



USAF photo by Amn. John Parie

“System

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is “deeply troubled” by various allegations of cheating in both the Air Force and Navy nuclear communities, said Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. John Kirby in early February.

Addressing such lapses of ethical behavior in the ranks is “an absolute top priority,” said Hagel, who added that there must be an “uncompromising culture of accountability” at “every level of command.”

“This is an interservice issue,” Hagel said. “This is an issue that cuts across all lines and commands. And that’s why I am putting this as a No. 1 priority for this institution.”

The issue first came to light in January when the Air Force’s nuclear community

Left: A missile maintenance team at Malmstrom AFB, Mont., removes the upper section of an ICBM for testing. Right: Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel speaks to airmen at F. E. Warren AFB, Wyo., during a visit to the base.



Systemic Problems”

Amy McCullough, News Editor

was once again thrust into the national spotlight after an Air Force investigation uncovered widespread cheating on a nuclear proficiency exam at Malmstrom AFB, Mont.

As of early February, nearly half of the roughly 190 missileers assigned to the 341st Missile Wing at Malmstrom had been implicated in the cheating scandal—that’s nearly three times the 34 initially implicated. Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said as of mid-February the investigation was still ongoing, though it was nearing completion.

Of the 92 officers involved, some 40 are suspected of actually cheating, said Lt. Gen. Stephen W. “Seve” Wilson, commander of Air Force Global Strike Command, in a late January briefing

with reporters at the Pentagon. The rest likely knew of the cheating and did not report it, he said.

“We do have systemic problems within the force,” noted James in the same briefing.

However, she also said the cheating scandal at Malmstrom centers around a “failure of integrity” among certain airmen, “not a failure of the mission.” At an Air Force Association-sponsored Air Force event in Arlington, Va., the day before, James said she is confident the nuclear “mission is strong” and it “remains safe, secure, and reliable.”

A few days later, however, the Navy announced a cheating scandal of its own.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert said on Feb. 4 that some 30 watch-standers at the Nuclear Power Training Unit in Charleston, S.C., allegedly cheated on a written qualification exam.

Adm. John M. Richardson, director of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program, told Pentagon reporters the same day that he had learned the exam was allegedly shared among senior enlisted operators after one sailor reported it to the command on Feb. 3.

Ability To Handle the Mission

“To say that I’m disappointed would be an understatement,” Greenert said during the same briefing. “Whenever I hear about integrity issues, it’s disruptive to our unit’s success, and it’s definitely contrary to all of our core values.”

Richardson emphasized that the alleged cheating involved propulsion reactors, not nuclear weapons.

The Air Force immediately revoked the certification of all those implicated in the investigation and the Navy did the same, removing those implicated from the site and revoking their access.

Air Force Global Strike Command retested roughly 500 ICBM crew members within 48 hours of learning of the cheating. The average score on that retake exam was 95.5 percent. Officials said it falls in line with the traditional average.

The Navy also planned to retest its personnel “to validate their knowledge,” said Richardson.

Yet, the scandals have caused many to question DOD’s ability to manage the world’s most powerful weapons.

The cheating scandal came to light as officials with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations looked into an illegal drug ring involving at least 13 Air Force personnel spanning at least six bases in the US and England. Some of those airmen under investigation were missileers.

During that investigation, it was discovered that a missile launch officer from the 341st Missile Wing allegedly sent the answers to a nuclear proficiency test last fall to other missileers via text message, Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III said.

In August, the same wing, which oversees 150 of the nation’s 450 Minuteman III ICBMs, received an unsatisfactory rating on a nuclear surety inspection after having made “tactical-level errors during one of several exercises conducted during the inspection,” according to an AFGSC news release.

Allegations of widespread cheating in the ICBM force have forced DOD to take action.



USAF photo by R. J. Orlez



USAF photo by Scott M. Ash

Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James and Lt. Gen. Stephen Wilson, head of Air Force Global Strike Command, brief reporters on Jan. 30 at the Pentagon on the investigation into compromised testing at Malmstrom.

Although officials said the cheating appears to be limited to Malmstrom, in April the Air Force sidelined 17 launch control officers at the 91st Missile Wing at Minot AFB, N.D., after they received a poor, yet passing, grade in missile crew operations.

Within a few months, most of the 17 officers were able to return to duty after completing recertification training.

