

STATEMENT OF

LIEUTENANT GENERAL JAMES C. SLIFE, U.S. AIR FORCE

COMMANDER

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

BEFORE THE

SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES SUBCOMMITTEE

APRIL 28, 2021

Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished members of the committee, I am honored to appear before you as the Commander of Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about one of my favorite topics - the men and women of Air Force Special Operations. On behalf of Chief Master Sergeant Cory Olson, AFSOC's Command Chief, and the 21,566 Airmen we serve together, I would like to express our gratitude for the support and resources provided by this committee since our last testimony in 2019.

AFSOC's guiding principle is that our human capital – our Airmen — are our competitive advantage. It is not AFSOC's diverse fleet of aircraft, nor our precision munitions, nor our cyber and AI driven networks that make it the force it is. Our strategic advantage lies with our Airmen: disciplined professionals capable of complex problem solving, biased for independent initiative, with deep technical expertise in their specialties. It is those women and men that enable us to deliver SOF airpower any place, any time, anywhere.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy, as well as this year's Interim National Security Strategy, describe a strategic environment substantially different than the one in which we have operated for the last two decades. This environment will require us to find balance in four areas: readiness for crisis response operations; continued efficient counter violent extremist operations; preparation for conflict against peer adversaries in contested environments; and competition globally with great powers who would challenge our national interests. Striking this balance, however, will require a different AFSOC than the one which has been required in recent years. In fact, AFSOC finds itself at its third strategic inflection point in the post-Vietnam era, each of which required a transformation to meet the demands of the future. Before we could transform

ourselves, we had to first take an honest look at where we've come from. In doing so, our history revealed two strategic inflection points which dramatically shaped our force posture.

The first occurred in April of 1980, when the nation's special operations forces were found wanting in the desert of Iran. In the aftermath of a national embarrassment which found us ill prepared for joint crisis response operations, the Congress took steps to build the force which served us so well in Panama, Iraq, the Balkans, and a host of other hot spots during the 1980s and 1990s. The creation of SOCOM in 1987 and AFSOC in 1990 represented a rare opportunity to build a new kind of fighting force. Habitual joint training and deliberate acquisition of specialized, interoperable equipment enabled us to create a highly trained and capable force, postured for short-term crises and contingency response while also supporting the larger joint force with unique capabilities only AFSOC could provide. In short, we transformed ourselves into the AFSOC our nation needed.

The tragedy of September 11, 2001 represented a second strategic inflection point. While the force was trained and capable, it was not fitted for the demands of sustained operations against networks of terrorists and insurgents. We had to transform into a force capable of long-term, sustained combat operations while also growing our surveillance and strike capabilities to enable the joint force to systematically find, fix, and finish our adversaries around the globe. After two decades of sustained conflict, AFSOC is home to the United States Air Force's two most deployed installations, a disproportionate majority of the most combat-experienced aircrew members, and the most highly decorated Airmen. Every aircraft in our inventory is a manifestation of our post-9/11 transformation, with the exception of a small handful of the remaining MC-130 Combat Talon IIs, set to complete retirement in the coming years. Once again, we transformed ourselves into the AFSOC our nation needed—the AFSOC of today.

But now, AFSOC stands at the precipice of another strategic inflection point, one requiring its third transformation in as many generations. This time, however, we seek to transform ourselves for the future without a catastrophic event to illuminate the need. The rise of belligerent peers and near-peers who threaten America's interests at home and abroad and the re-emergence of great power competition around the globe mean AFSOC must evolve once again. We must transform ourselves from the *AFSOC our nation has needed* for the last twenty years, into the *AFSOC our nation will need* in the future operating environment. Against the backdrop of a constrained resourcing environment, how will we find balance among our four pacing missions areas of readiness for crisis response operations; continued efficient counter violent extremist operations; preparation for conflict against peer adversaries in contested environments; and competition globally with great powers? Since the last time AFSOC testified before this Committee, we have established three major lines of effort focused on leveraging our human capital in order to transform into the AFSOC we will need.

First, we must develop our Airmen to maximize their potential. The continued recruitment and development of highly professional, deeply trained Airmen who proudly serve in AFSOC is essential. We also recognize that diversity in our ranks results in an AFSOC that reflects the best of America. Secondly, we must organize to ensure our Airmen are ready for full-spectrum operations from the lowest tactical level to the theater-wide operational level. Creating sustainable pressure on violent extremist organizations while expanding AFSOC's ability to compete strategically will require optimizing our force structure in ways aligned more towards the demands of the future rather than the successes of the past. Finally, we must equip our Airmen with concepts and technology to compete and win. We must employ our resources in ways that allow AFSOC to create dilemmas for our adversaries and generate options for the

joint force. At the same time, we must pathfind novel approaches and technology. We must not be afraid to experiment and fail, as long as we continue to learn and improve from our failures.

