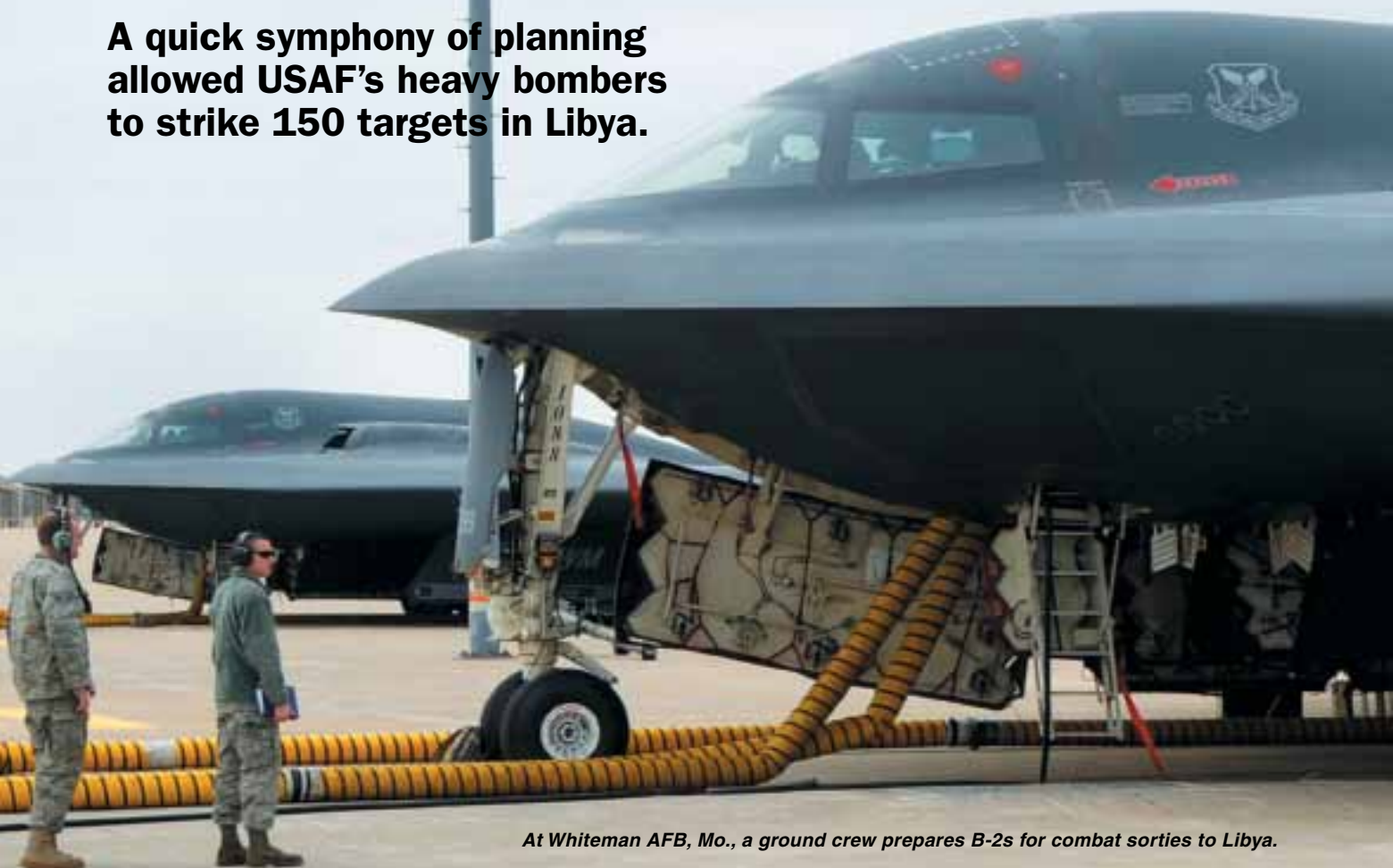




**A quick symphony of planning allowed USAF's heavy bombers to strike 150 targets in Libya.**



*At Whiteman AFB, Mo., a ground crew prepares B-2s for combat sorties to Libya.*

USAF photo by Kenny Holston

# Bombers Over Libya

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor



*Airmen from the 28th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron brave bad weather to ready a B-1 at Ellsworth AFB, S.D., for a mission over Libya.*

**I**n March, five Air Force bombers—three B-2s and two B-1Bs—attacked targets in Libya as part of NATO’s mission to protect civilians from government attack in that country’s uprising and civil war.

