Macro-Management in the Air Component

Learning to Love the Mission Type Order

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Air components conventionally view mission type orders (MTO)—the writing of orders focusing on what the mission is rather than how to execute it—as a contingency-only tool used when communications are degraded. Yet because of the sheer scale and speed of major war, MTO is needed even when communications are robust. Air components should therefore use them fluidly alongside air tasking orders (ATO). Their use within the air tasking cycle requires procedural, experiential, and cultural approaches. A review of doctrine, existing research, and Operational Command Training Program engagement with air components worldwide reveals solutions to the challenges of distributed control in multiple theaters, offering tailored prescriptions for creating procedures, gaining experience, and building the culture necessary for mission command.

The Air Force considers its leadership approach of *mission command* as the main counter to adversary anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities designed to erode US and allied command-and-control (C2) architecture. The Air Force's newly published doctrine on mission command defines it as a "philosophy of leadership that empowers Airmen to operate in uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing environments through trust, shared awareness, and understanding of the commander's intent" and decentralized execution.[1]

Agile combat employment, lead wing/expeditionary air base, joint all-domain C2, and sensor-to-shooter kill webs are all reflections of mission command as a decentralizing philosophy designed to thwart advantages in adversary hardware with the software of the US Airman, Sailor, Marine, and Soldier, who demonstrate a historic bias for action, creativity, and initiative. Future conflict will occur in a contested, degraded, and operationally limited (CDO) environment, where the superb C2 advantages of the United States will be

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1. Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 1-1, *Mission Command* (Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, 14 August 2023), https://www.doctrine.af.mil/.

diminished, exquisite long-range and high-speed A2/AD capability will hold US basing and logistics networks at risk, and the air component's operational C2 construct will need to evolve to win.

The Air Force laid the intellectual framework for evolving its C2 construct by examining mission command as a cultural concept and *distributed control*—the delegation of authorities to diverse locations that enables them to coordinate, execute, and assess air operations—as a C2 mechanism. Mission command is a cultural philosophy that breeds a preference for action and innovative problem solving.[2] The term refers not only to the approach's execution but also to the "philosophical, organizational, and cultural elements that must be in place" to effect decentralized operations.[3]

This decentralized execution and innovative problem solving is based on the mission type order (MTO)—a technique for writing orders that tells a unit what mission to perform without specifying how it is to be accomplished. *Commander's intent* is the guiding principle for those working under such orders and free to determine how a mission will be achieved. MTOs and distributed control are concepts that challenge the traditional C2 construct of the centralized air operations center (AOC) and prescriptive air tasking order (ATO) that tells a unit both what to do and how to do it.

Analyses examining how to implement greater decentralization in Air Force C2 often criticize AOC and ATO. One Marine Corps officer assessed the ATO's prescriptive and detailed nature as antithetical to mission command, calling for its revamp with greater emphasis on commander's intent.[4] One senior leader noted that a side effect of the successful ATO is the gradual removal of "every opportunity for combat decision making," leading to a need to "put all echelons of command back in C2."[5] Another commentary characterizes the AOC as "centralized, rigid, and vulnerable" with an ATO that does not provide sufficient guidance when the situation changes.[6] These authors and several others cite the ATO's emphasis on what to do and how to do it will hamstring subordinates in a CDO environment and call for greater reliance on MTOs that feature commander's intent and decentralized decision-making.[7]

The most notable dissent to this argument characterizes a case study of MTO use in Afghanistan as unscalable and impractical. While embracing mission command as a culture,

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2. Brian Blaine, "USAF Mission Command: Cultural, Organizational and Operational Change to Meet Future Demands," *Wild Blue Yonder*, 10 June 2024, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

3. AFDP 1-1, 1.

4. Blaine, "USAF Mission Command."

5. Alex Grynkewich and Antonio J. Goldstrum, "The AETF Today: Enabling Mission Command of Airpower," *Air & Space Power Journal* 34, no. 20 (Summer 2020): 12, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

6. George Kamena, "Before Mission Command," *Wild Blue Yonder*, 20 April 2023, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

