

## **Aerospace Advantage – Ep. 203 – Expeditionary Airpower: It Takes the 621<sup>st</sup> Contingency Response Wing – Transcript**

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Aerospace Advantage podcast, brought to you by PenFed. I'm your host, Heather "Lucky" Penney. Here on the Aerospace Advantage, we speak with leaders in the DOD, industry, and other subject matter experts to explore the intersection of strategy, operational concepts, technology, and policy when it comes to air and space power.

So, if you like learning about aerospace power, you're in the right place. To our regular listeners, welcome back. And if it's your first time here, thank you so much for joining us. As a reminder, if you like what you're hearing today, do us a favor and follow our show. Please give us a "like" and leave a comment so that we can keep charting the trajectories that matter the most to you.

It goes without saying, so much so, that we take it for granted, that air power is fundamentally an agile and dynamic force. So, we might generate sorties from well known established bases, places like Maguire and Travis, Anderson, or Lakenheath. But aircraft can operate anywhere there's a runway or a ramp.

And in World War II, we saw airmen flying their planes off [00:01:00] of jungle strips in the South Pacific, and out of farm fields close to the Normandy beaches. In Korea, this continued, with aircraft flying sorties out of bases that were incredibly primitive. They were forward, and they really weren't too far past dirt strips that were covered in Marston matting.

And this trend kind of continued in Vietnam, but today we've been operating out of mega-bases, and the vast majority of warfighters who have participated in Middle East operations have not experienced the kind of flexibility that air power really truly offers because of basing. So, we've got to shift that.

And that's the entire premise behind the Agile Combat Employment concept, distributing aircraft so they're not overly concentrated at these big mega-bases that can be easily targeted. But for these distributed forward leaning air power operations to work, it takes specially trained airmen to secure the region in operation, handle functions like refueling and maintenance, work on site command and control, and keep the general enterprise up and running.

[00:02:00] And that's what we're here to talk about today, because we cannot take it for granted. And the airmen of the 621st Contingency Response Wing are the ones that make it happen. They're the individuals charged with ensuring

airpower at the edge can continue to execute effective sorties for Air Mobility Command.

This is a huge responsibility. Contingency Response airmen are at the heart of the effort, whether they're responding to a humanitarian crisis or a combat operation in an austere environment. It's really important to highlight them and better understand their contribution because, without their skill set, operations would grind to a halt where it matters most.

So, with that, I'm pleased to introduce Colonel Jason Herring, Commander of the 621st Contingency Response Wing.

**Col Jason Herring:** Hey, good afternoon, Lucky. Thanks for having us on board today and being able to share what our airmen do. And as General Minihan says, “our airmen are the magic that makes this mission happen.”

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** So, I'm glad you said that because it really is about the airmen and everything that you're [00:03:00] doing there to build up these bases.

I tried to explain the 621st mission to the audience in my opener, but in reality, your mission is so much broader. It's very complex. So, would you mind helping elaborate on what I said so that folks can better understand what's going on? I mean, you're the expert.

So, what is your wing's overarching mission, and how does that break out into specific mission functions?

**Col Jason Herring:** So, Lucky when I look at our wing and I look at what our mission set is, you really, if you were to codify it, we're the fix it force for the joint maneuver. When you see a challenge, that's out there, or you see a crisis that's taking place, we're the ones that are typically going in on the first chocks to be able to make sure that everything else on the movement is executed in a smooth fashion. When you look at our mission that we've set up, it's advise, direct and project air power anytime, anywhere.

And we've added to it in saying any partner. And that's a big movement that we've tried to expand upon in the last several years of looking and being platform agnostic [00:04:00] at who we work with as well as partner nation agnostic. Across the missions, we're looking at four different sets that our airmen execute on a daily basis.

The first mission set that we look at is our air advisors. It's about building trust, access, and influence across the spectrum of conflict. Those are the folks that are going to be the first ones in on the ground creating those relationships. And we've seen that used not only from working with partner nations but enabling us to gain access and influence in some areas.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** And if you don't mind me interrupting, these air advisors, they're engaged in peacetime during just normal operations, right? You don't wait for contingency to engage these air advisors with partners.

**Col Jason Herring:** No, that's absolutely correct. So, what we've been doing lately, and since 2011, when we stood up the mobility support advisory squadrons is working with a lot of our partner nations, predominantly in Africa and in SOUTHCOM AOR, but now expanding around the globe. To be able to make sure that they understand that aviation enterprise development and how to, not only from the logistics side of the [00:05:00] air but expanding out into ISR and other types of assets that our members need or our partner nations need to be able to execute their own defense of their nation.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** So, that's one of four different mission sets that you do?

