

Aerospace Advantage Ep. 218 – Air Force Readiness Crisis: It's Time for a Reset – Transcript (AI-Assisted)

Heather "Lucky" Penney: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Aerospace Advantage Podcast, brought to you by PenFed. I'm your host Heather "Lucky" Penney. Here on the Aerospace Advantage, we speak with leaders in the DoD, industry, and other subject matter experts to explore the intersection of strategy, operational concepts, technology, and policy when it comes to air and space power.

So, here at Mitchell, we think about airpower in terms of capacity, capability, and readiness. The number of bombers, fighters, airlifters, and tankers the service possesses is the capacity. The technological edge of those platforms hold over our adversaries is capability. And the number of reps and sets our pilots and maintainers receive, well that's the readiness.

That's the train piece, right? But it also rests on the health of the aircraft that they collectively operate. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, coupled with a Global War on Terror, all of that really diluted the perceived need for healthy capacity readiness levels and the mindset required to hold a peer adversary at [00:01:00] risk.

I mean, if you remember, we wanted the peace dividend, we literally slashed the Air Force in half, and it was a unipolar moment, right? The United States was going to be the biggest, baddest superpower forever after. So as a result, funding levels for the Air Force dropped off and as I said the force was shrunk.

It was cut. We also saw many of the modernization programs that the service had get delayed, curtailed, or even cancelled. And all the while, the demand for airpower remained high in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, the Pacific, Europe, and the Homeland Defense Mission, pretty much the entire globe, right?

People forget that after Desert Storm, the Air Force stayed even after everyone else redeployed back to the states. So, things got even worse in 2011 with the passage of the Budget Control Act, what we call sequestration. And the bottom really just fell out. Units were grounded because of lack of funding and flying hours, and they never really got better.

Over a decade later, [00:02:00] things have yet to reset. Given the severity of the threat environment, and we really need to look at that, it's crucial that the Air Force restore readiness. And let's be clear, this is not just an Air Force problem. Because no form of warfighting in any of the other services across the joint force is possible without Air Force airpower.

Just look at Ukraine.

So that's what we're here to discuss. And I want to be clear. We're not just going to admire the problem and, you know, be cranky old men. We're going to define it and explore how we can fix it. And that's going to take support from the Department of Defense and from Congress, because the saying is true, and you've heard me say it before, no bucks, no Buck Rogers.

So, as we dive in, let me introduce to you, our guest to you, all of which have extraordinary backgrounds as Air Force leaders, and operational fighter pilots. So, first up is our well known and loved Major General Larry "Stutz" Stutzriem. And as a fighter pilot, he flew the F 4, the F [00:03:00] 16, and the A 10 and commanded the squadron group and wing levels.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Hey, Lucky. It's great to be with you again on Aerospace Advantage.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Sir, we always love having you here. Um, we've got a newcomer to our podcast, Barry "Papa" Murphy, former 8th Fighter Wing Wolfpack commander and a career F 16 pilot. Papa, welcome.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Yeah, I sure appreciate it. Thanks, Lucky. I'm happy to be here with all you.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And a dear friend of the Mitchell Institute, uh, and personal friends, Robert "Otis" Winkler, an F 16 patchwearer, former squadron ops group commander, and a SASC professional staff member, who's now vice president with Kratos.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Thanks, Lucky. Happy to be here, but really excited about having this conversation. It's important.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: It really is.

And finally, but not least, our very own J. V. Venable, an F 16 FWCG graduate, yes, Fighter Weapons School, back when they still called it that, who commanded at the squadron and the group levels.

John "JV" Venable: Heather, it's great to be with you and Papa, thanks for joining us. It's great to hear your voice again. This is going to be a powerful conversation and I'm really looking forward to it.[00:04:00]

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, I think so too. So JV, I want to start with you. You've had your fingers on the pulse for the Air Force the last nine years. But before we dive into where the service stands now with readiness, and actually I'd like to open this up to the group. How should we understand what readiness is? We talked about the organize, train, and equip elements of the Air Force. What it's required to do for the nation's security.

But what does readiness mean? What are its components?

John "JV" Venable: So, I think you said it up front. It's basically three bins. One is capacity. How many aircraft do you have that are capable of going in waging war? The capability of those platforms. How much of that is new technology and how well does that compare to our, um, our adversaries out there?

The, the capability. Goes into readiness. Finally.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: The combat advantage.

John "JV" Venable: Right. And so the readiness piece is very broad. It's mostly people. How many reps and sets the fighter pilots are getting. How many reps [00:05:00] and sets our maintainers are getting. Our bomber guys right in the same camp.

And you'll see all of this operational setting as we develop this conversation is basically abysmal right now in that area. Um, if you mentioned sequestration back in 2011. 2012 was actually the year that the budget was framed on sequestration. And if you look at the number of flying hours that were budgeted that year and not include the overseas contingency operation hours for that year.

The, the number of hours that were budgeted for that year was a little over a million hours for the entire Air Force. The Air Force right now doesn't have OCO funding and the United States Air Force is flying at the same rate as far as the number of flying hours per year as we were right at sequestration.

The one thing that we had going for us back then was a little bit better, uh, amount of spare parts called, uh, weapon system [00:06:00] sustainment accounts. We funded that very well. Today, we're funding weapons to sustainment at roughly 85 to 87 percent of what you need to fly all of those flying hours. So, there's no question in my mind why we're not sallying up to give our, our folks the number of reps and sets we need.

And if I could go down this lane just for a second. Um, this was explained to me by a Vietnam era fighter pilot when I was flying at Torrejon back in the 1980s. He said, how often do you fly? And I told him, and how long of hours are you working? I told him. And he said, well, let me tell you what I was doing when I was your age.

I was flying three times a day, every day, all week long. And I, I would do that, categorically throughout my operational life, but what I found, and this gentleman was, also became a POW in Vietnam. What I found was when I flew more than three times a week, I got better at everything. If I flew just three times a week, [00:07:00] then I got to sustain my capabilities.

But if I got down to one sortie a week, I was actually making that, uh, right stuff prayer. Please, Lord, don't let me mess up today when you get in the jet because it's just not familiar to you. Today, our guys and gals in the fighter world are flying between one and two sorties a week. On average, one and a half sorties a week.

So, it's in that lane where these folks are not, it's not glued in their head. It's not natural, the switches and the movements. And the same thing is happening in our bomber community. We're supposed to be giving those guys one sortie a week, and they're getting between one, make that two and three sorties a month, total.

