

# The AETF Today

## Enabling Mission Command of Airpower

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### Introduction

In the winter 2010 edition of *Air & Space Power Journal*, then-Lt Gen Mike Hostage wrote an article titled “A Seat at the Table.” In the article, he outlined how, as the Air Force Central (AFCENT) and combined force air component commander (CFACC) for United States Central Command (CENTCOM), he had evolved the concept of the Air Component Coordination Element (ACCE). General Hostage established the 9th Air Expeditionary Task Force—Afghanistan (9th AETF-A) as a means to present forces to the joint force commander (JFC). For years, the campaign in Afghanistan had suffered from the lack of a focused and full-throated air perspective, and moving beyond the ACCE and establishing the 9th AETF-A aimed to fix that deficiency.<sup>1</sup> A few years later in early 2014, then-Maj Gen Kenneth S. Wilsbach wrote about the further evolution of the 9th AETF-A. The article described how the role of its commander had grown to

encompass a dizzying array of five hats covering the USAF, air component, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Joint roles and responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, the concept of multihatting the ACCE and AETF commander with a Joint leadership role has continued to provide a credible voice representing the airpower perspective. This concept has served the Joint force well in Afghanistan. It allowed the senior Airman to synchronize the delivery of airpower with the ground scheme of maneuver, or to envision and develop other air operations in support of campaign objectives, as did then-Maj Gen James B. Hecker with the counter-opioid campaign against the Taliban in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

Almost under the radar, AFCENT established a second AETF to support operations against the Islamic State, commonly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Da'esh. AFCENT activated the 9th Air Expeditionary Task Force—Levant (9th AETF-L) in 2015 based on the lessons from Afghanistan. Again, the purpose was to ensure a strong and credible voice for airpower, this time for what became Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), a combined joint task force (CJTF) under the command of an Army three-star. The 9th AETF-L replicated the success of the Afghanistan model, giving the senior Airman a seat at the table with CJTF leadership. As the operational environment in the fight against ISIS has continued to evolve, so, too, has the AETF. While the core responsibility of articulating and integrating airpower remains central, the 9th AETF-L has also strengthened the connection between air expeditionary wings (AEW), providing combat, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and mobility airpower and the CJTF. It has also adjusted how AFCENT presents air advisors to the CJTF commander to increase responsiveness to CJTF direction and better support the OIR campaign. The 9th AETF-L and AFCENT are also planning and experimenting with operational-level airpower command and control (C2) constructs, with an eye toward developing mission command capability at echelon down to the AEW level. Finally, the 9th AETF-L is taking steps to structure the AETF staff to provide a ready-made joint task force (JTF)-capable headquarters, at the same time serving as the Air Force element of the CJTF-OIR headquarters. Taking these actions will provide the Air Force an organization and structure ready to accept tasking as a headquarters, with augmentation, that could serve as the core for a JTF in the future, including potentially CJTF-OIR itself.

### **The Seat at the Table**

Unlike in the Afghanistan model, in CJTF-OIR, the senior Airman is not only the commander of the AETF-L but also the deputy commander for operations (DCOM-O) for CJTF-OIR. In his or her Air Force hat, the AETF-L

commander is responsible to the CFACC for recommending adjustments to allocation and apportionment, and for suggesting effective airpower applications in line with the CJTF commander's intent and scheme of maneuver. As the DCOM responsible for all Joint force operations across the combined joint operational area, the senior Airman also has a strong voice in both the joint planning process and execution across all domains. As such, he or she can direct the CJTF staff and components as needed to ensure operations account for the effective employment of airpower.

These two hats increase multifold the effectiveness of the joint air component coordination element (JACCE), which also is under the operational control (OPCON) of the 9th AETF-L commander. The JACCE serves as the CFACC's representative to the planning and execution processes of not only the CJTF headquarters but the subordinate Task Force (TF)–Iraq and Special Operations Joint Task Force. The authorities that derive from being the 9th AETF-L commander, exercising OPCON of the JACCE, and from serving as deputy commander for the CJTF combined, provide a strong voice for airpower. If necessary, this even includes the ability to compel CJTF staff elements to collaboratively plan with the CFACC to ensure a full Joint perspective is brought to the table in the development of courses of action (COA) or during execution.

