

United States Air Force Reserve



Testimony

Before the Senate Appropriations
Subcommittee on Defense

Guard and Reserve Hearing

Statement of
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OVERVIEW

Chairman McConnell, Ranking Member Coons, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, it is my privilege to testify on behalf of the United States Air Force Reserve (AFR). The AFR is a combat-ready force committed to defending the Nation, deterring aggression, and should deterrence fail, defeating our adversaries. The character of today's Reserve Airman, one of innovation, perseverance and the selfless desire to serve is what makes this possible. We are not a backup force; we are defined by our ability to be efficient, experienced, accessible and above all, lethal. This unique combination of military excellence and civilian-sector expertise is the Reserve Advantage. Our direct application of this advantage is how we meet the priorities of the National Defense Strategy. In defending the homeland, we ensure the readiness of our Nation's nuclear security by training every bomber and helicopter pilot who executes this no-fail mission at home and worldwide. In deterring aggression in the Indo-Pacific, it is the irreplaceable experience of our veteran aircrew and maintainers, our strategic depth that provides the judgment required for a peer conflict. In strengthening alliances, it is the efficiency of our model that allows us to build partner capacity through persistent engagement. This is the Reserve Advantage in action: a unique combination of military excellence and civilian-sector expertise that provides a vital return on investment for the Nation. Timely, consistent authorizations and appropriations for defense spending are necessary to organize, train, and equip the most lethal force in the world. Lack of regular appropriations compromises our ability to defend the Nation. We are deliberately integrating our force design to meet future Air Force needs in competition with our adversaries. To win the future fight, the Air Force Reserve requires concurrent and proportional fielding which will give us time to recapitalize our fleet and build the force our Nation counts on.

The Reserve Advantage at Work: Meeting the National Defense Strategy

Defending the Homeland

The Reserve Advantage is not just words. Our accessibility in defending the homeland, our experience in deterring peer adversaries, and our cost efficiency are direct contributions to the National Defense Strategy. We demonstrate it every day through our unique, lifesaving capabilities that protect our national assets and the American people.

Global Strike

Nuclear Deterrence is a no-fail mission that allows the United States (U.S.) to project military power rapidly around the world. The AFR currently supports Global Strike with the B-52, B-1 and MH-139, encompassing over 1,700 positions across three states, enabling the continuity of our Nation's strategic deterrence. The AFR operates the only Department of the Air Force (DAF) B-52 Flying Training Unit (FTU) and produces all B-52 aviators for the Total Force (TF). Our experienced instructors train and certify 24 operators annually, fulfilling 100 percent of our requirement for manning the backbone of the U.S. nuclear triad. B-1s and B-52s from the 307th Bomb Wing at Barksdale Air Force Base (AFB), Louisiana execute agile combat employment in conventional and nuclear exercises as well as bomber task forces and show of force missions around the world.

Since its FY16 reactivation, the 489th Bomb Group at Dyess AFB, Texas has supported every Active Component (AC) deployment tasking, alleviating deploy-to-dwell pressures to sustain global combat operations. Our FY27 funding request includes necessary manpower growth to support consolidation of B-1 operations at Dyess AFB and establishment of a B-21 FTU (classic) association at Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota.

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The AFR is at the forefront of modernizing our Nation's nuclear security. As directed by the SECAF in FY24, the 908th Airlift Wing at Maxwell Air Force Base is now the sole FTU for the new MH-139A Grey Wolf helicopter. Our program is a model for success: we have received 8 of our 10 allotted aircraft with a projected full capability assigned by FY29. The AFR is on track to train all TF crews to execute this critical mission that safeguards nuclear deterrence for this no-fail mission.

Point Defense

The AFR is taking decisive action to protect our installations from drone threats through Counter-Small Unmanned Aircraft System (C-sUAS) technologies. We will achieve baseline C-sUAS protection at all our Base Operating Support Installations by the end of FY26. Our readiness was recently proven when we deployed a system to Barksdale AFB in just 30 hours to mitigate an active drone threat.