And so this idea that you're going to be able to maintain competency, much less being able to hold the edge in combat is, we're in a bad state.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, that readiness advantage is really about the advanced training that we have and the proficiencies and the currencies that our pilots have. And that's one of the reasons why those reps and sets [00:08:00] matter.

Now, having trip turned in my life, I'm going to tell you, I was a sopping mess at the end of it. And I was no better the next day because we didn't have the,

really, the energy, or even the leftover brain bites to be able to appropriately debrief and get the right lessons learned out of all that flying that we did.

And so, three times a day, every day, all week, I don't even know that I could sally up for roll call on a Friday. But I agree with you that we probably need to fly more. And so I think one of the revolutions that we saw following Vietnam and through the 1970s was that building block approach that was led by the fighter weapons school to really create more rigor and structure in our briefs and our debriefs.

And I think that we've seen a tremendous advantage out of that through the readiness of the 80s and advanced proficiencies through the 90s. But another difference we have today are the simulators. But sims can't replace flying. And so I know we want to talk about how important advanced simulation is, but we need to also talk about how important the flying part is, [00:09:00] because I think we need to understand that sims augment, but they do not and cannot replace flying hours.

John "JV" Venable: And they're not. So, the number of sorties our guys are getting with regard to sims is equal in month wise, one to two sorties a month in the sim. So, it's not even coming close to being a substitute for flying hours.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Excellent. Absolutely.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Yeah. I think that, you know, this idea that it becomes a death spiral, right?

Really? So it's, hey, we don't have the resources in order to fly. And so we're going to reduce the amount of time that we're going to fly because we're trying to increase the MC rates at the cost of our sort of rates at home station that maintains that readiness. And then it turns out at the end of the year, hey, we didn't execute.

So, next year we'll budget less and then we'll fly less and we have dropped. I mean, I think that, you know, we were talking before we started airing about, uh, you know, just in the last probably 10 years, right? We were in Spangdahlem when Papa was a squadron commander out there, he told me he was flying a [00:10:00] 25 Ute.

Uh, so for, for a 28 PAA squadron. And by the time he was a wing commander at Kunsan, they were flying a 16 Ute, and now we're programming to even fly less than that, right?

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, for Ute, that's basically how many times an aircraft flies that month. So, he's got 24 aircraft, and on average, each one of them fly 24 times a month.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Absolutely.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Or 25 times a month.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: 25, yes. That's what it was then. And it really demonstrates that this spiral that we have to pull ourselves out of. There's, there's not a senior leader in the air force that I've heard saying that, well, we should fly less and we need, we don't need as much training.

That is, that has been, uh, our secret sauce, if you will, in the United States of America is going, going forward with, exceptionally trained pilots and air crew. And we're giving we're starting to give that away and it's it's eroding very quickly and once we get down in that death spiral it's gonna be exceptionally hard to pull it back out cuz it ultimately changes the culture of the organization.

The new normal becomes a [00:11:00] 13 Ute. They just accept the fact that we're going to have to figure out other ways to get the training and we're seeing that, you know, sadly, right now, you're seeing an increase to accident rates.

John "JV" Venable: Over simple stuff. Over takeoffs and landings as opposed to combat employment.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, and the training that readiness matters, because as you mentioned Otis, I mean, training has been our asymmetric advantage through the eighties and the nineties.

We can't control the technologies of the adversary fields, but what we can control is our ability to provide our pilots the training they need to be able to overcome the adversary's advanced capabilities. That's always been something we've had, and now we're starting to give that up.

Papa, I'd like to turn it over to you. What components should we have when we think about how do we create readiness? So, as a squadron and as a wing commander, what were the levers that you had? Whether or not that was spare parts, flying hours, your ute rates, maintenance, manning. What were the things that That you could dial up or dial down to improve your squadron's readiness?[00:12:00]

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Yeah, that's a great question, Lucky. I think it starts with a framework and a mindset. So, you, we've talked a little bit about this ahead of time is just the leadership aspect of it. You do need all of your, your maintenance leadership and all of your squadron leadership on the fighter side. You know, both going off the same tune where we, we know that our job is to generate and launch combat airpower and we do whatever we can to get those jets airborne in a safe, effective manner.

So, it starts with that framework, but then it comes quickly down to maintenance capabilities. So, you have to have a trained maintenance force, so they have to have adequate oversight and then they do have to be resourced. There's a, there's a certain amount that leadership can, um, improve. Ute rates, aircraft availability, all those things.

I was pretty blessed being at Spangdalem and then Masawa and even Kunshan, and had very good maintenance leadership across the board. And we were able to have much higher mc rates [00:13:00] and aircraft availability rates than they average. Uh, but that'll only take you so far. Beyond that, you gotta be resourced so that it, it has been very concerning for me for a long time, uh, having those cuts and the, and the low funding and the weapon system sustainment, because, not only is it hard during peacetime to get, uh, the parts and everything needed to sustain training operations. But when you start talking about combat, we're very concerned about that because we need a whole lot of extra banked spare parts, uh, on the shelf, ready to go. Or a capability much more robust to fix those parts at the local level.

If you're going to effectively fight. So, that's kind of where it starts on the maintenance side. And then, um, on the flying side, it gets to exactly what JV is talking about. You got to have sets and reps. You got to have people flying RAP sorties that are sufficient to not only give them just that general flying sense, but also get them comfortable with the [00:14:00] tactics and in various different scenarios.

The RAP requirements that we have right now are not sufficient to do that unfortunately. And then last, but not least, we don't talk about it enough, but the command and control at the wing level is a huge part of readiness because making the decisions on how to generate, when to generate, when to kind of button things up if there's an attack coming in, things like that. Those are pretty critical skill sets, uh, are a huge part of readiness. And if you're not testing in that regularly at the wing level as an entire team, not just ops maintenance, but all the logistics that goes behind it, um, then you're not gonna be effective when that actually happens.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, Stutz, I'd like to bring you into the conversation because with your command experience at all levels of the Air Force and your senior leadership perspective as well, and you've been, you know, over in Afghanistan helping run that, that air war. I'm really interested in, in your perspective and wisdom looking back at readiness at the different levels that you commanded and how you see that [00:15:00] situation today.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Yeah, it's uh, let me go back to the 80s and Papa, what you just said about, you know, the system that you have to put together to be a little more than just reps on the air crews. It's much bigger than that. Uh, back, uh, you know, in the Cold War years and I hope this doesn't sound like, you know, granddad story.

