

AIR FORCE readiness levels have been declining since 2003. For a decade, “full-spectrum training” was set aside to support the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III at the Air Force Association’s Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla., Feb. 21.

The high operational tempo required to fight two simultaneous wars ensured that a small portion of the force remained “supremely” ready, he noted. However, that capability came at the expense of other mission areas.

Welsh had told the House Armed Services Committee Feb. 13 that nearly 50 percent of Air Force fighting units “are below what I would consider an acceptable combat readiness level.” That means the Air Force’s ability to fight a “determined enemy, in a contested environment, with degraded communications, degraded navigation, degraded weapons systems capability is not where it should be,” Welsh testified.

Air Force senior leaders are “fully aware” of the problem and had planned to address what Welsh referred to as a “readiness bomb” in the Fiscal 2013 budget, but faced instead a double whammy. In addition to the across-the-board spending cuts known as sequestration taking effect

March 1, meanwhile Congress refused to approve a Fiscal 2013 spending bill, forcing the service to operate under a continuing resolution that extends 2012 funding levels.

“These impacts to readiness occur at a time when the Chief and I have been striving to reverse a 10-year declining trend in this critical area,” said Air Force Secretary Michael B. Donley.

Random Slashing

The Budget Control Act of 2011 required the Defense Department to cut \$487 billion from its budget over 10 years—a move defense leaders agreed was not only possible but also the right thing to do for taxpayers. However, the act also included an additional deficit reduction of about one trillion federal dollars—more than half coming from national security accounts—over the same time period.

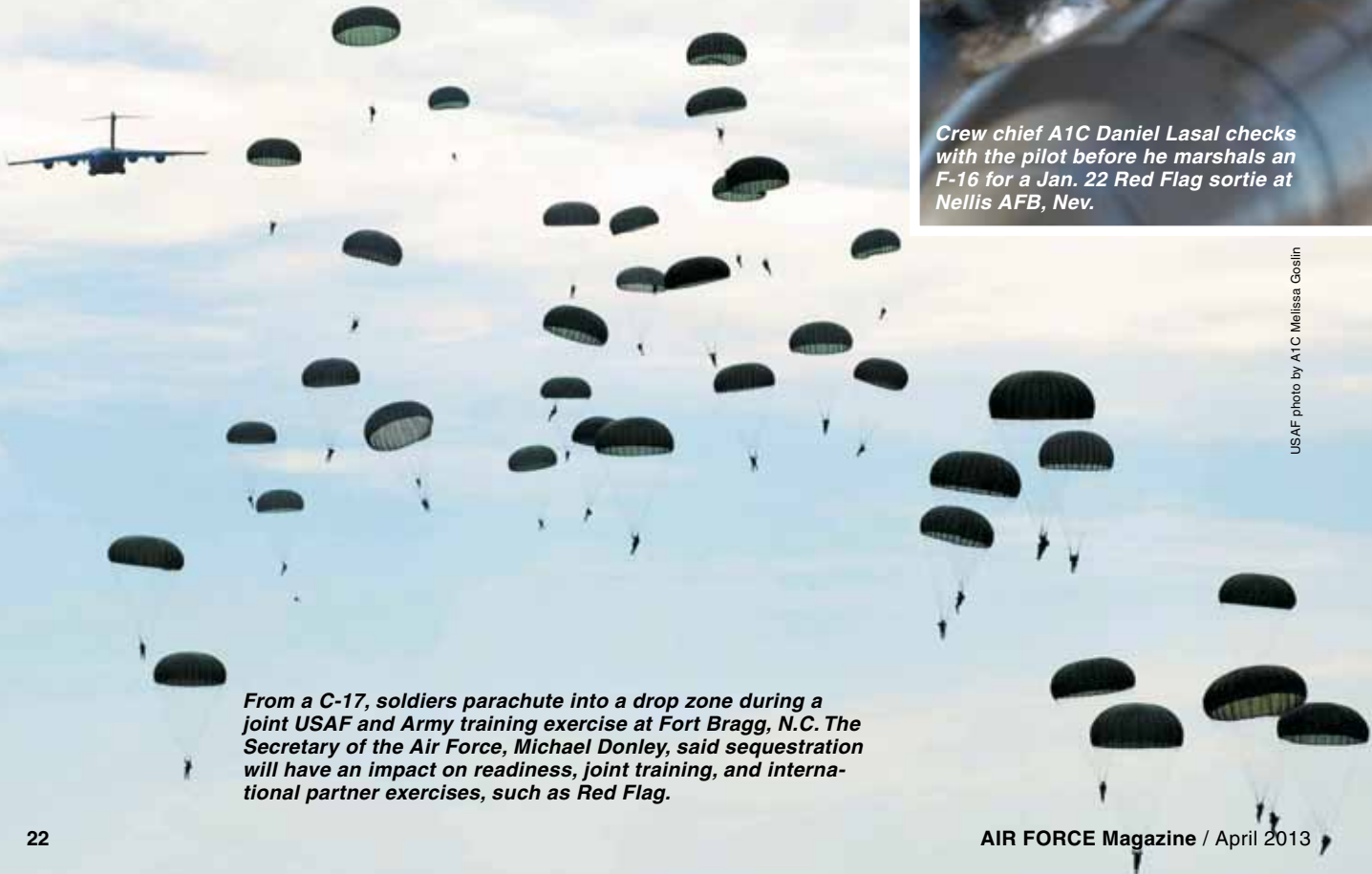
Just about no one in the defense community found these additional cuts a good idea.