Modular Aerial Spray System

The 757th Airlift Squadron operates the Department of War's (DoW) only large-area fixed-wing aerial spray capability, a critical tool for public health and vector control. In FY25, crews treated over 237,000 acres, a 40 percent increase from FY24.

Modular Airborne Firefighting System

As the only Title 10 aerial firefighting asset, the AFR's Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) provides 25 percent of the DoW's total MAFFS capability, offering critical support during wildfire seasons. In FY25, our crews delivered over 115,000 gallons of fire retardant across the western United States. As the sole Major Command (MAJCOM) operating the C-130H, our fleet will be impacted by high sustainment costs and the negative impacts of small fleet dynamics. Without a clear path to recapitalization, the long-term viability of this life-saving mission is at risk.

Weather Reconnaissance

The 53rd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, our "Hurricane Hunters" at Keesler AFB, Mississippi provides a crucial homeland defense and public safety support as the only military weather reconnaissance unit. Their data can improve hurricane forecast accuracy by up to 30 percent. Operational demand has surged, with flying hours increasing nearly threefold since FY21. This increase is driven not only by more accurate storm tracking, but by a significant expansion of the mission set to include year-round Atmospheric River reconnaissance on the West Coast, extending the unit's required availability from six months to 10 months of the year. This high operational tempo, combined with a 23 percent decrease in the availability of our WC-130Js, the oldest in the fleet, has created a gap between mission requirements, resourcing and readiness. Sustained investment in WC-130J modernization is essential to ensure the future viability of this vital national asset.

Deterring China in the Indo-Pacific

Deterring aggression in the Indo-Pacific is the central challenge of the 2026 National Defense Strategy. The AFR provides the strategic depth and seasoned combat experience essential to making that deterrence credible.

Air Superiority and Global Precision Attack

The AFR delivers the most experienced fighter pilots to the DAF. Reserve F-22 pilots have flown, on average, three times the flight hours of their AC counterparts. In 2025, AFR F-22 pilots conducted 67

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percent of all training for Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson pilots and 50 percent of all AC check rides, with only 20 percent of the pilots. With 70 percent being Weapons School graduates, they are the most lethal and experienced F-22 unit in the world. AFR F-22s provide homeland defense from a strategic location, a critical reserve of trained aircrews and maintainers and a bridge to future fighter capabilities.

Rapid Global Mobility and Agile Combat Support

Rapid Global Mobility is the DAF's ability to project power anywhere in the world on demand. The AFR is the source of combat-proven experience for this capability, delivering strategic depth and surge capacity at a fraction of the cost. Eighty percent of our annual pilot accessions are seasoned aviators with a decade of experience in their specific aircraft, providing immediate, high-level expertise that takes years to cultivate in the AC. This experience advantage acts as a force multiplier, creating an operational contribution far beyond our numbers. For example, with just a small fraction of the C-5 fleet, our aircrews constitute 65 percent of the entire C-5 Total Force crew base. Similarly, for the C-17, our crews make up one third of the total force but possess an average of 15 years of experience, compared to less than eight years for their AC counterparts. Our outsized contribution is even more critical in our newest platforms. For the KC-46, the Reserve provides 34 percent of the aircrews, 39 percent of the instructors and 40 percent of the evaluators for the TF.

The Air Force Reserve is the majority stakeholder in several unique, high-demand agile combat support missions. We provide 60 percent of the DAF's Aeromedical Evacuation capacity, delivering life-saving care with a 99 percent survivability rate. Our Aerial Port portfolio represents 44 percent of the DAF's capacity and fulfills nearly half of AMC's Global Force Management (GFMAP) taskings every year. The AFR delivers 14 percent of the DAF's Agile Combat Support capacity ensuring power projection platforms worldwide are viable and lethal to deter aggression in any theater.

Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR)

Our ISR personnel make up less than five percent of our manpower yet provide approximately 21 percent of the Air Force's total production in key intelligence missions. Our cyber teams neutralize state-sponsored attacks, while our expert targeteers craft actionable solutions for warfighters. In the last year, our ISR professionals supported 525 airborne combat sorties and executed over 30,000 mission hours, 20 percent of all total force Cyber-ISR taskings for two major campaigns. They pioneered the first use of the Contingency Intelligence Network for CENTCOM operations in direct support of high-stakes missions like Operation MIDNIGHT HAMMER. Our ability to train and operate in a high-end fight is tied to our access to modern, secure facilities. As we support 5th Generation aircraft and future technologies, the requirement for Secure Compartmentalized Information Facilities becomes absolute.

Command and Control (C2)

The AFR provides a significant and growing contribution to this critical mission, filling approximately 18 percent of the TF's C2 deployment requirements. To meet increasing demands, we have added manpower and reorganized our C2 portfolio, streamlining the dissemination of decision-quality data. Strategic competition drives the need to optimize resources and support multiple theaters concurrently. We request your support to invest in emerging C2 capabilities and the additional manpower to operate them to meet the demands of our Combatant Commanders.

Cyberspace Operations and Combat Communications

The Reserve Cyber Roadmap prioritizes mission growth opportunities across defensive and offensive cyber operations which helps map out a framework for organizing, training, preparing, and presenting

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Reservists to be employed by U.S. Cyber Command as part of the Cyber Mission Force. Recent successes include a string of firsts: achieving initial operational capability for a new cyber range squadron, activating an offensive cyber operations squadron, partnering with the Active Component to stand up two additional offensive units. Our major lines of effort are focused on operationalizing our tactical edge and modernizing our foundational Information Technology (IT) and leveraging new technology such as artificial intelligence. To provide a strong denial defense in the First Island Chain, we are programming to nearly double our combat communications force presentation to Combatant Commands. Concurrently, we are delivering cutting-edge technology to the warfighter through a multi-year End User Device Refresh Strategy. This effort rectifies IT shortfalls for the F-35, KC-46 and other priority missions while fortifying the command's infrastructure and data integrity.

We thank Congress for including Section 1544 of the FY26 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which directs a study on organizing, training and integrating Air Reserve Component (ARC) personnel into the Cyber Mission Force.

The Reserve Cyber Roadmap also prioritizes holistic integration of communication operations into our presentation of Reserve combat power. It has major lines of effort focused on operationalizing our tactical edge and modernizing our foundational Information Technology (IT) and leveraging new technology such as artificial intelligence. To provide a strong denial defense in the First Island Chain, we are programming to nearly double our combat communications force presentation to Combatant Commands. Concurrently, we are delivering cutting-edge technology to the warfighter through a multi-year End User Device Refresh Strategy. This effort rectifies IT shortfalls for the F-35, KC-46 and other priority missions while fortifying the command's infrastructure, C2 and data integrity.

Unit of Action/Air Expeditionary Wings (AEW)

The AFR is committed to providing predictable, combat-ready forces through the Air Force Force Generation (AFFORGEN) model. We are postured to provide one combat-ready AEW per cycle, beginning in October 2026. The Reserve has already produced three Expeditionary Air Bases for the 2025 and 2026 rotations, sourcing over 90 percent of these requirements organically. We achieved this while fully complying with all Congressionally mandated mobilization-to-dwell guidelines, ensuring we provide stable and capable forces to combatant commanders without adversely affecting our Reserve Airmen or their employers.

This commitment requires a specific investment to ensure success. Meeting the certification standards for these new Units of Action demands access to high-fidelity exercises and dedicated training.

Reserve Allies and Partners Program (RAPP)

Through RAPP we will strengthen alliances by building partner capacity and interoperability while training and exercising together. RAPP is similar to the National Guard Bureau's (NGB) State Partnership Program (SPP), but while the SPP engages with partner active and reserve military forces, along with targeted disaster assistance activities, the RAPP seeks to improve integration with partner reserve forces to our mutual benefit. RAPP integrates 176 AFR mission-sets into DAF security cooperation processes, with many unique AFR capabilities significantly enhancing DAF security cooperation capabilities.