Uh, you know, I trudged through the snow for 12 miles to get to school, but it was a very different world. And um.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: But it's a world that we're going to be going back into.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: And that's the point. Absolutely.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: With peer conflict. Two of them. Right. I mean, like we've got China and Russia.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Of course. Very, very similar. So, let me describe that and I'm, I'm curious what Papa, you know, sees from his recent tour as a wing commander, but, we were fully focused on, first of all, existential threat and defeating that threat.

It was part of the culture. It was in your blood [00:16:00] and you know, every minute, uh, of your life was dedicated to that. And as was your family, if you had one. Secondly, we had lots of air crews back then. We had lots of aircraft, lots of munitions. In fact, you know, when we got the Desert Storm later, we were dropping, uh, so many munitions that were brought into the inventories from World War II, Korea, uh, Vietnam and so forth.

Uh, but finally we trained for the fight as realistically as you could and be safe. So, you know, the readiness piece was about the ability to generate aircraft, deploy those aircraft, those air crews, those maintainers, and everything, all the supplies and munitions and so forth that weren't positioned somewhere else.

And then when you got there, get on the ball and employ those aircraft and those were going to be in, probably turn in those [00:17:00] aircraft three to five times a day. So, we were getting during peacetime back in the eighties, you know, three, two to 300 hours a year. And, uh, maybe a little more if you're an instructor pilot, of course.

And to receive less than 150, 200 hours was just unheard of. So, there was a lot of flying going back there and we had a lot of squadrons. So, we had about 30 squadrons in Europe. We had about another 50 we could deploy when the balloon went up and basically surge about 2,000 jets into Europe in probably about two months.

So, just as one measure today, you know, we just heard recently, Lucky, you were there. Uh, a certain person who understands how this works our bombers today, we probably have 140 or so total bombers. Uh, the quote is that you can only probably get 40 of those or about a third of those started at any one day.

John "JV" Venable: Just engine start.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: [00:18:00] Just engine start.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: We're not even talking about like, yeah.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Right.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Only mission capable.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: So, the training back, that was really interesting because we had a regimen of operational readiness exercises. So, every quarter the wing would spend an entire week, doing a generation, uh, which is, you know, we'd be suddenly recalled. Everybody silently and secretly get back to the squadrons.

Maintenance goes to work to take your, probably 28 aircraft in each squadron, but generate 20 for the 28th. You had to do that. And then you would, uh, prepare for that deployment. You demonstrate that you could do it. You bring those airplanes back and then generate them to fly combat lines in a simulated, uh, deployed environment.

Every quarter we do that.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Through combat attacks, right? I mean, like.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Correct.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: And the realistic training was.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Alarm black, alarm red.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Right. Yeah. Airfield attacks.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Putting [00:19:00] on your mop gear.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: And chemical attacks, uh, and you'd have to fly with the gear and you'd have to, uh, and so forth. And that was usually one to two days of the, uh, seven day exercise.

Then, of course, you still have to put bombs on target and those are all being scored. So, that led to about every two year, 18 months or so, two years, to an operational readiness inspection, which was run by an IG, which was black hat, as black hat you can get. This was not a constructive exit. And they were trained and, uh, you know, your best guys were selected for the IG team, especially a fly.

With, uh, among the guys who were airborne. So, you couldn't, you couldn't cheat. Uh, you could, we never cheated, but you couldn't cut corners, I guess. So, so it was tough, but I'll go back to what Papa said. It wasn't just training. It wasn't just sets and reps. [00:20:00] These, exercises And these inspections were about wing leadership.

And at times it would be about numbered air force leadership. So, your wing commander and your squadron commanders were also being tested as to how they would operate. Were they ready? Uh, besides just flying. I mean, it was the whole system as Papa referred to. So, very different, different, uh, time, but that's the kind of place we need to get back to. That all costs a lot of money and it wears the jets and you've got to have the capabilities on the shelf to be able to, uh, you know, do that kind of stressor.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, Papa, we're all long time washed up has beens. You only recently joined our ranks, you know, when you were commanding, um, what was your experience of these ORIs?

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Yeah, I think, you know, PACAF and USAFE, both were getting back to trying to do an ORI every other [00:21:00] year. So, about on a 24 month cycle. Right as they started doing that COVID hit. And so that slowed things down, but as I was retiring they were generally getting back on that schedule. I agree with Stutz, though, they need to get back to that black hat mindset because unfortunately what the Air Force changed a while ago is that inspections are primarily done at the wing level.

And when you even when you have an ORI the purpose of the MAJCOM to come and make sure that the wing is properly, um, inspecting and exercising its forces throughout the year.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: These events, were self inspections?

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Yeah, exactly.

John "JV" Venable: Paperwork. Paperwork inspections.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: There's a, there's a paperwork aspect to it, but even the ORI operate in the same in, the same manner where they're coming to, the wings still runs the exercise and the job of the [00:22:00] MAJCOM is to make sure that not only that the exercise, ORI goes well, but that you've been kind of doing all the pieces to prep yourself for readiness. And so that black hat mindset and mantra has gone because it's much more of, um, just sort of a I don't want to say check the box. They still make it relatively stringent, but, um, it's different when the MAJCOM is the one driving everything than the wing with the match. I'm just being in an oversight.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: What's interesting, Papa, I'll just jump in that, you know, when I was a wing commander 20 years ago, if you can imagine that. I can, it's been a long 20 years, but 20 years ago, when I was a wing commander, I took over a wing that, that was very decayed in terms of readiness, disciplines, and so forth.

And we had already gotten to a place [00:23:00] in Air Combat Command where it was optional, whether a group or a squadron could opt out of doing these exercises. So, it was really a long time in the making, but it's been like this for quite a long time. So, getting back to that is certainly a priority now that we're focused on a peer threat.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah. I mean, in these, these self inspections, it's not as if the wings are trying to be grossly negligent or cover anything up by

any stretch of the imagination. But I think they're undermanned, they're highly stressed, there are, you know, the deployments that they had, that deployment schedule has been very robust.

So they, I mean, they are just exhausted. And what we've been training for for counterinsurgency and GWOT is fundamentally different than the kinds of stressors, Stutz that you experienced in the Cold War and what you were training for in the Cold War. So, I'd like to pivot this, Papa, a little bit.

And we had talked before about, um, the Ready Air Crew program, which for our listeners is, it basically defines the [00:24:00] number of sorties that every pilot needs to fly a month. That's when we were talking about RAP, right? That's a Ready Air Crew program. The number of sorties a pilot needs to fly a month, the kinds of sorties that they need to fly, the types of events that they need to fly.

