

The State of the Force

By Peter Grier

Acting Secretary Peters

Heavy demands of international operations have hit USAF people and equipment hard in recent years, said acting Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters in a Sept. 15 address to the AFA National Convention and Aerospace Technology Exposition.

The service remains ready today, but the current pace of operations is not sustainable, according to Peters.

"In a nutshell, the Air Force is caught between a flat budget topline and increasing costs of operations," said the acting Secretary.

In the recent past, service leaders have often squeezed out the cash for contingency operations and readiness by cutting back on force size or scrimping on modernization, military construction, real property maintenance, and investment in research and development.

"This strategy is no longer viable," said Peters.

For one thing, with the exception of domestic base infrastructure, the Air Force is done shrinking. End strength has already been reduced by more than 40 percent, as has the current aircraft inventory. Major overseas bases have been cut by two-thirds.

Without another congressional round of base closings "we cannot go any further," said Peters.

Second, remaining USAF aircraft are aging to the point where they are becoming more difficult to maintain. For example, the cost of engine depot maintenance for KC-135s is now projected to increase 28 percent annually, as older power plants need service. The comparable figure for the F-16 is 21.7 percent.

Third, it is getting harder to pile up an adequate supply of spare parts. The service has added \$300 million

to \$500 million per year to spares and repairs accounts for the last several years just to keep pace with the demands of an aging aircraft stock.

Fourth, the collision of an aging fleet with less than full funding for spares has had a predictable negative impact on overall readiness.

"Mission capable rates are down 8.8 percent since the Gulf War," noted Peters.

The acting Secretary said it is important to note that the Air Force focuses its readiness resources where they are needed the most.

Deployed frontline units have first call, with aircraft stationed in the European and Pacific theaters next. Those based in the continental US are third in line for readiness cash.

The mission capable rate for F-15Es based in Southwest Asia was 100 percent this spring, for instance. Yet F-15Es in Europe had a 77 percent mission capable rate, while those in the US had a 70 percent rate.

"We're OK in the short run, but we can't afford to operate this way without some relief over the long haul," said Peters.

This relief must come from fewer bases in the US, plus savings from streamlined business practices and some added topline funds in the defense budget.

"Even in the face of these challenges, as we look ahead, we are determined to build on the progress yielded by all our reforms currently under way and those, such as the [Expeditionary Aerospace Force], which will be implemented in the near term," said Peters.

The acting Air Force Secretary also made reference to USAF's role in equipping and training friendly foreign air forces.

"It is not bragging to say that the Air Force has become the world's 'center of excellence' for aerospace training, as it trains more foreign students from more countries than anyone else," he said.

On average, USAF personnel train over 800 international aviators and 3,800 foreign airmen every year. In 1997, the Air Force participated in about \$260 million in foreign training programs and \$5.6 billion of foreign military sales.

Chief: General Ryan

A central problem for today's Air Force leaders is to provide more stability and predictability for people under their command while girding to protect US interests in a 21st century world that promises to be increasingly unstable and unpredictable.

The answer to this dilemma: Redesign the service into an Expeditionary Aerospace Force, said Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Michael E. Ryan.

In a way, US airpower has always been expeditionary, Ryan told AFA attendees. The nation's first air expeditionary force, he said, was formed in 1916, when the Army's Aviation Section accompanied Gen. John J. Pershing in his pursuit of Pancho Villa across the Mexican border. Two years later, noted Ryan, the soon-to-be-famous Billy Mitchell organized and led another US expeditionary force of aircraft in World War I's battle of St. Mihiel.

However, those efforts were reactive. They were organized from scratch, in response to specific crises.

The force of the next century will be active rather than reactive, with units trained and organized for expeditionary fighting prior to deployment. "What is new here is that

we're going to prepare ourselves for expeditionary missions all the time," said Ryan.

That is because the Air Force will undoubtedly be called on to perform such missions all the time. In recent years the Air Force has had to respond to multiple "pop-up crises," in Ryan's phrase, while remaining committed to protracted operations around the globe.

Since 1992 there have been six or seven pop-up crises every year, with an average of 25 USAF aircraft deployed to handle each one. Meanwhile, the Air Force has averaged 250 aircraft deployed at any one time to handle more predictable commitments, such as the enforcement of no-fly zones over Iraq.

