

JOINT TASK FORCE QUARTZ THROUGH AN AIRPOWER LENS

DAGVIN R. M. ANDERSON

JASON T. HINDS

Joint Task Force Quartz gave Airmen an opportunity to develop, establish, lead, execute, and debrief a Joint task force during combat operations. The operational context required the development of a synchronized and integrated scheme of maneuver bringing together information operations, combat aircraft, combat support, and logistics for each night's air tasking order. As the Air Force develops new operational concepts, the command relationships must be built upon centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution all under the art of mission command.

On Friday the thirteenth, just before Thanksgiving in 2020, United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) was notified to expect a decision to remove all US forces from Somalia. By the following Tuesday, we had direction from the president to reposition all US forces from Somalia no later than January 15, 2021. We received clarification over the next several days that we were to continue our tasked missions of training the Somalia defense forces, disrupting al Shabaab's external operations capability, and providing indications and warnings of terrorist activity and potential attacks.

To many this appeared to be simply a logistical exercise to reposition approximately 800 special operators and associated security and support forces. It was complicated, however, by the remote and austere locations from which our forces operated as well as by an enemy intent on killing American service members so they could declare victory as we repositioned. Adding a further challenge, all logistical operations would be conducted solely by air, at night, with little to no air-domain awareness.

Moreover, this became a large operation as senior defense leadership made it clear we would provide adequate support to protect our forces as more than 25 years later, the ghosts of Blackhawk Down still loomed over Somalia. To meet this compressed timeline while continuing our tasked mission, we determined the most feasible option was to reposition to bases in neighboring Djibouti and Kenya. To lead this effort, USAFRICOM established a command team that would be forward postured on the African continent with reach back to the command headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany.

Establishing a Joint Task Force—an Airmen’s Perspective

Joint Task Force (JTF) Quartz was established under the command of an Air Force two-star commander from Special Operations Command, Africa to oversee the high-intensity, limited-duration repositioning of forces from Somalia. Since few forces are assigned to USAFRICOM and limited support exists in theater, a significant increase in forces was required to provide the overwatch and operational firepower necessary to deter al Shabaab attacks while US military elements were vulnerable.

These forces included over 230 Joint Force aircraft including the Fifteenth Amphibious Ready Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit, support from the USS NIMITZ Carrier Strike Group, theater C-130 airlift substantially augmented from bases in the United States, fighter and tanker support from United States Central Command-based aircraft, and special operations aircraft providing close air support, vertical lift, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and helicopter air refueling.

These air assets, from multiple services across three combatant commands, converged in theater in a short amount of time and exceeded the theater’s command and control capacity. In response, an air component was called upon to oversee complex air operations in an uncontrolled environment. The integration of an air component element triggered a conversation with USAFRICOM on the establishment of a Joint task force that would include a special operations component already established under Joint Special Operations Task Force Somalia, and the addition of a maritime component to command and control the US Marine Corps and US Navy afloat forces.

The air component was required to provide oversight to the air movement of all military personnel and equipment from Somalia as well as the deployment of additional capabilities such as the contingency response group (CRG) and security forces. US Forces were operating in austere locations; as a result, they were only accessible by tactical airlift, the largest being C-130s. This limitation drove the timeline and support requirements for the contingency response group to provide expeditionary cargo handling, close air support to provide both rotary and fixed-wing security for the loading operations, and overwatch to provide indications and warnings as well as targeting of al Shabaab fighters planning to attack US positions.

In light of this initial focus, the decision was made to support the JTF with a Joint air component coordination element (JACCE), led by an Air Force brigadier general, which would provide air expertise to the JTF while maintaining a direct link back to the theater Joint Force air component commander (JFAAC) and air operations center.

JACCE or AETF?

The JACCE was sufficient for the coordination of the airspace, control of the aircraft, and synchronization of operations. But the JACCE director also took the lead for a Joint Forces special operations command commander-developed Joint asset allocation meeting (JAAM) where all assets—air, maritime, SOF, and information operations—were integrated daily. With this scope of responsibility, the JACCE director acted as a de facto air expeditionary task force (AETF) commander with the delegated authority

from the JTF commander to direct the JAAM process and integrate all assets across multiple domains. The transition of the Joint asset allocation meeting process to the JACCE director allowed the commander of the Joint Force special operations command, as the supported commander, to focus on the repositioning of security forces.