Like, do they need to strafe or, you know, night aerial refueling or things like that, and how frequently do they need to do them? I'm really curious about your perspective on the rep program and did that in your mind really make your pilots ready for, you know, the big show?

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Yeah. Great question. I would say, you know, on the whole people, inexperienced pilots, received about nine to 10 flights a month. That was a requirement for RAP and experienced about eight. Um, and then they had a log two RAP simulator sorties a month. And most of the time in all the units I was in an average month, you would make those RAP numbers. But as hopefully is obvious that RAP is a minimum. A lot of, you know, flight leads and IPs might make more than RAP if, uh, if [00:25:00] they got you know, low manning and in both those areas.

And then sometimes we'd surge and so, uh, everybody would get more than that. But in general, you are only getting your RAP sorties and I agree wholeheartedly with JV. Those are not, and Stutz, those are not adequate or sufficient to be fully ready.

On top of that, even beyond just the flying hours, the mission sets, you know, like, most of the units I was in kind of phased out their training. So you, you work your way through the different phases that are on your doc statement, which works work pretty well. But that also meant you weren't very proficient at the other mission sets when you were doing those phases.

But at the end of the day, most of the training that we did was not sufficient for these high end fights. So, uh, that's a big challenge. The Air Force has right now is because a lot of these threats require. Pretty massive joint operations to address and there's an [00:26:00] aspect of where you can break it down into the building blocks for each individual platform.

Um, but maybe getting 1 Red Flag a year to kind of test all of that coming together and making it happen, is I also think probably not sufficient and the Air Force really needs to look pretty hard at how we're going to combine that. I think as 5th gen proliferates, that will become a bit easier to do between 4th and 5th gen platforms.

But until that happens, there's going to be some pretty big gaps.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: But, you know, it's interesting that you say that because some of, a lot of the fifth gen pilots we speak with face this very similar problem and it's, you know, it's not just about getting the large force employment together and getting all the aircraft together, but it's their inability to either employ their wartime modes or advanced capabilities in an open air range because of their concern regarding collection.

Or the ranges themselves are insufficient. They don't allow for supersonic flight. They don't have modernized updated threats, um, and they might physically just not [00:27:00] be big enough or enable them to have the right targets they need. So, we have an aged out range training, training range infrastructure that doesn't support the kinds of flying and the kinds of capabilities that we need to use. And so those advanced simulators and the joint simulation environment, which is like the big model that physics, uh, the based on physics that really replicates what we know of the adversaries capabilities and our own capabilities and is supposed to knit together this large force capability.

This large force simulation, they don't have access to that. And so that's a major problem. So, it's not just the flying side. It's also, they don't have access to the simulation side.

John "JV" Venable: Yeah. So the, the only problem with the simulation thing is the only person it exercises is the operator. It doesn't in any way, give the reps and sets to the logisticians that need to move the weapons onto the ramp and move them back and load them up, turn the airplanes with fuel and the likes, that's a huge limitation.[00:28:00]

Let's go back to RAP just for a second. Uh, the numbers that I was given and the numbers I believe still hold true, uh, you know, I had the opportunity to interview every fighter pilot in Papa's squadron when he was at Sembach, and I went through this, you're flying 1.4 times a week, are you ready to go to war?

And every guy said, absolutely. And then I said, okay, interview's over. Can I tell you how stupid I am? If I got three sorties or less a week, I lost stuff. I lost capabilities. Two, I started really questioning, and one, I was really screaming in the cockpit, watch everything you do. And every guy in Papa's squadron said, that's exactly right.

And I said, but you're getting 1.4 sorties.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: They become habituated to this lower. And you know, and it's a shame because the, the aircraft, they're easier to operate, but they're also far more complex. So, I would argue these guys need more reps than we needed back in the day.

John "JV" Venable: So, the RAP requirement that Papa mentioned, [00:29:00] eight guys, eight sorties for an experienced guy, nine for an inexperienced guy. That, that adds up to, if you go there's four weeks in the month, there's more than that in some but, that's two sorties a month. That's eight. And you're still below the margin of being able to sustain your capabilities. And our inexperienced guys are, how do you hang on your hat? As an old guy, I was still under the same guys. If I got less than three stories a week, I was still questioning me. And so we are really only giving guys six stories a month or seven for the, uh, experience and inexperienced.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: I think that's a really key point. And the fact that, and Papa mentioned it, but what we're talking about is the min, right? The minimum sorties required for an experienced pilot that's been doing this for a, you know a thousand hours, to be the minimum level of proficiency to do the task. And somehow as of late, [00:30:00] that is the that's not the threshold that's the objective, right? That's you're doing good congratulations you've exceeded what the requirement is and so it's a it's a significant very close to boiling a frog, right? We've slowly turn the temperature up and now we're just accepting the fact that we're at the men and the men is now.

Our goal when you look at flying, I'd be interested, but you know, in all that I've seen about flying our programs as they've been developed. They're developed for most of the time for meeting at the maximum, meeting the min RAP

requirements for this. Some of the pilots in the wing, not all the pilots in the wing.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yes. You're playing the proficiency game. Exactly. A month from month.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: That's exactly right.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So JV, I want to go back to what you had mentioned regarding the value of actual live training, right? The simulator is really important for training the operators and getting them proficient in the systems and the tactics and advanced threat environments and so forth.

But live fly is [00:31:00] crucially important, not only for pilots to trust and actually fly their airplane to develop airmanship, but for the entire tail that enables the tooth. The maintainers, the logisticians, the spare parts, and so forth. How do we, how do we look at this and, and really neck down to how we empower wing commanders to improve the readiness of their entire wing? As we look at deployable combat wings, right?

That's going to now be the force that we move forward. So, it's not just about the fighter pilots as much as we love them, but it's about all the other things that enable and empower that.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: I'll start with, I think you have to prioritize it, right? In general, the leaders that we put in charge of wings, they will rise to the occasion if you ask them to, if you measure it and you hold them accountable to what the Air Force deems is, is important.

And if you deem important that, hey, we're allocating you this amount of flying hours that are required for you. To fly out to maintain the proficiency of your air crew and [00:32:00] maintainers for the year, your responsibility is to maximize the efficiencies between your mission capability ready to deploy within 72 hours and your readiness of the entire aircrew system.

To include maintainers, to include healthy aircraft, and to include trained pilots and aircrew. Maximize the efficiency of all of that on any given day. And they will do it. And you hold them accountable for it. You measure against it. And then, you make decisions based on, and you evaluate based, their leadership based on that.

