

Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, Air Force Chief of Staff, retires this month after 40 years of uniformed service. He sat down for an exit interview with *Air Force Magazine* on June 17, 2016. This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

AFMag: Flexibility is the key to air power. But as you look back over four years, has the nation expected the Air Force to be too flexible? Have you gotten even a baseline level of stability that's adequate for what the Air Force needs to accomplish?

Gen. Welsh: I don't think flexibility is ever a bad thing, but if you're flexible enough I think you have to be mindful that either you or someone else can tie you into knots. That's what you have to be careful of. There needs to be enough stability over time that you have a direction that the organization is moving toward, that you have a direction that the organization is moving toward, that you have a vision for where you're going in terms of capability and capacity that you can actually move in that direction and make steady progress. And I think you have to have an understanding of the type of Air Force you are trying to become over time.

If flexibility means that the targets you're aiming at in those three areas are constantly changing, then you're not flexible, you're just chaotic. And so all the things that go on around an institution, and for the Air Force that can include changes in the law, changes in funding levels, threat changes, different types of threats, world dynamics, all of that can disrupt that steady progress and consistent movement in a general direction. It's really important for a large institution to have. So you have to guard against that.

I don't think that America has asked us to be too flexible. I think the mission areas that we've been given have stayed very consistent over time. I think we're expected to be good at them. I think we are good at them. I think airmen understand how to do that. It's all that stuff around the edges that tends to be a little chaotic at times and can be distracting if we're not very careful.

AFMag: Do you think the Air Force writ large has a good sense of where it wants to head?

Gen. Welsh: I'll tell you, as a young airman, I just knew where I wanted [to be], what my job was, and I wanted to be really good at it. That's where I was headed. I didn't worry too much about what the rest of the big Air Force was doing. I think that probably is the same today. But I think institutionally the Air Force has an idea where it wants to go. The frustration for us right now is we don't have the resources to do everything we need to do today and the resources to do everything we need to do to get where we want to go. That's the tension right now.

So all the things that get in the way of making the transition from the Air Force of today to the Air Force of tomorrow are the things that are causing consternation. Unstable resource base, or just an uncertainty about what the resource base is going to be over time. Will it be sequestered? Will we have BCA level caps back after FY18? Will the BCA stay in effect through 2023? Will there be another iteration of BCA in 2023 that brings caps into the next 10-year period? How are we going to modernize these capabilities that are now 25, 35, 45, 55 years old that need to be recapitalized for a military force to be successful? That's the uncertainty.

I think as an Air Force we know where we want to go. The problem is, can we get there from here? And that turns into another tension, because if we can't get there from here, then there really needs to be a discussion by the nation of what it expects its military instrument of national power to do. And if you want to keep using it the way we've used it for the last 50 years or so, there needs to be a resource discussion. Not just for the Air Force, but for the entire United States military.

You can't keep using it the same way and resource in a less, relatively lower way. You can't do that.

AFMag: Nobody ever has enough money, but have you been able to have a productive discussion? Or has everything been tied to sequestration and tied to budget limits—almost out of your hands completely?

Gen. Welsh: Well, yes and yes. Everything is tied to the Budget Control Act, everything is affected by that. It just is. It had a dramatic impact on our planned future year budgets. And then the uncertainty year to year of whether the budget deal will go through. As the administration changes will we go into another continuing resolution for three months or six months? Or will there be a budget passed and we'll execute the second year of the balanced budget agreement from last year? I don't know the answer to any of those questions. That is just uncertainty that adds to the consternation and confusion about where we're going to be able to go.

But ... we've been able to provide is a little bit of stability in our own planning process, and airmen have worked at this for a long time. We have a process in place that lets us make the strategic decisions we think are necessary to guide resource allocation for the service. I think the service Secretary is well served by the process and it puts her in a position to make the right kind of resource decisions for the Air Force to modernize, recapitalize, and be successful in the future.

There are other factors in the environment today that make it very hard, even after we make those decisions, to move forward with those decisions. That's another tension that adds to the problem, because if you can't make decisions that allow a predictable path because someone is going to debate every step of the path and debate every decision, it just makes it harder to have any certainty about where you're going.

