



# Team Building

## The Next Chapter of Airpower Command and Control in Afghanistan

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On 22 May 2011, command of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan (9 AETF-A) shifted from Maj Gen Charles Lyon’s team to ours, and almost immediately we went to work writing the next chapter of airpower support to counterinsurgency operations. As we began our new roles, the 9 AETF-A staff and subordinate commanders were keenly aware of the recent changes to the command and control (C2) architecture of US Air Forces Central (AFCENT) that occurred in November 2010, thus establishing the sub-theater C2.<sup>1</sup> Major General Lyon’s tenure in Afghanistan included significant organizational change, and his team did an outstanding job of laying the foundation. By the time our team took the reins, everything was in place and running smoothly. Assuming the transformation

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complete and the major changes behind us, we discovered, however, that the stark situation on the ground made those expectations a far cry from reality.

Specifically, the 9 AETF-A underwent a second major C2 transformation between December 2011 and May 2012 when the 9 AETF-A commander was appointed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command's deputy chief of staff for air (IJC DCOS AIR).<sup>2</sup> This change significantly affected how the Air Force conducts airpower C2 in Afghanistan. Given this relatively new organizational change and the major events that unfolded during the past year, this article seeks to (1) describe in detail the airpower C2 transition that occurred as a result of assuming the IJC DCOS AIR position in December 2011, and (2) present observations and lessons learned from our team's tenure in Afghanistan, especially with regard to airpower C2 and the AETF-A structure.

## Our Goal: Make the ISAF Commander Successful

*Unity of command ensures concentration of effort for every objective under one responsible commander.*

—Air Force Doctrine Document 1

*Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*

14 October 2011

As the 9 AETF-A staff and subordinate commanders entered Afghanistan in the spring and summer of 2011, the AFCENT subtheater C2 construct was well established and running under both 9 AETF-A and 9 AETF-Iraq. Because discussion and debates regarding the utility of a subtheater C2 had passed, we could immediately focus on the mission, taking full advantage of the responsibilities and authorities established seven months prior.

As the 9 AETF-A, we recognized our most important priority: *Support the commander of ISAF (COMISAF), and help him succeed by his*



*measures of effectiveness.*<sup>3</sup> Everything that our team executed in Afghanistan reflected this short yet clear requirement, which provided straightforward guidance to the staff and subordinate commanders in terms of directing their efforts and resources. We often referred to this priority statement as a reminder of why and how we should operate as an organization.

In May 2011, the 9 AETF-A commander filled three roles simultaneously (commander, 9 AETF-A; director, Air Component Coordination Element–Afghanistan [ACCE-A]; and deputy commander for air, US Forces–Afghanistan [USFOR-A]), later filling a fourth role as IJC DCOS AIR. As 9 AETF-A, we conducted Air Force forces duties at the combined/joint operating area level while serving as the connective tissue between the AFCENT staff and the groups and wings of combined/joint operating area–Afghanistan. This construct allowed the groups and wings to have a voice and advocate for their positions and requirements while ensuring that the AFCENT staff had a senior Air Force commander pushing its theater priorities down to wing and group level.

