



An airman readies a weapons load at an undisclosed location in Southwest Asia.

■ Air Force “Zero-Based Review” Underway

Air Force leaders have begun a “zero-based review” of the service’s programs and activities, taking a hard look to see if anything it’s doing is propelled not by need but inertia, service undersecretary Matthew P. Donovan said Jan. 18.

“We are looking for programs that are no longer needed. The idea is to get after the relevancy of what we do,” he said in a speech to an Air Force Association audience on Capitol Hill. It’s been “more than 20 years” since the service has conducted such a review, and “everything is on the table.”

Donovan told reporters he doesn’t expect “major changes” from the review, which is being led by USAF’s strategic plans and programs shop.

The review is expected to be concluded by March 15, Donovan said.

■ Afghanistan Strikes Increase Significantly in 2017

US aircraft finished 2017 flying combat missions in Afghanistan at the highest rate in years—dropping more bombs than in any other year since 2011.

US aircraft in the final two months of 2017 kicked off a new campaign against the Taliban, called Jagged Knife, targeting Taliban drug facilities inside Afghanistan. After an initial salvo involving F-22s, aircraft including B-52s, F-16s, MQ-9s, and Navy F-18s hit 11 narcotics facilities in Helmand Province.

This contributed to 2017’s total of 4,361 strikes in Afghanistan, according to numbers released by Air Forces Central Command.

Tanker sorties to fuel this new offensive also increased, reaching 5,714—the most in the past three years.

In December, US and coalition aircraft released a total of 584 weapons in the air war against ISIS, the lowest monthly total since August 2014. However, 2017 was a busy year as coalition aircraft helped US-backed fighters rout ISIS from its so-called capitals of Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq.

There were a total of 39,577 bombs dropped as part of Operation Inherent Resolve in 2017, bolstered by 13,243 tanker sorties and 14,015 ISR sorties.



A B-52 lands at Andersen AFB, Guam, in January.

■ All Three USAF Bombers Deploy to Guam

Six B-52s and about 300 airmen from Barksdale AFB, La., deployed to Andersen AFB, Guam, in January to participate in the continuous bomber presence mission in the Pacific.

The B-52s replaced six B-1B Lancers from Ellsworth AFB, S.D. Additionally, three B-2 Spirits deployed to Guam to support the Pacific deterrence mission.

At one point in January all three bomber variants were at the base for the first time since August 2016 and for just the second time in USAF history.

■ Air Force to Establish D.C.-Based Vice Commander for Space Command

Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson has told congressional defense committees the Air Force plans to establish a three-star vice commander of Air Force Space Command who will serve in the Washington, D.C., area, USAF spokesman Maj. William Russell said.

The new position will be responsible for a variety of tasks related to coordinating with Air Force headquarters and other national security agencies. Air Force Space Command will still maintain its two-star deputy commander billet in Colorado Springs, Colo., whose responsibilities do not change.

Russell said he could not speculate on potential nominations, but this position, like all three-star positions, must be confirmed by the Senate.

The Air Force had previously created a position for a deputy chief of staff for space, and Maj. Gen. David D. Thompson was confirmed for the position last year. However, the Fiscal 2018 defense authorization bill eliminated that position.

JROTC students explore the flight deck of a KC-10 tanker during a tour of Travis AFB, Calif.



John Rood survived a bruising confirmation process to become undersecretary of defense for policy.

■ Senate Confirms New Undersecretary of Defense for Policy

The Senate on Jan. 3 confirmed John C. Rood to be undersecretary of defense for policy with a vote of 81-7, despite a rocky nomination process. During his confirmation hearing, both Republican and Democratic senators hammered Rood, a former senior vice president at Lockheed Martin, about potential conflicts of interest.

■ Airmen Receive Distinguished Flying Crosses for Afghanistan Mission

Two airmen at Cannon AFB, N.M., on Jan. 5 received Distinguished Flying Crosses for their role in a 2016 resupply mission in Afghanistan, braving enemy anti-aircraft fire to help US special operations forces on the ground.

On Jan. 5, 2016, Capt. Charlotte Raabe and SSgt. Gary Bjerke were flying as part of a six-man aircrew in an MC-130J Commando II conducting an emergency resupply airdrop to special operations forces who were under fire in an isolated area of Afghanistan. The aircraft flew through an area where it was within reach of small arms and anti-aircraft artillery.

"It did not set in that we were taking fire until the ramp and door had opened," said Bjerke, the loadmaster on the mission. Raabe was the aircraft's combat systems officer. "I distinctively remember hearing the cracks of the bullets passing behind the aircraft. The only thing I could think of was that this resupply needed to be executed successfully."

