Aerospace Nation: Lieutenant General James C. Slife

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**SPEAKERS**

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**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 00:57

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, I'm Dave Deptula, Dean of the Mitchell Institute of Aerospace Studies, and welcome to our aerospace nation series. We're really pleased today that Lieutenant General Jim Slife could join us today. General Slife is the commander of Air Force Special Operations Command. And as the commander of the air component of US Special Operations Command, General Slife manages the organization and worldwide deployment of approximately 21,000 Air Force Special Operations professionals. He's a command pilot with more than 3100 flight hours with the MH 53, MQ1, and other various aircraft. So welcome General Slife. And thanks very much for taking the time today. What I'd like to do is start off our session today by giving you an opportunity to make a few opening remarks on the critical challenges that your team is facing, and some of your top priorities as you look to the future. So over to you.

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 02:02

Hey, thanks, General Deptula, it's good to see you again. And it's good to have the opportunity to join the virtual audience here on aerospace nation, you've really done a great job managing this platform and keeping the conversation fresh, each and every episode of this. So thanks for giving me the opportunity to join you and talk a little bit about the Air Force Special Operations Command and where we are and where we're going. You know, I would say that, in general, like the rest of the DOD we find ourselves at a strategic inflection point. That is unlike anything that really we have seen since September 11 of 2001. And although you couldn't probably put a thumbtack on a calendar and say this is the day that great power competition became our primary focus, I think you'd have to acknowledge that this is where we are in the strategic environment. And so like everybody else, we're having to think about what that means and, and, you know, AFSOC really reinvented itself after September 11. AFSOC had been a force that was largely geared to short term crisis response and contingency operations. And was generally used to serving a supporting role to the broader Joint Force. And after September 11, both of those things changed, we got into a sustained contingency mindset where we've had squadrons deployed for the better part of 20 years without a break. And we had to re gear ourselves to operate in that environment, we had to re gear ourselves in many ways to be the supported force certainly for the counter VEO fight in a way that was somewhat unfamiliar to us. And so all these changes took place, because the AFSOC that we had was not the AFSOC that we needed. And so we needed to become something fundamentally different. And frankly, we have, but when we look at where we are at this strategic inflection point, we look forward another decade or decade and a half. I think we we have to acknowledge that the AFSOC that we have is not the AFSOC that we will need in the future. And so we have to go about another transformation effort. And the thing that makes this I think so difficult is, in general, I would say the hardest thing for any organization to do is transform in the aftermath of success. And when you look back at the last 20 years, this has been, you know, a very SOF centric era and AFSOC has benefited greatly from the experiences and in the focus over the last 20 years. And so, you know, the tempting challenge to many of us would be to say, Hey, we have just had, you know, 20 years Have unalloyed success, why would we possibly change? And you know, this is this is the challenge facing all of us. And the analogy that I use and talking to the force is hey, you know, we're the film industry in 1996. You know, in 1996, Kodak was coming off of over 100 years of profit, they created generational wealth for shareholders and employees alike for 100 plus years. And yet, they saw the future coming, they knew that digital imaging was coming. And they weren't stupid, they recognized it. But by 2011, Kodak was bankrupt. Kodak's primary competitor in 1996, was Fuji, in 2021. Fuji is still a profitable company. And so what's the difference? And the difference is that Fuji was able to successfully envision themselves in this in this future environment, and pivot around their competitive strengths in order to get to that strict that future environment in a way that kept them competitive, Kodak was not able to make that transformation. And so an AFSOC we are at, you know, it's 1996. And we're in the film business. And so, you know, the first thing we've had to do is figure out what is it that we have to pivot around what is our competitive advantage for the future. And in AFSOC, it's simple our competitive advantage, our airman, our airman our competitive advantage. And so we've laid out our our strategy for transformation built around three major lines of effort that focus on our airmen and how we're going to enable the airman of tomorrow to be relevant and capable in that future operating environment. So I look forward to talking about that with you a little bit today general Deptula and fielding your questions, maybe exploring some of that, where it's of interest to you. So thanks very much, again, for the opportunity to join you today.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 07:00

What that's super, thanks very much for that context, and insight, and also, for all that your team is doing to enable our air force to be ready for special operations around the globe. So as you suggest, let's dig a bit deeper into some of the topics that you are raised. Now the Air Force is likely to face a prolonged period of budget constraints in the years to come. And you've previously stated the need to carefully consider systems and equipment better suited for near peer competition. Looking ahead to FY 22. and beyond. How is AFSOC prioritizing its resources in this emerging strategic and budgetary environment?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 07:47

