

No Longer the Outlier

Updating the Air Component Structure

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Outliers are those who have been given opportunities—and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them.

—Malcolm Gladwell
Outliers: The Story of Success

Having served on a COCOM [combatant command] operations directorate staff twice, worked within three air components, and now as commander of an air component, I've had the opportunity to observe the interaction of the air component with its respective COCOM and sister components. As a result of my experiences, I strongly believe the time has come for a change in our thinking to take advantage of our recent doctrine updates and make adjustments to the air component organizational construct.



—Lt Gen CQ Brown Jr.
Commander, US Air Forces Central Command
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Since the inception of the air operations center (AOC) during Operation Desert Storm, the command and control (C2) of airpower has evolved, but the mission has not changed. The Air Force continues to provide combatant commands (COCOM) with a highly competent air component that is capable of conducting and supporting air, space, and cyberspace operations within its assigned area of responsibility. The air component has succeeded at its primary mission of delivering airpower to the joint and coalition environment over the past 20-plus years in conflicts across the range of military operations.

The air component has been an *outlier*, when compared to joint and other component staffs, in its unique ability to C2 military operations in multiple and diverse areas of operations simultaneously. Despite the success in doing so, there is room for improvement. Doctrine and guidance have been slow to adapt to changes in the joint environment. Past doctrinal distinctions between Air Force forces (AFFOR) and the AOC placed the air component at a disadvantage, or worst-case exclusion, when addressing COCOM and cross-component operational issues. Additionally, the distinct differences and separation of the AFFOR and AOC staffs previously articulated in Air Force doctrine and instructions have created confusion and dysfunction for operational elements both inside and outside the air component. However, the November 2014 doctrine updates have opened the door to a new approach (fig. 1).

