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SUBCOMMITTEE ON AIRLAND
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
UNITED STATES SENATE

PRESENTATION TO THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AIRLAND
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: Remotely Piloted Aircraft Enterprise

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Cotton, Ranking Member Manchin, and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how we deliver Persistent Attack and Reconnaissance with our Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA) Enterprise today and in the future. As lead command for the Combat Air Force and the RPA community, Air Combat Command is responsible for the organizing, training, equipping, and in-garrison employing of the RPA mission. This mission is instrumental to achieving decision advantage against our enemies, is an indispensable asset to our National Security, and is the backbone to the success of our fights in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and other areas combating extremism and terrorism. The Air Force is fully invested in continuing to achieve sustainability of this enterprise.

Combatant commanders rely upon our RPA enterprise, and specifically our MQ-1 and MQ-9. As we speak, we are flying combat missions around the globe. They are arming decision makers with intelligence, our warfighters with targets, and our enemies with fear, anxiety, and ultimately their timely end.

But this enterprise is a victim of its own success. An insatiable demand for RPA forces has stretched the community thin, especially our Airmen performing the mission. As much as we value our technology and weapons systems, our airmen are truly the most important aspect of this enterprise. We rely on their drive, commitment, performance, and innovation to find success. Due to mission demands, we have also been relying upon their sacrifice. We are taking steps to remedy this problem, stabilize the RPA enterprise, retain our valuable airmen, and sustain and eventually increase the capability our RPA community delivers to the warfighter. Our national defense requires it and we will deliver.

VALUE OF THE RPA MISSION

Air Force MQ-1s and MQ-9s currently fly 60 Combat Lines (CL) every day. Combat Line replaced the term Combat Air Patrol (CAP) and is defined as one aircraft's sortie. Each Combat Line can last up to 22 hours. They aid ground forces by providing close air support

during troops in contact situations, and employ their Hellfire missiles and guided bombs to neutralize their targets. Our intelligence airmen from our Distributed Common Ground System watch and analyze every second of their streaming video, monitor pattern of life to find potential targets, and arm our commanders with decision advantage.

Their video is also live streamed to devices in the field held by Air Force Joint Terminal Air Controllers accompanying Army units on the ground or observing the battle from nearby. US and allied forces can watch the enemy hide from or advance on their positions. They base their movements on the situational awareness provided by our MQ-1s and MQ-9s. There is not a ground unit to be found that does not request the support of an RPA.

When we find ourselves conducting combat operations against ISIL, al-Qa'ida, or its affiliates, our RPA enterprise quickly becomes one of the most valuable battlefield assets. Combatant Commanders may not have ground forces pushing through a city, able to identify enemy combatants or high value targets first hand, to radio the target information to overhead aircraft. Some of our combatant commander's only true on-the-battlefield eyes are viewing video streamed from our RPAs and manned ISR platforms. In our current conflicts, before an enemy target is destroyed by a precision guided munition, it is likely discovered and first viewed by an RPA.

RPAs are not the only aircraft in our inventory equipped with visual or infrared sensors commonly referred to as targeting pods. Our fighter aircraft such as our F-16s, F-15Es, and even our B-1 and B-52 bombers carry similar advanced sensors. But they cannot orbit unseen and unheard over a civilian population interspersed with enemy combatants. They are limited by their loiter time and aerial refueling requirements. Our MQ-1 and MQ-9 aircraft have no such limitations. They can loiter for longer periods of time and provide enduring battlefield effects, without which our combatant commanders would struggle to find and eliminate targets.

Our MQ-1 and MQ-9 enterprise has grown tremendously since its inception 20 years ago. In 2006 the Air Force flew 12 Combat Lines. Today we fly 60. That is a 5 fold increase and exemplifies the furious pace at which we have expanded our operations and enterprise. Today we have almost 8000 airmen solely dedicated to the MQ-1 and MQ-9 mission. Over 1400 of this 8000 are Guard and Reserve personnel dedicated to the MQ-1 and MQ-9 mission. 77% of our

cockpits are dedicated to flying combat lines every single day. The other 23% are dedicated to sustaining combat capacity through formal training and test. Of the 15 bases with RPA units, 13 of them have a combat mission. This mission is of such value, that we plan on consistent increases in aircraft, personnel, and results.

