

As ground troops 'surge,' Air Force quietly builds Iraq presence, drops 5 times more bombs

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BALAD AIR BASE, Iraq (AP) - Away from the headlines and debate over the "surge" in U.S. ground troops, the U.S. Air Force has quietly built up its hardware inside Iraq, sharply stepped up bombing and laid a foundation for a sustained air campaign in support of American and Iraqi forces.

Squadrons of attack planes have been added to the in-country fleet. The air reconnaissance arm has almost doubled since last year. The powerful B1-B bomber has been recalled to action over Iraq.

The escalation worries some about an increase in "collateral damage," casualties among Iraqi civilians. Air Force generals worry about wear and tear on aging aircraft. But ground commanders clearly like what they see.

"Night before last we had 14 strikes from B-1 bombers. Last night we had 18 strikes by B-1 bombers," Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch said approvingly of air support his 3rd Infantry Division received in a recent offensive south of Baghdad.

Statistics tell the story: Air Force and Navy aircraft dropped 437 bombs and missiles in Iraq in the first six months of 2007, a fivefold increase over the 86 used in the first half of 2006, and three times more than in the second half of 2006, according to Air Force data. In June, bombs dropped at a rate of more than five a day.

Inside spacious, air-conditioned "Kingpin," a new air traffic control center at this huge Air Force hub 50 miles (80 kilometers) north of Baghdad, the expanded commitment can be seen on the central display screen: Small points of light represent more than 100 aircraft crisscrossing Iraqi air space at any one time.

The increased air activity has paralleled the reinforcement of U.S. ground troops, beginning in February, to try to suppress the insurgency and sectarian violence in the Baghdad region. Simply keeping those 30,000 additional troops supplied has added to demands on the Air Force.

"We're the busiest aerial port in DOD (Department of Defense)," said Col. Dave Reynolds, a mission support commander here. Working 12-hour shifts, his cargo handlers are expected to move 140,000 tons of cargo this year, one-third more than in 2006, he said.

The greatest impact of the "air surge" has come in close air support for Army and Marine operations.

Early this year, with little fanfare, the Air Force sent a squadron of A-10 "Warthog" attack planes -- a dozen or more aircraft -- to be based at Al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq. At the same time it added a squadron of F-16C Fighting Falcons here at Balad. Although some had flown missions over Iraq from elsewhere in the region, the additions doubled to 50 or more the number of workhorse fighter-bomber jets available at bases inside the country, closer to the action.

The reinforcement involved more than numbers. The new F-16Cs were the first of the advanced "Block 50" version to fly in Iraq, an aircraft whose technology includes a cockpit helmet that enables the pilot to aim his weapons at a target simply by turning his head and looking at it.

The Navy has contributed by stationing a second aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, and the reintroduction of B1-Bs has added a close-at-hand "platform" capable of carrying 24 tons of bombs.

Those big bombers were moved last year from distant Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean to an undisclosed base in the Persian Gulf. Since February, with the ground offensive, they have gone on Iraq bombing runs for the first time since the 2003 invasion.

As chronicled in the Air Force's daily summaries, more and more pilots are getting the "cleared hot" clearance for bombing runs, usually with 500-pound (227-kilogram) bombs. In recent Army operations north of Baghdad, for example, Air Force planes have struck "factories" for makeshift bombs, weapons caches uncovered by ground troops and, in one instance, "several houses insurgents were using as fire positions."

Iraq Body Count, a London-based, anti-war research group that monitors Iraqi war deaths, says the step-up in air attacks appears to have been accompanied by an increase in Iraqi civilian casualties from air strikes. Based on media reports, it counts a recent average of 50 such deaths per month.

The Air Force itself does not maintain such data.

The demand for air support is heavy. On one recent day, at a briefing attended by a reporter, it was noted that 48 requests for air support were filled, but 16 went unmet.

"There are times when the Army wishes we had more jets," said F-16C pilot Lt. Col. Steve Williams, commander of the 13th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, a component of Balad's 379th Air Expeditionary Wing.

In addition, the Air Force is performing more "ISR" work in Iraq -- intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. "We have probably come close to doubling our ISR platforms the past 12 months," said Col. Gary Crowder, a deputy air operations chief for the Central Command.

Those proliferating reconnaissance platforms include Predator drones, high-flying U2s and AWACS, the technology-packed airborne warning and control aircraft, three of which returned to the Persian Gulf in April after three years' absence.

The F-16Cs and other attack planes also do surveillance work with their targeting cameras, keeping watch on convoy routes, for example. By Oct. 1, Crowder said, all squadrons will have "ROVER" capability, able to download real-time aerial video to the laptop computers of troops on the ground -- showing them, in effect, what's around the next corner.

"They love it. It's like having a security camera wherever you want it," said Col. Joe Guastella, the Air Force's regional operations chief.

Air Force engineers, meanwhile, are improving this centrally located home base, which supports some 10,000 air operations per week.

The weaker of Balad's two 11,000-foot (3,353-meter) runways was reinforced -- for five to seven years' more hard use. The engineers next will build concrete "overruns" at the runways' ends. Balad's strategic ramp, the concrete parking lot for its biggest planes, was expanded last fall. The air traffic control system is to be upgraded again with the latest technology.

"We'd like to get it to be a field like Langley, if you will," said mission support chief Reynolds, referring to the Air Force showcase base in Virginia.

The Air Force has flown over Iraq for many years, having enforced "no-fly zones" with the Navy in 1991-2003 when Saddam Hussein was in power, banning Iraqi aircraft from northern and southern areas of this country. Today, too, it takes a long view: Many expect the Army to draw down its Iraq forces by 2009, but the Air Force is planning for a continued conflict in which it supports Iraqi troops. "Until we can determine that the Iraqis have got their air force to sufficient capability, I think the coalition will be here to support that effort," Lt. Gen. Gary North, overall regional air commander, said in an interview. The new Iraqi air force thus far fields only a handful of transports and reconnaissance aircraft -- no attack planes.

North also echoed a common theme in today's Air Force: Some of the U.S. planes are too old. Some of his KC-135 air-refueling tankers date from 1956. Heavy use in Iraq and Afghanistan is cracking the wings of some A-10s, the Air Force says.

"We are burning these airplanes out," North said. "Our A-10s and our F-16s are rapidly becoming legacy systems."

If the equipment is under strain, it does not appear the personnel are.

The Air Force's four-month Iraq tours and extensive use of volunteer pilots from the Reserve and National Guard contrast sharply with an Army whose 15-month tours are sapping energy and morale.

In the Air Force, Iraq duty can even be cut to two months. Lt. Col. Bob Mortensen's 457th Fighter Squadron -- F-16Cs from Fort Worth, Texas -- managed it by working a deal with another Reserve unit to share one four-month rotation.

How much longer can these flyers answer the call?

"As many times as we're asked," Mortensen said.