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Remote U.S. base at core of secret operations

By Craig Whitlock

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Around the clock, about 16 times a day, drones take off or land at a U.S. military base here, the combat hub for the Obama administration's [counterterrorism wars in the Horn of Africa](#) and the Middle East.

Some of the unmanned aircraft are [bound for Somalia](#), the collapsed state whose border lies just 10 miles to the southeast. Most of the armed drones, however, veer north across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen, another unstable country where they are being used in [an increasingly deadly war](#) with an al-Qaeda franchise that has targeted the United States.

Camp Lemonnier, a sun-baked Third World outpost established by the French Foreign Legion, began as a temporary staging ground for U.S. Marines looking for a foothold in the region a decade ago. Over the past two years, the U.S. military has clandestinely transformed it into the busiest Predator drone base outside the Afghan war zone, a model for fighting a new generation of terrorist groups.

The Obama administration has gone to [extraordinary lengths to conceal](#) the legal and operational details of its targeted-killing program. Behind closed doors, painstaking debates precede each decision to place an individual in the cross hairs of the United States' perpetual war against al-Qaeda and its allies.

Increasingly, the orders to find, track or kill those people are delivered to [Camp Lemonnier](#). Virtually the entire 500-acre camp is dedicated to counterterrorism, making it the only installation of its kind in the Pentagon's global network of bases.

Secrecy blankets most of the camp's activities. The U.S. military rejected requests from The Washington Post to tour Lemonnier last month. Officials cited "operational security concerns," although they have [permitted journalists to visit in the past](#).

After a Post reporter showed up in Djibouti uninvited, the camp's highest-ranking commander consented to an interview — on the condition that it take place away from the base, at Djibouti's [lone luxury hotel](#). The commander, Army [Maj. Gen. Ralph O. Baker](#), answered some general queries but declined to comment on drone operations or missions related to Somalia or Yemen.

Despite the secrecy, thousands of pages of military records obtained by The Post — including construction blueprints, drone accident reports and internal planning memos — open a revealing window into Camp Lemonnier. [None of the documents](#) is classified and many were acquired via public-records requests.

Taken together, the previously undisclosed documents show how the Djibouti-based drone wars sharply escalated early last year after eight Predators arrived at Lemonnier. The records also chronicle the Pentagon's ambitious plan to further intensify drone operations here in the coming months.

The documents point to [the central role played by the Joint Special Operations Command \(JSOC\)](#), which President Obama has repeatedly relied on to execute the nation's most sensitive counterterrorism missions.

About 300 Special Operations personnel plan raids and coordinate drone flights from inside a high-security compound at Lemonnier that is dotted with satellite dishes and ringed by concertina wire. Most of the commandos work incognito, concealing their names even from conventional troops on the base.

[Other counterterrorism work at Lemonnier](#) is more overt. All told, about 3,200 U.S. troops, civilians and contractors are assigned to the camp, where they train foreign militaries, gather intelligence and dole out humanitarian aid across East Africa as part of a campaign to prevent extremists from taking root.

In Washington, the Obama administration has taken a series of steps to sustain the drone campaign for another decade, developing an elaborate new targeting database, called the "disposition matrix," and a classified "playbook" to spell out how decisions on targeted killing are made.

Djibouti is the clearest example of how the United States is laying the groundwork to carry out these operations overseas. For the past decade, the Pentagon has labeled Lemonnier an "expeditionary," or temporary, camp. But it is now hardening into the U.S. military's first permanent drone war base.

Centerpiece base

In August, the Defense Department delivered [a master plan to Congress](#) detailing how the camp will be used over the next quarter-century. About \$1.4 billion in construction projects are on the drawing board, including [a huge new compound](#) that could house up to 1,100 Special Operations forces, more than triple the current number.

Drones will continue to be in the forefront. In response to written questions from The Post, the U.S. military confirmed publicly for the first time the presence of remotely piloted aircraft — military parlance for drones — at Camp Lemonnier and said they support “a wide variety of regional security missions.”

Intelligence collected from drone and other surveillance missions “is used to develop a full picture of the activities of violent extremist organizations and other activities of interest,” [Africa Command](#), the arm of the U.S. military that oversees the camp, said in a statement. “However, operational security considerations prevent us from commenting on specific missions.”

For nearly a decade, the United States flew drones from Lemonnier only rarely, starting with a 2002 strike in Yemen that killed a suspected ringleader of the attack on the USS Cole.

