

A Polish F-16 pulls up to a KC-135 from the 100th Air Refueling Wing at RAF Mildenhall, England, to refuel on June 17, 2014. The tanker, which was deployed to Powidz AB, Poland, was supporting the US and Polish bilateral exercise Eagle Talon, as well as the US Navy-led Baltops 2014 exercise.



LOOKING EAST

By Amy McCullough, News Editor

US AIR FORCES IN EUROPE IS MUCH SMALLER THAN IT WAS IN THE COLD WAR, BUT IT IS ONCE AGAIN COMPELLED TO LOOK TOWARD RUSSIA.



IN the 23 years since the Cold War ended, the Air Force mission and force structure in Europe has undergone profound changes. This fact is lost on many Stateside, according to many US airmen in Europe.

The European mission has shifted, to increase focus on new NATO members and to support the war in Afghanistan, but this summer's upheaval in Ukraine is causing the Air Force to once again size up its old adversary, Russia.

Lt. Gen. Noel T. “Tom” Jones, vice commander of US Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa (USAFE-AFAFRICA), said he’s been shocked by the changes between what he experienced as an F-16 pilot at Torrejon AB, Spain, from 1985 to 1988 and the command he helps lead today.

“I was a little embarrassed of my own misunderstanding of life here in Europe,” Jones told *Air Force Magazine* at Ramstein AB, Germany, in June. “I hadn’t been assigned here between ’88 and 2012,” he said, and he assumed

things were much as they always had been. Jones doesn’t think he’s alone in that misperception.

“My sincere belief is many of our leaders, military and elected,” also don’t realize that USAFE is no longer like it was in the 1990s, when there was “all kinds of infrastructure, ... airplanes, ... [and] people over here.”

In fact, the number of USAF main operating bases in Europe—as well as the number of aircraft and aircraft squadrons in theater—has fallen by about 75 percent since the 1990s, while the



USAF photo by SSgt. R.J. Biermann



Staff photo by Amy McCullough

Above: USAF C-130J aircraft take off from Aviano AB, Italy, carrying 150 US soldiers to joint NATO training in Poland. **Left:** SSgt. Ross Blumer, a maintainer from the 52nd Maintenance Group at Spangdahlem AB, Germany, cannibalizes an F-16 at Lask AB, Poland, on June 16, 2014. Maintainers pulled spare parts from the aircraft to keep the rest of the F-16 fleet in flying shape during exercises Eagle Talon and Baltops. **Below left:** Lt. Gen. Noel Jones, vice commander of USAFE-AFAFRICA, speaks at a D-Day celebration in France in April. Jones says he's been surprised by the changes in the European area of responsibility since his tour at Torrejon AB, Spain, in the mid-1980s, when it was a much larger enterprise.

number of Air Force personnel assigned to the command has dropped about 55 percent during the same period.

During the Cold War, US Air Forces in Europe supported a single combatant command. It comprised four separate staffs, including a headquarters and three numbered air forces. There were 25 main operating bases, at which some 72,000 Air Force personnel were assigned. There also were 805 aircraft assigned to 34 aircraft squadrons. There was no Africa Command then.

Today, there are some 34,000 Air Force personnel assigned to USAFE-AFAFRICA, with just 204 aircraft and 10 aircraft squadrons. They support two combatant commands with a single integrated staff, including a headquarters and just one numbered air force. The 16th Air Force and 17th Air Force are now inactive.

The evolution of the 52nd Fighter Wing at Spangdahlem AB, Germany, is a textbook example of the changing European mission and force structure. In the mid-1990s, the 52nd reconfigured its fighter squadrons, assigning F-16s to



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the 22nd and the 23rd fighter squadrons and A-10s to the 81st Fighter Squadron.

Then, the Air Force announced plans to divest 254 legacy fighters, including 21 Block 50 F-16s at Spangdahlem. By August 2010, the 22nd and 23rd were inactivated, and the F-16 mission was consolidated under the reconstituted 480th Fighter Squadron. It became the sole Air Force F-16 squadron in Europe with a dedicated mission of suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD).

The wing underwent another major change in June 2013, when it furled the 81st Fighter Squadron's flag, marking an end to the unit's 71-year history. A total of 21 A-10s were relocated to Moody AFB, Ga., as a result of Fiscal 2013 force structure changes approved by Congress. While the A-10 was conceived to destroy vast numbers of Soviet tanks in Europe should the Cold War turn hot, there are no more Warthogs permanently assigned to Europe. The last A-10s left Spangdahlem on May 17, 2013, and the squadron was inactivated a month later.

