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FINE-TUNING THE ATF

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SERVICE PAPER - ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

FINE-TUNING THE ATF

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FINE-TUNING THE ATF

AIM

1. This paper aims to improve the Air Task Force (ATF) concept in order to enable it to produce and deliver air power more effectively and efficiently. To this effect, it addresses observed structural problems and doctrinal issues, while also to proposing solutions that will eliminate inefficiencies and facilitate integration in the Joint and Combined environment.

INTRODUCTION

2. Canada's most recent defense policy, Strong Secure Engaged, has restated in no uncertain terms the need for the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) to be agile, projectable and integrated.¹ Compounded with the likeliness that future operations will be Joint in nature,² this supports the continued importance of transforming the "RCAF into an effective, combat-capable, flexible, and responsive expeditionary force."³ Central to this ability to project air power globally is the relatively new the Air Task Force (ATF) concept.⁴ Now that it has been battle-tested in live operations such as Operation (Op) IMPACT, Op REASSURANCE and Op RENAISSANCE, the time has come for a vector check to ensure that it continues to mature in the proper direction.

¹ Department of National Defence, *Strong Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. (Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2017), 38-39.

² Department of National Defence. *Future Concepts Directive Part 2 : Future Air Operating Concept*. (Ottawa: Royal Canadian Air Force HQ, 2016), 4.

³ Department of National Defence. *Air Force Expeditionary Capability Concept of Operations*. (Ottawa: Royal Canadian Air Force HQ, 2013), iii.

⁴ Pux Barnes. "Air Doctrine Note 14/01, RCAF Air Task Force Commander: Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations." (2014), 1.

3. This service paper posits, based on recent observations, and also on the study of doctrine, that the ATF is a tactical-level entity and that its Command and Control (C2) should be restructured to permit more efficient internal processes and better integration into component command and Joint Task Forces (JTF). As such, a clearer delineation of roles at the tactical level is required to eliminate redundancies between functions and align the air expeditionary doctrine with Joint doctrine. The question will be approached in two parts. First, this paper looks at the relationship between the ATF and its subordinate formation, the Air Expeditionary Wing (AEW). Secondly, it assesses changes to the manner in which the ATF interfaces with Combined Air Operations Centers (CAOC) and Air Component Command (ACC). This approach deliberately focuses on the C2 aspects of the ATF and strives to provide low cost recommendations in order to steer the ongoing transformation towards more effective structures and processes, but also a better ability to integrate with the operational-level of alliance and coalition operations.

DISCUSSION

4. Internal ATF structure. The ATF was first developed as a modular and scalable way to present forces to a force employer, be they a component or joint commander.⁵ But its real life application has somewhat evolved. It has become instrumental in the RCAF's aspirations to command its own forces at the operational level of operations.⁶ This has led to the format we know today of an operational-level command element –the ATF Commander– in charge of a

⁵ Department of National Defence. *B-GA-401-000/FP-001, CF Aerospace Command Doctrine*. (Ottawa: Royal Canadian Air Force HQ, 2012), 46-47.

⁶ Pux Barnes. "Command or Control: Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations." *Royal Canadian Air Force Journal* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 34.

tactical-level command and support element –the AEW–.⁷ But in practice, there has instead been a tendency to rely on an all-encompassing ATF, and a reluctance to use an AEW.⁸ Part of the reasons why may be due to nomenclature and the semantics related to the connotation of a Wing being a large entity. But this is however far from only a terminology issue and it bears implications in the internal functioning of an ATF. Though air doctrine already provides options for such “dual-hatting” of the ATF with the AEW responsibilities based on variables such as “geographic location and anticipated workload,”⁹ this practice has instead demonstrated that both options present some shortcomings. This has led to some redundancies and gaps.

5. While the ATF Command element was designed to work at the operational level,¹⁰ in reality, its responsibilities at that level are very limited. They can be separated into two main categories: national command functions, and deployed command roles. The first role comprising of “national operational and administrative issues”¹¹ and residual authorities will be addressed in the next section. The other function is of interest in regards to the ATF’s position in the levels of war and particularly relevant when looking at the internal functioning of an ATF.

