

Martha McSally's New Battle

Arizona's 2nd congressional district has become ground zero in the battle over the fate of the Air Force's fleet of venerable A-10 attack aircraft.

The Tucson-area swing district, which includes Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, is home to 93 Warthogs, more than any other base in the country. The fighters are central to life on and around the expansive base, and their retirement would undoubtedly be a blow to the local economy if Davis-Monthan did not immediately assume a new mission of comparable size.

That fact is not lost on Republicans, who are trying to maintain the congressional seat they gained in November when Air Force veteran—and former A-10 squadron leader—Martha McSally beat Democratic incumbent Ron Barber in the last House race called following the November elections.

The nail-biting race, a replay of the bruising 2012 campaign, came down to a difference of just 167 votes, automatically making McSally one of the most vulnerable GOP incumbents at the very outset of her congressional career.

It may not even be campaign season yet, but the stakes for the rookie Arizona Republican couldn't be higher.

Saving the A-10s, which the Air Force has sought to retire to save \$4.2 billion over the next five years, does not guarantee victory for McSally, as Barber himself painfully learned in November.

But failure to keep them flying—particularly with her Air Force experience and her seat on the House Armed Services Committee—would deal a huge early blow to McSally's re-election hopes.

The first chapter in this political drama played out in late April during the House Armed Services Committee's debate on the Fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill, a sprawling measure that sets Pentagon policy and prescribes spending levels.

Many top Republicans on the panel—including now-Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas)—voted last year against an amendment offered by Barber. It would have tapped war funds to save the A-10s

from the Boneyard, coincidentally also located at Davis-Monthan. Thornberry now explains that his opposition to the Barber language, ultimately passed by the committee, stemmed from the spending offset, not to the fighters themselves.

And so Thornberry drafted an authorization bill that set aside \$682.7 million for the A-10s next year. But in a bit of political posturing, he left it to McSally to introduce an amendment during the panel's 18-hour debate on the bill explicitly prohibiting the A-10's retirement, handing his GOP colleague a golden

Democrats, however, mounted a rear-guard action. Many had supported the Barber amendment last year—a fact that congressional sources now acknowledge was an effort to save one of their own.

But most other A-10 units reside in Republican districts, making efforts to save the airplane much less attractive to Democrats this year. Indeed, Democratic defense hawks believe the money could be better spent on other priorities, including the F-35.

In a face-saving move, Democrats turned to Marine Corps combat veteran Rep. Seth Moulton of Massachusetts to introduce a competing amendment. This one would have allowed the Air Force to retire half the airplanes. The decision, Moulton stressed, should come down to dollars and cents.

"In war, rarely are there enough resources. Regardless of whether the Department of Defense has a \$10 billion budget or a \$1 trillion dollar budget, our policy-making responsibility is the same: How do we protect our troops and maximize our military effectiveness?" Moulton wrote in a letter to Armed Services members. "Supporters of the A-10 are never able to address the issue with the trade-offs necessary to keep the aircraft in service."

Moulton's amendment got the support of all but one Democrat on the panel, but that was not enough for it to pass. And as expected, McSally's language easily passed the committee on the backs of strong Republican support.

McSally wasted no time claiming victory—and pledging to continue her efforts as the bill works its way through Congress.

"As this bill moves to a vote in the full House, I'll continue to work with my colleagues to support the capabilities we need and ensure we're prioritizing the lives of American troops in harm's way," she said in an April 30 statement.

It is looking ever more likely that the Air Force's A-10 fleet will continue flying in 2016, despite the service's desire to spend its limited funds elsewhere. ★



Martha McSally flew A-10s and is fighting hard to keep them flying.

opportunity to claim a public—and decisive—victory.

Indeed, Thornberry teed it up for McSally just days before the markup, lauding her for being a "strong and persuasive advocate for the A-10" whose "relentless efforts helped to highlight the Administration's flawed reasoning and strongly informed our decision to continue its funding."

Late into the markup, McSally got her chance, calling the A-10s the Air Force's "most survivable close air support aircraft." In a shot at Barber's efforts last year, McSally also stressed that her amendment "does not cost a dime."

Megan Scully is a reporter for CQ Roll Call.