With this responsibility to synchronize the delivery of airpower in concert with the ground scheme of maneuver and targeted kinetic strikes using TF-111 assets, the establishment of an AETF subordinate to the JTF would have been a better construct given the array of air assets from across the Joint Force requiring integration. In the end, an air expeditionary task force has inherent command authorities, while the JACCE is intended to be a coordinating element on behalf of the JFACC.

The JACCE director also had the ability to reach back to the theater JFACC for unique approvals as some authorities were withheld at the higher echelon. For the execution of Operation Octave Quartz, this proved sufficient. But had al Shabaab been able to mount an effective offensive effort that would have required a more aggressive kinetic response, this additional layer of command would have created delays and proven insufficient.

In addition to the complex air picture that rapidly developed in theater, the entire airspace over Somalia was uncontrolled and all our operations were conducted under the cover of darkness. The compressed timeline along with the rapidly growing force required the air component to quickly develop an airspace deconfliction plan robust enough to handle as many as 90 sorties per night, simple enough to allow aircrews to quickly integrate into operations, flexible enough to enable decentralized execution, and safe enough to ensure proper deconfliction.

This task was complicated by the fact that this diverse spectrum of airpower was then concentrated in a very confined area over the locations where US Forces were operating without any persistent tactical datalink capability or air domain awareness systems. The establishment and management of the procedural control measures became the initial task of the JACCE including ensuring all air units fully understood the rules of engagement and authorities for a theater that few had ever flown in.

The JACCE team did a fantastic job establishing these procedures and, more importantly, proactively disseminating information and conducting training sessions as new units arrived. As noted by the commander of the air group from the USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group, “This is what right looks like—this was excellent experience and training for my aircrews who aren’t used to flying in this type of uncontrolled airspace.”¹

When considering future operations in a contested environment where communications and data transfer are disrupted, establishing the right level of command and control forward with delegated authority will be critical to maintain an agile and capable response. In hindsight, the JTF commander would have advocated for the establishment of an AETF with delegated authorities and the ability to request additional authorities as the operation evolved. Having an AETF with a designated commander ensures the air component has an equal voice in decision making and

1. Email to authors from Navy Captain Todd F. Cimicata, Commander, CVW-17, January 19, 2021.

brings the full spectrum of capabilities to bear for the Joint task force commander. In the end, the JACCE construct worked for JTF Quartz but an AETF would have better supported mission command.

Success of the JAAM

The next priority became integrating these forces into the air tasking order as they converged on the theater. This effort entailed creating, distributing, and reviewing the special instructions (SPINS), mission rehearsals, nightly 9-line check-ins with the Joint terminal attack controllers, synchronized live fire events to allow integration as well as deterrence, and contingency planning. This is where the Joint asset allocation meeting process benefited from the newly formed team responsible for integrating actions across multiple domains.

Guided by the JTF commander's intent, the JAAM developed operational approaches that placed doubt in the adversary's mind regarding its ability to strike US Forces. If al Shabaab wasn't deterred, the operational approach ensured we would be prepared to identify al Shabaab forces before they could mount an attack or disrupt an emerging attack with kinetic fires.

Additionally, the JAAM brought information operations to the front of mission planning. For specific missions, we began our mission planning efforts with an objective of what the JTF commander wanted al Shabaab to believe would be true. The JAAM allowed the air, maritime, and special operations components to develop, propose, discuss, and integrate activities that would support the desired operational message targeted at al Shabaab. The results were often innovative solutions to information operations which worked extremely well and measurably reduced the risk to US forces.

The JTF Quartz team rapidly established the command structure, developed processes, and gained alignment from the assigned forces. Over the course of just 37 days, the team repositioned over 1600 US personnel, 4.8 million pounds of equipment equivalent to 1,011 pallet positions, 193 C-130 missions, 247 periods of close air support coverage, and 1,160 sorties from the other supporting aircraft. The team completed the mission with a few days to spare, no aircraft incidents, and no successful al Shabaab attacks.

The keys to success included clear and well-defined direction, commitment by all to the ordered timeline, and a rapid alignment of the forces supporting the Joint task force. One can see the elements of centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution in the manner the JTF commander and JFACC organized and delegated decision making. Their approach was critical to the success of JTF Quartz mission command.