Based on how, your job as a wing commander is to be ready to take your unit to war. In a deployed combat wing. Measure that.

John "JV" Venable: And that's what promotions are based on. That's what progression in your career is based on. You have to do that.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: And I'd say, Otis, it's gotta be, uh, once again, I totally agree with you.

But there has to be a commitment from the top and I think there is but not a connection with the fact that fighting tonight is the [00:33:00] priority. For the Chief for the Air Staff, I get it. Organize, train, and equip for the future is important, but fight tonight is what matters and you have to inculcate that notion of readiness from the very top down. Now what I would say is one of the solutions is that our general officers in the Air Force need to be also exercised and tested.

This is, what's coming at us is a full up, peer on peer conflict. Unlike anything, anybody who's on active duty has ever seen. We've developed the last 30 years, all of our leadership in a very low tempo, low threat, almost a bureaucratic warfighting style. Now, there's been brilliant tactical, displays in that. I don't mean to, you know, discount that in any way, but do we train our military leadership for what's [00:34:00] ahead of us? That's about fighting tonight.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Yeah. Stutz I'll piggyback on that one. I could not agree more. Um, there's gotta be tons more work done at the operational level of directing wings and things like that.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Right. Yes. Yes.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: One of my big frustrations, that's why I started with the command and control thing, is we're our command and control assumptions are fundamentally flawed right now. We, we are still stuck in an old school mindset where we exercise to having high fidelity on the location and timing of an enemy attack.

And we, you know, at the bases I was at, we, we did our best to get away from that and really start working towards some of the capabilities, but there's multiple reasons in a future conflict that what you're, we're going to be, we might know an attack is coming, but we not might not know precisely where the enemy is going to attack.

What time projectiles are going to start hitting and, you know, when you look at the math behind a ballistic missile, it's pretty simple. [00:35:00] Um, if you've got a good early warning system, but, uh, if you start having to deal with ballistic missiles combined with cruise missiles, layering in traditional hypersonic attacks or hyper glide mass drone attacks kind of all in the similar timeframe.

That is a enormous challenge that at least when I retired, we had barely scratched the surface of even coming close to operating in that because that's where, you know, an individual wing commander can can make decisions that could be make or break. You might have guys in that threat environment that are way too conservative and just button everything up, uh, thinking an attack is going to happen at any time.

And then others might be way too risky and have stuff strewn all about that ends up getting hit and, uh, we've got to start exercising that. And we have huge amount of data from the Ukraine conflict. And now the 2 large scale attacks from, uh, Iran on Israel that we, we got to start incorporating that, absorbing it into our institution and merge that into how we [00:36:00] train and fight.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Yeah. Well said. Very well said.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, exactly. And you need to be able to operate and continue to fight and generate, generate and fight through attack because that ultimately is readiness. So, we've talked a lot about the power that wing commanders have to facilitate readiness within their, within their own wings.

What advice would you gentlemen give those wing commanders today based resourcing they have? Like, so let's just say status quo. What advice would you give these guys today that could meaningfully change the readiness of their own squadrons?

John "JV" Venable: I'll start. The thing that drives me crazy is that this is all basically accepted from the bottom to the top.

It's now a mindset and we're going to have to have a culture change. Um, uh, the last, uh, big accident report that I read was the one, the B1 accident report that came out this last June. And it was abysmal. The IP, the overseeing authority on the flight, had flown [00:37:00] twice in 60 days. And the findings of this report were, to me, they really set me back.

One of the findings was the cavalier approach to which the squadron, and the group, and the wing. Looked at flying and when I read that, I said, where is the Air Force missing here? Because right now it's the Air Force. It's the senior leadership that is sitting back and going, yeah, it is what it is. And everybody on down is doing the same thing for me.

If I was a wing commander, I would be standing on my heels and screaming. My guys aren't ready. This is what I need to get ready. I want your approval to break glass here. And start making changes to where I can elevate my ute rates and MC rates and, and more sorties for my guys. And you need to give me X capital, X spare parts, in order to manifest this.

And it's [00:38:00] gotta be, uh, I, if I was a captain, I would be doing this to my squadron commander. And the squadron commander, the wing commander, and then the wing commander to the Air Force level.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, we need to be able to speak truth to power, report actual readiness levels to senior leadership without being penalized or you know, being punished because our airmen are great airmen.

They will continue to deliver as much as they possibly can in the worst of circumstances. Which is absolutely what we want them to be able to do. But while we're in peacetime in garrison, we need to be setting them up for success, not asking them to practice bleed. So, this is what I hear from you, JV, is your advice is this is a 12 o'clock high moment.

John "JV" Venable: Yeah, and so I'm not sure that the squadron commanders and the wing commanders aren't reporting their readiness levels.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Oh, no, I'm sure they absolutely are.

John "JV" Venable: I just, the Air Force is now masking it to where that's no longer part of the cross check. If you go back to 2016, it was bad then. Fingers Goldfein, the Chief of Staff, said that he had four squadrons that were C1 that could execute all the missions all of [00:39:00] their mission statement. That means that all of the other ones were less than that were, it's C2 or below. Today, we don't have anybody that's a C1. There's no way that you could define that in a way that they could elevate to that point.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, what other advice do folks have for wing commanders?

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Yeah, so I'll, I'll give one. I think that, you know, when you're in command. Regardless of at what level, you never have enough resources, right? To do what you want to do. And so, that being said, the unit the combat units, right? We should focus on warfighting in particular across United States Air Force, right? We should resource the WSS at a level that is what we're asking them to do which would be a hundred percent. We should man the pilots, aircrew, and maintainers at a hundred percent across the board for frontline. And then we should actually work very hard on recapitalization of our very old and worn out fleets, right? Okay, so that being said and off the table at some point then wing [00:40:00] commanders need to start looking at taking calculated risks and what I would, the advice I would offer is make that calculated risk, not in war fighting, right? You have to be ready to fight tonight. And in order to do that, you have to have trained air crew. You have to have healthy aircraft, including spare parts. And then you have to have trained and available maintainers. Prioritize that, right? Not prioritize some of the other things that are going on in the base.

Focus on that warfighting. Understand that there's a whole lot of, you know, healthy living, a whole lot of other priorities that are going on the base. But your number one responsibility is focusing on the readiness of your unit to be ready to go to war.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Because when the balloon goes up, we have a moral obligation to ensure that our airmen are trained, equipped, so they can go into bad guy land, execute their mission safely and successfully and then come home.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Yeah. And I think it's that culture point, right? This is we joke about this a lot, but a lot of times when you're at a unit, not Kunshan, but in other places that you're stuck with. [00:41:00] What do you need to do to night fly? To be able to let your air crew get ready, training at night. And in order to do that, a lot of times will limit that because we don't with the CDC won't be open, right?