The command relationship governing AETF's can be slightly confusing to non-Airmen. In most Joint contexts, leaders at higher echelons of command retain OPCON of forces, offering subordinate or adjacent formations tactical control (TACON) for use in the battlespace. In the case of the 9th AETF-L, this relationship is largely inverted. The AETF maintains OPCON of three wings, but the CFACC retains TACON of the combat, ISR, and mobility power generated by two of them. True to our mantra of centralized control of airpower at the theater level, the CFACC, as is normal, tasks the wings to fight their bases and fly the air tasking order (ATO) under his retained TACON authority. The instrument the CFACC uses to execute this mission command is the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), which through the Master Air Attack Plan (MAAP) process, produces special instructions (SPINS) and the daily ATO.

The retention of TACON by the CFACC is wholly consistent with airpower doctrine. No one can execute the C2 of Joint effects at scale and in-depth like the Air Force. By retaining TACON, the CFACC also maintains the capability to provide those Joint effects essentially on-demand and, when required, at scale to the combined force commander (CFC). Furthermore, retained TACON allows the CFACC to rapidly shift forces across multiple area of responsibility (AOR)-wide missions, avoiding the perils of "penny-packeting" airpower. If, for example, the commander in Afghanistan needs additional capability or capacity for a par-

ticular operation, the CFACC can manage that need by reallocating capabilities from other missions, including OIR. In May 2019, the CFACC and CENTCOM commander made several such decisions, reallocating ISR and strike resources around the theater in response to specific and credible threats of an imminent Iranian attack on US forces and interests in Iraq. The role of the 9th AETF-L commander in such cases is to engage both the CFACC and CJTF staff and leadership, articulating the commander's intent and risk assessments across the supported and supporting command lines.

Whether in a crisis situation as in May 2019 or during steady-state operations, the CFACC's retention of TACON has historically focused the 9th AETF-L commander upward, toward the CFACC and CAOC staff. For example, the 9th AETF-L commander might provide advice to planners at the CAOC via the JACCE on desired airpower contributions for ongoing or upcoming operations. Similarly, the commander will have almost-daily touchpoints with the CFACC or deputy CFACC (DCFACC), where they might provide updates on the apportionment of airpower resources across the theater that impact options available to the CJTF commander. In all cases, the AETF commander fills a critical role, maintaining a tight relationship between the CJTF and the air component.

### **Strengthening the AEW's Links to the Joint Fight**

While the upward engagement of the AETF commander toward the CFACC and his staff is necessary, experience suggests it is not sufficient if we are to attain the CSAF's objective of building Joint war fighters. Fundamentally, while such an approach reinforces the Air Force's long proven and doctrinally sound desire to execute centralized control and decentralized execution, it provides an insufficient focus on mission command at echelon within the air component. If CJTF-OIR is to be a true Joint task force, it is just as important for air component Airmen supporting CJTF to understand the commander's intent—meaning the CJTF commander's intent. While CFACC intent is certainly also important, to most effectively execute a supporting relationship to CJTF, the wings and squadrons executing the CJTF-OIR mission require an understanding of CJTF and its subordinate command operations.

This need grows as the complexity in the battlespace increases. During normal combat operations, with relatively static battle positions and no major changes to task, purpose, and intent, the extant battle rhythm established between the CJTF-OIR staff, the OIR JACCE, and CAOC are more than sufficient to ensure the correct application of airpower, whether ISR, mobility, or strike. While some might think that in more dynamic and crisis-driven scenarios, the centralized nature of airpower would prove a strength, it more often manifests instead as a

limitation. The main issue that emerges in these situations is the supporting AEW's inability to maintain awareness of the rapidly evolving situation. This inability manifests as curtailed tactical understanding of the CJTF commander's intent, with a corresponding degradation in their ability to support the CJTF.

As an example of this dynamic, the experience of CJTF-OIR following the liberation of the last territory held by ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) in March 2019 is instructive. Following the destruction of the physical caliphate, the fight against ISIS continued across northeast Syria. There were no frontlines in this ongoing fight against ISIS, but there *were* frontlines where the coalition exercised air control against other actors, such as the Syrian Regime and Russia. This air control allowed CJTF to maintain and its partner force—the Syrian Democratic Forces—to effectively control all the territory north and east of the Euphrates River in Syria with a small footprint of only about 1,000 personnel on the ground. This achievement was only possible because of airpower.