7. Matthew Quintero, "Master and Commander in Joint Air Operations: Winning the Air War Through Mission Command," *Joint Force Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (2019); and Trent R. Carpenter, "Command and Control of Joint Operations Through Mission Command," *Air & Space Power Journal* 30, no. 2 (2017), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

it rejects MTO as a C2 mechanism, noting its usefulness "is inversely correlated to the subordinate headquarters' requirement for external support and coordination."[8] MTOs falter on airpower's need for force packaging—the combination of assets such as strike, refueling, and electromagnetic warfare—to achieve range, protection, and precision. The case study concluded that MTOs should not be part of the air tasking cycle because centralized C2 is necessary to schedule myriad units to appear at the same place and time to achieve effects.[9]

The 505th Command and Control Wing Operational Command Training Program (OCTP) notes many Airmen and air components share this perspective and are loathe to abandon the ATO and centralized C2 construct that has served them so well. OCTP comprises operational C2 subject matter experts who mentor and advise every air component around the globe via major exercises and real-world contingencies.[10] During dozens of events from 2023 to 2025, OCTP observed that discussion of mission command and MTOs, if it ever occurred, was in the context of what to do in the event of a temporary communications outage. Multi-day ATOs, guidance packages, and contingency-only MTOs appear in exercises as band-aids to communications outages. Continuity-of-operations plans are discussed as ways to keep the centralized C2 node moving and surviving.

All of this rests on the premise that resilient communications will eventually allow normal operations to resume—that the ATO will always get through and centralized airpower will continue. It also assumes that communications outages are the only reason to entertain the thought of mission command. With this mindset, the MTO and distributed control are rare at the air component, even during exercises, and infrequently practiced.

Yet air components will need mission command, MTOs, and distributed control, even if communications are robust. The sheer scale and speed of the operational environment in a peer conflict will require decentralized decision-making. Even if the AOC is fully manned and completely protected with flawless communications, it cannot contend with the entirety of the complexity such a war will present. The air component will need to macro-manage and establish a broader view of the air war.

This article calls for the greater use of commander's intent and MTOs that emphasize what to do over how to do it and seeks to give practical advice on how to make that a reality within the C2 structure. Airpower has unique challenges for MTO usage, and fluidity in ATO versus MTO will help bridge the false dichotomy between them. Air components must set conditions by working out the delegation of authorities in advance and test those authorities by seeking peacetime distributed control experience using MTOs.

Air components should attack mission command through three lenses: procedural, experiential, and cultural. Establishing delegated authorities and pre-arranged approvals, deliberately

8. Frederick Coleman, "The Limited Utility of Mission Type Orders for ACE … and a Better Way to Execute Mission Command," *The Mitchell Forum* 49, January 2023, 4, https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/.

9. Coleman, "Limited Utility."

10. Deb Henley and William Murphey, "Air Force Provides C2 Advisors to Operational-Level Commanders," US Air Force [website], 29 April 2021, https://www.af.mil/.

assigning tasks to specific distributed C2 nodes, and identifying when to use the ATO and the MTO are important procedures. This will allow air components to understand how mission command works at the operational level. But understanding alone is not enough. It must also be experienced to be made real.[11] Finding ways to use mission command in peacetime operations and exercises will be crucial in turning procedures into muscle memory.

Perhaps the most egregious weakness of a contingency-MTO is relying on subordinates to act in a mission command manner for the first time during war. Experience with using MTOs, leading with a distributed mindset, and perhaps most importantly, failing and learning from the experience when the stakes are low are essential to set conditions for success when the stakes are high. Culture underlies both procedure and experience and is more important than either. Building a mission command culture means rewarding initiative-based failure, championing learning through mistakes, and establishing trust.

The Legacy of Mission Command in the Air Force

The Operation Command Training Program seeks to challenge the general sense among Airmen that mission command is ill-suited to the Air Force and unlikely to take root, a doubt based in an Air Force culture that emphasizes safety over risk-taking. It also stems from an ATO process that has proven successful for over a generation but is highly prescriptive with how to execute missions.