And then you have to have. Dual military families and they need to work through that for, um, your personnel management and the care of the, the unit. But ultimately you have to pick the time to fly, that's best to get the best training, not the best that makes it easier for the rest of the base.

And that's hard. That's a cultural shift that needs to happen.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: I'll tell you, Otis, you're hitting it right on the head. The, uh, I had an experience back at right after 2001. Once again, wing commander, there was a, uh, Guard unit, Army Guard unit that was activated, to support security at the base.

They showed up rag tag, you know, overweight, untrained and [00:42:00] their sergeants that kind of rallied this group up, had them out, no kidding, marching. And they had silhouetted wooden plywood guns, rifles that they were carrying. And, and I couldn't believe it. I go, these guys are here to protect this base.

So, I grabbed the sergeant, I go, this is your unit that they sent to guard us against, you know, terrorists that are attacking us from above? And he goes, it's all we got. I'm making the best of what I can do. In the moment I'm at. So I would come back to you and what you said about wing commanders have a lot of things they got to do these days.

But no matter what the resources are, no matter how few flying hours, no matter what, keep them busy in some type of movement, some kind of productive tension that is all about the war fight. And everybody in that wing needs to understand that [00:43:00] they support the mission. If it's a fly and fight, that's what we do.

We're warriors here. No matter what your specialty is, you support the mission of the space. You've got to be tough with that. And you can't be afraid of overworking or over temping the wing. People want that tension. They want to feel part of the team. Don't wait for the resources.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So Otis, I'm going to spin back to you and ask you to put your congressional hat back on because we've talked a lot about what readiness is, why it matters.

Um, and some of the challenges we have offered some advice to wing commanders but, you know, the Senate Armed Services Committee, which you were a pro staffer on you. These are issues that are near and dear to your heart. How did, how do the committee's track and understand readiness, because it has to be a crucial part of their oversight responsibilities?

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Yeah, absolutely. And the committee, the professional staff actually gets copies of the SORTS and DRRS. So, DRRS is the defense readiness reporting system. [00:44:00] And SORTS is the status of resources and training system. Both of them are measures that squadron, units, squadron commanders have to report in what their readiness is.

And so you'll get that. You can upgrade or downgrade yourself. And we actually get a chance to see that. And they get the joint staff gives a roll up to to both the HASC and the SASC to be able to track to provide oversight. And then we're also, you know, responsible for the budgeting, allocation and budgeting of flight hours, the weapon system sustainment, and managing and maintaining that, right?

And what the staff ends up doing is trying to hold that sacrosanct, right? So, so the time that I was on the committee, we would not allow money to be taken out of flying hours. And the chairman at the time, Senator Inhofe was, who was a pilot as well understood that flying hours were something that just you did not want to use as a, as a piggy bank.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yes, it's not a bill pair, it's not a trade off.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: But what you end up having is the Air [00:45:00] Force coming back and saying, well, there, we will not be able to execute those hours. And every year the committee was very frustrated in the fact that, why, why can't you execute those? And so you end up, you know, the GAO reports, they're trying, they're trying to get to the bottom of things.

Understanding why you have low M. C. rates, why you're not flying out you're flying hour programs. And fundamentally, right? We came down to the fact of, uh, one is there's a manning problem, right? There's a in particular maintenance manning, but, but also in pilot manning which compounds this idea, right?

So you have, so in some units, you'll have less pilots available, so then they won't be able to fly out their hours. And then or they'll have too many pilots, right? And not enough maintainers, uh, specifically in a lot of the F 35 units. And then they won't, they still won't be able to fly out what they need to, right?

Because they don't have the right number of maintainers. So, one is getting the , personnel bill and the personnel allocations correct and not, uh, [00:46:00] across the board for the longest time, we're manning at 80 percent for maintenance and that you can't get to 100 percent if you only applying and now we're finding that WSS well, because historically we haven't been able to execute.

Oh, we're gonna lower that down and only fund that at 80 percent, 85 percent but nonetheless, right? And understanding that we're just continuing to lower the bar and Congress is trying this, you know, it's like the old hey, we're here to help. So people don't always feel that, that way. But actually, they've been

trying to hold those levels and increase them to give the right number of resources to the, to the men and women that are, that are trying to fight.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: You know, part of the irony though, is it as, because we're not recapitalizing and putting new jets into the fleet, we have these old jets, like the F 16, F 15C, even F 15E is getting old now. Like it's crazy old. They require more resources and more spares. Then the new jets do.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: They [00:47:00] do. And if you look at whether it's China and the amount of that, that they're recapitalized their entire fleets, or whether it's the other services that have actually like the Navy's recapitalized their fighter fleet three times in the span of the Air Force has not done it at all.

Uh, and we, so the Air Force tends to just accept that we're getting older and older. Congress put in caps. It's a minimum, you have to maintain. You know, 19, say, say, 1947 aircraft.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: It's like a floor, a fighter floor.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: That sets in and we've then through the, the Air Force's advocacy, the Air Force continues every year to ask us to lower that down and lower that down.

And are you seeing that that go farther and farther down and then there's still the argument of, hey, we're the smallest force. But we're not recapitalizing our fighter force at the speed that we should. As a matter of fact, we're looking at getting rid of even more of the Guard and Reserve aircraft and trying to push them back in either get rid, divest them or get rid of them and push them back into the active duty. Because we're [00:48:00] just continuing to get smaller and smaller and smaller. At some point you just have to step up and we should have been buying F-35s at rate about seven years ago. Uh, we're still not, right? 42 to 48 aircraft isn't just enough. We're plussing up a little bit in the, on the, F15EX as well. But it is not the number of aircraft you need to recapitalize and more importantly, not just recapitalize, uh, the emaciated force that we have today, but actually grow it to what it needs to be, to be able to meet the mission requirements that the President and the Chairman of the Joint Staff requires.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And people think that when you're getting rid of the aircraft, that's all that you're getting rid of, but that's really not the case. You're getting rid of everything else behind that that's necessary to make that combat system effective. The pilots and the maintainers are core to this, right? And experience matters here.

When you get rid of the aircraft, you get rid of your experienced pilots and maintainers and experience matters in combat because experienced maintainers can create higher mission capable rates, can turn those jets faster, can repair those jets better. [00:49:00] And experienced pilots have better mission outcomes and higher survivability rates.