Yeah, thanks that that is the central. That is the central challenge facing is not you know, as you well know, when you go around and talk to commanders and airman at echelons, there's no shortage of good ideas about what we ought to be doing and what we ought to do more. There is a relative scarcity of ideas of what we need to stop doing. And that is, of course, the challenge facing us is how do we how do we invest in the things that only we can do? And so that's kind of the first lens that I look at is what are the things that only AFSOC can do for the broader Joint Force. There, there are things that perhaps for for, you know, various reasons we could go into if it's of interest that we have find ourselves in 2021, performing what I would consider commodity activities, things that other people do. And you know, we may do them, we may like the way we do them better than other people, we may think we're the best in the world that and but at the end of the day, if it's not a unique part of what we bring to the Joint Force, then we really need to carefully consider whether we need to be staying in that that line of work. The analogy that I use in talking about this with the force is you know, sometimes when it's time for dinner, you go into the kitchen and you open the refrigerator and you open the cupboard and look at the ingredients you have and and you and you decide what you can make for dinner with the ingredients that you have available. Sometimes you know exactly what you want for dinner. And so you just go to the grocery store and buy the groceries that you need. And I would say that we are in an era as you describe with the with the budgetary environment, and so forth. We're probably in an environment where we need to look in the kitchen to see what we have available. And go to the grocery store only for those ingredients and spices and condiments that maybe will round out the meal that we're going to have tonight. But maybe not, but maybe not completely replace all the groceries we have in the cupboard. And so we have some great capabilities and apps on They just maybe need a little bit of work and a little bit of technical tactics, development in order to be relevant for the future operating environment that are covered and our refrigerators have got some groceries, and we just need to think about how we're going to make the meal that is gonna be required for the future.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 10:21

I have to tell you, that's the first time I've heard that analogy. And I think it's a good one, I'll tell you why it's a good one is because it allows those outside the military and you spoke very well, in non jargon is to understand some of the challenges so, so keep that up. Now, you you previously served as the commander, that 27 Special Operations Group, which includes AFSOC's primary remotely piloted aircraft squadrons. As always, there's a debate today in Washington, over the future utility of RPA is against near peer competitors. What would you say has been a lasting effect, remotely piloted aircraft on AFSOC ops? And what's been AFSOC's role in transforming the RPA into the formidable system that it is today?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 11:18

Yeah, I you know, this is a community that I've got a pretty big spot in my heart for. I think, I don't know that you know, this, but I believe I certainly asserted that I am the Air Force a senior RPA pilot. When I was the ops group commander at canon, I checked out and flew the mq one operationally. And I did that because it was new to us at the time, and there was no senior leaders and AFSOC, that understood the very, very unique aspects of how you operate this platform is, you well know from your experience, this is not, you know, something where you can just translate what we grew up doing flying airplanes to the RPA force. And so somebody needed to understand this. And so I took it upon myself to kind of dive into this. And I would tell you that you know, first off, again, prior to 911, we were really geared towards crisis response. And so we didn't necessarily have a need for long dwell iosr. And, you know, the types of capabilities that is we moved into a counter vdeo fight, counterinsurgency, these types of operations. The enormous requirement for intelligence to pace our operations was something that would that we had not previously considered. And so I think, now that we have figured out how to integrate RPA s and iosr more broadly, into our operational cycle, I don't see that we will ever go back. Now, I don't know that the mq nine is the platform for the future, it certainly has a place in the if you know, it's a it's a condiment, or, you know, piece of food in the kitchen. But I don't know that it will be a central part of what we're going to be doing in the future. But RPA is and is our mission, more broadly, are here to stay, I would tell you, for sure. And to the latter part of your question, how its AFSOC kind of facilitated this, you know, we have been able to benefit from SOCOM SOF, peculiar funding to pioneer capabilities and tactics with the RPA force that have then been broadly proliferated across the rest of the Air Force enterprise. And I think there's a lot of value to that model, where AFSOC can serve as a Pathfinder for the rest of the Air Force in a host of areas. And there are other examples of that. Certainly, we have done that with the RPA force, really, to the benefit of the whole Joint Force, not just to soft

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 14:08

Well, I'd also I applaud you for doing that for getting checked out in the airplane as a senior officer. And I'm awfully proud of the fact that I was fully combat mission qualified in the F 15. And every rank from Lieutenant to Lieutenant General. And that, you know, as as you now understand, as you get more and more senior and rank, you tend to get more and more isolated from the folks who are on the at the tip of the spear. So I think there's a lot of value for senior officers to be able to be checked out in the systems over which they participate because you then garner insights and can also share insights with those at the lower levels. So well done in that regard. Jim, you know this, but the audience may not I first got to know you when you were a major in 2002 When you were working on a book about general bill Creech, in which you chronicle the transformation of Tactical Air Command following the Vietnam War, as the Air Force transitions to meeting threats posed by pacing and peer competitors, how do you think general Creech would frame the challenge facing us today? If he was still alive? And what lessons Do you think that Joe Creech would have us remember?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 15:27

Yeah, I, uh, so, you know, just to correct the record. So I was not trying to write a book, I was just trying to graduate from SAAS, so I could get back to the ops world, so I didn't miss the war. Right. So I was, you know, 9/11, I was, I was a student at the School of Advanced airpower studies at the time. And my biggest fear was, I'm going to miss the war. You know, because that was the era that I grew up in was that, you know, we, you know, we got in, we did our thing, we declare victory, and we came home. And so, you know, I'm definitely afraid that I'm going to miss the war. And, you know, thankfully, I got back to the ops world in the summer of 2002, just in time to not miss the war in Afghanistan. But so I, you know, I was writing this paper that turned into, you know, I don't think it's a book but turned into a monograph really longer than than I intended. I just wanted to graduate but it it did turn into quite an effort is, you know, some interesting, interesting stories that are my relationship with general Creech.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 16:37

Yeah. And I understand he got a couple of phone calls from it.