**Col Jason Herring:** That's correct the second set that we, talk about is, will be almost the fall on and that's the open the air base mission. And so, we execute that with our six contingency response squadrons that fall under two contingency response groups. And then, as we move down joint integrators, as our third mission, and that's composed of our air mobility liaison officers that are spread out through 20 different locations around the globe.

And then our Eagle teams. And so those teammates are folks that are, it's typically an Aerial Porter, as well as a career enlisted aviator that go to our Army and our Marine partners and work with them to be able to train on how to execute airlift movements, proper documentation, and then in crisis, turn around and help them execute those deliveries.[00:06:00]

And then our final mission set that we look at across as a theater wide command and control. And those are our teammates that go out the door when a crisis occurs, and they augment air mobility divisions inside the and the theaters providing both planning and execution of airlift, air refueling, and our AE mission or air medical evacuation.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** And all of those missions are utterly crucial because if we don't have that, you know, as we say, amateurs think about tactics, professionals think about logistics. And you are the bedrock and the foundation of all of that.

So, I really appreciate the context. I'd like to highlight how unique your mission and airmen are by better understanding when and how you operate with other expeditionary forces like Red Horse, base defense groups, and combat camera.

I imagine you have a lot of overlap, especially with the Red Horse teams on certain missions, because you're working the same field simultaneously. But I'd like to also understand how your folks are different and unique here in the [00:07:00] CRW.

**Col Jason Herring:** Yeah, I think the unique nature, you know, as you mentioned, those forces, combat communications, Red Horse, Prime Beef, the base defense groups.

Those are all part of doctrinally the air base opening forces, much like our contingency response groups that provide not only response forces, but also the joint task force port opening capability. The difference that you see with us in these fashions is that we are spread across multiple different AFSCs.

And so we work together as a team. So, as you talked about the specialization of, Red Horse, you know, that is a predominantly a large CE unit that goes in and builds a heavy construction and heavy runways. Base defense groups provide security around an air base or a combat comm unit provides communication nodes for larger packages, as well as some of the ATCALs, which provides the air traffic control systems.

Well, when you look at our contingency response groups, what you're seeing is a smattering of about 39 [00:08:00] different AFSCs. So, we're a much smaller footprint. We like to call ourselves kind of the light, lean, and lethal force because when there is a challenge that is required from a base opening, it's our forces that are going in there.

And then running everything as if it is a small expeditionary base. But we have to use a lot of the same functions, meaning that you may only have Aerial Porter on the road. And now you're having to double up with aircraft maintainers, vehicle maintainers that are going out and executing the mission together.

So, the difference that you see with our contingency response groups is we have about 39 different AFSCs that are rolled up into those organizations, that are charged with going into open air bases. And so, we use a lot of what we call mission ready airmen. Training to be able to go in and you may be a cook on one day helping support the food side or the MREs and the next day you're out with the M4 guarding the line.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** You're really the original multi [00:09:00] capable airman, right?

**Col Jason Herring:** That's absolutely it. And when you look at the way that the Air Force is moving with the AFORGEN cycles in our Air Task Force, a lot of that, I believe, is built off of the model that was created in the past under our contingency response groups.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's incredible, Jason. You've got 39 different AFSCs. You've got cross-training, so really multi-capable airmen. You're out there, you're standing up these austere bases.

Let's break that down into more of a real-world sense. Can you walk us through how your mission executes when the phone rings and your teams are tasked to deploy?

**Col Jason Herring:** So, the challenge with that statement and Lucky, is it always depends.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's always the answer. Right?

**Col Jason Herring:** That's it. So, it really depends on the mission set that is required.

Like, we talked about, we have four different main mission sets. They are air advising, base opening, joint integration, and then our theater command and control. But you can even break that down further into airfield assessments, running a [00:10:00] landing zone, running a drop zone, running an aerial port at night. And so, there's a lot of specific cases where it just depends on what the mission requirement is.

And that's the unique thing about our wing is that we are completely moldable to the actual requirement that's out there. And so, the main piece that you, hear a lot about is our contingency response groups that are sitting on alert, ready to go at a moment's notice. And that's driven by a 2006 U. S. Transportation

Command requirement to make a joint task force port opening capability. That's a combination between the Air Force and our contingency response groups, along with the Army, where it's able to go into an aerial port and then establish that base and then the onward movement from there.

You've seen that used in events such as Hurricane Katrina. And that that force is constantly ready to go at a moment's notice, and we [00:11:00] rotate that between our six contingency response squadrons to be able to execute. And so, typically, how that would execute is a phone call would come down with a location that we're going to head to, and then our team had to be ready to load on the first available aircraft that came in to be able to pick them up.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** And from there they go and they open up the airbase and they set up all the operations that are necessary for that specific operation. As you mentioned, the crews and their duties and what they will do, their tasks and functions will be tailored specifically to the need of that particular operation and demand.

