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A Seat at the Table

Beyond the Air Component Coordination Element

Lt Gen Mike Hostage, USAF

Of course, I know where [the bombs] are falling. They are falling in the right place. Go ask George Kenney where it is.

—Gen Douglas MacArthur, 20 January 1943

Planning and executing combat operations demand trust and coordination at all levels—especially at the senior-leader level. Clearly, General MacArthur trusted Lt Gen George Kenney, the senior Airman in the Pacific during World War II. Their relationship and the success of MacArthur's Pacific campaign stemmed from frequent and meaningful interaction between the two men and their staffs, underwritten by access to resources and authorities. As MacArthur island-hopped through the Pacific, Kenney moved his headquarters forward, bringing combat capability and resources with him and directing the employment of airpower along the way.[1] The relocation of headquarters proved critical at a time when the ability to communicate and interact was primarily a function of distance.

Although modern technology significantly reduces the need for close proximity to sustain communication or to command and control airpower, it comes with a cost. Today's state-of-the-art combined air and space operations center (CAOC) and its communications capabilities allow Airmen to make full use of the inherent flexibility, speed, range, and mobility of airpower. The CAOC, however, lacks the portability that would allow a combined force air component commander (CFACC) to colocate with every ground commander; the price tag for such redundancy in both personnel and equipment far exceeds the benefits. In addition, commanding and controlling airpower in multiple joint operating areas does not

allow the theater CFACC to stand side by side with each ground commander—a fact that has hampered discourse and cooperation with our joint partners.

The Air Force's recognition of this disconnect in 2003 led to implementation of the air component coordination element (ACCE). The ACCE construct solved the proximity problem by placing a senior Airman at the joint force commander's (JFC) headquarters to facilitate integration and offer an Airman's perspective from planning through execution. However, my observation, since 2003, has found the ACCE construct wanting.

Liaison and coordination did not prove sufficient to satisfy the JFC. Effective integration at all levels requires more than close proximity. The ACCE needed, and I gave him, sufficient staff to integrate at all levels, responsibility for forces assigned to the joint operations area (JOA), and the necessary authorities to respond to the JFC's needs.

This approach is not new; it shares much with the successful relationships of MacArthur and Kenney in the Pacific or of Gen George Patton and his senior Airman, Brig Gen O. P. Weyland, during the drive through southern France in 1944.[2] In both cases, the senior Airman commanded the resources and appropriate authorities to support his ground commander.

To improve the integration of airpower with the ground scheme of maneuver, I empowered the ACCE-Afghanistan and ACCE-Iraq through a verbal order in 2009.[3] Specifically, I delegated limited operational control and full administrative control over US Air Forces Central (AFCENT) forces in each JOA to the respective ACCE.[4]

Although the tactical control of theaterwide air assets remains at the AFCENT CAOC, the ACCE has authority to organize forces, recommend courses of action, and provide authoritative direction to the subordinate air expeditionary wings.[5] The ACCE also ensures that inputs to the air tasking order meet the needs of the operation or plan. Reachback to the Air Force forces staff and the CAOC permits the ACCE to accomplish these tasks without having to maintain a large forward staff and robust command and control capability.

To remain flexible and best manage airpower across the Central Command theater, I provide each ACCE with a fragmentary order with commander's intent and mission type orders outlining the limits of his authorities. A critical element of this limit is my prerogative, as the theater CFACC, to reassign assets to meet theater-level or cross-JOA requirements.

One alternative to the approach I have suggested involves pushing a deputy CFACC forward. In the case of AFCENT, doing so would result in a CFACC in Iraq and another in Afghanistan—and possibly others. This idea may be appropriate for smaller operations, single-purpose missions (like a humanitarian-assistance operation or noncombatant evacuation), or multiple major combat operations that occur far enough apart to preclude the ability to swing assets between the two. In the first two instances, command and control of air operations likely does not require a CAOC. In the third, two simultaneous major combat operations may overwhelm the ability of a single CAOC to provide adequate command and control in both fights.

In AFCENT today, however, the ability to swing air assets from one JOA to another; to maximize limited airlift, air refueling, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities; to meet competing theater demands outside Iraq and Afghanistan; and to leverage the full capabilities of the CAOC militates against the CFACC-forward approach. I also believe that this approach diminishes the important theaterwide perspective that a theater CFACC brings to the fight. This broader perspective is representative of the unique viewpoint that Airmen have long contributed to the planning and execution of joint operations.

Over the last year, I have become convinced that ACCE empowerment was the right approach (it works), and I am now moving to align our model properly and institutionalize it in a meaningful way in our doctrine, education, and training. My intent,

as I have emphasized to Airmen throughout the theater and especially to the ACCEs, is to make the ground commander successful. I have seen positive results from this change as the ACCEs have been more fully integrated in operational planning and during staff deliberations, allowing them to provide world-class air support.

Airmen must have a seat at the table when the JFC organizes, plans, and executes operations. Guaranteeing that seat requires meaningful daily interaction and the resources and authorities to make a difference. Empowering the ACCE is the key to this meaningful interaction and improved execution. I believe that our doctrine must evolve to accommodate this approach where it makes sense, and I look forward to that doctrinal dialogue in the months ahead. ✪

Notes

1. Kenney relocated his headquarters from Brisbane, Australia, to New Guinea and, later, the Philippines during the war.

2. Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 637; and Gen O. P. Weyland, oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff and Brig Gen Noel F. Parrish, 19 November 1974, K239.0512-813, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL. The command relationship between Weyland and Patton was the same supporting-supported construct in use today. Weyland's chain of command actually went through Ninth Air Force (first, Maj Gen Lewis Brereton and, later, Maj Gen Hoyt S. Vandenberg) to Air Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, the commander of Allied Air Expeditionary Forces.

3. I recently redesignated the ACCE-A as the 9th Air Expeditionary Task Force-Afghanistan, or 9 AETF-A. For Iraq, redesignation of the ACCE-I as the 9 AETF-I will follow.

4. Delegation of these authorities can be withdrawn and exercised by the AFCENT commander in his role as theater joint force air component commander (JFACC) / commander of Air Force forces when needed to satisfy theaterwide requirements and to ensure that actions within one JOA do not adversely affect broader theater or outside-of-area concerns.

5. Tactical control (TACON) is the "detailed direction and control of movements or maneuvers within the operational area necessary to accomplish missions or tasks assigned. [TACON] is inherent in operational control." Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 12 April 2001 (as amended through 31 July 2010), 457. In this case, the theater JFACC reserves TACON and exercises control over the execution of theaterwide air operations through the CAOC.

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Lieutenant General Hostage (BSME, Duke University) is commander of 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 Hostage received his commission as a distinguished graduate of the ROTC program at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, in 1977. A distinguished graduate of pilot training in 1979, he has served as aide to the chief of staff of the Air Force, senior military assistant to the secretary of the Air Force, Joint Staff political-military planner, and director of requirements and integration at Joint Forces Command. He has served as director of air, space, and information operations and director of plans and programs at Air Education and Training Command as well as assistant director of operations at Air Combat Command. He has commanded a fighter squadron, operations group, and three wings. Prior to assuming his current position, he was vice-commander of Pacific Air Forces, Hickam AFB, Hawaii. General Hostage is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Air War College, and the USAF Fighter Weapons School. A command pilot with over 4,000 flying hours, he has logged more than 600 combat hours in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Southern Watch, Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and New Dawn.