"We are trying to be as ready as we ... can be. It doesn't matter that we have a large force here in Europe, but the fact that we can continue to train with our allies and continue to build partnerships and partner capacity is really key," said Col. Lars R. Hubert, then acting commander of the 52nd Fighter Wing, in June. "You're opening up the doors. You're building the capacity, not necessarily with a large force, but with a small force, and large forces could roll in behind that."

That's the philosophy behind the aviation detachment at Lask AB, Poland, located about 100 miles southwest of Warsaw. The geographically separated unit, which reports to the 52nd Fighter Wing, represents the first regular presence of US forces in Poland. It is a "proof of concept" of the benefits a small force can bring to partner nations, detachment commander Maj. Matthew Spears said in June. The detachment stood up in November 2012 to strengthen the US-Polish relationship through regular joint training exercises and rotational deployments.

At Lask, there are 10 Active Duty airmen from a variety of specialties assigned, including a three-man officer corps. It comprises Spears, who is an F-16 instructor pilot; the director of operations, who is a C-130 pilot; and the maintenance officer in charge, whose expertise is in F-16s.

There also are seven enlisted members, including an F-16 crew chief, an

aerospace ground equipment specialist, a cyber transport specialist, a client systems specialist, a contracting officer, a logistics planner, and a material management specialist.

Together they work around the clock, mostly behind the scenes, to ensure that USAF units rotating into Poland can start operating on Day 1, said Spears. They also work with the Poles every day, building trust between the two countries, so when a crisis arises, "we will have ready knowledge of each other's capabilities, we are speaking off the same tactics, same operations, same strategies, and we can literally communicate with each other," said Hubert.

"Some of those things are pretty darn key," he added, noting that in previous operations, communications were impossible.

COMMITMENT TO POLAND

Spears said the detachment's role "has evolved" since Russia invaded Ukraine earlier this year. Initially, the airmen were tasked with hosting four theater security cooperation events per year. Typically, that meant two F-16 deployments and two C-130 deployments.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced in April, however, that the US would maintain a continuous presence in Poland as part of an effort to reassure allies—especially those in the Baltics and neighboring countries that were wary of further Russian aggression.

Twelve F-16s from the 555th Fighter Squadron at Aviano AB, Italy, and some 200 personnel arrived at Lask in mid-March. It was the first deployment under the newly defined continuous presence. They were followed in late May by the largest rotation of F-16s to Lask to date—including some 300 airmen from Spangdahlem. An extra two F-16s also were temporarily based there during President Barack Obama's visit in early June, though those fighters weren't participating in training exercises, officials said.

"We are supporting [an] 18-ship package with, essentially, the people and equipment we would bring for a 12-ship package," said 1st Lt. John McKinney, assistant aircraft maintenance unit officer-in-charge for the 480th Aircraft Maintenance Unit from Spangdahlem.

Poland offers great training for US forces. Not only do they get to work closely with a NATO ally, there also are less restrictions to Polish airspace than there are at Ramstein or other western European bases. This gives pilots an

opportunity to fly more night training missions and update their certifications.

However, bringing such a large package was not an easy task. For example, ramp space was limited.

"We didn't have the space to park those 18 aircraft here," said McKinney, so they had to measure the ramp pavement and re-mark it to create minimum-distance parking spaces. "If they didn't do that, we would be split between a couple different aprons and ramps and that would really hinder our progress."

The Spangdahlem F-16 rotation was the third this year to Poland. C-130s followed soon after, making a fourth.

"Our commitment to Poland's security, as well as the security of our allies in Central and Eastern Europe, is a cornerstone of our own security and it is sacrosanct," said Obama during a joint press conference with Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski in Warsaw on June 3.

During that same visit, Obama announced the \$1 billion European Reassurance Initiative, a series of measures meant to bolster a persistent US air, land, and sea presence in the region, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The initiative is meant to assure NATO allies of American commitment to Europe following Russia's recent annexation of Crimea and the buildup of Russian forces near the Baltic borders. The details were still being worked out by midsummer, but partner nations welcomed the idea with enthusiasm.