Mission command has shaped the Air Force since its early days. During World War II, General George C. Kenney and the Fifth Air Force set the template by adopting mission command to manage the Southwest Pacific's complexity and widely dispersed geography.[12] Kenney established composite units known as air task forces (ATF), which had the assets and authority to fulfill broad mission sets. He issued brief MTOs that emphasized commander's intent, identified the main effort, and described the why of a mission over the how, relying on ATF or wing or group commanders to work out the details. He empowered these commanders to coordinate actions laterally and self-synchronize. Geographic separation and clearly established supported/supporting relationships helped deconflict decentralized operations.

The construct was fluid, with composite units coming together or disbanding as the operational environment dictated.[13] The Fifth Air Force relied on centralized command, but that command was focused on *macro-management*: putting forces together, assigning them broad missions, and keeping an eye on the campaign's progress.

During the Vietnam War, a unit called Commando Sabre flew what were known as *Misty* missions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to identify targets, serve as forward air

11. Kamena, "Before Mission Command."

12. AFDP 1-1, 2.

13. Michael E. Fischer, *Mission-Type Orders in Joint Air Operations: The Empowerment of Air Leadership* (Air University Press, 1995), 80.

controllers, and conduct assessment.[14] Commando Sabre was given MTOs to troll over this enemy terrain in North Vietnam and Laos, freely focusing on areas as the operational environment dictated. It looked for choice targets such as anti-aircraft sites and concentrated supplies and submitted them to airborne C2, which would vector in fighters loaded with bombs.[15] The Mistys would act as forward air controllers and mission commanders of downed aircrew rescue attempts. They operated under MTOs in their own deconflicted space with the freedom to adjust to the changing operational environment and also served as an element of distributed control, helping guide strike and rescue sorties.

The 7440th Composite Wing, a Türkiye-based unit assigned to a separate Northern Iraq geographic space, used MTOs to good effect during Desert Storm. It had a robust planning and intel staff and organic capabilities that enabled force packaging—that is, strike, electromagnetic warfare, and airlift, among others—all under a single wing commander. While other units were directed and force-packaged by the daily ATO, the 7440th was given air component commander's intent and three broad tasks to execute: attack air bases in the north, tie down Iraqi forces on the Turkish border, and strike weapons-of-mass-destruction facilities.[16] The air component commander could, and did, pull the 7440th into the ATO for specific missions as needed but generally allowed the unit to conduct its own planning and execution based on a broad-based MTO.

During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Air Force intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) stood out as a positive example of mission command. ISR was frequently identified as the core combat capability needed to fight insurgent networks, and its use was a special operations best practice that later migrated to conventional forces.[17] The AOC evolved ISR tasking from a highly prescriptive method with emphasis on specific collection tasking to a mission command method where ISR was force-packaged with supported ground units. ISR was allocated for extended periods of time in a supported/supporting relationship and given the freedom to maneuver within a broad mission and commander's intent. This enabled greater speed and responsiveness because ground commanders and ISR could coordinate laterally and develop habitual relationships in a joint force package that emphasized qualitative results.[18]

Air Forces Central experimented with MTOs in 2019 by delegating operational C2 to the Air Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan. The task force had its own geographical operational area, robust planning staff, and force packaging capabilities. The planning staff

14. "The Misty Experiment: The Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail," posted 4 July 2024, by History & Warfare Now, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/.

15. William R. Phillips, *Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Sky* (St. Martin's Press, 1996).

16. AFDP 1-1, 12.

17. Michael T. Flynn et al., "Employing ISR SOF Best Practices," *Joint Force Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2008).

18. Jaylan Michael Haley, "An Evolution in Intelligence Doctrine: The Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Mission Type Order," *Air & Space Power Journal* 26, no. 5 (September–October 2012), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/.

was well integrated into Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan and had a deep understanding of commander's intent and priorities. MTOs allowed the task force to plan its own sorties and strikes and to inform the AOC in Al Udeid Air Base merely for administrative inclusion in the ATO.