6. It must first be recognized that, for air power, the operational level of war resides with the “service component commander having the preponderance of air assets and the capability to plan, task, and control joint air operations.”¹² That is the ACC.¹³ Conversely, an ATF is designed

⁷ Barnes. Air Doctrine Note . . . , 5-7.

⁸ Most recent operations have foregone an AEW in favor of an ATF bearing both the ATF and AEW Command functions.

⁹ Barnes. Air Doctrine Note . . . , 2.

¹⁰ Pux Barnes. “The RCAF Air Task Force: Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations.” (2014), 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Allan English and al. *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives Context and Concepts*. (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005), 231.

to operate in subordination to an ACC. Even though it comprises of a “of a forward deployable operational planning staff,”¹⁴ it can seldom claim to operate at the operational level. For instance, the ATFs in Op IMPACT, Op MOBILE and Air Policing missions conducted under Op REASSURANCE all reported to a Joint Force ACC (JFACC).

7. Besides its “national operational”¹⁵ responsibilities, the role of ATFs in such situations is therefore limited to tactical level command. The consequent problem is that there doctrinally already exists another command element at this level: the AEW. Even in situations where the ATF and AEW functions are merged into a single entity, the same overlaps continue to exist internally between the operational-level staff functions and the tactical-level Mission Support (MSE) and Operational Support Elements (OSE). This has in turn resulted in overlaps and friction.

8. In ATF IMPACT for example, this has caused “redundancies in roles across staff principles required additional effort to deconflict and created friction in the conduct of common practices.”¹⁶ Furthermore, it has been identified that “deploying multiple layers of C2 into a mission that has one element and focus could be counter-productive and limits the timely execution of mission requirements.”¹⁷ This leads to two observations:

¹³ Ibid., 242.

¹⁴ Department of National Defence. *Air Task Force 1501 High Readiness Directive*. (Winnipeg: 1 Canadian Air Division, 2017), 2.

¹⁵ Barnes. Air Doctrine Note . . . , 2.

¹⁶ Department of National Defence. *Air Task Force Iraq Collective and Preventative Action Plan – C2 (15-009)*. (n.p.: Air Task Force Iraq, 2015). 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

a. Unless it also holds the responsibilities of ACC, an ATF is a tactical-level entity, with some residual authorities; and

b. Delineation of responsibilities between the AEW and ATF are not adequately defined.

9. In their current structure, the AEW and ATF are not appropriate to all situations. When both an ATF and an AEW exist, there is a duplication of tactical command. When the AEW is foregone, the dual-hatted ATF Commander becomes directly responsible for commanding the MSE, OSE, Force Protection (FPE), and Flying Detachments (Dets),¹⁸ in addition to bearing the national command responsibilities. This produces both a span of control and a workload issue for the ATF Commander.

10. This resulting complexity can however be simplified with minor changes in C2. As illustrated in annex A, command of the MSE, OSE and FPE should fall under a dedicated squadron commander: an Air Expeditionary Support Squadron (AESS). This concept has been tested during Exercise RIMPAC. Though it was only an exercise, the 2016 iteration of RIMPAC was the “largest collection of deployed RCAF air power since the Second World War.”¹⁹ Further speaking to the reluctance of employing an AEW, the ATF Comd was dual-hatted as AEW Commander despite the sheer size of the deployment. To mitigate the span of control and workload issues, a sort of AESS was formed under a single Lieutenant-colonel to oversee the non-flying detachments. By delegating this portion of command, span of control and workload

¹⁸ Barnes. *The RCAF Air Task . . .*, 2.

¹⁹ Department of National Defence. *RIMPAC 2016 Post Exercise Report*. (n.p.: Air Task Force RIMPAC, 2017), 1.

issues are immediately reduced, while also avoiding the addition of another layer of tactical command above manoeuvring elements.