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 16:41

Yeah. And one or two, one or two. But I think, you know, General Creech there. There. There was a lot that I think that I learned that that we all could learn from general Creech about how to approach the Air Force of 2021 in the strategic and operating environment. And so there really, there are two things that I think I would probably highlight as things that I would confidently say that general preach would would tell us about today, the first thing general Creech would tell us and really, this is this is less for the airman of the Air Force and more for kind of the external audience, General Creech is you will recall faced a, you know, he and the other senior leaders of the airforce, faced a very active, so called defense reform movement in the late 70s and early 80s, who argued that the Air Force was buying technology that was too complex, it was too expensive. You know, we needed quantity rather than, you know, these exquisite capabilities at the time, it was things like the F 117, precision guided munitions. what later became the F 22. lantern. All of these capabilities were things that the broader Air Force was accused of buying into too much complexity and general creatures. point to that was that you were only building the air force that is as complex as it needs to be to win. You know, I mean, we're not we're not pursuing technology for the sake of pursuing technology. we're pursuing technology, because this is what it's going to take to win against our primary adversary of the time, which is the Soviet Union. And so I think we see shades of that reemerging in 2021 as we consider the recapitalisation efforts, and advanced technology development efforts inside the Air Force for things like the next generation air dominance program, or perhaps the B 21. That, you know, some might question here, are these things really required? They really, you know, are we putting all our eggs in a technology basket? And I think I would say the same thing that general Creech said in the early 1980s, which was that we're only building an Air Force as complex as it needs to be to prevail in conflict with our primary adversaries. And so I think that would be the first lesson. The second lesson I think general Creech would offer us is, you know, General Creech had a profound belief in pride as the fuel of human accomplishment. And the way to engender pride across the service was by investing airman with ownership, investing airman with mission ownership. And you do that by decentralizing and organizing around your mission and not centralizing and elevating decision making to increasingly higher echelons. And so, you know, there are those who would argue that we need to centralize because we Get economies of scale or it's very efficient or whatever. But at the end of the day centralization robs ownership from the airman which is the and takes away the pride which is the fuel of human accomplishment. And so I think, you know, General Creech would be pounding his fist on the table, arguing against efforts to centralize and encouraging us to decentralize, empower airman at lower levels and become comfortable with a disaggregated Air Force where airman at lower echelons like your son, and my son, and other airmen, that generation are empowered to go out and execute the mission without waiting for guidance from higher echelons. So I think those are the two things that general Creech would probably counsel us on today.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 20:50

Wow, that's a very powerful, and you're extracting those two key pieces, if I might say the latter one in terms of decentralization is so important, particularly in an era of we, as we have seen that the magic I'll tie this back to our discussion on RPA is provide attend, tended over the last two decades to drive decision making away from the leading edge. And folks to have to ask mother Mae eye before they could engage in that kind of control is a disease. And so I applaud you on highlighting that decision. It's a great segue into asking you about, you know, you talked about general Creech in his lead AFSOC 2020 strategic guidance. So what changes are AFSOC making to its forced development curriculum as you look to the future?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 22:09

Yeah, that's a so not not coincidentally, developing our human capital is the first of our three lines of effort in our strategic guidance that was published at the beginning of 2020, and remains relevant to us today. And so developing human capital, you know, that that comes in a host of ways, but I would kind of boil it down to three things, education, training and experience. And we have great tools available to us to educate, train and experience our airman. But they've been a bit haphazard, and sometimes not for purpose, you know, and so you take an airman that has a series of assignments, a series of experiences, a series of deployments, and you look at them as a kernel. And you go, Well, how did these things all fit together? And what were we trying to build in terms of the development of this individual person. And you know, more often than not, it, we find ourselves almost behaving as if we were defense attorneys, where we look backwards at the fact pattern, and then try and create a narrative that fits that fact pattern. And it's much more effective if you start at the front end with a vision for what it is you're trying to build, and then deliberately stack the education training and experiences together to build the thing that you set out to build instead of looking back from, you know, what did we end up with at the end. And so we've got a great tool in the Air Force Special Operations school at hurlburt. That is that we're really gearing many of the curriculum that we have there at the Special Operations school focused on tactical level leadership. And we are pushing that authority and responsibility as I just talked about, down to lower echelons. And frankly, it makes people like me and wing commanders that work for me uncomfortable because we're not used to empowering Squadron commanders and flight commanders with the authority that we envision needing to empower them with and so we're building curriculum instruction that do that. For training, we're really gearing our our capstone exercise programs, and the joint exercises that we have available for across across the Special Operations Command and also the DOD in order to specifically experience people with operating, getting training operating in this disaggregated fashion that I talked about. And then finally, the Experiencing mechanism that we're putting in place along with that. So it's all very deliberate. underpinning this whole thing is something that I think AFSOC is probably a little out in front of the rest of the Air Force on but I believe is fundamental to our ability to develop the force we're going to need for the future. And that is a deliberate, predictable, unit based force generation model. And so we have, we have really driven hard towards a unit based force generation model, which will provide leaders at all levels, the space they need to train airman to educate airman and to get some experience on airman in order to be prepared for that future operating environment. And it is starting to pay dividends. For us, I'm really, really excited about the benefits of this. And as the Air Force continues to kind of, more broadly move towards a more predictable force generation cycle to replace the system that we've been using for the last several decades, I think many of the same advantages will accrue across the rest of the Air Force.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 26:13

