

# Fighter Pilots Aren't Flying Enough to Hone the Skills of Full-Spectrum War

*Defense One*



***U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY SENIOR AIRMAN PETER REFT***

**The Air Force is losing training time, experienced teachers, and its combat edge.**

During his confirmation hearing, U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff General David Goldfein said his service could not surge enough combat-ready forces to conduct a single major regional contingency operation without stripping other regions of the airmen and aircraft needed to meet their basic security needs. He further noted that less than half of Air Force combat units are ready for “full-spectrum” (high threat, high intensity) combat. This lack of readiness could jeopardize the lives of aircrews and other service members who depend upon them in combat, and put mission-essential tasks at greater risk.

How did it come to this? Fighter force readiness has been declining since 2003, but it took a big dive in fiscal 2013, when funding cuts forced the Air Force to temporarily ground half of its active-duty, combat-coded squadrons and reduce overall flying hours by 18 percent.

It got worse. In 2014, additional cuts led to shortages of spare parts and aircraft maintenance workers. Fighter pilots, who once averaged over 200 flying hours a year, struggled to get 120 hours that year.

Last year, the average rose to 150 hours with a slight uptick in funding and by rolling in the surge of flying time accumulated during combat deployments. Flying in a combat environment may sound like an incredible opportunity to employ and refine high-end skillsets, but it isn't. The vast majority of a fighter pilot's time in a cockpit over Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria is spent

holding (loitering), waiting to be employed in that low-threat environment. While they fly much more frequently, the opportunity to actually drop munitions comes infrequently. And after they return home, those pilots often average less than one sortie a week.

To put this into context, in the 1980s and '90s, Air Force fighter pilots averaged three to four sorties a week, flying over 200 hours a year in order to achieve "full spectrum capable" readiness. It enabled them not just to sustain proficiency, but to improve their skills.

There's a pretty well-accepted formula for this. When pilots fly only two sorties per week (averaging slightly over 100 hours per year), their skills decrease with every passing week and the likelihood they will be effective or even survive in combat drops precipitously. Fly three sorties a week, and they sustain their baseline faculties. Fly four sorties a week – at least 200 hours a year—and they get better at everything.

Simulators have improved significantly over the years and the fidelity, threat array, and contact ranges of fifth-generation sims overcome the challenges of limited range space and physical assets available in the continental U.S. However, the fidelity of F-16, F-15, and A-10 sims will never measure up to those available for the F-22 and the F-35. No pilot interviewed believed any simulator could replace the need for time in the air – it could only be used as a supplement.

So last year's average of 150 flight hours per year, just under three a week, means that most pilots are training to a level the Air Force considered not ready for combat in the '80s and '90s. Moreover, units currently deployed to (or spinning up for) the fight in the Middle East, are training for low-threat, close-air-support missions—and that training doesn't sharpen full-spectrum skill sets. Once in the Persian Gulf region, whatever high-threat, high-intensity faculties they possess will continue to fade for the duration of their deployment. Upon their return home, they will fly as little as one sortie a week—a rate that allows even mundane/administrative flying skills to become rusty.

The current state of Air Force fighter unreadiness is one we haven't witnessed since the Carter Administration. And the long-term impact of a 13-year starvation diet on the faculties, retention, and mindset of our fighter force should be setting off klaxons. But we aren't hearing any.

We can further note the effects on three specific areas:

**Faculties.** Learning the ins and outs of executing fighter tactics, techniques and procedures requires hands-on knowledge/instruction which is handed down by ever-cascading generations of fighter pilots. A fighter pilot's skill set generally peaks after seven years in the cockpit, at which point most pilots move on to staff, leadership and Professional Military Education assignments. As those pilots cycle out of the cockpit, they pass on their experience and mindsets to the next generation. But the last time Air Force fighters flew in, or consistently trained for, a high threat environment was in March 2003. By next spring, two full generations of fighter pilots will have come and gone since high-threat, high-intensity operations were part of their regular training regimen.

**Retention.** The low sortie rates and emphasis on additional duties (administrative tasks assigned to aircrews that do not further or even involve the flying mission) has helped bring the current Air Force pilot shortfall to 700—a number that is heading to 1,000. It takes two years for an individual to become an operational fighter pilot, but it will take far more than that to regain the experience lost through this flight of talent.

**Mindset.** The greatest loss suffered through this period can't be fully quantified, and that is in a fighter pilot's unquenchable thirst for more time in the air. During a recent survey of 20 operational fighter pilots, the average pilot expressed the belief that 14 hours of flying time a month (170 hours a year) would be sufficient to prepare pilots for "full spectrum" operations. Two decades ago, fighter pilots on active duty knew that wouldn't suffice, and they demanded more sorties, even when the average pilot flew well over 200 hours a year.

Air Force leaders know that our pilots need more flying time. They will likely petition the next administration to increase funding so they can get it. The challenge is to get that increase to the service in time to reheat a mindset in the current generation of pilots for absolute dominance in air warfare.