The Challenge of MTOs for the Air Force

Despite this history, the general sense in the Air Force is that MTOs are ill-suited to airpower. The air tasking cycle has proven efficient and effective in providing airpower in every air campaign since Desert Storm. Although the 72-hour span is sometimes maligned for its length and rigidity, such criticism often ignores the cycle's inherent flexibility through dynamic targeting and ad hoc tasking, which enable it to respond to events as they occur. MTO usage has legitimate challenges that must be acknowledged, yet all are surmountable.

Force Packaging

Airpower requires force packaging to be effective. For example, strike assets require tankers, ISR, defensive counterair, electromagnetic warfare support, airborne early warning, and other capabilities to conduct its mission. Unless a wing or ATF commander has the requisite platforms to be independent, they must rely upon operational level C2 to orchestrate timing, tempo, and location for a force package.

Lack of Master Air Attack Plan Capability

Wings or ATFs must have planning and intelligence staff to take an MTO and turn it into a force-packaged tasking. Ensuring they have the necessary experience and manning to work out packaging and deliberate targeting in a timely manner is a challenge. Wing staffs will undoubtedly be small but can be augmented by AOCs dispersing and thus creating distributed control nodes at strategic points. While there may be creative manning solutions, having small numbers does not necessarily equate to less capability if the leadership and training are there. Manning challenges aside, the existence of a wing A-staff should not imply an ability by AEW commanders to endlessly carry on an air campaign by themselves. They should be designed to execute MTOs in a discrete geographic area akin to many mission command examples in Air Force history.

Airpower is Strategic

As Air Force doctrine makes clear, mission command is not applicable in all situations, noting that "certain missions and operations are not suited to a decentralized approach." This is especially true for missions requiring "consistency and uniformity," such as nuclear operations. Doctrine further adds that "commanders may elect to retain authorities or

impose restraints to reduce strategic risk; preserve resources; or when subordinates lack the ability, knowledge, information, or awareness needed to make decisions."[19]

Highly orchestrated events that consume inordinate resources with a high strategic cost of failure do not make good candidates for MTO. Some in the air component could argue against MTO by saying that airpower is strategic—it travels too fast and too far, is highly destructive, and represents great potential for unintended military escalation and political blowback. Airpower by its very nature may be in that category of military capabilities that require more top-down management versus decentralized decision-making, yet this is not true in all cases.

Communications Will Persevere

The CDO assumption is the air component will be cut off due to non-kinetic or kinetic strike on a C2 node like the AOC. The ATO will then have difficulty getting published, hence the use of MTO, where daily and detailed guidance may not be necessary. Yet, one school of thought is that adversaries will never be able to jam 100 percent of blue force communications or destroy an AOC adopting distributed control. Hence, the ATO will always get through. The US Space Force initiative to deploy the proliferated warfighter space architecture with a network of 1,000+ satellites in low Earth orbit for the purpose of providing resilient communications to terrestrial actors reinforces confidence that no adversary could completely deny air component comms.[20] If air component leadership has high confidence in this architecture and other forms of comms resiliency, then the imperative for MTOs becomes less urgent.

While these challenges are significant they do not necessarily mean that MTOs are a bad fit for the Air Force. Like much else in warfare, C2 is rarely dilemma free. There will be trade-offs and sacrifices, and the above challenges illuminate these as well as indicate that there is a role for both the ATO and MTO simultaneously within Air Force C2.

One former Ninth Air Force commander encouraged Airmen to think about how they could "retool the current air component C2 system and processes to improve war fighting," stating that "mission-type orders need not be seen as only useful when they 'can' be used, such as in Afghanistan, or when they 'must' be used, such as when communications are degraded." He challenged Airmen to integrate MTOs when they should be used as a norm in the daily air tasking cycle and not just at the extremes of an overly permissive air environment, where choices hold little consequence, or in an extremely non-permissive air environment, where no choice exists.[21] This calls for a sliding scale of ATO-MTO usage where both coexist and are used in circumstances most beneficial to specific operational environments.

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19. AFDP 1-1, 13–14.

20. Ramin Skibba, "The Space Force Is Launching Its Own Swarm of Tiny Satellites," Space Development Agency, 14 August 2023, https://www.sda.mil/.