The sequester does not give budgeters the authority to pick and choose which accounts will be slashed, in effect crippling readiness and critical modernization efforts. Sequestration was designed to be so devastating that Republicans and Democrats in Congress would be forced



Crew chief A1C Daniel Lasal checks with the pilot before he marshals an F-16 for a Jan. 22 Red Flag sortie at Nellis AFB, Nev.

USAF photo by A1C Melissa Goslin



From a C-17, soldiers parachute into a drop zone during a joint USAF and Army training exercise at Fort Bragg, N.C. The Secretary of the Air Force, Michael Donley, said sequestration will have an impact on readiness, joint training, and international partner exercises, such as Red Flag.



CUTTING READINESS

By Amy McCullough, News Editor

USAF was forced into immediate action when sequestration kicked in.



ANG photo by MSgt. Mark C. Olsen



USAF photo by Scott M. Ash

Top: A KC-135 is in for maintenance at a phase dock at JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J. Under sequestration, maintenance funds could run out in July. Here: Donley speaks at the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium in February. He painted a bleak picture of the effects of draconian, untargeted budget cuts on readiness—effects that could take years to counteract.

to work together to reach a compromise that would protect national security while reducing the deficit.

By early March, no compromise had been reached, and both sides continued to play the blame game.

In addition, Congress has failed to pass a Fiscal 2013 appropriations budget even though the fiscal year is nearly half-way complete. Repeated continuing resolutions keep the government operating at Fiscal 2012 funding levels, but they also introduce another level of fiscal uncertainty

that will have a lasting effect on readiness, said Donley at the Orlando symposium.

“Although we’ve protected people and readiness to date, the impact of sequestration will ultimately force us to consider actions that will impact readiness and our civilian work force as well,” said Donley.

As a result of the steep cuts, the Air Force will reduce flying hours by about 200,000 hours through the remainder of the fiscal year—a move Donley said “would impact our theater security packages, our continuous bomber presence missions, as well as

many Air Force joint and international partner exercises, including Red Flags.”

Gen. Edward A. Rice Jr., commander of Air Education and Training Command, said it’s too early to say how the absence of a Red Flag-type exercise will affect training.

“If the absolute worst-case scenario were to happen, where we were in this for a very extended period of time, I think we would look at restructuring how we train in a less optimal fashion,” said Rice. That could mean more virtual exercises, though Rice said it’s premature to consider that now.

Officials hope to protect prioritized missions, such as operations in Afghanistan, nuclear deterrence, and initial pilot qualification. But “the majority of our fighter and bomber units will only continue to fly until depletion of their flying hour funds, which could occur as early as mid-May,” said Donley. Initial flight qualification training may have to stand down as early as September if a solution is not reached, he added.

Here Comes Tiered Readiness

Gen. G. Michael Hostage III, commander of Air Combat Command, said the only way he can continue to provide effective operational combat power is to transition to a state of “tiered readiness,” meaning a significant portion of combat air forces will no longer be combat capable.