Strengthening our force through the development of our human capital is our first priority. We must deliberately develop our Airmen by providing them with the education, training, and experiences to succeed. Following SOCOM's 2019 Comprehensive Review, AFSOC added two courses of professional military education which include mandatory ethics and professionalism content. We now offer a total of nine courses for all tiers of leaders, from our newest lieutenants and airmen, through veteran lieutenant colonels and senior master sergeants about to take the reins of a squadron. AFSOC has also completed a reset of our deployed forces, introducing a standardized four-cycle force-generation model that provides the stability to ensure individuals can attend these courses as well as other joint leadership and professional development opportunities. We have revamped our assignment practices, targeting high performers and placing them in deliberate developmental positions to gain leadership experience. Finally, we have invested our most precious resource—our human capital—in our institutional training enterprise, such as increasing our instructor pilot presence in Air Force flight training programs by over 60%. Providing our highest caliber officers and enlisted members to train and recruit the next generation of AFSOC Airmen underwrites our future success.

I am proud of the strides AFSOC has made towards expanding the diversity of our formations to improve our collective effectiveness. Data shows that advancing and increasing diversity in our ranks makes our formations more lethal and agile without sacrificing our high standards. The largest single tactical formation in SOCOM, AFSOC's 1st Special Operations Wing, is commanded by a woman. This summer, the second largest tactical formation in

SOCOM, AFSOC's 27th Special Operations Wing, will be commanded by an African-American man. In fact, this summer, an Airman assigned to one of our flying squadrons at Hurlburt Field would have had to look all the way up to the three-star general's photo before they found a man in their chain of command. We continue to improve our training programs as well and have begun to introduce leadership training on combatting unconscious bias, developing emotional intelligence and practicing inclusive leadership, all of which will make us not only more cohesive in garrison, but more effective in the ambiguous and dangerous environments in which SOF often operate.

Twenty years of conflict have taken a toll on the mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being of AFSOC's Airmen. In fact, one of our squadrons deployed continuously for nearly nineteen years straight, with the exception of a single six month reset period. For this reason I am thankful for the committee's continued support of the Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) program. AFSOC is dedicated to detecting and treating the neurocognitive, psychological, and moral injuries which constitute the so-called "invisible wounds of war." Investing in POTFF at the squadron level allows us to support our Airmen where it matters most, enhancing their resiliency and unleashing their full potential. We have seen a 60% increase in individual counseling appointments between 2017 and 2020, with 91% of POTFF recipients stating the program was effective in helping Airmen cope with life struggles. Squadrons with embedded POTFF facilitators reported improvements in fitness in every measured attribute, with reductions across the board in physical injuries and reduced recovery times. The POTFF program is an invaluable tool in caring for and preserving our competitive advantage.

AFSOC's second line of effort is organizing our human capital to ensure they are ready for full-spectrum operations and able to compete and win around the globe. At this

strategic inflection point, AFSOC must make the organizational changes necessary to balance our ability to respond to crises and contingencies, efficiently sustain pressure on violent extremist organizations, compete with adversaries on the global stage, and win in conflict. Consequently, AFSOC is undergoing the most significant organizational optimization in our 30-year history.

In order to reliably present forces to the joint force, we are looking at fielding four operational squadrons each for the majority of our air and ground operational portfolio areas. This is critical to sustaining the four-cycle force generation model highlighted previously. Additionally, we are adjusting the deployment phase length to a standardized 150 day window across all units and mission types. This optimization of our organization and deployment force offering will allow AFSOC to articulate the sustainable deployable capacity of our force elements and normalize our deploy-to-dwell ratios between 1:2 and 1:3. It will also ensure unit level leaders are not separated from their units during the force generating and deployment cycles, addressing the central finding of the SOCOM Comprehensive Review.