Outstanding. Let's switch gears a little bit and talk a bit about hardware. What can you tell us about the status of the armed Overwatch aircraft program? And specifically, what are the key attributes that you're looking for in an armed Overwatch aircraft that you don't have in your force right now? And what are some of the key milestones and associated dates?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 26:38

Yeah, so the armed Overwatch program is proceeding a pace we so the Congress appropriated money in the fy 21 budget for us to continue rd t and e Research Development test evaluation to conduct a a flying demonstration of commercially available platforms that might meet our requirements and inform our final requirement document before we go to a procurement decision. There is some procurement money in FYI. 21. But I don't anticipate that we'll we would get into aircraft procurement until FYI, 22, at the at the earliest. So, you know, we enjoy congressional support. Clearly, there is some oversight and concern in some committees, about the, you know, what is it that we envision this armed Overwatch platform doing? And what is the problem that we're trying to solve? And I would just describe it very simply, as you know, we we built a surveillance strike methodology in the mid you know, 2005 2006 timeframe based on the threat that we had, you know, with an insurgency in Iraq, simmering insurgency in Afghanistan, and so we built this methodology for, for doing counter BPO operations that was very, very resource intensive. And so as you will know, from your own experience, you know, we would frequently over a target area, we would build a stack of airplanes, you know, from 10,000 feet to 25,000 feet consisting of, you know, gunships and mandai, ASR and unmanned diastar and electronic warfare and cast and fixed wing fighters, sometimes even bombers, and we would build this stack for 15,000 feet. To bring airpower to bear on a very discreet target on the surface of the earth, that model is not viable for the future. It's not cost effective. And it's not viable, particularly in the areas where we will be pursuing enduring counter video operations against adversaries that pose an external operations threat to the United States. And so the idea here, you know, part of the national defense strategy calls on us to sustain a cost effective, enduring counter video capability. And so for us to do that, we have to get out of specialized platforms stacked up for 15,000 feet over targets. And we need a platform we need to collapse the stack, if you will, into a smaller number of platforms. And that's where this armed Overwatch capability comes in where it's going to have some reconfigurable iosr capability when needed, it will be able to provide cast procedures in support of ground forces. And so it's really a multi role airplane that's capable of operating with a very light logistics footprint in small towns. This aggregated teams, once again, is we were talking about in very austere regions. And so that type of capability is what we intend to demonstrate this year, and then move along in the acquisition process following that. But the first step really is getting to a flying demonstration which we anticipate is going to take place in the coming months

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 30:25

are very good a bit of a follow up with the EU 28 continue to fill It's a unique niche and complement the armed Overwatch aircraft. I understand that eu 20 ages went over 600,000 combat hours, I was curious if you anticipate any service life issues.

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 30:43

So right now, so we're not at a crisis in terms of service life on the 28th. But we can see it from here, we put a lot of hours on are you 28 platforms. And so we understand that, you know, we are going to have to decide what to do about this. And the EU 28 is an incredibly capable man is our platform. But again, like the rest of that stack of airplanes, it is basically a single roll platform. And so as we think about the future of the combination of iosr and, and fire support for small teams on the ground, the EU 28 we anticipate as the armed Overwatch platform comes online, our current planning shows us drawing down that you 28 as the armed Overwatch platform comes online. And so there there is a phased transition there. But at the end of the day, the armed Overwatch platform will be less expensive to operate, it will be more versatile than the EU 28. And frankly, we'll have greater capacity to operate in those small disaggregated kind of teams, as we've talked about.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 32:03

Well, very good. Let's switch back to AFSOC's 2020 strategic guidance. One of the goals in there is to develop a comprehensive data strategy that provides European with a baseline knowledge of data science and artificial intelligence. Could you elaborate on why this is such an important objective? And what would a data strategy for AFSOC look like?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 32:30

Yeah, so I, you know, that's an area where I probably should have been more demanding in terms of how we wrote that in our strategic guidance, because at the end of the day, I don't think there is such a thing as a data strategy. I think there is data in support of your strategy. You know, this is much like communications, I don't really believe in a communication strategy. I just believe communicating in support of the strategy. And so, you know, if you if you go back to where we started, on the strategic guidance, it is an airman centric document, our airman our competitive advantage. And as we lay out these three lines of effort all centered around our airman. The question with respect to data is how do we leverage the power of data and AI in order to enable airman to be more effective in this future operating environment. So whether it's our, you know, cb 22, maintainers, who maintain a very maintenance intensive platform, and they need predictive analytics that will help them understand the health of the aircraft and what parts are going to fail, predictive logistics that we can send the parts forward as we predict that they will be needed. This is an area where SOCOM has done some pretty groundbreaking work, and AFSOC is leveraging the larger SOCOM effort on this. But that's an example another example. This is clearly in our intelligence enterprise. We have some of the most talented airman and AFSOC are spent doing, you know, solving a problem that you tried to solve during your time in uniform, which is the full motion video analytics and you know, having incredibly talented and bright airman looking at a TV screen counting the number of people walking in and out of a building is is not work that airman ought to be doing. And so how do we leverage AI in order to free up Airmen to do the things that only an airman can do? If a machine can do it? We ought to let the machine do it, perhaps with humans supervision, but but humans ought to be doing what only the humans can do. And so really, you know, and again, our human capital, in developing the human capital is kind of that first line of effort that we talked about. So how does data play into developing our human capital? Well, you know, there are reams and reams of data around every course that I've attended, you know, my ability or not to speak a foreign language, my assignment history, all of this is data. And so when you think about how do we decide who the right airman is, for this particular important assignment we have available, being able to leverage the power of data to manage our human capital, it's something we need to get our arms around. And so wherever you go, you know, data is not the problem of the chief data officer data is all of our problem. And so that's really what I would say about that. This is just this is an area where the department defense broadly has work to do. There's some exciting developments underway and AFSOC's trying to stay on the leading edge of that.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 36:15

Very good. Now, last year, AFSOC collaborated with the Air Force Research Lab on a demo of the palletized munitions concept for the air battle management system. What value does have AFSOC bring to the development of a BMS in in djed c two concepts of operation.

