

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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**COMMANDER, AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS**

**COMMAND**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGING THREATS AND CAPABILITIES**

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### INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Ernst, Ranking Member Slotkin, and distinguished members, it is my profound honor to represent the more than 21,000 Air Commandos of Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). I cannot think of a greater honor or responsibility than leading America's sons and daughters during a time of consequence.

Our area of responsibility is the entire world—and the demand for Air Commandos and our capabilities has never been higher. Despite multiple years of flat or declining budgets, we are being asked to do more than ever before. We account for less than 0.5% of the Air Force budget and a proportional part of the USSOCOM budget -- which collectively represents only about 2% of the overall defense budget. Without a doubt, AFSOC provides an outsize return on investment for America.

In just the last four months, AFSOC executed the two largest crisis response deployments in our 36-year history, while also maintaining a persistent, high operational tempo in five different geographic combatant commands. From the First Island Chain to Iran and from South America to the Arctic, Air Commandos are defending the homeland and fighting for America's interests abroad. Whether eliminating ISIS terrorists in East Africa, creating dilemmas for the PRC in the Indo-Pacific, or rescuing downed aircrew in Iran—if the mission is hard, chances are an Air Commando is involved.

Today, I will detail how your Air Commandos are rising to meet the challenge of an unprecedented demand signal and the growing gap between what we are asked to deliver and the resources provided to sustain our exceptional Airmen and our specialized capabilities. Our true asymmetric advantage has always been, and will always be, our people. Air Commandos love the mission—we train hard and have exceptionally high standards. It's a demanding lifestyle that asks a lot of our service members and their loved ones. We must ensure we have the tools to both recruit and retain this exceptional group of Americans.

Command Chief Freeman and I are blessed to be a small part of a command that seeks out the hardest challenges. We're willing to attempt what others cannot or will not—the epitome of having "the guts to try."

### CURRENT OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT: AIRMEN PROVING THEIR VALUE

The complex operational environment of today is what our Airmen were built for. The demand signal validates the relevance of our long-standing core missions and confirms the enduring need for AFSOC's rapid, global maneuver and delivery of effects for the Joint Force. The counterterrorism mission remains foundational to the defense of the homeland, and the skills honed over two decades—precision, lethality, and a small footprint—are the core competencies now being applied across the full spectrum of operations.

Recently, when the nation required immediate force projection to multiple theaters simultaneously, we demonstrated what distributed operations truly mean. From a cold start, we

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deployed numerous personnel and the vast majority of our CV-22 fleet to multiple locations...in days, not weeks. This represented crews across operational squadrons, our schoolhouse, and crewmembers in staff positions at my headquarters. Our MC-130 force executed an equally comprehensive effort: while a portion of the fleet deployed forward, our remaining aircraft were fully employed to position the tiltrotors and transport essential personnel, cargo, and maintenance gear into theater. We rapidly deployed, conducted pre-mission rehearsals, executed operations, and redeployed within 72 hours of mission completion, ensuring we were reconstituted and ready for the next mission.

Less than two months later, another major operation required an AFSOC-led Personnel Recovery Task Force and an Air Force Special Operations Task Force. As the world recently witnessed, AFSOC was instrumental in the personnel recovery event that brought home our teammates. As our AFSOC Airmen and Joint SOF teammates know: infiltrations are optional, but exfiltrations are mandatory. If we have boots on the ground, we will protect them and must always have the ability to get them out.

Simultaneously, our MQ-9 enterprise proved that adaptive Airmen could expand any platform's mission envelope. Our crews destroyed hundreds of targets in contested operating areas—not lucky shots, but the result of crews applying ingenuity with precision in what I believe has been the MQ-9 community's finest hour. Operations have taken their toll with combat losses in recent months, a stark reminder of the cost of combat operations, but we gained invaluable lessons on employing unmanned Armed ISR in contested environments against our adversaries.

### **FORCE POSTURE AND READINESS**

This operational success is the result of deliberate decisions to place our Airmen where they provide maximum value for competition, crisis response, and conflict. Our regional alignment institutionalizes what our people have always done: build deep, enduring relationships to shape the environment before a crisis begins. AFSOC maintains forward-positioned wings—the 352d Special Operations Wing in Europe and the 353rd in the Indo-Pacific—to provide critical, persistent support across multiple combatant commands. These forward-positioned wings enhance our agility and exemplify our commitment to being present where and when it matters most.

AFSOC's ability to respond to crisis is a direct result of long-term investment in readiness. This capability cannot be surged; it must be cultivated and constantly refined. The core of our crisis response is not a platform or pre-planned operation—it is the unmatched ingenuity and judgment of American Airmen under pressure, enabled by relationships built over years of persistent engagement and training.

Our upcoming relocation of a special operations wing to Davis-Monthan AFB represents a strategic realignment that directly supports the National Defense Strategy's emphasis on homeland defense. This move positions AFSOC to rapidly respond to threats in the Western Hemisphere while leveraging Arizona's strategic location, expansive airspace, and proximity to the Southwest border. Davis-Monthan will host two of our three active-duty OA-1K squadrons

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and AFSOC's sole CONUS-based CV-22 squadron, along with our largest Special Operations Theater Air Operations Squadron—providing combatant commanders with integrated ISR, Strike, and Maneuver capabilities from a single hub.

The revised basing plan accelerates Full Operational Capability by nearly three years while avoiding hundreds of millions of dollars in unnecessary costs. By co-locating with western-U.S. mission partners and positioning forces near premier training ranges in California, Nevada, and Utah, we reduce transit times, enhance interoperability with conventional forces, and improve training effectiveness. Critically, this move also preserves our most vital asset—our people. To retain Air Commandos, we must retain their families—by improving family readiness and expanding Exceptional Family Member Program access, we preserve our investment in our Airmen and broaden the talent pool across the command. This agile repositioning demonstrates AFSOC's ability to pivot quickly to meet the nation's highest priorities while maintaining the readiness and flexibility to support global operations.