The money will "help us keep US troops on Baltic soil, because [it] will go for sustainment, for more exercises, for permanent presence, as ... needed with [the] Ukrainian crisis," Latvian Defense Chief Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube said during a June interview in his Latvian defense headquarters in Riga.

"We are very pleased about this money, but we don't [expect] to use money for Latvian defenses. It should help to do more exercises [and provide] more soldiers" in Latvia, he added.

Speaking to reporters at the Pentagon on June 30, Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, commander of US European Command and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, said, "It's too early to lay out what the details" of the initiative will be, "but it will cover increased and enhanced training, readiness, exercises, and necessary facility improvements that we will need in order to conduct quality training and readiness activities with all of our allies and partners."



Staff photos by Amy McCullough

Top: A four ship of F-16s assigned to the 52nd Fighter Wing at Spangdahlem AB, Germany, fly alongside a KC-135 tanker from RAF Mildenhall during Baltops 2014 over Poland. Above: 1st Lt. Paul Anguita and Capt. Aaron Richardson, KC-135 pilots assigned to the 100th Air Refueling Wing at Mildenhall, prepare to take off from Lask Air Base in support of Baltops.

Those training exercises now fall under what has been dubbed Operation Atlantic Resolve. “In this operation, we will ... demonstrate our continued commitment to the collective security of NATO and dedication to the enduring peace and stability in the region, in light of the Russian intervention in Ukraine specifically,” said Breedlove.

Hubert said that while it would be easy to see the largest F-16 rotation to Poland as a response to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine—especially in light of Obama’s Warsaw announcement, which coincided with the arrival of the aircraft—USAFE-AFAFRICA had been planning it long before the Crimea crisis erupted. The size of the rotation was bolstered, he said, because of the number of exercises the aircraft would participate in during their stay.

While in Poland, the F-16s supported the US Navy-led Baltops exercise—the largest maritime exercise held in the region—where they worked with the US Navy, German, French, and Swedish forces conducting maritime interdiction, SEAD, and defensive counterair munitions, according to Lt. Col. Steven Horton, 52nd Operations Group deputy commander, in Lodz, Poland.

The F-16s also flew with the Polish air force in Operation Eagle Talon, which was limited to just US and Polish forces.

“They had Exercise Eagle Talon in the morning and then they would fly for Baltops in the afternoon, or [conduct] local currency training,” said McKinney. “Some days they flew the same stuff, just [with] a different NATO ally. ... Being able to be more flexible with our fly times allowed our pilots to become more efficient. That’s the cool thing of training with our allies. ... We all benefit from that.”

One day after the F-16s departed Poland on June 30, three C-130Js from the 86th Airlift Wing at Ramstein touched down at Powidz Air Base in Poland. USAF officials said another F-16 deployment was in the works, though it wasn’t clear if that would follow the C-130 rotation or happen simultaneously.

“We can go heel-to-toe if necessary. That’s [part of] our plan for the immediate future and that’s kind of the way we are looking at it for now,” said Gen. Frank Gorenc, USAFE-AFAFRICA commander. “We’re still continuing to work on that plan and we’ll adjust

that plan as necessary to address the conditions set out by EUCOM and NATO.”

Also in mid-June, there were 475 US airmen participating in the Baltic exercise Saber Strike, which included some 4,700 participants from 10 countries. This year’s exercise included eight F-16s from the Minnesota Air National Guard’s 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth.

The fighters came directly from exercise Thracian Star in Bulgaria, where they flew 10 to 12 sorties a day. They were simultaneously supporting joint terminal attack controllers on the ground for Saber Strike and joining the F-16s from Lask, providing maritime support to US Navy ships operating in the Baltic Sea for Baltops.

THE TANKER ISSUE

This was the first time F-16s took part in Saber Strike; typically, A-10s have provided the ground-troop support. It’s also the first time Duluth’s F-16 Block 50 airplanes have operated in the European Theater since the wing acquired them from Spangdahlem in 2010.

“It is very busy supporting two different operations on two locations, but our maintenance people are doing a wonderful job ... and the operational support people are doing a wonderful job planning,” 148th Fighter Wing detachment commander Lt. Col. Nate Aysta said during a visit to Amari AB, Estonia, where F-16s staged southwest of the capital of Tallinn.

Such operations wouldn’t be possible without tanker support. All the exercises have kept the 100th Air Refueling Wing at RAF Mildenhall, UK—USAF’s only permanently assigned aerial refueling unit in Europe—busy.