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 36:37

Well, like I alluded to a little earlier, you know, AFSOC as a innovation and experimentation platform for the airforce makes a lot of sense. So you know, AFSOC can leverage SOCOM acquisition authorities. So limited SOCOM resourcing, a streamline requirements process available to us wearing our, you know, Air Force component of SOCOM hat. And we can leverage those things wearing our Air Force match comm hat on behalf of the rest of the Air Force. And so for example, last year, when the acquisition executive was talking about, hey, we, you know, really ought to look at palletized munitions and how to how to move quickly on this, you know, my, my thought was, Hey, you know, if only there was a match calm somewhere in the Air Force, that had some experience turning cargo airplanes into munitions delivery platforms, you know, wouldn't that be fantastic? Oh, wait, we have that. It's called AFSOC, you know, we built the ac 130 gunship. And so, you know, this is in our DNA. And so I said, hey, look, we'd be happy to demonstrate this capability to you. And literally, we were dropping. We were dropping hardware out of the back of airplanes, literally inside of two months. And when it came time to do a inflight retargeting demonstration as part of the ABMs effort that you alluded to, of course, why wouldn't we want to do that? If we can help the Air Force, develop concepts and technology that will be relevant to the future operating environment that's beneficial to the Air Force? And SOCOM crews benefit from that as well? Because, you know, I firmly believe that the SOCOM service components are most effective for soft when we're closest to our parent service. And so for me, I you know, I am always aware of the fact that the first part of AFSOC is AF. And so, if I can draw as close as possible to my parents service, that's good for SOCOM, and it's good for the Air Force.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 38:51

Very good. Let's, uh, move to a different part of the world. And talk a bit about Air Force Special Ops role in combating terrorism and extremism and East and West Africa. As a US in total kind of reorient toward an era of near pure competition, what role do you think AFSOC can play on the African continent as we move forward?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 39:20

Well, I you know, it's it's hard to say, without, without getting, you know, without supposing what the new administration priorities are going to be in this type of thing. So the short answer is, I don't know. But I but I would suggest to you that if we want to maintain pressure on those extremist organizations that pose a threat to the United States that poses a threat to the homeland, we may need to remain engaged in portions of Africa against very specific threats and not and not just broadly anywhere there's an extremist but but specifically were those that pose an external threat are. And, you know, when you go back to our Armed Overwatch conversation, what it what is the nature of our engagement look like? What do we think that that is going to look like and I, you know, what I would envision is a light footprint, a multi role capability that has the ability to provide the intelligence needed to remain aware of the threat and to take action where necessary and has a kinetic capability to take action when necessary, without drawing a lot of attention to our host nations that may be hosting those operations. That is what the future looks like, in my mind. And so, you know, the armed Overwatch platform, you know, would be ideally suited for that type of an operational environment.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 40:57

Virtual thank you for that. Now, Air Force statistics published last year found a shortfall in the number of special ops pilots between 2015 and 19. What is the AFSOC pilot meaning situation look like today? If you could bring us up to speed on that? And how do you plan to resource training to ensure that you all have the pilot capacity to meet your challenges tomorrow?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 41:25

Yeah, so this is a complex issue with a lot of different chemicals. And, you know, I'm sure the audience would love to hear me talk about absorption and experiencing and, you know, white jets and you know, all the all the various parts of the white of the of the aircrew management problem. But suffice it to say that AFSOC is a customer of the Air Force, undergraduate Flying Training pipeline, just like every other match calm in the air force, AFSOC absorbs a number of new pilots every year, and our ability to absorb those new pilots is really governed by our training enterprise. And so if we, if we grow our training enterprise, to get the throughput that we need into our squadrons to fully manned our squadrons, then that means we need to invest in the training enterprise. And so part of what we're doing going forward in this as part of our strategic guidance, is fully resourcing our training enterprise, we have assumed risk in our form of training enterprise over the last 20 years in order to maximize the capacity that we can deploy forward. But now's the time to reset that and to bring that more in balance. And so I am happy to contribute more instructors to the undergraduate training enterprise, I'm happy to contribute more instructors and more platforms to the formal training unit instruction capacity of the Air Force enterprise. And I'm happy to absorb more new pilots as they as they come in new crews, frankly, it cut it's more than just pilots. But the interesting thing is that AFSOC retention is actually above the Air Force average. And so, you know, you contrast the Air Force's most heavily deployed match calm with the fact that our retention is actually better than most parts of the Air Force. You know, what, where How does that happen? What does that tell us? And what what I believe it tells us is there there is a lot of pride in apps out there, I think airman feel like what they do matters. And they and they want to stick around and be a part of something important. And so as we think about our transformation for the future, that's what I intend to build on the fact that people like being part of something that matters, they like having mission ownership, is we push down authority and responsibility to lower levels. You know, it's interesting. In AFSOC, we hear we hear young officers and nccos clamoring for more. And outside of AFSOC, we hear some that tell us well, you can't give them more responsibility. They're gonna, you know, that's gonna drive a retention issue because, you know, one of the primary complaints of the people as they get out of the Air Force, so are too many additional duties. And, you know, my response to that is leadership is not an additional duty, you know, leadership, people want to lead, people want responsibility, they want to be accountable. And so as we push more and more responsibility and authority to our young officers, what we find is they are absolutely hungry for all of that and so our, our retention is pretty good. That and I think anticipate that it will continue to be good as long as we can show Airmen that what they do matters as part of apps are.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 45:09

