

**USAF is still refining the concept, but initial reports have been promising.**

# The Expeditionary Air Force

**T**HE air expeditionary force is still a fairly new concept for the US Air Force, but it promises to become one of the service's defining capabilities for the decades just ahead.

A shrinking overseas base structure increasingly demands that the US have home-based military forces able to project power over great distances. The "plug and play" nature

of the AEFs will help USAF chart a middle course between, on one hand, the old system of fighting from permanent overseas bases and, on the other, relying too heavily on direct overseas employment of forces from North America.

AEFs will provide the nation with both an on-call "911" capability as well as the coalition-building ele-

ment envisioned in the Air Force's strategy of "Global Engagement."

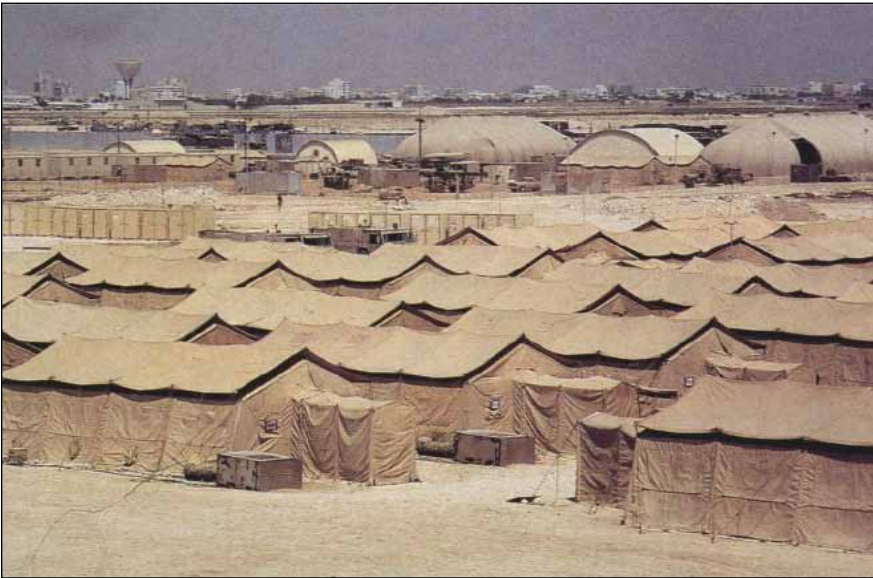
The AEF itself, however, is one of the least-understood of the new military tools at the nation's disposal. Its newness has led some supporters to oversell it and some in the other services to mistrust it as a bald attempt at mission-grabbing during a major national defense strategy review.

*Access is one key to the success of air expeditionary forces, which must act with the full cooperation of the host country in such places as Doha, Qatar (above).*

A photograph of an airfield at sunset. In the foreground, there is a concrete surface with some reddish-brown markings. A dense, tangled mesh of barbed wire is stretched across the middle ground, creating a grid-like pattern. In the background, several fighter jets are parked on the tarmac. The sky is bright and hazy, suggesting a low sun. The overall mood is somber and industrial.

# *Takes Shape*

By John A. Tirpak, Senior Editor



**Advance planning in the continental US, another key to success, enables the rapid construction of tent cities that can accommodate the 1,100-plus personnel necessary for an effective deployment.**

“There are a lot of misconceptions about what an AEF is,” said Air Force Brig. Gen. William R. Looney III, commandant of the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Va., and commander of USAF’s second air expeditionary force (called AEF II), which deployed to Jordan for several months in 1996.

“Some people think AEFs can go anywhere. They cannot,” continued the General. “Some people try to tell you it’s intended to replace the [aircraft] carrier. It’s not, and it doesn’t. It’s not ‘one-stop shopping’”—incorporating the entire range of airpower capabilities—“and it can’t operate autonomously,” meaning outside of normal theater command and control.

“What it does give you is rapid, responsive, and reliable airpower that can be tailored to the specific needs of a situation . . . [and which] moves out quickly,” Looney said.

In essence, the goal of an AEF is to be able to deploy a package of “shooter” airpower—including air-to-air, precision air-to-ground, and defense-suppression airplanes—into a theater and begin generating combat sorties within 48 hours of the “execute” order.

### **Covering Over the Gaps**

Washington can use such a capability, said Air Force officials, to deter adventurism by an aggressive nation, increase the landbased air-

power already available to a regional commander in chief, or provide a temporary “filler” force that can cover naval airpower “gaps” created when an aircraft carrier leaves the scene before a replacement is on station. Such gaps can last for weeks.