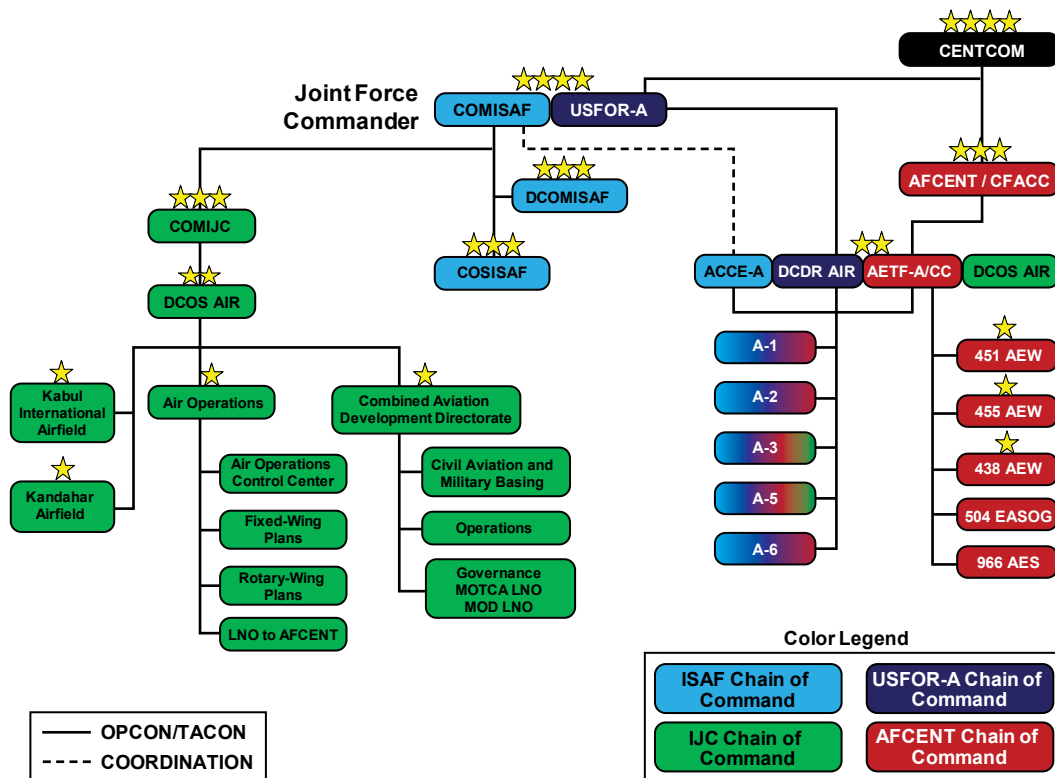
A year's experience operating under the AETF-A convinced us that selecting this construct was the correct decision for the air component. As an airpower team, we found that having a single Air Force Airman leading from the front but living alongside subordinate commanders and coalition partners represented a highly effective design for conditions on the ground in Afghanistan. Perhaps more importantly, the commander of 9 AETF-A and its approximately 10,000 US Airmen serving in Afghanistan afforded the air component a seat at the table for every major strategic and operational discussion that occurred throughout the past year. Personal and professional relationships remained critical to sustaining effective airpower advocacy and moving forward, but our joint and coalition counterparts were more receptive to a commander than a senior liaison.

The ACCE-A fills the doctrinal role established by the Air Force for liaison and coordination between the air component and the joint force commander.<sup>4</sup> Although the 9 AETF-A commander began the tour



with three distinct roles and picked up a fourth in December 2011, mentioned above, we actually found that the requirement for the second role, that of ACCE director, increased in proportion to the span of control exercised through the other three roles. The chain of command for the 9 AETF-A commander runs directly to the combined force air component commander, with no direct linkages to the joint force commander (see the figure on the next page).<sup>5</sup> However, the role of director, ACCE-A, allows the air component unencumbered access to the joint force commander, permitting an Airman to articulate key issues directly to the highest levels of the coalition command structure while continuing to serve as the combined force air component commander's direct and personal representative to the COMISAF. Additionally, as ACCE-A members and liaison officers to the combined force air component commander, we could plug in directly with the tactical-, operational-, and strategic-level planning efforts at the ISAF, ISAF Joint Command (IJC), and regional commands. Two of the most notable of these efforts included the ISAF revision to Operation Plan 38302 (the strategic-level operation plan) and its operational-level counterpart, Op Naweed 1391, written by the Afghans ("Naweed" means "good news" in Dari).<sup>6</sup> In the coalition's counterinsurgency model of Afghanistan, the ACCE-A construct continues to offer access and liaison opportunities across all levels of the staff and command headquarters.

Under the third role, deputy commander for air, USFOR-A, our staff expended considerable effort on a myriad of issues such as the bed-down of US forces, logistics, retrograde operations and redeployment of forces, force-management-level accounting, and US-only planning and operations. The deputy commander for air, USFOR-A, reports directly to Gen John Allen in his capacity as commander, USFOR-A (see figure). This position and its accompanying staff remain a critical element to US-specific functions in Afghanistan.