The 100th—with refueling responsibility for most of the vast European and African airspace—is on pace to reach 144 percent of its scheduled annual flying hours during just the first six months of the year, said wing commander Col. Kenneth T. Bibb Jr.

“We’re at an exceptionally high operational tempo this year,” said Bibb. “To only have one flying squadron and one maintenance unit [for all of Europe and Africa], it’s an incredible pace to keep up with current operations, but it’s also an exciting time to be part of the operation.”

Of the wing’s 15 KC-135s, two were deployed to Italy, two were in Spain,

and one was operating in Poland in early June, said Bibb. The wing was planning to send two KC-135s and three aircrews to Powidz to support Baltops, Eagle Talon, and Saber Strike, but real-world requirements only allowed for one aircraft and one aircrew.

At the time, the unit’s airmen also had just returned from Iceland, where they were supporting the Icelandic air policing mission.

“Right now, there are a lot of airmen doing more with less and making things happen,” said Bibb, but “there is some stress that comes with that.”

Doing more with less is a mantra in today’s military, given the tight fiscal environment. European units and bases have had a bull’s-eye on their backs for years, however, because a Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) action isn’t required to close excess infrastructure on the continent. Every time DOD leaders ask for another round of BRAC, the default response from Congress has been to cut infrastructure in Europe first. There’s no constituency in Europe to plead differently with Congress.

The Defense Department launched the European Infrastructure Consolidation review about a year ago in response to such comments. Breedlove said on June 30 that he expected that review to be completed “relatively soon.”

Infrastructure in Europe already has been reduced by some 30 percent since 2000. Thus far, many of the affected facilities have been the Army’s. However, the closures still send a ripple effect through the other branches, said Col. Joseph D. McFall, commander of the 435th Air Ground Operations Wing at Ramstein.

The AGOW is a “hugely diverse wing” that primarily serves as a combat enabler. Its members are spread out all over Europe, and many serve on Army installations.

McFall said many airmen feel the effect of the Army closures. For example, the 4th Air Support Operations Group used to be made up of three air support operations squadrons and the 7th Weather Squadron. When the Army downsized from four brigades in Europe to two, the ASOG headquarters moved from Heidelberg to Wiesbaden, Germany. The weather detachment based at Mannheim, in southwestern Germany, shut down because the base closed down, said McFall. The Air Force also made the decision to close two ASOSs, effective Oct. 1—one

at Aviano and one in Wiesbaden—and “consolidate everything into one squadron out where the major Army training ranges are, which is Vilseck,” the northern part of Bavaria.

Breedlove has said repeatedly there is room for further infrastructure reductions in Europe. However, he’s also made it clear that the same doesn’t apply to force structure—which needs to be preserved. Although he declined to discuss specifics of the EIC during the late-June news conference, Breedlove said USAF should expect to see “at least reductions of our F-15 force in Europe.”

The Fiscal 2015 budget request sought a reduction of 51 F-15Cs across the force, of which 21 will come from Europe, Air Force spokeswoman Ann Stefanik said in early July. Gorenc said his command made its inputs to the EIC, and “up to this point, I’ve been satisfied that our concerns have been addressed.”

USAFE-AFAFRICA and EUCOM leaders also are taking a look at force structure needs in Europe, especially in light of Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

“As a result of budget and sequester, there are already some reductions ... on the books, so I think the first step in this process is that we develop a mechanism by which we stop [and] relook [at] those planned actions in Europe,” said Breedlove. “Then, once that question is answered, we would have a better understanding of what we would need as far as rotational forces. As you know, we have forces all over Europe now, European Command forces that are a part of our immediate response measures, ground forces in the three Baltic nations, in Poland, air forces in Lithuania and in the south, ships in the Baltic Sea, marines in Romania, et cetera, et cetera.”

Breedlove said the continuous presence in Eastern Europe would stay in effect at least through Dec. 31. Beyond that, officials will take a look at the situation and determine whether they’ll need to rotate in additional forces to accomplish the mission.

“We are an expeditionary Air Force. If something happened here, depending on the priority, we would certainly have to go back to the expeditionary Air Force to fill the requirement,” said Gorenc. “With respect to permanently based combat aircraft, for now, given the strategy that we have and the resource decisions we have to make, we think it’s reasonable.” ■