The genesis of the AEF concept came in October 1994, when Iraqi forces under the control of dictator Saddam Hussein made new and threatening moves toward Kuwait. The US had long since removed the bulk of its Operation Desert Storm assets from the theater and was forced to make a hasty return to the Persian Gulf with enough forces to credibly deter a replay of Iraq’s 1990 invasion of the tiny but wealthy Arab state. The return of forces—on an extremely tight schedule—proved to be a major challenge.

According to Looney, the deployment was “not as crisp as it should have been. . . . It didn’t go as well as we wanted.”

Coincidentally, Air Force leaders had been looking for a new way to demonstrate the capabilities of airpower to the world and the national command authorities, and the 1994 Iraqi incident provided the spur to put a concept into action.

Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, the Air Force Chief of Staff, turned to Gen. Joseph W. Ralston, who was then commander of Air Combat Command (now vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and assigned him

to put together a concept for an air expeditionary force to demonstrate “the ability to project long-range, lethal, sustainable, combat power inside of normal war plan time lines,” Fogleman explained.

Officers at 9th Air Force fleshed out the concept and “advertised” it to the theater commanders. The officer who headed up this effort, 9th Air Force’s commander, is now USAF’s deputy chief of staff for Air and Space Operations, Lt. Gen. John P. Jumper.

US Central Command responded right away, requesting AEFs to supplement Operation Southern Watch, enforcing a no-fly zone over southern Iraq. To date, there have been four AEF deployments—two to Qatar, one to Bahrain, and one to Jordan.

A typical AEF draws 34 to 40 aircraft from three or four wings. This aircraft complement includes about a dozen F-15Cs for air superiority, a mixed dozen of F-16Cs equipped with Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night pods and F-15Es for precision attack, and a half-dozen F-16Cs equipped with the High-Speed Antiradiation Missile Targeting System for defense suppression. In addition, a number of heavy bombers are “tied” to the AEF and made available to its commander at need, though they remain stationed in the United States. If needed, tankers deploy with the fighters.

### **Building Around the Core**

Of the supporting wings, one is designated as the “core” unit and provides the skeletal framework—including headquarters staff—around which squadrons from other units coalesce. After receiving notice that they are “on call,” units will fuel their airplanes, load long-range fuel tanks and ordnance, and begin loading airlift aircraft with aerospace ground equipment and support gear.

When the “go” order comes, the first airlifters will launch with a setup team. On arriving at the deployment site, they open prepositioned equipment and prepare for the arrival of the combat airplanes. With them travels a cadre of fighter pilots, who immediately begin to plan the first combat sorties. When the first fighter aircraft arrive, the airplanes are checked out, refueled, armed, and boarded by the now rested fighter pilots who flew in ahead of them on airlifters. Combat

operations begin as soon as the fighters can be turned.

As more airlifters arrive, the base becomes more fully equipped. During lulls in sortie generation, the troops erect a tent city for the 1,100 or so personnel of the provisional air wing that will run for the 90 days of the deployment.

Looney noted that the rapid transit and sortie generation times belie the extensive preparation that supports an AEF operation.

"The first thing you have to work is the diplomatic clearance," he said, noting that a host nation must volunteer a usable air base for the duration of the AEF. In addition, transit permission must be secured for aircraft seeking to get into and out of the operating area. Moreover, the host nation must be willing to harbor US warplanes and munitions on its soil and be willing to allow the United States to launch combat operations from its territory.

"Access is one of the things that's required to make a concept like this work," Jumper observed. "Access is not always trouble-free. . . . You have to be welcomed by the host country, and in times of tension that host country has to feel genuinely threatened before they're going to want to host groundbased forces."

The base offered must also have ready access to water and fuel—though, in a pinch, tankers can fulfill

the latter need—and the host nation must be willing to allow the prepositioning of equipment that will be used when an AEF is activated.

In the case of the Jordan AEF, USAF needed several months' preparation to get required diplomatic clearances and bring the Azraq AB up to snuff. However, once established, an AEF base can be reactivated on short notice. When an AEF departs, it leaves behind ground equipment, fuel, food, and some munitions—so far, bomb bodies only—in a structure called a "K-Span." This structure is emptied when the advance team arrives, and then the advance team lives in it until the tent city can be erected.

"Some of the equipment we leave, . . . we allow the host nation to use, like fire trucks," Looney said. "It's better for us if it's being used and maintained in the interim, and the host nation gets the use of it until we return."

### Plugging In

Usually, however, an Air Force AEF "has got to go somewhere we've been before," Looney noted. "We come back, plug in, and start generating sorties."

