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ROUNDS

ROUNDS: Ellsworth's future better than ever

7 hrs ago

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Ellsworth Air Force Base and the 28th Bomb Wing have played a critical role in our national defense since they were established more than 70 years ago.

Originally called Rapid City Air Base, it was a training location for long-range bombers during World War II. After the war, upgrades were completed to make it a permanent base.

Today, it is home to the 28th Bomb Wing, one of two B-1B Lancer strategic bomber wings in the Air Force.

I'm incredibly proud of the work being done by the 28th Bomb Wing and thank the surrounding communities for their unwavering support of the airmen, their families and their missions. As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, my priorities include further solidifying Ellsworth's vital role in the defense of our nation.

We should take note of the newest addition to the base, the 89th Attack Squadron, which operates the Air Force's unmanned aircraft, the MQ-9 Reaper. This weapon system, controlled by crews at Ellsworth since 2011, is engaged in constant global operations.

Since I took office in 2015, we've had a number of successes. Just weeks after I was sworn in, the Air Force announced an expansion of the Powder River Training Complex after nearly a decade of work and reviews. It is now the largest training airspace in the continental U.S., spanning parts of South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana and Wyoming. This airspace allows the Air Force to conduct critical training exercises necessary to prepare for combat. Conducting these simulations close to home at Ellsworth saves the Air Force time and money.

Additionally during my time serving on the Senate Armed Services Committee, it was announced that Ellsworth will be one of three bases that will be home to the new B-21 Raider bomber. The B-21s, currently being developed as part of the Air Force's Long Range Strike Bomber program, will be long-range stealth bombers capable of delivering conventional or thermonuclear weapons. More than 100 B-21s are planned to be in service, entering the force in about 2025.

Most recently, we learned that the FAA has approved a request by the Air Force to increase the amount of airspace available at certain times for large-force exercises at the Powder River Training Complex. After hearing from Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson and other leaders about delays in receiving approval by the FAA, last month I wrote FAA Acting Administrator Daniel Elwell urging the agency's support for the Air Force's request regarding the Powder River Training Complex.

In my letter, I emphasized that exercising rapidly-advancing combat aircraft and technology requires flexible and creative solutions to provide periodic military access to all altitudes across large geographic areas. Because the request equated to only 10-15 hours of a larger section of airspace, distributed over a three-day period and planned around peak commercial aviation travel times, approving the request was possible without unduly disrupting the efficiency of the National Airspace System.

I was pleased to hear from Secretary Wilson a few weeks later informing us that the FAA had granted the request. This approval gives the 28th Bomb Wing the ability to fly at these higher altitudes during the upcoming Combat Raider exercise in October and in the future. Now, military aircraft will be able to fly up to 52,000 feet, from a previous limit of 26,000 feet. This will allow more advanced aircraft, such as the F-22, F-35 and B-2, to participate in these large-force exercises. Under previous altitude restrictions, these advanced fighters and bombers would stay home, making the training less realistic.

Solidifying Ellsworth as a vital component of our long-term national defense strategy has long been a priority. While working as governor during the most recent Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) round in 2005, we successfully removed Ellsworth from the Department of Defense's proposed

closure list. This was largely due to the extensive information the State of South Dakota and thousands of Ellsworth supporters presented to the BRAC Commission. We also created and made permanent the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority, whose sole mission is to protect, strengthen and promote Ellsworth. In the 13 years since, Ellsworth's vital role in our long-term defense strategy has only grown.

I will continue to vigorously advocate for improving Air Force capabilities, by improving the Powder River Training Complex and continuing to shape it to be the premier military airspace. With this goal in mind, I recently wrote a letter to Secretary Wilson, asking what additional resources the Air Force needs for Powder River, particularly, threat simulators. Improved threat simulation will allow our aircrews to conduct more realistic training.

As a member of Senate Armed Services Committee, it is a true honor to work to secure Ellsworth's vital role in our national defense.

Mike Rounds represents South Dakota in the U.S. Senate.

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