



# Joint Force Multipliers

## America's Airmen Transition to the Resolute Support Mission

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A nonstandard force of Airmen, both individual augmentees (IA) filling positions on joint manning documents and joint expeditionary tasked (JET) Airmen, is deployed to Afghanistan, helping transition the nation from current combat operations to the Resolute Support mission. This transition focuses the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's efforts more squarely on enabling Afghan forces to provide security for their nation through "training, advising and assisting."<sup>1</sup> Airmen supporting the joint force through individual augmentation are long-standing and predate the current Operation Enduring Freedom

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mission. However, support to the joint force also includes a sizeable number of Airmen who are individually tasked, trained, and deployed to conduct missions not always within their core skill sets. The US Air Force's support to the joint fighting team in Afghanistan is as varied as it is important. Most Air Force support is provided by standard units conducting normal missions within their core capabilities. For the most part, these standard-force Airmen prepare, deploy, and operate as a unit. Requirements for JET Airmen, on the other hand, have evolved from what was once considered a temporary solution to offset other services' manpower shortfalls to a permanent element of the Global Force Management Allocation Plan. This means that filling JET taskings will remain a consideration long after Afghanistan when the Resolute Support mission is terminated, and Airmen will continue to undertake them with professionalism and pride. As we transition to a new phase of operations in Afghanistan, now is the time to identify hard lessons won on the battlefield while acknowledging outstanding achievements and contributions to the joint force by nonstandard forces.

## Sustaining the Joint Force

Across the board, Airmen contributed magnificently in the past dozen years around the globe. When it comes to Afghanistan, though, our nonstandard forces faced numerous challenges during their predeployment preparation and on the battlefield as they integrated into unfamiliar units without the benefit of their normal Air Force support structure. Identifying the challenges faced by our Airmen and working to provide solutions are a fundamental aspect of leadership. The processes to train, prepare, and deploy JET and IA Airmen have evolved over the years. Those predeployment challenges and solutions are well cataloged.

As a former commander of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan (9 AETF-A), I witnessed the impact of these challenges and implemented corrective actions. At the same time, I was proud to observe the determination and powerful capability of our JET



and IA Airmen firsthand. The battlefield experiences of our Airmen are critical as we move forward into the next phase of the Afghanistan campaign.

## Integration Begins with Training

Since JET and IA deployments are individually tasked and still not as widely understood as standard air expeditionary force deployments, it is necessary to discuss basic background information on the historical progression of JET deployments. The original JET Airmen filled “in lieu of” (ILO) taskings to solve US Army manpower shortfalls in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004. All of these ILO taskings required some level of predeployment training since the Airmen chosen had to conduct missions outside their basic core skills. Moreover, because the ILO Airmen had to integrate into Army units on the battlefield in Iraq, they needed to understand all of the unit differences between Air Force and Army operations. The Army was responsible for providing this training then and does so today.

In the chief of staff of the Air Force’s memorandum “Joint Expeditionary Tasking Term” of 4 December 2008, Gen Norton Schwartz created the term *JET* and applied it to all Airmen who fill jointly sourced solution requests for forces to “emphasize our contribution to the fight with a single term that reflects our esprit and mission.”<sup>2</sup> These JET and IA deployments have supported Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn. However, key general characteristics of all of these deployments remained largely unchanged through the years. That is, as Airmen are individually tasked from across the Air Force, they attend predeployment training provided by the US Army for combat and mission skills. They then deploy and assimilate into joint or sister-service units widely dispersed across the battlefield. The commanders of these units exercise tactical control (TACON) of the JET and IA Airmen.





As the commander in Afghanistan, I retained administrative control (ADCON) and operational control (OPCON) of all JET and IA Airmen assigned to US Air Forces Central Command (USAFCENT) in the Combined Joint Operating Area–Afghanistan. A basic responsibility of a commander is ensuring the well-being of his or her Airmen. The 9 AETF-A commander has command authority over all Airmen assigned, both standard and nonstandard forces.

## Caring for and Tracking Airmen in the Fight

In a memorandum dated 31 May 2009, USAFCENT commander Gen Gary North established JET air expeditionary units in Afghanistan with the primary intent of providing specified ADCON over all deployed JET and IA Airmen.<sup>3</sup> Although not stated in the memo, his primary intent was to prevent the possibility of a “lost patrol.” In other words, to ensure accountability, all Airmen would have and know the Air Force commander in their chain of command. In turn, all commanders would know and track the Airmen under their command.

By 2010 the 466th Air Expeditionary Group (466 AEG) and its three squadrons were activated to assume this responsibility in Afghanistan. However, when I assumed command of the 9 AETF-A in 2012, the 466 AEG had been scaled down to only one squadron—the 966th Air Expeditionary Squadron, which moved to the Transit Center at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, in an effort to reduce the footprint of Airmen in Afghanistan. This initiative, necessary at the time, significantly reduced the commander’s battlefield circulation capability and degraded direct outreach to each JET and IA Airman.

