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Maj M.T.N. Bolduc

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IN THE JOINT COMBINED ENVIRONMENT**

Maj M.T.N. Bolduc

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THE MISSING LINK: THE AEW CONCEPT IN THE JOINT COMBINED ENVIRONMENT

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper will examine the Air Task Force (ATF) and Air Expeditionary Wing (AEW) concepts based on recent lessons learned, primarily those of Operation IMPACT. It will consider existing command processes of the RCAF as part of an allied/coalition operation, highlighting some of the ongoing challenges and recommending improvements to the ATF concept to aid in the global delivery of air power.

INTRODUCTION

2. Born out of the need to break the ad hoc force generation cycles, the Air Force Expeditionary Capability (AFEC) Concept of Operations (CONOPS) was published in 2012 with the purpose of transforming the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) into “an effective, combat-capable, flexible, and responsive expeditionary force.”¹ The development of the AEW concept was not revolutionary; rather many of Canada’s allies, including the United States Air Force, the Royal Air Force and the Royal Australian Air Force, had already adopted the necessity for scalable, modular, task-tailored air expeditionary force packages. In its simplest configuration, an AEW is “a deployable, task-tailored, tactical-level force normally comprised of a command element, one or more air operations elements, an operations-support element, a mission-support

¹ 1 Canadian Air Division, *Air Force Expeditionary Capability Concept of Operations*. Rev. 1 (Winnipeg, MB: Royal Canadian Air Force, National Defence, 2012), iii.

element and a force-protection element.”² From this notion emerged the RCAF’s first Command and Control (C2) doctrine introducing an ATF as “a temporary grouping of RCAF operational/tactical formations, squadrons, units or detachments formed for the purpose of carrying out a specific operation, mission or task.”³

3. In turn, depending on the length, complexity and geographic location(s) of the mission, the ATF Commander (ATF Comd) may be double-hatted as the Detachment Commander (DETCO), AEW Commander, the Air Component Coordination Element (ACCE) Director or the Air Component Commander (ACC). This C2 structure has proven itself successful for small and medium missions, including ATF MALI, Operation LENTUS, and Operation RENAISSANCE, where the ATF Commander primarily operated at the tactical level, reporting to an operational level commander. For larger operations, primarily as part of an allied/coalition force structure, the RCAF Command doctrine delineates the ATF Comd at the operational level from the AEW Comd at the tactical level. However, the RCAF has only exercised the ATF, in this construct, with the full AEW doctrinal concept on two occasions to date, RIMPAC and Operation REASSURANCE. Other missions, such as Operation IMPACT, have collapsed the AEW command element, where the ATF Comd operated both at tactical and operational level. This paper will focus less on the reasoning behind merging the ATF operational and tactical levels, rather will argue that the coalescence of operational and tactical levels could prove problematic for larger deployments in a combined joint environment. In a political climate focused on the tallied in-theatre assets, a better integration of the ATF command and general

² Canadian Forces Air Warfare Centre, *B-GA-402-001/FP-001 Royal Canadian Air Force Doctrine: Command and Control* (National Defence, 2017) 2-2;

³ *Ibid.*, 1-11

support elements with the JTF Headquarters (HQ) and Joint Task Force Support Component (JTFSC) would reduce redundancies and allow for a reinvestment of forces into the tactical *Act* and *Command* functions in the delivery of air power. The paper will first review the operational art in the Canadian context and subsequently identify shortfalls and challenges of the ATF command structure during Operation IMPACT.

DISCUSSION

Operational Art in the Canadian Context

4. Before evaluating the ATF C2 structure, it is worthwhile exploring how the operational art is exercised in the Canadian context and how it translates into the RCAF. If the levels of war are visualized as a “chain of three links,” the operational links tactics to strategic objectives; however, there is overlap and redundancy between the links, especially in the joint combined environment, which make it sometimes difficult to define and act upon the operational level.⁴

5. Canadian Joint doctrine defines operational art as “the skill of employing military forces to attain strategic objectives in a theatre of war or theatre of operations through the design, organization and conduct of campaigns and major operations.”⁵ However, it is argued that the CAF does not achieve strategic objectives through design and campaigning; rather, Canada prefers sharing strategic intent with its allies in a supporting role as a force contributor at the

⁴ Ash Irwin, *The Levels of War, Operational Art and Campaign Planning*. Vol. no.05. (Camberley, England: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 1997), 7; James Simms, “Keeping the Operational Art Relevant for Canada: A Functional Approach,” *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives: Context and Concepts*. Ed. Allan D. English (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005) 309.