The demand for this partnership is clear. Our units participated in 71 strategic engagements last year, including signing an agreement with France, guided a 100-member bilateral planning team to forge a deep U.S.-United Kingdom partnership across 21 functional areas and established new pathways with the Netherlands and the Philippines.

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Training with Allies and Partners

In modern conflict, victory is impossible without interoperability. We have deliberately realigned our staff structure to synchronize our training with Combatant Commands. We deployed over 1,400 Airmen to major exercises in the first six months of FY26. Our FY27 budget request for training funds and flight hours allows our Reserve Airmen to hone their skills in premier events like Exercise RED FLAG, where true, combat-ready interoperability is built.

Innovating to Win

Our ability to execute these missions rests on a simple premise: our experienced Airmen must be equipped with modern, lethal and sustainable platforms. However, a significant portion of our fleet is comprised of aging, legacy aircraft. To maintain our edge, we must modernize our current systems while ensuring we are part of the DAF's overall recapitalization strategy.

National Guard and Reserve Equipment Account (NGREA) Appropriation

With 77 percent of our aircraft over 39 years old, the diminishing availability of spare parts from original manufacturers threatens readiness. NGREA is our most crucial tool for mitigating this risk, allowing us to rapidly integrate cost-effective, commercial off-the-shelf solutions. We historically execute this appropriation at 99 percent, often through engagement with small to mid-sized industry partners. Our ability to develop, purchase and integrate new technology directly impacts DoW's objective to supercharge the Defense Industrial Base.

Air National Guard-Air Force Reserve Command Test Center (AATC)

To keep our legacy platforms credible, the AFR, with the ANG, operates the AATC. The AATC provides a unique, rapid and cost-effective pathway for operational and developmental testing. By leveraging NGREA funding, we can quickly field upgrades that increase the lethality and survivability of our platforms. The AATC is responsible for the test and evaluation of key weapon systems which is essential to maintaining our combat effectiveness.

Weapons System Sustainment (WSS)

Full funding of our WSS programs is a critical requirement for wartime readiness. WSS is the modernization, upgrades and component replacements that ensure the survivability and lethality of our aircraft. Right to repair initiatives are critical to empower our maintainers to make faster fixes and reduce sustainment costs. Our FY27 budget request of \$1.44 billion, a 20 percent increase from FY26 is essential to execute this work, allowing us to modify our aging fleet and maintain a credible, lethal force.

Flying Hour Program (FHP)

The FHP is the cornerstone of our readiness. In FY25, the AFR proved our commitment as effective stewards of resources by over-executing our Peacetime flying hours and funding allocations. While we remain dedicated to maximizing readiness, our current FY26 program faces significant headwinds from the very readiness challenges this statement highlights: ongoing contingency operations, depot backlogs, and persistent supply chain issues for our legacy fleet are impacting aircraft availability. Our FY27 budget request of \$868.1 million for Peacetime hours is driven by specific mission requirements, including funding the A-10 extension and standing up the F-35 at Tyndall AFB, Florida. Predictable, stable funding for the FHP is the most direct investment in aircrew proficiency. Your full support of our flying hour

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request will ensure we can both meet these new mission demands and overcome the readiness deficits created by a challenging operational environment.

Recruiting and Retention

To retain our most valuable asset, our people, we are implementing a targeted, multi-year human capital management strategy backed by a \$105 million incentive budget request for FY27. This funding addresses a significant vulnerability: an 86 percent retention rate among enlisted Airmen with 5-11 years of service. By offering critical skills retention bonuses of up to \$45,000, we are making a smart, necessary investment in our warfighters. Furthermore, increasing the Inactive Duty Training travel reimbursement to \$750 removes a financial barrier to service, ensuring we retain our experienced personnel. Reversing this accession deficit requires a direct investment in our recruiting enterprise. Our FY27 budget request includes a critical increase to grow our production recruiter force and fund the targeted canvassing essential to building a healthy pipeline of future Airmen.