Cooperation and coalition-building are by-products of the AEF, Looney said. USAF units and the host air force exercise together and against each other, practicing tactics as well as command and control.

In Jordan, AEF personnel instructed Royal Jordanian Air Force personnel in maintenance of the F-16, former USAF versions of which the RJAF will receive over the next few years. They also practiced airfield management, flight and ground safety, academic and doctrine classes, and ran a joint exercise called "Eager Tiger."

"Our Jordanian hosts were just excellent—very professional—and they told us they were sorry to see us go," Looney reported. Such cooperation builds a basis for future access, which, with the end of the Cold War and the loss of many overseas bases, is becoming a critical commodity.

All of the AEFs so far have deployed to the operational area overseen by US Central Command, where the airplanes were added to the Southern Watch Air Tasking Order.

USAF veterans will recall Cold War exercises called "Checkered Flag," in which tactical wings would pick up wholesale and deploy to sister bases in Europe—practice for the reinforcement of USAF units hit by a no-notice Soviet attack. Checkered Flag is the basic model for an AEF, Looney said, but he noted that the main difference between the two is that, under the old system, the emphasis was on the deployment and marrying up with the forward units, while an AEF concentrates on "generating combat sorties as soon as you land."

The AEF deliberately does not carry with it "the full spectrum" of combat and support aircraft because to do so would "get in the way of staying 'light and lethal,'" Looney added.

Jumper said that the AEF fits in well with national strategy by offering a strong counterpunch to an enemy army on the move.

He said, "Airpower's greatest responsibility . . . is in the 'halt phase,' due to the fact that we can get there quickly, and when we meld with other forces we think we have the ability to take on a force that's on the ground and stop it."

Jumper said that, in the 1994 Operation Vigilant Warrior deployment in answer to Iraq's threatening moves, the greatest deterrent to further aggression seemed not to be forces already in theater but those that were on the way. "The notion that large numbers of forces were deploying . . . seemed to have the greatest effect," said Jumper. "That's when [Saddam



**AEFs do not carry the full spectrum of combat and support aircraft because such a package would not be "light and lethal," says Brig. Gen. William R. Looney III. But they do contain F-16s configured for precision attack and defense suppression.**



*F-15Es have been part of all four AEFs so far, and they are also integral to Air Combat Command's 366th Wing, which is slated to serve as the core of the developing AEF concept.*

Hussein] seemed to stop and turn around—once the news broke that large numbers of airplanes were responding to this situation.”

Because the effort to deter an aggressor might fail, said Jumper, the AEF needs to be “a lethal threat to whomever you’re trying to persuade to do other things.”

### Leaving a Footprint

Each of the first four AEFs deployed has yielded valuable lessons, Looney observed. He said that an effort is continuing to “reduce the size of our footprint,” meaning that the AEFs are constantly seeking ways to cut the number of airlifters they need to deploy. Prepositioning will help, as AEFs return to bases where large stocks of equipment and supplies are stored.

Additionally, “we are looking at ways to reduce the number of people we take,” so that it gets down to the “absolute minimum needed.” Furthermore, proper sequencing of what equipment goes, packed with what and when, can also slice the airlift requirement substantially. It is hoped that future AEFs will be able to halve their requirement for C-5-equivalent loads from the current 11 to five or six.

Among the Air Force’s new battle labs is one at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, which will study improvements to the AEF concept. Mountain

Home is home base to USAF’s sole dedicated air expeditionary wing, the 366th Wing. Originally set up as a composite wing, the 366th is intended to be USAF’s on-call AEF outfit, though “problems with spares and other things have kept us from using it for that purpose, yet,” Fogleman said.

Jumper noted that while composite wings offered excellent training-together opportunities for dissimilar aircraft, “it turned out to be ungainly in its execution. In the day-to-day training, it was marvelous to have all of those assets together, but it was offset by the ponderous way it got off the ground.”

Fogleman told Congress in February that the composite wing idea has been scrapped for the Air Force in general. It was too expensive for several bases to maintain a full range of support gear for each of the handfuls of different aircraft types they operated. Only Mountain Home’s 366th will be maintained as a composite wing to serve as the core of the developing AEF concept, and “it is my hope” that the 366th will be the AEF called on in future crises, Fogleman said.

So far, AEFs have been put together with pieces of other units, and the Chief of Staff noted that it takes “extensive” workup time to get the diverse units functioning cohesively.

Commanding the newly formed

AEF Battle Lab is Col. Donald L. Oukrop, who expects to have his organization operational with about 25 people by July 1.