⁵ B-GJ-005-500/FP-000 Canadian Forces Joint Publication 5.0 (CJFP 5.0) (April 2008), 1-3

tactical level, rather than a force employer at the joint combined operational level of war.⁶ As a result, Canada approaches operational-level doctrine differently than its allies who exercise the classical interpretation of the operational art.⁷ In turn, force generation (FG) is dependent on the availability of personnel and resources, and on the caveats defined by the Government of Canada (GoC), primarily maximum personnel cap and mission type. As such, strategic objectives are more closely linked with “the participation of a CF rather than their performance in attacking decisive decision points and centres of gravity to achieve a strategic outcome of use to Canada and its allies.”⁸

6. But what does this mean for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the RCAF? This does not negate the need for the operational-level command but understanding the premise of the operational art in the Canadian context aids commanders in understanding how CAF fit into a coalition/allied C2 model. For Canada, the centre of gravity rests with the CAF’s ability to *Act* in whatever shape or form determined by the the GoC, with *Command* is its enabler. For air operations, it helps explain the importance of retaining the ATF tactical command element in

⁶ J.H. Vance, “Tactics without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign,” *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives: Context and Concepts*, Ed. Allan D. English (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005) 271-291.

⁷ The notion that Canada employs a ratified version of the operational art has been contented by various academics, historians and senior military officers, including..... According to J.H. Vance, “the classical interpretation of operational-level doctrine demands a top-down approach to planning, force structure and force generation decision. Once established, strategic objectives drive a process that determines the number and nature of tactical forces requires, and how those forces may be organized and tasked to meet them. This is the root utilities of the operational art and a certain indicator that it is practiced.”; J.H. Vance, “Tactics without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign,” *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives: Context and Concepts*, Ed. Allan D. English (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005) 283; Allan English, *The Operational Art: Theory, Practice, and Implications for the Future* (Canadian Forces College: 15 March 2003, 20.

⁸ J.H. Vance, “Tactics without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign,” *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives: Context and Concepts*, Ed. Allan D. English (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005) 283.

theatre as the central node between the ATF HQ and the Coalition/Allied JTF HQ, responsible for operational campaign planning. The ATF operational command element, in turn, is the central node between the Canadian JTF HQ, focused on adherence to the national interests, risk management, and administrative control, and the Coalition ATF Coordination Element and RCAF JFACC. While recent developments to the RCAF Command doctrine refined six C2 models to provide a scalable framework for air operations, the responsibilities lie with the commanders and staff officers to identify redundancies and find efficiencies in the deployed Air and Joint C2 frameworks; this remain essential to stay within the national caveats while focusing on the delivery of air power to achieve coalition/allied strategic objectives.

Operational Impact as a Case Study

7. Lessons finding reports (LFR) from Operation IMPACT pinpoint an initial lack of understanding, at least during first rotations, of the scalability and modularity of the ATF concept. At that point, in 2015, the RCAF Command doctrine was still relatively new and a learning curve within the RCAF was expected, both in the application of doctrine and the education of ATF/AEW concept. It is this incomplete grasp of the AFEC that led the Air Task Force – Iraq (ATF-I) to combine the AEW HQ with that of the ATF HQ structure in the attempt to find efficiencies in C2; they deemed that deploying multiple layers of C2 within one element appeared counter-productive and limited the timely execution of mission requirements.⁹ As a result, ATF-I collapsed the tactical command element of the AEW in support of an operational

⁹ Air Task Force – Iraq, *Corrective and Preventative Action Plan (CPAP) 15-09 – AF1A1.1 (FG) and AF1A1.2 (FE)* (Ottawa, ON: National Defence, 08 January 2015); This paper will not examine other observations from the CPAP 15-09, which include the need to ensuring the ‘right rank’ appointment based on the complexity of the mission. Although the ATF Comd and AEW Comd positions were identified at the time as LCol, the doctrine does not prescribe the commanders rank because it is entirely depending on the situation.

command element more closely resembling the doctrinal model. This, however, meant that the ATF Comd and staff officers fulfilled roles at both the operational and tactical levels. Even though there was no unclassified evidence suggesting shortcomings regarding the lack of the tactical command element for Operation IMPACT, the omission of this enabling capability could be an inherent risk to the successful application of air power to achieve the operational objectives defined by the coalition.

8. Identifying overlap between tactics and operations and finding efficiencies within the ATF become a Commander's prerogative; however, the reduced doctrinal ATF HQ force structure did not address the redundancies and doctrinal frictions with the JTF HQ. Disparities between the RCAF and Joint doctrines created a lack of common understanding of the functions and areas of responsibilities of the various organizations. Even though CONPLAN Jupiter was written as a full-spectrum joint operation, there was no alternative defining the joint command construct for joint air-centric operations, like Operations MOBILE and IMPACT.¹⁰ As such, C2 requirements did not fit the doctrinal mould, which resulted in the duplication of some responsibilities within the ATF and JTF operational staff functions. While the ATF "shaved the ice cube" within their own force structure, it is argued that the efforts should instead be focused at the operational level between the ATF and JTF HQs. A leaner operational organization would allow a reinvestment of forces into the air detachments and its tactical enablers, which are the centre of gravity of national interests and Canada's contribution to warfare.

