

Washington Watch

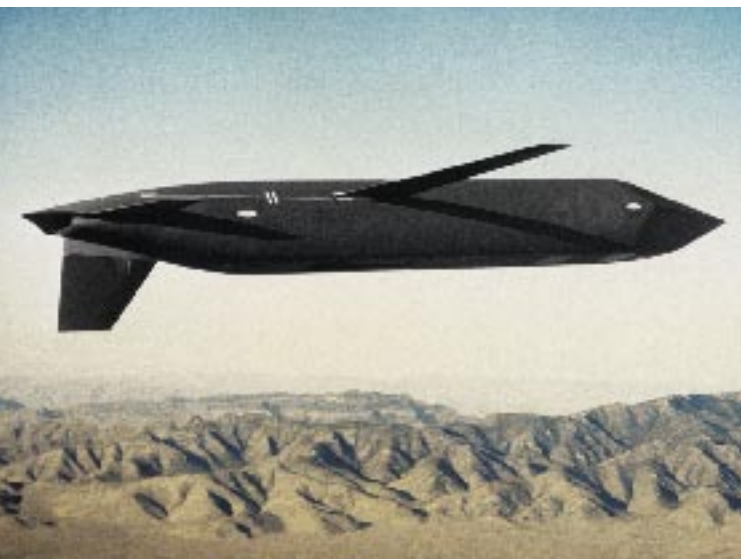
By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

Dumped From the Portfolio; Congress Talks, but Doesn't Walk; The New Bomber Shuffle ...

You Cruise, You Lose

The Air Force has decided to retire its stealthy, nuclear-tipped AGM-129 Advanced Cruise Missile and, at the same time, cut its number of AGM-86B Air Launched Cruise Missiles, which also have nuclear warheads. It is a move that could well ripple through the B-52 bomber fleet.

Money, as always, played a prominent role in the decision. In its Fiscal 2008 budget request, USAF terminated funding for the ACM, of which it has about 460. The move apparently was made on short notice; just weeks before, USAF officials had been saying the ACM would be updated



USAF photo

AGM-129 going into retirement.

and maintained into the 2030s. (See "Strategic Force," February, p. 38.)

In a March interview, Secretary of the Air Force Michael W. Wynne characterized the retirement as a simple cost-cutting step taken in light of the service's other capabilities.

Wynne said the service recently had taken "a good hard look" at all of its standoff weaponry, examining whether USAF needed it all and whether the expense was justified, given other options. The ACM, he said, was among the "isolated cases that are costing ... a lot of money, with a very low probability of use." There are alternatives, he said, noting, "We have B-2-delivered weapons. We have ICBMs. We have not taken down our entire cruise missile fleet. It's a portfolio."

Wynne said substitutes include "lower maintenance" systems with "a reasonable probability of getting through." He didn't specify a system, but USAF still has about 1,100 AGM-86B Air Launched Cruise Missiles, which are not stealthy.

Through a spokesman, the Air Force said the service will "restructure" the ALCM inventory, meaning a not-yet-determined number of ALCMs will also be retired. The

spokesman said there is no set timetable for determining what will be retained.

The Air Force said the ACM retirement was "approved by the Secretary of Defense, based on analysis and recommendations from US Strategic Command and the Joint Staff."

The impact could spread. USAF wants to shrink its B-52 fleet from 94 to 56 bombers but has been blocked by Congress. The Air Force is not funded to maintain and crew all 94 B-52s; 18 of them are kept as attrition reserve aircraft. However, the ACM and ALCM can be carried only by the B-52. Because the nuclear cruise missile role at least partly justifies the B-52, eliminating ACM and reducing ALCM would inevitably reduce the need for B-52s in the nuclear role. If the Air Force were to retire 25 B-52s, it would leave about 460 cruise missiles without launch platforms.

Wynne stated that he is "not ... aware" of any plans to convert the stealthy ACMs to conventional weapons. The Air Force, in response to a query, said it has not made a "final decision on the disposition of the ACM" and will explore the possibilities of using the ACM "for conventional use or testing."

In a statement prepared for *Air Force Magazine*, the service said it will take 66 months for "demilitarization" of the ACM fleet, but "will not take any irreversible action ... until Congress has reviewed this force structure initiative."

Flying With a Limp

Secretary of the Air Force Michael Wynne lately has taken some heat on Capitol Hill. Some lawmakers have slammed his plans to cut Air Force personnel even as the Army and Marine Corps are adding troops. He's also taken hits for not requesting more gear. (See "Washington Watch: Murtha Demands, 'Give us a Number,'" April, p. 10.)