Airmen’s lack of direct access to their service’s chain of command caused problems. The first indication of the difficulty was the increase in complaints made by Airmen after they had returned to their home stations. These complaints included incidents of basic and sexual assault. The fact they were not reported until after the Airmen rede-



ployed was unacceptable and indicated a deficiency within the chain of command.

Two actions were taken to correct this deficiency. First, under the authority of the USAFCENT commander, I implemented what is now known as the Airman Blue Line Program (ABLP) as the primary mechanism to define the roles and responsibilities of the ADCON and OP-CON command authority and to establish a clear chain of command for each JET and IA Airman.<sup>4</sup> The intent was to create an unbreakable but flexible “blue line” as a link between Airmen and the US Air Force while they were deployed to another service’s unit.<sup>5</sup> The ABLP clearly assigned responsibilities of each participant at every level of command, from the Airman all the way to the USAFCENT commander. Today the ABLP is briefed to all JET and IA Airmen as they go through predeployment training and again when they in-process at deployed stations in-theater.

Second, I reactivated the 466 AEG and returned squadron-sized elements to Afghanistan. This action had multiple benefits. It not only enhanced unity of command and effort within the 9 AETF-A but also increased the number and effectiveness of routine battlefield circulations. Having a group in place allowed the O-6 commander to be on par with most of the commanders of the TACON units where the JET and IA Airmen were assigned.

The solutions to these challenges were found in basic Air Force doctrine and other guidance, but the lesson we learned is key for future operations. Moreover, the implementation required advocacy at the highest level since adding the manpower back on the books in Afghanistan was counter to the joint force commander’s intent. Most importantly, the cost of inaction was not acceptable due to the potentially adverse impact on our Airmen.

CMSgt Frank Batten, 9 AETF-A command chief, acknowledges that one of the most significant limitations is how JET/IA requests for forces (RFF) are revalidated and/or turned off. He explained that after a position is validated (i.e., the Army has critically manned jobs versus



Air Force manning levels), recurring checks should ensure that the RFF is still valid according to the original criteria.

Further, as the TACON commander determines the end of mission, there is no automatic trigger to turn off the JET/IA RFF. During this transition, the Air Force must work with the requesting service to determine when to manage the revalidation and/or drawdown of the JET and IA positions. Additionally, OPCON responsibility currently does not allow the TACON authority to rerole/relocate JET/IA Airmen—potentially a problem if Airmen are being asked to perform a mission for which they are not trained or safely prepared.

## Crucial Asset to Our Sister Services

Despite these challenges, our JET and IA Airmen continued to prove their superior capability and demonstrate the highest levels of flexibility as they contributed to the joint fighting team. During my many trips throughout the battlefield, I attempted to make contact with as many Airmen as possible. I was continually impressed with the capabilities of all of our JET and IA Airmen. The feedback I received from each of the TACONs was always positive. The most crucial consideration is that our Airmen were integral to supporting the joint force. A news article released by the Department of Defense notes that

joint expeditionary tasked airmen have two commanders: an Army commander responsible for their day-to-day missions, and an Air Force commander responsible for their administrative and operational control.

And both sing the praises of their Airmen.

Army Lt. Col. Matt Smith, the [former] task force commander . . . [at Forward Operating Base Lightning in Afghanistan], said airmen are crucial in ensuring that the joint and combined services achieve their missions.

“Airmen help fill a critical function in our headquarters and are doing an exceptional job—every one of them,” he said. “One of my greatest fears is if the Air Force leaves us here; our operations run like a charm because of our Airmen.”



The wing commander responsible for all JET airmen in Afghanistan said airmen supporting the joint fight are examples of the Air Force's "all in" approach to the conflict.

"Mentoring and partnering with the Army, Navy and Afghan forces are crucial to this war effort," said Air Force Brig. Gen. Steven L. Kwast, [former] 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander. "Every airman has to be all in; you'll be more focused on the mission, and you'll ultimately be a better airman and person. Airmen will do anything [the joint community asks] of us, as long as we're trained to do the job correctly."<sup>6</sup>

