

Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James
March 7, 2016
State of the Air Force Opening Statement

All right. Well, thank you, General Cook, and good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for joining us here this afternoon.

A few days ago, I had the opportunity to attend a Women's History Month event on Capitol Hill. It was hosted by the first lady and the second lady, and they -- they honored not only all of the women veterans who have served, but also a real Air Force pioneer, whose name is Brigadier General Retired Wilma Vaught. She was the first woman comptroller to become a general officer, and she's also the recently retired president of the Women in the Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, otherwise known as WIMSA.

WIMSA, if you haven't seen it, is the only major memorial that honors and tells the stories of our servicewomen and their contributions to the defense of our country. And so I couldn't help but be reminded by that event on Capital Hill how far our military has come with respect to women and service.

And of course this important progress continues today, and it needs to remain strong and moving forward for the future. As you know, we now have all of our combat career fields opened to women. We have two female four-star generals in the Air Force, and just last month, Ms. Lisa Disbrow was confirmed as the undersecretary of the Air Force, which I think marks the first time in history that our -- that one of our military services has been led, in the two senior civilian posts, by women. So all in all, it was a pretty good start to the month of March, which, as I said, is Women's History Month.

Now, thinking back to our last State of the Air Force address, it's been a little bit more than six months since we gathered here together in this forum, and a lot has happened since that time.

In October, Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria. In November, Daesh terrorists attacked Paris again, as well as Lebanon, Mali and here at home in San Bernardino. In January, China landed an aircraft on a newly built runway in the South China Sea, and then in February, they installed a surface- to-air missile system on Woody Island, and then a few weeks ago, North Korea tested a nuclear weapon.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the Taliban, Al Qaida, Daesh and other anti-government groups continue to conduct attacks, undermine security and create challenges to the people and the government of Afghanistan as they work to develop a more secure and prosperous nation.

And as I'm sure by now you have heard, on Saturday, we conducted an airstrike in Somalia against an Al-Shabaab training camp. This strike was in self-defense and in defense of our African Union Mission in Somalia partners. We did use a mix of manned and unmanned platforms, and as more information is available, we will certainly be looking to provide it to you, but that is the only information I'm able to provide at this time.

So the bottom line to all this is your Air Force has been extremely busy and extremely effective, and all of that is being accomplished with 200,000 fewer people than we had on active duty during the days of Desert Storm.

We have continued the fight against Daesh. We're gaining momentum. In the past year, our coalition forces have upped the ante, flying more than 55,000 sorties in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, and that's a threefold increase of sorties as compared to 2014. So this is from strike aircraft like the F-16, the F-15, the A-10, the B-1s. They're deliberately and dynamically striking Daesh every day, enabling the Iraqi, Kurd and Syrian partners to recapture territory.

And then there's the ISR aircraft, like the MQ-1s and 9s, that are developing targets and striking them when they expose themselves. And then we have our KC-135s and our KC-10 refueling aircraft that are supporting this incredible daily sortie rate in both Iraq and Syria, and, really, all around the world.

There's more than 16,000 airmen deployed in the region, and they are working diligently to sustain these operations that I've described to you seven days a week.

Now, as you know, this persistent effort against Daesh is taking a toll on our aircraft, our readiness and our airmen, and while we continue to meet the increased demands for combat air power, we must also modernize, maintain, upgrade our aircraft, take care of our people, and I want to now talk a little bit about the B-1.

The B-1, as you may know, redeployed home from CENTCOM in January and while the B-1s will be receiving much needed modernization and maintenance, the -- the venerable B-52, with its similar capacity and accuracy and endurance, remains ready and able to meet combatant commander requirements. Now, we're waiting for final approval, but there have been recent infrastructure improvements that now allow the necessary support to deploy the B-52 in theater. So additional details about all of that, should it happen, will be available at the appropriate time.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would ask that we don't forget our airmen serving in harm's way. In these last six months since we last gathered, we lost 19 intrepid airmen, eight of whom were due to enemy activity, and two of those were lost less than 48 hours after the last time we joined together for State of the Air Force.

On August 26, 2015, most of us awoke surrounded by the comforts of home, but Captain Matt Rowland and special -- who was a special tactics officer and Staff Sergeant Forrest Sibley, a combat controller, woke up a world away in Afghanistan. And in a sickening twist of fate, at a Helmand Province checkpoint, two men camouflaged as soldiers opened fire on a U.S. vehicle and we lost Matt and Forrest that day.

In their combined 12 years of service, Matt and Forrest deployed seven times, and in addition to the Purple Hearts, Forrest earned five Bronze Stars, including one for valor. And very, very soon, we will posthumously honor Matt's heroism with a Silver Star, which as you know, is one of the highest medals we reserve for gallantry in action against enemies of the United States.

Now as I mentioned, Matt and Forrest weren't the only airman lost to the hands of our enemies since our August address. We also bid a painful farewell to Major Adrianna Vorderbruggen, Technical Sergeant Joseph Lemm, Staff Sergeant Louis Bonacasa, Staff Sergeant Michael Cinco, Staff Sergeant Chester McBride and Staff Sergeant Peter Taub.

Another development since we last met was the contract award of the LRS-B. We went through a GAO protest and now work has begun. We've given the bomber a designation, the B-21, we've shared an artist's rendering, we've given a detailed acquisition approach explanation and we've told you how we intend to hold down costs. And don't forget, we still need a name. Airmen and their families can now go to the Air Force Global Strike Command website or they can link directly through af.mil and submit their ideas, as well as get more information on submission guidelines.

Now, all of this is in the spirit of more transparency, even though this is and will remain a highly classified program and we'll continue to be as transparent as possible going forward with, of course, the appropriate oversight, people in Congress being fully read in.

So today, I have a little bit more information I'd like to share with you on the B-21, specifically the seven major contractor partners who will join Northrop Grumman in building the nation's bomber for the 21st century.

These partners and the primary B-21 work locations are Pratt & Whitney, East Hartford Connecticut; BAE Systems, Nashua, New Hampshire; GKN Aerospace, St. Louis, Missouri; Janicki Industries, Sedro-Woolley, Washington; Orbital ATK, Clearfield, Utah and Dayton, Ohio; Rockwell Collins, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and Spirit Aerosystems, Wichita, Kansas.

Now, Pratt and Whitney, of course, is our engine provider, the other six will work on air frame or mission systems. And again, that is the totality of the information I'm able to share on this aspect at this time. However, as General Cook mentioned, after the chief and I conclude here today, for those who are interested, General Bunch will remain behind, and he'll be prepared to give some additional details on the B-21 contract incentive structure, which I know has been of interest to some of you in the audience today. So chief and I will defer those questions to General Bunch.

Finally, since the last State of the Air Force, we rolled out our FY '17 budget and we've completed three of our four budget hearings. To each of the committees, we have expressed our appreciation for the stability of the Bipartisan Budget Agreement, but we also point out that that agreement did leave us somewhat short of our budgetary needs, 3.4 billion to be specific, for the Air Force.

We've, of course, detailed the investments that we've made and we've tried to detail the tough choices that we made for budgetary reasons, none of which are popular as you know. They're not popular with us either. And that's precisely what makes them tough. And of course, we always remind Congress please lift sequestration permanently so that we can do a better job across all three of our top priorities, which are taking care of people, striking the right balance between readiness and modernization while always making every dollar count.

So again, we thank you very much for being with us today, and we'll now take your questions.
Bob, would you like to start us off?