21. Grynkewich and Goldstrum, "AETF Today," 13.

Whether an air component uses MTOs when it can, must, or should, Airmen must gain MTO experience and training during peacetime. If MTOs are employed only when communications and the AOC are down, then Airmen do not want their first real MTO experience to be in a conflict. Air components must exercise their mission command muscles by developing procedures, experience, and culture during peacetime to be proficient in it during wartime.

Three Lenses for Air Component MTOs

These three interrelated elements create genuine capacity. Procedure is intentionally and typically written. It covers the gamut from plans to techniques but is theoretical if never used. Experience, however, is theory in use and bridges intentions and behaviors.[22] Experience determines whether a unit is hypocritical or not—whether they do what they say and say what they do. Culture simultaneously underlies and is reinforced by both procedures and experience but is more elusive than them. A unit's culture is its behavior at rest, when it is not trying to be anything other than it is. All three need addressing by air components to create an environment conducive to mission command, MTO, and distributed control.

The Procedural Lens

The overall gist of MTO and distributed control procedures is to focus the air component on macro-management—setting conditions in which subordinate units can exercise their initiative and make decisions in a decentralized way. Macro-management involves the following elements.

Habitual Use of Commander's Intent

Commander's intent represents the core of a MTO and the heart of mission command. Airmen should seek ways to emphasize commander's intent, focusing on the why versus the how of a task. Even a highly prescriptive order like the ATO could better enable mission command by explaining the reasons behind the tasking lines.[23] All taskings, briefings, and orders should have a section for commander's intent so all air component members become accustomed to hearing why something is being done or tasked.

Delegated Authorities

Delegation of authorities is a critical element for mission command, MTO, and distributed control. Delegations can be standing or based on conditions. An apt example of

22. Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, and Israeli Armies*, Stanford Security Studies (Stanford University Press, 2011), 23.
23. Blaine, "USAF Mission Command."

standing delegation of authorities could be air defense, specifically the regional air defense command or sector air defense command. Both Pacific Air Forces and Air Forces North make effective use of these commands, which are in essence self-contained entities with the awareness and capability to execute the air defense mission for the area air defense commander.

Conditions based authorities (CBA) are crucial to time-sensitive AOC tasks and should be increasingly important to air expeditionary wings employing the agile combat employment concept. CBAs are typically approved through iterative discussions with the joint force commander in peacetime and through execution during exercises. Exercises are a good time to discuss authorities that may be best delegated to the air component commander and, ideally, much lower. Procedurally, having pre-approved CBAs during peacetime will serve to put the combatant command, air component, and subordinate AEWs on the same wavelength regarding expectations to take initiative and manage risk.

MTO Tips from History

Air components should write orders using the best practices from Air Force mission command history. From World War II to Afghanistan, Air Force history offers techniques repeatedly used that allowed air components to macro-manage and subordinates to micro-execute. Some examples of this are as follows:

- Aim for short orders that define what to do, not how to do it. MTOs are brief, being historically three to five pages in length. Air components should strive for MTO brevity because it forces a commander to focus on what and why versus how. Left and right limits are fine, but the entirety of the order should be concise.
- Identifying a unit as the main effort and establishing supported/supporting relationships among units provides additional intent that subordinates will use to make decisions when circumstances change. Identifying a main effort enables *Zusammenwirken*—the German military concept meaning lateral self-coordination at the lowest level.[24] Subordinate units will lend each other support and minimize secondary efforts without higher headquarters involvement if the main effort is clearly understood.
- Assigning geographical areas and distinct tasks will help deconflict subordinate units. Using zone C2 where a distributed control node like tactical C2 is assigned a specific geographic area may be an organizing principle for this. The role of tactical C2 that is in the air, on a boat, or on the ground may become increasingly important to force package disparate elements.
- Finally, writing orders that create composite units will enable force packaging under a subordinate leader. These composite units may be permanently established, but more likely the air component will set up temporary and mission-focused composite units that will disband once the task is complete. These were used to great effect

24. William S. Lind, *The New Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Special Tactics LLC, 2023), 62.

by the Fifth Air Force in World War II, the 7440th in Desert Storm, and the Air Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan in 2019, which were assigned those forces based in Afghanistan. The revival of ATFs as an Air Force unit may augur a revival of the composite wing concept at least as a series of deployed force modules coming together under a single commander.

