



Two F-16 pilots assigned to the 4th Fighter Squadron fly toward the Nevada Test and Training Range at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., on Jan. 25, day three of Red Flag, 12-2. Two new programs are underway to lengthen the F-16's service life.

MASTER SGT BENJAI\4IN BLOKER/AIR FORCE

EVERY, AIRMAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT*

F-16 upgrades

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The Air Force plans to stretch out the service life of one of its most-used fighters with a pair of upgrades over the next few years. The F-16 made its Air Force debut in 1979, and the two-seater has since proved a staple in a number, of conflicts, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Two new programs—detailed during the Defense Department budget rollout earlier this month—will be used to lengthen the F-16's time in the Air Force: a Service Life Extension Program, or SLEP, and the Combat Avionics Programmed Extension Suite, or CAPES.

Here's what you need to know about the two programs:

- 1. The current, feet.** The Air Force now has about 1,000 F-16s in its fleet. About 640 are from blocks 40 and 50- the variants from which the Air Force will pull Vipers to update. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz told reporters in early February that the service would upgrade hundreds of hits F-16s from the active-duty, Guard and Reserve components. 'We've committed to do service-life extension on about 350 of our multirole F-16s, some structures in the early-block airplanes, and then more extensive structure and avionics improvements on the more modern airplanes," he said.

The total upgrade cost is estimated at \$2.8 billion, said Air Force spokeswoman Jennifer Cassidy.

2. SLEP. SLEP upgrades will include "a full scale durability test and structural modifications to add 8-10 years of service life to each airframe," according to the Air Force budget overview, released Feb. 13.

The Air Force will award a contract for 30 SLEP kits in March 2016, and another for 48 more in January 2017, Cassidy said. Both the SLEP and the CAPES upgrades will start at the end of 2017 and continue into the 2020s.

3. CAPES. The CAPES upgrades will include " an [Active Electronically Scanned Array] radar, a new cockpit display data link enhancements and an improved defensive suite," according to the budget overview.

4. Cuts to fighter aircraft. As part of their budget announcement this month, Air Force leaders said the service plans to cut 21 older F-16s across the Air Force over the next five years. About 100A-10s will be cut in the same time frame, as well as 133 mobility aircraft and 30 intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems.

5. When's the next-gen fighter coming?

No discussion about the F-16 would be complete without mentioning the F-35, the Defense Department's beleaguered next-generation fighter program.

The Air Force has already taken a dozen F-35s into its fleet for testing and eventual training, but the service plans to slow procurement of the joint strike fighter. The service's top leaders told reporters Feb. 3 that it still plans to hold steady the number of F-35s it wants to have in its fleet -160 by 2017.