Boeing, U.S. Air Force Celebrate B-52 Stratofortress Golden Anniversary

The U.S. Air Force and Boeing [NYSE: BA] celebrated the 50-year anniversary of the B-52 Stratofortress at a ceremony here today.

Since the Boeing YB-52 prototype made its first flight on April 15, 1952, the Stratofortress has been the world's foremost heavy bomber. After decades of serving as the backbone of the strategic bomber force for the United States, the B-52 has provided its unique capabilities to numerous military operations including Operation Desert Storm and most recently, Operation Enduring Freedom.

"The B-52 changed the balance of power," Jerry Daniels, president and chief executive officer of Boeing Military Aircraft and Missile Systems, told the almost 8,000 current and retired U.S. Air Force and Boeing personnel in attendance at the ceremony. "It helped create order out of disorder, and as it proved most recently in Afghanistan, the amazing and ever-youthful B-52 is still one of the most useful and devastating weapons in the entire U.S. arsenal."

The anniversary event featured Air Force and Boeing officials who were instrumental in the development of the B-52, including retired Air Force Gen. Guy Townsend, the first B-52 test pilot; retired Col. Pete Warden, who was chief of bomber projects in the 1940s and a key player in bringing the B-52 into the Air Force inventory; and Bob Withington, a former Boeing staff engineer and aerodynamicist who led the design and development of the Stratofortress.

The event also focused on the present and future of the B-52, which is expected to remain in service for another 40 years.

Lt. Gen. Tom Keck, 8th Air Force commander, told the audience, "Every major conflict since the Korean conflict has witnessed the incredible and deadly combat power of the B-52. Today's war on terrorism is no exception."

So far in Operation Enduring Freedom, the B-52 has delivered nearly 35 percent of all ordnance on targets, with 100 percent aircraft launch rate and safety, while flying less than 3 percent of the total bombing sorties in the operation.

"It's a glorious history for this marvel of aviation, and the future looks every bit as bright," Keck said.

The Air Force and Boeing have continually updated the B-52 with new avionics, data-link communications, defense systems and precision-guided weapons capabilities, and are jointly exploring re-engining the Stratofortress fleet with modern, fuel-efficient turbofan engines.

Boeing has extended the structural life of the B-52 airframe to at least the year 2040 through a service-life extension program that has become an industry standard.

Air Force Maj. Gen. Charles Johnson, commander of the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center, saluted the men and women of the B-52 System Program Office for keeping the Stratofortress fleet reliable and effective. "We face many challenges as any aircraft ages -- even an aircraft as well designed and built as this one," he said. "But we are doing it -- with American ingenuity, grit and determination. Men and women who weren't even born when this airplane first flew are breathing new life into a true American icon."

A total of 744 B-52 bombers, including the XB-52 and YB-52 test models, were built by Boeing. The Boeing plant in Wichita produced 467 of that number, and 277 were produced in Seattle. Today, 94 B-52H models remain in Air Combat Command service and are based at Barksdale Air Force Base, La., and Minot Air Force Base, N.D. One is used as a test aircraft at NASA Dryden Flight Research Center at Edwards, Calif.

Historical information about the B-52 and its 50th anniversary is available at a special website.

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For further information:
Paul Guse
(314) 232-1520
paul.m.guse@boeing.com