USAF photo by TSgt. Cohen A. Young

Wynne will believe it when he sees it.

AD SPACE

Wynne responds, though, that Congress may be talking the talk of modernization and reset, but hasn't walked the walk.

"All of the budgets we've sent over have all been cut," Wynne observed in an interview. Even though he frequently hears indignation and impatience, "the evidence is preponderantly against" a Congressional push to revitalize USAF, he said.

"The Air Force is trying very much ... to recapitalize within our own bounds, trying to find and husband resources by becoming more efficient across the board, including within our personnel," Wynne insisted.

He would "dearly love" to buy 38 F-22 fighters each year, rather than just 20, and to continue the C-17 line, buy more than 15 tankers a year, and replace F-16s with F-35s at much higher rates. However, he can't. "We don't have the money," said Wynne. And while Congress may grouse about USAF's condition, "there's a consistent theme here" in the real funding shortfall. "The Air Force is basically saying they don't have the money to modernize their equipment, and so they're going to limp into the future as best they can," Wynne said. It will find money within for only the highest priority programs.

Asked if the Air Force will get back the 6,000 airmen who have been sent to what he calls "ground force taskings" once the Army gets an increase in end strength, Wynne said discussions are under way about "possibly seeing a way clear to free up the 'in-lieu-of' ... missions that we've been at." For now, Wynne will proceed with cutting the 40,000 full-time equivalent Air Force personnel by 2009 because "I haven't been able to issue any other instructions to my budgeteers ... because there's no other funding being offered me."

Long Road to Long-Range Strike

It will take a few more years for the Air Force to evaluate its options for the next long-range strike system, despite the looming 2018 deadline to have a system on the runway, USAF Secretary Michael Wynne reported.

"We are hoping we can hold 2018," he said in a March interview, but "given all our other funding constraints," that will be a tough goal to achieve. "For right now, it's a great target," he said.

Wynne's comments belie previous USAF suggestions—even from Wynne himself—that USAF will have to start "bending metal" soon if it is to meet the LRS deadline imposed by last year's Quadrennial Defense Review.

Technologies applicable to the LRS system are "coming along," he said in the interview, although the Air Force will have to invest some more money in propulsion and sensors. It can make good use of design and development work carried out on the now-defunct Air Force version of the Joint Unmanned Combat Air System, as well as demonstrations for refueling unmanned vehicles, he said.

However, Wynne feels that the overall concept has settled into being a system that can be manned—for nuclear missions and those requiring man-in-the-loop—or unmanned, for those occasions when "we want to send it up and keep it up in a refueled state for more than a week."

Once the Air Force is satisfied that it has achieved what he called "technology readiness," and has proved to its Pentagon masters that it can achieve the requirements set, Wynne said he believes the service will be able to move quickly into a hardware program.

"We know the stable of suppliers. We've been working with them pretty [well] on the [J-UCAS program], and my guess is we could go to a fairly rapid down select," he said.

Boeing and Northrop Grumman were the two companies involved in J-UCAS; they are now competing to supply the Navy with its carrier-capable Naval UCAS.

More Mobility Twists

If the Army and Marine Corps are expanding by a combined 92,000 troops, as decreed by President Bush, the Air Force will likely need more airlifters to haul around all of these new troops and their gear, and more airmen to integrate with new units and help coordinate air support. Maybe.

"We know that there will be a larger requirement for strategic lift" as a result of the ground force increase, USAF's Chief of Staff, Gen. T. Michael Moseley, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March. Last year's mobility capabilities study verified a need for about 300 strategic airlifters, Moseley said.

However, he told the Senate panel, "we're in a very interesting place now" with regard to mobility aircraft. "Our land-component brothers are growing, our strategic airlift inventory is static, our C-5s are becoming much harder to maintain, and [their] reliability ... is in question. The C-17 line is about to be shut down." It all adds up to a "crease in history ... where we're going to have to make some decisions."

Two C-5 upgrade programs—an avionics improvement and a re-engining and reliability effort—are way over cost and have prompted the Air Force to re-evaluate whether the upgrades are worthwhile. (See "Washington Watch: Those Slippery Mobility Plans," April, p. 12.) The Air Force has not, though, rushed to request more C-17s, deciding to wait and see just how the Army and the Marine Corps apportion their personnel increases, and also to evaluate some new technologies and tactics in aerial resupply.

Wynne told this magazine that the service has begun to "really explore and employ" the Joint Precision Air-Drop System (JPADS), which combines steerable parachutes and satellite guidance to deliver cargo dropped from high-flying airlifter aircraft. The system has gotten very good very fast, and Wynne said it is now possible to put fairly hefty loads of cargo in a precise location without any aircraft having to touch down. That can't help but affect mobility requirements.