## Airmen in the Fight

These Airmen include MSgt Rebekah Virtue, an aerospace medical service technician assigned to a JET tasking with the 157th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan. As a convoy medic, Master Sergeant Virtue was appointed by the brigade commander to serve as the senior medic over all battalion medics after her leadership abilities and medical skills were highlighted by the battalion command sergeant major. Due to an absence of Army senior enlisted personnel, Master Sergeant Virtue was asked to take on the senior medic role, overseeing 18 combat medics. Her team aided in 175 convoys, expedited 45 aeromedical evacuations, and saw to the needs of 4,248 military members and civilians as well as 159 local nationals. During her deployment, Master Sergeant Virtue and her team provided medical escort coverage for 20,000 miles of outside-the-wire convoy movements and responded to 76 attacks by vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, half of which resulted in multiple casualties. Master Sergeant Virtue exemplified all of the Air Force core values as a JET Airman, especially "service before self" and "excellence in all we do."<sup>7</sup>

Our Airmen also led provincial reconstruction teams (PRT), which supported reconstruction efforts and empowered local governments to govern their constituents more effectively. One such team in the region of Paktya, Afghanistan, was the US military's first PRT.<sup>8</sup> Team members not only assisted, advised, and mentored their provincial partners but also conducted counterinsurgency operations. This effec-



tively culminated more than 10 years of PRT operations in Paktya, resulting in the administration of nearly \$60 million in Commanders' Emergency Response Program funds, the construction of 38 health facilities, and an increase in schools from 24 to 518 and in agricultural projects from fewer than 10 during Taliban rule to over 68 province-wide today.<sup>9</sup> The Paktya area is now home to an estimated 1.2 million residents, up from fewer than 400,000 under Taliban rule.<sup>10</sup> Afghans the world over have returned home seeking a better life for their children and are credited not only with enduring hostile contact with insurgents but also with proudly completing the development of Afghanistan's first self-sufficient province.

The 466 AEG maintained accountability of all JETs/IAs in this area 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Deliberate efforts by the group to implement the ABLP made our Battlefield Airmen active sensors who relayed critical contact events back to the group—and thus the Air Force—without prompting and in real time. When one of our combat medics was critically wounded and being prepared for theater medevac without any notice to Air Force leadership, a JET Airman called the group to advise of the situation. As a result, the group was accountable for the Airman to Headquarters 9 AETF-A hour-by-hour with complete status and location as the medevac occurred. Furthermore, they simultaneously certified that both the Air Force Combat Action Medal and Purple Heart were awarded to our hero before leaving for the regional medical center in Germany.

From being entrusted to leading joint and coalition forces and securing hundreds of millions of dollars of equipment, US Air Force JET/IA Airmen—the most invaluable and dynamic aspect of airpower—provided the equivalent of a large combat air wing across the entire country of Afghanistan. These Airmen remain a critical manpower component for the future of the Resolute Support mission, just as they have during Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn. They are an enduring feature of Air Force support to the joint force worldwide. Challenges remain to ensure the highest level of support to



these nonstandard forces, especially as the operations tempo begins to decrease. It is important to continue identifying and understanding the lessons learned from this significant service effort and adapt the Airman Blue Line Program as needed. However, I feel certain that the outstanding individual contribution of these Airmen to the joint force around the globe will continue without fail. ★

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## Notes

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9. Bakogiannis, e-mail, 2013–14.
10. Ibid., 2014.



### **Maj Gen Jake Polumbo, USAF**

Major General Polumbo (USAFA; MS, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is the commander of Ninth Air Force at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. Under his command, Ninth Air Force comprises eight active-duty wings and three direct-reporting units in the Southeastern United States with more than 400 aircraft and 29,000 active-duty and civilian personnel. Ninth Air Force is also responsible for the operational readiness of 16 Air Reserve Component wings. General Polumbo has commanded at the squadron, group, and three times at the wing level, including a yearlong deployment as commander of the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing, where he also led planning and deployment of the first US Army Patriot Battalion on his base in the area of responsibility. He most recently served as commander of the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan; deputy commander–air, US Forces–Afghanistan; and deputy chief of staff–air, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command. In the latter assignment, he oversaw three air expeditionary air wings and three expeditionary groups consisting of more than 4,500 Airmen directly engaged in combat operations for Operation Enduring Freedom. He is a command pilot with 4,000 flying hours in all blocks of the F-16 Fighting Falcon, including combat sorties in Operation Northern Watch. He also holds the distinction of being the first Air Force general officer to fly the U-2S in combat and completed 21 operational U-2 missions in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. General Polumbo also flew combat missions in the MC-12W weapon system during Enduring Freedom.



### **Mr. Wesley Long**

Mr. Long (BS, Citadel; MAS, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University; MSS, Air War College) is the chief of US Air Forces Central Command's Air Advisory and Training Division at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. His division is the focal point for joint expeditionary tasked (JET) / individual augmentee (IA) expeditionary training requirements, combat skills development, and operational support for Airmen deployed to US Central Command's area of responsibility. He has deployed in a JET billet as an air adviser in Iraq and has conducted several deployed assessments in both Iraq and Afghanistan to develop training techniques and procedures for JET/IA Airmen.

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