

Support the Combatant Commander, Develop the Force, or Roll the Dice?

What the Air Force's Deployment Tasking Process Doesn't Do

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Over the last 10 years, Airmen have routinely waked up in a foreign land wondering, "Why am I here?" One aspect of this question relates to the Air Force's current personnel deployment system. Most Airmen are well versed in the timing of their deployment cycle, but the method of selecting an individual for a specific deployment tasking remains a mystery. In some ways, the process is more akin to rolling dice than following a deliberate procedure. In truth, understanding the system may not offer much comfort.

The Air Force's current personnel deployment mechanism ignores two major discriminators in assigning an Airman to a tasking. First, the system rarely considers any unique qualifications an individual possesses. Second, it fails to take into account the effect of a tasking on an Airman's professional development. Thus the Air Force deprives itself of any special expertise that its personnel could bring to the current fight and misses an opportunity to prepare them for the future, largely due to the timing of the steps in the process and an overemphasis on minimum requirements.

Recently, the Air Force announced an initiative to convert its air and space expeditionary force (AEF) deployment system to a new construct known as AEF Next, which "will focus on teaming, at the unit [and] installation level" as well as put "commander[s] and immediate supervisors back into the deployment decision process."¹ Furthermore,

this initiative creates an opportunity to improve the areas discussed in this article, which primarily apply to joint expeditionary taskings (JET) and individual augmentees (IA)—the two of them making up 17 percent of all Airmen tasked in AEF 9/10. This seemingly small percentage nevertheless accounts for more than 5,000 Airmen.² Even if AEF Next eliminates most single-person and small-team unit type codes (UTC) for the preponderance of the force, JET and IA taskings will still require a methodology and system for filling.

The Problem within the Process

Before analyzing the system, one must have a rudimentary understanding of it, specifically from a squadron-level perspective. A squadron has the responsibility to fill a tasking for a UTC that comes to a base from the major command (MAJCOM). For simplicity's sake, let us assume that the UTC is for one person. The squadron must produce a name to fill the tasking within a few days, having only the location, in-place date, duration, Air Force specialty code (AFSC) required, grade required, and line remarks to help make the decision.³ Among other administrative information, line remarks, if any, may express a desired specialty or experience in very brief terms. For the squadron, if only one available Airman meets the requirements, then the choice is easy. If two or more do, then squadron commanders apply their own heuristic. Several factors usually play into this decision, such as dwell time, home-station duties, and timing of significant events (weddings, childbirth, attendance at professional military education schools, etc.). Commanders have neither sufficient time allowed nor information to consider Airmen's qualifications or the expected duties of the position. Consequently, minimum requirements become the driving force rather than consideration of which individual could have the most productive effect or would best benefit from the experience. Thus, to fill each tasking that comes their way, squadron commanders must utilize limited information to make the best decision possible, doing so in isolation from other decisions. As deployment taskings trickle to the

squadron throughout the cycle, the sequence and timing of the process drive a large number of single, isolated personnel decisions, leaving no chance of optimizing the system.

A good start to rectifying such a system would involve addressing two clichés: (1) we should all be “plug-and-play” Airmen, and (2) if the minimum wasn’t good enough, it wouldn’t be the minimum. Despite the truth of these statements, they do not compare to the effects that a better system could produce. Certainly, all Airmen should be plug-and-play to some extent, capable of performing duties in any organization commensurate with their grade, AFSC, and skill level. Further, the gaining command establishes the minimum requirements for a tasking, based on what it considers necessary for the job. Granted, these two facts have validity but should serve only as a baseline.

How the Air Force Can Improve

We know that other organizations seek to do better. Can the Air Force do so as well? For example, professional football teams that need a new quarterback do not approach the draft each year by settling for just any passer from a Division I college. Instead, they want the best—one who will contribute the most to their chances of winning. Similarly, when shopping for a new car, few buyers have in mind only minimum requirements for the number of seats, trunk space, and gas mileage; rather, they want the best vehicle they can afford. A plug-and-play approach that emphasizes merely the basics creates an environment in which nothing more than “clearing the bar” defines success. A recent criticism of the Army personnel system claimed it “treats each employee as an interchangeable commodity rather than as a unique individual with skills that can be optimized.”⁴ The same holds true of the Air Force’s deployment system. The current approach well suits the beginning of a conflict, when a number of manning requirements need filling in short order. However, when operations span multiple years, a more refined system would better support the combatant commander (COCOM).

