

The United States Air Force global strike concept of operations

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The United States Air Force Global Strike Concept of Operations

Die amerikanische Luftwaffe versteht sich als militärisches Instrument mit globaler Einsatzfähigkeit und Verantwortung. Der englische Journalist Thomas Withington beschreibt das «globale Strike-Konzept», welches für die US Air Force massgebend ist. Das Konzept basiert auf dem überwältigenden technischen Vorsprung der US-Luftwaffe. Es muss davon ausgegangen werden, dass die Vereinigten Staaten für Jahrzehnte keinen gleichwertigen Gegner im Luftkrieg antreffen werden. Dies dürfte auch die generelle Überlegenheit der amerikanischen Streitkräfte für lange Zeit sicherstellen.

Thomas Withington*

The United States Air Force Global Strike Concept of Operations (GSConOps) is the holy grail of every air commander; a force of stealthy aircraft using precision munitions and a state-of-the-art command and control system to establish air superiority; hit an enemy hard on the opening night of a campaign and to render any retaliation badly coordinated and ultimately futile. In delivering this shattering blow, the GSConOps is also designed to permit the unimpeded entry of follow-on air and ground forces.

In a hypothetical GSConOps scenario stealthy F/A-22A 'Raptor' air-superiority fighters would guard groups of B-2A 'Spirit' stealth bombers and their F-117A 'Nighthawk' stealth fighter cousins as they fly towards their targets. In the opening salvo these targets would include fixed Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) sites and their accompanying command and control systems. The use of low-observable aircraft is deliberate: they are all but invisible on radar and therefore almost impossible to defend against. The F/A-22A has been described as essential to the GSConOps. In a statement to the Congressional Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces, Lt. Gen. John D.W. Corley, Principal Deputy, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Acquisition) explained that; "the F/A-22 is the linchpin for all follow-on forces and therefore resides at the heart of the Global Strike CONOPS".

Once fixed ground-to-air defences have been dealt with, the force will turn its sights on fixed, high value leadership and command and control installations. The 'shooters' will be coordinated by airborne 'sensors' such as E-3B/C 'Sentry' Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS) and E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) aircraft which will watch like hawks for movements in the

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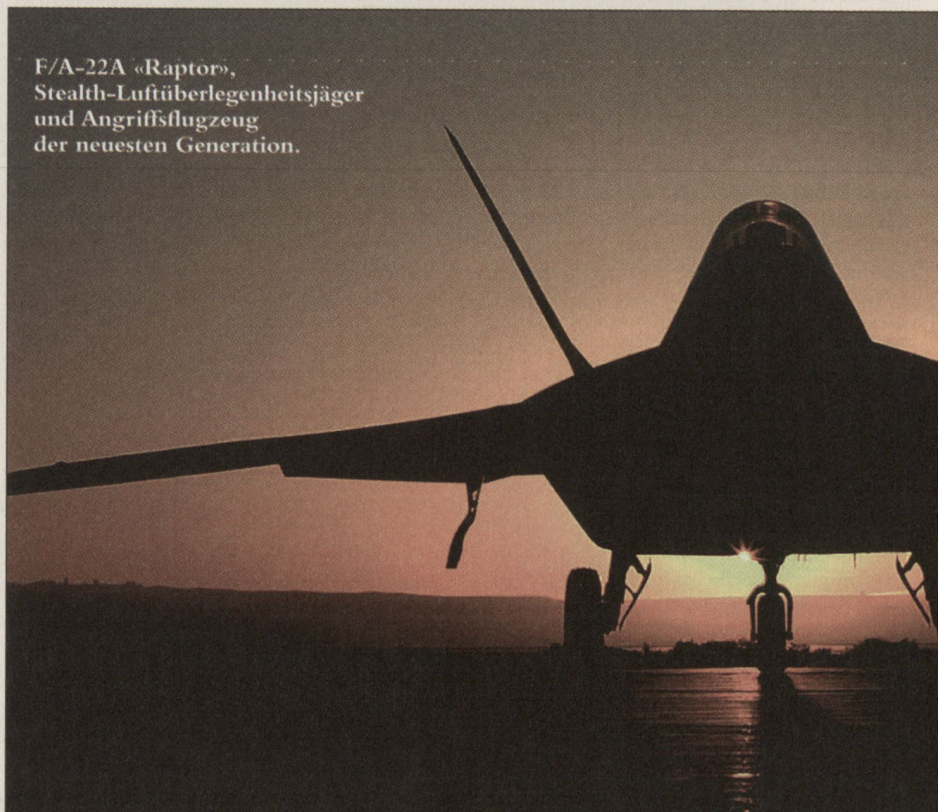
air and on the ground. U-2C 'Dragon Lady' reconnaissance aircraft will provide high-altitude reconnaissance, reinforced by RQ-4A 'Global Hawk' Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Thousands of miles away from the action, USAF commanders will direct the strike force and the air battle from the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), currently in its test phase and known as the CAOC-X, based at Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. Acting as a clearing house the CAOC will collect data from the sensors, identify 'aim points' for attack and transmit this information to the force. The rationale of the centre is to ensure that time-critical targets such as mobile R-17/SS-1C 'Scud-B' ballistic missile launchers are destroyed moments after they are detected.

