



For Your Information

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Remarks by Lt Gen Obering at the Airborne Laser Rollout Celebration

Wichita, Kansas - 27 October 2006

Lt Gen Obering: Congressman Tiehart, Lt. Gov. Moore, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Albaugh, Mr. Renard, Mr. Graham, and those who really count the most, who get the job done, all of you.

I'm honored to be here today to express my thanks to all the members of the Airborne Laser Team – government and contractor, military and civilian, workers and the family members who support them – for the extraordinary job all of you have done to reach this important milestone in the Ballistic Missile Defense program.

You have overcome some formidable challenges to get us to where we are today. But before I talk about that, I think it's appropriate to step back to ask some fundamental questions. Why have you been working so hard? Why have many of you missed birthday celebrations, weekends, or cut short vacations? Why is this capability needed so badly?

Just over five years ago, I witnessed first hand the destruction at the Pentagon on September 11. I also lost a personal friend and neighbor on one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center. The real lesson learned from the tragedy that day, was not how we were attacked. It was the fact that a group of dedicated fanatics demonstrated the will to kill thousands of innocent men, women, and children – not out of oppression generated desperation, but out of pure, hate-filled arrogance.

Just look also at the lessons learned from the past several months. This summer, North Korea attempted to launch a long range missile which failed shortly after launch. But they very successfully launched six other shorter range missiles over a two day period. Several days ago, they apparently detonated a nuclear device underground as part of a declared test program. And if you listen to their statements, they promise to rain "nuclear fire down upon American cities."

Look also at what happened to Israel this summer where more than 4000 rockets rained down on their northern cities and towns. These were provided by rogue nations and launched by terrorists. Once launched, the rockets could not be stopped by the Israelis.

The means by which the terrorists and rogue nations seek to do us harm will continually change – seeking out our vulnerabilities. But we do know that ballistic missiles are increasingly the weapon of choice and they continue to proliferate around the world. Until two years ago, we were defenseless against ballistic missile attack. But that is no longer the case.

Today we have deployed the initial block of an integrated and layered Ballistic Missile Defense System with more than a dozen long range interceptors and powerful radars keeping watch in Alaska and California. We continue to deliver sea and land-based interceptors to defend against shorter range missile attacks. And we will continue to expand and improve this defensive capability over time.

We've started to close off our vulnerability to the ballistic missile threat, but we have a long way to go. We need to be able to engage missiles in the boost phase of their flight, where the defense can be the most efficient and effective. Stop and think about it, if you can knock down a missile in its boost phase, you are protecting the world from that single missile. That's where you come in.

The revolutionary technology you are developing with the Airborne Laser has the potential to change the very nature of warfare. You are developing a system that the adversary cannot outrun.

You are also pioneering a field of endeavor upon which untold other technologies and advances can build, in hardware and software, in tactics and strategies, in offense and defense, all ultimately contributing to improved security for this nation.

So the “why” is indeed compelling, and all of you have responded magnificently to the nation’s need.

Now as an old fighter pilot, I have to marvel at how you can put a nearly six-ton turret on the front of a jet, incorporate an incredibly complex system of lasers, optics and avionics, make more modifications to the hull of a 747 than have ever been made before, and still have it fly. Those of you who know me, know that I am honest to a fault, so I have to say that it is the ugliest aircraft I have ever seen. But it’s not supposed to be pretty – it’s supposed to be mean.

In all seriousness, not only have you performed the technical miracles, you’ve also had to invent your own management approaches from scratch, new procedures, new tests, new targets.

The Big Crow aircraft, for example, with its one-of-a-kind plume emulator, is an example of the imagination and dedication at work here.

You’ve passed some critical knowledge points, including demonstrating last year that the high-energy laser can produce enough power for enough time to make it operationally lethal; and succeeding in the early flights of the heavily-modified aircraft.

I don’t have to tell you how difficult your challenges have been, but the way you have overcome them has been equally impressive.

You’ve forged a team of government and contractors that have worked together to push the boundaries of science and engineering in new directions and dimensions.

You have discovered new engineering techniques to take advantage of older scientific knowledge, you have discovered new manufacturing techniques to solve structural problems, and you are opening the gate to new operational techniques to solve the age-old challenge of defeating an adversary.

You are actually building on a concept nearly 2200 years old, when Archimedes reflected the sun’s rays off of a series of mirrors to set the Roman fleet on fire off Syracuse. But you have taken the concept well beyond Archimedes.

In short, you are laying the groundwork for the twin goals of a more robust missile defense now, and a new field of directed energy systems for the future. Your professionalism and your accomplishments stand clearly before us today.

Today, of course, we’re marking the rollout of the aircraft as we prepare to get it back in the air to test the low power system. It’s time to begin active tracking flight tests against the Big Crow aircraft. We’ve demonstrated capability on the ground. But you know that, despite all we’ve accomplished since the aircraft arrived here about 15 months ago, we still have our work cut out for us. While the low power system may not be as sexy as the high power engagement laser, it’s the heart of the system. It’s what turns an interesting engineering project into a lethal weapon system. That’s why it’s the program’s next Knowledge Point. Without it, the system can’t focus all that energy on a boosting missile.

Finally, I want to thank you for your dedication and perseverance often in the face of tremendous skepticism. Many critics said you would never achieve first light – you did. Many critics said you would never achieve first flight – you did. Many critics say you will never shoot down a boosting target – I believe you will. As I have said many times before, never bet against the technical ability, hard work and innovation of the American people.

Early on, those same critics ridiculed the missile defense system as “Star Wars”. I embrace the comparison because I believe we are building forces of good to defeat the force of evil. And in that vein, today we are taking a major step to give the American people their first “Light Saber”.

So the sacrifice and dedication to our nation is truly appreciated. Your families and friends should be extremely proud of what you do! On behalf of your colleagues and teammates in the Missile Defense Agency and the Department of Defense, I thank you. Now let's go fly!

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