That swiftly changed in 2010, however, after [al-Qaeda’s network in Yemen](#) attempted to bomb two [U.S.-bound airliners](#) and jihadists in Somalia separately consolidated their hold on that country. Late that year, records show, the Pentagon dispatched eight unmanned MQ-1B Predator aircraft to Djibouti and turned Lemonnier into a full-time drone base.

The impact was apparent months later: JSOC drones from Djibouti and CIA Predators from a secret base on the Arabian Peninsula converged over Yemen and killed Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-born cleric and prominent al-Qaeda member.

Today, Camp Lemonnier is the centerpiece of an [expanding constellation](#) of half a dozen U.S. drone and [surveillance bases in Africa](#), created to combat [a new generation of terrorist groups across the continent](#), from Mali to Libya to the Central African Republic. The U.S. military also flies [drones from small civilian airports in Ethiopia](#) and the Seychelles, but those operations pale in comparison to what is unfolding in Djibouti.

Lemonnier also has become a hub for conventional aircraft. In October 2011, the military boosted the airpower at the base by deploying a squadron of [F-15E Strike Eagle](#) fighter jets, which can fly faster and carry more munitions than Predators.

In its written responses, Africa Command confirmed the warplanes’ presence but declined to answer questions about their mission. Two former U.S. defense officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the F-15s are flying combat sorties over Yemen, an undeclared development in the growing war against al-Qaeda forces there.

The drones and other military aircraft have crowded the skies over the Horn of Africa so much that the risk of an aviation disaster has soared.

Since January 2011, Air Force records show, five Predators armed with Hellfire missiles crashed after taking off from Lemonnier, including one drone that plummeted to the ground in a residential area of Djibouti City. No injuries were reported but four of the drones were destroyed.

Predator drones in particular [are more prone to mishaps](#) than manned aircraft, Air Force statistics show. But the accidents rarely draw public attention because there are no pilots or passengers.

As the pace of drone operations has intensified in Djibouti, Air Force mechanics have reported mysterious incidents in which the airborne robots went haywire.

In March 2011, a Predator parked at the camp started its engine without any human direction, even though the ignition had been turned off and the fuel lines closed. Technicians concluded that a software bug had infected the “brains” of the drone, but never pinpointed the problem.

“After that whole starting-itself incident, we were fairly wary of the aircraft and watched it pretty closely,” an unnamed Air Force squadron commander testified to an investigative board, according to a transcript. “Right now, I still think the software is not good.”

Prime location

Djibouti is an impoverished former French colony with fewer than 1 million people, scarce natural resources and miserably hot weather.

But as far as the U.S. military is concerned, the country's strategic value is unparalleled. Sandwiched between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, Camp Lemonnier enables U.S. aircraft to reach hot spots such as Yemen or Somalia in minutes. Djibouti's port also offers easy access to the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

“This is not an outpost in the middle of nowhere that is of marginal interest,” said [Amanda J. Dory](#), the Pentagon's deputy assistant secretary for Africa. “This is a very important location in terms of U.S. interests, in terms of freedom of navigation, when it comes to power projection.”

The U.S. military pays \$38 million a year to lease Camp Lemonnier from the Djiboutian government. The base rolls across flat, sandy terrain on the edge of Djibouti City, a somnolent capital with eerily empty streets. During the day, many people stay indoors to avoid the heat and [to chew khat](#), a mildly intoxicating plant that is [popular in the region](#).

Hemmed in by the sea and residential areas, Camp Lemonnier's primary shortcoming is that it has no space to expand. It is forced to share a single runway with Djibouti's only international airport, as well as an adjoining French military base and the tiny Djiboutian armed forces.

Passengers arriving on commercial flights — there are about [eight per day](#) — can occasionally spy a Predator drone preparing for a mission. In between flights, the unmanned aircraft park under portable, fabric-covered hangars to shield them from the wind and curious eyes.

Behind the perimeter fence, construction crews are rebuilding the base to better accommodate the influx of drones. Glimpses of the secret operations can be found in an assortment of little-noticed Pentagon memoranda submitted to Congress.

Last month, for example, the Defense Department awarded [a \\$62 million contract](#) to build an airport taxiway extension to handle increased drone traffic at Lemonnier, an ammunition storage site and a combat-loading area for bombs and missiles.