Excellent. Well, unfortunately, we've now come to the end of this segment of our discussion and general slide. Thanks again for your insightful comments and for sharing your valuable perspectives on Air Force Special Operations. Now, as an alert to our listeners, next week, the Mitchell Institute will be hosting a number of live and on demand panels with top Air Force leaders as part of this year's virtual aerospace warfare symposium. So we'll hope you'll join us. And you can check it out online and search for aerospace warfare symposium 2021, or ffa.org. All right, Jim, we're now going to open up the second session to our questions from our audience members who've been listening to the conversation. And then just as a reminder, for our listeners, when you're called on Please announce your name and the organization you're with and use that raise hand function on your device or send in via chat. Your questions so we'll get started right off the bat with the Valerie Insinna. Valerie.

**Valerie Insinna** 46:22

Hey, thank you so much for doing this general. I had a question about armed Overwatch. So Congress and the NDAA and the defense appropriations bill. You know, last year, they prohibited SOCOM from being able to buy any armed Overwatch aircraft. And then they also decrease the funding quite a bit to around 21 million. I was wondering, you know, how big of a deal is that in your mind? And are you concerned at all about a lack of congressional support for the program?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 46:56

Yeah, so the reduction in funding, the way the program was initially laid out, would have resulted in procurement, because again, I think so common visions, a commercially available platform, so in other words, a non development, non developmental type of capability. And so I think SOCOM had envisioned this for to begin acquisition in 2021. And so that are 2022. And so I know I'm sorry, 2021. I, you know, there's so many budget palms floating around, it's hard to keep straight where we are. So Congress wanted to see more of what came out of the demonstration. And so the money that was funded in 2021, I think is a little more than what you indicated. But But I bet your point is valid. That money is fully sufficient to do the demonstration program that SOCOM asked to do. And we anticipate going back for further conversation with Congress about that before initiating acquisition on the backside of a demonstration program, that, that that should take place here in the coming months. And so to you know, to the point of your question, am I concerned about it? So I think Congress is is appropriately and prudently exercising their oversight role? I think I would view this as a lower risk enterprise than perhaps some charged with oversight, dude. But the fact that that we see it differently doesn't mean that they're wrong. I mean, I I respect that. Am I concerned about a lack of support? I'm actually not. And of course, it varies across the committee's I mean, some are more supportive than others. But I think Congress is, is being prudent about this. But ultimately, I believe that SOCOM will be able to demonstrate to the Congress that this is this is a viable program, and it's required for the future operating environment. So I remain cautiously optimistic. You know, I certainly don't want to take anything for granted with respect to congressional support, or, frankly, the support of the new administration, but but I do believe that that the armed Overwatch program makes sense and I look forward to continuing to talk about it with interested parties, both in the administration and also on the hill.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 49:43

Okay, gentlemen, who's had his hand raised for a long time. Garrett Reim.

**Garrett Reim** 49:50

General, thank you. Um, my question is about the contract that was just announced for the silent Aero cargo glider to downsize it so it could fit into the CV-22 or other small fixed wing aircraft. What's the thinking behind trying to deploy this? This glider from the CV-22, or a small fixed wing aircraft as opposed to trying to, you know, drop it out of the back of a C-130? What sort of missions would be enabled these other aircraft?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 50:22

Yeah, so I gotta admit that I'm not familiar with the details of that, that program. I know that, in general, our approach has been, you know, to proliferate these capabilities to platform as broadly as we can. And so the CV-22, has a robust overseas presence in both Europe and also in the indo Pacific region. And so anything we can do to broaden the capabilities of those platforms. So if you go back to the analogy that I was using earlier about the kitchen, the V 22 is a fantastic is a fantastic set of groceries that we have in our kitchen. But we need to, we need to maybe buy a few continents to make it relevant, more relevant to the future operating environment. So this would be an example of that. But in terms of the specifics of that exact contract, I'm not tracking it.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 51:28

Alright, let's turn now to Marcus Weisgerber.