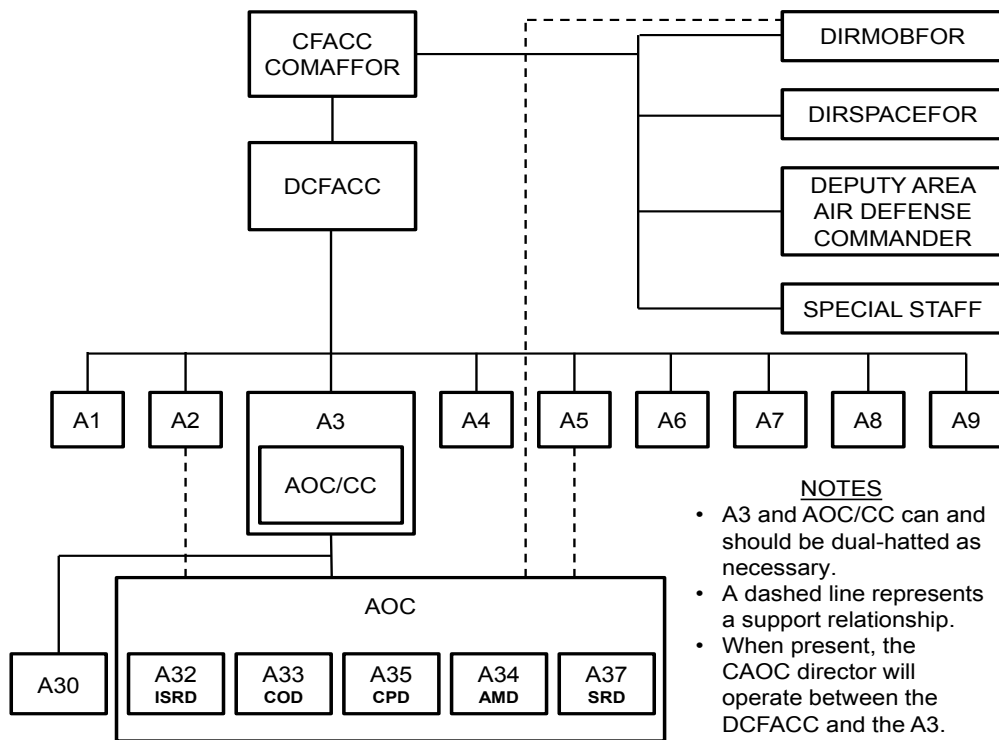


Figure 1. Proposed air component framework

- CFACC - combined force air component commander
- COMAFFOR - commander, Air Force forces
- DCFACC - deputy combined force air component commander
- DIRMOBFOR - director of mobility forces
- DIRSPACEFOR - director of space forces
- A1 - manpower, personnel, and services
- A2 - intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)
- A3 - operations
- A4 - logistics
- A5 - plans and requirements
- A6 - communications
- A7 - mission support and installations
- A8 - strategic plans and programs
- A9 - studies, analyses, assessments, and lessons learned
- AOC/CC - commander, air operations center
- AFFOR - Air Force forces
- ISRD - ISR division
- COD - combat operations division
- CPD - combat plans division
- AMD - air mobility division
- SRD - strategy division
- CAOC - combined air operations center



With the exception of the air component's operational elements, the operations director (A3), and the AOC, the alignment of the A staff with its COCOM and sister components is clearly understood both in doctrine and in practice. For example, the relationships and alignment between the air component's manpower, personnel, and services directorate (A1) or logistics directorate (A4) and a joint staff manpower and personnel directorate (J1) or logistics directorate (J4) are well understood. When one compares the functions of the A3 and AOC divisions with the equivalent J3 structures in a typical joint staff, the understanding becomes less clear. To gain synergy across the air component's operational elements and better align with joint staffs, the air component structure should change by aligning the AOC within the A3 to *become an air component with a staff and operations center versus a staff and operations center that is an air component.*

The Air Component Today

The current AOC structure grew out of the Vietnam-era theater air control system (TACS). Following the Gulf War, when Tactical Air Command and Strategic Air Command merged to form Air Combat Command, the TACS formally transitioned to the AOC and was later established as the AN/USQ-163 Falconer weapons system. After the start of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, the Air Force identified the need for a formal training course and a standardization program. In 2004 AOC formal training programs began at Hurlburt Field, Florida. Additionally, the AOC-X at Langley AFB, Virginia, continues to shepherd the development of the weapons system by providing a standardized framework and test bed for new concepts.¹

Building on the AOC history and current framework, the air component is a single entity made of up two elements—the AOC and the AFFOR—both charged with the C2 of air operations. Prior to the Air Force doctrine update in 2014, the dual nature of the commander, Air Force forces (COMAFFOR) as joint force air component commander (JFACC) was frowned upon, and a clear distinction was made between the staffs supporting the COMAFFOR and JFACC. In accordance with Joint Publication 3-30, *Command and Control of Joint Air Operations*, “the JFC [joint force commander] will normally assign JFACC responsibilities to the component commander having the preponderance of forces to be tasked and the ability to effectively plan, task, and control joint air operations.”² However, as acknowledged in earlier versions of Air Force doctrine and historically executed, the COMAFFOR has normally been dual-hatted as the JFACC, not merely due to the preponderance of air forces but also due to the ability to provide C2 of airpower through the AOC. Conversely, doctrine had recommended avoiding dual- or triple-hatting the AFFOR staff to the maximum extent possible because of manning and the distribution of workload.³ Until the recent doctrine changes, Air Force Doctrine Document 1 depicted an Air Force-preferred joint organization construct of a separate COMAFFOR and JFACC (fig. 2).