The entire force will be refuelled by either KC-135E/R/T 'Stratotanker', KC-10A 'Extender' or the forthcoming KC-767A jet tankers. This will also enable the force to reduce its dependence for basing rights on host nations near to the theatre. Witness Turkey's refusal to allow its soil to be used as the 'jump-off' point for the invasion of northern Iraq.

While the GSConOps looks towards the future, its concepts are steeped in history. Both Operation Rolling Thunder waged by the USAF during the Vietnam War and Operation Allied Force against Serbia in 1999 were attrition air campaigns designed to wear down their opponents. However the North Vietnamese continued to fight and Belgrade took some time to capitulate. Chief of the USAF Air Combat Command (ACC) General John Jumper stressed that; "we should never start a limited operation if the enemy can turn it into a sustained conflict". That is why the GSConOps is designed to deliver a crippling knockout blow to the enemy at the start of hostilities, much like that delivered to Saddam Hussein's regime during the opening 'Shock and Awe' phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The blow delivered by the GSConOps is designed to be so strong and precise that it might even persuade an adversary that it is pointless to continue hostilities and best to sue for peace. Colonel David Gerber, GSConOps Champion at the Pentagon's Directorate of Operational Capability Requirements explains that; "the point of strategy and war is to force the adversary to change their mind".

With the door kicked down and air supremacy established, less-stealthy follow-on forces such as the F-35A 'Joint Strike Fighter' and US Navy F/A-18E/F 'Super Hornet' could continue precision attacks against battlefield and other lightly defended targets. However, the Spirits will loiter in the battlespace to attack time-critical, heavily-defended targets as they are identified by the reconnaissance aircraft. Exceptionally dangerous targets could be left to Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles

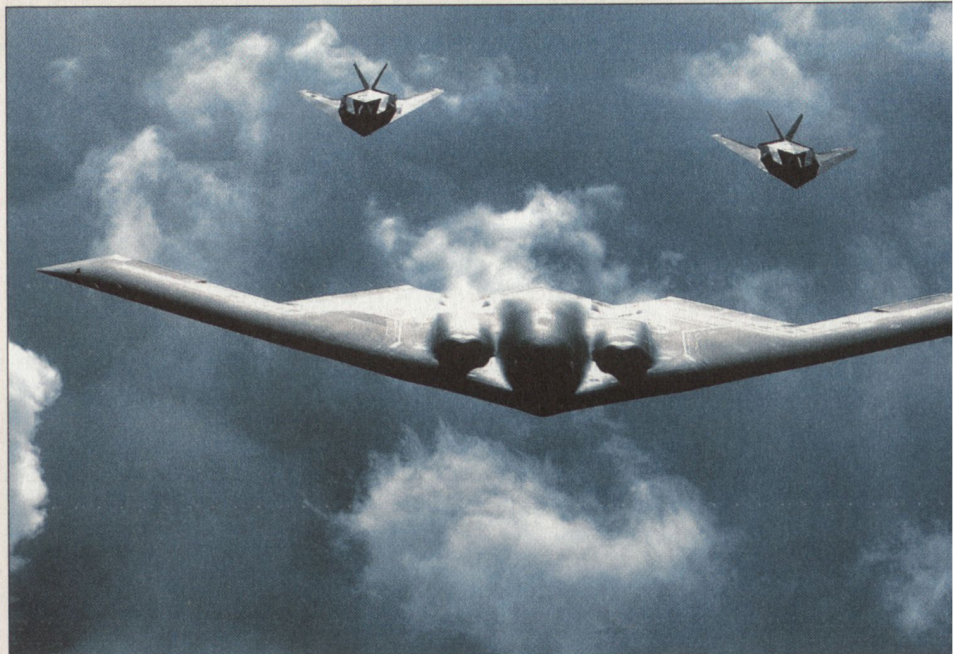
F/A-22A «Raptor»,
Stealth-Luftüberlegenheitsjäger
und Angriffsflugzeug
der neuesten Generation.



