

Missileers Decertified After Inspection

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The U.S. Air Force acknowledged last month that 17 officers responsible for operating U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) were decertified and relieved of their duties in April for poor performance during an inspection.

At a House Armed Services Committee hearing May 9, Gen. Robert Kehler, the head of U.S. Strategic Command, acknowledged the poor performance of the unit, but defended the Air Force's response to the inspection and reaffirmed his confidence in the unit.

Kehler's testimony came a day after the Associated Press reported on the disciplinary actions.

In a May 8 statement, the Air Force Global Strike Command said the action marked the largest decertification of missile launch officers in Air Force history.

The officers, from the 91st Missile Wing at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, were responsible for operating 150 Minuteman III ICBMs, constituting one-third of the U.S. ground-based nuclear force.

After the command's inspector general evaluated the missile wing in mid-March, the Air Force called the inspection a "success" in a March 18 press release. Overall, the unit performed well in most categories in which it was assessed, but received a grade of "marginal" on its core mission, the launch procedures associated with the Minuteman III missiles, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh said at a House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee hearing May 9.

During the hearing before the armed services panel, Kehler said it is "unusual" for a missile wing to be graded "marginal" in that area. He added that "marginal" is a passing grade, indicating that the job performance "meets the minimum standards for getting the job done, but it is not the level [wing leadership] would expect."

The AP story cited an e-mail from Lt. Col. Jay Folds, deputy commander of the 91st Operations Group, sent to the launch officers informing them of their poor performance. According to the AP, the e-mail "describes a culture of indifference, with at least one intentional violation of missile safety rules." The missile control officers were placed in a retraining program in April, the AP said.

At the hearing, Kehler said that the unit's less-than-satisfactory grade and Folds' response to the inspection are "a product of the increased scrutiny and the increased diligence that is going into these inspections, and the responses to them." He also said that, despite the unit's performance in the inspection, "I remain confident in that unit's ability to perform its mission."

The 17 officers are expected to return to duty in a few months after completing the retraining program, according to the Global Strike Command.

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