

# Don't Call it a Comeback

By Amy McCullough, News Editor



## The Air Force isn't rebalancing to the Pacific. It never left.

**T**he “Pacific Pivot” has been a popular term of art since the President outlined his new defense strategic guidance in 2012, but for airmen operating in the theater it just means business as usual.

“You hear a lot about the rebalance to the Pacific. I think that’s true for the US as a whole, but for the Air Force ... it’s nothing new,” Brig. Gen. Jeffrey R. McDaniels, director of air and cyberspace operations at Pacific Air Forces, told *Air Force Magazine* at JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, in April. “We’ve been here over 80 years. We’ve never turned our back on it. We’ve never taken our eye off the Pacific. The Pacific is very important to us. Not just to us, but to the world as a whole.”

More than half the world’s population is located around the Asia-Pacific region, as are five of the world’s 10 largest economies and five of the eight world nuclear powers. About 50 percent of the world’s oil and more than 50 percent of all tonnage pass through the contentious waters of the South China Sea. Of the United States’ seven mutual defense agreements, five are located in US Pacific Command’s and PACAF’s area of responsibility.

When compared to the Middle East, or even Europe following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Pacific is a relatively peaceful place, but there are plenty of fault lines in the region where potential conflict could erupt.

China is building up tiny disputed atolls and reefs in the South China Sea at an unprecedented rate—pumping

sand, laying concrete, and claiming the artificial islands for facilities and airstrips.

The buildup is raising tensions in the region and encouraging other Pacific countries to strengthen maritime capabilities. For example, Malaysia now plans to park a repurposed oil platform off its coast and use it as a floating military base, said one PACAF official.

During a speech in Canberra, Australia, in March, Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., commander of US Pacific Fleet, said, “China is creating a great wall of sand.” PACAF Commander Gen. Lori J. Robinson raised a similar warning flag during the Air Force Association’s Air Warfare Symposium in February.

The provocative actions are raising “serious questions about Chinese intentions,” added Harris.



**An F-22 Raptor assigned to JB Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, is readied for flight. The Air Force is heavily investing in the units on US territory in the Pacific.**

Staff photo by Amy McCullough

As the US looks to pare down its defense budget, China's officially disclosed military budget has increased by an average of 9.5 percent per year in inflation-adjusted terms from 2005 to 2014, according to the Pentagon's annual report on Chinese military modernization, released in May. China's spending is expected to continue at comparable levels for the foreseeable future.

In 2014, the People's Liberation Army continued to improve its cruise missiles; short- and medium-range ballistic missiles; high-performance aircraft; integrated air defense; information operations; and amphibious and airborne assault capabilities.

The Chinese air force also completed its first military drills over the Western Pacific on March 30, according to the state-run Xinhua News Agency. The

drills aimed to increase China's "mobility and combativeness" in far offshore areas, said PLA air force officials.

Meanwhile, North Korea is a grave concern to South Korea, Japan, and even China. If North Korea continues to threaten nuclear warfare and flaunt its ballistic missile capabilities, it's not difficult to imagine surrounding countries going nuclear too, said the PACAF official.

#### **PACAF OF THE FUTURE**

In addition, Russia, which is expanding its military presence in the region, has flown its long-range bombers off the coast of California and around Guam. It also views the Arctic as an area of strategic importance.

Despite the focus on the region, there isn't likely to be a build up of new bases

in the next 10 to 20 years, said Brig. Gen. Steven L. Basham, director of PACAF strategy, plans, and programs.

Former PACAF Commander Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle coined the phrase "places not bases" to describe the Air Force's preferred regional engagement approach. Robinson has kept the motto as part of the PACAF lexicon, though she modified it slightly to emphasize the importance of airmen serving as "ambassadors" each time they engage with allied or partner countries.

That's the PACAF of the future, said Basham.

Through theater security cooperation and building partnership capacity events, "I see us operating from more locations, training, gaining familiarization, being prepared for whatever requirement comes," he said.



**Chinese paratroopers jump from a transport aircraft during an exercise. China's aggressive buildup in the South China Sea is raising tensions in the region.**

Photo via International Communication Bureau of the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China

“As an example, we would see ourselves in Australia in the future. There are a lot of discussions going on with the Philippines right now, and certainly the buildup in Guam.”