11. Part of this proposal relates to the rank structure of the AESS as well. In ATF-IMPACT for example, the rank ratio of the support elements did not match that of the other Dets and of the ATF staff.²⁰ This caused a reduced efficiency and higher requirements for internal coordination.²¹ While this operation did not employ an AESS structure, the lesson is applicable to the concept. The rank structure must allow for equal access to the command level by the staff, the Dets Commanding Officers and the AESS, as was done during the aforementioned RIMPAC 2016. Similarly, ATF REASSURANCE Iceland, though it was small in size and did not have redundant staff functions, had support elements reporting under the Deputy Commander who was of equivalent rank to the CF-188 Det CO, which facilitated the conduct of efficient operational support.²²

12. This is not to say that the responsibilities of the AEW should be eliminated altogether. The separate ATF and AEW concept remains a valid solution for large operations with multiple geographically separated AEWs with span of control issues. Even in this scenario, the ATF level remains only a tactical-level higher headquarter and the implications of the presence of a subordinate level of tactical command be addressed. There is however the expectation that “the trend of the RCAF employing small air task forces (ATFs) with capabilities appropriate to the

²⁰ DND. *Air Task Force Iraq . . . C2 (15-009) . . . , I.*

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Post Operation Report depicting the internal ATF Iceland structure is classified, however it should be noted that the author of this service was the Deputy ATF Commander and OC OSE for ATF Iceland.

specific operation will continue.”²³ And in this respect, the ATF structure for such smaller operations can and should be optimized.

13. In the grand scheme, this speaks to the challenge of “smaller air forces” having to operate in the wide spectrum of war.²⁴ This in turn highlights the importance of the ATF’s ability to seamlessly integrate into all types of operations, but more particularly those under a Combined JTF and Component Command.

14. ATF Joint and Combined integration. As previously stated, the ATF is a tactical-level entity, with some national operational command responsibilities. There are however some exceptions of ATFs working at the operational level. This responsibility however comes from bearing the additional role of ACC,²⁵ not from the ATF structure itself. Such instances are however limited to non-coalition JTFs such as OP RENAISSANCE 2013²⁶ (Philippines) and 2017²⁷ (Caribbean). While these exceptions require attention, they relate more to the RCAF’s ability to generate an ACC or project the C2 of Winnipeg’s CAOC, and are therefore beyond the scope of this paper. With the exception of Humanitarian Relief Operations and embarked aviation on Canadian frigates,²⁸ ATFs normally operate under to NATO or U.S.-led CAOCs.

²³ DND. *Future Air Operating Concept* . . . , 4.

²⁴ Brad Gladman and al. “Professional Airpower Mastery and the Royal Canadian Air Force: Rethinking Airpower Education and Professional Development.” *Royal Canadian Air Force Journal* 5, no 1. (Winter 2016): 17-20.

²⁵ Barnes. *Air Doctrine Note* . . . , 1.

²⁶ Department of National Defence. *End of Tour Report Joint Task Force Philippines, OP RENAISSANCE 13-01*. (n.p.: Joint Task Force Philippines, 2014).

²⁷ Department of National Defence. *Post Operation Report Op RENAISSANCE 17-01*. (n.p.: Air Task Force Renaissance, 2017).

²⁸ The topic of the C2 of embarked ATFs warrant a service paper of its own. Additional information is available in the RIMPAC 16 Post Exercise Report.

15. Domestically, the RCAF is well integrated with the Winnipeg CAOC. But during deployed operations, this integration is not as seamless as it could be. The RCAF does contribute personnel to work in CAOCs and ACC staffs, thus developing some expertise in this domain. But this ability to contribute is however limited to a few select individuals with specific expertise.²⁹ While having RCAF personnel incorporated such organizations does often facilitate networking, these positions are part of the coalition effort and have no formal C2 links with deployed ATFs. Where the ATF C2 interfaces with the Combined Joint environment is with its Coordination Element (ATF-CE).

16. In recent history, the RCAF has strived to integrate into coalition, instead of simply synchronizing³⁰ its activities like it previously did. This has led the necessity of legally delegating Operational Command (OPCOM) of ATFs to coalition commanders, while also having the ability to exercise a “national prerogative”³¹ in operations. Thus the ATF-CE has become necessary in limiting the amount of authority that is actually delegated to non-Canadian partners.

