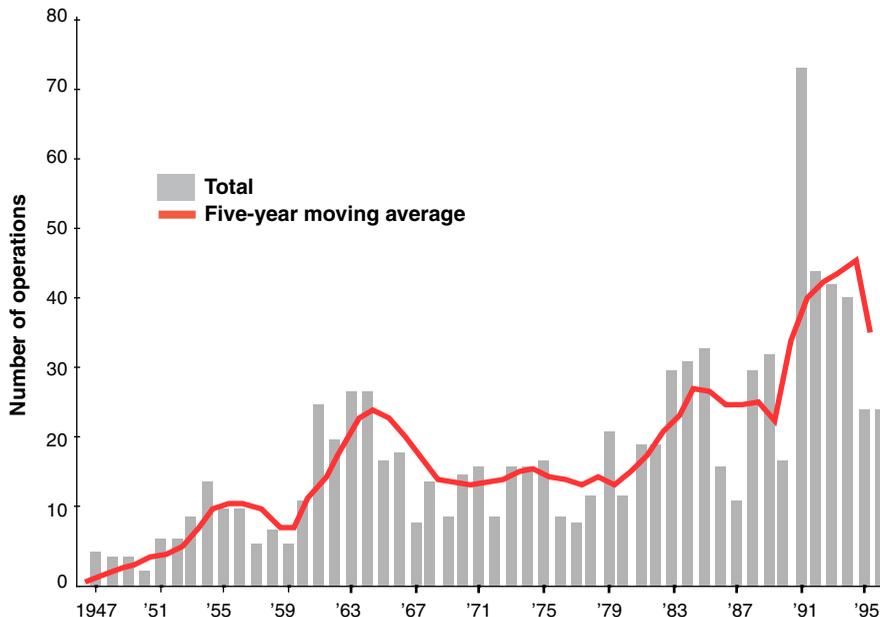
Take, for example, the 1st Fighter Wing, based at Langley AFB, Va. Because the wing's 54 F-15 fighters are such important assets and are in such demand, an average of 38 percent of

“demanding, enduring, and, in some cases, expanding” TDY requirements. Throughout 1996, he added, the 1st FW fulfilled more than 2,100 deployment taskings. On average, more than 500 wing personnel were deployed at any given time.

The problem was especially acute with respect to the wing's para-rescuemen (PJs). In the past year, many of the PJs were deployed for more than 200 days. As a result, said Carpenter, “we project that only 70 of our 95 authorized PJ billets will be filled in the immediate future.”

The resulting strain affects the personnel left behind as well as those on the road. In March 1996, for instance, the 1st FW was the lead unit for Air Expeditionary Force II, a major bare-base exercise in Jordan. The event required

**USAF Involvement in MOOTW, 1947–96**



**From 1991 to 1995, USAF participated in 194 Military Operations Other Than War, nearly double the 100 operations of the preceding five Cold War years (1986–90).**

Source: *Preparing the US Air Force for Military Operations Other Than War*, by Alan Vick, David Orletsky, Abram Shulsky, and John Stillion, RAND's Project Air Force, 1997.

wing personnel were deployed away from home base at any given time in 1996. These tours of duty aren't just week-long trips; most last for more than 90 days, according to wing Vice Commander Col. William D. Carpenter.

**“Demanding, Enduring, . . . Expanding”**

Carpenter said that many of the wing's major readiness concerns are directly related to the high level of

unit Security Police in such numbers that those remaining in Virginia had to work overtime to take up the slack.

“We don't have a great deal of depth in the Security Police squadron, so we've been on 12-hour shifts for nine of the last 12 months,” Carpenter told Congress in March.

Some of the 1st FW personnel have been deployed to southwest Asia five times, counting Operation Desert Storm. So great is the operations tempo

strain that unit commanders fear it will soon begin to drive down retention rates. They're particularly worried about midrange captain fighter pilots. The average work week for these 1st FW officers is more than 60 hours. Their TDY rate is between 120 and 140 days per year.

Second-term enlisted airmen may also become a retention problem, if 1st FW experience is any guide. This group makes up most of the unit's critical level-five technicians, and they are already opting out of the service in increasing numbers. The second-term airman retention rate was 77 percent in Fiscal 1996—down from 84 percent just a year earlier.

Training is becoming another operations tempo casualty, say 1st FW leaders. When on TDY, a fighter squadron cannot complete many of the approximately 7,000 maintenance and ancillary training actions it is supposed to finish every year. The Air Force says that it takes at least a month for pilots newly returned from a desert deployment to regain basic proficiency in fighter maneuvers and weapons use in high-threat environments.