Despite the complexity of multiple players vying for access to the airspace and the need for continued operations against ISIS, during this time planner interaction between the CJTF staff and the CAOC was more than sufficient to meet the needs of the CJTF commander. With the high turnover rates at both CJTF and within the air component due to rotational cycles, the JACCE proved invaluable in maintaining situational awareness and linkages across planning and execution time horizons. Senior leader dialogue at the two-star level between the 9th AETF-L commander and deputy CFACC supplemented these interactions, ensuring a common understanding between the CJTF and the air component in its supporting role. The CJTF commander's intent for the air component was simple and relatively static: (1) maintain an acceptable level of air control, (2) utilize ISR to develop ISIS targets, and (3) employ Joint fires to strike targets either deliberately or in a dynamic environment as the ground force conducted back-clearance and targeted operations against the enemy.

Since the factors impacting the battlespace were relatively static, it was sufficient during the post-MERV time period for the commander's intent to flow from the CJTF staff to the CAOC either directly or via the JACCE, then down to the executing units from the CFACC. The 9th AETF-L leadership certainly had touchpoints with wing leadership—but most of the dialogue centered on ADCON responsibilities with only limited discussions of the CJTF scheme of maneuver. When operational discussions did occur between the 9th AETF-L and its subordinate wings, it was generally to provide wing leadership with direct feedback in terms of either battle damage assessment or to express the ground force commander's (GFC) appreciation for air contributions to the fight. The idea behind this dialogue at the time was to provide wing commanders the data needed

to share with their Airmen the impact their contributions were having in the campaign, which was information the air component did not have readily available. The feedback was used purely as a motivational tool—it was certainly not a required action to meet the CJTF commander's intent.

From late September to early October 2019, the situation began to change rapidly in three ways. First, the amount of airpower in the CENTCOM AOR underwent a number of gyrations, constraining available resources from a supply perspective. Second, Iranian threat network activity increased, particularly in the wake of a series of attacks by the Houthis and the direct Iranian attack against the Saudi Aramco facility. Finally, the dynamics on the ground shifted under CJTF-OIR's feet, with a substantial uptick in fighting near Idlib, in northwestern Syria, and guidance from political leadership to conduct a deliberate withdrawal of ground forces as Turkish forces entered Syria from the north.

As these factors collided in time and space, CJTF-OIR rapidly adjusted its desired outcomes and objectives across the CJOA. Force protection—always important—became the top priority. In Iraq, illegitimate militia groups threatened to attack coalition forces and interests. In Syria, a variety of actors, including the Russian-back Syrian regime, Syrian opposition groups comprised of Islamic extremists, and Iranian-backed militias all maneuvered to gain an advantage on the ground and seize key terrain as the Turkish military incurred from the north. As this happened, the US military began retrograding in Syria from west to east. Accordingly, CJTF-OIR, working with the CFACC and CENTCOM, reprioritized ISR to maintain the required level of battlespace awareness. CJTF also worked with the CFACC and CAOC to increase and configure fighter defensive counterair (DCA) coverage and on-call close air support based on the situation on the ground. This situation evolved rapidly, with shifting locations of friendly and other forces and dynamic schedules for ground movement. The CJTF plan for retrogrades and reinforcements at various forward bases and observation posts changed by the hour.

Through a series of discussions with the DCFACC, the air component reworked the broad CFACC intent and the air scheme of maneuver. The latter included new locations for combat air patrols for both ISR and fires, as well as a surge of mobility assets to move in reinforcements and move out retrograding personnel and materiel. The CFACC also clarified his intent, with substantial input from the JACCE and 9th AETF-L, allowing for a robust defense of forces on the ground should they come under attack by any actor, but also emphasizing the need to avoid inadvertent escalation. Turkish military forces and their proxies, operating in close proximity to US forces and engaging elements of the US's long supported partner force in the fight against ISIS, complicated the situation even further.

