

RECORD VERSION

**STATEMENT BY
MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM K. GAYLER
COMMANDING GENERAL,
U.S. ARMY AVIATION CENTER OF EXCELLENCE**

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Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Bordallo and fellow distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Readiness, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the state of Army Aviation readiness and safety trends. I am honored to represent the Army's leadership, and the Soldiers and Civilians of Army Aviation serving around the globe.

The United States Army maintains the world's largest, most modern, and well-trained aviation force of its kind and provides an unparalleled advantage to the Joint Force. The foundation of our advantage has been and always will be our professional, agile, and adaptive leaders and Soldiers. The number one priority of these leaders and Soldiers is maintaining the level of combat readiness which provides commanders and Soldiers on the ground with a distinct advantage as they fulfill the Nation's commitments. At its essence, Army Aviation combat readiness is defined as fully trained and proficient units led by competent leaders, equipped with modern and capable aviation platforms at the appropriate capacity. It is the combination of these factors that when successfully realized, enable safe aviation operations and allow Army Aviation to thrive as an integral member of the Joint Force.

Maintaining Readiness – Critical to Safe Aviation Operations

Consistent with my testimony before this committee last November, building and maintaining readiness remains Army Aviation's number one priority, which we generate by manning, training, and equipping forces and developing leaders to fulfill the requirements of Combatant Commanders. Readiness is paramount to meet today's extremely high demand for Army Aviation, as well as to ensure that the force is prepared to meet emerging threats. However, we are continually challenged with balancing high global demand with a requirement to train for large scale combat

operations and to modernize the aviation force. Providing adequate readiness is also hampered by shortfalls in manning, aviation maintenance concerns, and years of constrained and unpredictable funding.

Manning

We continue to feel the repercussions of previous force structure adjustments and fiscal constraints that forced tough decisions that prioritized short-term readiness over the long-term health of the force. One such decision was to under-access Regular Army Aviation Warrant Officers for several years. The results of that period of under-accession are still being felt today, where manning shortfalls in junior-grade warrant officers and particular aviation specialties add stress to the force, reduce overall experience levels, and degrade our ability to produce readiness. We are mitigating some manning shortfalls by retaining higher numbers of senior aviation warrant officers, however twenty-five percent of that population is retirement eligible. Furthermore, ongoing and largely unprecedented recruitment of Army Aviators by the commercial aviation industry challenges our ability to maintain adequate manning levels.

The Army continues to address manning concerns through three lines of effort: increasing accessions, increasing training throughput, and retention. The Army will increase annual Aviation Warrant Officer accessions by twenty-five percent by FY 19, while also increasing institutional capacity to train new aviators. Additionally, in October 2017, the Army introduced a graduated incentives program to qualified aviators, targeting pilots nearing the end of their initial six year Active Duty Service Obligation, as well as those who are retirement eligible. Since the incentive program's inception, Army Aviation has retained 344 aviators who were eligible to retire or depart the service. While these mitigation measures are having positive effects in reducing aviation warrant officer shortages, a strategic threat to pilot manning persists which will require resources and continued vigilance to maintain a healthy Army Aviation force.

Aviation Maintenance

Army Aviation is inherently dangerous and our modern aircraft and their complex systems require highly skilled maintenance professionals to ensure the airworthiness of our aircraft. Last November, I discussed the detrimental impact that years of relying on contract-provided maintenance has had on the proficiency of our aviation maintainers. In addition to clear concerns regarding safety, reduced maintainer proficiency has also manifested in fewer aircraft available for training, negatively impacting aviation readiness rates. While dependency on contract maintenance has been reduced, increasing the knowledge and skills of our aviation maintainers will take time. Since I last appeared before this committee, the Aviation Enterprise developed a Standardized Aviation Maintenance Training program that will be released shortly to the field. This program significantly increases rigor in aviation maintenance training and standardization, while also introducing required testing and evaluation of aviation maintainers. While it will take time to see the long-term benefits of this program, this effort will enable the force to better develop and assess aviation maintainer proficiency across aviation formations, ultimately resulting in increased operational readiness.

Fiscal uncertainty also presents difficulties to aviation maintenance, impacting overall readiness. Our modernized supply systems are designed to deliver "peacetime" efficiencies at minimal cost. The "just in time" nature of these systems combined with their focus on satisfying a rolling average of past demand makes their effectiveness extremely vulnerable to any increased requirement. Increased operational tempo, deployments, quality problems, and contract delinquencies all result in increased demand for critical aviation parts. Furthermore, long acquisition lead times for complex aviation components hamper our ability to rapidly recover from these events. This situation, one of insufficient aviation parts stockage levels, has become a key impediment to Army Aviation readiness as it detrimentally impacts aircraft available for training and also reduces mission capable rates across the force. While the Aviation Enterprise is working hard to rectify these issues, low stocks of certain critical aircraft parts ultimately place Army Aviation one major reliability event or significant emerging requirement away from substantial aircraft readiness challenges.

Training

Army Aviation faces unique challenges as we re-orient our training focus to Large Scale Combat Operations against a peer or near-peer adversary. While the U.S. military appropriately concentrated on counterinsurgency operations over the past seventeen years, potential adversaries invested in capabilities to target our strengths and exploit our weaknesses. Regaining overmatch will require improved readiness with an emphasis on increasingly agile forces that can fight without assurances of dominance in the air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace domains. Defeating more capable and lethal adversaries demands proficiency levels at company and battalion level, proficiency far greater than the levels Army Aviation maintained during counterinsurgency operations. Furthermore, the required capabilities to fight and win on future battlefields are significantly different than the expertise resident throughout much of Army Aviation today, who have honed their skills in counterinsurgency operations. Potential adversaries possess the ability to deny or contest access with longer range fires, enhanced lethality, and integrated air defenses. As a result, our aircrews must once again become far more adept at operating at terrain flight altitudes and in larger formation sizes to mitigate the risks presented by such adversaries. As stated by the Secretary of the Army and Chief of Staff of the Army in the Army Vision published earlier this month, our training must be tough, realistic, iterative, and dynamic, focused on high-intensity conflict and incorporating battlefield innovation and combined arms maneuver with the Joint Force, allies, and partners.