“Tiered readiness is not something we as an Air Force would do normally because we are the ready force,” said Hostage during an interview with *Air Force Magazine* in Orlando. “When conflict kicks off, it’s expected by all our sister services, our allies, and [even] our adversaries, ... that hours after something initiates, airpower will be flowing en masse. The only way to do that is with an Air Force that is constantly combat ready to move.”

Under tiered readiness, however, units returning from a combat theater will stand down. Those units, as well as other State-side units, will then remain in a dormant status until they are tapped for a combat deployment or a named operation, said Hostage.

“In order to get to the end of the year and still be able to produce fully combat ready forces, I have to husband those resources,” he said. “If I spread [the flying hours] out to everybody, all my units would fly but they would be at some minimally low level of capability and not combat ready. My only choice is to husband the resources of those that I need immediately and then take risks with those that I don’t need immediately.”

Though a significant departure for Air Force units, tiered readiness is a normal

operating concept for the Army and Navy, said Hostage. For example, when a carrier returns from deployment, the ship goes in for refurbishment, the company disperses, and the air wing flies off to train elsewhere. Over a period of time, the ship becomes noncombat capable as it undergoes refit, but it is then brought back up before deploying again. An Air Force squadron, on the other hand, is typically combat capable just a few weeks after returning from theater.

“The period of time when they are not combat ready is because their parts and pieces and their people are in transit,” said Hostage. “Once back at home station, they are back on combat status.”

As a result of sequestration, Hostage said, “more than half my force” will go in to dormant status, during which pilots will rely solely on simulators for training.

Welsh said most of the combat air forces will be “below acceptable combat levels” by mid-May and “about 70 percent of our CAF will be completely nonmission capable by July.” In addition, the Air Force will be forced to close about 10 training ranges in the United States, including places such as the Utah Test and Training Range and the Nevada Test and Training Range.

In a move designed to free up some flying hours, the Air Force announced March 1 that it was canceling the Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team’s entire season beginning April 1 and ending support such as flyovers for public events. These activities are funded through standard Air Force training accounts.

USAF also will need to cut weapon systems sustainment by as much as 18 percent, essentially pushing aircraft availability rates and mission capable rates significantly below established standards, said Donley.

“These depot delays would affect over 30 aircraft types and weapon systems across our Total Force and could require the grounding of some affecting aircraft,” he said. “The deferments result in disruption to production lines, the degradation of work force productivity and proficiency, and they’ll drive up future sustainment costs for our Air Force.”

Repeated continuing resolutions have decremented the force to the point where officials had no other option but to begin implementing cuts on March 1, regardless of whether a budget is passed or a solution to the sequester is reached, said Hostage.

“The problem doesn’t go away once you fix the budget and get it back on the budgeting process,” said Hostage. “We’ll have to take irrevocable actions starting

1 March; otherwise, we start getting into ... all kinds of catastrophic situations at the end of the year when we can’t meet the numbers.”

Air mobility forces also will “experience training degradations in airdrop and air refueling” as operations and maintenance funds could run out by July, said Donley. The Army could lose as many as 21,000 training jumps, and the Air Force will

“lose the ability to do air refueling training for both our own forces and for coalition partners because we simply won’t have the flying hours to fly,” added Welsh.

Gen. Paul J. Selva, commander of Air Mobility Command, said he is obligated to “make sure we’re capable of moving the President, vice president, and members of the Cabinet; to exercise American influence at home and abroad; ... to make

Here: Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh delivers his keynote address at the symposium. Sequestration will shape the way the Air Force looks and operates in the future. Bottom: Members of the Thunderbirds, USAF’s aerial demonstration squadron, perform at a Nellis open house. The Thunderbirds had their 2013 season canceled in an attempt to free up desperately needed flying hours.

USAF photo by Scott M. Ash



USAF photo by SMSgt. Kevin Gruenewald





SrA. Mindy High prepares to launch a B-2 from Andersen AFB, Guam. The continuous bomber presence in the Pacific is also threatened by sequestration's budget slashing.

sure that parts of our military force can be moved to places in the world where they are absolutely essential; and ... to have a portion of my crews ready to move the nation's nuclear stockpile if it needs to be moved." Everything else is subject to the budget ax.

That means KC-135 air refueling operations inside the continental United States, C-17 continuation training, and aircraft commander and instructor pilot upgrade training may take a heavy hit under the sequester.