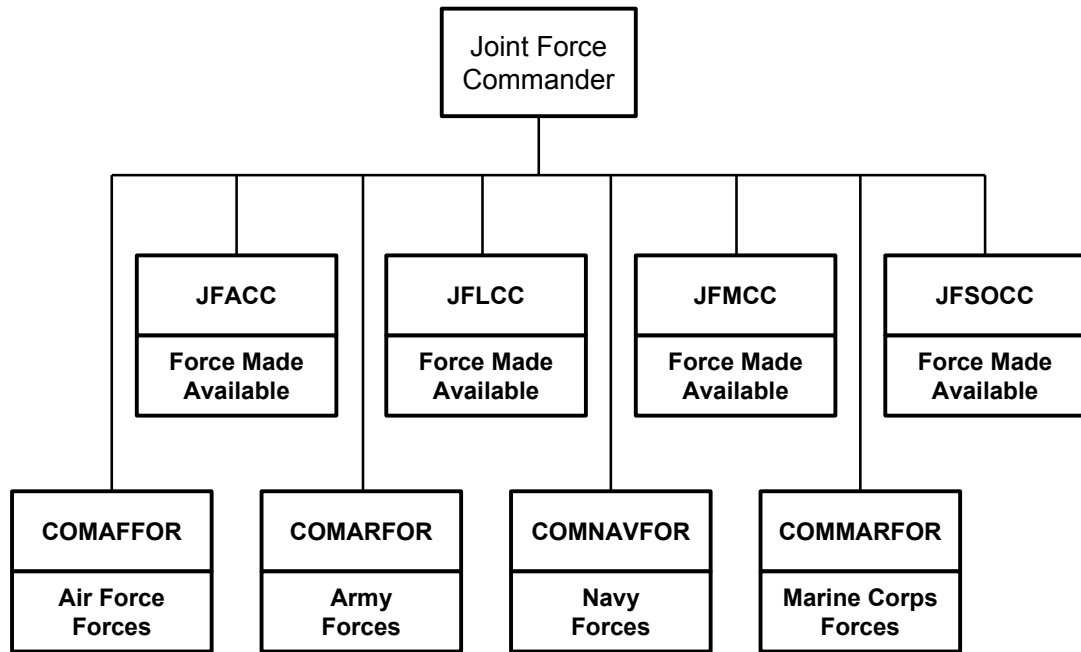


Figure 2. Joint force organization with functional and service components. (Reprinted from Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, 14 October 2011, 90, [http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/END-Archive/AFDD1\(11\).pdf](http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/END-Archive/AFDD1(11).pdf).)

- JFACC - joint force air component commander
- JFLCC - joint force land component commander
- JFMCC - joint force maritime component commander
- JFSOCC - joint force special operations component commander
- COMAFFOR - commander, Air Force forces
- COMARFOR - commander, Army forces
- COMNAVFOR - commander, Navy forces
- COMMARFOR - commander, Marine Corps forces

Although the COMAFFOR and JFACC may be the same person, Air Force Instruction (AFI) 13-1, *Operational Procedures—Air Operations Center (AOC)*, advocates the execution of responsibilities through separate staffs but then blurs and confuses the associated C2. The AFI articulates that the COMAFFOR should exercise operational and administrative control and that the JFACC should exercise tactical control. In the very next paragraph, however, the AFI states that “the AOC enables the JFACC to exercise operational-level C2 of air and space forces.”⁴ The AFI clearly contradicts itself and creates confusion. This confusion is amplified in AOC AFI guidance noting that “C-NAF [component numbered air force] headquarters will be properly structured, equipped, manned, and trained to execute C2 of air, space, and cyber-space operations assigned or attached to the unified component commander (UCC)

for day-to-day operations with the ability to accept additional AOC forces for any increase in UCC mission tasking or direction. A C-NAF will normally look as shown” in figure 3.⁵ As depicted and in practice, the C-NAF commander effectively has a split headquarters—AOC and AFFOR—with roles and responsibilities defined in separate AFIs increasing the potential for gaps and seams in the C2 of air, space, and cyberspace operations.

