Gulf Coast Reporters' League

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AEROSPACE NEWSLETTER

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About 100 participants were on hand for the two-day Aerospace Alliance Summit at Point Clear, Ala., in early November. *GCAC photo*

Aerospace summit

Worker pinch about to hit home

The aerospace industry faces a severe worker shortage worldwide, and in the next few years Mobile and Pensacola will be tested to see if they can fill hundreds of new openings...

The numbers are large enough to make economic development officials drool. But they can also make workforce officials and educators fret.

The issue: The aerospace industry worldwide is facing a severe shortage of workers, from pilots to maintenance workers and more. Industry officials have been sounding the alarm for some time now. But in the next two years it will hit home big-time and the Gulf Coast will get to see if it's up to the challenge of finding workers.

The Mobile-Pensacola area will have to find a way to pack the training pipeline to fill up to 2,000 aerospace jobs that will be required by two companies - one in each city. And if that's not enough of a mountain to climb, more jobs may open as additional suppliers come in. On top of that, there's a hint of another assembly line (*page 5*).

If all the current plans reach fruition, Mobile, Ala., will need to some 650 workers for two passenger jet assembly lines - one that's

already building Airbus A320 passenger jets and targeted for an expansion, and a second line that will assemble A220 jetliners - the former Bombardier CSeries passenger jet.

Meanwhile just 60 miles to the east, Pensacola, Fla., which this summer opened the ST Engineering Aerospace maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) hangar at Pensacola International Airport, is getting together the funding to build three additional ST Engineering MRO hangars. They will bring 1,300 new jobs.

It's an exciting development, for sure. But it also represents an incredible challenge for workforce development officials at a time when young people have far more options for their technical skills. Still, if the two cities can pull it off and manage to meet the workforce need of both companies, it is likely to catch the attention of the industry and serve as a case study for addressing a global problem.

The summit

Education was the topic last month on the first day of the two-day Aerospace Alliance Summit at the Grand Hotel in Point Clear, Ala. The Alliance, which promotes aerospace and aviation in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi, holds a summit each year to address issues important to the member states. The second day looked at what lies ahead for the industry.

Their message to the more than 100 participants this year was clear: aerospace in the four states is growing and steps need to be taken to ensure the workforce pipeline is filled. In addition, technology is changing rapidly and will impact the industry and the way the workforce is trained.

Neal Wade, director of the University of Alabama Economic Academy and chair of the Aerospace Alliance, said in opening remarks that all surveys point to education and workforce training as a top critical need. John Watret, chancellor of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, reiterated the message as Wade.

"One of the things that we need to do is to make sure we have the pipeline of young people coming in to it, and being able to follow in the footsteps of everyone that's done so much work to bring the aviation industry to the Alliance states," Watret said.

Others have also voiced concern over the shortage. In September the Federal Aviation Administration held a Workforce Symposium that attracted participants from across the aerospace spectrum. Participants heard that the number of jobs is growing but the talent pool is not keeping up. No matter how good the training pipelines may be, they're useless without student interest, participants said (*see October 2018 education issue*).

Education and training has been of interest to the participants of the Alliance summits for years. Watret pointed out that the first time they focused on education and training at a past summit they had 11 people, "and each year the small rooms end up filling up." This year half the summit focused on education and training.

Ron Garriga, associate executive director of U.S. Campus Operations, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide, said the industry will need 790,000 pilots, 754,000 technicians and 890,000 new cabin crew over the next 20 years to maintain the world's fleet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Garriga said, "if that doesn't concern you, where have you been? … We have got to get our pipeline together."

The Airbus experience

One aerospace company that has dealt with workforce issues in recent years is Airbus, the European plane maker that's had a presence in Mobile since 2005, but kicked it into high gear when it opted to build A320 series jetliners in Mobile.

Airbus started from scratch building its Gulf Coast assembly line workforce. While it had no trouble finding workers for its assembly line - there were 30,000 applicants for the first 200 jobs - the company does have concerns about the future.

Stephanie Burt, director of Human Resources of Airbus U.S. Manufacturing Facility in Mobile, said Airbus currently has 480 direct employees, with 10 percent engineers, 32 percent business professionals and 58 percent production workers.

In Phase I Airbus hired 250 people with at least five years of experience, and sent them to Airbus' European facilities for six to nine months for on-the-job training. When they came back over 80 ex-pats returned with them to help with their technical learning and to open the facility in Mobile.

In Phase II Airbus continued to hire experienced people but was also able to hire less experienced workers with one to five years experience who did on-the-job-training with the ex-pats.