17. Consequently, doing so requires a set of specific expertise. But recent observations have identified that this expertise has not been completely developed. First, current air expeditionary doctrine has identified the function of a deployed ATF-CE, but has stopped short of detailing its

²⁹ David Lowthian. “CFACC and CAOC Observations and Recommendations from RIMPAC 2014.” *Royal Canadian Air Force Journal* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 5-9.

³⁰ G.M. Pratt “A Clash of Service Doctrines: Integration versus Synchronization in Joint Operations.” In *The Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives Context and Concepts*. (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2005), 225-247.

³¹ DND. *RIMPAC 2016 Post . . .*, 5.

roles and responsibilities. While no two CAOCs function exactly alike, there remains a necessity to formally identify and prepare for the ATF-CE roles and responsibilities.

18. Particularly, the ATF-CE is the primary means for an ATF Commander to fulfill their responsibility of “monitoring, in accordance with the Chief of Defense Staff . . . Strategic Targeting Directive, the ATF’s target engagement authority process at the [CAOC].”³²

Furthermore, this expertise has become increasingly relevant given the current context in which the Canadian Armed Forces is developing its joint targeting capability. But for the topic at hand, it speaks directly to the ATF’s ability of ensuring that strategic intent is adhered to and that residual authorities are respected.

19. Taking two recent operations for example, the ATF-CE roles have come short of demonstrating proficiency. In ATF Iceland, there was no ATF-CE present in the CAOC Udem.³³ While the red card holder responsibilities were affected nonetheless by the ATF Commander remotely, this demonstrates the low level of ATF integration with the CAOC in this operation. In a similar fashion, ATF Iraq had a Coordination Element in the Al-Udeid CAOC, but the lessons learned program has identified the lack of formalized training as a shortcoming.³⁴

20. While this raises the issue of expertise, there is also the importance of availability.³⁵ Under last year’s MRP, the responsibility to FG a deployable ACCE fell upon 1 CAD.³⁶ This

³² Barnes. Air Doctrine Note . . . , 2.

³³ See note 22.

³⁴ Department of National Defence. *Air Task Force Iraq Collective and Preventative Action Plan – ATF-CE (15-007)*. (n.p.: Air Task Force Iraq, 2015), 1.

³⁵ Clive Blount. “Staying Relevant? The Future Utility of Air Power.” *Air Power Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 112.

meant that deploying this ACCE would have impacts to the domestic CAOC's day to day manning. But more importantly, this ACCE was conceived with the vision of projecting the Canadian JFACC's C2 to provide air power to JTFs when OPCOM is retained in Winnipeg, such as to coordinate strategic airlift during CONPLAN ANGLE. This capability is not adaptable to Combined operations.

21. Consequently, ATF-CEs are now produces only when required for specific operations, such as was the case for ATF Iraq. This approach to generating the ATF's only means of integration in CAOCs has led to poor retention of the expertise, particularly for the Red Card Holder function. Interestingly, the 2012 AFEC had envisioned a "standing, deployable, operational level" unit –2 Air Component Coordination Unit (ACCU)– to hold the responsibility of generating a operational-level coordination capability.³⁷ This has however become aspirational, as no qualification standard or course exists to generate this expertise.³⁸

22. While the RCAF is in the process of improving the professional education of air-mindedness, particularly with the newly implemented Air Power Operations Course, this kind of specific expertise goes beyond this scope. This problematic can be solved by first developing formal training for the relevant ATF-CE functions, particularly those relating to Red Card Holding, Target Engagement Authority and Collateral Damage Effects. While this expertise exists in some form within the RCAF, it needs to be adapted for the task. Options to develop this

³⁶ Department of National Defence. *RCAF Managed Readiness Plan (MRP) 2012-2017*. (Winnipeg: 1 Canadian Air Division, 2013), 5.

³⁷ DND. *Air Force Expeditionary . . .*, 11; Department of National Defence. *2 Wing Force Employment Concept*. (Winnipeg: 1 Canadian Air Division, 2015), 8.

³⁸ Department of National Defence. *Air Task Force Iraq Collective and Preventative Action Plan – ATF-CE (15-006)*. (n.p.: Air Task Force Iraq, 2015), 1.

training already exist: 2 Expeditionary Readiness Center, which has a role in individual training for ATFs and the Aerospace Warfare Center, which already delivers the CAOC 101 course.