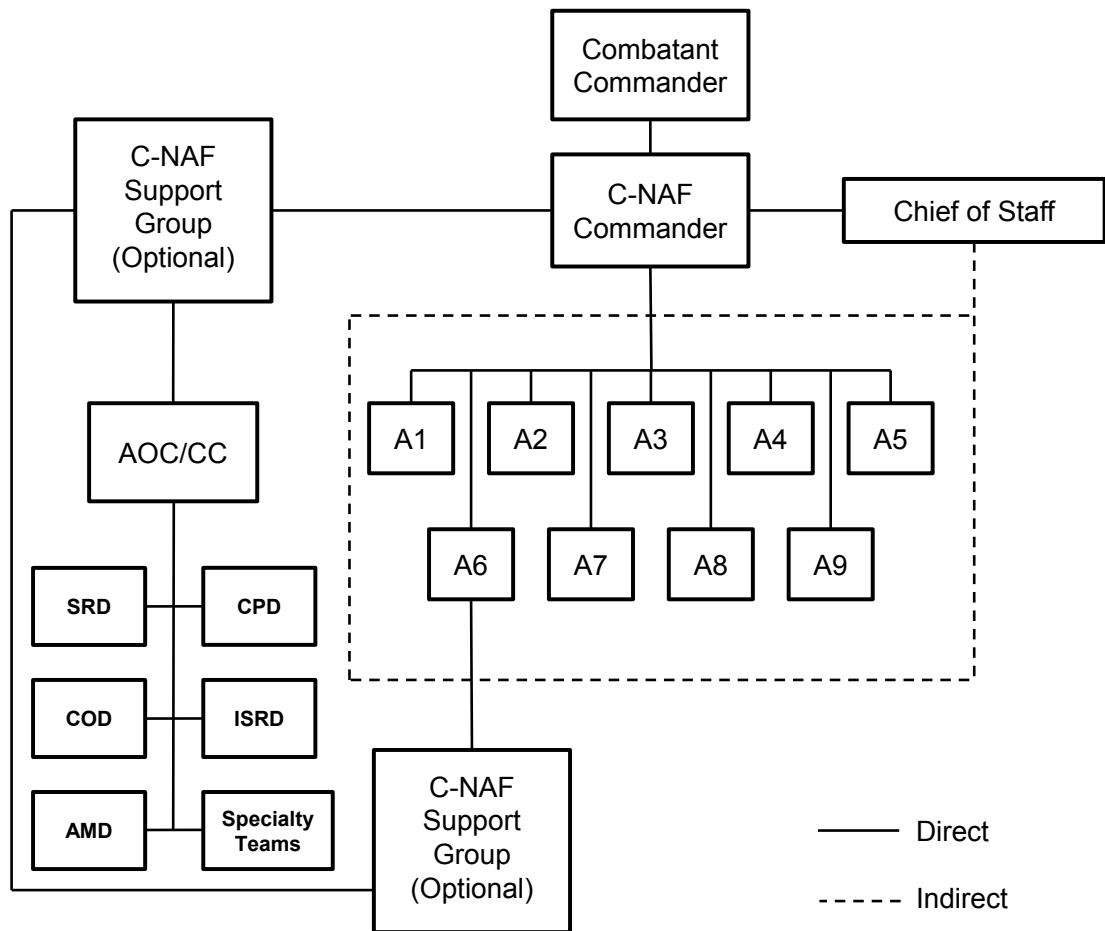


Figure 3. Current air component framework. (Adapted from Air Force Instruction 13-1AOC, vol. 3, *Operational Procedures—Air Operations Center [AOC]*, 2 November 2011 [incorporating change 1, 18 May 2012], 12, http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a3_5/publication/afi13-1aocv3/afi13-1aocv3.pdf.)

- C-NAF - component numbered air force
- AOC/CC - commander, air operations center
- A1 - manpower, personnel, and services
- A2 - intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)
- A3 - operations
- A4 - logistics

A5 - plans and requirements
A6 - communications
A7 - mission support and installations
A8 - strategic plans and programs
A9 - studies, analyses, assessments, and lessons learned
SRD - strategy division
CPD - combat plans division
COD - combat operations division
ISRD - ISR division
AMD - air mobility division

Room for Improvement

Due to the AFI guidance and past doctrinal mindsets that shaped the air component organizational construct, COCOMs, joint, and coalition partners do not clearly understand the distinction between the AFFOR and AOC. This misunderstanding is not limited to our joint and coalition partners, however. A survey across the Air Force would likely reveal that Airmen as well do not fully understand the defined doctrinal and AFI roles between the AFFOR and AOC. The lack of comprehension is likely not a surprise. Within the air component today, the lines of responsibilities between AOC and AFFOR operational elements in planning, coordination, and execution are often blurred and overlapping, resulting in misunderstanding and inefficiencies.