**Col Jason Herring:** That's exactly correct. So, one example of this Lucky, was when we sent part of our contingency response squadron, or the contingency response element of that force to go into Haiti. Where we sent, roughly, about three quarters of the force down to Charleston Air Force Base, and then used maybe half of that force to be able to go into Haiti on a daily basis. [00:12:00] Enabling the delivery of additional supplies to provide law enforcement capabilities from partner nations into the Haiti area to try to stabilize the country there.

And so that's just one example of how we have a large force generation element, but it's able to break into smaller parts in order to execute the. The dynamic mission and the dynamic taskings that are available.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's a phenomenal capability, especially when it comes to building partnerships and responding to unexpected situations and unknown conditions on the ground. And you're really making it happen. But Jason, you come from a robust air mobility background. I mean, you've got time in the C 130, the KC 10, the KC 135, and the work of the 621st CRW is not the same as what you do leading an aircrew. So, clearly, you've been around contingency response crew before, but being a command, that's different.

So, what were some of the biggest surprises and takeaways that you had when you got to better understand the mission?

**Col Jason Herring:** It's kind of funny that you say that [00:13:00] because, you know, it's very unique. And in fact, the leaders that I look for are folks that have a diverse background in the flying community, like you just mentioned.

But it was funny years ago when I was sitting in the Pentagon and found out I was going to go take command of the 435th Contingency Response Squadron. Where I actually had to Google it and figure out what.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** What they do?

(Laughter)

**Col Jason Herring:** But once I got into the mission, I realized how the airmen perform in such a phenomenal way that I've never seen the teamwork that exists in these organizations.

And so, you say that, I think the biggest surprises that I got as I moved up into taking over the 621st Contingency Response Wing, is the level of training that our members are going through right now. The training is extremely detailed, especially with the new Air Force Generation Cycle, that allows our members at 18 months, to be able to really prepare and certify for several of these missions.

And so, seeing the level of detail that they get into working as a team, [00:14:00] and then being prepared and ready to execute is outstanding. Another item that I missed was the lack of awareness across the Department of Defense of what our mission is and how important it is to our nation's objectives.

It's one of the things that I'm continuing to drive home with joint partners when we're out on the road to be able to explain what we do on a daily basis. And it's one of the driving factors that pushed us to actually create a contingency response patch. Where all of our members across the wing where this so that it's a recognizable feature. So, that when someone sees that patch, they know a member of an elite team to be able to come in and help support.

When we talk about with our partners. We're starting to see some of our other foreign nations wear these patches that say CR on it. And one of our other partners actually, you know, we talk about it being contingency response, but one of them talked about it. I actually know what that patch says. It means chaos resolved. And I thought that was a very unique [00:15:00] phrase that was used by one of our allies.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** I like that. I like that, chaos resolved, because that's what you do. You bring in your airmen who have a number of different specialties. They understand how to work as a team, solve those complex problems.

So, they will descend into an area and basically turn it into order so that you can operate and do whatever is required of, you, your airmen, your partners, and our joint partners as well. So, that's really incredible. And I am, I appreciate the fact that we need to elevate the awareness of what the contingency response airmen are capable of doing, because we will have to rely on them for what we anticipate having to be able to do within the Pacific. And our partners, our allies, and these austere bases will absolutely require your talent.

So, we need to understand and be aware of and know what you're capable of doing so that we can call upon you when we need you.

**Col Jason Herring:** Yeah, Lucky, one of the points I bring up with my airmen when we're out on the road and we're all talking is that I really [00:16:00] see the contingency response wing as a training ground. And it's about bringing folks in, spending some time inside the unit, developing the mindset.

And I've told them all I love each of you, but you can't stay in our wing. You've got to get back out to the big Air Force and you've got to be able to kind of infect the host or spread the mindset of how to work as a team and work in the expeditionary framework. To be able to set our nation up for what we need them to do.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** I kind of chuckled when you said you can't stay here, you got, you know, you got to go out. But you're right. The rest of us need to be able to adopt that kind of mindset. So, you kind of touch a little bit upon this when you talked about the, all the different mission functions and all the components of the 621st CRW. So, where are your airmen distributed across the U. S. and beyond? Because you mentioned you've got 1,500 airmen. Your main CRW office is McGuire, but you've also got a major presence at Travis, and I'm assuming this is because you have to deploy anywhere around the [00:17:00] world on the moment's notice. And you have airmen and bases all over the world today.

