

Questions on U.S. Air Sovereignty Mission

April 23, 2009

By Amy Butler



The impending fighter shortfall in the U.S. Air Force may prompt the Pentagon to turn to the Navy to fulfill some air sovereignty missions – flying patrols in U.S. airspace – in the future, according to Defense Department officials.

The Air Force is facing the retirement of up to 80% of the fleet dedicated to conducting the air sovereignty mission in the United States without timely replacements expected, according to testimony offered at a House Armed Services readiness subcommittee hearing April 22. Of 16 Air National Guard units on alert status, 11 fly F-16s. The aircraft of eight of those units are expected to reach their service lives between Fiscal 2015-2017.

Democrats and Republicans on the subcommittee expressed frustration that the Pentagon hasn't articulated a plan to conduct the air patrol missions in light of the expected force structure reductions.

Peter Verga, deputy under secretary of defense for policy integration, said in prepared testimony that in the past, the Defense Department “was prepared to reinforce the air sovereignty mission” with U.S. Navy and Marine Corps aircraft. After the hearing, he also cited the example to Aviation Week of carrier-based Navy aircraft filling in for Air Force missions while the F-15 fleet was grounded. Fleet-wide inspections were conducted after a Missouri Air National Guard F-15C broke apart in midair when its front right longeron failed in late 2007.

Verga declined to specify when Navy aircraft may be needed for air sovereignty missions, and which fighters would be used. The Navy also predicts it will encounter a fighter shortfall without the purchase of more F/A-18E/Fs. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, however, says the fleet has an excess capacity in tactical aircraft in light of the missions currently being conducted.

Though the F-15 fleet has returned to flight, some observers worry that similar issues associated with aging aircraft could unexpectedly cripple the Air Force's ability to execute its missions, especially as planners call for F-22s and F-35s to replace more plentiful F-15s and F-16s.

Verga was joined by Davi D'Agostino, director of the Government Accountability Office's homeland defense team; Lt. Gen. Daniel Darnell, Air Force deputy chief of staff for air, space and information operations; and Lt. Gen. Harry Wyatt, director of the Air National Guard.

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) was among the most vociferous critics of the Pentagon's approach. "The future of this mission, I think, is in question," she said. The Air Force is "ignoring the rapidly approaching fighter shortfall." The 162nd Fighter Wing, which operates F-16s, is located in Tucson; those F-16s will no longer be flyable in six years without upgrades, she says.

Wyatt says that the Air National Guard, which will operate some F-22s and F-35s will get their aircraft "late to need," and he says that if his units received the stealthy "fifth-generation" fighters sooner, much of the problem could be averted. Air sovereignty sites will begin to lack aircraft to conduct air patrol missions beginning in late 2014, with the largest number of units to be without them in 2020, according to GAO data presented by D'Agostino.

Giffords questioned purchases of legacy "fourth-generation" fighters, such as F-15Es (variants of which are being sold to Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Singapore) and F-16 Block 60, which includes the active electronically scanned array radar. On the heels of the announcement of Defense Secretary Robert Gates' plan to end F-22 production at the current 187 on order, Wyatt did not say whether he would advocate for buying older fighters. Air Force policy had been until recently to advocate only for the purchase of fifth-generation fighters, which include stealth, integrated avionics and internal weapons carriage. Should Congress decide in the current fiscal environment that more fourth-generation fighters are needed, Wyatt asks that lawmakers take into account the sophisticated technologies required to tackle cruise missile attacks, hostile unmanned aerial vehicles and marine threats.

Criticized repeatedly by the subcommittee for lacking a long-term plan for air sovereignty, Verga said, "This mission is not going to suffer." Darnell said the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review will provide some clarity on the issue.

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