In addition to providing input up to the CFACC, the 9th AETF-L also focused down to the wings during this time. AETF leadership repeatedly engaged AEW leadership to ensure the timely and fullest possible understanding of CJTF intent and scheme of maneuver as it evolved. While the CAOC effectively managed the technical aspects of the air domain during this critical time, this direct dialogue between the 9th AETF-L and wing leadership provided additional context and awareness during a rapidly evolving situation. This put a substantial but appropriate operational burden on wing leadership somewhat out of the norm for Air Force commanders. Wing leaders essentially fused the technical inputs from the CAOC, such as sortie rates, weapons load-outs, and the like, with both CFACC intent and 9th AETF-L context.

While the CAOC and 9th AETF-L provided inputs to the AEW, it was leadership at the lower echelons—wing commanders, squadron supervisors, and flight leads—that truly drove mission success. Airmen on the flight line loading weapons, armed with the context for why load-outs kept changing, worked doubly hard to ensure the right aircraft had the right ordnance. Crew chiefs and specialists ensured sortie generation on time for the next flight. Logistics Readiness Squadron and Force Support Squadron Airmen were ready to receive weary forces and equipment returning from the frontlines in Syria as they retrograded. In the air, the stakes were particularly high. When US forces at an observation post near Kobani, Syria, came under fire from a Turkish artillery battery north of the border, the aircrew kept their cool, deescalating rather than escalating the situation, avoiding the need to use force in self-defense. Their precise understanding and application of CFACC and CJTF-OIR commander's intent allowed them to make the right call time and time again as a fluid and multiactor environment evolved around them. Daily conversations with AEW leadership allowed the 9th AETF-L to keep commanders informed of this evolution and the complex mosaic on the ground.

Wing leadership and their Airmen deserve all the credit for their professional execution. The presence of a senior Airman at CJTF-OIR supported these Airmen, not vice versa. The 9th AETF-L was able to shape the ground scheme of maneuver based on the ability of airpower to provide ISR, mobility, and combat power. The OIR JACCE was able to shape CFACC intent through planner-to-planner dialogue regarding the various actors on the ground and the threat there represented. Finally, through down-and-in communications, the 9th AETF-L kept the AEWs informed of CJTF-OIR intent and the situation on the ground, allowing for more comprehensive understanding and thus more synchronized execution between air and land components. The aggregation of these activities during this period represented the first tentative steps in AFCENT toward executing mission command at an echelon below the theater-level air component.

## **Mission Command at Echelon**

Several months before the situation in Syria evolved as described above, the 9th AETF-L and 9th AETF-A, our sister AETF in Afghanistan, began a dialogue with the CFACC on alternative C2 constructs for airpower across the CENTCOM AOR. In the case of Afghanistan, this was driven by geography and capability. The relatively isolated Afghanistan CJOA was a perfect place to start, as most of the airpower employed emanated from bases within the country, including tanker, fighter, and ISR aircraft. Furthermore, a mature theater air control system (TACS) was in place, providing an extant mission command capability. In November 2019, the CFACC delegated TACON of the air assets in Afghanistan to the 9th AETF-A, and they became largely—although not entirely—self-sufficient. By retaining OPCON, the CFACC retained the ability to reallocate assets throughout CENTCOM, either to provide increased support to forces in Afghanistan or, more rarely, to swing those forces toward other priorities. Most daily flight operations dropped off the ATO, governed instead by locally generated orders under the 9th AETF-A.

While the 9th AETF-A was preparing to move forward with its innovative approach to mission command, the 9th AETF-L directed the OIR JACCE to work with the 332nd AEW and CAOC on alternative C2 constructs for airpower in support of OIR, where a different set of challenges emerged. First, most airpower for OIR is not generated within the CJTF-OIR CJOA, covering Iraq and Syria. While the majority of the daily support for OIR comes from the wings aligned under the 9th AETF-L, those wings operate largely from bases outside the CJOA. Furthermore, the 9th AETF-L's wings also support operations up and down the Persian Gulf, and bases around the Gulf not under the 9th AETF-L provide airpower for OIR. Furthermore, the backbone for tactical C2 of airpower is not in the CJOA. Neither the 9th AETF-L nor the wings underneath it has ready access to the TACS for OIR, which is comprised of disparate elements within and outside the CJOA.