After proper training has been developed, 2 ACCU can then be refocused to generate deployable and proficient ATF-CE personnel, in accordance with the 2 Wing Force Employment Concept and AFEC.

23. This initiative, while having some related costs in terms of training development and trade-offs for the employment of the 2 ACCU personnel, would inevitably benefit ATFs' ability to integrate with CAOCs more seamlessly, particularly during early rotations and single-rotation short operations such as the currently frequent air policing missions. If the RCAF is serious in its desire to work at the operational level, it must develop the credible capability to integrate at that level. The second order added benefit will be an improved ability to contribute to the future Canadian Armed Forces Joint Targeting Capability.

CONCLUSION

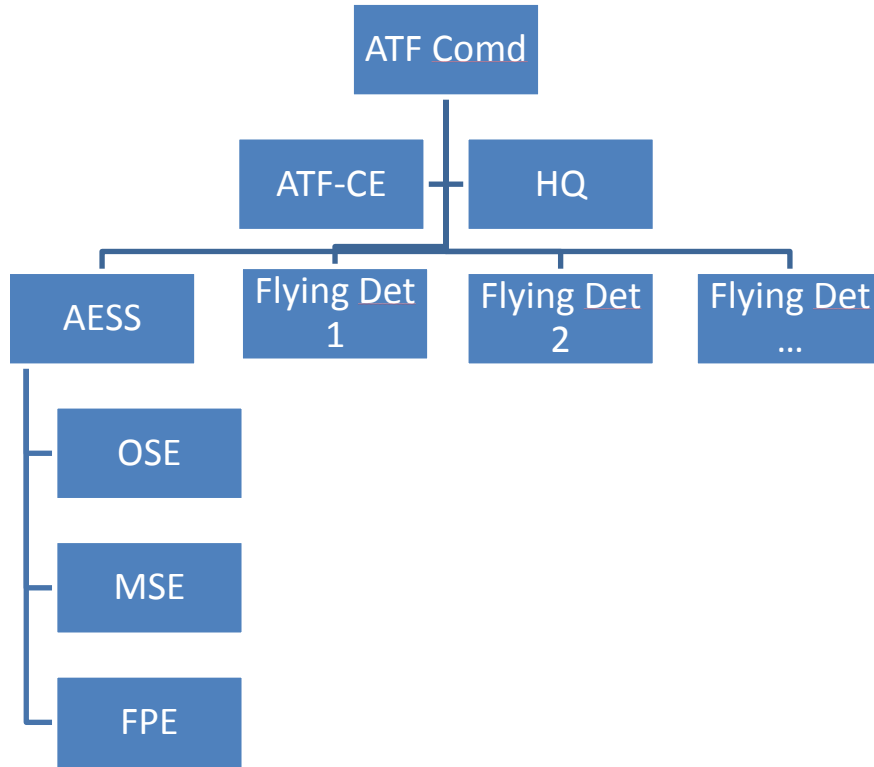
24. The Air Task Force has continued to mature into an efficient concept to package and command deployed air forces. Though "the RCAF invariably delivers high-calibre tactical output,"³⁹ it is important to recognize that the ATF is, in reality, working at the tactical level. Revising doctrine to realign the concept in this respect will allow for efficiencies to be gained by eliminating redundancies and simplifying C2 processes. Lastly, the RCAF has made great strides towards Joint and Combined integration, but the ATF-CE capability, and prerequisite expertise, still requires some improvements to become more credible at the operational-level.

³⁹ Gladman, "Professional Airpower Mastery . . .", 10.

RECOMMENDATION

25. This paper has made three recommendations:
- a. Clarify doctrine to clearly represent the ATF at the tactical level of operation, albeit with some national operational-level responsibilities;
 - b. Incorporate into doctrine the concept of the Air Expeditionary Support Squadron to reduce redundancy of command while also alleviate span of control issues.
 - c. Develop the ATF-CE capability by formalizing the training curriculum and refocusing 2 ACCU's mandate to generate the personnel for employment, thus improving integration with the Joint and Combined operational-level.

Annex: A. Proposed AESS structure



Annex A – Proposed AESS structure

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