We just have to keep working hard at this and making sure we do everything we can to make very clear to everyone around us in government who is responsible for resourcing where we're trying to go, why we're trying to get there, what are the facts of the future threat, what is the reality of our current state of the force, how old are our systems, what is the impact of age on a service? It's significant. And where do we need to go to be capable, credible, and viable against a threat 20 to 30 years from now?

Air forces should always be worried about how good they're going to be in the future, not how good they were in the past. That's kind of a fundamental idea if you're a service that's based on technology. And there's some tension that that causes. If you have supporters who believe that the best way for the Air Force to stay capable is to hang onto everything that we have today, then they will have a certain position. The Air Force will always believe the best way for us to be

capable in the future is to build for the future and to modernize for the future, to aim at the future threat and future capabilities. That tension resolves itself in the debates we have day to day now.

AFMAG: If you're short maintainers, that affects every maintainer that you do have. If you don't have enough munitions, that affects the people that are working in the munitions field. How much impact do budgets and politics in Washington, D.C., have at the operational level?

Gen. Welsh: Much more than it used to because they know more about it. When I was a lieutenant in the Air Force I didn't know what was going on in Washington, D.C., and didn't pay much attention to it. We didn't have electronic media; we didn't have social media. Our awareness of the issues that affected the large Air Force was just not very good.

Our young airmen now are much better informed, they're much more interested in some of these issues. Every base I go to I get questions from two-striper about retirement systems, about TriCare, about things that I just never would have heard 30, 40 years ago from a young airman.

So they're very engaged, they care, they're passionate about their service, and they want to be the best in the world at what they do. That's really all they ask.

So I don't know if worried is the right word for every one of them, but they're certainly paying attention and they want to know that they have a future, that their mission has a future, that their unit has a future, that we are going to give them the equipment they need to be successful and the training and education they need and desire to be successful. They want to know we're going to take care of their families while they're out doing the nation's business. As long as we can provide those things and assure them that those things are going to be the case, then we'll be fine.

Here's what they're not comfortable with. They're not comfortable with sitting still. They're not good with good enough. They're not happy with not being able to get better at their mission because they don't have the resources to go train for the mission. That's not why they joined.

So we have got to make sure we do everything possible so that that's not the case.

AFMAG: The Air Force has had many of the same high demand/low density career fields since 2001. Is this a permanent situation? Why is it so hard to fix?

Gen. Welsh: We haven't quit fighting. We're in the same war. It's changing shapes and shifting, but it's the same place, the same commitment, the same type of conflict, so the same type of forces are stressed. We have other parts of the force that are less stressed than they were in 2001. We have fewer bases overseas. So the people who run infrastructure on the bases in the Middle East, some of those bases have drawn down. So not as many of the base support people, the personnelists, the LOG supply guys, the cops, et cetera. There aren't as many of them having to be deployed as consistently, so the tension on those career fields has dropped a little bit. It's still there, but it's dropped a little bit.

When you're maintaining fewer of these contingency bases than you were in the past then there's less of a demand signal. But when it comes to the operational career fields that are in the middle of the fight or directly supporting the fight, for the counterterrorism effort it hasn't gone away. For ISR it hasn't gone away. There's still a huge demand on our fighter units and on our bomber, B-1 units have been heavily deployed, and our entire AFSOC community.

So we've got great airmen in all these parts of the Air Force who are doing fantastic work. Then you think about all the people who don't deploy but are still doing 24/7 operations in support of activity around the world every day from RPAs to ISR to space, the entire space force. We've got a ton of people who are working non-stop supporting a conflict that's now 15 years of serious conflict and really 25 years for the Air Force of combat operations.

The great part about our airmen is most of them came in to the Air Force after the first Gulf War and so this is what they know, it's what they do. They're good at it. They and their families have accepted it. They do tremendous work. The battle rhythm is something they're familiar with. And yet they continue to serve. We shouldn't take that for granted.

