

The RPA Problem

OVER the past 14 years, the Air Force has steadily fielded an enormously capable remotely piloted aircraft fleet, though during the first half of that timespan, USAF was frequently criticized for an alleged lack of interest in the burgeoning mission.

Criticism reached its apogee in April 2008, when Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates traveled to Maxwell AFB, Ala., and spoke at the Air War College. “Unmanned systems cost much less and offer greater loiter times than their manned counterparts, making them ideal for many of today’s tasks,” Gates said.

“Our services are still not moving aggressively in wartime to provide resources needed now on the battlefield,” he continued. “I’ve been wrestling for months to get more intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets into the theater. Because people were stuck in old ways of doing business, it’s been like pulling teeth.”

At the time, the inventory of remotely piloted aircraft had increased 25-fold over seven years, and even Gates admitted DOD had “doubled this capability in recent months.” To the Defense Secretary, this was “still not good enough.”

And so ISR, and RPAs in particular, moved to the head of the requirements queue. Over the past seven years, the Air Force has redoubled its efforts to meet the nation’s immediate wartime ISR needs.

The never-ending effort to provide the capabilities sought by combatant commanders has come at a price, however. This affects all aspects of Air Force ISR, such as the Global Hawk, AWACS, and U-2 communities, but the strain is seen most clearly in the RPA community.

Combatant commanders freely admit their appetite for ISR is insatiable, and this manifests itself in an ever-increasing requirement for more and more RPA “orbits”—around-the-clock airborne coverage tracks.

“Our budget is going to ramp up support to the most urgent needs that the combatant commanders identified to us, which basically equates to one thing: ISR,” said Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James, explaining the service’s 2016 budget request to House lawmakers

March 17. “ISR. ISR—that is what they tell us.”

The airmen working with MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper RPAs have been unable to meet the demand for their systems’ reconnaissance and strike capabilities. After 14 years of nonstop shortages, the community is now at the breaking point.

“We’ve never caught the requirements rabbit,” Gen. Mark A. Welsh III, Air Force Chief of Staff, said April 8. “It’s been running so fast since 2008 that

USAF has spent years chasing the ISR “requirements rabbit.” The force has reached the breaking point.

we’ve been chasing it, but we haven’t been able to catch it. ... We’ve gone from 21 orbits to now 60.” This requires ever-growing numbers of RPA airmen.

The demand goes up another five orbits this year, “three orbits next year, and five more the year after that,” Welsh noted.

The shortfalls are exacerbated by the fact that the Predator and Reaper force regularly goes into surge mode, further straining the system.

The Air Force has 55 combat air patrol’s worth of airmen to meet a steady state requirement (such as it is) for 60 CAPs. The RPA airmen have been working six day on, two day off schedules, with 12-hour days, for years.

And then come the surges, “nine of them in the last eight years, some lasting months at a time,” Welsh said. The surge periods require USAF to fly 10 orbits more than it has personnel for, which to the airmen means seven straight 12-hour days, followed by a single day off.

This is an unsustainable pace—the Air Force doesn’t even have enough RPA airmen to fill its training units. Too many airmen are needed in the operational units to spare trainers, so the problem snowballs.

The RPA replacement training unit is only 60 percent manned, meaning USAF is only able to produce 180 new Predator and Reaper pilots per year. It is losing 240 pilots per year through normal rotations and separations.

Welsh said the RPA community is excited about the mission and its future, but the airmen are overworked and unable to get the career-broadening experiences—or even the time off—they need to have viable long-term careers. Staff assignments and advanced schooling are tough sells.

“We have got to change that dynamic by at least taking enough of a deep breath ... that we can get ahead of that training curve and create a healthy force size so they can have a battle rhythm that’s supportable over time,” the Chief said.

It is time to begin looking beyond today’s ISR requirements and think about long-term needs.

First, the Air Force must be allowed to build a Predator and Reaper community large enough to meet the long-term demand for these systems, even if it means the combatant commanders find their insatiably growing hunger going temporarily unfilled. Failing to stabilize the force will result in mass defections from the RPA career fields. This could come to a head in 2017, when a large cadre of RPA pilots will reach the end of their initial service commitments.

“We can’t afford to lose these people,” Welsh said. “These are the experts in this business. These are the pioneers.”

Second, the Air Force must be granted the funding and flexibility needed to develop ISR systems for tougher future fights. Predators and Reapers are great for places where the US has absolute control of the air, but they are slow, visible, and not particularly agile. They would be shot down in droves in a battle against an enemy with advanced air defenses.

“A relentless operations tempo, with fewer resources ... has left a force proficient in only those portions of the mission necessary for current operations,” Air Force officials wrote in the 2015 USAF Posture Statement.

Today’s unrelenting requirements are draining the current force and crowding out future advancements. As the posture statement put it, “the nation deserves an Air Force that can outmatch its most dangerous enemies at their peak of power—the most demanding warfighting scenario, not just the ‘low-end fight.’”