Fluid Tasking Orders

Using an ATO or a MTO does not have to be presented as a dichotomy or all-or-nothing proposition. There is a need for proper balance between prescriptive or permissive orders based on the situation and operation's nature.[25] The general belief is that it must be ATO until there is an outage; then MTO takes over until communications are restored and the ATO can make its return. But the two can and should be blended with some missions requiring a high degree of orchestration with others needing general guidance with intent and end-state.

The concept of a fluid ATO emerged during one OCTP seminar with an air reserve unit that emphasized the importance of the ATO's prescriptive guidance during the early phase of an air campaign, when concentration and tempo are a must. But the ATO could transition to the more permissive MTO once air superiority is achieved.[26] Broad mission MTOs may succeed where swift reaction to opportunities and dilemmas is at a premium, for example when close air support for the ground component is important. MTOs could also prosper where persistent and patient effort over time is required for the desired effect, such as an air interdiction campaign designed to isolate part of the battlespace.

In other words, the air component must be able to flow between the ATO and the MTO as the operational environment dictates. The two will likely coexist like they did during Desert Storm with southern units directed by ATO while northern units were given an MTO under the 7440th wing commander. The key to these air component procedures is to give a mission to a commander and let them work out the rest. Simultaneously, that same air component needs to execute some missions with a high degree of direction and coordination.

The Experiential Lens

Determining MTO procedures is only the first step. Building these plans and procedures will not matter much unless the air component staff and subordinate units gain practical experience to build the necessary muscle memory to execute these missions during war. The following prescriptions are concrete suggestions to gain experience in MTO use.

25. Carpenter, "Command and Control."

26. Robin Kimmelman and Thomas Cantrell, Operational Command Training Program, "Mission Command Seminar," March Air Reserve Base, California, 20 July 2024.

Wing Tabletop Discussions

During an OCTP seminar in Europe, Airmen recommended the use of wing commander tabletop discussions with the air component commander as an easy means for them to experience mission command, MTOs, and distributed control. This recommendation would start with the air component publishing an MTO with commander's intent, output-based missions, clear risk discussion, and constraints/restraints with a wing identified as the main effort and others as supporting. Provided the what and why, all the wings would be given several days to work out the how and be invited to the air component to tabletop discuss their actions.

This discussion would likely identify gaps in authorities, understanding of risk, mutual trust, and left and right limits. The air component commander would thereby have a means to assess subordinate's mission command capabilities, and the wings would benefit from better understanding the commander's mind and risk tolerance. This simple exercise would require little preparation and no simulation but would result in the trust-building needed among commanders to make mission command a reality.

ISR MTOs

The air component should seek real-world events for which MTOs are appropriate. ISR is a natural place for this to occur with execution of the daily collection plan changing as circumstances dictate, under the delegated authority of the AOC's senior intelligence duty officer, the distributed ground station, or the ISR aircrew. Appointing a package commander, identifying a broad collection mission, determining an allocation of sorties, and giving several days to develop results will unleash the initiative of such a team, perhaps packaged with tactical C2 or other distributed control nodes. This will force ISR to think like a maneuver element and empower it to solve problems posed by the operational environment versus delivering a specific sortie at a specific time like an ISR help desk. Some air components are employing the ISR MTO today in real-world scenarios and in exercises, usually against discrete target sets like ballistic missiles or a hostile network, where time and flexibility are needed to achieve impactful effect.

Find, Fix, Track, Target

Real-world find, fix, track, target (F2T2) events are ideal for MTOs. F2T2 is the Air Force kill chain minus the engage and assess steps, since no fires occur. These are self-generated drills that practice an actual kill chain conducted with, for example, maritime and ground surface fires and all-domain capabilities like space and cyber against a real adversary in the area. Once the adversary is found and fixed, ground, maritime, and cyber participants run their respective kill chains to obtain a targeting solution, which helps measure speed and breed interoperability. The F2T2 initiative is ingenious because it combines real-world requirements with actual joint targeting processes and can occur many times a year.