On the first night of the operation, March 19, three B-2s of the 509th Bomb Wing struck 45 targets at an airfield in Ghardabiya, Libya. Photos of the airfield released by the Pentagon the next day showed hardened aircraft shelters at that base struck with great precision. All were collapsed or showed blackened trails emanating from their entrances, confirming that whatever was inside exploded and burned.

The B-2s flew directly from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and recovered there as well, as they had done previously in Iraq and Serbia. The longer flights in 2001 into Afghanistan required a brief stop at a forward base to change the crews.

Just days later, B-1Bs destroyed ammunition depots, combat aircraft and vehicle maintenance facilities, command and control buildings, and Libyan air defense sites. The B-1s, too, attacked Libya directly from their base in the continental US, but recovered in Europe before striking at more targets en route to home base.

Collectively, the bombers destroyed nearly 150 targets. All the aircraft returned home unscathed. The missions marked a number of organizational and operational firsts for the Air Force, especially with regard to how USAF coordinates the planning and execution of long-range strikes.

The operation marked the first global strike mission under the direction of US Strategic Command and its relatively new air component, Air Force Global Strike Command. It was the first combat operation for US Africa Command, another relatively young organization. It was also the first combat operation run for STRATCOM out of its own global strike air operations center, the 608th Air and Space Operations Center (AOC) at Barksdale AFB, La.

### Reaching Out

Both types of bombers have seen extensive combat over the last 20 years, and in that regard, the missions were unremarkable. The bombers, the crews, and the weapon of choice—the satellite guidance-assisted Joint Direct Attack Munition—performed flawlessly. Although B-2 stealth bombers have often carried out combat missions originating and ending at their home base of Whiteman, the Libya strikes marked the first time B-1Bs have mounted attacks directly from the continental US.

Moreover, the missions highlighted how the Air Force, now involved in combat air operations in three different theaters, had to choose its platforms very carefully. It was necessary to select aircraft not already involved in other missions, which could carry the required amount of firepower, and, most importantly, carry the required load without overtaxing the supply of aerial tankers. The availability of tankers—in the right place and at the right time—was critical in enabling the bomber missions.

The missions verified that a Byzantine series of hand-offs among various regional and combat commands could actually work seamlessly under real-world conditions, as promised.

The operation “validates the structure that we’ve built with Global Strike Command and Strategic Command,” said 8th Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Floyd L. Carpenter. The Mighty Eighth “has been doing long-range aviation since the beginning of time,” but the 608th AOC “has never gotten to do this in reality,” Carpenter said in an interview. “So we spend a lot of time planning, and now we’ve proved that we can execute the plan as well.”

There had been some dry runs of bomber missions supporting AFRICOM, he noted. “Luckily, we had actually been working with AFRICOM quite a bit before all this happened.”

Over the last year or so, “we had been doing exercises with B-2s and B-52s flying out to the Atlantic” until they came into radio contact with—and under the control of—AFRICOM, he explained.

“We reached out to them,” because AFRICOM had no assets of its own, and STRATCOM wanted to be sure the new command knew it could call on bombers when needed, Carpenter noted. After several of these training missions “to let them understand how it works and get used to talking [with the] fliers,” communications procedures were ironed out.

“So the communications piece was pretty well established” before Operation Odyssey Dawn was launched, he said.

Unlike Afghanistan, however, there were no bombers routinely in the air over Libya. The AOC planning cell at AFRICOM had not originally anticipated the long transit times bombers would need to make the journey from the continental US to attack targets a hemisphere away.