"I believe the world we live in today requires us to sustain an expeditionary posture indefinitely," said Ryan.

The Air Force should be in the execution phase of its new Expeditionary Aerospace Force posture by the turn of the century. Plans call for operationally linking geographically separated units into 10 Air Expeditionary Forces.

Two AEFs will be on call at all times for deployment, or possible deployment, but this on-duty stage will last for only 90 days, followed by a year-long training and reconstitution period back at home bases.

This more-predictable schedule could lower operations tempo for Air Force personnel now whipsawed by duty demands. The pace of operations, plus a perception of low pay and deteriorating benefits, is hurting retention.

"We're not keeping as many quality people as we would like," said Ryan.

The pilot problem is well-known. The hiring demands of the 14 major airlines are more than double the number of fixed-winged pilots from all the US military services who have completed their military obligations, pointed out the Air Force Chief. The service goal is for half of pilots to stay beyond their initial nine-year commitment. Currently, only one-quarter do so.

Last year the Air Force doubled its retention bonus for pilots. While that helped, more action is needed.

"We are doubling our pilot training rate to 1,100 active duty pilots per year by the turn of the century,

and we are extending the active duty service commitment to 10 years, vs. eight, for those entering pilot training in 1999," said Ryan.

Less publicized is the enlisted retention problem. Military pay is, on average, 14 percent less than comparable civilian wages. For this and other reasons the Air Force is having trouble keeping skilled people in such technically demanding spots as F-16 crew chief and combat air controller.

"We, therefore, must continue to work on the incentives to serve, such as improved mission satisfaction, sustainable operations tempo, reasonable stability, and family security," said Ryan.

But people are not the only component of the Air Force that must receive attention if strength and readiness are to be maintained. The aging aircraft force structure needs to be updated to meet the full promise of the AEF concept, said Ryan.

Next year, the average age of an Air Force aircraft will be 20 years. By 2015, the average age will be 30 years—even if every new plane now in development proceeds apace.

"That is why it is so important to stay on track with all our modernization efforts both in new replacement procurement, such as the F-22, Joint Strike Fighter, and C-17, and investment in revitalizing our older, but still critical, aircraft like the KC-135 and C-5," said Ryan.

JCS: General Ralston

For Gen. Joseph W. Ralston, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the most consistent lesson in modern warfare is that applying force in any medium requires air superiority.

"We use airpower in a multitude of ways to meet the challenges that our nation faces," said Ralston.

Airpower remains a force that will provide the United States with an asymmetrical advantage for the conflicts it will face in the 21st century, said the vice chief. Today, the state of US airpower remains strong.

However, today's money crunch makes maintaining that superiority difficult. "We are trying very hard

to get the proper balance between today's readiness, modernization, and quality of life for our people," said Ralston.

The final report of the Quadrennial Defense Review, drawn up almost two years ago, did a good job in balancing these needs for all US forces. Since then, however, a number of things have occurred—or not occurred—that have upset some of the QDR's calculations.

The QDR did not assume that the US would remain in Bosnia in the year 2000, as now appears will be the case. "The price tag for that is \$2 billion a year," noted Ralston.

The QDR assumed that the Russian parliament would have ratified the Start II nuclear arms reduction agreement. It has yet to do so, meaning the US is spending an extra \$1 billion a year to maintain strategic forces it would otherwise have scrapped by now.

The QDR also figured in more domestic base closings than have actually occurred.

"Yes, it is making things increasingly more difficult to strike that balance between today's readiness, modernization, and quality of life," said Ralston.

Consider what is happening to procurement, which represents tomorrow's readiness.

Budget plans call for a continued ramp-up in DoD procurement spending. The goal for Fiscal 1999 was \$49 billion—a goal the Pentagon managed to meet. The goal for 2000 is \$54 billion. So far, military budget planners do not see where they will get that extra money.

"We have made it very clear that we think we ought to adhere to that \$54 billion ramp in 2000. Right now we're short of that," said Ralston.

Still, insisted the JCS leader, the Air Force represents a viable choice for young people now planning their careers.

"Look at the enormous strides that we've made in the space business," Ralston said. Look at the F-22, the C-17, and all that coming downstream, he added. "I find it terribly exciting." ■

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, "The Retention Problem Spreads," appeared in the October 1998 issue.