



By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

*SrA. Dan Briscoe, a tactical airlift control element member, marshals a C-130 to a parking space at a forward base during Gulf War II. Shortages of combat support personnel have put a strain on USAF's expeditionary system.*

# Expeditionary



## Gulf War II reconfirmed the value of the Air Force's new deployment concept.

**A**FTER the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the United States Air Force beefed up its system of 10 rotating Air and Space Expeditionary Forces (AEFs) to meet its new requirements.

In late 2002, the network of AEFs helped to simplify the early stages of the buildup for war in Iraq. The system provided an orderly path through which forces bound for Operation Iraqi Freedom could flow to the Persian Gulf region.

Eventually, though, ever-increasing demands swamped the rotational system, and regularly scheduled pairs of AEFs couldn't maintain the pace. In the run-up to Iraqi Freedom, forces were deployed before the time dic-

# Air Warriors

tated by the schedule. In addition, troops already in the region were told they would stay in Southwest Asia as long as necessary.

These actions put notional 90-day deployments of AEF pairs on indefinite hold.

Officials said that, although the schedule broke down, the existence of the system—the “Expeditionary Air and Space Force,” or “EAF”—paid handsome dividends. AEF rotations made it easy for the Air Force

USAF photo by SSGT. Quinton T. Burris

to identify and task units for missions overseas; all USAF had to do was reach forward and deploy units from AEFs later in the calendar.

Air Force officials also say the AEF system will ease the force through its planned postwar reconstitution period.

### Busting the Schedule

When hostilities became imminent, the Air Force began using assets from virtually all of its individual AEFs.

First, USAF froze in place the forces and weapons of AEFs 7 and 8, whose period of duty was supposed to end Feb. 28. The Air Force deployed forces from AEFs 9 and 10 in their regular period. Then, it began early deployment of some forces in AEF pairs from the next rotational cycle.

Gen. John P. Jumper, the Air Force Chief of Staff, said in February that more than 23,000 airmen from future AEFs had been deployed to meet immediate taskings.

Although the deployment schedule had gone out the window, the expeditionary system made it possible for the Air Force to easily identify the units that would be able to cover deployments during a reconstitution period after Iraqi Freedom.

“We’ve always said that if we had a crisis, we’d go to the pair [of AEFs] that’s vulnerable first, then the next ready pair, then the next ready pair,” said the USAF’s chief expeditionary force planner, Maj. Gen. Timothy A. Peppe. That is exactly what happened in the buildup for Gulf War II.



USAF photo by MSgt. Terry L. Blevins

**SSgt. Brett Duncan stands watch in Southwest Asia. Security forces are among those personnel who have been most in demand since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. USAF plans to boost their numbers, starting in 2004.**

The AEF structure has served the Air Force well, Peppe said in an interview, even when it had to deal with “an extremely high number of requirements.”

During preparations for the war in Iraq, Air Force planners “saw the requirements coming, and there was literally no way to meet that level of requirements without literally freezing people in place” and instituting indefinite deployments, he said.

The AEF system also called attention to shortages facing a force that had been originally designed to operate in a Cold War structure of large,

permanent bases. The Air Force has too few support personnel in key areas. Though questions remain about what the steady state demands on the Air Force will be in the future, the Air Force is working to synchronize forces and expeditionary requirements.

Each of the 10 AEFs in the EAF setup is designed to offer the theater commander roughly equal “buckets of capability.” The AEF pairs are organized to meet almost all operational needs short of major theater war. Units assigned to an AEF are on call for a 90-day period, followed by a 12-month rest and reconstitution period in which other units take the lead on deployments.

The system was established to provide stability and predictability for the force. Some missions, such as no-fly zone enforcement over Iraq, had been going on for years and had undermined retention, morale, and readiness because of frequent and haphazard deployments.

Under ideal circumstances, the AEF schedule would let every airman know when he or she would be vulnerable to deployment—and for how long.

However, the real world often intrudes. Iraqi Freedom, in fact, was not the first time a contingency had overpowered AEF plans. When the system was designed, EAF forces were aligned in such a way that each on-call AEF pair could provide enough equipment and personnel to maintain continuing operations such as Northern and South-

USAF photo by SSgt. Bennie J. Davis III



**ANG F-16s from Alabama, Colorado, and Illinois arrive at an airfield in Southwest Asia. USAF uses its Guard and Reserve forces “big time,” said Maj. Gen. Timothy Peppe, the service’s chief expeditionary force planner.**

ern Watch—with extra assets available for “pop up” contingencies.

However, the conduct of Operation Allied Force over Serbia in 1999 immediately called for force levels that surpassed the plan. This was a minor concern at the time because AEF rotations were not scheduled to begin until after the campaign. Yet then—Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters said at the time that Allied Force was consuming about four AEFs’ worth of assets. Only two AEFs are supposed to be on call at any given time.