"We've gotten some of the 10,000-pound pallets to drop within ... 300 meters," Wynne said. "So, what I'm getting here is the ability to put in ... a helicopter landing zone



J-UCAS has bred familiarity.



Lockheed Martin photo

Will there be fewer C-5s?

pretty much all of the supplies that a relatively large Army contingent could use.”

He added, “Suddenly, I have sufficient precision that it actually alters the Army’s need to carry subsistence with them. And therefore they become immediately more agile and ... flexible.” The JPADS, he said, will allow Army commanders to “fight towards an objective” and be resupplied as soon as they attain it. He called it a “pretty cool” option.

This capability “begins to push back on how many intratheater lifts” the Air Force needs, Wynne said. It may allow some C-17s now performing intratheater resupply to return to strategic missions. It may also mean that the Air Force can live with fewer upgraded C-5s, especially if some are used in less critical domestic missions.

However, Air Mobility Command chief Gen. Duncan J. McNabb told *Air Force Magazine* in late March that JPADS will only help in the overall mobility picture, and not necessarily reduce the need for aircraft.

“It helps you most in the ground infrastructure,” he said, in that JPADS will reduce the need to set up, man, and defend some forward bases, and in that it could “indeed save us a lot of money.” However, the amount of cargo to be delivered won’t change, he said: JPADS “won’t scratch that itch.”

Wynne said he expects that USAF will “ask to retire somewhere between 15 and 30” C-5As—the oldest and least-efficient ones—and use the unmodified A’s “for domestic flights for the next, probably, 10 years.”

The program will also likely be “stretched out, because the cost of doing it has gone up,” Wynne reported.

But what about in the meantime? Should the Air Force buy more C-17s? The Air Force didn’t request any C-17s in its Fiscal 2008 budget, and noted only two more that it would like to have under its “unfunded priorities” list to Congress.

Wynne believes that USAF has about 18 months to decide the issue. While Boeing has argued that it needs an immediate commitment from the Air Force to build more C-17s or it will continue shutting down long-lead production on some components, Wynne said with some testiness that he sees Boeing’s ultimatum as a kind of corporate game of chicken.

“I think Boeing is confronting its patrons with a do-or-die situation, for which the patrons don’t have the money,” he asserted.

KC-X Descendants

The stakes in the Air Force’s KC-X aerial tanker replacement program may be even higher than previously thought.

That’s because the aircraft selected may be the heir apparent platform to replace today’s heavy intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance fleet.

The Air Force plans an initial buy of about 179 tanker airplanes and will choose from Boeing’s KC-767 and the Northrop Grumman-EADS KC-30. The program as now structured is probably worth about \$40 billion in today’s dollars.

However, Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Chief of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March that the selected airplane could also be the basis of the next generation ISR fleet. Responding to a question on the urgency of filling the capability hole left by canceling the E-10 multisensor aircraft, Moseley said, “Until we get through with the KC-X opportunity and see which airframe we get and see what opportunities we have down the road to look at a follow-on to AWACS, JSTARS, and Rivet Joint, ... I think we’ll be OK.”

The KC-135 tanker is the airplane to be replaced by the KC-X, and it served as the basis for a number of ISR types, such as the E-3 AWACS, the RC-135, and EC-135 fleet. The E-8 Joint STARS were built onto secondhand Boeing 707s—which are similar to the KC-135—as the starting point.

The Air Force had previously settled on the Boeing 767 as the basis of the E-10, but Moseley’s remarks suggest that the service will seek commonality between the ISR aircraft and the tanker.

The ISR “heavies” number about 84 aircraft, and replacing all of them—without their elaborate electronics gear—would cost about \$24 billion at today’s list prices.

As for the E-10, it died for several reasons, according to Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne.

“I would say that the expense of it was probably more

Northrop Grumman illustration



KC-30 (here, tanking a B-2) or KC-767 will get the prize.

than anything” the chief factor in the E-10’s demise, Wynne said in an interview. He said that “there may be coming a different portfolio” of systems that will accomplish the same mission intended for the E-10. The Multiplatform Radar Technology Insertion Program (MP-RTIP) radar, which was the centerpiece of the E-10, might be made small enough to fit on the long-endurance Global Hawk vehicle, which may be a “very [much] less expensive way” of accomplishing some of the mission.

Moreover, although the E-10 would have had “protection in depth” if it had been used in a homeland defense role—by virtue of operating well inside US border—“most of us [thought of it] as a part and parcel of conducting an attack offshore,” Wynne noted, where “it would be a delightful target” for an enemy. ■