“Long-range aviation ... timelines are much different than they are ... in-theater,” Carpenter said. “We had to get AFRICOM thinking ... further ahead,” he said. “That was a lesson learned.”

Tapping the B-1Bs through US Joint Forces Command, however, was a seamless effort. The process through which a combatant command asks JFCOM for forces “has been well oiled for a long time,” he reported.

Col. Michael A. Tichenor, commander of the 608th, said his AOC had been tipped by counterparts in Europe—where EUCOM and AFRICOM have co-located AOCs—to watch the news and be prepared if called upon to supply combat power.

“Those guys e-mailed me” in late February with the message, “‘Just to let you know, we’re churning on these types of options,’” he said. The 608th got to work immediately, mainly answering AFRICOM’s and EUCOM’s questions and shaping the scope of potential bomber missions. At first, it was unclear whether EUCOM or AFRICOM would be the lead command, but once it was decided that AFRICOM would be in charge, potential missions began to take solid shape.



USAF photo by SSGT. Marc I. Lane



**Airman Michael Doto readies a JDAM for loading onto a B-1B at Ellsworth prior to a mission to Libya. B-1s were chosen for the mission because of their ability to carry a larger weapon load than the venerable B-52.**

It was a highly “iterative” process, with many plans built, rearranged, dropped, and resurrected as political events unfolded and the nature of the mission evolved, Carpenter said.

Tichenor said AFRICOM began developing a plan to establish the no-fly zone, which demanded that Libyan fighters and air defenses be struck quickly and comprehensively. The 617th AOC at AFRICOM concluded there were limited assets available in Europe, “and there are just a lot more targets on the ground than they can service,” Tichenor said. This cinched the need for CONUS bomber support.

“Tanker planning ... ends up being the real story,” he added. “How can I

get the tanker support so I can get the bombers over there? ... They take a lot of gas.”

### **Evolving Situation**

Maj. Jason Smith, crisis action planner for the 608th, said three B-2s required four aerial refuelings each. The number of refueling aircraft “depends on whether they used KC-135Rs or KC-10s, ... so it’s in the neighborhood of 15 to 20 tankers” needed for the B-2 mission.

The B-2s were chosen for the first night because just three of them could carry enough bombs to hit all the required targets, which fit in with the tanker assets available.

“The B-2 can carry 16 2,000-pound weapons,” Tichenor said. The B-2 is also relatively fuel efficient, reducing the number of tankers needed.

Barksdale put Whiteman on alert to get pilots into crew rest, to prepare their aircraft, and build the required bombs, Tichenor said. Stealth was a secondary consideration in picking the B-2s for the first mission.

“The air defenses in Libya just weren’t that worrisome,” he explained. However, it is now standard operating procedure that if stealth aircraft are going to attack a target, they will be supported by Navy EA-6B Prowler or EA-18G Growler electronic warfare and defense suppression aircraft, “whether they need it or not.” The electronic attack aircraft flew from undisclosed ground bases in the region.

The 617th AOC was responsible for building the air tasking order and deconflicted the bombers from other aircraft and Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles launched at Libya from US and British naval vessels. Some TLAMs were directed at targets adjacent to ones selected for the B-2s.

Post-attack imagery was available to all the AOCs almost immediately, Tichenor said, showing the bombs all to have been good hits, making for textbook mission results.

The B-2s were kept on alert for a second strike, but the political situation evolved again. At first, NATO wanted to establish a no-fly zone to prevent Qaddafi from using his aircraft to attack civilians. However, as an open Libyan rebellion emerged and began to seize



**An Illinois Air National Guard KC-135 taxis on the ramp at Scott AFB, Ill., preparing to launch for operations over Libya.**

territory, NATO shifted gears and also targeted Qaddafi's ground forces, which were attacking civilians and rebels alike.

That led to a requirement for additional bomber strikes. The B-2s, however, were by this time participating in exercises and coping with an operational readiness inspection.

"The B-2s were very busy," Carpenter said, so focus shifted to having either the B-52 or the B-1 hit the new target set. The choice was easy to make: The B-1s could carry double the number of bombs that the B-52s could carry, and tankers were still in short supply.