What really bothers me about what the service is doing right now regarding divesting aircraft from the Guard, is the Guard does represent the service's most experienced, uh, component, right? Because when pilots leave the active duty and the Air Force has not been able to sufficiently mitigate that pilot access, where do those pilots go?

They go to the Guard. So, the guard really captures that experience on the pilot side and oftentimes from the maintainer side as well. And those maintainers, even the Guard baby maintainers that start with that unit, they grow up with that unit. They have tremendous experience because their retention rates are phenomenal.

The Air National Guard retention rates are in the upper eighties, right? Um, so this is fantastic, except that now we're getting rid of them, which means we're losing some of the most valuable core that we have, those experienced warfighters. So, we need to ensure that when we're recapitalizing, we do it at a one for one rate.

We cannot divest to invest.

We heard, [00:50:00] Secretary Kendall talk about divest to invest early on in, in his tenure, where he wanted to get rid of aircraft to free up funding, but we never saw those airplanes, uh, you know, bought, right?

Robert "Otis" Winkler: You know, that's never worked.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: It's never worked for the Air Force. We've, we've tried that multiple times.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: We've tried it. PBD 720. And now this divest invest. Every single time, but the what the Air Force tends to forget is if they free up those funds instead of.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Those funds vaporize and they go somewhere else.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Somebody else will take those funds, right?

Instead of putting it back where it was supposed to be apportioned and allocated to, it'll just it just gets taken by somebody else that has that has a more need. Has a larger need for it.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, you have to replace these aircraft at a one for one rate, ensure that you have that the shadows on the ramps stay the same.

So, we've been, you know, things are clearly bad. We've talked about fixes throughout this entire, um, throughout this entire podcast. But, you know Stutz, I'd like to start with you regarding an Air Force leadership perspective. Where should they start to address this? I mean, It's not like today's leaders want [00:51:00] poor readiness.

I mean, that's not what they are trying to do. They are trying to make the best decisions they can for the Air Force. What advice or what suggestions do you have for them?

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Yeah, I think, once again, I'll go back to, you know, the emphasis, for the overall force that starts at the Chief's level is the fight tonight is the priority.

Um, and that's got a trickle down. In the discussion we've had today and set the pace that we have to be on the very tip of readiness. And that's a big, that's a big machine. It's about the readiness pilots and crews. It's about what you have out there in terms of adequate flying hours, about how you exercise and so forth.

Everything we've talked about. I do think that the core value of the Air Force, you know, we've had some statements recently that appear, you know, go soft on what is [00:52:00] air superiority and can we do it in a different way and so forth. That's, that's gotta be an Air Force is an Air Force. It is about the magic of being able to be that force that establishes air superiority in the air domain.

Uh, so, I like what JV said earlier, which is the other part for leadership is think clearly about the money you may get, you know, cause we all believe, I think we need to plus up the Air Force budget. About 5 percent on a long term basis. But how do you prioritize what you're going to do with that money?

And maybe, you know, that, that reach into the future and RTD and E all your developmental money, money, maybe that's out of whack with what you're doing right now with modernization procurement. Uh, maybe there needs to be

a balance there. So, I think there's some new prioritization besides some new threads of culture that have to be reinforced, uh, as we did back in the old days, not [00:53:00] to be the cranky old, uh, old man at the table.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Yeah, I love the fact of that fight tonight force, right? That they have to be ready to fight tonight. One thing that makes the Air Force different from some of the other services is that we don't do tiered readiness, right? We're at a 72 hour strength at all times, right? And so that means that we don't take a hit on readiness.

We don't go to C3 or C4, uh, when we get back from a deployment. We're continually ready to go. And that culture, I think, through the last 20 years has kind of left the force and the idea that, hey, it's my turn to go back to Iraq or Afghanistan. We're going to spin up for that for a long period of time.

And we're that culture needs to shift. And I think it is shifting now with it. See that the way that Red Flag is, uh, is kind of evolving, right? And incorporating live virtual constructive in order to get those wider areas, those wider ranges that have you talked about. But really getting back to that culture of being ready to go at a moment's notice, right?

Because that's what deters the [00:54:00] adversary. Not, hey, we're going to give you eight, eight, nine months, right? You're only going to deploy once a year, and you only have to be ready for that. That's a different model, and the United States Air Force doesn't do that model.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Actually, it is moving in that direction, right? Because General Slife has introduced AFFORGEN. So you only deploy, you know, one fourth of your cycle time so only a quarter of the Air Force will be ready to deploy at any point in time. So, so we're moving away from that fight tonight force and that always ready to deter force to only one quarter of the force. And when you think about how small we are today, like.

John "JV" Venable: That's just cancerous. That's just, that's just a cancerous thought.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Okay, I gotta butt in here. Because I understand what this purpose is, but it's about continuing to fight in the mode we have for the last 30 years, counter terrorism, counter insurgency.

If we're asked to go fight China, Papa and I, if we were running things, we would mobilize the entire [00:55:00] Air Force. It has to be ready to fight tonight.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Exactly.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: So, there is this schizophrenia that we continue to cling to this low tempo mode of gradual, you know?

I hate, you know, let me be an old man here, angry old man, you know, uh, an occupying force in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa and so forth. So, this is good for counterinsurgency, but we have a SOCOM for that and all the services put special operations capabilities into that. The rest of the Air Force is about biting at the high end in 100 percent of it in all its specialties. No one is excused. No matter what they, am I being an angry old man?

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Amen!

John "JV" Venable: A little, a little angry. I felt anger.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: Not angry at all.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: No. Okay. All right. [00:56:00] Final question. So we're going to do a little bit of a lightning round.

There are a lot of demands on the Air Force, uh, everything from recapitalizing the nuclear enterprise with Sentinel to fielding the T 7, F 35, B 21, NGAD, ground capacity, all of this, like the Air Force has to do it all at the same time because they have been starved and cannibalizing themselves for 30 years.

So, if you're the next SECAF, what would be your 1st, 2nd and 3rd priorities? And so, Papa, we're gonna start with you, and then we'll go JV, Stutz and Otis. So, Papa, you're SECAF. What are your priorities?

Barry "Papa" Murphy: All right. Um, yeah, I think you have to have the nukes as number 1. I mean, seeing how Russia is using nuclear posturing and things to threaten and try to get its way if we don't have a effective nuclear force, uh, then we're going to lose any of those potential things that we, we have to have that [00:57:00] deterrence effect. So that one, that one's gonna be number one in my boat, although I would also say they need to look a little bit outside the box and, and see if there are other capabilities that we can have other than just purely replacing stationary ICBMs.