### Overmatched

When the 1st FW's 27th Fighter Squadron returned from the Middle East recently, for instance, it was no match for a sister squadron, the 71st, which had been home for almost a full year and had participated in two Red Flag exercises.

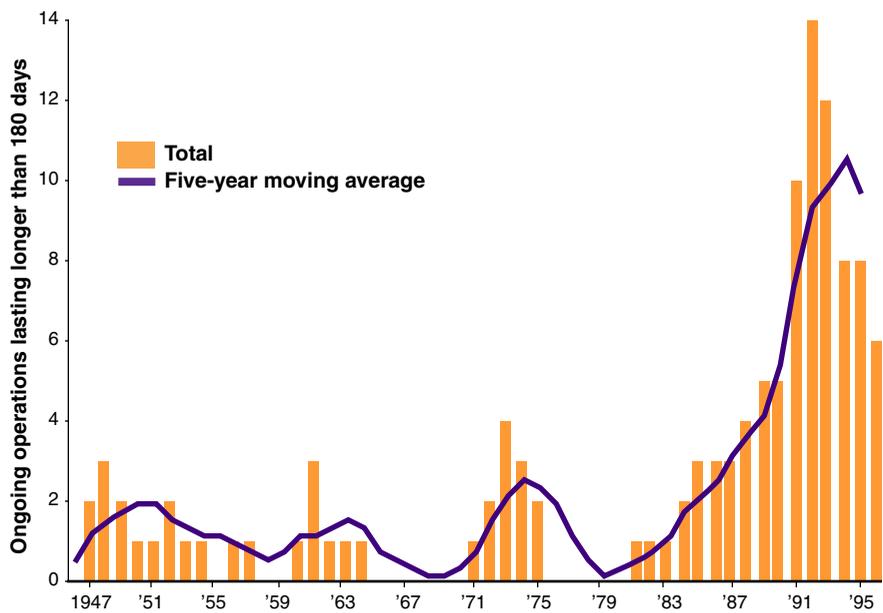
It is the advanced combat skills that suffer as a result of these deployments, and it takes a significant but essential training effort to regain them, said Carpenter.

The airplanes suffer, too. Deployment to southwest Asia means more time in the air—wing aircraft flew a total of almost 21,000 hours last year rather than the normal total of 18,000 hours. As of March, the 1st FW's mission capable rate had dropped to 81.1 percent, below the Air Combat Command standard of 83 percent.

Parts shortages for the 1st FW's F-15s have similarly increased the rate of cannibalization, in which a key component is removed from a designated "hangar queen" and used to keep another airplane in the air. The unit's "cann rate" has shot up as high as 44.4 per 100 sorties, though it has declined recently.

"Not having the required [part] avail-

### USAF Involvement in MOOTW Exceeding 180 Days, 1947–96



The Air Force is especially feeling the effect of the tremendous growth in the number of MOOTW lasting longer than 180 days.

Source: *Preparing the US Air Force for Military Operations Other Than War*, by Alan Vick, David Orletsky, Abram Shulsky, and John Stillion, RAND's Project Air Force, 1997.

able can easily reduce efficiency and double a technician's work load," said SMSgt. Dennis M. Krebs, a 1st FW sortie-generation flight chief.

Not that Krebs doesn't have more annoying things to worry about. His dormitory has at times been without hot water due to boiler and storage problems. "Our squadron's own maintenance area only has adequate heat in one-third of the building, which is produced by portable, wall-mounted heaters," he told a Congressional panel.

Not all Air Force units face the same operations tempo problems. Some—such as the 437th Airlift Wing, at Charleston AFB, S. C.—have actually seen an easing of their work load in 1997. That is because this year the C-17s and C-141s of the 437th have not been called on to handle emergency airlifts, as they were in 1996 with major operations into Rwanda and Bosnia.

"This has afforded our personnel more stability in their schedules and therefore a higher quality of life," said Brig. Gen. Steven A. Roser, 437th Airlift Wing commander. "Of course, this could dramatically change overnight, depending on the next world crisis."

Still, the pace of recent years has been fast and, as a result, Roser foresees a major pilot retention problem just ahead. With their multiengine

experience, aircrew members from the 437th are among the personnel most prized by civilian airlines.

"I anticipate a much higher [percentage of pilots] will leave us in 1997 than did in 1996," said Roser. "Within the next 12 to 15 months, I think we probably will lose 40 percent of the majors who currently fly the C-17."