Mission Command, A JFACC's Perspective

General Jeff Harrigian, Commander, USAFE-AFAFRICA

As the JFACC for JTF-Quartz, we recognized the need to send the right team to support the Joint Force on behalf of the air component and we needed to move out. Our team was going to have a significant level of responsibility and authority, meaning they had to know the theater, know the mission, and know how I think. Mission command is more than delegation of responsibilities to the appropriate level, it is understanding the JFACC's intent from the four-star level all the way down to the lowest tactical element in the command relationship. It is over communicating between the AETF commander or JACCE director and the JFACC as the situation adjusts. It is the AETF commander or JACCE director routinely speaking with unit commanders especially as they rotate into the theater so they understand their task, purpose, special instructions, rules of engagement, and the JFACC's intent. Gone are the days when an aircraft commander had to ask for permission to take action. Our future way of warfare requires more flexibility in tactical operations, and more responsibility will be expected of our youngest leaders. It is not lost on me that tactical-level decisions could very well have strategic implications in a large-scale conflict. That is not something we should shy away from; we need to acknowledge it and use it to educate our Airmen. Airpower is inherently flexible and command relationships must ensure that agility will be there during the high-end fight. Mission command is not only how we lead our Airmen, it is how we let our Airmen lead.

Lessons from Somalia

The airspace over Somalia and other locations in Africa exemplified certain characteristics of a contested environment and their impact on air domain awareness. The Joint Force expects air domain awareness and tactical command and control from the air component. A lack of air domain awareness typically arises from adversary denial activities or a lack of capability. Joint Task Force Quartz lacked the capability to provide the typical air domain awareness and tactical command and control, which placed those executing the mission in degraded operations from the beginning of mission planning.

The Joint Force is very familiar and comfortable with tactical control while procedural control is viewed more as a contingency and is, therefore, rarely discussed in mission planning. The contested nature of today's operating environments provides ample reasons for the Joint Force to explore procedural control in a denied environment and include procedural control in operational planning. Once procedures are in place, a thorough understanding of mission command, commander's intent, and delegated authorities are needed from the Joint Force commander's level down to the unit level.

Integrating logistics into the greater scheme of maneuver during a conflict phase proved difficult due to the Joint Force processes mobility planners must follow. The processes are very good when efficiency is needed to optimize the use of logistics forces in peacetime, permissive environments, and often standalone operations. Set-

ting the theater in a road to war, such as a time-phased force deployment data flow, is and should be efficiency based, which allows mobility planners to develop a plan that others will support if needed.

Joint Task Force Quartz was operating on a fixed end date with a thinking adversary, which required an effectiveness-based logistics model. Due to the constraints of operating solely under the cover of darkness with the protective cover of manned, fixed-wing close air support and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, the C-130s were required to operate during specific times at each contingency support location. The traditional efficiency-based logistics process did not provide the flexibility needed by the logistics planners to properly integrate mobility into the greater scheme of maneuver.

This challenge isn't unique to JTF Quartz as we've seen similar lessons learned across the US Air Force during Operation Allies Refuge and major command Agile Combat Employment operations. During contested operations, logistics planning systems need to communicate seamlessly with air tasking orders production to synchronize and integrate logistics forces with combat operations. To achieve the needed level of integration, logistics needs to be part of the planning from the start and not bolted onto a plan already developed. To truly enable mission command, logistics operations planning in support of contested environments needs to be delegated down and not centralized.

Conclusion

Joint Task Force Quartz provided the unique opportunity for Airmen to develop, establish, lead, execute, and debrief a Joint task force during combat operations. Airmen need to understand how the air component can best support a JTF and should be prepared to discuss the benefits and constraints of an AETF or JACCE. The operational context provided the Airmen of JTF Quartz the task of developing a synchronized and integrated scheme of maneuver bringing together information operations, combat aircraft, combat support, and logistics for each night's air tasking order.

The creativity of the Airmen supporting the greater JTF enabled the mission to be completed on time, safely, and effectively. As the Air Force continues to develop new operational concepts, the command relationships must be built upon centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution all under the art of mission command. Æ

Major General Dagvin R. M. Anderson, USAF

Major General Anderson currently serves as the vice director of operations for the Joint Staff.

Brigadier General Jason T. Hinds, USAF

Brigadier General Hinds is the director of plans, programming and analysis for United States Air Forces in Europe and United States Air Forces Africa.

Disclaimer and Copyright

The views and opinions in *Æther* are those of the authors and are not officially sanctioned by any agency or department of the US government. This document and trademarks(s) contained herein are protected by law and provided for noncommercial use only. Any reproduction is subject to the Copyright Act of 1976 and applicable treaties of the United States. The authors retain all rights granted under 17 U.S.C. §106. Any reproduction requires author permission and a standard source credit line. Contact the *Æther* editor for assistance: aether-journal@au.af.edu.