Our RPA enterprise operates differently from others in our flying enterprise. Some of our RPA bases have aircraft for local training and cockpits where our crews fly combat missions. Some bases just have cockpits. Overseas we operate numerous Launch and Recovery Elements where our deployed crews take off and land our RPAs. Crews from one unit will likely be flying aircraft from another unit, and possibly multiple aircraft in different areas all in the same day. This stands in stark contrast to how a traditional squadron operates, where their aircrew, maintainers and aircraft deploy together, fly combat sorties together, and redeploy together.

Another unique aspect of our RPA enterprise is that our crews deploy in-garrison. They arrive at work, fly combat sorties, and then go home to their families. This occurs every single day. However, their services are in such high demand that a regular work week, a 5-ON 2-OFF work schedule, is prohibitive to adequately providing for combatant commander requirements. Our crews work a different and more demanding schedule. Their regular work days are 10 hours long. They fly for six days straight, conduct non flying duties for one day, and then receive two days off. Instead of a 7 day week they work a 9 day week and their two days off are not guaranteed to coincide with a weekend. This grueling schedule is necessary to meet mission requirements; however it is also a significant aspect of the enterprise we are committed to fixing.

The first step to fixing that is to increase the number of RPA crews by increasing the output of our training pipeline. Air Combat Command is responsible for the training of our Air Force's RPA pilots and sensor operators. We will graduate 384 next year which is 200 more than we have graduated annually in past years. This tremendous output is currently achieved with very limited resources as we strive to balance ACC's two main priorities: Provide for Today and Prepare for the Future. More pilots and sensor operators flying combat lines means less instructors available to train our pipeline students. Increasing the instructors available to train our pipeline students will decrease the number available to fly combat lines. This delicate balance is challenging, but achievable thanks to The Secretary of Defense's authorization to decrease our daily Combat Lines from 65 to 60. This slight reduction has allowed the Air Force

to begin the process of righting our training pipeline and continuation training requirements by reinvesting those pilots into the school house.

Our process for training our RPA airmen has changed significantly from its inception years ago. Originally we pulled pilots and navigators from manned flying communities like fighters, bombers, transport, and special operations. Usually these were not voluntary assignments. This drained valuable experience and manpower from these other flying communities and was a stop gap measure. Additionally it was not a good use of resources as our Air Force expended tremendous time, money, and effort to train these airmen for flying manned aircraft only to retrain them in RPAs. As our RPA enterprise increased exponentially, we transitioned towards a sustainable training pipeline and initiated a new career field – 18X RPA Pilot. We created a new focused training pipeline for RPA pilots that not only shortens the time required to complete, but also eases the strain on other flying communities. While only one third of our current RPA pilots are 18X RPA Pilots, our steady state goal is to reach 90% and we are well on our way to achieving that desired end state.

Our 18X training pipeline and RPA pilot career field is not the only recent measure to help improve our enterprise. Our total force has been integrated into our RPA enterprise and it is not just our active duty that fulfills our RPA requirements. Our Air Force has 17 total Guard and Reserve locations operating MQ-1s and MQ-9s. Our Guard and Reserve components currently fly 19 of our 60 daily combat lines from 10 different locations with a planned reduction to 16 steady state combat lines. Our near term plans include converting all Guard units to MQ-9s, standing up units in Arkansas, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and initiating two active associate squadrons to be used for formal training in the New York Air National Guard at Syracuse and March Air Reserve Base in California.

As we have increased our RPA footprint with our Combatant Commanders over the past decade, our enterprise must now grow. Plans are in place to continue purchasing aircraft and cockpits to achieve the required force structure. This will strike through the top item on Combatant Commander's priority lists.

