

## Sequestration's Destructive Decay

**I**N APRIL, to meet congressionally mandated budget targets, the Air Force stood down 17 squadrons' worth of combat aircraft and shifted another 10 squadrons to a bare-bones readiness level. The majority of those affected were frontline fighter and bomber units belonging to Air Combat Command, Pacific Air Forces, and US Air Forces in Europe.

In July, the Air Force received permission to reprogram funds from within its accounts and promptly lifted the groundings, putting the affected squadrons back into the air again.

Problem solved, right?

Not even close.

After three months on the ground, the affected airmen and their equipment were left completely ineffective. Pilots didn't fly, crew chiefs were idled, fuels airmen didn't refuel aircraft. Training events large and small—including Red Flag exercises and even a Weapons School course—were canceled. Aircraft weren't maintained, spare parts weren't available, and aircraft were barely moved around enough to prevent flat spots in their tires.

This gave airmen an opportunity to catch up on their course work, simulator training, and perhaps even their sleep—but it's no way to run a combat air force. The grounded units slowly but surely lost the ability to go to war.

On Day 1 there was no effect. By Day 90, more than a dozen squadrons had no meaningful capability and others were at such a basic level they would not survive a war. This isn't fixed overnight.

USAF is fully supporting its steady-state requirements, as it did during the stand-down. Units supporting the war in Afghanistan, other "named" operations, nuclear missions, high-risk combatant command taskings, and air defense of the United States were essentially the only units protected from sequestration's across-the-board budget ax.

The standing requirements essentially sucked down all of USAF's sequestration-level operation and maintenance funding, leaving nothing in reserve.

One thing the Air Force has learned repeatedly over the decades: Unknowns can literally kill you. That is why the service eschews tiered readiness and keeps units trained and ready to go at a

moment's notice. The Global Response Force in particular offers packages that can quickly be deployed in the event of a crisis.

As 17 squadrons atrophied and others decayed to a "basic mission capable" level not suitable for war, USAF's ability to provide a Global Response Force died off. By the time the flying hour funding was restored in mid-July, Air Combat Command had half a bomber squadron's worth of GRF capability left.

The grounded squadrons are flying again, but the problem is not solved. Thirteen of the 17 mothballed units

### **This is not over. The problems have just begun.**

spent more than 90 days on the ground. Officials say three months represents a tipping point. Up to then, skills are regained about as quickly as they are lost, but when airmen and aircraft surpass 90 days on the ground, recovery becomes slower.

At summertime readiness levels, even the recent Libya operation would have been impossible unless USAF pulled units from other frontline locations directly supporting combatant command missions. It will be early November before the combat units are fully capable again. If the Air Force is soon called to go into action over Syria, Iran, North Korea, or elsewhere it will have to pull units from Afghanistan or the Pacific.

The nation is currently missing its air-power bench. This creates "risk," but let's be real here—risk can mean dead troops and needlessly destroyed equipment.

So what's next? A slow climb back. The Air Force needs to be deliberate this fall. There will be temptations from the Pentagon down to the individual airman to go too fast. B-1 or F-15E operations, however, are not like riding a bike. Skills must be rebuilt slowly and methodically so that rusty airmen and unused aircraft don't lead to crashes and deaths.

It is important to note USAF was not given additional money to resume flying—it was only given permission to move funds among various sequestration-ravaged accounts to meet an immediate readiness need.

Funding shortages prevent the Air Force from fully implementing the training needed for the future.

For example, the service's "Wild Weasel" F-16CJs charged with the suppression of enemy air defenses have been heavily tasked with close air support missions in Afghanistan. High-intensity SEAD training fell by the wayside, and under sequestration it will be extraordinarily difficult to build it back up. This capability will be vital if the Air Force is called into action against a nation with advanced integrated air defenses, such as Syria.

The new fiscal year will begin at about the same time USAF's grounded combat units get back up to speed. What will another year of sequestration look like? More of the same, but with compounding effects.

There will not be enough money for readiness accounts, nor will there be enough to pay to design, develop, test, and install new equipment needed to keep today's aircraft relevant and survivable.

Sequestration's mandatory budget shortfalls mean the Air Force will have to cannibalize its future to pay for the present. Modernization and recapitalization will inevitably be gouged to pay today's bills. The current combat fleet is already older than it has ever been, and this summer's cash flow problems threw a new wrench into readiness.

Big-ticket recapitalization programs, such as the F-35 fighter, will be tempting targets under forced austerity. Even small cuts in quantities will force legacy aircraft to remain in service even longer. The Air Force faces years of sequestration-level funding to pay for a force that is already too small for its taskings. USAF is prohibited from closing excess bases and is frequently blocked from retiring aircraft. The situation is untenable.

Sequestration is not over, and its problems may have just begun. Unless Congress acts to end this budget nonsense, the nation will ultimately pay more for an Air Force that is less safe, less relevant, and less capable. In the meantime, let's all hope that none of America's adversaries get overly adventurous while the combat air forces are still rebuilding their capabilities. ■