"What does the third phase look like for us? It's extremely challenging," Burt said.

"At this point in time we have definitely gotten enough applicants that have one to five years of experience, but we know with 700 jobs that are going to saturate the market by us alone. we're not going to be able to fill those jobs with the local population."

It's the expected growth of the current A320 assembly line and the new one in the works for the smaller A220 that is causing concern.

"We have a new facility in the A220 model and we're looking to hire 400 to 500 individuals," she said. "With our A320 ramp-up to a rate five (per month), we're looking to hire over an additional 150 individuals."

On top of that, there are likely to be work opportunities in the supply chain, which will add to the workforce need.

New tech school

Burt said Airbus needs to look for a workforce "that we can develop ourselves here."

"We need to do that through technical programs, and there are many technical programs in the area, but we need to have help from our teachers, from our parents, from our counselors

so that children will know and individuals will know that the aviation careers are worth going after, they can make really good careers."

To help alleviate the crunch, Airbus is working towards creating a technical school of its own that would help provide it with the larger workforce it will need with the two assembly lines.

The tech school would not be designed to keep people away from four-year or two-year colleges, but to create more opportunities for the local and extended community who may not take the traditional college path. It would open next year.

She said it's not going to be a technical school in the traditional sense of a two-year college, but rather a place where someone who went to a two-year school could come and be assessed over three- to five-week program before being put in a position at the plant or "you come to us with nothing and in 12 weeks we have you capable to go out and do some OJT (on-the-job-training)."

"It's very important to have individuals who have a four-year degree or a two-year degree, but it's important to realize here in Mobile we have a large opportunity to pursue another avenue for people in creating technical training programs for individuals that have skills.

"They have a solid foundation out of high school, they understand what it means to come to work to be a team player to have problem-solving skills ... those are very important skills that are needed in the workforce. You don't have to necessarily be a rocket scientist to have these types of careers. We've got to get out in the community and make this known. We've got to have partnerships with the schools, it can not be just one business it has to be all of us sharing the knowledge with the parents and with the teachers so that they can educate the students."

Untapped resources

All the panelists agreed that one of the great opportunities to increase the workforce is to appeal to underrepresented groups. Neither women nor African-Americans are represented in a way that reflects the makeup of the community.

We have to have a more diverse workforce than what we do today," said Burt.

What lies ahead

There is little doubt that industries, including aerospace, will change in the future given the rapid changes brought by innovation. That was the focus on the second day of the summit.

"It's an extraordinary time, the technology is changing almost everything about how we deal with everything. It's changing how we behave, how we learn, how we move, how we make decisions and ultimately, how we fight," said Vago Muradian, editor of the *Defense and Aerospace Report*.

Advances in nanotechnology, materials, energy and more will be even more profound than in the past two decades.

"Everybody's sort of sitting around waiting for the dawn of AI (artificial intelligence)," he said, but in fact, AI is already with us, shaping how we think and changing how we make decisions.

Autonomy is a key part of commercial aircraft. Aside from the takeoff and landing, everything is automated, he said.

Muradian pointed out that the Navy version of the highly advanced F-35 can land on a carrier with such precision that it hits the center line at the same spot every time, wearing out the wire and causing a bare patch on the flight deck.

"When it comes to autonomous vehicles, the whole notion of how we move is changing," he said. "Even though I'm a gear head and I love cars and I love driving, at some point I'm going to be a liability in this entire equation - all of us will be."

Autonomous vehicles will be safer.

"It won't drive angry, it won't drive distracted, it won't turn around to yell at the kids in the back seat because they're being stupid," he said. And the vehicle also won't be texting somebody while driving.

The move to autonomous vehicles will have a major impact on those who drive trucks or cars for a living, and they will require less maintenance than today's combustion vehicles.

Fewer people are working in manufacturing than in the past. He pointed out that if you were to look at the Airbus manufacturing footprint 10 or 20 years ago, it would have been different. Every change is going to cause significant disruption.

"How does the education system respond and educate a new generation of citizens who will find meaningful, value-added work at the end of the day as opposed to being a simple cog in a machine?" he asked.

He also said warfare is changing in profound ways. Future fighting may not be as it was in the past and may not involve large scale exchanges of fire, but instead might be an adversary making every single traffic light on the Eastern seaboard turn green at the same time. Taking down the power and electric grid might be more likely.

This dynamic environment we're living in puts a premium on speed and engineering things very rapidly to stay a step ahead of others. He pointed to Israel and Sweden as particularly adept at the game.