In an Aug. 20 letter to Congress explaining the emergency contract, Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said that 16 drones and four fighter jets take off or land at the Djibouti airfield each day, on average. Those operations are expected to increase, he added, without giving details.

In a separate letter to Congress, Carter said Camp Lemonnier is running out of space to park its drones, which he referred to as remotely piloted aircraft (RPA), and other planes. “The recent addition of fighters and RPAs has exacerbated the situation, causing mission delays,” he said.

Carter’s letters revealed that the drones and fighter aircraft at the base support three classified military operations, code-named [Copper Dune](#), Jupiter Garret and Octave Shield.

Copper Dune is the name of the military’s counterterrorism operations in Yemen. Africa Command said it could not provide information about Jupiter Garret and Octave Shield, citing secrecy restrictions. The code names are unclassified.

The military often assigns similar names to related missions. [Octave Fusion](#) was the code name for a Navy SEAL-led operation in Somalia that rescued an American and a Danish hostage on Jan. 24.

Spilled secrets

Another window into the Djibouti drone operations can be found in U.S. Air Force safety records.

Whenever a military aircraft is involved in a mishap, the Air Force appoints an [Accident Investigation Board](#) to determine the cause. Although the reports focus on technical questions, supplementary documents make it possible to re-create a narrative of what happened in the hours leading up to a crash.

Air Force officers investigating the crash of a Predator on May 17, 2011, found that things started to go awry at Camp Lemonnier late that night when a man known as Frog emerged from the Special Operations compound.

The camp’s main power supply had failed and the phone lines were down. So Frog walked over to the flight line to deliver some important news to the Predator ground crew on duty, according to the investigators’ files, which were obtained by The Post as part of a public-records request.

“Frog” was the alias chosen by a major assigned to the Joint Special Operations Command. At Lemonnier, he belonged to a special collection of Navy SEALs, Delta Force soldiers, Air Force commandos and Marines known simply as “the task force.”

JSOC commandos spend their days and nights inside their compound as they plot raids against terrorist camps and pirate hideouts. Everybody on the base is aware of what they do, but the topic is taboo. “I can’t acknowledge the task force,” said Baker, the Army general and highest-ranking commander at Lemonnier.

Frog coordinated Predator hunts. He did not reveal his real name to anyone without a need to know, not even the ground-crew supervisors and operators and mechanics who cared for the Predators. The only contact came when Frog or his friends occasionally called from their compound to say it was time to ready a drone for takeoff or to prepare for a landing.

Information about each Predator mission was kept so tightly compartmentalized that the ground crews were ignorant of the drones’ targets and destinations. All they knew was that most of their Predators eventually came back, usually 20 or 22 hours later, earlier if something went awry.

On this particular night, Frog informed the crew that his Predator was returning unexpectedly, 17 hours into the flight, because of a slow oil leak.

It was not an emergency. But as the drone descended toward Djibouti City it entered a low-hanging cloud that obscured its camera sensor. Making matters worse, the GPS malfunctioned and gave incorrect altitude readings.

The crew operating the drone was flying blind. It guided the Predator on a “dangerously low glidepath,” Air Force investigators concluded, and crashed the remote-controlled plane 2.7 miles short of the runway.

The site was in a residential area and fire trucks rushed to the scene. The drone had crashed in a vacant lot and its single Hellfire missile had not detonated.

The Predator splintered apart and was a total loss. With a \$3 million price tag, it had cost less than one-tenth the price of an F-15 Strike Eagle.

But in terms of spilling secrets, the damage was severe. Word spread quickly about the mysterious insect-shaped plane that had dropped from the sky. Hundreds of Djiboutians gathered and gawked at the wreckage for hours until the U.S. military arrived to retrieve the pieces.

One secret that survived, however, was Frog’s identity. The official Air Force panel assigned to investigate the Predator accident couldn’t determine his real name, much less track him down for questioning.

“Who is Frog?” one investigator demanded weeks later while interrogating a ground crew member, according to a transcript. “I’m sorry, I was just getting more explanation as to who Frog — is that a person? Or is that like a position?”

The crew member explained that Frog was a liaison officer from the task force. “He’s a Predator guy,” he shrugged. “I actually don’t know his last name.”

The accident triggered alarms at the upper echelons of the Air Force because it was the fourth drone in four months from Camp Lemonnier to crash.