“We’re working with different groups at AMC [Air Mobility Command] and ACC [Air Combat Command] . . . gathering lessons learned” from the four AEFs so far, Oukrop said. Operational aspects of the AEFs are not part of the battle lab’s charter, but rather its main focus is “exploring and delivering innovative approaches” in putting AEFs together, getting them deployed faster, and getting them up to sustained operations more quickly.

The battle lab is not assigned to come up with new technologies or to develop new hardware, Oukrop said, but must maximize the use of “anything we already have in the areas of organizing, training, or equipment.”

### “Smaller . . . Lighter”

Big savings of lift assets can be expected if AEFs neck down to the point of “using the same [aerospace ground equipment] as much as possible” and take advantage of any off-the-shelf commercial systems available that could streamline the flow of aircraft, for example.

“We need to be smaller; we need to be lighter,” Jumper said. “We need . . . smaller [and] lighter pieces of equipment, a much smaller footprint on the ground. Those are the things that the battle lab will be developing for us.” He called it an attempt to “institutionalize the expeditionary mindset.”

All the battle labs, Oukrop noted, must focus on meeting the Air Force’s core competencies. If a new technology, system, or idea “does not enhance our core competencies . . . no matter how good it is, we’re not interested.”

Should the AEF Battle Lab develop a useful idea that seems to work in simulation, it would be forwarded to high-ranking USAF officials for a directive to implement it.

Jumper emphasized that AEFs “must . . . integrate with other components” and suggested that an AEF need not be made up only of USAF airplanes; Marine Corps or Navy aircraft might be added by a regional commander in chief if he felt an AEF required assets not available through the Air Force.

For example, said Jumper, “there’s

nothing that would preclude” incorporating some Navy EA-6B Prowlers in an AEF, since the Air Force and Navy have decided to “share” the type.

The operations tempo (optempo) of the Air Force is not expected to change dramatically if AEFs become a capability frequently requested by regional CINCs.

“Those airplanes are going to fly whether they’re in North Carolina or in Doha,” Qatar, Fogleman observed. While the personnel tempo might go up, the capability is worth it, he said.

The cost of an AEF’s operations over and above similar training at home is about \$7 million to \$10 million, Jumper said, and “that’s mostly the airlift cost.”

As for the number of AEFs deployed at any time, Fogleman anticipates that it “would probably be no more than two in the field and one at the ready,” with “one in the field and one at the ready” as the norm.

Jumper noted that the AEF could have “a positive effect” on optempo, since a unit waiting in the continental US “on a quick-reaction basis . . . means less instability caused by many rotations” to forward bases, “which is the situation we’re sort of in now.”

Moreover, by planning the deployment of an AEF well in advance—to cover the planned absence of an aircraft carrier in a given theater, for example—a unit can begin focusing its intelligence efforts and



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

**USAF has had to switch gears in response to a changing international situation. Rather than preparing to thwart a Soviet invasion through such exercises as Checkered Flag, it now practices to be a “911 capability” in places like Doha.**

mission planning on its AEF site ahead of time, making it that much more effective on arrival. In addition, some of the unit’s equipment can “catch a ride” on airlift going to the area the AEF will deploy to, reducing the airlift effort when the go order comes.

But to preserve the “rapid response capability,” Jumper said USAF will strive toward achieving launch of an AEF “in about a three-day time frame from a cold start.”

Regional CINCs are not yet con-

vinced that an AEF on call in the US is just as good as having the same assets already forward deployed, Looney said.

“We have not yet demonstrated” that AEFs can indeed respond to a “bolt out of the blue” request, he said, but he added that warning time is likely to be adequate in most cases for an AEF to make good on its promise.

Indeed, Jumper said, some “crises” are predictable.

“We traditionally know that Saddam is going to do something crazy about once a year, and it usually has something to do with a sanctions review,” the General said, meaning that an AEF can be set up to respond to what may be the inevitable threatening gesture.

The AEF also need not be an all-shooter capability. Fogleman predicted that “there may be a situation where we’re doing a humanitarian relief operation, where you would form an AEF out of mainly airlift. . . . The basic idea is that this is a ‘tailorable’ capability.”

Jumper said he hopes that the AEF will be viewed by the other services as a cooperative, and not a competitive, initiative.

“If viewed in the correct light, this is not a threat to anybody,” Jumper said. “This is a way to make better use of our resources. For us, the benefit is the ability eventually to reduce our optempo.” ■



**Prospective bases for an AEF must have ready access to water and fuel, and prepositioned equipment, such as fuel bladders, helps to reduce the amount of equipment that AEFs must carry with them.**

Staff photo by Guy Aceto