We in the Air Force and Air Combat Command fully understand the value of our RPA enterprise to our national defense, and that is why over the past 10 years we have added over

35,000 airmen to our ISR community, of which almost 8000 are dedicated to the RPA enterprise. This addition occurred while we shrunk the total force by over 50,000 airmen. That means 85,000 airmen were removed from other essential missions. This is the trade-off decision we made because we fully understand the value of their mission. It is not just value-added, but required.

CHALLENGES FACING THE USAF RPA ENTERPRISE

A robust RPA enterprise is essential for the successful conduct of armed conflict. The biggest challenge that we as an Air Force face with our RPA enterprise is that our airmen are leaving the service faster than we can replace them, taking with them years of training and combat experience. When an RPA airman separates, we do not just lose a body in the cockpit. We lose their expertise and experience too. While on paper, personnel may be a one for one swap that populates spreadsheets, their experience is incalculable and irreplaceable.

The surge that our RPA enterprise has experienced in recent history is now no longer a surge, but the new normal. We have surged RPA operations nine times over the past eight years. It has become routine, and is taxing our airmen and our RPA enterprise beyond their limits. Sustained high operations tempo and the corresponding high levels of stress is negatively impacting the RPA enterprise. It is robbing our airmen of the quality of life necessary to withstand grueling schedules and maintain a healthy force. This leaves many of our airmen with just one option: to separate; a decision they have chosen at an extremely high rate, which threatens the sustainment of our nation's essential RPA mission.

Our regular Air Force RPA pilot manning currently accounts for around 80% of our requirement. Of these pilots, only one third are career RPA pilots (18X) while two thirds come from manned flying communities. The Air Force has borrowed pilots from these other flying career fields to augment this steady state force, but it remains over 200 pilots short. This shortfall is based on our cap of 60 Combat Lines and would only increase should the requirement for CLs increase.

Due to the insatiable demand for their RPA combat services and the corresponding increase in MQ-1/9 Combat Lines, the Air Force has executed rapid growth of the RPA community. This generated a requirement for more operators. In order to produce this higher number of operators, the Air Force has made the difficult decision to augment our Formal Training Units with Instructor Pilots from operational squadrons, further reducing the availability of pilots to fly combat lines, and swelling the burden on the rest of the force. Second order effects of this decision include less Instructor Pilots available to train less experienced pilots in operational squadrons.

Additionally our combat surge has reduced the availability of training sorties for our operational units. These RPA units must now borrow time during combat sorties to conduct training, such as upgrades, and improving skills, tactics, and weapon delivery procedures. This places severe limitations of their effectiveness. This is opposite the rest of our flying communities where home station training, conducted during dwell time with dedicated training sorties, allows our operators to focus on a diverse skill set across the full range of military operations

RPA ENTERPRISE WAY FORWARD

Air Combat Command recognizes the stressors applied to the RPA community and we have taken the initial steps required to fix it. We are invested in this venture and we know that we must stabilize the enterprise in order to sustain the combat capability and capacity for America.

Recognizing the need for change in 2015 the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Air Force initiated an RPA Get Well Plan. Also in late 2015 ACC initiated a Culture and Process Improvement Plan (CPIP) for the MQ-1 and MQ-9 enterprise, with the goals of providing relief to our taxed crews and constructing a sustainable plan for the future. Our overriding goal was to determine why our MQ-1 and MQ-9 airmen are stressed and leaving the force and what we can do to improve their quality of life so they make the preferred decision to remain in the Air Force and continue to provide their in-demand services to the combatant commanders.

ACC's CPIP is an aggressive, action-oriented, field-influenced program with the goal of making lasting change for the MQ-1/9 enterprise. We want to move the RPA community toward the sustainment model we have established for other Air Force weapon systems. To tackle this challenge our team conducted 1,195 face to face interviews and 1,164 electronic surveys with our RPA airmen and families. This was a grass-roots initiative to listen to our Airmen and ensure their voice was heard and incorporated into stabilizing the RPA enterprise.

