Welcome to the Hollow Force

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

Grounded units, canceled exercises, and a deepening maintenance backlog make everything the Air Force does more difficult.

The March deployment of stealthy F-22s and B-2s to South Korea was an effective use of airpower—North Korea's belligerent tone softened suddenly and considerably in the following days and weeks—but it also highlighted how complex air operations can be and why readiness is so critical.

"Think about putting together a mission that starts in the United States and goes literally halfway around the world," said Lt. Gen. Burton M. Field of the 37-hour B-2 roundtrip to South Korea. "Do it in a couple of days, ... do it at night, and do it so nobody knows about it until you want them to know about it. That's not an easy thing."

Field, USAF's deputy chief of staff for operations, plans, and requirements, observed that "having a problem in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, in the middle of the night, in the middle of weather, is not something you want untrained crews to be doing."

Unfortunately, because of the government's budget sequestration, many Air Force crews are falling out of proficiency, and fewer units are ready and available for short-notice operations. This is the new hollow force, and it's going to be with us for a while.

The Air Force's readiness hit rock bottom early this summer, due to the sequester's effect on flying hours. More than 30 squadrons had been grounded since April, while some others flew only enough to maintain the most basic proficiency. Pilot, aircrew, and maintainer skills decayed, and remain precarious: The service's top leaders say their options are limited if a new war breaks out. If Congress won't reverse the budget sequester before the end of this month, the situation will likely get much, much worse.

The sequester has been "everything we've been telling everybody it was going to be," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III said in June. Speaking at a seminar in Arlington, Va., Welsh said, "We have 33 squadrons not flying. There are … 12 combat-coded squadrons that are not turning a wheel."

Among the canceled and grounded: a weapons school class, a Red Flag exercise, international exercises, Aggressor units that train other pilots in air-to-air combat, and even the Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team. Civilian Air Force employees—everyone from analysts to grounds-

Photo via NATO Multimedia Library

The shadow of an E-3 AWACS stretches across a closed hangar at Tinker AFB, Okla. The budget sequester has sharply degraded the readiness of many Air Force flying units.

keepers to those who repair parts—have endured unpaid furloughs. By mid-June, depot maintenance of 84 engines and 24 aircraft had been indefinitely postponed, and needed facilities maintenance across much of the service was canceled.

While some units were put back in the air after July 15 when Congress granted permission for USAF to reprogram some of its funds, most grounded units were not so lucky. Aircrews are trying to make gainful use of the unexpected downtime, but service officials admit that some of the activities arranged for them amount to busywork, as their fighting skills atrophy. "It's ugly, right now," Welsh said.

Michael B. Donley, in an interview shortly before his June retirement as Air Force Secretary, said the situation is nothing less than "a readiness crisis" from which it will take many months to recover, even if the sequester is halted before a new fiscal year begins next month.

"Air Force readiness levels have declined steadily since 2003," Welsh said in a late May press conference. "We've been forced to put full-spectrum training on the back burner to support the current fight. And we've also been trading readiness for modernization for the past several years." The Budget Control Act of 2011—which created the sequester—"has driven us over the readiness cliff."

Asked, in a June interview, if the Air Force has fallen back to the days of the "hollow force," Welsh answered, "I think we're there, now."

Everything Short

Sequestration took away 30 percent of the Air Force's remaining Fiscal 2013 flying hour funding. It also obliged the service to slash other operating expenses and reduce the support it can give regional combatant commanders, all of whom have been asked to accept fewer assets and take bigger risks in their theaters of operation.

"We would like to be at a readiness level of … 80 percent," Field said in an interview. Instead, by mid-June, less than 50 percent of the Air Force's "primary fighting forces"—fighter, bomber, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance units, and command and control capabilities—were operating at desired readiness levels.

"Combatant commanders are not receiving all the forces they think they need in order to provide stabilizing presence in their regions," he noted, adding, it's a "constant negotiation" with the COCOMs to see what requirements they can overlook.

"Our readiness posture was not that great going into the sequester," Field said. For some time, there haven't been enough airmen to populate units to 100 percent manning, "so I don't have the required number of airmen on the flight line that have the required skills levels" to marshal, handle, and repair aircraft. "I don't have the right amount of flight leads and instructor pilots, aircraft commanders, or instructors in the squadrons."

When the sequester hit, the priority was to ensure that those forces either in combat or slated to deploy to Afghanistan or several other key areas overseas got top priority, according to Air Combat Command chief Gen. G. Michael Hostage III.

"The strategy we took … was to first look at the … Global Force Management Plan and see what it takes to meet all of the operational requirements" of regional COCOMs. These included "named operations" such as Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, the nuclear mission, aerospace control alert in the US, as well as units deployed in Korea and Japan.

It turned out, Hostage said, "we were short, and we had to go back to the Air Staff and say, 'You've got to give us a little more money so I can at least meet" the Global Force Management Allocation Plan. Planners found the money, "but I really don't have anything beyond the GFMAP," he admitted.

ACC has taken on risk in possible contingency operations, Hostage explained.

