

First AEFs stand up Oct. 1

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WASHINGTON -- In less than two weeks, elements of the first two of 10 aerospace expeditionary forces will fulfill the Air Force's deployment requirements for overseas operations.

Oct. 1, combat units, people and equipment aligned to AEFs 1 and 2 will begin the first rotational deployments, fulfilling Air Force commitments for steady-state operations like Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch, which enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq.

Their assigned squadrons and expeditionary combat support personnel will make the first deployments in the expeditionary aerospace force's 15-month AEF rotation cycle.

The person charged with implementing the EAF concept uses a football analogy to demystify the Air Force's transition to the new structure.

"The Air Force's diverse responsibilities and core competencies have not changed," said Maj. Gen. William S. Hinton, Jr., director of EAF implementation. "We'll still do all the fundamental things we've always had to do -- blocking, tackling, passing, running and kicking. What has changed, for the better, is the way we'll field the Air Force team."

According to the Air Staff's EAF Implementation Division, nearly every active duty wing and many units in the Air National Guard and Reserve will have people, aircraft and equipment aligned to AEFs.

AEFs are essentially a force management tool that helps the Air Force spread its capability more evenly across the total force -- active duty, Guard and Reserve.

By operating on a known schedule, ongoing deployments will become more predictable for Air Force members and their families. The structure will also allow the Air Force to better handle its global commitments and improve readiness to execute established major theater war plans.

Each AEF will include approximately 175 diverse mission aircraft and about 20,000 people. An AEF is unlike a composite wing that would deploy as an entire unit at once; rather, it is likened to a pool from which resources are aligned, then parceled out to fulfill requirements.

According to Hinton, each AEF has, on average, eight aligned aircraft squadrons -- F-15Cs, F-16s, A-10s, B-52s or B-1s -- so they each have the same capability to provide air superiority, precision ground attack and heavy bombers, to engage across the spectrum of military

operations.

Aerospace expeditionary wings at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C., and Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, will serve "on-call" rotations in alternating 90-day windows to provide a rapid response capability for "pop-up" crisis military operations beyond the two AEFs' capability.

In addition, a mobility lead wing is paired with each set of AEFs, to support the potential need for setting up basing at any new global contingency location.

Strategic mobility forces -- the C-5s, C-141s and C-17s that move the nation's assets -- will conduct business as usual against their commitment levels, but gain better predictability in knowing when the AEFs will rotate overseas.

Each AEF's operational and combat support forces will be drawn from as many as 50 total force units, enlarging the pool of deployable members and, thereby, helping "level" the deployment requirement for routinely tasked units and people.

This means airmen stand the chance of deploying within a predictable three-month rotation one time in the AEF schedule's 15-month lifecycle. While they may still go TDY for exercises and specialized training during the 10-and-a-half-month routine training phase of the AEF rotation cycle, they should not be tapped to deploy overseas again or with another AEF to fill contingency requirements.

EAF planners said it's premature to specify unit commitments for AEFs 1 and 2, as actual Air Force deployment requirements are still being refined in joint service coordination. Units aligned to the AEFs are identified in Air Force deployment planning databases but have not been publicly announced.

Meanwhile, AEF-aligned units are preparing to deploy tailored forces to meet commander in chief requirements.

"In the past, the Air Force presented entire fighter-wing equivalents to the supported theater CINCs," said Hinton. "Now we'll present them with tailored-to-need squadrons, groups and wings from the scheduled AEFs."

The EAF concept is intended to service two customers: commanders in chief who require ready-to-fight Air Force assets, and Air Force people who require more predictability and stability.

Hinton refers to EAF as "leveling the playing field," so the same units aren't tasked with deploying repeatedly.

"The people who will be affected by EAF the most are those who deploy a lot and those who don't deploy at all," Hinton said. However, senior Air Force leaders and EAF implementation planners are keenly aware that each Air Force unit is unique, yet all are part of and contribute to the Air Force's expeditionary vision.

The "enabling positions," such as space operations or research and development, include the estimated 35 percent of the Air Force that serves in non-deploying billets.

"The space community operates the satellites that support warfighters with integral

communications, navigation, weather, intelligence info; the ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) community maintains deterrence; the R&D (research and development) folks develop the systems that will make us lighter, leaner and more lethal; AETC (Air Education and Training Command) develops our expeditionary culture and ensures a trained force.

"EAF is the entire U.S. Air Force, not just those who'll deploy," said Hinton. "Everybody has a key role to play. It may not always be grabbing your mobility kit and climbing on a C-17 and going somewhere, but you're still players in this whole expeditionary culture.

"EAF is not a program, nor does it entail any additional commitments or deployments," Hinton added. "Even with having to reconstitute the force to pre-Kosovo readiness levels, it's not going to impact our start-up. It may, however, stretch the transition."

AEFs 1 and 2 kick off the transition Oct. 1, and AEFs 3 and 4 continue the transition in January. By AEFs 5 and 6, in the March rotation, planners expect to receive lessons learned that will enable them to fine tune AEF processes with regard to people, aircraft unit sourcing and other deployment issues. Hinton and Air Force senior leaders will depend on constructive comments from those in the field to identify continual improvement ideas to help the transition and mature the EAF vision so that its intended benefits can be realized.

"We'll need feedback from Air Force people," Hinton said. "We're going to learn by just getting out there and doing business this way. We recognize that there will be numerous challenges and course corrections in implementing it.

"That's OK," he said. "We believe the positive aspects of this concept more than outweigh some of the hurdles."

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