"I think it's the most exciting time to work in aviation," said Robert Hastings, of Bell, the former Bell Helicopters. He recalled seeing Star Wars in 1977 - three times the day it was released - and many of the things that are with us today were seen in that movie, including artificial intelligence.

To show the benefits of machine intelligence, he said that if he backs out of the driveway and had to stop short so he wouldn't hit someone, it would make him more aware the next time. But he would not be able to pass that along to his son. He simply would not have the same learning experience.

People can learn from their own personal experience, but that really can't

be passed along. Machines are different - they can learn and pass that along to other machines.

Raanan Horowitz, president and CEO of Elbit Systems, talked about the development of technology that eventually led to the unique helmet used by F-35 pilots.

He said a little over 25 years ago, when Elbit Systems of America was in its infancy, he was sent to Camp Shelby, Miss.

"We were submitting a proposal for the U.S. Army for a training system that would support the Bradley Fighting Vehicle and the Abrams tank. We were supporting something that was pretty innovative," he said.

It used off-the-shelf commercial technologies, including a Sony Digital Camera, and what was the state-of-the-art at the time, a video cassette recorder (VCR) from Panasonic.

"We needed to demonstrate a working training system," he said.

He was given access to the military vehicles to find ways to install the system and ensure it really worked. Ultimately the tests were successful and the company sold 450 of the systems to the military.

While 25 years ago doesn't seem that long ago, the technology has changed dramatically since then. Cameras and recorders are still used, but the technology behind them has changed.

State of the art today might best be represented by the sensors and helmet mounted display of the F-35, developed by Elbit and partner Rockwell Collins.

The F-35 system receives images from nine built-in cameras on the aircraft and a hybrid tracking system that "creates the magic of a pilot being able to see through the skin of the aircraft" 360 degrees on the visor of the helmet.

The pilot receives information from weapons systems, targeting, incoming threats, and more. It's all blended and displayed on the visor.

"Everything the pilot needs to fly and operate the aircraft is actually in front of their face," a development that eliminates the need for a heads-up-display in the cockpit itself and frees up space.

"When you have all the information on the visor, you don't have to look down," he said. It also has integrated night vision capability on the helmet that eliminates the need for the pilot to wear night vision goggles.

"We're looking at additional capabilities," he said, including higher resolution, color imaging, faster processing and more.

The helmet has not been without glitches, including a green glow pilots saw at night that had to be eliminated. That issue was particularly dangerous for Navy pilots landing on aircraft carriers at night.

Right now the system tracks the head movement of the pilot, but in the future it will incorporate the ability to track the eye movement. He said he envisions a pilot being able to use the movement of the eye to operate different systems, for instance, blinking his eye to bring up additional information or contacting a wingman.

Horowitz said he can envision a future where the helmet interacts with the pilot through more than just vision. It will use a broad range of sensors, including touch, audible and others, and blend it together "to optimize performance."

The condition of the pilot is also something of concern, and steps are being taken to monitor the pilot's health. It includes "incorporating a monitoring system, we're using state-of-the-art commercial medical sensing capabilities embedded in the helmet to provide physiological and cognitive monitoring of the pilot."

The goal is to predict his or her physical state in order to take steps to remedy the situation. "And we can actually, if needed, transfer control to the machine so we can bring the aircraft back home safely if the pilot is incapacitated."

That hasn't happened yet, but it will.

"We are taking a look at that, and I see that as an area that's going to require a whole lot more work in the future," he said.

All this technology being created for the F-35 helmet is working its way into commercial aviation, Horowitz said.

He said he's a big believer in unmanned systems. They are the future and the workforce of the future needs to adapt.

"Even with unmanned, in the end the design the development, the production of these systems, is going to be done by you," he told the gathering.

- David Tortorano

Next year's summit will be in Florida, probably in Orlando, according to Wade. Don Pierson, economic development chief in Louisiana, will become chair of the group in January.

During the summit, participants were put into small groups to brainstorm on ways to address the shortage of workers in aerospace. These are the top five suggestions.

- Aerospace Alliance should be facilitator convening opportunities for companies, educators and workforce professional etc., to collaborate across the four-state region.
- Reach out to youth about the array of job opportunities in aerospace, as early as the 8th grade, using their own language and tools. Ensure parents through groups like PTAs understand more about aerospace. Get future employers into schools.
- Encourage underrepresented populations to think about a career in aerospace.
- Market the array of aerospace career opportunities. Make sure the push makes clear it involves more than pilots and things like autonomous vehicles and cyber security.
- Continue to work with aerospace companies to find out their future needs. Educate to that, not just today's needs.