Beyond that I think the number two priority needs to be the F35 and getting. A conflict could happen tomorrow. You know, like, we had this whole fight tonight thing that we've talked about so much. Uh, we're at the point where we've got to prioritize what we've got and generate that as much as humanly possible and then go from there.

Beyond that, it gets pretty, pretty tough. We need the T7. We need the B21. We need the NGAD for sure. Um, so I'd put all 3 of those kind of in the, in the same bucket at number 3. These are not easy decisions. The only [00:58:00] other thing I'd add is when it, when it comes to, I do wish Congress would get to the point where with all these threats flashing red right now, we're at the point where we've got to activate the defense industrial base in a pretty massive way and to do that, I think you need to get away from just traditional service budgets and have a big chunk of money that is there for, maybe a little bit of procurement for new weapon systems, but primarily to restock our munitions, spare parts, all the materials that you're going to need to actually fight a war. And that should not be coming in just a normal DoD food fight between the services. It needs to be a more of an OCO mindset of like.

This whole pot of money is to get ready for the war that we don't want to happen, but might happen.

John "JV" Venable: Yeah. I love your thought process. Papa, the capacity thing that we were talking about earlier, the one thing we didn't mention was the munition side of it. And there are some munitions, some specialized [00:59:00] munitions that actually can get to the ranges.

We'll need to fire them from into a precision targets. Those stockpiles are less than a week long. So we'll absolutely need to do that. But if I could take an uber view of this. We have been focused for so long as the Air Force and what is what are we going to look like in 20 years? What are we going to look like in 15 years?

And I know it may sound as an overstatement, but I think we've been abdicating the 1 to 3 year readiness window for the big fight. We need to turn that on, on its head immediately and go into a readiness campaign one to three years. People think that it takes two to three years from the time you put cash down until the time you get an F 35 on the ramp.

That's true. Same thing for the munitions. It's about two, uh, two to three years, but readiness is three to five years. It's gonna take us that long to get to a point where we're ready to fight that fight. Uh, [01:00:00] unless we're forced into it

now, we would want to hold that off. Go back into the reps and sets just for a second.

I had a conversation with Senator Tuberville, which really focused my mind on how this analogies work. He's a football coach in the SEC, he was, and I said, uh, sir, if, if your team gets to practice once a week and everybody else is practicing six days a week. How well would that turn out for you in the big game on Sundays?

And he said, not very well. I said, well, what if you did that for several years? You might be able to, to beat ankle biter league, but you're not going to compete at the SEC. We're talking about peer conflict and combatants, and our folks are getting one to two reps a week, max. While our Chinese counterparts right now are actually they flip the paradigm.

They're flying at 200 hours of a fighter pilot a year, and our [01:01:00] guys are in the little one thirties. We've got to do that first, one to three years, three to five years, three to five to seven years and anything we can acquire between now and the five to seven year point, we've got to move on it and we've got to increase those acquisition rates as fast as we can.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, I call that our strategic surprise time horizon. We could have crystal ball and know that the big fight is going to happen in five years, but we might already be too late based off of how long it takes us to do those things. Stutz, what do you got?

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Yeah, my priorities, I think, come back to what's been said, uh, in terms of how we have to have the most aggressive and believable and demonstrable deterrence posture possible in the world that we're facing today.

And so my thought about fight tonight is where it's all at. I would hope it'd be a defense wide change in terms of we need to procure what we can as a Papa said. [01:02:00] We need to get serious about a base air and missile defense so that we can continue to fight under threats. We need our munitions stockpiles built.

Right now, you know, we did a study, a workshop, we run out of munitions against a China in a Taiwan scenario in about a week. I mean there is severe issues that we have to fix to be able to prove and demonstrate that we have the capacity wherewithal to deter and dissuade before the balloon goes up.

So all that is, all those three priorities wrapped up in that by the way.

I hope I passed the test there.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: You totally passed the test. And we are on board. Otis, what's your, what are your, what's your wisdom, what's your priorities?

Robert "Otis" Winkler: I think number one is you have to, you have to focus on warfighting.

And the enemy, right, for China, the China one declared as an enemy right not as a competitor. And then two they told us when they're gonna be ready to fight and so we should [01:03:00] be ready to fight as well and so the focus is on readiness modernization of what we have not developing new stuff but modernization, increasing the capability of what we have today and then being able to survive in a peer environment, in a threat environment. Right? Not running away, right? Not leaving the battlefield, but actually getting in and fighting because that's the only way that you're going to have, uh, effectiveness against a peer adversary.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah, the pressure concentration mass and and continue to keep those sorties. They get their head down. So we got to ensure that China doesn't have the ability to relax, reset, recoup, regenerate, and respond.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: That pressure matters in a fight. And then finally, we should start acting like we're an underdog. So instead of waiting, you know, hey, looking for the perfect thing, we're going to do a clean sheet design of a new widget or a new capability.

Let's take a look at what's out there today and let's get it fielded in the field, ready to deter China, whether it's these, you know, seven, we have, I think the Air Force has six different [01:04:00] low cost cruise missile programs that are currently under development. And we have things that are actually out there ready that you could just pull off of the commercial market.

Let's do that. Let's field, get things into the field. It's probably the 90 percent solution. It won't be the 100 percent solution. But we can live with that if it deters China in 2027.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Yeah. Gentlemen, thank you so much today. It's been a great conversation. I know we could talk about this for a lot longer.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Thanks, Lucky.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Readiness matters. I'll tell you, if you don't have an Air Force, you cannot have a joint force. The entire U. S. national security depends on the Air Force's ability to execute independent and global attacks. It comes down to global vigilance, global reach, and global power.

Maj Gen Larry Stutzriem: Well said.

John "JV" Venable: Great to be with you. Wonderful conversation. Thank you.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Papa, thanks so much for joining us.

Barry "Papa" Murphy: You're welcome. Thanks, Lucky. I appreciate you guys, uh, inviting me. This was awesome.

Robert "Otis" Winkler: Well done. Thanks a lot. It's been a pleasure.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Fantastic. Thank you so much. We'll see you next time.

With that, I'd like to [01:05:00] extend a big thank you to our guests for joining in today's discussion.

I'd also like to extend a big thank you to you, our listeners, for your continued support and for tuning into today's show. If you like what you heard today, don't forget to hit that like button and follow or subscribe to the Aerospace Advantage. You can also leave a comment to let us know what you think about our show or areas you would like us to explore further.

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