A-1 – Personnel Directorate  
 A-2 – Intelligence Directorate  
 A-3 – Operations Directorate  
 A-5 – Plans Directorate  
 A-6 – Communications Directorate  
 ACCE-A – Air Component Coordination Element–Afghanistan  
 AES – Air Expeditionary Squadron  
 AETF-A/CC – Commander, Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan  
 AEW – Air Expeditionary Wing  
 AFCENT – US Air Forces Central  
 CENTCOM – US Central Command  
 CFACC – Combined Force Air Component Commander  
 COMIJC – Commander, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command  
 COMISAF – Commander, International Security Assistance Force

COSISAF – Chief of Staff, International Security Assistance Force  
 DCDR AIR – Deputy Commander for Air  
 DCOMISAF – Deputy Commander, International Security Assistance Force  
 DCOS AIR – Deputy Chief of Staff for Air  
 EASOG – Expeditionary Air Support Operations Group  
 IJC – International Security Assistance Force Joint Command  
 ISAF – International Security Assistance Force  
 LNO – Liaison Officer  
 MOD – Ministry of Defense  
 MOTCA – Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation  
 OPCON – Operational Control  
 TACON – Tactical Control  
 USFOR-A – US Forces–Afghanistan

**Figure. Airpower command and control in Afghanistan**



## Unexpected Challenge Equals Opportunity

*Coordination may be achieved by cooperation; it is, however, best achieved by vesting a single commander with the authority and the capability to direct all force employment in pursuit of a common objective.*

—Air Force Doctrine Document 1

*Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*

14 October 2011

The IJC DCOS AIR position, the fourth role, has authority over the Kabul and Kandahar airfields, oversight of all conventional North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) fixed- and rotary-wing assets in combined/joint operating area–Afghanistan, a robust planning staff of approximately 20 personnel (mixture of NATO and US), and several key positions on the IJC operations floor within the air operations control center. The left side of the figure depicts the IJC DCOS AIR's span of control. Within IJC, the DCOS AIR staff works closely with IJC Future Plans and IJC Future Operations to integrate airpower into operational- and tactical-level planning. Additionally, the staff of the air operations control center (currently led by an Air Force colonel) works closely with the combined force air component commander's air operations center during execution of air tasking orders to ensure the delivery of airpower effects where and when needed in support of the COMISAF's objectives. Unexpectedly, in December 2011, Germany chose to cease filling the IJC DCOS AIR position.

Following approval from the chief of staff of the Air Force and the supreme allied commander, Europe, the 9 AETTF-A commander also became the IJC DCOS AIR, a role that has proven instrumental in aligning *unity of effort* under *unity of command*. Whereas the air component previously relied upon personal relationships and tight coordination to align the efforts of AFCENT and NATO airpower, the new structure provides a unity of command that streamlines decisions at all levels. One can find a clear example of the alignment benefits at Kandahar Airfield, a NATO air base. The commander of this airfield, who





reports directly to the IJC DCOS AIR, runs many of the base facilities. Conversely, the 451st Air Expeditionary Wing, AFCENT's resident wing at Kandahar, reports directly to the 9 AETF-A commander (see the figure). Under the old construct, the two chains of command *never* met, resulting in friction and time delays whenever a contentious issue such as force protection or base support demanded attention from a senior officer. Under the new construct, the two chains of command technically still never meet, but they both reach the same senior officer in their chain, ensuring accelerated decision making with a much reduced potential for friction between the AFCENT and NATO chains of command.

Under the IJC DCOS AIR role, we implemented the additional measure of combining some of the 9 AETF-A/A3 and A5 staff with the IJC DCOS AIR staff, resulting in an increased level of interaction that did not occur under the previous unity-of-effort model. Operational- and tactical-level planning now occurs with the AFCENT and NATO planners sitting side by side—and they both have the same boss who gives them the same guidance. During the past year, we continued to develop some of these positions, but every adjustment thus far has produced gains in combat effectiveness and coalition cohesion.