As the Marine Corps looks to relocate thousands of marines from Okinawa, Japan, to Guam by the early 2020s, Basham said the Air Force is looking “for an increased presence [on] Guam.”

The island itself is small—just 30 miles long and about seven miles wide—but the strategic importance of Andersen AFB, Guam, was evident during a visit to the base in April. Almost everywhere you look, there is a construction project underway.

Northwest Field, for example, was mostly jungle in 2006. Today it hosts more than a dozen buildings, including the growing Pacific Regional Training Center and the Army’s Terminal High

Altitude Area Defense battery. Andersen officials are working to clear another 70 acres of vegetation for a new assault landing strip and parachute drop zone, said Stephen Wolborsky, director of the 36th Wing’s plans, programs, and readiness directorate.

### **SPEEDING THINGS UP**

In addition to the Marine Corps buildup on the north ramp, in Fiscal 2014, contracts were awarded to harden some of the base’s fuel storage and build two large hardened hangars intended to modernize the base’s maintenance capability, said Wolborsky. The Navy is constructing a hangar for its MQ-4 remotely piloted aircraft, expected to arrive at Andersen in the next three years.

In Fiscal 2015, Congress authorized funding for a corrosion control maintenance facility, although it ultimately

was not appropriated. The President’s Fiscal 2016 budget again requests funding for the facility, as well as funds for a warehouse to store resiliency products, a hardened command post, and some more utility work on the south ramp to upgrade the base’s underground infrastructure.

Andersen officials are hoping to build a joint deployment-processing center near a new freight terminal, to “optimize the logistics flow” and “speed things up,” said Wolborsky.

The 554th RED HORSE Squadron at Andersen has been working since 2006 to build up the Pacific Regional Training Center.

Although all service components have worked on the project, slated for completion in 2016, the 554th RHS dedicated 8,000 man-days in Fiscal 2014 alone to it. The troop labor significantly reduced the estimated cost of the proj-



**SSgt. Bruce Green repairs a crater during airfield damage repair training in Guam as part of a Silver Flag exercise aimed at honing expeditionary skills.**

USAF photo by SSgt. Melissa B. White



**Marine Corps Osprey helicopters park at Andersen AFB, Guam, as part of the exercise Forager Fury in 2012. The USMC will have relocated thousands of marines from Okinawa, Japan, to Guam, by early in the next decade.**

ect from \$251 million to \$200 million and enabled the center to reach initial operational capability two years early, said Lt. Col. Andrew DeRosa, 554th RHS commander.

Exercise Silver Flag relocated from Kadena AB, Japan, to Andersen in October 2014. The move was made in part to reduce the Air Force's footprint on Okinawa, but it also allows USAF to bring a large contingent of students from other countries to the island. Although Silver Flag operated at Kadena from 1989 to 2013, USAF was restricted from training other nations on Japanese soil.

"We don't have that restriction here," said Lt. Col. Kevin A. Mares, head of Silver Flag training at Andersen. He noted that in June instructors there planned to train engineers from Singapore and Taiwan.

Today, Silver Flag is part of the expanding PRTC at Andersen. Some 1,200 Air Force engineering and force support students are trained in 13 Air Force specialty codes on the campus each year on subjects from airfield damage repair to bare base electrical layout and reverse osmosis water purification.

Beginning in the second quarter of Fiscal 2016, USAF plans to reincorporate explosive ordnance disposal into Silver Flag training, said Mares. The training was part of the curriculum "until about 2000, but due to the high [operations] tempo for EOD airmen, they didn't have the manpower to support all the deployments [to Afghanistan and Iraq]

as well as the training," Mares said in an April interview. Now that combat operations in Afghanistan have wound down and the US presence in the country is getting smaller, EOD can return to the curriculum.

The Air Force is in the "infancy" stages of instituting large-scale changes to the way it repairs runways after an attack. EOD will play a major role in this new methodology, said Mares.