### Sudden New Demands

More recently, the 9/11 terrorist attacks created a host of new demands on the Air Force, many of which now appear permanent. The most glaring example is the requirement for heightened force protection in the US and overseas. The global war on terror also highlighted shortages in the AEF system.

Overall, however, the concept has held up well under the strain. The success of the system stems in large part from the Air Force’s determined expansion of “the library”—the total number of active duty personnel who are eligible for deployment.

Before 9/11, the typical Air Force overseas operation required around 3,700 airmen. The AEFs originally were designed with that number in mind as the likely steady-state need.

At the time the service came up with this system, USAF was engaged in enforcements of no-fly-zones over Iraq and peacekeeping in the Balkans, Peppe noted, without much else in sight.

After 9/11, but before the buildup for war in Iraq, steady-state deployments rose from about 7,500 (for the two no-fly zone operations) to roughly 19,000 people, covering Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan as well. Even at that level of demand, the Air Force was in “pretty good shape” because of the enlarged AEF rosters, Peppe said.

Planners already had been readying the AEF system for significant changes when hostilities neared in Iraq. The changes will still take place, but they may not be implemented as planned at the beginning of AEF Cycle 4, which begins June 1.

Now, no one knows the steady-state level of the future, especially the number that will be needed around

Iraq. “The biggest thing we have to work in the next couple of years is the manpower equation,” said Peppe. “We have to size the force properly.” He added, “It’s the base support aspect [that is most in question]. ... We’ve got to take a hard look at what we can and cannot support with an AEF.”

Building on the experiences of the

past two years, when the Air Force began to operate from a large number of new locations, the service is now developing a playbook for opening and operating out of new bases.

### “Force Modules”

USAF is creating “force modules,” so that if, in the future, the service needs to open a new base, it will

## Expeditionary Support Units Surge For Iraq

When new air bases were needed for access to Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom, USAF base support and medical units went into high gear. When the buildup began for the war in Iraq, those same expeditionary support forces had to ramp up their efforts even further. Demands on these units increased again as Operation Iraqi Freedom got under way.

Between February and April, USAF’s Expeditionary Combat Support teams established 12 new bases in the Persian Gulf region—five of them in Iraqi territory. This proved to be critical, as the new airfields ensured that commanders had access to airpower near the combat zone—around the clock. In one instance, the pilot of an A-10 that was shot up over Baghdad was able to land at an operating base in Iraq, possibly saving the aircraft.

Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, who ran the Gulf War II air campaign, said in April that “from opening bases and launching sorties, to providing fuel, munitions, food, and billeting, our ECS team has done a truly amazing and essential job.”

Primarily, the ECS teams were responsible for ensuring that the expeditionary bases—often austere, bare-base locations—were capable of hosting and launching the aircraft that warfighting commanders needed for Iraqi Freedom. Officials noted that three of the new bases in the region pumped more than one million gallons of JP-8 jet fuel per day, five times the normal rate. They also said ECS units launched more than 46,000 sorties, with a reported aircraft mission effectiveness rate of 98 percent. Meanwhile, other ECS members served at least 111,000 hot meals daily.

Moseley called the ECS teams “a vital element of our success.”

Sometimes they had to improvise when immediate action was needed to support the changing operation. For example, officials noted that ECS teams leased Kuwaiti trucks to move equipment into Iraq when the demand for transportation became greater than what coalition trucks could provide. ECS teams also made purchases within Iraq—while combat operations were still in progress—to support the forward forces.

The Air Force Medical Service deployed expeditionary medical support (EMEDS) personnel that Moseley described as “absolutely phenomenal.” These are small, modular units that enabled the service to set up health care services ranging from small clinics to theater hospitals in 12 nations during the war. In all, USAF deployed 1,822 medics to the theater and 1,370 tons of medical equipment.

Aeromedical evacuations took place on an unprecedented scale. Officials noted that more than 2,000 patients were evacuated from the war zone during Iraqi Freedom, with no deaths in transit. It was the largest such effort since Vietnam and was accomplished without the use of any dedicated aeromedical evacuation aircraft.

Moseley praised the EMEDS concept, saying, “They pack so much capability in such a tiny footprint, I didn’t have to choose between bombs and bandages.”



**Members of an Air Force expeditionary services unit construct tents at Tallil AB, Iraq. USAF is developing a force module approach to organize the personnel needed to set up new bases for operations.**

have a prepackaged plan to do so, complete with personnel needs stated. “We’re trying to modularize it, so we can present our forces [to the warfighting commanders] in a logical fashion,” Peppe said.