“The need for perfection has created a climate of undue stress and fear—fear about the future,” said James, who noted she was repeatedly told by airmen at all three ICBM bases that the “system can be very punitive,” offering few rewards for good behavior but severe punishments for anything less than perfection.

She said the Air Force also seems to have lost the distinction between training and testing. Missileers are required to score a 90 percent or higher to pass both proficiency exams and nuclear surety inspections, but many say anything less than 100 percent on every test will negatively impact their chances of promotion.

“In the current environment, there is no room for error ever,” said James. However, a training environment is supposed to facilitate learning, in which case mistakes can and will happen. James said this constant need for perfection “is wrong” and must be corrected.

Wilson has asked Lt. Gen. James M. “Mike” Holmes, vice commander of Air Education and Training Command, to lead an investigation into training and testing procedures at AFGSC. The investigation also will look into the leadership environment, said Wilson.

The goal, he said, is to identify the “root causes” that led so many officers at Malmstrom to either cheat or fail to report the cheating. Holmes was to report back to Wilson by the end of February, and Wilson

said he planned to take “deliberate and swift action” on whatever information Holmes brought forth.

Examining a Culture of Perfection

In addition, Wilson has implemented a “force improvement plan.” It is an “aggressive, action-oriented” grass roots effort “with the goal of making rapid and substantial changes to the ICBM mission,” states a Feb. 6 Air Force news release.

As part of the FIP, members of the ICBM community will help “identify challenges” and propose solutions, said Wilson.

Specifically, there will be a total of five functional cultural working groups—one from each of the following career fields: missile operations, security forces, maintenance, mission support, and helicopter operations, according to the release. Each FCWG team will be made up of lower-ranking airmen, junior and senior noncommissioned officers, as well as companygrade officers. They also will be augmented by experts outside the ICBM field, such as Navy submariners, bomber combat systems officers, or members of the 576th Flight Test Squadron and the 381st Training Group at Vandenberg AFB, Calif., states the release.

The teams were expected to visit each of the missile wings in February to determine what challenges exist for airmen in their respective mission areas and then report directly back to Wilson, who will make recommendations to James and Welch.

“Our nation demands and deserves the highest standards and accountability from the force entrusted with the most powerful weapons in the world,” said Wilson.

James echoed those sentiments, saying there must be accountability at all levels, not only for those implicated in the ongoing investigation, but also at the leadership level.

She said she wants the Air Force to re-evaluate its professional and leadership development within the career field and suggested the independent panel, which Hagel has ordered of the entire nuclear enterprise, could offer some suggestions in this area.

Hagel actually has asked for two reviews of the overall nuclear enterprise. In the first review, the Joint Staff and members of the Pentagon policy office will work together on an action plan to identify and fix any systemic personnel problems in the nuclear force, said Kirby in early February.

The second review will be led by former Air Force Chief of Staff retired Gen. Larry D. Welch and retired Adm. John C. Harvey Jr., a nuclear-trained surface warfare officer and former commander of Fleet Forces Command.

“They will offer their views on the quality and the effectiveness of the action plan, and they’ll also provide their insights and recommendations on addressing any systemic personnel problems in the nuclear force,” Kirby said.

James, however, wants to take that a step further. She said the Air Force must look at how its nuclear officers are commissioned, the training that is done at Vandenberg and whether there is an appropriate level of mentorship for those in the career field.

The Air Force also must go back to the basics and reinvigorate its core values within the nuclear community.

“Airmen have a responsibility, not only to act with integrity in their own actions, but also to report wrongdoing,” said James at the AFA podium. She noted there are both direct and indirect ways to report misconduct.

She said the Air Force’s wingman culture actually could be working against the missileers; those airmen she talked with had serious concerns about turning in their fellow airmen.

The Air Force must examine “incentives, accolades, and the recognition available to the nuclear force.” This could mean instituting incentive pay, offering scholarships, or creating a medal or ribbon for the nuclear force, she said.

Finally, the Air Force needs to put its money where its mouth is. James said she noticed a few leaky roofs during her visits to the ICBM bases and suggested the Air Force place a higher priority on military construction at those bases. She also suggested potentially raising manning levels.

“This is a lot about addressing people issues, and getting this done right for our people will be crucial,” said James. “I want to reassure everybody again that this ... was not a failure of the mission.” ■