### FILLING A HOLE

"We are currently still teaching legacy airfield damage repair field methodology ... based on Cold War technology and ... threats ... but there are some new and improved threats from adversaries in the region that have forced us to come up with a new methodology for recovering airfields," he said. "We have always trained to the threat of fixing three 50-foot craters in four hours. Now, the new threat is going to be potentially 20 to 100 six-foot craters, so there are going to be many more pieces of damage, but of a smaller nature."

There are more than 5,500 missiles pointed at US forces and allies in the region, said Maj. Justin Pendry, PACAF legislative liaison. In an effort to address the threat, Pacific Air Forces is positioning airfield damage repair kits at locations throughout its area of responsibility to enable remote bases to quickly get runways up and running in the event of an attack.

Because of its strategic location in the Pacific and its two runways, Andersen

will get four of the kits. One for the 554th RED HORSE, two for the 36th Civil Engineering Squadron, and one for Silver Flag training, enabling instructors to introduce PACAF airmen to the new technology, said DeRosa.

The large kits are designed to provide everything crews need to fill a crater in the event of an attack, including heavy construction equipment such as rollers, dump trucks, and bulldozers, DeRosa said. "They are coming in piecemeal over the next several months," he said of the equipment.

PACAF will standardize the kits across the region, though it is scaling the kit sizes based on need. As for Andersen, "the expectation is [that an adversary] would send more missiles our way to take out more of the runway and we'd have more runway to repair," DeRosa said.

The actual method for filling the holes is changing. Instead of using compacted dirt and then topping it with a folded fiberglass mat, the Air Force is moving to a process called flowable fill—"more of a very thick slurry" used to fill the crater, said DeRosa. "It's quicker because you pretty much just pump it into a hole, skim it off, and let it set."

Flowable fill is a semi-permanent repair designed to sustain thousands of aircraft passes, said Maj. Robert Liu, expeditionary programs chief at the Air Force Civil Engineer Center (AFCEC) at Tyndall AFB, Fla.

There are three lines of runway repair: repair, mitigation, and assessment. The kits are intended for repair only, though



**RED HORSE airmen float concrete at a runway training area on Guam. USAF has been moving toward a crater-filling method called flowable fill.**

USAF photo by SrA. Marianne Santos

AFCEC is researching ways to improve the other two lines.

The goal is to take the human factor out as much as possible. For example, the center has already started testing a three-kilowatt Zeuss III laser and robotic arm, to be mounted on mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles, said Liu.

Dubbed the Recovery of Air base Denied by Ordnance, or RADBO, system, the laser is meant to neutralize unexploded ordnance and improve UXO removal capability.

As Afghanistan operations draw down, the Defense Department is looking to distribute the abundance of MRAPs acquired over the last 13 years of war to other theaters. PACAF will take ownership of 45, most to be placed in storage, though James Silva, PACAF deputy director of logistics, said some of the MRAPs will become operational at specific locations, such as in South Korea and Japan. Silva said PACAF is “being very selective” about which vehicles are “turned into daily use items versus wartime support.”

However, Liu said AFCEC is not even taking the MRAP distribution plan into account. “We’re just trying to make the technology work and when we get the requirements, then we’ll figure out where the MRAPs will come from,” he said.

The Air Force is pre-positioning materiel throughout the Pacific so it can operate from many different locations if a crisis or contingency arises, said officials.

“One of the things we know from ... studies ... [is that we] need to operate

out of more locations than just main operating bases,” said Silva. “So where do we want to put our stuff? We know wherever we put it, it’s going to be the wrong place, but we’re picking key locations to place stuff.”

#### TRADING REPAIRMEN

For example, the command wants to put “key ground equipment,” such as tugs and towbars, at RAAF Darwin or RAAF Tindal in Australia to handle B-52s when they fly in as part of PACAF’s continuous bomber presence, operated out of Andersen.

Increased bomber rotations would require some infrastructure improvements at Australian bases. Basham said those discussions are ongoing right now.

“From an Air Force standpoint, ... there is always a requirement for a little bit more concrete to park on and then the appropriate amount of fuel,” said Basham, who commented that the “discussions with Australia are going great.”