Brig. Gen. William P. Ard, USAF director of manpower and organization, said that in recent reviews, the Air Force has identified more than 26,000 positions—a mix of military and civilian—that it can realign. The service expects to use more than two-thirds of those positions to help ease shortages in its stressed career fields.

About half of the 26,000 positions—9,300 military and 3,900 civilian—will come from USAF’s major commands. The service will be realigning those positions through the end of the decade, with some 3,700 realignments within the next two years. Some current military positions will become USAF civilian positions, while the service expects to contract out others.

Many of the positions are termed non-core, that is they do not relate directly to Air Force core mission areas, known as core competencies. For example, officials say too many USAF personnel are performing information technology work, when there is a large and capable base of contractors available to perform that mission.

Ard noted that it is difficult to make final determinations on how many people need to be assigned to

stressed fields because the steady-state requirements are still unknown. Predicting security forces concerns five years from now would be difficult under the best of circumstances.

However, even before the realignment candidates were announced, some areas with personnel shortages were well-known.

### The Known Shortages

Ongoing operations have exposed shortages of personnel who support an expeditionary force, including some behind the scenes. For example, so many airmen were deployed or otherwise assisting with ongoing operations that the Air Force developed a shortage of qualified instructors, which produced training backlogs.

Peppe said that trainees at some bases “are basically stacking up like cordwood” because the bases lack the personnel to train new arrivals.

The planned realignments will benefit career fields where the shortages are most critical, often areas where there have been deficits since the 2001 terrorist attacks. These include security forces, intelligence, and civil engineer readiness and enlisted aircrew functions.

Further, the Air Force instituted a Stop-Loss order shortly before the war with Iraq began that kept 43 officer and 56 enlisted specialties in uniform. It was the second use of Stop-Loss since 9/11. About 21,000

airmen were initially affected by the latest order, but on May 14 the service released airmen from more than half the specialties.

Most severe shortages have been in security forces. Force protection requirements unexpectedly skyrocketed after 9/11, and the Air Force had to enlist the help of nearly 9,000 Army National Guardsmen to help protect USAF installations.

Security demands increased at home and overseas. In Fiscal 2004, officials say, 2,600 positions will be realigned, with 1,400 of these going to the security forces.

The Air Force also hopes that new technologies can be used to assist with security missions such as perimeter defense, which would reduce the demand for security forces in future years.

### Making Trade-offs

The USAF plan to retire early some aging aircraft such as early model F-16 fighters and C-130 tactical airlifters will not reduce AEF capability, said Peppe. These retirements will be limited to the older systems, and he said there is no large-scale force structure reduction in the works. The total number of aircraft available to each AEF “may decline a bit, but the capability will remain the same,” Peppe added.

Service officials determined that these older systems didn’t offer enough benefit to justify their rising operating costs.

Trade-offs of capabilities and quantities may become even more prominent in the future. For example, procurement plans for the F/A-22 will not allow the Raptor to replace aging F-15s on a one-for-one basis. Despite that, the Raptor will take on a ground attack mission that far exceeds that of the F-15C.

The Air Force has stuck with its stated requirement for 1,763 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters. However, it has made other decisions that will affect its AEF forces. One prominent example is the decision in the Fiscal 2004 budget to discontinue the purchase of F-16CJs used for suppression of enemy air defenses missions.

In 1999 the service announced a requirement for 50 new CJs to round out the AEFs with SEAD capability, but funding has languished because of other budget concerns. Only 14 of

the airplanes were funded, and now additional purchases have been moved completely off the books.

Ultimately, AEF rotations influence force structure decisions by defining what quantities are needed. The Air Force's desired capabilities will continue to drive requirements. The current requirement for 381 F/A-22s, for example, is derived from the goal of equipping each AEF with a full squadron of Raptors, along with a sufficient number of attrition, test, and depot aircraft. The Air Force views this as the minimum number that will provide the warfighting commanders with the needed capabilities, while preventing the F/A-22 from becoming yet another low-density, high-demand asset.

Currently, each AEF has a total of about 26,500 positions assigned to it, drawn from a library of standard unit type codes. Of the Air Force's 359,000 total personnel, about 269,000 are now eligible for deployment in each 15-month AEF cycle. This number represents a marked increase from the 173,000 positions that were postured for deployment in April 2002.

Almost every airman who could reasonably be expected to deploy with an AEF is now part of the force, in the view of Air Force officials. "I don't see the number going much higher than that," Peppe noted, because the remaining positions are in areas that make them difficult—if not impossible—to deploy.