Furthermore, the IJC DCOS AIR realignment presented an opportunity to reorganize the development of civil aviation in Afghanistan. The 9 AETF-A had a joint air traffic management cell that worked airspace issues and aviation development while the ISAF deputy chief of staff for stability maintained an aviation development branch that had similar and sometimes overlapping functions. During the winter, we realigned all of these functions under the IJC DCOS AIR as the Combined Aviation Development Directorate. By doing so, we brought together air traffic, airfield management/development, civil air control, international donor coordination, and the long-term plan for transfer of airspace control under a single commander; moreover, this realignment effectively merged the AETF-A and NATO staffs working these





projects—another example of going beyond unity of effort and achieving unity of command.

## Observations and Lessons

The AETF concept is working well in Afghanistan. Having an in-theater commander has both clarified the lines of authority and ensured that the air component retains a seat at the table for key operational- and strategic-level decisions. No example more clearly paints this picture than the US force-reduction decision briefs that occurred between the commander, USFOR-A, and his subordinate commanders in the fall of 2011. US force reduction is a complex, tough, and sometimes emotional topic as the entire combined/joint operating area-Afghanistan team works to reduce the US footprint while retaining the right capability to continue meeting the COMISAF's objectives. The 9 AETF-A commander, with tactical control of nearly 5,000 Airmen and operational control of an additional 5,000, received a seat at the table for these discussions. More importantly, from an Airman's perspective, the air component was given a voice to advocate the value of airpower and had the opportunity to hear and understand other subordinate commanders' points of view. Most significantly, from the perspective of the commander, USFOR-A, the room included an Airman who not only could articulate a position but also, without hesitation, agree to execute a course of action once the commander, USFOR-A, made a decision.

Having the senior Airman in Afghanistan simultaneously fill four roles works well in the current environment, but we should not automatically consider this either the standard or template for future operations. The character of counterinsurgency operations, the coalition, the geography, and the unique C2 structure of ISAF all played a part in morphing the ACCE into the multifaceted organization that exists today. Serving multiple roles simultaneously and AETF activation should be considered a part of the Air Force's tool kit for C2 in future operations, but we should not blindly turn away from more than 50 years of airpower C2 based upon our experiences in Iraq and Afghani-



stan. The latest edition of Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, does a good job of laying out the multiple options available for theater C2.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, change is inevitable. Our experiences in Afghanistan demonstrated the importance of embracing change as an opportunity rather than viewing it as a challenge. We had minimal warning about the change in IJC command structure that took place in December 2011, but the result took the form of a more effective fighting force that combined unity of effort under unity of command. With the approach of the 2014–15 transition, organizational realignment looms on the horizon; indeed, change is around every corner in Afghanistan. The specifics, timing, and players remain a mystery, but it will happen—change is inevitable.

## Looking Forward

Our team in Afghanistan tackled many more issues than simply organizational and C2 realignment during the past year. Oversight of force-management levels, implementation of air support to the Security Force Assistance Model, planning for the post-2014 transition, and the drawdown of US forces to 68,000 by 1 October 2012 as directed by the president of the United States represented just a few of the major items worked by the AETF-A and its subordinate commanders. Additionally, the airpower we supplied to the coalition team every day across the spectrum of Air Force capabilities was a monumental accomplishment, and I am extremely grateful to the Airmen serving inside and outside Afghanistan who morphed the air tasking order's direction into tangible airpower every single day; they truly make it look easy.

Further, the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing, charged with supporting development of the Afghan air force (AAF) within NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, continues to press forward steadfastly with AAF development and training. The 9 AETF-A commander's opportunity to take a seat at the table has enhanced our understanding of the connection be-



tween NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan and the 438th, as our Air Force brethren working alongside the AAF play a critical role within the COMISAF's campaign plan. The 438th Air Expeditionary Wing now stands as an equal partner in the cross-check of the multirole 9 AETF-A commander, making certain that he receives the appropriate level of support from the entire air component. This cross-check and support will continue to grow in importance as the AAF reaches greater operational capability and independence.