Despite these challenges, 9th AETF-L elected to press ahead and apply intellectual energy to the idea of distributed mission command. The 332nd AEW, which provided the preponderance (but not all) combat airpower for OIR, was uniquely situated to accept mission-type orders. The ideas began with a question: what if we give the 332nd AEW commander an order to maintain air superiority over US forces in Syria, and to strike Da'esh targets in the CJOA when requested by the GFC? The thought was that the wing commander should be able to accept such an order, conduct mission analysis, and develop COAs through a review of the available intelligence and dialogue with the GFC. These COAs would include



how many sorties to fly and where, weapons load-outs, tanker plans, and the like. The wing commander could rapidly adjust the flying schedule—effectively a local version of the ATO—in near real-time to meet emerging requirements, seize the initiative, and exploit opportunities based on the situation on the ground and commander's intent from OIR or the supported GFC.

Implementation of this idea faced several hurdles, each of which would be even more challenging in less permissive environments. Recognizing this fact, 9th AETF-L and the CFACC committed to experimenting to advance the ideas and concepts that would be required for the C2 of airpower in the high-end fight. The experimentation plan acknowledged the CAOC's ability to synchronize Joint effects at a scale and scope well beyond any other mission command capability or C2 node in existence today. Nonetheless, both the Air Superiority 2030 Enterprise Capability Collaboration Team (ECCT) and the Multi-Domain C2 (MDC2) ECCT that followed it identified the need for the Air Force to develop alternatives to this command construct. Both ECCTs envisioned environments where the strengths of the CAOC became vulnerabilities, and where successful operations would depend on the initiative of countless leaders at echelon operating on intent. This approach challenged the C2 construct with which generations of Airmen have now grown up and grown comfortable. While the operational environment of the OIR CJOA did not require an adjustment to mission command, experimentation in a mature theater with a well-understood yet dynamic operational environment seemed likely to yield lessons that could be applied elsewhere.

### **Putting All Echelons of Command Back in Command and Control**

During a tabletop exercise designed to lay the foundation for live-fly experimentation, a combined CAOC, 9th AETF-L, and 332nd AEW planning team identified a host of authorities that currently resided at the CAOC, but which would have to be executed at echelon in a degraded C2 environment. These ranged across a wide arc and included items such as the authority to launch an aircraft, conduct a reattack, or reposition a combat air patrol. As the team examined and discussed the need to execute these authorities elsewhere, they began to ask why the CAOC was making these decisions in the first place. The epiphany then hit: over the course of many years and probably for a variety of good reasons at the time, the C2 construct had slowly removed almost every opportunity for combat decision-making in the air. To fix this, leadership at the CAOC recognized the need for mission-type orders to deal with contingencies such as a degraded C2 environment. Even more importantly, they also realized these same mission-type orders could provide broad guidance and intent that would give commanders and operators the context and authority they needed for combat decision-making at

echelons of command or in the cockpit. In other words, 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. Instead, Airmen should imagine how they can retool the current air component C2 system and processes to improve war fighting on a daily basis. To do so, commands need to incorporate mission-type orders and the concept of mission command into the MAAP and daily guidance and orders from the CAOC.

At its heart, mission command is about empowerment. When executed well, mission command provides clear guidance and intent that empowers subordinate commanders to execute without having to ask “Mother, may I” from higher headquarters. The outcome is a synchronized initiative among subordinate commanders, where all know the desired outcome and the left and right limits of actions they can take. As mission command permeates echelons, leaders can seize the initiative, innovate, and exploit otherwise fleeting opportunities. They know the overall objective—the “why” behind their actions—and understand the level of risk their higher command is willing to accept. Armed with this knowledge, they surprise us with their ingenuity, increase the speed of the decision cycle, and outpace the enemy, all of which drive mission success.