Silva said PACAF is considering acquisition cross-serving agreements with Australia, specifically on the aircraft maintenance side. If approved, the agreements would allow maintainers from either country to work on C-17s and eventually F-35s. He said the command is thinking about a similar agreement for C-130s because Australia flies a Herc variant.

“We haven’t stepped in to certifying technicians yet to do the repairs because their training processes are different from ours, but we’re going to study it to figure out what it would take” for Australians

to do repairs on our airplanes and for us to do repairs on theirs, he said.

He estimated it would be 2017 to 2019 before something like that could be exercised.

PACAF has pre-positioned humanitarian assistance and disaster relief equipment, such as pallets, nets, forklifts, and aerial port materiel, in the Philippines.

“We have a contract to sustain the materiel and we can, if needed, loan it to the Philippines and they would take ownership of it,” said Silva. “We’re looking at other locations to go do that. It’s a big bill to go placing more and more stuff out there, though we do have the capability to containerize stuff so we can keep it under lock and key and just go check [on] it every once in a while.”

Unlike some other theaters, however, PACAF’s logistics network is complicated by the “tyranny of distance.” That’s why bilateral and multilateral exercises are so important, stated Silva.

“You really can’t go to your neighbor you’ve never met and ask them to watch your dog. You can only do that if you have a relationship with them,” he said.

In Fiscal 2013 the command participated in 17 bilateral, two trilateral, and eight multilateral exercises or engagements. In Fiscal 2014, those numbers rose to 22 bilateral, three trilateral, and 11 multilateral exercises or engagements. The numbers appear to be holding relatively steady in Fiscal 2015, according to PACAF officials.



USAF photo by SSgt. Shawn Nickel

**PACAF Commander Gen. Lori Robinson greets TSgt. Ian Neske at Eielson AFB, Alaska, in December. Alaska-based F-22s, as part of Rapid Raptor, can get out the door and start flying sorties within 24 hours.**

Such exercises assure partners and allies in the Pacific that the US is committed to the security of the region, and they prevent any gaps that a potential adversary could step into, said Basham.

McDaniels said flex basing serves as a good deterrent because forces can

operate from more than just the main bases in the Pacific. That not only keeps adversaries guessing where US forces and equipment are coming from, it helps the US build relationships with smaller island nations, enabling smoother integration if a humanitarian crisis or contingency arises.



USAF photo by A1C Amanda Morris

**TSgt. Howard Uyeda, an avionics technician, boots up a computer to connect to the F-22 Raptor behind him at Andersen.**

Vietnam is one potential growth area, said McDaniels, who noted that in the future USAF could fly C-17s, C-130s, or tankers from there for military exercises or engagements.

“The last time we were really on the ground there as a military, it was a war. It’s hard to believe it’s come full circle, but that’s a testament to the US focus on the region,” said McDaniels. “I’m not saying it’s been approved, or even that we’re really working toward it, but if at some point we wanted to do military exercises just to train their military, we have the capability and resources available.”

Lt. Col. Justin Spears, commander of the 19th Fighter Squadron, said there are many places other than the main operating bases, where the US could land aircraft if necessary.

“We need to figure out as an Air Force how to operate out of any location that’s feasible and operationally capable for us to operate out of in the theater,” he said during an *Air Force Magazine* visit to the 15th Wing in Hawaii.

That’s part of what the Rapid Raptor concept is trying to address. Instead of the traditional 72- to 94-hour time period it takes to generate orders for a unit to deploy, under Rapid Raptor, Hawaii- and Alaska-based F-22s can get out the door and start flying sorties within 24 hours.

Although the concept is not fully operational yet, Spears said the Raptor airmen have already demonstrated they are able to compress the deployment time line. USAF is still working on the logistics required to set up camp and fly out of more austere locations.

That takes a lot of “forethought into what you’re going to take with you,” he said. “We almost need to have a plan and have a book for every place we could get tasked to go, then we just take the book and say we need X amount of supplies ... based on said location.”

Basham acknowledged it’s impossible to know where the next contingency will arise, but said that’s why pre-positioned equipment and the ability to operate from as many locations as possible in the Pacific are so important.

“We can’t just feel comfortable with the way we operate today,” he said. “We have to look for more opportunities to operate in more advanced fashions.”