USAF photo by SrA. Benjamin Stratton

Ground crews fix a B-1B's blown tire at a forward location in July. Crews either in or preparing to go to combat were spared readiness cuts; others flew minimally or not at all.

"If Syria blows up, or Iran blows up, or North Korea blows up, I don't have a bunch of excess forces I can immediately shift to that conflict. I'm going to have to pull them from other places."

The Air National Guard and the Air Force Reserve are flying nearly their full planned flying hour program because Congress allowed them the flexibility to reprogram funds within the overall budget reduction. The Total Force units took money out of base operating support and depot maintenance in order to keep flying, according to a Guard Bureau spokeswoman.

The Active Duty USAF, however, had no such flexibility at the outset and was compelled by Congress to lop at least 10 percent off almost every account. But sequestration demanded a full year's spending cuts after half the fiscal year had already passed, and USAF had already been shorted $1.8 billion in funds to pay for its Afghanistan operations—money it had already been forced to rob from other accounts. The 10 percent cut to flying operations thus quickly ballooned to a 30 percent reduction.

USAF was later allowed to reprogram some of the base budget funds. It put $413 million toward flying hours, but heavy damage had already been done.

Hostage said he's not relying on the Air Guard for his contingency capability. "What we are doing is looking at using mobilization authority to have greater access to Guard and Reserve forces," he said. That is "very expensive," though, and "if sustained over a long period of time, we'll likely have some political and economic ramifications that may make it hard to continue that." Nevertheless, "we're going to give that a try because I fundamentally don't have enough Active Duty operational forces to meet the requirement."

Operational testing has also stopped on everything except the F-22 and F-35. "You can't sacrifice the future completely," Hostage said, and part of his job is ensuring "there's a future out there" for American airpower. In the meantime, certification of new weapons and software for the legacy fleet will languish.

Welsh said the reprogramming authority could get seven squadrons flying at bare minimum rates back up to combat-ready status.

"If you're going to do a no-fly zone anywhere, you're probably going to want your Air Force suppression of enemy air defenses aircraft ready to go," Welsh said. "But we have some of them that have been parked since April. So if you want options, you better bring some of the readiness back up on line." Hostage concurred that SEAD capability, in the form of F-16 Block 50s, must be one of the first capabilities fished out of the sequester barrel.

"There was a lot of pressure to not stand down any units," Hostage said. "I was told, 'Hey, just fly them a little bit, fly them once or twice a month. That'll be OK.' I said, 'No. That's not safe.'"

There are only three categories of readiness, he insisted: Air Force combat squadrons are either "combat mission ready, basic mission capable [or] …grounded."

"To try to fly the whole force on the limited dollars that we had left meant I would be flying somewhere well below [basic mission currency] across the fleet. That's … a completely unsafe way to do business."

Consequently, Hostage decided the right thing to do was to keep some fraction of his force ready and stand down the rest. The Air Force has never before used this approach, commonly referred to as "tiered readiness," but Hostage believed it was the only acceptable option.

USAF photo by MSgt. Kevin Wallace

USAF photo by A1C Aubrey White

F-15E Strike Eagles from the 4th Wing at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., on static display in April. Grounded crews found other ways besides flying to stay sharp.

This creates a whole new set of problems. "In some scenarios, the entirety of the Air Force is needed in the first 30 to 40 days," Field explained. "That leaves you no time to spin up to anything and everyone has to be ready to go immediately. ... We don't have excess capacity. We're not ready to do everything. That's not tiered readiness. That's being 'not ready.'"

The sequester-induced readiness crisis isn't just affecting fighters and bombers. Air Mobility Command is hard hit, as well. Gen. Paul J. Selva, AMC commander, said in April that tanker operations would likely take a 40 percent flying hour hit through the end of the fiscal year. "If you went to one of our bases today and talked to a tanker crew you'd find they're flying the airplane about once every 30 days," Selva told defense reporters at a roundtable discussion.

ACC chief Gen. Michael Hostage greets airmen at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, last year. He accepted "tiered readiness" as a last resort to preserve some of USAF's combat power.

Three Protected Mobility Missions

In the tanker mission, AMC has ruled out any cross-country air refueling, Selva reported. "If you need to move an airplane from the West Coast to the East Coast, and it's not on its way to Southwest Asia, we've already said no to those operations."

Stateside tankers—along with C-130 operations not supporting wartime activities—are funded by operation and maintenance accounts, subject to sequestration. Afghanistan operations and several other kinds of activity, though, are insulated from cuts.

AMC has a secondary revenue stream known as the "transportation working capital fund," Selva explained. It involves users—US Central Command or the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), for example—"buying our services. ... That's the resupply of Afghanistan, which cannot stop. So that is a secondary stream of revenue that allows us to keep our crews current and qualified in that mission set."

Besides the war effort, three other mobility missions are protected from sequestration cuts, Selva noted. One is any movement of the President, with the small armada of aircraft needed to move his vehicles, security, and command and control. A second must-do category is the movement of special operations forces, both with cargo aircraft and tankers to extend their range. Finally, AMC must support nuclear operations—supporting bombers with tankers or transporting nuclear materials.