Another area in which we are making substantial improvements is in the command and control and logistical support of forward forces. New technology and operational paradigms have allowed us to radically streamline our C2 network. Radical transformation in the command and control architecture is a key component in our vision of disaggregated, specialized air operations. AFSOC is focused on our ability to rapidly generate tactical “lily pads”, agile landing zones that quickly refuel and rearm aircraft, and then collapse and relocate in a manner unpredictable to our adversaries. A distributed SOF C2 network relies on the deliberate development and empowerment of our Airmen, and plays to our operational strengths while exploiting our potential adversaries’ weaknesses.

We must also equip our human capital with the concepts and technology to compete and win through modernization efforts and transformational innovation. The tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment which have allowed us to succeed in the fight against violent extremist organizations are not what will be required against a near-peer adversary. AFSOC is modernizing our operational concepts and techniques, emphasizing activities that deter aggression and create an unaffordable cost-benefit calculus for our adversaries.

As we think about our own cost-benefit calculus, we believe a critical component of our future ability to sustain cost-effective pressure on violent extremists who pose a threat to our homeland is the Armed Overwatch program. Over the past twenty years, AFSOC has been closely partnered with our ground and maritime SOF counterparts to develop an unrivaled “find-fix-finish force.” We made significant institutional investments in our surveillance and strike portfolios to protect every SOF ground force with a stack of aircraft overhead. Partnered with conventional force platforms, AFSOC gunships, manned and unmanned intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance aircraft, and a host of other capabilities worked in concert to provide ubiquitous situational awareness and on-call close air support to our teammates on the ground. However, our organic capacity is limited, our platforms are specialized, host-nation access will likely become more challenging, and the significant conventional force capabilities provided by fourth and fifth generation fighter aircraft will likely be cost prohibitive from both a fiscal perspective and also a readiness perspective in the future. In short, we need a new model for the aviation portion of the joint force conducting counter violent extremist operations. We need a low-cost, reliable, rugged, multi-role Armed Overwatch aircraft which can do the various roles currently performed by specialized platforms while operating in austere regions, closely partnered with our joint teammates. Rather than employing the capabilities of multiple aircraft

in vertical collaboration, we can develop a lean, agile, and hardened system as part of the joint SOF force while freeing up financial resources and human capital to compete on the strategic stage. While Armed Overwatch fits squarely in the counter-violent extremist portfolio, it is also an investment in competition.

Further, we must find ways to improve our aircraft reliability and survivability. AFSOC's CV-22 fleet plays a pivotal role in today's crisis response and contingency operations, but it suffers from the worst maintenance reliability rate in AFSOC. Our partners in industry have identified engineering solutions to improve both the nacelle structure and wiring harnesses. These nacelle improvements result in a 6% increase in CV-22 aircraft availability and corresponding reduction of 1.9 maintenance work hours per flight hour. We are implementing the CV-22 Block 20 Mission Computer modifications as well as investing in enhanced situational awareness kits to standardize the fleet. Furthermore, we are working closely with both SOCOM and our parent service to look beyond our current CV-22 to next-generation, high-speed vertical takeoff and landing aircraft. AFSOC is also exploring required upgrades to our C-130 family of aircraft by investing in Airborne Mission Networking on our MC-130 mobility aircraft and Precision Strike Package upgrades on our AC-130 gunships. We are testing new capabilities, such as palletized munitions, airborne mission networking, and a variety of roll-on, roll-off sensor packages. We are seeking communications modernization efforts to facilitate seamless integration with the joint force in the most contested environments.

Finally, AFSOC must also continue to pathfind new operational concepts and technologies for both the Air Force and Special Operations Command. We have invested in several innovation programs, such as the Air Force's Spark Tank and last year's inaugural AFSOC Evil Genius competition. These programs enable our Airmen to bring their most

innovative ideas forward to provide solutions to the joint forces' most complex problems. Further, AFSOC's small size and agility enables us to conduct rapid experimentation to develop and assess new concepts, systems, technologies, and programs. Our experimentation cycle is synchronized with our new force generation model, and rapidly pursues developing requirements identified by the joint force. Our experimentation cell conducts war gaming, table-top and field exercises, training events, architecture analysis, science & technology programs, tailored pathfinding events, and specialized innovation assessments. AFSOC must focus on generating advantage and opportunity across the spectrum of competition and conflict.

Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Ernst, and distinguished members of the Committee, the Airmen of Air Force Special Operations Command represent the finest our nation has to offer. As the world emerges from the COVID 19 pandemic into the future operating environment, our Airmen are the competitive advantage we will need. On behalf of all AFSOC Airmen and their families, thank you for the opportunity to address you today and for your continued support. I look forward to your questions.