These events could easily exercise C2 procedures for mission command. MTOs could create an ad hoc composite unit in-being that appoints a mission commander and supported/supporting relationships between space, cyber, maritime, and air. The MTO-enabled mission commander would determine maneuver within left and right limits, generate sorties as the operational environment requires, and exercise conditions-based authorities in deciding to strike or not strike a target. Multiple F2T2 mission commanders could operate in geographically assigned areas and work laterally (*Zusammenwirken*) to deconflict use of shared resources.

Competition Event MTO

In a variation of the F2T2, one air component is experimenting with MTO usage during real-world competition events with an adversary. Day-to-day airpower is tasked using ATO. Yet, during a discrete event an air package commander will be given broad guidance, an output-based mission, and control of sufficient resources to achieve real-world objectives. These MTO competition events may be flexible deterrent options or a partner nation capacity-building activity. They are meant to exercise both the AOC and wings in mission command principles with an after-action review that will help further develop air component procedures.

Exercises

Some air components have experimented with an MTO paragraph in the daily air operations directive and stand-alone MTOs that execute in the event of a contingency—namely the inability of the AOC to function or communicate due to kinetic or non-kinetic fires. In that contingency, the MTO is temporary until the continuity of operations site or communications backup plan kicks in, and another node picks up responsibility for ATO publication.

In addition to using MTOs when one must, air components should exercise using them when one should. Exercises should test how MTOs could be used for airpower in the context of major theater war when communications are robust. Real-world MTOs in the Air Force might be limited in size and scope, but exercises offer a time to show how it might work on a grander scale. Examples include assigning package commanders responsibility for a pulse strike when air superiority is contested; tasking regional air defense command with air defense of geographic areas; or tasking an air expeditionary wing as supporting airpower to a supported surface force for a short time or an entire phase of the campaign. Both command post exercises and field training exercises are good venues to flex how an air component should employ mission command and MTOs on a scale that real-world events cannot provide.

Battle Drills

While tabletop discussions educate leaders, real-world events add friction, and exercises test procedures, battle drills instill muscle memory in the air component through increased frequency. Sound MTO procedures worthy of repeating and scaling will become obvious from the experience gained in tabletop discussions, exercises, and real-world events. Battle drills that practice distributed control, dynamic targeting, partner nation teaming, or simply orders writing are ways to knit together the disparate elements of an AOC, staff, tactical C2, distributed ground station, and joint partners, helping to solidify processes and build expectations. Commander's intent should precede every battle drill event to inculcate these disparate elements on mission command expectations.

Battle drills should be accompanied by habitual MTO use. MTO writing is an art that requires practice. Such orders should "include only a mission statement, a statement of intent, disposition of enemy and friendly forces, and special instructions" and should be "clear and concise," leaving "the details of execution to subordinates."[27] Finding the sweet spot between too much and too little detail in MTO requires experience that battle drills can deliver.

The experiential recommendations will build the sets and reps necessary for the air component to make the wartime transition to mission command, MTO, and distributed control. Tabletop discussions build commander-to-commander experience; real-world activities such as ISR MTOs, F2T2s, and competition event MTOs will add practical field experience; and exercises and battle drills will allow air components to practice the worst-case or most complicated scenarios from warfare. All this will not only test and refine the procedural lens but also give the air component the necessary practice in the art of macro-management for success in high-speed warfare.

The Cultural Lens

Establishing MTO and distributed control procedures and seeking experience in using them are essential for wartime expertise. Yet, building a mission command culture is foundational. The discussion on building mission command culture in the Air Force has centered on revamping education and taking a generational view to cultural transformation.[28] This is a valid approach, but one that lets the air component off the hook. Airmen who only serve a few years at the operational level of war may feel that this cultural transformation is best left to Air Education and Training Command. OCTP would encourage air component leaders to seize responsibility in consciously developing a mission command culture in tandem with crafting procedures and gaining experience. The three efforts should unfold more or less simultaneously to create a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle. Developing a culture is amorphous, but three concrete recommendations will help.

