

By Robert S. Dudney, Editor in Chief

The Unified Air Force

IN 1967, Air Force mobility wings began fielding Reserve associate units. Many long-range airlift and refueling wings now have one. These units—Reserve elements embedded within active units—use the same aircraft and fly the same missions as their active duty cohorts.

In the mid-1990s, USAF conducted an F-16 Reserve associate test program at Shaw AFB, S.C. In the early 2000s, it created a “blended” active-Air National Guard Joint STARS wing at Robins AFB, Ga.

ANG and AFRC units that deployed overseas were integrated with active units. The “integration” idea, however, did not exactly catch fire at home. Most active, Guard, and Reserve units continued to organize and train more or less as they always had.

That was then. Today, the Air Force is poised to take a new and dramatic step. It is prepared to fully integrate active, Guard, and Reserve personnel formally, across the board, in peacetime as well as during operations, at home as well as overseas.

This is the objective of the Future Total Force plan, major elements of which were unveiled Dec. 1. The service said it was embarked on six actions to help reshape the way it trains, equips, and employs active, Guard, and Reserve members.

The move is vital because USAF faces both growing modernization needs and budget shortfalls. FTF, said Air Force leaders, can be used to increase combat power for less cost. Lt. Gen. Stephen G. Wood, deputy chief of staff for plans and programs, said it will squeeze maximum use from aircraft, reduce redundancies, and end outdated operations.

Thus, broad and deep integration would help USAF get through the budget crisis that is about to hit.

The Air Force sees three compelling reasons for the changes:

First, integration will permit USAF to smooth the work tempo of its personnel and fully man its aircraft—a force multiplier that does not generate expensive overhead costs.

Second, integration would bring

out strengths of each component. Guard and Reserve members are few but experienced. Young active duty members would benefit from association with seasoned airmen.

Third, integration will help USAF stabilize and expand its “brainpower” fund. With expanded duties, ANG and AFRC will be able to absorb experienced airmen leaving active service.

The magnitude of the coming change is amply demonstrated by the sweep of the six new FTF proposals:

■ The Virginia ANG’s 192nd Fighter Wing will team with the 1st FW, Lang-

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ley AFB, Va., to fly the F/A-22 Raptor—marking the first time the Air National Guard has helped bring on a new fighter system. Experienced ANG pilots are to help squeeze maximum combat power from the Raptor.

■ USAF will move some active enlisted personnel to the Vermont ANG’s 158th FW. The expectation is that relatively green actives will quickly learn technical skills from experienced Guardsmen. The test will be used to aid future transfers of active airmen.

■ Two F-16 outfits—the Reserve 419th FW and active duty 388th FW—reside at Hill AFB, Utah. USAF will blend them in an “integrated fighter associate unit,” using Reservists to support the 388th’s missions.

■ Texas and Arizona ANG’s will acquire new squadrons of Predator unmanned aerial vehicles. Home-based operators will fly the UAVs around the world, using reachback technologies, but will train in their states, where there is good weather and empty skies.

■ ANG and AFRC forces will team with the Army and Army National Guard in the operation of a global intelligence ground station in western New York. This project will pave the way for use of Air Reserve Com-

ponent forces in reachback missions.

■ The Air Warfare Center at Nellis AFB, Nev., suffers from high optempo, heavy training loads, and low experience levels. The Air Force will push Reserves into all AWC mission areas to alleviate the problems.

These steps no doubt are harbingers of things to come. As one officer noted, “I don’t think there’s much chance that these things are going to fail.”

Moreover, said Lt. Gen. Daniel James III, director of the Air National Guard, FTF will help the reserve components move into “new, relevant missions”—intelligence, space, command and control, UAVs, and cyber-warfare.

The world of the reservist is changing, and not everybody is cheering. Some preferred the old, slower-paced ways. Others fear that Guardsmen and Reservists will be shunted into homeland defense duties and other missions with little martial flavor, or that the reserve components will lose their distinct “cultural identities.”

Others worry that FTF portends a major reduction in traditional flying forces. That is a special concern to ANG, which is loaded with F-15, F-16, and A-10 fighter units.

Still, it seems clear that the service has little choice but to press on. The Air Force has a huge set of modernization needs, but it is becoming painfully obvious that sufficient funding won’t be forthcoming. Efficiencies are needed, and FTF promises to deliver them.

Moreover, with the services facing a new round of base realignment and closure—BRAC—this year, the FTF concept would allow the Air Force to make better use of infrastructure and maximize the return on its investment in new weapons.

Critics often accuse the services of clinging to hidebound practices and refusing to break institutional crockery. The FTF certainly undercuts that claim. At this point, everyone should stand aside and let the Air Force give this idea its best shot, and hope matters work out as well as it seems they may. ■