For the air component, this kind of empowerment must occur in two places. The first of these is in the battlespace itself. Here, those operating the aircraft or delivering effects from other domains can better accomplish the mission if given intent and allowed to execute. For example, consider a two-ship of fighters is returning to base from a DCA mission after their vulnerability time is complete. Today, these fighters are required to go straight home. Indeed, they are most often denied if they try to take the initiative by contacting a joint terminal attack controller to execute a show of force near a base that has been threatened recently, or if they ask to perform additional defensive patrols over exposed ground forces in an area adjacent to their flight path home. If it isn’t on the ATO, it isn’t allowed without at least deputy CFACC approval.

Yet, each of these tasks—executing a show of force or additional DCA—is exactly what commanders would intend those aircraft do if they have the time and fuel available. Limited air assets across the CENTCOM AOR preclude having the coverage needed to fill every GFC request or to cover every bit of airspace desired to prevent Russian or Syrian Regime incursions. If, however, a mission-type order supplemented the ATO, and if the concept of mission command was adopted up and down the chain of command, Airmen delivering effects could capitalize and exploit opportunities, whether due to having extra gas and extra weapons or due to an enemy misstep. Rather than assume the plan instantiated in the ATO is the perfect solution to a complex problem, Airmen should assume it

is merely a starting point from which they can deviate to better meet the intent of the commander. Rather than assume those controlling the execution of the ATO—whether on the CAOC floor or executing TAC C2—have perfect situational awareness, Airmen should assume the individual in the fight is best positioned to make tactical decisions. Others can supplement their situational awareness to improve their tactical decision-making, but they should not supplant it. This approach has the added benefit of sharpening the contributions of TAC C2 and the CAOC battle captains who, instead of becoming mired in the tactical, can instead focus on operational-level decision making in support of the CFACC.

The second kind of empowerment required to implement the concept of mission command is, appropriately, empowering commanders at echelon. Under the current construct, the TACON of forces is executed directly from the CFACC to the cockpit, skipping the echelons of command in between. While the AETFs and their subordinate wings, groups, and squadrons have OPCON of their forces, once TACON is withheld at the theater level, little beyond administrative control (ADCON) remains. Returning TACON to all echelons of command again allows the ATO to serve as a starting point for subordinate units to meet higher-level intent rather than being viewed as the only vehicle for doing so. Furthermore, it improves the air component's war-fighting effectiveness by leveraging the vast experience and knowledge resident in the chain-of-command. As an example, consider a two-ship of DCA fighters scheduled for a tanker, and assume that tanker is required to get to the Combat Air Patrol location. Under the current construct, if the tanker falls out for some reason, the two-ship of DCA fighters must cancel. If instead, the AETF, AEW, Expeditionary Operations Group, and Expeditionary Fighter Squadron commanders had TACON, they might decide to launch the fighters anyway to cover a nearby location where a known DCA requirement was unfilled. Or, if the fighters were multirole, those same lower-level commanders might send the two-ship to support a nearby GFC who had an unfilled request for air support, or who perhaps had an emerging target that had not been apparent during ATO development. Similarly, a commander might decide based on higher-level intent to add or remove lines from the flying schedule based on the health of the fleet, to meet a more robust sortie generation requirement for a major strike shaping up for the days ahead. Empowered commanders would know this through coordination with adjacent or supported commanders on the ground, or through discussions of higher-level intent passed from the AETF staff colocated with the JTF headquarters.

Commanders empowered to execute TACON, and subject to the baseline requirements of the ATO but with the flexibility to make smart command decisions in line with intent, will be better postured to execute during more complex con-

tingencies. Having been allowed or even required to execute disciplined initiative each day, they will be more ready and more confident to do the same when communications with the CAOC degrades in a contested environment. Combining this aspect of mission command with the empowerment of those at the tactical edge will be the key to success in high-end combat. By putting all echelons of command back in C2, smart leaders will be able and empowered to make the right decisions when their expertise is needed most.

### **Task Force–Air**

Another significant evolution of how the 9th AETF-L and AFCENT chose to present forces was through the creation of Task Force–Air, a Joint and combined organization focused on the development of the Iraqi Air Enterprise for the purposes of improving its ability to defeat Da'esh. Then-Lt Gen Jeffrey L. Harrigian laid the foundation for TF–Air in 2017 when he directed the creation of the 321st AEW and the Coalition Air Advisory and Training Team (CAATT).