And for those new and emerging career fields where the stress has just grown as their mission success has grown—RPAs is a perfect example of this—we've got to realize that we have to do everything possible to create a battle rhythm over time that is acceptable to both them and their families in terms of being able to stay in and make this a career. It's an exciting career field. They do incredible work. It's a major contribution to the joint fight. In fact, in many ways they're just changing the face of warfare. But it has to be a lifestyle that they and their families can manage over time. So we've got to continue to convince them that that's the way it's going to be.

We've got to just keep grinding at this. There's no easy fixes, there's no magic answers. It's just hard work.

AFMAG: The stereotype, the cliché, is that within the Air Force RPAs are what you do if you can't get a pilot slot. Have you made progress in that regard? Are people excited about going into RPAs? Are people requesting RPAs?

Gen. Welsh: Yeah, they are.

I mentioned the other day when we were talking about some of the missile folks, I was out at the Air Force Academy for graduation. Some of the cadets who are going to RPAs just can't wait to get there. They're excited about it. They grew up thinking about RPAs. We have officers in the Air Force now who have degrees in RPA operations and RPA maintenance and logistics from universities around the country.

Our 18X force, which is our specific RPA pilots, is a really, really talented, [and a] very, very proud group of people. And they are the ones who are going to take this remotely piloted aircraft community writ large and drag it through the rest of the 21st century. Who knows where this is going. But these are the people who are going to lead the practical application. And they know it. And they're capable of it. And they will come up with ideas and concepts and approaches to

things that we just haven't even imagined yet. It's really kind of exciting to watch. And all we've got to do is give them an environment that makes them want to stay. Give them mission challenges and demands that are exciting. A tough job to do that others just can't get done. Then give them the resources to get it done and make sure we take care of their families along the way, and give them a lifestyle they can live with. They don't ask much. We should be able to do all those things, and they should expect us to do it.

AFMAG: Going forward with remotely piloted aircraft, what do you want to see happen? What's your vision for the future?

Gen. Welsh: The first step is to make sure that everybody in the community realizes how terribly important they are to the joint fight and to the United States Air Force. They have to feel value, just like every other airman in the Air Force feels value. They ... have to believe that their mission area is critically important and that they're critically important to getting it done right. I believe that's true. But every airman in that community needs to feel that way ... [The] whole team has been stressed for a while now. Not because anybody did anything evil to them, but because they have grown so fast over the last really 10 years or so, ... that we have never been able to catch up.

Every time we had a new training pipeline built—which takes about two years to recruit, train, and field somebody in a new career field in the Air Force, from the time you get the idea of how many you need until the time they're actually out there doing the job operationally—in that two-year period we'd get five or eight or 10 more orbits added to the requirement. So we were behind again. We've been chasing that requirements rabbit since 2008. And we have now stabilized it. Just for two years with the Secretary of Defense's approval, and we will get ahead of it now on the training side for pilots.

Now we need to shift, once we've got that fixed and look at do we have the maintenance equation right? Do we have viable career fields for our maintainers? Do we need to go to a single common identifier for a maintainer who does everything on an RPA instead of having specialists in each area? Is that a better approach than having specialist? I don't know.

But that community will help us figure this out because they're really good at what they do. They're kind of making the game up as they go. They've developed all the tactics for remotely piloted aircraft operations. They've developed all the different procedures they use to mass fires and to transition from ISR to strike missions. And how do you develop somebody in RPA operations from never having done it before to being a mission qualified combat veteran? They have done all of that inside the community. They didn't get a lot of help from anybody else because nobody else knew how to do it. They've been remarkable.

Now the institution kind of needs to go around them and give it the stability and the direction it needs over time and the support it needs over time, and that's what we're trying to do now.

AFMAG: The Air Force is a victim of its own success. How do you make the case that yes, you need more airmen and it's an investment, not a cost?

Gen. Welsh: You just keep saying it. You can't do the things the Air Force has done without people. Autonomy doesn't mean you need no people. It will never mean that.

The reason the Air Force has been successful, and I believe the United States Air Force is a huge success story over time. ... [is] because of our people. They have responded to every challenge. They have overcome every shortfall. They have ignored lack of resources or not enough airmen and got the job done with 80 percent manning. They're doing it today all over the Air Force. They've just been spectacular.

