

Is the US Drone Fleet at ‘Breaking Point’?

By [Drone Wars UK](#)

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Media attention was aroused by the collision of a drone with a tree on the South Lawn of the White House on Monday, reportedly prompting the Secret Service to go into ‘lockdown’.

But dozens of social media sites have been focussing on the 2012-2013 story of drone pilot Brandon Bryant, rather than the more recent news about a leaked internal US defence force memo, which appeared in Australia’s number one news site, www.news.com.au, earlier this month.

[It alleges](#) that a leaked memo reveals that experienced drone operators are leaving the Air Force ‘in droves’ and fewer new recruits are entering the ranks.

US Air Combat Command (ACC) says it is facing a ‘perfect storm’ of budget cutbacks, staff turnover and heightened demand.

Air force Chief of Staff General Mark Welsh is reported to state in the memo that he is “extremely concerned” at the future of the “combat viability” of the drone program. His fleet is expected to keep 65 drone combat air patrols constantly active. The general now wants this figure cut to 62.

Each robotic combat aircraft requires a team of 10 trained pilots and support staff to maintain its operations around the clock. Current staffing levels are failing to meet the designated minimum emergency staffing level of 8.5 personnel per drone.

Drone operators are said to have been treated like machines, their leave cancelled and compulsory career-critical, training sessions postponed in an effort to maintain staffing levels. Staffing levels are now so low that operators in training at military drone schools are being drafted long before they complete their programs.

In sum it says: “The United States’ fleet of robots — and their human handlers — are at ‘breaking point’ after 15 years of non-stop combat”.

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