Modeled in many ways on the lessons from air advising in Afghanistan, General Harrigian aimed to centralize the advising effort and make it a more relevant and substantial contributor to OIR's campaign progress. While successful in this regard, the alignment of the 321st AEW under the 9th AETF-L and AFCENT put it in a supporting role to OIR, not under the direction of the CJTF-OIR commander. Furthermore, the CAATT existed only as an AFCENT entity. From the OIR perspective, it appeared as just another staff entity, advocating for capabilities but not contributing to the CJTF scheme of maneuver. In a CJOA where the kill mechanism for the adversary usually was not US or coalition firepower but rather the Iraqi military—advised, supported, and sometimes equipped by the coalition—these attributes limited the positive impact the 321st AEW and CAATT could have on the campaign relative to ground and special operations elements of the Joint force.

In July 2019, the 9th AETF-L took steps to address these limitations. Working with the AFCENT staff, the CFACC agreed to create a new task force comprised of Air Force and a limited number of coalition air advisors. TF–Air, as uncreatively branded, was then offered TACON to CJTF-OIR. Once CJTF-OIR accepted TACON, TF–Air became a subordinate component of the CJTF, coequal with TF–Iraq (the OIR land component providing advice and assistance to the Iraqi Army) and the Special Operations Joint Task Force (SOJTF). While such a rebranding and command relationship adjustment might seem insignificant on its surface, it made all the difference. The day before TF–Air stood up, the 321st AEW commander had a seat at the end of the table in the OIR commanding general's conference room, and he was seldom consulted. A day later, the TF–Air

commander had a seat near the head of the table with other commanders. He was called upon for input and opinion as a matter of course, and his staff was called upon to coordinate and comment on CJTF-OIR plans and orders. Thus, while it remains the smallest of OIR's subordinate commands, TF-Air now has a "seat at the table" as a component working by, with, and through the air elements of the Iraqi Security Forces as they endeavor to achieve the enduring defeat of Da'esh.

### **The Next Evolution—A Joint Force-Capable Headquarters**

The creation of TF-Air brought an Airman's perspective to CJTF-OIR's efforts to enhance partner capacity, which became the main effort following the liberation of the last ISIS-held territory. It also provided an opportunity to reexamine the 9th AETF-L and what it contributed to the CJTF-OIR fight. Rather than persisting merely as an ADCON headquarters over three wings, the question became whether there was a way to reimagine the AETF as an element of mission command for CJTF-OIR. After observing how the US Army deployed into the OIR headquarters, it became clear there was.

In most people's minds, the CJTF-OIR headquarters staff is formed around an Army corps headquarters, supplemented by Joint Individual Augmentees (JIA) and coalition personnel. This view may have been accurate at the beginning of OIR, but it no longer comports with today's reality. Today, the Army corps headquarters assigned to OIR provides the commanding general and command sergeant major but brings with it only about a third of its garrison force, or around 250 soldiers. The CJTF-OIR headquarters, by contrast, comprises of more than 1,000 individuals. Thus, the corps only fills about a quarter of OIR staff positions. JIA members comprise another quarter, with the Air Force alone providing around 120 personnel. Coalition, civilian, and contractor personnel flush out the remaining 50 percent of the staff.

The Army *corps* staff that deploys to OIR thus does not actually provide the *core* of the CJTF. Rather, they plug into the other 75 percent of the OIR staff that is already running and operating at full speed when they arrive. Furthermore, the command team and many of the key officers from the corps still retain many of their garrison responsibilities. While the vast majority of their effort is focused on CJTF-OIR after they arrive, they are required to balance their responsibilities and never fully divest from garrison or nondeployed duties. In this sense, while the Air Force (in theory) suffers from a lack of headquarters unit cohesion in the deployed environment, we gain in deployed effectiveness at the headquarters level as Airmen are relieved of nondeployed duties throughout their time in CENTCOM. Furthermore, the alleged benefit of headquarters cohesion is questionable. While the corps staff may train together and deploy

together, their cohesion as a body that makes up only a minority percentage of the staff does not bring substantial advantages. In some cases, their cohesion can create an insularity that is even disruptive to the remainder of the CJTF staff. For all these reasons, Joint doctrine recommends using a Joint force-capable headquarters only as the initial sourcing solution for a JTF. As the JTF evolves from dealing with the initial crisis and moves further along in the campaign, a purpose-built headquarters is generally preferred.