The crew air-dropped a bundle of ammunition and supplies, which landed within 50 meters of the team, according to an Air Force news release.

■ Tackling the Pilot Shortage Problem

The Air Force launched the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps Flight Academy scholarship program in January, which plans to teach cadets how to fly. The effort is one of many steps the service is taking to address its growing pilot shortage.

Scholarship recipients will take classes this summer, each course lasting between seven and nine weeks, according to the Air Force. If all goes according to plan, cadets will return with private pilot licenses. However, there is no requirement for cadets to become military pilots.

"We understand not all of the cadets graduating from the Flight Academy will elect to take a military track, but that's OK as those young people electing to enter commercial aviation will have a positive impact on the overall national crisis," said Brig. Gen. Michael G. Koscheski, director of the Air Force Aircrew Crisis Task Force, in a press release.



T-6 Texan II aircraft are grounded—again.

■ 19th Air Force Grounds T-6 Trainers

Maj. Gen. Patrick J. Doherty, commander of 19th Air Force, indefinitely suspended all T-6 Texan II operations on Feb. 1, after a "cluster" of unexplained physiological events (UPEs) were reported at three bases within a week.

"We're acting swiftly, making temporary—but necessary—changes to everyone's training, general awareness, checklist procedures, and possibly [modifying] aircrew flying equipment to mitigate risk to the aircrew while we tackle this issue head-on to safeguard everyone flying T-6s," Doherty said in a statement.

The suspension comes a week after USAF stood up a team dedicated to investigating similar UPEs. As recently as November 2017, two A-10 pilots at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., reported physiological incidents while flying, which led the base to ground a third of its Warthog fleet for about a week.



Maj. Gen. Anthony Cotton is taking over as commander of Air University.

■ 20th Air Force Commander Promoted to Lead Air University

The Senate has confirmed Maj. Gen. Anthony J. Cotton, commander of 20th Air Force, based at F.E. Warren AFB, Wyo., for promotion to lieutenant general. He is to take command of Air University at Maxwell AFB, Ala.

Maj. Gen. Ferdinand B. Stoss assumed command of 20th Air Force from Cotton during a Jan. 26 ceremony. Stoss previously served as director of operations and communications for Air Force Global Strike Command headquarters at Barksdale AFB, La.



Vice President Mike Pence speaks during the AFWERX grand opening in Las Vegas.

■ Air Force Opens Innovation Hub in Las Vegas

The Air Force opened its new innovation hub and start-up center in Las Vegas on Jan. 11 with the goal of incubating a new approach to solving national security problems.

With an initial \$2 million budget, AFWERX includes Air Force officials, with involvement from industry and academia. It centers on a facility that includes a 25,000-square-foot fabrication lab, containing 3-D printers and carbon fiber ovens to help "bring some ideas to life in a physical form," AFWERX spokesman Bobby Mack said. The second floor is a 15,000-square-foot collaboration space, which includes areas that are restricted for classified work.

AFWERX will eventually have a permanent staff of 12 people focusing on new USAF mission areas.



Speeding up F-35 testing.

■ F-35 "Pre-IOT&E" Underway, Aimed At Expediting Testing

Six F-35 jets—two of each variant—deployed to Eielson AFB, Alaska, on Jan. 18 for cold-weather testing as part of an unusual effort to speed up initial operational test and evaluation, according to USAF officials.

The Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center at Kirtland AFB, N.M., in coordination with the Pentagon's Operational Test and Evaluation shop, has begun "pre-IOT&E" activities on the F-35, to "mitigate delays in program development," a center spokeswoman said.

The jets at Eielson were doing cold-weather testing in temperatures averaging minus 23-degrees Fahrenheit. AFOTEC and the Defense Department's OT&E were collecting "data regarding the F-35 air vehicle system's effectiveness, suitability, and mission capability during alert launches in cold-weather," said Maj. Gen. Matthew H. Molloy, AFOTEC commander and head of the F-35 joint operational test team.

■ The War on Terrorism

US Central Command Operations: Freedom's Sentinel and Inherent Resolve.

Casualties

As of Feb. 15, a total of 49 Americans had died in Operation Freedom's Sentinel in Afghanistan, and 52 Americans had died in Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq and Syria.

The total includes 97 troops and four Department of Defense civilians. Of these deaths, 46 were killed in action with the enemy while 55 died in noncombat incidents.

There have been 239 troops wounded in action during OFS and 58 troops in OIR.