With the November 2014 doctrine update, the Air Force made great strides to correct some of the more problematic doctrinal concepts. Air Force doctrine now opens the door to address inefficiencies inherent in the current air component construct. Doctrine now reflects historical practice and provides a framework in which the COMAFFOR can expect to be dual-hatted as the JFACC and execute C2 through an AFFOR and AOC.⁶ As a result, the AOC can now easily evolve to be a joint or combined AOC, which should allow for better integration of joint and coalition partners into the air component.⁷ Additionally, doctrine stresses that the AFFOR and AOC should develop a habitual working relationship as a way to overcome problems that arise from the split staff.⁸

Despite the maturation of Air Force C2 doctrine, redundancies and inefficiencies persist within the updated framework. Although the COMAFFOR is

As a component major command (C-MAJCOM) operations director (AFFOR/A3), I and my AFFOR/A3 staff had constant interaction with COCOM J3s in the planning of future operations; however, in execution of the same operation or in a crisis, I was unable to provide real-time information when queried by the COCOM J3 or component 3s. I often found myself redirecting inquiries to the AOC (or air component deputy) versus being responsive to the COCOM J3.

I found a similar situation during my time as the DCFACC. I had more situational awareness and engagement with the US Central Command J3 and component 3s on both future and current operations than the air component operations director.

—Lt Gen CQ Brown Jr.

I had the same experience at the lower levels of coordination. As a deputy air component coordination element, I often found that there was no clearly defined separation between AOC and AFFOR responsibilities. The end result was confusion over problem ownership. During my time in the combined air operations center (CAOC) working closely with a combined joint task force J-35 staff, there was often confusion on the proper point of contact in the air component.

—Lt Col Rick Fournier



responsible for determining the size, shape, and location of the AFFOR staff and AOC to best support the operation, the admonition against dual-hatted staff positions remains, frequently resulting in overlap of work or, worse, creating a gap.⁹ Within the AFFOR, the A3 is “the principal staff assistant . . . in the direction and control of all assigned and attached Air Force forces” and is the “focal point for executing component operations outside the purview of the AOC.”¹⁰ Similarly, the AOC “is the Air Force component commander’s command and control (C2) center that provides the capability to plan, direct, and assess the activities of assigned and attached forces.”¹¹ Although not specifically stated in either doctrine or AFIs, the air component effectively places current operations within the AOC and future operations within the AFFOR/A3. Both staffs are tasked with planning, directing, and controlling assigned and attached forces without clear delineation of responsibilities in either doctrine or AFI guidance. As previously stated, this overlap causes confusion and some duplicative work at best. More concerning is a potential gap or lack of responsiveness that could negatively affect an operational outcome.

The confusion and inefficiency are not limited to inside the air component, though. The assumed line between current operations (AOC) and future operations (A3) potentially creates a seam in planning and execution in relation to COCOMs and sister components. This seam creates confusion between the joint organizations that the AFFOR and AOC staffs interact with on a daily basis. COCOM and component operations directorates (J3, G3, N3) are responsible for both current and future operations. In COCOM staffs and joint task forces, the component operations centers work directly for the operations directorate—the air component is the *outlier*. The AOC is aligned outside the AFFOR/A3 staff, creating a separate and somewhat illusory entity. As a result, when a joint staff interacts with the air component, there is often confusion over whom to contact—the A3 staff or the AOC. From experience, COCOM and component operations directors tend to engage more often with the air component deputy (or CAOC director if assigned) versus engaging the air component operations director (AFFOR/A3). With the current air component construct, the air component deputy is effectively the lowest level for oversight and integration of current and future operations. Similar oversight and integration happens at a lower level within joint and component staffs—specifically, at the operations director level.