Taking these observations into account, the 9th AETF-L is moving forward with the next iteration in C2, reimagining how we present Airmen to the CJTF-OIR headquarters. The way forward builds upon the strengths of how Airmen currently deploy. The principal element of this change is to realign the JIA Airmen assigned to the CJTF directly under 9th AETF-L, forming an Air Force element of the CJTF-OIR joint staff. Currently, these Airmen are aligned under a squadron, the 387th AES, responsible for almost 500 Joint Expeditionary Tasking/Individual Augmentee (JET/IA) Airmen around the AOR. Realigning the Airmen on the OIR staff will not only relieve pressure on the 387th AES, but it also puts Air Force leadership on the OIR staff directly in charge of the Airmen working on that staff. This realignment simplifies command relationships, as although the 9th AETF-L commander currently is responsible for these Airmen, it is only through a much longer and less efficient wing, group and squadron command chain.

Realigning the approximately 120 JET/IA Airmen on the OIR staff under the 9th AETF-L also allows the construction of a “shadow” core staff capability that could support future OIR command evolutions. As an example, the OIR staff has approximately 35 Airmen working in the CJ2 directorate. Naming the senior Airmen in CJ2 as the 9th AETF-L A2 and aligning CJ2 Airmen under that 9th AETF-L directorate provides a staff structure the Air Force could leverage for future JTF leadership opportunities. Airmen on the staff already arrive in the CENTCOM theater trained to work in a Joint headquarters. By virtue of their positions, they already exercise joint planning and execution skills every day, working Joint processes, and executing a Joint battle rhythm. While they will be no more an intact headquarters element than the Army’s OIR contribution from the corps staff, aligning Airmen in this way structures the 9th AETF-L for rapid re-tasking should the OIR headquarters further evolve, or in the event another crisis requires a mission command element.

## **Conclusion**

While mission-type orders provide tactical guidance to our formation, exquisite communication suites speed our decision-making, and technology advancements enable our capabilities, mission command is ultimately about none of these.

It is about enabling Airmen. Ensuring they understand the purpose of their contribution is what enables innovation and motivates mission success. This philosophy is wholly consistent with the tenant of centralized control and decentralized execution. When Airmen understand their purpose, it allows for the establishment of clear lines of communication and understanding the operational environment. The ability of a commander or senior enlisted leader to explain the ongoing campaign for Airmen and link their contributions to overall effort not only secures awareness but increases morale. Regardless of the architecture of mission command, there is always a requirement to articulate the mission to Airmen that technology will never replace. The more Airmen understand that context, the better they can contribute to the Joint campaign.

In his initial days as the 21st chief of staff of the Air Force, Gen David L. Goldfein identified the concept of Joint war-fighting excellence as one of his big three priorities. This tenant implored leaders to speak in Joint terms, understand and contribute to Joint doctrine, and to seek experience serving in Joint organizations. Theater airpower under the centralized control of the CFACC remains the preferred method for presenting air and space capabilities and providing air and space effects to CJTF-OIR for long-held and validated doctrinal reasons. Nonetheless, by advancing the AETF construct, exploring alternate mission command and distributed C2 opportunities, and reimagining the role of the AETF in the Joint fight, the 9th AETF-L continues to evolve. This evolution is not about dominating conversations in the Joint environment. It is about making the Joint team stronger. Joint operations, after all, are about the synchronization of capabilities across components and domains. From combined naval and ground operations at the Battle of Yorktown that led to the defeat of Cornwallis to the Joint All-Domain Command and Control concepts envisioned today, the Joint team is more effective when everyone has a seat at the table. Through innovative approaches to command relationships, C2, and staff structure, AFCENT and its subordinate AETFs continue to forge new tools and methods for the Air Force to engage in the Joint fight through the crucible of ongoing and persistent combat operations. ♣

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**Notes**

1. Mike Hostage, “A Seat at the Table: Beyond the Air Component Coordination Element,” *Air & Space Power Journal (ASPJ)* 24, no. 4, 18–20, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/ASPJ/>.

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