However, our smaller force continues to be challenged to train to these high standards due to the insatiable demand for Army Aviation. Throughout the remainder of FY 18 and into FY 19, we will commit a large percentage of aviation forces to combat deployments or rotational requirements, homeland support requirements, Combat Training Center training requirements and aircraft modernization efforts. While our incredibly capable leaders and Soldiers are working through these tasks, high

operational tempo will continue to challenge their ability to prepare aviation units for Large Scale Combat Operations.

Aviation Safety

All Army Aviation operations are inherently dangerous. Sufficiently mitigating this risk is a complex and resource-intensive effort that requires careful oversight, management, and engaged leadership at multiple levels. Army Aviation Class A mishap rates have steadily declined over the past four decades, with the exception of increased mishaps experienced during the initial stages of major combat operations (*Class A - permanent disability, loss of life or cost greater than \$2 Million*). FY 17 concluded with a mishap rate of 0.99 incidents per 100,000 flight hours, while the current rate for FY 18 is 0.93. In fact, the mishap rates from FY 16 through today represent the lowest three-year period in the last thirty-five years of Army Aviation. Class B and C mishap rates also remain below ten-year averages (*Class B - cost less than \$2 Million but greater than \$500,000; Class C - cost less than \$500,000 but greater than \$50,000*). Despite decreasing mishap trends, Army Aviation Soldiers and leaders remain absolutely committed to improving our safety record.

Human error remains the primary causal factor for all Army Aviation mishaps. In fact, roughly eighty-percent of all Class A through C mishaps involve human factors as the leading or underlying causal factor contributing to the mishap. Within the human factor category, the leading causes are performance-based and judgement errors; while individual training, experience level, supervision, planning, and crew and team training represent the predominant underlying causal factors. We remain confident that the best method to ensure aviators are optimally prepared to handle the complexities of aviation operations is through sufficient training repetitions. While even perfect practice will never completely eliminate human error, the improved confidence and proficiency that our aviators gain through rigorous, realistic, and iterative training not only enhances mission effectiveness, but also mitigates risk to aviation operations.

The Army Aviation Enterprise continues to work diligently to reduce risk and to prevent future mishaps. Initiatives including the development of low altitude emergency

procedures Training Support Package, adjustments to instructor pilot courses to increase tactical employment focus, and adjustments to Army Aviation Doctrine, which all seek to ensure Army Aviators are better prepared to fight and win in Large Scale Combat Operations. Additionally, the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center is conducting vignette-based training across Army Aviation, drawing lessons learned from Class C mishaps and other “near miss” incidents, which highlight the leading and underlying human factors that often lead to many of our catastrophic aviation mishaps. Furthermore, the Combat Readiness Center is developing and fielding improved information sharing systems that capture near-miss reporting for more ready access and dissemination to the field.

It is important to note that elevated risk levels accompany Army Aviation’s shift to training for Large Scale Combat Operations due to the low altitudes required to defeat radar threats, increased complexities that these missions require, and training conducted at echelons above the team and platoon level. Despite elevated risk levels, we cannot afford to be risk averse. We must train to high standards in demanding conditions in order to remain prepared to meet future threats. The alternative is deferring the cost to the next conflict – a price that may be unaffordable.

Modernization

Modernizing Army Aviation to maintain or regain overmatch with potential adversaries requires timely, predictable, adequate, and sustained funding. Prior fiscal constraints have delayed modernization efforts and have largely eliminated strategic depth in the force, resulting in reduced capacity to meet emerging requirements. To win decisively on future battlefields, Army Aviation requires modernized equipment and trained personnel to ensure the force is not outmanned, outgunned, or outdated. The Army Futures Command, once operational, will specifically address these issues with the continued support of the Future Vertical Lift Cross Functional Team.

The current and highly capable aviation fleet will continue to serve us well for future decades. However, Army Aviation requires modernized equipment and capabilities optimized for Large Scale Combat Operations to compete with advancing

military competitors. In the near term, we will make tough choices on how to invest competing dollars in pursuing improvements in reach, protection, and lethality to ensure that our current fleets maintain competitive overmatch. In the mid-term, we continue to pursue Advanced Unmanned Aircraft Systems and Future Vertical Lift solutions to ensure that Army Aviation continues to provide the critical capabilities that ground commanders and the entire Joint Force require to dominate on future battlefields.

Conclusion

Army Aviation is and will remain an essential member of the Joint Force, providing unparalleled capability to Combatant Commanders across the full range of military operations. Despite the unpredictable and uncertain fiscal environment and insatiable demand for aviation forces, our Soldiers, leaders, and civilians remain committed to building and maintaining readiness for the future. Concerns persist, however, that weighting today's efforts to provide readiness comes at significant cost to our level of preparation to meet emergent requirements, as well as to investing in the modernization of the future aviation force. While the Army's senior leaders continue to address these concerns, we ask for your continued assistance in providing predictable and sustained funding to enable readiness and modernization investment to posture Army Aviation for an increasingly complex future. Your continued oversight and support is greatly appreciated.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of this Subcommittee, thank you for your strong and enduring support of the outstanding men and women in uniform, to our Army Civilians, and to their families.