Full Time Manning Request

At present, the AFR is approximately 2,000 Airmen below the end strength we need to execute our mission requirements. Our full-time manning is below optimal levels, further driven by over 1,200 chronic vacancies in the Air Reserve Technician (ART) program. To mitigate the readiness risk caused by these empty billets, we are leveraging existing statutory variance authorities. This allows us to strategically place mission-ready Active Guard Reserve (AGR) members against these critical ART vacancies where it makes sense. This initiative serves as a real-time proof of concept, demonstrating the value and flexibility of using AGRs to solve our most pressing full-time manning shortfalls. We are executing a multi-staged programmatic plan to stabilize our full-time force and provide a cost-neutral readiness improvement to the DAF.

Pilot Manning

The greatest challenge to our pilot readiness is the battle for talent against the commercial aviation sector. We are aggressively fighting to retain our most experienced pilots in the cockpit and recruit new ones from the AC. Our Aviation Bonus program has been a critical tool, helping us retain 92 percent of our pilots to at least 20 years of service in FY25. Simultaneously, our new Pilot Concierge Cell is tackling the recruiting challenge, saving the DAF \$30 million in initial training costs in its first year.

Maintenance Manning

A 23 percent decrease in our assigned maintenance manning over the past 15 years has caused a documented nine percent decline in aircraft availability. This readiness crisis is driven by our inability to retain our ART maintainers in the face of private sector competition, with a documented pay disparity as high as 25 percent in some locations. To solve this, our strategy is to use targeted hiring and retention incentives to rebuild our maintenance capacity, while also leveraging all available manning flexibility to stabilize the workforce and improve aircraft availability. Your continued support is necessary for stabilizing our maintenance workforce and improving mission capability.

Our Competitive Edge: Investing in People

Our most decisive and enduring competitive edge will always be our people. Investing in their well-being, resilience and professional development is the foundation of everything we do.

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Suicide Prevention and Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR)

The Integrated Primary Prevention Workforce has incorporated effective suicide prevention as a core component of its mission, and we remain focused on credentialing staff across AFR's 10 host installations. The SAPR program develops proactive prevention plans and provides victim support, ensuring continuity of operations throughout the FY26 government shutdown.

Mental Health and Spiritual Health

The Director of Psychological Health (DPH) program provides non-clinical services to Reservists and their families through early intervention, support programs and crisis response, including initiatives such as the FY21 Brandon Act and the FY23 Cognitive Monitoring Program Initiative. In FY25, the Chaplain Corps accomplished over 579,000 engagements with Airmen and families, providing confidential counseling and 24/7 on-duty support.

Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP)

YRRP promotes the readiness and resilience of Reservists and their families before, during and after deployments. In FY25, only 40 percent of those who registered for events could attend, and FY26 currently consists of seven YRRP events. Nonetheless, we endeavor to do more as 18 to 20 events may be required to serve the full eligible population, a number that does not include contingency or emerging deployment requirements.

Access to Child Care

We are working collaboratively with the ANG and the Air Force Child and Youth Program to determine child care needs and increase Airmen awareness of existing programs. To improve awareness and access to resources, the AFR is implementing a Wing Child Care Point of Contact at every location. This initiative standardizes where Airmen can find child care information and access referral services, ensuring a consistent support structure throughout the command. To inform our long-term strategy, an ARC Child Care Working Group was established and collaborated with Air Force Programs to survey the force, allowing us to better understand specific needs and identify future opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Reserve Advantage is rooted in the conscious choice of our Airmen to balance a civilian life with military service in defense of our Nation. Our FY27 budget request reflects this responsibility and represents the necessary investment plan to equip our Airmen with the modern tools, realistic training and critical resources they require. Your support and timely approval of this budget to concurrently and proportionally field modern equipment is critical to the success of the AFR. With Congressional support, we will uphold our commitment to provide the most efficient, experienced, accessible and lethal force our Nation requires – The Reserve Advantage.