**Marcus Weisgerber** 51:33

Hey, thanks, Dave. And thanks, General for doing this. Also, on armed Overwatch, I got just a few rapid fire ones for you. Are you looking only at one type of aircraft? Are you open to leasing? aircraft? And what I guess is the soonest you would like to have these aircraft on the ramp? Thanks. Yeah. So

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 51:57

when you say are we looking at only one type of aircraft? We're not we're, we're looking at a handful of aircraft that we think are would all be capable to make the mission requirement. And, you know, it's without having done the demos, it's preliminary to say whether what an acquisition program would look like whether it whether it would look like a single platform or whether it looked like multiple platforms or whether leasing might be part of that. We're, you know, we're too far out from that. So we need to get through this demo to see what industry can produce at low risk in a in a short order. In terms of the timeline on it. You know, we were ready to go in in 21. Congress one take a harder Look at this, which I completely understand. And you know, we're going through that now. But I would like to be in a procurement sometime in fiscal year 22. And so I think I think we can do that at relatively low risk. Based on what we've seen from the vendors who have indicated that they intend to bring platforms to demonstrate for us in the coming months, I think we could we could easily meet a 22 procurement decision so that that's really what I would be looking for. A quick follow up are you looking at stuff from I guess, the range of arm caravan to a super Tucano, 86, Scorpion, all that stuff? Anything more or less? If it's if it is non developmental, and it meets the requirements that that SOCOM is laid out to industry, then we're interested in looking at it. And so I mean, that general class of airplanes is about right. The key thing that I would I would offer is, you know, this is not a rehash of the Air Force light attack program. You know, I think SOCOM envisions this as more of a multi role, platform that can perform level delivery of precision munitions. And so, you know, our, you know, it's not in our DNA, at least not in 2021. It was in the 1960s and early 1970s. But it's not in our DNA in the Air Force Special Operations Command to fly fighter type aircraft. And I, you know, frankly, I don't want to get into that line of work, because frankly, it would just exacerbate the problem the Air Force has with with fighter pilot Manning, more broadly, and so I think we can meet the requirement with a level delivery precision munition kind of platform. Thank you.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 54:44

Okay, let's turn to Yasmin.

**Yasmin Tadjdeh** 54:48

Hi, Sir, thank you so much for doing this. I have two questions, but the first one is an armed Overwatch question. So there have been some critics in the past who have said that the platforms that you guys are looking at are not survivable in great power competition that they really could only be used in, like a region like Africa. Do you agree with that? And then my second question is a bit of a departure. But I know the services have been rolling out Arctic strategies recently. How do you view an AFSOC's role in the Arctic? And what kind of capabilities Do you need to operate in that

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 55:22

region? Thank you. Yeah. So I think, you know, to the, to the former point about the armed Overwatch platform not being survivable. You know, clearly, we're not trying to build an armed Overwatch platform that, you know, would be in a contested first world, ai ads kind of environment. I mean, if we wanted to do that, the armed Overwatch platform would be the F 35. And the whole reason we're doing this is because the national defense strategy talks about the need to do cost effective counter video operations cost effective, irregular warfare. And so you know, the operating environment where we currently operate you 28 is about the same operating environment where we would we would envision operating armed Overwatch platforms, you know, it doesn't, it doesn't have an ejection seat. Right? No airplane and AFSOC as an ejection seat, you know, if we're, if we're trying to fly airplanes that require ejection seats, we're probably focused on the wrong thing as the Air Force component of SOCOM. So I, I think that it is, as envisioned, it is survivable enough to operate in the environment that we anticipate it operating in. And so I think it's, I think that that's how I would answer that. With respect to the Arctic, you know, we've, we've done a lot of work in the Arctic, particularly in some of our forward station units. And so we've that we've learned some valuable lessons. You know, there's some great innovation taking place at the unit level, on Arctic operations. You know, we're operating in Europe in the very high North well above the Arctic Circle, and our airmen are innovating in terms of aircraft capabilities, the mobility platforms that operate in that kind of environment, and how to get those on and off our aircraft. Cold weather gear for operators and maintainers of those platforms are special tactics, operators are learning some valuable lessons, you know, sometimes communication and very high latitudes can be challenging. And so we've learned some valuable lessons about radios and our ability to transmit voice and data over long distances. And so we're learning all these lessons. We're, you know, we're not planning to operate in the Arctic, we are operating in the Arctic. We're learning every day and improving our capability to do more. Thank you.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 58:09

Alright, Frank Wolfe.

**Frank Wolfe** 58:11

Yeah, hi, General, I'm just wondering if you could speak a little bit about excuse me, AFSOC's top unfunded requirements and how you see those evolving and whether there's still a plan next year for the test of the the ac 130 g laser or offensive laser and what that's going to involve? What types of targets that kind of thing

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 58:37

Yeah, in terms of AFSOC's top unfunded requirements, I'm gonna defer on that, for the for the time being, because I, you know, I don't want to get out in front of either the Air Force or SOCOM in terms of, you know, talking about what our unfunded requirements are going forward. What I will say about that is that Congress provided the Air Force with funding last year in the 21 budget for two CV-22 aircraft, which really will be useful to us in the sense that, at our training base at Kirtland, there are a couple of pre production CV-22s that are configured unlike any of the other aircraft in the fleet. And so they're very difficult to maintain. And because they're not configured the same, we can't rotate them through the operational fleet. And so Congress provided funding for two additional CV-22 that we intend to, to use to standardize the fleet on on the production configuration of those platforms. So that that was good news for us that Congress took an interest in that one. So that's about as much as I can. To say about the about the unfunded requirements, was there a second part of the question that

**Frank Wolfe** 1:00:05

Oh, yeah, I just I was wondering about the AC-130J, that laser demonstration that was supposed to happen next year, if that's still going forward? And what kind of, you know, offensive capability Would you be able to demonstrate with that gets ground target?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 1:00:18