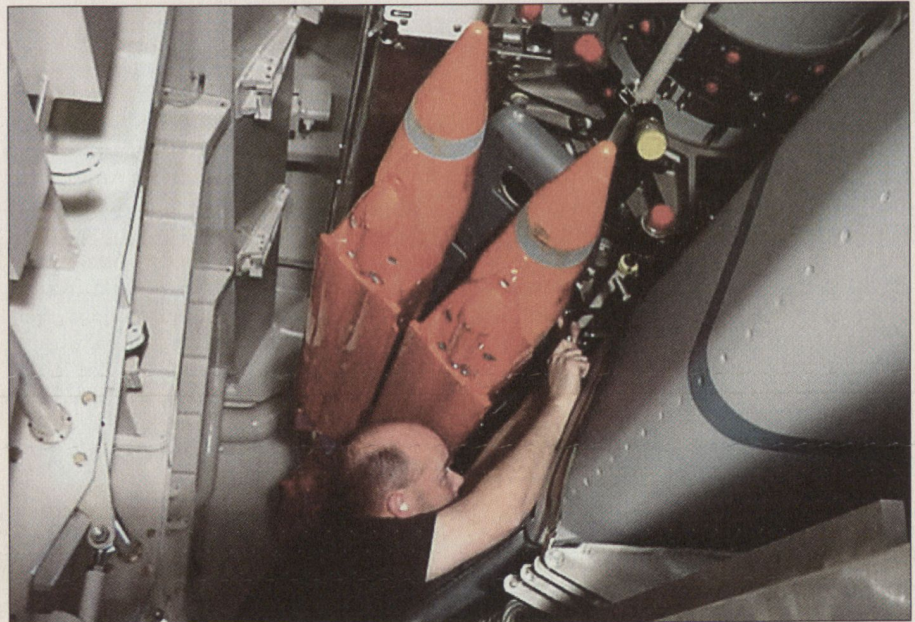
such as armed RQ-1 Predator UAVs which could operate with Special Forces behind enemy lines.

Precision munitions will also play a vital role in the GSConOps. The forthcoming Small Diameter Bomb (SDB), which measures just 15.2 cm in diameter and has a weight of 113 kg, will increase the precision weapons payload of the strike aircraft. Four B-2A bombers and 48 F/A-22 aircraft, all carrying SDBs could hit 380 targets. According to David Deptula, Director of Plans and Programs at ACC, this could create the "effects of mass (bombing) without massing". These precision weapons, coupled with existing ordnance such as the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM), will enable the force to outmanoeuvre the enemy and hit fragile key targets. Why attack the enemy's strong points when you can bring them to their knees by hitting their weak points?

It could be argued that all of the objectives which the GSConOps will fulfil could be achieved equally well with carrier-based aircraft. Certainly the US Navy does have its own force of air superiority fighters, attack aircraft and command and control planes. Secondly, the forthcoming naval variant of the F-35 has stealthy characteristics, along with the existing 'Super Hornet', however, the combined bomb load which could be delivered from a single carrier even if a mix of 46 F/A-18E/F and F-35A attack aircraft were armed with a SDB and JDAM weapons would be 128 munitions. One report commented that a single B-2A bomber could carry up to 216 SDBs. Moreover, aircraft carriers are vulnerable to anti-shiping missiles. The all-weather GSConOps is designed to out-



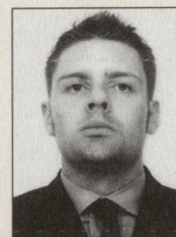
B-2A «Spirit», Stealth-Bomber, flankiert von zwei F-117A «Nighthawk», Stealth-Jagd-bombern. Beide Flugzeugtypen sind Waffenträger, welche gegen wichtigste gegnerische Ziele eingesetzt werden.



flank many of the problems experienced with air expeditionary operations over the last fifty years. The use of precision weapons will reduce civilian casualties and collateral damage; stealthy aircraft will help to safeguard aircrews and the GSConOps task force, an all-seeing, all-networked command and control system will reduce the 'sensor-to-shooter' gap ensuring that time-critical targets are destroyed in a timely fashion. Tankers will negate the need for overseas air basing while new munitions will cause a relatively small strike package to have an impact far outstripping its size. But this is not the stuff of the future, while some of the equipment such as the F/A-22 is still to enter USAF service *en-masse*, many of the assets are already there and according to Col. Gerber, the concept is "already up and running".

Zukünftige Waffen wie die abgebildete «Small Diameter Bomb» brauchen weniger Platz in den (Stealth-)Flugzeugen bei gleich präziser Wirkung im Ziel.

Fotos: Thomas Withington ■



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