Now, the alternative is what? We should have failed at something? No, we should not have failed at something. That's not why we raised our right hand, and none of our people believe that that would be okay. So they will continue to do everything possible to succeed. My concern is it will get to the point where they just can't keep it up anymore and they'll decide to choose another profession. And we lose and the nation loses.

So it is really important for us to keep making the case that you have to have a lifestyle, a family battle rhythm, you have to have a predictable future, quality of life, that will attract people to stay in the business. It's true in every business, not just ours, but it is especially true in a business where you're going to ask people to give the kinds of sacrifices that our people give. So we just have to keep telling this story. The fact that it's hard to tell doesn't matter. Keep telling it. The fact that some people may not want to hear it doesn't matter. Keep telling the story. The fact that we don't have enough resources to do everything we want to do for our people doesn't matter. Keep telling the story and do everything we can. I think that's what we owe them.

AFMAG: What are the issues the next Chief of Staff might have to deal with that have been quiet in the past, but won't stay quiet in the future?

Gen. Welsh: Manpower is going to continue to be an issue and it's going to be a consistent drumbeat. We have got to keep focused on that.

Modernization has got to be a consistent drumbeat. We are lagging that technology curve right now. We're catching up in a few areas and we're trying to catch up in a couple of others, but we've got an awful lot of equipment in our Air Force that is really, really old.

So we were over on Capitol Hill at an event the other day and had a member of Congress who was talking about his Air Force experience. In 1973 he had been flying KC-135s, refueling the venerable B-52s of Strategic Air Command. I asked him if he ever thought when he got out of the Air Force in 1976 that in 2016 I could offer him the opportunity to come back into the Air Force and fly the KC-135 and refuel the venerable B-52. We have got to think about how we modernize this Air Force.

And I think the importance of the squadron will be something that the new Chief has got to keep focused on. The squadron is the foundational unit of our Air Force. It is the fighting unit of our Air Force. We have done a whole bunch of things that have not added to the cohesion and unity of squadrons in the way we've been deploying for the last 15 years. And squadrons are a way of addressing a whole lot of things—pride, morale, legacy, focus on heritage, the profession of

arms, taking care of individuals and families. I mean the root of where we're really good at that is in the squadron, so anything we can do to strengthen squadrons, we can damage a lot of other level organizations, but the squadrons have to work.

AFMAG: What's happened over the last few years that's kind of detracted from the cohesion there?

Gen. Welsh: Well, a couple of things have happened. No. 1 is the Air Force downsized over the last 25 years ... We focused on tooth versus tail. That was kind of our construct. Looking back on it we created a second order effect that maybe we didn't fully anticipate. We took the tail out of the squadrons, instead of looking at the entire operational unit as tooth.

So you take away the personnelists, you take away the administrative people, you take away some of the life support folks in the flying squadron or equivalent organizations in other type of squadrons, and so you cut all those people and pretty soon you've got nobody to do additional duties. Nobody to do awards and decorations, training reports. And then you get your front line operators, whether they're maintainers or they're cops or they're fliers, are now having to do all that additional work because the work doesn't go away. It's still required. And now they're not focused on their primary duty, which is a frustration for airmen. I don't blame them. It was a frustration for me when I was young. It's a frustration for me now.

So we have got to realize that we have to reconstitute some of that capability or we have our people focused on the wrong things day to day. And so that's one aspect of this.

The other is that because of the way the Air Force has deployed for the last, especially the last 15 years, but really the last 25, we have deployed in pieces and parts. So you don't pick up your Air Force wing or your group or your squadron and deploy it wholesale into a base in the Middle East. If you're a flying unit you go more intact than other units do. Maybe you're a 44-person security forces detachment and you go as a chunk of people, but you don't take the whole 300-some-person squadron.