Related news posts:

- Airbus tech school in works 11/2/18

Corporate

Airbus-Boeing tanker battle looming?

Eight years after the battle to build aerial tankers for the Air Force, Airbus and Lockheed are teaming up to win any contracts for additional U.S. tankers...

Michele Evans of Lockheed Martin and Fernando Alonso of Airbus in A330MRTT cockpit. *Airbus photo*

In an opening salvo of a future aerial tanker battle, Europe's Airbus is teaming with U.S.-based Lockheed Martin to develop tankers to meet the military's growing demand.

The early December announcement of the memorandum of agreement between the two aerospace giants comes eight years after Airbus lost an Air Force tanker battle to rival Boeing. In that battle, Airbus teamed with Northrop Grumman and in 2008 won the $35 billion contract to build tankers in Mobile, Ala.

But after a protest by Boeing, Northrop Grumman dropped out and Airbus opted to go it alone. The Chicago-based Boeing in 2011 won a $49 billion contract to build 179 of its 767-based tankers, called the KC-46A. It has missed deadlines and has piled up $3 billion in costs, according to *Reuters*.

Although Airbus lost the tanker competition, it built a plant in Mobile anyway to assemble the popular A320 series of jetliners. The 100th jetliner built in Mobile was delivered in December. Mobile will also be getting a second assembly line to build A220 passenger jets as a result of a joint project between Airbus and Canada's Bombardier. The second assembly line will deliver its first aircraft in 2020.

Now Airbus will work with Lockheed Martin, the largest U.S. defense contractor, to go after the next possible aircraft and refueling service orders from the U.S. military. The U.S. Air Force, which wants to ultimately replace its entire fleet of over 400 tankers, is examining ways to meet growing demand for aerial refueling with possible fee-for-service arrangements, purchases of hundreds of additional aircraft, and the future development of a stealthy tanker.

Senior executives from Airbus and Lockheed agreed to jointly explore all those opportunities. Airbus has had success selling its A330-based Multi Role Tanker Transport (MRTT), which has been selected by 12 countries.

The aircraft is already refueling or capable of refueling most major U.S. combat airplanes, including the stealthy F-35 fighter jet. Lockheed builds, among other things, the F-35 and the C-130 transport plane that can also be used as a tanker.

"By combining the innovation and expertise of Airbus and Lockheed Martin, we will be well-positioned to provide the United States Air Force with the advanced refueling solutions needed to meet 21st century security challenges," said Lockheed Martin Chief Executive Marillyn Hewson.

The Airbus-Lockheed agreement opens the intriguing possibility that Mobile could be the site to build A330 MRTT aircraft. Key officials from Airbus have said for a long time that Mobile is the company's primary industrial home, and that it has room to grow.

Airbus has not ruled out producing tankers in Mobile if it can secure Pentagon business, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Although it's already building A320 jetliners and will eventually build A220 jets - up to 10 total every month - there appears to be no issue of space.

During the Southeast Aerospace and Defense Conference in Mobile in June, Chris Curry, executive director of the Mobile Airport Authority, said the plan to move commercial airline traffic to the 1,200-acre downtown airport will not hinder industrial tenants, like Airbus. He said tenants were consulted during the study to ensure any move would not jeopardize their operations.

Asked what kind of space Brookley has for future companies, Curry said it has as much space as needed and hinted it could acquire more if needed.

The heavy activity is also apparently not an issue to Airbus. During Novem-

ber's Aerospace Alliance Summit, an Airbus official pointed out that the airport in France's Toulouse is far busier and it poses no problems for building aircraft.

Growth curve

Paul Gaskell, who is heading up the Airbus A220 final assembly line project in Mobile, said during the November summit that the expected growth of the A320 production rate combined with the new assembly line for the A220 will double the size of the Airbus footprint at the Mobile Aeroplex over the next few years.

Airbus in Mobile delivered its 100th A320 jetliner Dec. 11, an A320neo to Frontier Airlines. The Mobile plant will build its first extended range A321 next year, Gaskell said.

Right now they are finalizing construction plans for the A220 assembly line. Like the A320 assembly line, major sections will be brought to Mobile from a variety of locations, including Belfast, Montreal and Italy. Gaskell said that with the A320 assembly line it took three years from project launch to start of assembly. For the A220, it will be 13 months. He called it a "copy and paste" of what's done in Mirabel, Canada, where A220s are now built.