To gain synergy with other components and joint staffs and to reduce the existing seams and/or gaps, the AOC as an “operations center”—an extremely capable “operations center”—can and should be aligned under the operations directorate. Although generally accepted practices in execution do exist, the AOC and AFFOR AFIs are not particularly clear in articulating the dividing line between responsibilities that are inside and outside the purview of the AOC. Given this background of similar responsibilities and the desired habitual relationship, why not align the A3 and AOC into a more synergistic organizational construct similar to joint doctrine and aligned with the rest of the joint community?¹²

Proposed Framework

Manning the AOC and AFFOR under this new construct will require an integrated and agile approach. Air components are not typically manned for contingency operations above and beyond steady-state phase zero operations. As such, in the early stages of any contingency, air component Airmen require the basic capability and flexibility to operate in the AOC or AFFOR to fill immediate, critical requirements. Whether working as a member of A3 coordinating the needed air assets for the theater one day or working in the AOC to develop the air tasking order to employ those assets the next, flexibility is the key. As a contingency progresses beyond steady-state phase zero, additional manning requirements would likely be sourced, allowing AOC and AFFOR Airmen to return to their normal AOC or AFFOR duties. Consequently, there must be an executable process to ramp up manning from phase zero to phase three and back down when the contingency is over.

To achieve this operational flexibility, the Air Force will need to modify the current training system for AFFOR and AOC personnel. All Airmen working on either staff should have core air component training and then receive additional specialized AOC or AFFOR training as necessary. This does not dissolve the concept of the AOC as a weapons system. A difference exists between the AOC weapons system and the AOC organization: the AOC weapons system is analogous to any Air Force major weapons system that requires funding, logistical support, and personnel to allow employment as an operational unit.¹³

Realignment of the AOC within the A3 would not result in major changes to the organizational structure. This structure would work in Falconer AOCs that reside in either a C-NAF or C-MAJCOM construct. However, regardless of whether this construct is at a C-NAF or C-MAJCOM, the traditional AFFOR functions must continue. In any case, the AOC will remain an entity with five divisions—just as it exists today. Nevertheless, the following minor changes will occur within the AOC to better align the air component with the joint force:

The air operations center commander (AOC/CC) can be dual-hatted as the AFFOR A3:

- Dual-hatting of the AOC/CC and A3 has occurred in the past when a single officer served as both director of operations, CAOC; and director of operations, Central Command Air Forces Forward.
- This arrangement is best suited for AOCs where the A3 and the AOC/CC positions are of equal rank. In a C-MAJCOM, in which the A3 is a usually a general officer, the AOC/CC would work directly for the A3.
- The AOC/CC would remain a Command Screening Board position.

Within the proposed air component structure, special staff functions should not be duplicated in the AOC and AFFOR but should be complementary and integrated.¹⁴ The five divisions in the AOC would still exist, receiving direct support from other staff components as necessary. The AOC functions would remain the same, but the naming convention would be modeled on a typical joint staff framework:



- The A30 will provide traditional AFFOR functions for the A3.
- The A32 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance division (ISR/D) will receive direct support from the AFFOR A2. The ISR/D houses traditional intelligence functions, which will benefit from direct support from the A2 staff.
- The A33 combat operations division (COD) and A35 combat plans division (CPD) will receive direct support from the A3.
 - The A33 COD closely aligns with the operations centers traditionally located at a joint or task force staff.
 - The A35 CPD focuses on the next 72 hours and therefore falls within the time frame of a traditional J35 staff looking at near-term future operations.
- The A34 air mobility division will receive direct support from the A3 as well but will also continue to receive assistance from the director of mobility forces “to ensure the effective integration of intertheater and intratheater air mobility operations, and [facilitate] intratheater air mobility operations.”¹⁵
- The A37 strategy division (SRD) will receive direct support from the AFFOR A5 while supporting A3 operations. The A37 SRD occupies a unique position, straddling what would traditionally be a J35 staff with future operations responsibilities and a J5 staff with strategy and future plans responsibilities. Within the A37 SRD, the strategy guidance branch leans towards the former with their 96-hour outlook, and the strategy plans branch aligns with the latter, looking outside five days. The operational assessments branch aligns with staff functions located within a typical J5 staff.