So what we ended up doing instead is when you go to the Air Operation Center, you'll go as an individual or a group of two or three. When you deploy as a support function, you may show up at an airport of entry, an aerial port somewhere, and you might have one person or two people from the same unit. But you go to a base in Kuwait and you might find people from 90 different bases there. It's not a big chunk of people from one unit. So the cohesion of your unit, kind of the sanctity of the squadron, the relationship between supervisors and supervisees, is split to support combat operations. That was the model we ended up having to go to to man all these different places around the world. So that has hurt the squadron a little bit, and we've got to figure out how we get back to more of a squadron-focused approach to everything because I think it's important to the Air Force.

We've been talking a lot about this. We've done small things in this regard. But it's going to be a long-term focus. If we can make the squadrons healthy, airmen feel better. It's not complicated.

AFMAG: So does the fact that there are now less operating location allow you to send larger groups to fewer places?

Gen. Welsh: In some cases it [does]. In some career fields it [does]. [In the] perfect world [we] would shut down a base here in the States and send forward the entire support function from that base to run Base Y in the desert somewhere and take a break for a year or six months or however long. But we can't do that. There's still training that has to happen. There's still other capability at home station that isn't deployed that needs to be developed and ready for the next deployment.

So you need capability to operate at the home station, but we have cut the manpower in some of these career fields so far over the last 25 years, that there's not enough left at home station to train and operate properly. So training programs slow down. This is what's affecting our long-term readiness. We don't have enough people back home to turn the sorties [so] the people who are back home can do the training they need to do to stay fully up on readiness.

So all the focus goes to support activity forward; that's where the priority is, it needs to be. Then there's less activity back home because we're short in so many manpower areas. That's been the problem.

So how do you adjust that? And you've got to look at it organizationally. You have to look at it from a resource perspective. You have to look at where you're going to prioritize your effort. But this is a long fight on this particular issue. It's a generational thing. We're going to have to keep grinding on it.

... Morale's pretty good at deploying locations for the most part. They see the need, they see the mission, they know they're making a difference. When they go home and they have frustrations at home, it's different. They shouldn't have to work as hard when they're at home as when they're deployed. They shouldn't feel like they have the same strains, the same resource shortages. They shouldn't feel like they're in an environment that makes their job harder when they're at home station.

And most of the reason they feel that way is just because of shortages of manpower and shortages of resources.

AFMAG: As you look back on you four years as Air Force Chief of Staff, what are your sources of pride and accomplishment? And conversely, what have you found frustrating or limiting?

Gen. Welsh: One of the interesting things about this job is there is no sense of personal accomplishment. You don't do anything here. The Air Force does things or doesn't. The only thing I'm proud of personally is I never quit trying. I tried hard every day. Like everybody else, sometimes my best just isn't good enough and airmen carry me. But I'm proud of the fact that I kept trying.

I'm really proud of what the Air Force has done operationally around the world. It had nothing to do with me. It had to do with airmen. Every airman. They're phenomenally good at what they do, and I hope that's a source of pride for every airman. It certainly is for me.

I know those airmen never quit trying either. They do their best every day, even when it's really hard for them.

I'm really proud of our leadership team. I believe that Air Force senior leaders—officer, enlisted, and civilian—are as good a team as any leadership team on Earth. And I'm really proud of them.

The only frustrations that I think senior leaders have in the Air Force, the only real frustration I've had day to day is that we don't come to solutions fast enough. We just need to do a better job of taking care of our people, providing them more capability, providing better care for their families. And any time we can't get it done sooner, it's frustrating to all of us. It's not because we're not trying. But that frustration is the enemy. We've just got to keep grinding. We've just got to stay focused on it.

AFMAG: Your final thoughts?

Gen. Welsh: Airmen rock. They already know that, but they should know that I know that. Airmen rock. Airpower rocks. And there is no question that they will continue to provide it. I hope they know how proud Air Force senior leaders are of them. I hope they understand that.

I really wish I had the opportunity to look every airman in the eye. That's the one thing I would have liked to have been able to do. To meet every single one of them and just say thank you to them and their family. They're just, they're unbelievable people. They're unbelievable servants. All they ask is that we try and take care of them. I just hope everybody in the Air Force, everybody in the Department of Defense, everybody in the United States government remembers that. That's all they want. Thanks.

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