As the only component of SOCOM that owns and operates installations, we are also charged with protecting our force generation facilities at home. We face growing unmanned aerial system threats to our installations and are establishing comprehensive counter-small UAS programs to defend the bases where we train and generate the force. This unique responsibility adds another dimension to our mission: we must defend the force at home while projecting power globally.

### **MODERNIZATION INITIATIVES: TOOLS OUR AIRMEN ASKED FOR**

The capabilities we demonstrated in recent operations are direct results of our modernization strategy: listen to our operators and joint teammates, then rapidly field solutions. The technologies we pursue answer problems our Airmen have identified as critical to winning now and on future battlefields.

Our new OA-1K fleet provides combatant commanders with a Swiss-army knife—an adaptable, rugged combat platform that operates at a fraction of the cost of other military aircraft. Our Adaptive Airborne Enterprise initiative codifies what our Airmen have always done: find creative ways to turn any asset into a sensor, a shooter, and a node in the network. Our Special Tactics teams are pioneering distributed command and control for the Joint Force. We've successfully integrated advanced satellite communications with tactical data links and existing military networks to pass targeting data between SOF units and Joint Force assets in near-real time. In joint exercises, we've demonstrated the ability to bridge different service architectures, connecting SOF air and ground assets with the full spectrum of Joint All-Domain shooters.

While we're building capabilities for tomorrow's fight, our Airmen prove daily they can think on their feet and rapidly create solutions when plans fall apart. In one instance, when an unexpected communications outage threatened connectivity during combat operations, our team identified alternative pathways within hours and restored critical command and control links across the theater – all done remotely from Hurlburt Field, FL. This exemplifies our

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philosophy: empower Airmen with authority and resources to solve problems, and they will deliver results that keep the Joint Force connected and lethal.

Our intelligence professionals have fundamentally transformed how we turn raw data into actionable intelligence. An AFSOC-developed intel platform has become a central hub for full-motion video processing across multiple services. By pairing AI-augmented workflows with trained humans, this system drastically accelerates targeting cycles—collapsing the time from detection to engagement from hours to seconds—increasing lethality and survivability.

While AFSOC operates a relatively new aircraft fleet, continuous modifications are essential to maintain our tactical and technological advantage. Modernization is not optional when the threat evolves faster than traditional acquisition timelines allow. Our ability to rapidly test, validate, and field capabilities in combat gives the Joint Force options that would otherwise take years to deliver.

### **BALANCING CAPABILITY WITH REALITY: RESOURCE CHALLENGES**

AFSOC continues to deliver exceptional results, but we must be clear-eyed about the fiscal environment shaping our future. Prior to FY 2026, flat budgets have forced hard choices. During this time, AFSOC has realized a \$1.07 billion reduction in our Total Obligation Authority which slashed modernization investment by nearly \$2 billion—a 39 percent cut to future capability. At the same time, flying hour costs have sky-rocketed for several platforms, outpacing inflation. We've divested 84 aircraft and already committed to further reductions, affecting an additional 31 combat platforms, meaning more than one-third of our fleet has been lost or reduced while demand and readiness requirements continue to rise. The inflationary pressure we faced put mission readiness and future modernization at serious risk.

These fiscal realities required hard choices, but they also sharpen our focus on what matters most: our people. Broad Air Force manning shortages have created an environment where units manned at 80 percent are considered healthy. For AFSOC, this means our Airmen are being asked to achieve 100 percent mission success with a 20 percent personnel deficit. We cannot sustain a readiness posture that demands full capability from a force structure designed for less. I am optimistic the President's FY27 budget will begin to restore readiness and enable planned force structure modernization.

We invest heavily in training our Airmen. AFSOC training is difficult, lengthy, and costly—we cannot mass-produce Air Commandos, nor can we afford to lose their critical combat experience and ingenuity. Our Airmen don't serve for the money, but they notice when incentives such as special duty pay and re-enlistment bonuses are inconsistently offered. Our Preservation of the Force and Family program has proven essential to retention, helping us keep experienced operators and enablers who were considering separation due to operational tempo and family strain. The cost of this program is a fraction of replacing years of combat experience and specialized training—it's a combat multiplier that delivers measurable return on investment.

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The single greatest risk to our nation's strategic advantage is not platforms or budgets, it is the growing strain on our people. While our people are resilient, they are not invincible. Sustained excellence requires sustainable resourcing.

### CONCLUSION

The character of war is changing in ways that Air Force Special Operations Command has long anticipated and prepared for. The future requires forces that are agile, distributed, and led by empowered, creative thinkers capable of operating across the full spectrum of conflict. It requires Air Commandos.

From climate-controlled blood resupply via unmanned systems in denied terrain to expeditionary intelligence operations that collapse targeting timelines, our Airmen are innovating across the globe. We operate at a tempo that would break many conventional forces, yet we continue delivering the ingenuity, precision, and partnerships the nation demands.

The choice before us is not whether AFSOC can continue to deliver -- we have proven we will find a way. The choice is whether we will provide the resources necessary to sustain this force at the pace and scale the nation requires. AFSOC provides an unmatched return on investment for America -- but we cannot ask our Airmen to do more with less indefinitely, without risking the very capability that makes them exceptional.

On behalf of Air Commando Nation and our families, Chief Freeman and I thank you for your continued support. We dare to win in the most challenging environments. We do these things so others may live, and we deliver...Any Place, Any Time, Anywhere.

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