

Banned From the Boneyard

Long reluctant to send venerable military aircraft to the boneyard, lawmakers have decided to make it even more difficult for the Air Force to retire some of its oldest aircraft despite the high costs of keeping aging airframes flying.

The annual Pentagon policy bill, signed into law in November by President Barack Obama, contains several provisions blocking or restricting retirements of a number of aircraft, including the A-10, EC-130H, KC-10 tanker, E-8 JSTARS, and E-3 AWACS.

The airframes, lawmakers have publicly argued, are simply too important to the military's mission to do without, even in an era of fiscal belt-tightening that military officials warn will force trade-offs between current and future capabilities.

The retirement restrictions, though opposed by Air Force leaders, were to be expected, given the military's poor track record selling these proposals on Capitol Hill.

But Congress went one step further than usual in the Fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill, inserting a provision in the nearly 2,000-page conference report that dictates the size of the Air Force fighter fleet.

Specifically, the bill establishes that the Air Force sustain a fighter jet inventory of 1,900 aircraft, 1,100 of them combat-coded.

The service's current fighter fleet numbers about 1,965, according to the Defense Department's most recent 30-year aviation plan. But the fleet size was expected to dip slightly over the next several years as the Air Force sought to retire older jets, such as the A-10, even as it ramps up procurement of the fifth generation F-35A strike fighter.

"A quarter-century of near-continuous deployments, frequent aircraft divestments, and a decades-long procurement holiday has left us with the oldest and smallest Air Force in history," the Senate Armed Services Committee stated in its summary of the bill. "Therefore, the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] emphasizes the need to retain sufficient combat airpower capacity."

In the conference report, lawmakers pointed to the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, in which the Air Force determined it needs 2,000 fighters to execute the National Defense Strategy with some increased operational risk. Two years later, as the Pentagon grappled with budget caps, the service determined

it could make do with 1,900 aircraft, but would have to accept even greater operational risk.

Given ongoing operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and heightened tensions with Russia, lawmakers determined that dipping below that level "poses excessive risk to the Air Force's ability to execute the National Defense Strategy, causes remaining fighter squadrons to deploy more frequently, and drives even lower readiness rates across the combat air forces," according to the conference report.

In a move to prevent further retirements, the bill requires the Pentagon to submit lengthy detail any time it requests retiring a fighter as part of its annual budget submission.

That report, according to the bill, must include a rationale and analysis for the retirement, as well as an assessment of the effects of the retirement on the overall force mix. The only exceptions are for aircraft that the Air Force Secretary determines, on a case-by-case basis, are beyond repair.

Air Force leaders, however, continue to balk at Congress' resistance to aircraft retirements, arguing that it forces them to spend their limited cash on capabilities they have determined are no longer needed.

The A-10 retirements, for instance, were expected to save \$428 million in 2016 and \$4.2 billion over the next several years—no small amount in an era of belt-tightening. For an Air Force where the average age of aircraft is 27 years, that means less money to spend on investments in future capabilities.

Speaking at the National Press Club on Dec. 2, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said the prohibitions on retiring the A-10 would force the service to rethink its budget plans for Fiscal 2017, due on Capitol Hill in February.

"We're not going to be able to do it all," she said. "So these are the kind of end game final decisions that are going to have to be made in the next month or two."

More broadly, James added, the service needs more money for next generation aircraft.

"You can't keep flying these aircraft forever and ever," James said. "I mean there are aircraft in our inventory that are not quite as old as I am, ... but they're aging and they're aging quickly just like some of us Secretaries of the Air Force. So we have got to modernize." ✪

Keeping the A-10 means rethinking Fiscal 2017 budget plans.

USAF photo by TSgt. Nathan Lipscomb