That leaves a wide variety of other missions AMC must say no to, Selva reported. Among these are some airborne troop practice drops and other forms of training with the Army.

In concurrence with the Guard and Reserve, AMC paid for the annual spin-up training for crews in the domestic firefighting mission, Selva said, with the proviso that the "Department of Interior and Forestry agreed" to pay for the actual firefighting missions themselves.

In the area of training, there was discussion of slowing or canceling undergraduate pilot training or some of the "B" courses airmen take right after basic training, but Field said, "We made a decision that we had to keep that training pipeline fully funded and flowing." He added, "This year."

So what are the idled airmen doing with their time?

Field explained that pilots are flying simulators "to the max extent possible. They're doing a lot of academics and mission planning, they're doing profes-

USAF photo by A1C Brittain Crolley

Marking the end of a 100-day grounding, Lt. Col. James Howard (l) and Maj. Christopher Troyer of the 336th FS at Seymour Johnson head for the flight line.

sional military education." Many bases are putting together "broadening" programs for pilots to see parts of the mission they wouldn't normally, he noted. At JB Langley-Eustis, Va., for example, pilots in the Active Duty F-22 squadrons aren't flying, but the associated Guard unit at the base is.

"That means the maintenance on the flight line and in the back shops have to produce airplanes for the Guard to fly," Field explained. The Active Duty pilots can observe these enabling activities and "get into very good detail of what it takes to produce a sortie. … And it makes them better airmen and prepares them for future leadership positions better."

But maintainers at totally grounded units are also quickly losing their skills. Engines on grounded jets are run about every month and they get moved from time to time to prevent flat spots from forming on the tires. Taxiing is permitted every two months or so, but that's it.

Welsh said he's well aware that maintenance crews have run through all the short-term maintenance, probably have done all the long-term maintenance on their jets, and now have little to do. "You can't just accelerate training and catch up."

Pilots are getting intensive academics programs discussing the threats they'll encounter in future combat. Field also said aggressor squadrons are building "road shows" of air combat academics to teach at grounded units.

Privately, pilots sidelined by the sequester said that even the highest fidelity simulators do not reproduce all the sounds, sights, sensations, and forces encountered on a mission and are insufficient to maintain proficiency.

A Different Air Force

One F-16 pilot said a simulator provides no sense of the danger and reality of a flying mission, and "if I could talk to [the senior leadership], I'd hope they understand this is in no way a substitute" for actual sorties. Moreover, "we practice [dangerous situations] in the sim that you generally don't do in the aircraft, because you know you can walk away from it." While certainly useful, these exotic emergencies don't really build day-to-day competence.

Officers and enlisted affected by the sequester have also been "strongly encouraged" to take advantage of the downtime to complete professional military education and graduate courses.

"Get your schools, reconnect with your family, go to Disney World. … That's what we've been told," said one airman. However, the extended time at home station is a temporary benefit with many possible long-term costs, including competitiveness for future promotions. "I don't think there's going to be a sticky note on my file that says, … 'Promote without required experience,'" he said.

Hostage acknowledged that gaps in flying and leadership experience are the unavoidable by-product of sequestration and could affect retention before long.

He noted that the second Fiscal 2013 Weapons School class at Nellis AFB, Nev., had to be canceled, and it was a blow. "I'll never recover that class," Hostage said. If he gets to hold Weapons School classes next year, those "bumped" from Class 13 Bravo might compete to attend, but "more than likely, … they will never get to go."

Field said the effect is multiplied because the chosen few who go to Weapons School are then expected to return to their units and be the teachers of their peers. The cancellation starves units of that passed-along expertise.

"It costs somewhere around two-and-a-half times as much money to retrain a squadron as it does to keep it trained," Welsh said. It would take six months, at least, to restore a squadron that's lost its currency, according to Hostage, who added that it's urgent for Congress to—at a minimum—give the Air Force a budget total it can plan for.

"I can't even use good, commonsense business practices to deal with the issues, because politics won't let me live within my means," he asserted.

When asked what happens if the sequester is not reversed and continues on into Fiscal 2014 and beyond, senior USAF leaders all said the same thing: The Air Force will probably shrink.

"The Air Force will look different," Welsh said in the interview. "I think all the services will look different." Using the 10 percent sequester as a baseline, Welsh said simple math would suggest a cut of some 33,000 airmen and some 700 aircraft would be a likely starting point.

He couldn't say specifically where the cuts would come from, but acknowledged that a whole fleet of aircraft could well disappear. Hostage agreed that it saves more money to take out whole fleets because "not only do I save the money of those squadrons and the parts and the pieces, but the whole logistics train that supports it. That's where the big savings are."

This would have cascading effects throughout the force as the service would then have to retrain thousands of airmen, reduce the number in uniform—or both.

The worldwide demands for airpower are not declining just because budgets are. Welsh noted that "our readiness continues to decline, even while calls for potential no-fly zones or air policing operations in response to Syrian violence are reaching a new crescendo."

While USAF is still the best air force in the world, Welsh said, "atrophied skills elevate risk, and stagnant proficiency will only grow over time if we can't restore some sense of budget normalcy. And so that's what we're hoping for." ■