Looking forward to the 2013 and 2014 fighting seasons, US Airmen serving in Afghanistan have both challenges and opportunities awaiting them. We must continue working with our Afghan partners to develop their air force and its sorely needed capabilities while finding creative solutions that maximize the amount of joint and coalition airpower we provide to the increasingly independent Afghan security forces. Mitigation of civilian casualties also will remain a critical area as we move forward. Our air component has performed very well in this area, but we must continue looking for opportunities to improve. Finally, as Airmen, we must remain focused on the COMISAF's objectives. The character of the Afghanistan counterinsurgency continues to evolve—this dynamic fight demands constant reassessment of objectives, apportionment priorities, and weight of effort. But if the air component continues to retain the joint force commander's objectives as our top priority, we stand a very good chance of delivering the right effects on the battlefield.

## Closing Thoughts

According to Air Force Doctrine Document 1, "Airpower results from the effective integration of capabilities, people, weapons, bases, logistics, and all supporting infrastructure."<sup>8</sup> One could replace the word *airpower* in that sentence with *a successful military force* and apply the same concept to our coalition in the combined/joint operating area–Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, our Airmen work side by side with joint and coalition partners (including Afghans) to integrate the many



pieces of our team and form a successful military force. During the past year, our air component solidified the AETF-A construct and strengthened unity of command under the NATO and AFCENT banner. At the end of the day, however, the personal relationships and trust that Airmen build throughout all levels of war still matter more. Whether it's an Airman working alongside an AAF partner, an Air Force MC-12 crew passing threat data to our ground brethren, or a group of senior officers deciding on the new phase of the campaign plan, the foundation begins with personal relationships and trust. ★

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## Notes

1. See Maj Gen Charles W. Lyon and Lt Col Andrew B. Stone, "Right-Sizing Airpower Command and Control for the Afghanistan Counterinsurgency," *Air and Space Power Journal* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 5–11.

2. The ISAF, part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, has responsibility for executing operations in Afghanistan. We commonly refer to the ISAF commander and his staff as the strategic headquarters and to the commander of the ISAF Joint Command and his staff as the operational headquarters.

3. Major General Lyon initiated this important priority: "Support the commander of ISAF. . . . Help him succeed . . . by his measures of success." See Lyon and Stone, "Right-Sizing Airpower Command and Control," 6. We altered the wording slightly in 2011, but the intent remained exactly the same. In the Afghanistan area of responsibility, the *COMISAF/com-mander of US Forces-Afghanistan* is the *joint force commander*. We use these terms interchangeably throughout the article but distinguish between the two when necessary for the sake of clarity.

4. See Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, 14 October 2011, 99, <http://www.e-publishing.af.mil/shared/media/epubs/AFDD1.pdf>.

5. Although the chain of command went directly to the combined force air component commander, we worked very closely with the deputy combined force air component commander every day for both planning and execution.

6. See Department of Defense news briefing, Lt Gen Curtis Scaparrotti, ISAF commander, 8 February 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4973>.

7. AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 94–98.

8. *Ibid.*, 20.

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Major General Wolters (USFA; MS, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University; MS, National War College) is the commander, 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan; director, Air Component Coordination Element–Afghanistan; deputy commander for air, US Forces–Afghanistan; and deputy chief of staff for air, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command. He commands three wings and two groups consisting of nearly 10,000 US Airmen engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan. Additionally, the general serves as the senior airpower liaison and personal representative of the combined force air component commander to the ISAF commander. Prior to his assignment in Afghanistan, he served as the director of air, space, and cyberspace operations for Air Force Space Command, Peterson AFB, Colorado. General Wolters, who has commanded at the squadron, group, wing, and air expeditionary wing level, has more than 4,900 flying hours in the F-22, F-15C, OV-10, and T-38, including over 180 combat hours in the F-15C.

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