One Approach: Leveraging Expertise

An improved approach would consider the value of expertise in professional experience, regional knowledge, and language skills. Professional experience builds over time through varying assignments and duties. Take, for instance, Gen Curtis LeMay, whose operational proficiency in World War II, coupled with his time at Headquarters Materiel Command and his position as deputy chief of staff for research and development, made him uniquely suited to transform Strategic Air Command into a leading force in the Cold War.⁵ Today's combat-seasoned Airmen have the most deployed experience since the Vietnam War, but the deployment system allows no mechanism for capitalizing on it. An officer who served on a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in a previous deployment would be ideal for a joint headquarters staff or embassy office with oversight of several PRTs. Such an officer would have firsthand knowledge of challenges in the field. His or her successes, failures, and observations would prove useful compared to what another officer without the same professional experience might offer—although both meet the minimum requirements. Conversely, an officer with experience in a joint headquarters would have a better grasp of command priorities and processes, which would be helpful to a PRT in the field.

Furthermore, the present system does not make use of Airmen's regional knowledge—their understanding of the culture in an operating environment, something that the Air Force now includes in its professional military education curriculum and promotes in its *Air Force Culture, Region & Language Flight Plan*.⁶ Individuals who have deployed to a particular region or country have knowledge of local customs, mannerisms, and social habits beyond that found in textbooks. Clearly, sending them back to that region or country would prove beneficial to the service. Language skills offer the same advantage. Under the current system, someone who speaks Dari (one of the official languages of Afghanistan) would have little opportunity to use it if he or she were the base's only available Airman who met the

minimum requirements for a tasking to Iraq. At the same time, despite the availability of an Arabic-speaking Airman at another base within the same MAJCOM, today's system would never recognize the possibility of a swap.

Another Approach: Developing Airmen

So far, these observations lead toward a recommendation to redeploy Airmen to former duties and locations. Doing so, however, would ignore the importance of force development. As commander of Strategic Air Command, General LeMay could draw on his broad experience because, throughout his career, he had diverse assignments that broadened his perspective. Adm Mike Mullen, formerly the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sees the United States at “a strategic inflection point” that forces the military to expand its focus beyond Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷ Furthermore, according to Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley, “Over the past decade, the Air Force has substantially reshaped itself to meet the immediate needs of today's conflicts and position itself for the future.”⁸ Without question, the Air Force must win today's fight and prepare for the next conflict. Sending Airmen back to the same jobs at the same deployed locations does not satisfy the latter imperative. In practical terms, lessons learned from PRT experience in Iraq may or may not apply to a PRT in Afghanistan; however, a fresh perspective with new ideas based on a broad background has value. Additionally, someone who has served on a PRT in Iraq and Afghanistan should be considered a qualified expert in postconflict or transconflict reconstruction for future operations planning or policy development. A mix of deployed field, headquarters, Air Force, and joint assignments would also supply a broad experience base to Airmen.

The system now in place does not let commanders deliberately develop their Airmen through deployments. Instead, as described above, it demands a name within a few days for a single tasking, without regard for later taskings within the same cycle or those that

flow to other bases. Commanders know the special skills their Airmen possess. They also know what types of deployments would better develop them for the long war or the next fight. Regardless, by the time commanders can act, they either assign a tasking to the only Airman meeting the minimum requirements or choose from a very small pool of qualified, available Airmen. Even if commanders could select from among several individuals, the minimal information available on the duties of a tasking offers little substantive criteria with which to make a decision.

With regard to force development alone, one might easily conclude that the Air Force should never return an Airman to the same deployed location. Rather, the service would do better to develop its Airmen as much as possible by sending them to a variety of deployments. Although this development paradigm in its purest form may also prove too extreme, it merits consideration.

Finding a Solution

Two equal yet contrasting viewpoints apply to this issue. One suggests that the Air Force should send Airmen back to the same place as much as possible to capitalize on their experience and skills in the current fight. The other holds that the service should deliberately broaden its Airmen as much as possible by varying their deployment taskings. Perhaps former secretary of defense Robert Gates has the best answer: “The defining principle driving our strategy is balance.”⁹ This article does not attempt to choose sides or favor one view over the other. Instead, it recognizes the merits of both arguments and calls attention to the fact that the current Air Force system for deployment taskings permits neither view, more closely resembling a roll of the dice. The article does, however, make two recommendations, realizing that any change in methodology would need to come from the Air Force corporate level to ensure equal implementation across the force.

Recommendation No. 1:

Require More Information about Individual Taskings

The lack of information on individual taskings hobbles commanders' ability to make informed decisions. Location, in-place date, duration, AFSC, grade, and limited line remarks are insufficient to leverage any expertise or deliberately develop Airmen. Additional functional oversight and direct coordination with downrange staffs and units would help build and consolidate available, current information on units and individual positions. Establishing and maintaining an expanded scheme of codes to denote desired and available skill sets could facilitate a more automated approach. Admittedly, pulling additional details may necessitate changes to the request-for-forces process.