It's not just the sheer pace of operations that causes dissatisfaction among airlift crews. The unpredictability of operations is a problem, as well. One example: Last November, on short notice, C-17s from the 437th were hurried to Germany and Africa to support relief efforts in Rwanda. Once on the scene, the crews waited for weeks as the United Nations tried to decide what, exactly, should be done.

### Can't Plan

C-17 loadmasters say their number one complaint is that an uncertain schedule makes it difficult to plan time with their families and friends. "People are severely restricted from seeking off-duty education or employment because our manning and our operations tempo won't allow for it," said MSgt. Rodger McElrea, C-17 instructor loadmaster and superintendent of Aircrew Training for the 437th AW.

One way to ease the load would be



**USAF's C-17s were busy in 1996, deploying to Rwanda and Bosnia. Now, worries have arisen about pilot retention, because flyers with experience in four-engine aircraft are particularly prized by civilian airlines.**

an increase in C-17 crew members, said McElrea. The C-17 is designed to be operated by a three-person crew—two pilots and a loadmaster. Changing the average to one-and-a-half loadmasters per crew, as is currently the case with the C-141, would ease operations tempo strain and provide training and scheduling flexibility.

Such seemingly small changes could greatly improve the quality of life in the Air Force at the grass-roots level. The service needs to work on incentives for the young personnel it wants to keep, according to McElrea. Already, the lower-level airmen know that they are not getting retirement packages as attractive as those their older compatriots will receive, and some of the benefits can actually turn out to be expensive to use.

"We have a very good child-development facility at our base," said McElrea, "but I recently had to turn to an off-base day-care provider because the cost of care for my child on base became too expensive."

The news on the quality of Air Force life is not all bad. New military construction investments have improved the living conditions in Europe, for instance. In general, Air Force hous-

ing remains the envy of the other US military services.

Even so, housing is still a major USAF concern. Currently, 41,000 names are on the waiting list for base residence, according to Air Force officials. Service personnel say that saving money isn't the only reason they want to live within blue-suit bounds. Many want neighbors who share their values and who are in sync with the military culture. For others, it's a matter of safety. Frequently, they say, the only affordable off-base housing is in dangerous neighborhoods. "Right outside Robins AFB, Ga., you can hear gunfire," said USAF's top enlisted man, CMSAF Eric W. Benken. "We have a lot of people who want to live on base for that reason."

Second-termers are the service's key retention issue at present, said Benken. The entry-level, first-term force is more transitory, he said, and top service officials know it. But those who have chosen to reenlist once have shown a commitment to the Air Force life. They've had training that makes them valuable, and they have acquired skills that provide them good employment opportunities in civilian life.

Furthermore, today's incoming Air

Force recruits might not be as high-quality as the members of the existing force. In the first quarter of Fiscal 1997, the percentage of recruits who scored in the upper half of the Armed Forces Qualification Test was 79 percent, down from 83 percent in 1996.

"Our recruits are a little less qualified than they have been in the past," said Benken, "so the caution lights are on."

### Recruitment Worries Increase

In fact, recruitment could become an important readiness issue. The Air Force continues to meet almost all numerical recruitment goals and still enjoys the highest-quality incoming force of any of the armed services—and 1996 was a slightly easier recruiting year than 1995—but 1995 was the worst recruiting period in almost two decades. Since the late 1980s, the number of youths who say they have a propensity to join the Air Force—a leading recruitment indicator—has slid downward by about 30 percent.

"We remain concerned about our ability to continue to attract a sufficient number of qualified individuals, even if accession requirements remain at the current low levels," said Lt. Gen. Michael D. McGinty, USAF deputy chief of staff for Personnel.

One relatively simple way to ease the recruitment problem might be to hold onto the new personnel already in the pipeline. To that end, officials say they want to improve the washout rate from Basic Military Training. BMT attrition was seven percent back in 1991. In 1995, it was 11 percent.

Last year, the service implemented a number of reforms designed to reverse that trend. Many seem obvious—one entails adopting a break-in period for combat boots to reduce nagging leg problems—but they seem to have worked. BMT attrition ran at nine percent in the first quarter of Fiscal 1997.

Further improvement may come from values education. Air Force officials have discovered—perhaps belatedly—that today's incoming recruits often do not share the service's core values of integrity and service, so they've started a values program in BMT and technical training.

"This training will lead us to an Air Force characterized by cohesive units, manned by people who exhibit loyalty, and who act in a manner consistent with Air Force values," claimed McGinty. ■

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*Peter Grier, the Washington bureau chief of the Christian Science Monitor, is a longtime defense correspondent and regular contributor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article, concerning information warfare, appeared in the March 1997 issue.*