Ten days earlier, on May 7, 2011, a drone carrying a Hellfire missile had an electrical malfunction shortly after it entered Yemeni airspace, according to an Air Force investigative report. The Predator turned back toward Djibouti. About one mile offshore, it rolled uncontrollably to the right, then back to the left before flipping belly up and hurtling into the sea.

“I’ve never seen a Predator do that before in my life, except in videos of other crashes,” a sensor operator from the ground crew told investigators, according to a transcript. “I’m just glad we landed it in the ocean and not someplace else.”

Flying every sortie

The remote-control drones in Djibouti are flown, via satellite link, by pilots 8,000 miles away in the United States, sitting at consoles in air-conditioned quarters at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada and Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico.

At Camp Lemonnier, conditions are much less pleasant for the Air Force ground crews that launch, recover and fix the drones.

In late 2010, after military cargo planes transported the fleet of eight Predators to Djibouti, airmen from the [60th Air Force Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron](#) unpacked the drones from their crates and assembled them.

Soon after, without warning, a microburst storm with 80-mph winds struck the camp.

The 87-member squadron scrambled to secure the Predators and other exposed aircraft. They managed to save more than half of the “high-value, Remotely Piloted Aircraft assets from destruction, and most importantly, prevented injury and any loss of life,” according to [a brief account](#) published in Combat Edge, an Air Force safety magazine.

Even normal weather conditions could be brutal, with summertime temperatures reaching 120 degrees on top of 80 percent humidity.

“Our war reserve air conditioners literally short-circuited in the vain attempt to cool the tents in which we worked,” recalled Lt. Col. Thomas McCurley, the squadron commander. “Our small group of security forces personnel guarded the compound, flight line and other allied assets at posts exposed to the elements with no air conditioning at all.”

McCurley’s [rare public account](#) of the squadron’s activities came in June, when the Air Force awarded him a Bronze Star. At the ceremony, he avoided any explicit mention of the Predators

or Camp Lemonnier. But his narrative matched what is known about the squadron's deployment to Djibouti.

"Our greatest accomplishment was that we flew every single sortie the Air Force asked us to fly, despite the challenges we encountered," he said. "We were an integral part in taking down some very important targets, which means a lot to me."

He did not mention it, but the unit had gotten into the spirit of its mission by designing [a uniform patch](#) emblazoned with a skull, crossbones and a suitable nickname: "East Africa Air Pirates."

The Air Force denied a request from The Post to interview McCurley.

Increased traffic

The frequency of U.S. military flights from Djibouti has soared, overwhelming air-traffic controllers and making the skies more dangerous.

The number of takeoffs and landings each month has more than doubled, reaching a peak of 1,666 in July compared with a monthly average of 768 two years ago, according to air-traffic statistics disclosed in Defense Department contracting documents.

Drones now account for about 30 percent of daily U.S. military flight operations at Lemonnier, according to a Post analysis.

The increased activity has meant more mishaps. Last year, drones were involved in "a string of near mid-air collisions" with NATO planes off the Horn of Africa, according to a [brief safety alert](#) published in Combat Edge magazine.

Drones also pose [an aviation risk next door in Somalia](#). Over the past year, remote-controlled aircraft have plunged into a refugee camp, flown perilously close to a fuel dump and almost collided with a large passenger plane over Mogadishu, the capital, according to a United Nations report.

Manned planes are crashing, too. An Air Force [U-28A surveillance plane](#) crashed five miles from Camp Lemonnier while returning from a secret mission on Feb. 18, killing the four-person crew. An Air Force investigation attributed the accident to "unrecognized spatial disorientation" on the part of the crew, which ignored sensor warnings that it was flying too close to the ground.

Baker, the two-star commander at Lemonnier, played down the crashes and near-misses. He said safety had improved since he arrived in Djibouti in May.

"We've dramatically reduced any incidents of concern, certainly since I've been here," he said.

Last month, the Defense Department awarded a \$7 million contract to retrain beleaguered air-traffic controllers at Ambouli International Airport and improve their English skills.

The Djiboutian controllers handle all civilian and U.S. military aircraft. But they are “undermanned” and “over tasked due to the recent rapid increase in U.S. military flights,” according to the contract. It also states that the controllers and the airport are not in compliance with international aviation standards.

Resolving those deficiencies may not be sufficient. Records show the U.S. military is also scrambling for an alternative place for its planes to land in an emergency.

Last month, it awarded a contract to install portable lighting at the only backup site available: a tiny, makeshift airstrip in the Djiboutian desert, several miles from Lemonnier.