"It's conceivable that up to a third of the C-17 fleet and almost the entire KC-135 fleet will be reduced to basic missions, which means the pilot and the copilot will get to takeoff and land every 30-to-45 days," Selva told reporters in Orlando.

Selva said he has the ability to maintain some training, such as takeoff certifications, through simulators. However, that's not a lot of help considering pilots cannot certify landings in a simulator.

"By the way, the takeoff is beneficial to the landing," he joked halfheartedly.

Instead, Selva said he would focus solely on training "that is required to keep

the crews minimally proficient and then accept the risk if I have to send them on a mission."

That would require recommendations from squadron, group, and wing commanders to determine which crews are the most qualified to conduct missions, he said.

Minimum Mission Assurance

Niche missions, such as aerial firefighting, could be cut completely because they require a significant amount of training to ensure the mission can be conducted safely—and Selva said he simply won't have the flying hours to do that.

Although officials have said they plan to protect operations in Afghanistan, Selva said the sequester would constrain his flexibility in executing missions in and out of theater. For example, a reduction in flying hours would reduce the number of crews available to fly such missions, limiting options available to withdraw supplies and equipment from Afghanistan.

"Today, essentially any crew available can be tasked. I can manage their deployment ratios, their time away from home,

their time in training, and I can keep the pipeline open ... to grow new crews," said Selva.

Though he does not anticipate longer deployments as a result of the cuts, the smaller pool of mission capable crews will mean more time away from home, just for shorter stretches of time.

"This is a place our Air Force has not been in several decades, so the rebuilding time, ... the bill to pay for taking ourselves down to that level of minimal efficiency, minimal mission assuredness, is substantial in terms of training and the investment of dollars and time to do that training," said Selva.

The Air National Guard also anticipated grounding or significantly reducing flying hours on a large portion of its fleet as of early March. "Critical wartime missions" would be exempt for the time being, said National Guard Bureau spokeswoman Rose Richeson. However, NGB funding is set to expire on March 27 and Air Guard funding in the continuing resolution is "greatly underfunded," she said.

As a cost-saving measure, the Air Guard will operate a reduced number of fully mission capable and partially mission capable aircraft as of early March, said Richeson. The most critical missions, such as aerospace control alert, search and rescue, and predeployment activities, will continue to operate. Unlike AMC, the

Air Guard considers airborne firefighting systems a must-fund mission.

Donley said it could take “six months or more to reverse” the effects of grounding units. And “curtailing pilot training could result in pilot shortfalls that could take over a decade to remedy.”

Air Education and Training Command won’t be hit nearly as hard as ACC or AMC by the flying hour reductions, but there will still be plenty of pain under a sequester, said Rice.

Because Air Force leaders want to protect initial pilot training, Rice said he will have to cut advanced pilot training first. That will create a backlog in training requirements that Rice said will “be very difficult for me to catch up on” because there is not enough excess capacity to easily restore the proper levels.

“We are training to our limits in most cases, though there are a couple of exceptions to that,” Rice told reporters in Orlando. “When I miss training slots it’s hard for me to make those up later. When I catch up depends on how long we go in to this [sequester].”

Rice said if sequestration lasted just a few days, the complications could be dealt with, but anything longer than that would start to have a serious impact on training.

“We will have to make decisions that I can’t make today on an individual basis,” he said.

For example, a commander of a flying squadron must be certified in the aircraft variant he oversees. However, the cancellation of advanced pilot training means Rice may have to “sacrifice an initial training slot in order to catch up with one of these other training slots.” That could

mean pushing pilots who are not currently in a flying billet to the back of the line so a commander can be requalified, he said.

The Air Force does, however, plan to protect F-35 pilot training at Eglin AFB, Fla., even though that is considered “advanced” training, said Rice.

“We just don’t have that many F-35s or that many flights at Eglin,” he said. “Because we are dealing with fairly large numbers here in terms of flight hours across my command, I can afford to continue to train at Eglin.” He said, “It’s really not an either-or question at Eglin, and it’s important to continue maturing the training of the fleet.”

This Is Personal

Sequestration often is characterized as an inside-the-beltway issue, but it could be deeply personal for airmen.

The Air Force already has cut back on “nonmission critical” temporary duty assignments as part of its sequestration mitigation efforts. Donley said the further cuts that began March 1 could mean delays to professional military education courses, such as the Noncommissioned Officer Academy and mission readiness training.