27. Shamir, *Transforming Command*, 40.
28. Kamena, "Before Mission Command."

Discussion-Based Trust

Mission command relies on trust. Trust flows from the higher commander to the lower commander—the former believes that the latter will operate with intent through a shared understanding of risk tolerance, mission output, and constraints/restraints. Trust also flows in the opposite direction. The lower commander trusts that the higher commander will encourage and reward initiative and risk-taking. Thus, mission command is based on a relationship between commanders and a common understanding of what risk, initiative, and recklessness mean.

One participant in an OCTP seminar, a graduate from an advanced Army school, observed that this type of trust is built in the ground forces through a heavy investment in discussion.[29] Discussing the mission, intent, and common frames of references consistently is the foundation for building trust. While every single MTO does not require a discussion, fundamentally, a commander's trust in subordinates is built through consistent communication that ensures everyone approaches problems from a basis of shared values.

Mistake Tolerance

The tolerance for mistakes in the Air Force may be lower than other services due to the potential for greater consequences. Anecdotally, one often hears Airmen describe a "one-mistake Air Force" with fixation on safety and a general tendency of risk aversion. While every unit is different, this attitude may be one of the greatest obstacles to instilling mission command, which requires a great deal of trust not only from the commander down but also from the subordinate up. Subordinates must believe that decision-making and "prudent risk" are encouraged and that mistakes that inevitably follow from taking initiative will be forgiven. Notably, Army doctrine has adjusted the phrase "prudent risk taking" to simply "risk taking," seeking to eliminate a modifier that may slow subordinate initiative.[30] The commander assumes risk for mistakes on behalf of subordinates by encouraging them to seize the initiative—but subordinates must believe in the initiative to make it real.

Train to Failure

This means taking risk to test out new ideas, undertake a bold initiative, and learn from mistakes. Commanders who encourage initiative must also be tolerant of initiative-driven failure, because one cannot exist without the other. Initiative-driven and action-prone mistakes during training and exercises are wonderful opportunities for commanders to demonstrate this tolerance, which in turn generates the trust needed for mission command.

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29. Robin Kimmelman and Thomas Cantrell, Operational Command Training Program, "Mission Command Seminar," Ramstein Air Base, Germany, 6 September 2024.

30. James D. Corless, *Mission Command in the USAF: Challenges and an Analytical Framework, School of Advanced Military Studies* (US Army Command and General Staff College, 2024), 17.

At a 2025 exercise, a three-star general air component commander emphasized, "I am okay with failure we can learn from," in an effort to encourage his staff to make the bold decisions in a low-risk exercise that will pay dividends in a higher-stakes war.[31] A crucial component to building a culture of mistake tolerance is vulnerability based trust. According to this concept, the fastest way for a leader to build trust is to allow subordinates to see their shortfalls and mistakes and own them.[32] By not punishing vulnerability, leaders create an environment that encourages risk-taking, initiative, and taking responsibility.

Conclusion

Mission command should be incorporated in the daily operations of the air component and not relegated to contingency. The first time the air component staff and its wings employ these concepts in a substantial way should not be during war or real-world crisis. The sheer quantity and complexity of problems facing the air component—or any theater C2 node—during near-peer war necessitates the need for macro-management and delegating decision-making and authority.

Air components can best prepare themselves and their units for macro-management by viewing the concepts of mission command, distributed control, and MTOs through procedural, experiential, and cultural lenses. Building procedures to publish MTOs and empower distributed control nodes and wings with delegated authorities are a critical first step. Both ATO and MTO will have their place in near-peer war. Viewing these procedures through the experiential lens of exercises, battle drills, and small-scale, real-world operations will make those procedures stronger and result in more mission command-capable staff and units. Lastly, viewing both procedures and experience through a cultural lens will emphasize the trust and mistake tolerance needed to invoke bias to action. The criticality of the air component in future war necessitates its embrace of mission command to unlock the initiative of its Airmen, a historical legacy that is the surest path to victory. ✈

31. Personal observation by authors, March 2025.
32. Blaine, "USAF Mission Command."