Yeah. So that, yes, it is still proceeding? Yeah. So it is that test is still proceeding. So we have, you know, an aircraft undergoing modification to accept that. And so, you know, when we get the depth, the results of that demonstration, I think we'll have a much better idea for the use cases for that. So, you know, there, there are a lot of variables that make employing a laser from from an aircraft, challenging, you know, atmosphere, dispersion, target size, heat, power, all those things become very, very challenging. And so when we see what the demonstrated capability actually is, I think we'll be in a better position to decide whether, whether it has a place in the gunship fleet going forward. So I'm looking forward to seeing the demonstration next year. Thanks for the question.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 1:01:22

A General Slife. We've come to the end of our time, but I've got two more hands up. Do you have time to take on two more questions?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 1:01:30

I, I would usually say no. But sir, since since it's you that's asking, of course I will.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 1:01:37

Okay, thanks. Jennifer Leigh, you're next.

**Jennifer Leigh-Oprihory** 1:01:41

Hi, sir. Thank you so much for taking the time, General. And thank you so much for hosting this event in general. My question is, I was hoping that you might be able to tell us how if at all, the services growing focus on agile combat employment is changing the way that you train your operators?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 1:02:00

Well, you know, that I'm not sure if somebody planted that, but I'm really glad that that question came up. So this is a great example of what I was talking about earlier, with respect to building small teams focused around the mission, you know, in, in my entire career, I have never once fielded a phone call for from, you know, Central Command, asking for us to quickly deploy the contracting Squadron, or quickly deploy the logistics readiness Squadron. And this is a this is an area where our garrison organizational construct for our support functions, is not aligned to the way we actually employ these capabilities in combat. And so how do you the problem statement for us is how do you build and force generate Combat Support capabilities that are ready to operate in that future operating environment in a in a method, that that isn't based on our current home station garrison construct. And so this is a place where AFSOC is really putting a lot of effort right now. And we've got a, we've got a pilot effort going on at one of our bases right now, where we're where we are assuming risk and some installation support functions to build a small multifunctional team of airman that will go through a fourth generation cycle and a deployment cycle, together with the operating forces in a way that is representative of what we think the future operating environment might require. So envisioning a small unit of airman where the forklift driver knows how to run cat five cable for your communications suite, and your generator electrician knows how to stand guard at the at the perimeter of your of your small, Forward Operating Base. This type of multifunctional team based organization is really what I think the future Mission Support is going to look like. And so we're pretty excited about the work we're doing in that regard. But thanks for thanks for highlighting that one.

**Jennifer Leigh-Oprihory** 1:04:24

You're welcome. Sir. Could you possibly elaborate which base that trial run is happening?

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 1:04:31

I could, but I'm not going to. Because I don't, I don't want to put I don't want to put those airman in a spotlight. I want them to be able to experiment to learn lessons, you know, if they, you know, if we don't get it right the first time. I want to give them freedom to do that without, you know, the bright spotlight of people staring at them, you know, to see if they were successful or not. I'm 100% confident we're going to be successful. I just you know, I don't know whether It'll be this year or the second cycle after we we learn from the first one. Thank you.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 1:05:06

All right, last but not least Oriana.

**Oriana Pawlyk** 1:05:09

Thanks so very much. So to wrap up the aircraft discussion, sir, I believe it was in 2018 AFSOC was conducting an analysis of alternative study to look at alternatives for its manned iosr. But also looking at the broad range of aircraft that fit the AFSOC model. And of course, you today talked about that might soon incorporate armed Overwatch. I'm curious what became of that study and what its findings were and how is it shaping what you're looking at for your next generation ISR as well as armed Overwatch? Thank you.

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 1:05:38

Yeah, thanks. So it is absolutely one of the things that is kind of shaping the way we think about the future of single role platforms. And, you know, do we need a kinetic capability organic, to all of our ISR platforms in the future? Or can you know, how much of it should be manned? How much of it should be unmanned? It absolutely is informing all of that. But, you know, analysis, analyses of alternatives, of course, are all snapshots in time. And I think it I think, you know, we we have a clearer picture today of what the future is going to require of us than we did in the past. And so I don't want to get out in front of, of things that the SOCOM in the Air Force haven't haven't sorted out internally yet. But I would tell you that I think that there is a lot of room for partnership between SOCOM in the Air Force on ISR for the future, and it doesn't necessarily have to revolve around who owns what, you know, we tend to we tend to fix bayonets around the issue of ownership. And I think if we don't have to do that, I think I think there's a lot of room for partnership here in a way that that provides advantages to both SOCOM and the Air Force. And so that analysis of alternatives, absolutely informed the requirements document as it evolved for the requirements document is that evolved for the armed Overwatch platform. But it is one of several data points, but thanks for the question on that.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 1:07:22

Well, thank you, General Slife for extending the your time we have come to the end of this aerospace nation event. And thanks again for taking the time to do this to you and our audience. From all of us here at the Mitchell Institute. Have a great aerospace powered kind of day.

**Lt Gen Jim Slife** 1:07:40

Thanks, general. Good to see you.

**Lt Gen (Ret.) Dave Deptula** 1:07:43

You bet. Have a safe flight back. Thank you.