That could lead to delayed promotions for airmen and possible loss of certification for airmen in technical specialties such as firefighting and explosive ordnance disposal, said Donley.

Rice said officials are “trying to manage prudently near-term decisions so we don’t cost ourselves more in the long run.”

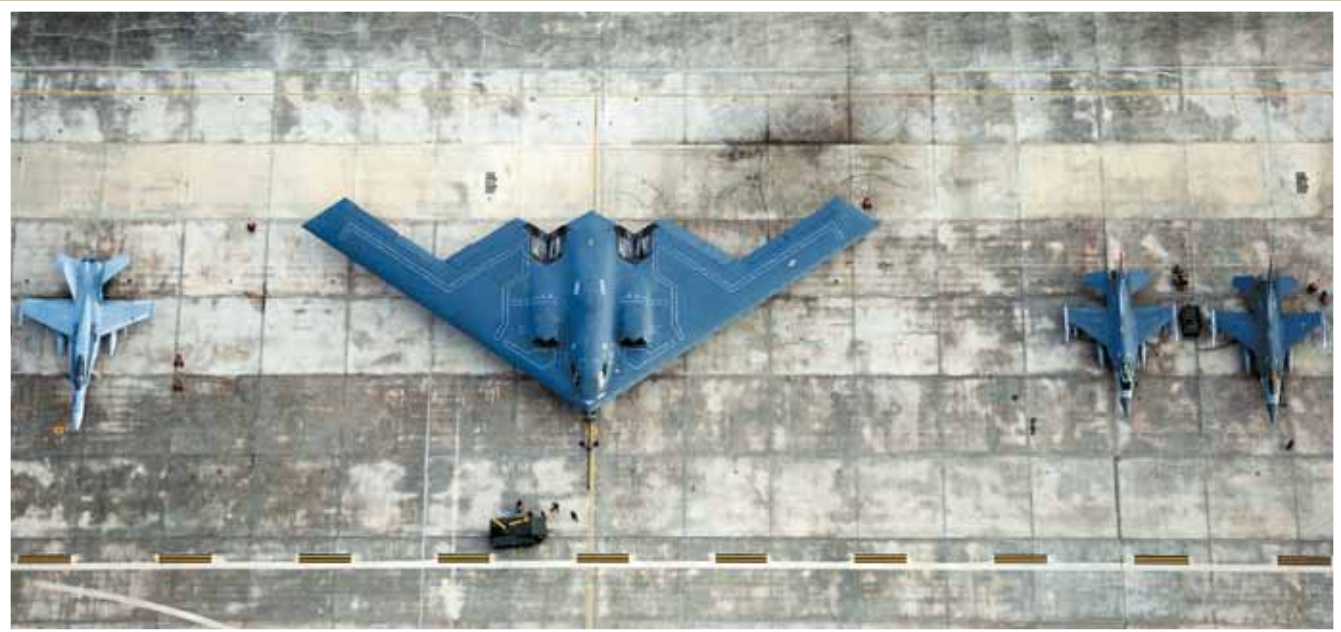
However, delays in initial qualification training or upgrade training will follow airmen throughout their careers, creating a backlog that is difficult to recover from. That’s why the Air Force has made a strategic decision to preserve those elements of training in the short term, said Rice.

Regardless of how the cuts play out, Welsh said they will be significant and they will hurt. They also will shape the way the Air Force looks and operates in the future.

The last two decades of war have already taken a toll on the force, straining airmen and their families and reducing training opportunities. Donley said the Air Force has “a critical responsibility to rebuild and restore full spectrum readiness and training” so the force will be prepared for the future and any unexpected contingencies that might arise.

“Sequestration is a threat to our national security which will undermine readiness in the short term, likely drive us to be smaller than we should be, and endanger modernization in the long term,” said Donley. “The ongoing uncertainty plays havoc with our planning processes. It makes it difficult to invest and finalize contracts, to maintain infrastructure and essential military equipment, and to take care of our people.” ■

L-r: A Navy F/A-18 Hornet, a B-2 Spirit, and two F-16 Fighting Falcons await their next mission on the flight line at Andersen during last year’s joint Air Force-Navy exercise Valiant Shield.



USAF photo by SSgt. Bernice J. Davis III