CPIP responses cast light on the individual issues our RPA airmen have experienced, detrimental to the culture of their enterprise. Our RPA airmen are overtasked, their communities undermanned, and are lacking adequate support on their bases. This materializes as increased stress, reduced motivation, and a general reduction in job satisfaction, even though the airmen fully understand the incredible impact they have on our combat mission.

Our solutions generated from our CPIP process are extensive but achievable. We are examining the possible expansion of the RPA community to several new bases and overseas locations. This will help by giving airmen and their families more diverse options where they can be based. We are evaluating base services to meet the personal and family requirements of our RPA airmen, and we are also taking a further look at other quality of life initiatives, compensation, and developmental opportunities.

There are also additional changes, resulting from our CPIP findings, the Air Force is enacting to continue to build our RPA capacity and capability for the future. We are committed to investing resources to meet our sustained requirement of 361 MQ-9s and 271 cockpits. We are growing our Formal Training Unit (FTU) capacity in order to increase RPA pilot production to over 400 per year by 2019. The most we have trained up through this year is 250. Our FTUs must continue to expand to fully realize the benefits of a stabilized and in-demand service.

The funding required to support our initiatives is essential to our national defense. Air Combat Command would like to express our sincere appreciation to Congress for their support regarding our MQ-9 initiatives. The 12 MQ-9 aircraft added in FY15 and the addition of 4 more aircraft in FY16 will greatly aid our combat and reconnaissance operations we provide to the Combatant Commanders. We also thank you for your continued support in our FY17 budget request. This will allow us to purchase additional MQ-9s and help replace combat losses. All of

these programs will not only help stabilize our RPA enterprise, but will also amplify our combat capability.

To further incentivize our airmen to remain in service, we have requested and received authorization for an annual \$25,000 aviator retention pay for RPA pilots to bring their total compensation to the levels of our most in-demand operators and pilots. Congress's support for this initiative has been indispensable and we thank you for your backing. Furthermore, we plan to add regular monthly flight pay with gate months which ensures flight pay during non-flying assignments. These additional compensation measures will align our RPA pilot force with the rest of our flying enterprise.

CONCLUSION

The Air Force has provided continuous combat airpower for our Nation. It has been continuous as there has been no break in combat sorties and units deployed to combat theatres in the last 25 years. But it has also been continuous in that it has continuously evolved.

In Desert Storm, only 8% of our weapons were precision guided. 92% were unguided. Today that number is 100% precision. And as we have transitioned to the precision era, our Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance has also become precise. To support our 100% precision operations, to find our enemies, to relay targets to aircraft, and to monitor and execute the strikes, we have grown our RPA enterprise exponentially, creating a bow wave of challenges.

There is no break in sight for this mission, and we must mitigate these challenges all while continuing to supply our combatant commanders with forces required to support the defense of our nation. We have plans in place to address our current challenges, and we have enacted further plans to grow our RPA enterprise to reach its full potential.

None of this can happen without our airmen. They are indispensable and our most valuable asset and this will never change. Recruiting, retaining, and promoting our Airmen is as vital to our service as our aircraft and weapon acquisitions. Our RPA Airman and families have sacrificed greatly in the defense of our nation. I am proud to have the opportunity to make the

necessary changes to give our Airmen the resources and tools necessary to maximize their impact on our national defense.

Our Get Well Plan and CPIP initiatives have started the ball rolling, and the future only gets brighter for our RPA enterprise. I thank the committee for their dedication to our Armed Forces and attentiveness to our RPA enterprise. I have no doubt that this partnership will continue to do much to improve our forces, the lives of the airmen involved, and the combat output so desperately desired by our combatant commanders. I look forward to continued collaboration and the success it will bear for the Joint Force and our Nation.