The Way Ahead

Historically, the air component has been an *outlier*. The recent change in doctrine allows the Air Force to seize the opportunity and make the air component more effective. The AOC within the A3 is neither a unique nor a new concept. Counter to AFI guidance and previous Air Force doctrine, the concept of incorporating the AOC within the A3 has been employed in different forms. Whether in the past, during exercises, or in the current drive to gain staff-manpower efficiencies, the AOC within the A3 construct has proven to have merit. Building on recent doctrine changes, an opportunity presents itself to update the air component structure and the associated AFIs and training to better employ air, space, and cyber capabilities for the combatant commander in the joint fight. We can maintain the status quo where the air component remains an outlier with self-induced operational gaps and seams between the AOC and A3, or we can seize the opportunity *to become an air component with a staff and operations center versus a staff and operations center that is an air component. We must have the presence of mind to do so.* 🌟

Notes

1. Lt Col Joseph H. Justice III, "Airpower Command and Control: Evolution of the Air and Space Operations Center as a Weapon System," research paper (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2004), <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ada423705>.
2. Joint Publication (JP) 3-30, *Command and Control of Joint Air Operations*, 10 February 2014, II-2, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_30.pdf.
3. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, *Volume I, Basic Doctrine*, 27 February 2015, 71, 90, <https://doctrine.af.mil/download.jsp?filename=Volume-1-Basic-Doctrine.pdf>.
4. Air Force Instruction (AFI) 13-1AOC, vol. 3, *Operational Procedures—Air Operations Center (AOC)*, 2 November 2011 (incorporating change 1, 18 May 2012), 5, pars. 1.1.1–1.1.2, http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a3_5/publications/afi13-1aocv3/afi13-1aocv3.pdf.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, "Command and Control Mechanisms," in "Annex 3-30, Command and Control," 7 November 2014, 41, <https://doctrine.af.mil/download.jsp?filename=3-30-Annex-COMMAND-CONTROL.pdf>.
7. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, "Air Operations Center," in "Annex 3-30, Command and Control," 42–43.
8. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, "Air Force Forces (AFFOR) Staff," in "Annex 3-30, Command and Control," 44–45.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, "Appendix C: The Air Force Forces (AFFOR) Staff," in "Annex 3-30, Command and Control," 107.
11. Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, "Air Operations Center," in "Annex 3-30, Command and Control," 42.
12. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, 11 August 2011, IV-10, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf.
13. AFI 13-1AOC, vol. 3, *Operational Procedures—Air Operations Center (AOC)*, 5, par. 1.1.
14. JP 3-30, *Command and Control of Joint Air Operations*, E-3.
15. *Ibid.*, III-28.



Lt Gen CQ Brown Jr., USAF

Lieutenant General Brown (BS, Texas Tech University; MSA, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is commander, US Air Forces Central Command, Southwest Asia. As the air component commander for US Central Command, the general is responsible for developing contingency plans and conducting air operations in a 20-nation area of responsibility covering Central and Southwest Asia. General Brown was commissioned in 1984 as a distinguished graduate of the ROTC program at Texas Tech University. He has served in a variety of positions at the squadron and wing levels, including an assignment to the US Air Force Weapons School as an F-16 instructor. His notable staff tours include aide-de-camp to the chief of staff of the Air Force; director, Secretary of the Air Force and Chief of Staff Executive Action Group; and deputy director of operations, US Central Command. He also served as a National Defense Fellow at the Institute for Defense Analyses, Alexandria, Virginia. General Brown has commanded a fighter squadron, the US Air Force Weapons School, and two fighter wings. Prior to his current assignment, he served as director of operations, strategic deterrence, and nuclear integration, Headquarters US Air Forces in Europe—Air Forces Africa, Ramstein Air Base, Germany. The general is a command pilot with more than 2,890 flying hours, including 95 combat hours.



Lt Col Rick Fournier, USAF

Lieutenant Colonel Fournier (BS, Texas A&M University; MS, Texas Tech University; MMAS, School of Advanced Military Studies) is currently deployed as the chief, Strategy Plans, 609th Air Operations Center. He is stationed at Langley AFB, Virginia, as chief, Wargaming and Concepts Branch, Directorate of Plans, Programs, and Requirements, Air Combat Command. Lieutenant Colonel Fournier was commissioned in 1998 from the ROTC program at Texas A&M University. He has served in a variety of positions at the squadron and wing levels, including chief, Group Standardization and Evaluation, and wing executive officer. He has also served as an air liaison officer at Fort Hood Army Installation, Texas. Lieutenant Colonel Fournier is a B-1B instructor pilot with 1,550 hours, including 429 combat hours.

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