Recommendation No. 2: Batching

To optimize the system, the Air Force must remove some of the process-driven structural impediments that force isolated decisions in response to single taskings to single bases. If the succession of taskings were held at base level and not immediately filled, then commanders could choose the best Airman for each tasking. Batching several taskings into decision groups would provide better matches. MAJCOMs could implement similar batching processes to optimize a larger pool.

Batching, however, involves two major issues. First, optimizing the system would call for additional management actions. For example, batching taskings at the MAJCOM level would necessitate a sourcing conference to consider the taskings and available names. MAJCOM functional area managers are best suited to facilitate sourcing conferences in person or via video teleconferencing. The optimization payoff compared to additional management logically leads toward setting a threshold to determine when batching makes sense (i.e., first deployments for second lieutenants and airmen first class may not warrant batching). Second, Airmen who eventually receive taskings would lose preparation time. Any batching would reduce the advance notice Airmen now have to put their professional and personal affairs in order.

Indeed, very short notice taskings would further hinder preparation time, rendering batching unfeasible. However, the Air Force Personnel Center's metrics show that, on average, Airmen receive notification more than 100 days before their first movement.¹⁰ Certainly, Airmen need time to prepare themselves and their families for deployment, but the Air Force has given most of them a sense of predictability when determining their vulnerability windows. With these facts in mind, sacrificing some of the aforementioned 100-plus days seems worthwhile, given the potential benefits of batching.

Conclusion

In contemplating improvements to its deployment system, Air Force leaders must carefully consider several competing interests. During a discussion of AEF Next, Gen Norton Schwartz, the Air Force chief of staff, mentioned a few of them: synchronizing deployment and assignment cycles, standardizing the presentation of forces, and facilitating the deployment of Airmen and their leadership as a team.¹¹ This article has highlighted a few others: improving support to the COCOMs and enhancing the quality force for the future. As we refine the service's deployment tasking system, we must seek the best balance, continually attempting to maximize the Air Force's contribution to the COCOM in order to win the current war. We must also deliberately develop our force to prepare for the long war and the next fight. These interests apply to JET and IA taskings as well as the entire force. We cannot leave the fate of either of these priorities to chance. This article should serve as a call to action for including the concepts presented here in any system improvements that deal with deploying a specific Airman to a specific tasking. Anything less does nothing more than meet the minimum requirements and develop the force by rolling the dice. ✪

Notes

1. Mitch Gettle, "Air Force Refines Force Presentation, Generation," Air Force News Service, 16 November 2011, <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123280212>.
2. The Air Force filled 5,239 JET and IA taskings among the total of 30,845 in AEF 9/10, December 2010–May 2011. "Metrics Review: AFPC Directorates," Headquarters Air Force Personnel Center, 15 November 2011, slides 14–15, https://aef.afpc.randolph.af.mil/reference/Nov_2011_AEF_Metrics.pptx.
3. A survey of three installation deployment plans showed a range of three to seven days for squadron-level commanders to return a name to the installation deployment officer.
4. Tim Kane, "Why Our Best Officers Are Leaving," *Atlantic* 307, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 84.
5. "General Curtis Emerson LeMay," US Air Force, accessed 1 May 2011, <http://www.af.mil/information/bios/bios.asp?bioID=6178>.
6. Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Culture, Region & Language Flight Plan* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, May 2009), <http://cultureandsecurity.yolasite.com/resources/flightplan%20Gen%20Schwarz%2005-09.pdf>.
7. Thom Shanker, "Joint Chiefs Chairman Says Military Must Focus beyond Iraq and Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 8 February 2011, <http://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/08/joint-chiefs-chairman-says-military-must-focus-beyond-iraq-and-afghanistan/>.
8. Hon. Michael Donley, secretary of the Air Force, "A Strategy Focused on Balance" (address, National Security Forum, Maxwell AFB, AL, 17 May 2011), <http://www.af.mil/information/speeches/speech.asp?id=649>.
9. Robert M. Gates, "The National Defense Strategy: Striking the Right Balance," *Joint Force Quarterly* 52 (1st Quarter 2009): 2, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/images/jfq-52/1.pdf>.
10. On average, 105 days passed between notification and first movement for AEF 9/10, December 2010–May 2011. For JET and IA taskings only, the average was 116 days. "Metrics Review: AFPC Directorates," slides 14–15.
11. Gen Norton A. Schwartz, chief of staff, US Air Force (address, Air Force Association Air and Space Conference and Technology Exposition, National Harbor, MD, 20 September 2011), <https://newafpims.afnews.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-110921-014.pdf>.



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