



SECRETARY OF THE AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON

The Honorable Deb Fischer
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Fischer:

Thank you for your June 29, 2018 letter addressing your concerns with the 55th Wing's C-135 fleet, to include the RC-135V/W Rivet Joint, RC-135S Cobra Ball, RC-135U Combat Sent, WC-135 Constant Phoenix, OC-135B Open Skies, and TC-135 Rivet Joint Trainer aircraft.

I appreciate your concerns given the recent articles published in the Omaha World-Herald newspaper and I share your focus on safety, security and mission focus of the 55th Wing. You have my assurance that the Air Force continues to work diligently to address any maintenance and sustainment issues for these aircraft, and all aircraft within the Air Force's inventory.

Below are answers to your questions, which I am confident will help you better understand the 55th Wing's, as well as the Air Force's, processes and oversight in maintaining and sustaining aircraft and keeping our Airmen safe.

Question #1 - What is your assessment of the health, readiness, and overall safety of the 55th Wing?

The overall assessment of the 55th Wing's C-135 fleet is that it is a safe and effective weapon system. The aging fleet is being well maintained and the "health" is closely monitored for any trends that require attention. The 55th Wing is ready to perform its mission and support the Combatant Commanders. The readiness of the 55th Wing is tracked monthly in the Defense Readiness Reporting System and all deficiencies are reviewed and addressed throughout all levels of the Department of Defense. Risk is inherent in all flight operations and all our Airmen take their responsibilities to provide a safe environment very seriously. To mitigate risk, the 55th Wing expects all members of the wing to participate in identifying and addressing safety issues. In 2015, the 55th Wing implemented a Risk Management Program that mandates aircrew to perform a personal and operational risk assessment before each flight. This gives every member an opportunity to voice their concerns heading into a flight, and the Aircraft Commander and Director of Operations review these assessments before each mission to ensure the sortie does not surpass an acceptable level of risk.

Question #2 - Has the Air Force observed any changes to the average monthly "health of fleet" aggregation for the 55th Wing?

When reviewing the average health of fleet statistics for the last 36 months, there have been no significant indicators. For the past three years, the fleet has maintained an average mission capable rate of 75.5 percent, slightly below the Air Force standard of 76 percent. This is in line with Air Force expectations for a fleet of this size and age. Small fleet dynamics drive a wider variance in expected rates. However, the C-135 fleet has remained within standard deviation. This is likewise true of break rates at 25.7 percent versus the standard of 24 percent, which is expected for the age of this fleet.

Question #3 - Is there any trend toward an increase in maintenance issues or safety problems?

There are no indications of increased maintenance issues or safety problems. The 55th Wing works closely with the headquarters and program office to address any negative trends in maintenance. The highest maintenance drivers over the last three years have been engine and fuel system related. The Air Force is addressing the TF33 engine issues with additional engineering technical service support and in-depth analysis on engine sustainment. The program office has developed a robust depot improvement program that includes fuel tank inspection and refurbishment to mitigate the amount of fuel system leaks. Corrosion issues have also become an issue due to the age of the aircraft. This is a specific inspection item and is addressed at the depot for repair, sometimes leading to increased depot time and increased costs. There have been two high visibility incidents in the last three years: a galley fire in April 2015 caused by a leaking oxygen line; and an engine fire in March 2017. Following the galley fire the Air Force initiated an inspection of the fleet finding no other aircraft affected. An in-depth engine failure analysis concluded the number two bearing failure caused the engine fire. The program office has taken action to institute a bearing time change replacement program. However, the overall safety record for the fleet is quite remarkable.

Question #4 - Do you assess that there is any increase in risk to the safety of pilots and aircrew due to current maintenance issues within the C-135 airframes of the 55th Wing?

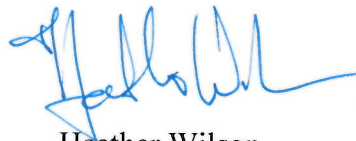
Based on historical safety reports and current safety trends, there is no increased risk to the safety of C-135 aircrew. The Air Force strives to provide our aircrew the safest aircraft possible to meet mission requirements both at home and deployed. The aircrew are provided a safe, airworthy aircraft and are further afforded the opportunity to refuse it if anything seems amiss. The 55th Wing Safety Team tracks safety issues reported from depot, maintenance, aircrew, and anonymous reporting and implements mitigation efforts as issues arise. Of note, the 55th Wing's safety trends are better this year than in previous years.

Question #5 - What is the Air Force's long-term plan to sustain and recapitalize this critical capability?

The Air Force remains committed to sustaining this vital capability through aggressive depot inspection and repair of these airframes. This exhaustive process identifies components requiring repair and replacement, ensuring platform safety, viability, and effectiveness in support of our global missions. Missions system performance continues to benefit from our block upgrade program and the consistent investment the Air Force has made in this capability. As noted in your letter, the Air Force is currently pursuing new platforms to replace the OC-135B for Open Skies missions, as well as the planned conversion of three modernized KC-135Rs into WC-135R Constant Phoenix aircraft. The rest of the RC-135 fleet is deemed sustainable through 2050, providing more than sufficient time to assess when recapitalization is necessary.

Thank you for your continued support of the Air Force and for our nation's defense.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Heather Wilson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Heather Wilson
Secretary of the Air Force