Staff photo by Guy Aetto

**USAF forces in Korea, such as this A-10 and F-16CG from the 51st Fighter Wing, at Osan AB, South Korea, are not included in USAF's AEF deployment pool, which now includes nearly 75 percent of the service's personnel.**

Normally Air Force members in recruiting and in training pipelines cannot be deployed, nor can many space officers or missileers. Units based on the Korean Peninsula are exempt as well, even though other overseas locations regularly contributed forces for missions such as patrolling the no-fly zones in Iraq. The ongoing tensions with North Korea make a permanent, fixed force on the Korean Peninsula a fact of life.

Peppe added that, on an average day, about 25,000 Air Force members are moving to a new duty sta-

tion or undergoing training and thus "aren't really available."

### Tapped Out

"We've reached the bottom of the barrel. ... I don't see the number changing," Peppe said.

The AEFs therefore generate a finite amount of capability, particularly in the base support realm. Each AEF has a certain number of bases it can support at any given time, driven to a large degree by the limited number of expeditionary support personnel on hand.

The Air Force is also still defining exactly what an AEF can be expected to do. Planners are working to create metrics for this purpose so senior leaders can understand what the EAF offers. If new bases must be opened up, a commander needs to know how many airfields an AEF can create and sustain.

Also important to understand, said Peppe, is "if you go above that number, we've got a problem." The Air Force has far exceeded its true capability in this area. "I've lost track" of the number of bases the service is supporting overseas, the general added.

For the EAF system to work in the long run, the Air Force has to rein in its requirements so they do not overwhelm the capabilities provided by a pair of AEFs. Making the AEFs more robust will enable them to do more, but the Air Force is now reaching the limit of how many assets can be added to the expeditionary force.



USAF photo by SSgt. Cherie A. Thuribby

**An F-16CJ from the 52nd Fighter Wing, Spangdahlem AB, Germany, flies over Iraq. USAF fighter aircraft flew more than 40 percent of the coalition fighter sorties, which numbered more than 20,000.**

The Air Force has plans to smooth out the assets assigned to each AEF and correct lingering personnel imbalances.

First, USAF will eliminate the air expeditionary wings based at Seymour Johnson AFB, S.C., and Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, and add their forces to the main AEF structure.

The AEWs were envisioned as forces that would play backup roles, pitching in if an unexpected contingency overtaxed the on-call AEFs. But the two expeditionary wings had been chipping in all across the AEF calendar, so aligning them with the rotating forces was viewed as the equitable and inevitable solution.

Second, the Air Force is trying to spread expeditionary combat support assets more equally across the AEFs, the better to make operations more sustainable. Existing allocations had some “peaks and valleys” Peppe said, and these combat support personnel have been in constant demand since 9/11.

Combat support “runs the gamut” from air traffic controllers, to supply, to fuels, to medical and finance personnel, the general said, adding that support capabilities have “strained us the most,” since the war on terror began.

Finally, USAF realized that Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve Command forces were not properly postured in the AEFs because their forces were clustered primarily in AEFs 7, 8, 9, and 10. This re-



**A loadmaster from the Kentucky Air National Guard deployed for operations in Iraq pulls the chocks from in front of a C-130. USAF is working to spread reserve forces more evenly across its 10 AEFs.**

stricted the Air Force’s ability to support a high level of requirements without mobilizing large numbers of reserve forces.

These assets will also be spread across the AEF calendar, Peppe said, because active duty units continually rely on Guard and Reserve support. The Guard and Reserve are “being used big-time,” he said, to provide the active duty force with critical enablers such as airlift and tanker aircraft. The Guard and Reserve also play the lead role in Operation Noble Eagle, defending US airspace.

The need to balance forces is indicative of the fact that USAF has not reached its goal of equal capabilities in each AEF. The realignment planned for the next EAF cycle, which starts this month, will get the Air Force closer to that goal, but the AEFs will never be exactly the same.

What is needed is combat equivalence, said Peppe, and not identical airframes. He said the Air Force has many options for equalizing its 10 buckets of capability.

“It doesn’t make a difference to me if it’s a Block 30 F-16 or a Block 40—if it can shoot a [precision guided munition] or a [Joint Direct Attack Munition], we’re meeting combatant commander requirements,” Peppe noted. “The issue then is making sure each AEF has a full range of the capabilities we offer.”

PGMs for strike, close air support systems, combat search and rescue forces, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets remain in short supply. They must be spread across the AEFs to ensure each pair has access to enough. High-demand airlift and refueling capabilities are also aligned with the AEFs, and all of this has to be postured in a way that does not require units to be forward deployed for half a year.

This is a situation that has existed in the past, and has reappeared in recent months, and could well defeat the purpose of the rotational force that USAF has labored so hard to assemble. ■

USAF photo by SSgt. Louis Rivers



**Members of the 35th Fighter Wing, Misawa AB, Japan, return from a deployment supporting operations in Southwest Asia. USAF expanded its “library” of personnel engaged in the expeditionary rotation schedule over the past year.**