Airbus has committed to going to an annual rate 60 A320s by mid-2019, up from the current 48.

"Getting to rate 60 is an extremely difficult task, especially in Europe," said Gaskell. "But here, we have room to grow, and therefore, I can't announce anything, but we will definitely grow in Alabama." His comment is particularly intriguing in light of the Airbus-Lockheed agreement.

The company began its military operation in Mobile in 2005, and followed that with the engineering center in 2007. That was followed by the A320 assembly line, which delivered its first jetliner in 2016, "and today, we're producing four aircraft a month, and we're actually increasing slightly above that at the moment and we're hoping to even go above that."

Airbus is feeling right at home here.

"We have an excellent relationship with Alabama and the rest of the Gulf Coast, and we're extremely proud of that," he said.

"So what comes next as we go into 2019 and beyond? It could be summed in three simple words: growth, growth, and growth. That's what we're doing," he said.

"In terms of what we're looking at over the next few years, we're probably looking at doubling the size of the plant both in physical space but also employees, adding another 400 to 600 people over the next two to three years," he said. "So that's a huge economic growth for the community." It will also create opportunities in the supply chain.

For the A220 assembly line, Gaskell said the intention is to be at rate four before 2023.

"The only way we can achieve those tight timelines is, we're building in a temporary footprint. The main final assembly line is a complicated building it takes quite a while to build, so we will start building, we literally are going to start our first section right next to the first section of the A320 so we put it right in the existing hangar. At some point put we have to pick all that tooling up and put it in the main assembly line when it's ready," Gaskell said.

"Our intent on the site is to try to have as many synergies between the 320 and 220 as possible." he said.

He noted the amazing story of Mobile's growth as an aerospace center. Today it is ranked sixth in the world and three in North America.

"Where will we be in another three, four years? If everything comes to fruition on the 320 and 220 program then there's absolutely no reason why Mobile shouldn't be number four in the world and number two in North America," he said.

Mobile is behind Seattle, Hamburg and Toulouse, but they have been producing aircraft for more than 100 years, Gaskell said.

"So you've jumped up into fourth place in just 10 years … The pace of growth here is just phenomenal," he said.

A330 MRTT of the Republic of Korea. *Airbus photo*

"It's all about creating a Southeast aerospace cluster," he said. Having two programs here and potentially going up to a rate eight and maybe even rate 10 as a production center, that draws in more suppliers.

Airbus attracted nearly 20 suppliers with a rate of four. The size of those suppliers varies, from as little as one person to 80. "Imagine what it will be when we have A220 planes as well.."

Gaskell said the move of commercial traffic to the downtown airport not only represent no problem, but could be a benefit for suppliers flying direct. He said it could be "fantastic."

Could subassembly manufacturing eventually come to the Gulf Coast or other areas of the United States?

"It's something we've looked at several times," he said, but it's a difficult decision to make as Airbus is ramping up. "It's difficult because you can't just bring the sections. You need to bring the supply chain with it so it's an enormous investment to do it."

He can't say whether it will happen, but said that as other locations reach their capacity limit and they have to invest somewhere, "then it could be an opportunity where we look at Mobile and other centers."

- David Tortorano

Related news posts:

- Airbus Mobile delivers 100th 12/11/18
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Military

Storm-damaged Tyndall eyed for F-35s

The Air Force is considering assigning F-35s to the base damaged by Hurricane Michael, while maintaining its critical training mission for the F-22...

An F-22, foreground, and an F-35 flying together along the Gulf Coast. *Air Force photo*

It was one of the most unexpected developments in the wake of Hurricane Michael, the Air Force now wants to base up to three squadrons of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters at Tyndall Air Force Base, near Panama City, Fla.

The mayors of small towns in eastern Bay County bordering Tyndall Air Force Base say they're happy about the F-35 squadrons likely arriving, according to the *Panama City News Herald*.

The towns of Callaway, Springfield and Parker lost residents and suffered damage from the hurricane, so Tyndall bouncing back is good news.

"Being this close, it will affect our housing and redevelopment after our storm damage," Springfield Mayor Ralph Hammond said.

"We know nothing's final until it happens, but this would be an incredible impact to our community," Parker Mayor Rich Musgrave said. "There are many local businesses that relied on military customers and I'm sure this will help speed those business' recovery."

It was obvious as the October hurricane approached that it would have a big impact on Tyndall, home of the 325th Fighter Wing, comprised of two F-22 squadrons - one operational and the other training. Other tenants included the 1st Air Force, the 53rd Weapons Evaluation Group, and the Air Force Civil Engineer Center.

