

F-22A Raptors Ready to Take Flight

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ARLINGTON, Va. — The Air Force's first squadron of 12 F-22A Raptors is ready to go to war.

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Air Force Gen. Ronald Keys, commander of Air Combat Command at Langley Air Force Base, Va., where the fighters will be based, said Thursday that the F-22A is "initial operational-capable" as of Dec. 15, a term that signifies the fighter's fitness to hit the skies in defense of her country if needed.

The designation does not mean that the Raptor is headed to Iraq or Afghanistan any time soon, Keys said.

"IOC is an extreme go-to-war declaration," he said.

The first Raptor squadron of 12 aircraft at Langley "is in the queue to become part of our air expeditionary force in January 2007, and at that point" the jet may be employed in the Middle East if needed, Keys said.

The jet was originally designed to "protect central Europe against the Soviet hordes," Keys said.

Once the Soviet Union collapsed, however, "naysayers" began questioning the Air Force's need for a new stealth fighter, Keys said.

And with budget constraints, the F-22 is facing a major challenge: the Air Force wanted 381 fighters, but some in the Pentagon want that number reduced to 183.

The most recent Raptors cost about \$133 million, not including research and development.

Basing decisions are on hold until the Air Force learns the end size of the F-22 fleet, Keys said.

Keys said no decisions have been made on whether to base some Raptors in the Pacific. Some military experts regard China as the emerging threat to air dominance.

"We may in fact make a swing through the Pacific" next year, as the aircraft continues to be put through its paces, Keys said.

"I think we might go into Guam for a period of time; we could go into Hickam" Air Force Base, Keys said.

However, "it's a little premature to say or promise that I'm going to base an airplane" squadron of F-22s in Guam, he said. "We've first got to figure out how

many airplanes we have.”