

Turmoil shakes California National Guard with firing, suspension of top generals

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Turmoil has gripped the leadership ranks of the California National Guard, with the firing of the general who commanded its air branch, the suspension of a second key general and new limits placed by Gov. Gavin Newsom on the organization's use of fighter jets for civilian missions. Newsom's office and the head of the Guard, Maj. Gen. David S. Baldwin, refused to provide details on the reasons behind the recent leadership changes other than a statement from the Guard saying that the organization "is committed to facilitating a positive working environment for all of its members, regardless of gender and ethnicity."

The air branch's former commander, who was forced out two weeks ago, told The Times he did nothing wrong and said Baldwin had "lost touch with reality."

The abrupt actions against the two generals mark the second major shake-up in California's Military Department in as many years. And they were announced on the heels of a Times report that Guard members were concerned that their leaders had readied an F-15C fighter jet last year for a possible mission in which the aircraft would fly low over civilian protesters to frighten and disperse them.

Baldwin denied that the jet was placed on an alert status for that purpose, and a Newsom spokeswoman said the governor would never authorize such a mission. Erin Mellon said in a statement to The Times that Newsom wanted to be "crystal clear" about restrictions on the use of military aircraft for domestic missions.

"The governor has directed his Office of Emergency Services, in collaboration with the California National Guard, to review and assert definitive and unmistakable parameters for authorizing and using military aircraft under the State Emergency Management System, while reverting F-15 aircraft to a reduced state of readiness for civil support missions," the statement said. Mellon provided Guard memos saying fighter jets have been used a few times in the past to quickly survey earthquake damage. She did not answer several questions regarding the use of the F-15C last year, including whether it was placed on an alert status for earthquakes or other natural disasters.

In an email statement to The Times, the Guard said Baldwin accepted Maj. Gen. Gregory Jones' resignation as commander of the California Air National Guard on April 16. Jones said he never offered to step down but was forced out.

Baldwin said in a statement that he "lost faith, trust, and confidence in [Jones'] ability to foster an inclusive and healthy command climate."

Asked whether the F-15C controversy had anything to do with Jones' removal, Baldwin wrote: "I do not fire people for fictional events. The F-15C narrative is just that, a fictional event."

Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Magram, director of air staff, was suspended and reassigned, and Chief Master Sgt. Steve Pyszka was relieved as command chief under Jones, the Guard said.

Magram and Pyszka declined to comment.

In an interview, Jones said the Guard's statement suggesting that he treated women or people of color unfairly is "absolutely false" and added that it was Baldwin who created an unhealthy environment at Guard headquarters.

"He's been there too long," Jones said. Then-Gov. Jerry Brown appointed Baldwin to the post in 2011. "He's lost touch with reality."

Jones said he did not know why the F-15C, an air-to-air combat aircraft, was placed on an alert status for a domestic mission last year. The jets are based at the Guard's 144th Fighter Wing in Fresno. Their principal mission is to respond immediately to attacks by enemy aircraft on orders from the Pentagon as part of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD. They are also used to train pilots for that mission.

Jones said it would make no sense to place an F-15C on an alert status to respond to earthquakes. "You don't know when they're going to happen," Jones said. "It's a poor use of resources to have an airplane just sitting there.... It's just not the mission that they're designed to do either," which is to shoot down other airplanes.

He said he has butted heads with Baldwin in the past over what he thought was an improper use of military aircraft.

He said Baldwin pressured him to deploy an F-15C jet to survey damage from the 2019 Ridgecrest earthquake. When he resisted, Jones said, Baldwin told him, "These are my airplanes."

To accommodate Baldwin, Jones said, the Guard classified the Ridgecrest mission as a federal training exercise to disguise its true purpose.

During last year's mass protests after the police killing of George Floyd, Jones said, Baldwin pushed to send hundreds of Air Guard members to cities across the state with inadequate training.

"I told him I think we could put 500. He said, 'No, I want 800.' We were tasked with training 800 airmen the next day," he said, adding that the training included firearm and riot control components. "Luckily nobody got hurt, we didn't have any accidental discharges. It could've gotten really ugly."

The Guard and Baldwin did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Jones' assertions.

Jones' predecessor as commander of the Air Guard, Maj. Gen. Clay Garrison, was removed from the position in 2019 amid complaints of reprisals against whistleblowers and allegations of a cover-up of misconduct that reached into the highest ranks of the organization. The complaints, which were disclosed by The Times, focused on the leadership of the Fresno base and included an alleged cover-up of an incident in which someone urinated in a female Guard member's boots. The commander of the base was also removed.

In announcing Jones' appointment to succeed Garrison, a spokesman for Baldwin said: "The Guard is committed to providing a transparent, respectful and positive command climate.... I am confident that Brig. Gen. Jones will be able to lead the organization effectively and with the utmost integrity."

Guard sources told The Times that last year's order to put the F-15C on an alert status didn't spell out the mission but that, given the aircraft's limitations, they understood it to mean the plane could be deployed to terrify and disperse protesters by flying low over them at window-rattling speeds, with its afterburners streaming columns of flames. Fighter jets have been used occasionally in that manner in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, they said.

The sources said the directives from Guard headquarters made their way down orally or in text messages, rather than in formal written orders, which was unusual and heightened their concerns that the jet would be used inappropriately.

Mellon, the governor's spokeswoman, said she couldn't speak to how Guard members interpreted directives beyond "what the governor's office's understanding is, which is — the aircraft would never be authorized for such a mission."

She provided The Times with a memo in which Col. Jeremiah Cruz, who commanded the 144th Wing until January, said, "At no time during my tenure as wing commander, vice wing

commander, and operations group commander was I ever tasked to utilize an F-15C at the 144FW to respond to a civil unrest event nor has the idea ever been discussed with me as an option.”

The memo was dated April 21, well after The Times began asking the Guard to respond to concerns among its members that the jet had been readied for a possible response to civil unrest. An earlier email reviewed by The Times shows that Cruz had referenced concerns over the jet’s use to several officers three days before the Nov. 3 election. “There is no expectation that the F-15C will be used in any way in support of civil unrest,” he wrote, instructing the recipients to keep him apprised of “any requests or upcoming requests” from Guard headquarters in Sacramento. The Times reviewed other internal Guard documents showing that the jet was placed on an alert status for a possible election-week mission and that officers discussed concerns in March 2020 as well as that summer about using the F-15C for domestic purposes, including to intimidate civilians.

The Guard has faced scrutiny before for how it has deployed military aircraft. In October, Newsom’s office denounced the Guard’s decision to send a military spy plane to suburban El Dorado Hills, where Baldwin lived, to help civilian authorities monitor demonstrations over the Floyd killing. Baldwin said the fact that he resided in El Dorado Hills, where the protests were small and peaceful, had nothing to do with the deployment of the RC-26B reconnaissance plane.