¹⁰ Air Task Force – Iraq, Lessons Finding Report 15-045- C2 Relationships AF1B Planning, directing and controlling assigned forces (Ottawa, ON: National Defence, 7 April 2016)

9. The operational and mission support elements faced the similar challenges. The Operational Support Element (OSE) Intelligence and the National Intelligence Centre (NIC) experienced an overlap, a result of lack of delineation in air-centric (ATF) and targeting (NIC) roles and responsibilities. The ATF-I Mission Support Element (MSE) equally experienced frictions with the relatively newly defined JTFSC and Operational HUB-Kuwait (OSH(K)). Over the course of 7 rotations, the pendulum swung both ways, first with each element operating in stovepipes and then subsequently an ATF-I with no MSE, OSE and HQ staff after the transition in flying missions.¹¹ These decisions stemmed from an oversight of ensuring sufficient air power expertise at the JTF and HHQ levels. While factors such as changes in national strategic objectives and consolidation of forces geographically contributed to the evolution of the in-theatre C2 force structure, LFRs identified that integral first and second line support elements were essential to ATF success of geographically dispersed detachments.¹²

10. By ensuring the ATF incorporates the requisite enabling elements within the AEW, it reinforces the notion of “train like we fight.” ATF LFR for ROTO 2 identified that the ATF Comd, Deputy Commander/Chief of Staff, and A2 had already deployed well before the main body. This left the A7 to fill the position of the COS and the A3 of Deputy Commander for the entire readiness training cycle.¹³ The trickle Relief-in-Place (RIP) further exacerbated tensions and hindered cohesion between rotation staff officers, despite elements had completed their training together. Deploying some form of AEW HQ structure and following the same

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ 2 Expeditionary Wing, *Lessons Finding Report - 1 CAD LOI AF4.A2*. Royal Canadian Air Force, National Defence, 08 November 2015

deployment cycle as the remainder of the AEW enabling elements would provide better unity and continuity of command.

CONCLUSION

11. The RCAF investments into its expeditionary concept have paid dividends over the past five years. The development of the AFEC into the ATF model, bolstered by a newly defined C2 doctrine has fundamentally changed how the RCAF approaches the delivery of air power. The 2 Wing and its Air Field Activation Surge Team (AFAST), the delivery of the Air Operations Course (APOC) and advanced C2 courses, as well as the Division Management Readiness Plan (MRP) and Collective Training Program have validated and legitimized this capability. Despite these successes, command at the operational level is still ambiguous, and continuous review of doctrine and operational processes are necessary. While this paper has simplified certain aspects of C2 in an air-centric joint environment, its purpose was to highlight the importance of distinguishing the roles of the tactical and operational command elements. Constrained by the Canadian style of operational art, CAF forces must minimize the redundancies traditionally found between the three levels of war or the “three links.” It is important to ensure effective command and control while minimizing the effects on the tactical units’ ability to *Act*. As the RCAF continues to export its expeditionary capability into the joint environment, it should leverage opportunities to further validate the full AEW concept, collaborating with its joint partners to better integrate into joint doctrine and force structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. While this paper provides but a cursory review of the AEW C2 for Operation IMPACT, it, by no means, paints a complete picture of challenges of operating air assets in a combined joint environment. However, due to the length, scale and complexity of the operation, ATF-I should delineate between the tactical and operational levels of command, and duplicate general functions consolidated with JTF-I, while air specific functions must reside within ATF-I to exercise its fundamental tenet of “centralized control and decentralized execution.” The RCAF should review the its C2 force structure with that of the JTF in collaboration with the Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) to define clear lines of responsibility.

13. In turn, the ATF should also seek to exercise an AEW force structure to include a command, mission support and operational support elements in a combined joint environment for a medium to large operations.¹⁴ Endeavoring to “train like we fight” and to promote unity and continuity of command, the AEW force structure should be practiced from readiness training to deployment to reconstitution. These elements are scalable, as defined by the doctrine, depending on the complexity of the mission and the support provided by Joint and Coalition partners. They could be as rudimentary as a single position or skeleton section or scale up to their full doctrinal strength. However, these elements remain important nodes in enabling and advocating the application of air power by the Air Detachments.

14. The ATF and JTF concepts for execution of an air-centric joint operation should be holistically reviewed to better integrate the air capability into the joint environment, thus

¹⁴ The notion of “large operation” is relative. In this author’s opinion, an operation requiring the deployment of 250 personnel or more to deliver and enable air power should necessitate the deployment of all elements of the AEW concept, scaled to the needs of the mission.

increasing efficiency and operational effectiveness. While the C2 force structure evolved over the course of Operation IMPACT rotations, the growing pains exhibited by ATF and JTF could have been mitigated through more collaborative planning processes. As joint doctrine currently remains land-centric, culture clashes between doctrines are inevitable. With the continued validation of the air expeditionary capability both domestically and internationally, the RCAF should actively seek opportunities to be more participative in joint planning. Although this cannot be prescribed in doctrine, this all-inclusive collaboration will help ingrain within the RCAF and Joint culture that HQs need to be balanced and scalable to minimize the operational footprint yet providing the requisite C2 without taking away from tactical capabilities.

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