Before the hurricane arrived, Col. Brian Laidlaw, 325th Fighter Wing commander, ordered an evacuation of all but the ride-out team of nearly 100 personnel, which included first responders, base leadership and command post personnel.

As is usual procedure, assets that could be moved to safety were, including F-22 and T-38 aircraft. The hurricane slammed the area with fierce winds and rain and caused damage to 95 percent of the buildings at Tyndall.

The base's hangars and flight operations buildings suffered some of the greatest damage from the storm passing directly overhead. Among the assets damaged were some of the F-22s that could not fly to safety because they were in various states of repair and maintenance. Later it was determined the F-22s suffered little damage and could fly away for repairs.

Still, the damage to Tyndall caused a good deal of concern from local officials over what would become of the base that's so important to the region's economy. But the initial concern was soon calmed.

On Oct. 25, Vice President Mike Pence assessed the damage to the base and reassured the community of the base's importance to the nation.

"We will rebuild Tyndall Air Force Base," Pence said.

Tyndall's access to 130,000 square miles of airspace over the Gulf of Mexico is very valuable for military training.

"We have been given a chance to use this current challenge as an opportunity to further improve our lethality and readiness in support of the National Defense Strategy," said Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. David L. Goldfein.

Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson announced Nov. 2 that a number of important missions will resume at Tyndall in the next few months and others will shift to other locations for the time being. All but some 500 airmen will return to Tyndall.

Wilson said the units that will remain

Gulf Coast Aerospace Corridor

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Our thanks

This is the last issue of the year, and we are taking this opportunity to give a shout-out to the sponsors who helped us bring this newsletter to you - free of charge.

The logos of Gulf Power, Santa Rosa Economic Development, and FloridaWest have been on the front page for all six 2018 issues. Trent Lott International Airport's name has been on the back page all year.

Others have been supporters on an irregular basis: Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce; Enterprise Florida; Alabama Community College System; and Quint Studer.

They all believe in what we're doing and want our region's aviation story to be told. Let them know you appreciate it.

Now on to 2019.

David Tortorano
Editor
December 17, 2018
dtortorano@tortorano.com

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Civil engineering Airmen from the 23rd Civil Engineering Squadron, Moody Air Force Base, Ga., dig trenches through tent city for laying more permanent high-voltage power lines at Tyndall Oct. 28. Support personnel from Tyndall and other bases are working to repair base infrastructure and build bare-bones facilities after Hurricane Michael. *Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Kelly Walker*

at Tyndall include the 601st Air Force Operations Center, the 337th Air Control Squadron, the Air Force Medical Agency Support team, Air Force Office of Special Investigations, the 53rd Air-to-Air Weapons Evaluation Group, the Air Force Legal Operations Agency, the 823rd Red Horse Squadron, Detachment 1 and the Air Force Civil Engineer Center.

While people were concentrating on Tyndall returning to what it had been, the Air Force had a new twist in mind.

The service recommended that Congress use supplemental funding for rebuilding the base for up to three squadrons of the fifth-generation F-35A fighters. The preliminary evaluation confirms Tyndall can accommodate the three squadrons of 72 aircraft.

"We have recommended that the best path forward to increase readiness and use money wisely is to consolidate the operational F-22s formerly at Tyndall in Alaska, Hawaii and Virginia, and make the decision now to put the next three squadrons of F-35s beyond those for which we have already made decisions at Tyndall," said Wilson.

"We are talking with Congressional leaders about this plan and will need their help with the supplemental funding needed to restore the base," she added.

If approved and funded, F-35s could be based at Tyndall in 2023.

More than 2,000 personnel have since returned to the base and the Air Force intends to keep the testing, air operations center, and civil engineer missions at Tyndall. The recommendation announced in December only affects the operational fighter flying mission at the base.

Members of the Florida Defense Support Task Force in October toured Tyndall to see the damage first-hand. The task force, which has an interest in all military installations in the state, offers support on a state level. Rep. Neal Dunn said the rebuild will mean a brand new Tyndall, updated to the needs of the 21st century.

- Staff report

Related news posts:

- F-35s eyed for Tyndall rebuild 12/9/18
- Tyndall repair to take 3-5 years 11/17/18
- Task force tours Tyndall 10/29/18
- F-22s damaged, command moved 10/16/18
- Tyndall takes direct hit 10/11/18

***Page 1 mast**: The 100th Mobile-built A320 takes off on its maiden flight in December 2018.* *Airbus photo*