AFRICOM, he said, was asking for more B-2 strikes, but it's the AOC's job "to educate them: You really don't want to ask for a platform; you want to ask for ... an effect on the ground." The AOC did the math and presented various "COAs," or courses of action, to the combatant command.

### Into High Relief

These COAs also spelled out "which one is most effective, the cheapest, the least risk, all those kinds of things," Carpenter noted. The B-1 was the platform of choice for the second—and, as it turned out, third—big bomber run.

With the approval of JFCOM—and with only two days' notice—two B-1Bs of the 28th Bomb Wing from Ellsworth AFB, S.D., were readied for an extra long mission: They would fly directly from home base to Libya, attack targets, then recover at a base in theater (which USAF officials declined to name). After the crew rested and the B-1Bs were rearmed and refueled, they took off

## A Lengthy Chain of Command, Executed Perfectly

Requests for the bombers needed to attack targets in Libya originated with US Africa Command, in whose theater Operation Odyssey Dawn—the name of the mission to prevent Muammar Qaddafi from attacking his own people with heavy military equipment—would be carried out.

■ AFRICOM, lacking any combat assets of its own, requested forces from US European Command (fighters, tankers, and support aircraft) and US Strategic Command, which has responsibility for both long-range conventional and nuclear strike, among other missions.

■ STRATCOM then turned to Air Force Global Strike Command, which "owns" the dual-role (conventional and nuclear) B-2 and B-52 bombers. AFGSC in turn handed off the job to 8th Air Force at Barksdale AFB, La., and it in turn relied on the 608th Air and Space Operations Center, the hub of mission planning for 8th Air Force and STRATCOM.

■ While STRATCOM could command the B-2s and B-52s, the 608th had to request permission to use the conventional-only B-1Bs from US Joint Forces Command. JFCOM then directed Air Combat Command to "chop" the B-1Bs to STRATCOM.

■ Once in the region of Libya, the bombers all temporarily belonged to AFRICOM, which had tactical control of the aircraft during their time in the combat zone.

In the midst of the communications traffic up and down this elaborate chain of command, there were directives and messages from the Joint Staff, peppered with nonstop communications between AFRICOM and EUCOM's air operations centers, the one at Barksdale, and the 618th Tanker Airlift Control Center at Scott AFB, Ill., which manages the air refueling assets. Air National Guard or Air Force Reserve Command units flew many of the participating tanker missions.

Neither the B-2s nor B-1Bs overflew any other country on their way to Libya. All the flying was done over water. For the B-2s, there were two refuelings per bomber en route to Libya, and two each on the way home.

again two days later, attacked targets in Libya, then flew home to Ellsworth. Total combat flight time: 24 hours.

Although the specific targets are classified, Air Force officials allowed that ammunition depots, aircraft and vehicle maintenance facilities, and buildings related to command and control and air defense systems were struck by the

B-1Bs. At no point were either the B-2s or B-1Bs tasked to attack individuals or combat ground vehicles.

Using B-1Bs already deployed to US Central Command was ruled out early, Tichenor said.

"Those B-1s that are over there" are fully subscribed by CENTCOM taskings, he said. "I'm sure, had the urgency been high enough, you could have used them," but it wasn't, at that point.

Although the B-1s carried Sniper pods, they, too, used JDAMs to attack "just under a hundred targets," Smith said.

Carpenter said the two bomber missions bring into high relief that STRATCOM's primary mission is deterrence.

"We talk strategic deterrence, and everybody [makes] a nuclear connotation to that, and I don't necessarily think that's 100 percent correct." The missions demonstrate that no target is too far away, and "that, to me, is just a way of showing presence [and] of offering some deterrent capability," Carpenter said. It also underscored the value of building ties between the commands long before combat so that they'll be in place "when we have to do operations like this." ■



SSgt. Tyson Thibeault (l) and SrA. Hursel Johnson prep a KC-135 for fuel at Ramstein AB, Germany. Some 15 to 20 tankers were used for the initial B-2 bomber missions to Libya.