**Col Jason Herring:** Yeah, so you're exactly right. The predominance of the force is split between Travis Air Force Base and then Joint Base McGuire-Dix Lakehurst. Ultimately on each of those bases, we have a contingency response group in each one. We have an air mobility operations squadron and then we



have a mobility support advisory squadron. And then the last set of members is, is spread throughout about 19 different locations. Some in the state side, but as you mentioned several over in Europe and several in the Pacific. And those are our mobility liaison officers that are working right there with our Army partners and our Marine partners to ensure they not only, know how to prepare the cargo, prepare the larger movements in the tip fit flows. But also, be able to support them with drop zones, landing zone support, and work alongside those partners and deploy with them.

That's how our wing is spread out, which drives lot of travel. I [00:18:00] try to do my best to be out at Travis once a month, while also spend some time at McGuire to be able to make sure that we've covered down on all our bases and keep the clear communication going across and standardization of our force.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's a serious challenge. I mean, crossing all of those time zones and keeping everybody focused on the mission set, as well as being able to put your arms around all the different moving parts that each one of those locations are being challenged with. You mentioned that you've got folks that are, at these disperse, the air liaison officers, are they part of your Eagle teams?

**Col Jason Herring:** All fall under the Mobility Support Operations squadron, but they are a separate from the Eagles teams. Now, when the Eagle teams do deploy, to an area where an additional assistance is required from our joint partners to ensure that they can explode into theater. Oftentimes we will send the air mobility liaison officer that is stationed with those forces, will then have the Eagle teams that are back at McGuire, Dix-Lakehurst come together with them to be able to support that mission.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** And [00:19:00] what specifically do the Eagle teams do? You had mentioned this earlier in the conversation, so I'm just trying to understand what their specialty is.

**Col Jason Herring:** So, our Eagle team, also known as our Expeditionary Air Ground Liaison Elements, are an elite group of members that, as I mentioned, it's typically a team of 3 personnel. Two aerial porters and 1 career enlisted aviator, that their primary mission is to go out and train our partner forces on how to not only request, air movement, but also then be able to prepare the documentation, prepare the cargo for a safe movement across the board.

Now, what we typically will do with them is in a crisis mode, we will also send them forward to be able to provide joint inspection capability or assist a partner

and being able to get out the door even faster. Exploding into theater is one of the critical aspects that we have to be able to execute with our joint maneuver.

And the reason for that is the [00:20:00] faster we can get into theater, the advantage that we can get over a potential adversary or the safety that we can secure for our airmen as well as our joint partners becomes ever so critical. With the speed of movement.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Yeah, exploding the theater's initiative and it's a logistical initiative. And logistics proceeds any kind of combat operation we might want to do. So, I am totally on board with exploding into theater and it's really interesting. Eagle Teams, which, by the way, is a super cool acronym, helps to do that because it cuts down the rework for joint partners, Army, Navy, or any of our allies and coalition partners as well because they might not necessarily have the understanding of how to load up.

And as you said, do the administration as well as the physical packing that's necessary for you to be able to safely and effectively move cargo. So what, that's a really effective and unique solution to that problem set to accelerate speed. So, this also means that you are part of the Global Air Mobility [00:21:00] Support System.

What does that mean?

**Col Jason Herring:** So, the Global Air Mobility Support System, or GAMS as it's referred to from an acronym name, is really a structure and a system that allows for the rapid movement of cargo and personnel. And so Air Mobility Command manages through a few ways. One is through the Air Mobility Operations wings that have enroute structure, spread throughout the globe, both in the European AOR, the Pacific AOR, and over in the CENTCOM AOR, that allows that rapid movement of cargo and tanker aircraft.

The other portion that we provide is the expeditionary side of the GAM system where it's a base, it has to be opened. And then we're able to go in and establish that aerial port and be able to move the cargo, move the aircraft through there at a rapid pace.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's really impressive and it goes a long way [00:22:00] to integrating those mobility logistics across the joint force and the coalition partners from your Eagle teams all the way up to GAMs.

So, the idea of forward leaning air mobility and logistics at the edge, it isn't new. You know, I think of the challenge of flying the "hump." And everything it took to operate across Africa and the Pacific in World War II. And the 621st, I think you might have mentioned this, was established in 2005. So, what was your lineage leaning up to this point? And how have you evolved since this founding?

**Col Jason Herring:** Yeah, so, the lineage there started in the early days. As you mentioned the idea wasn't new. It started back in the days of the "hump" or the started back in the days of the Berlin Airlift, with these small teams out there. But it's evolved over the years.

There was a time that it was the tanker airlift control elements that would move forward because as Air Mobility Command continued to develop, they saw this need for having in route structures to be able to support aircraft with maintenance, cargo [00:23:00] loading, cargo downloading, air traffic control.

And so, as we built that out, as you mentioned, there, in 1994, it really establishes the 621st Air Mobility Operations Group, and that was the initial establishment from there. And then lead ultimately into the growth of the wing itself, and then multiple groups onward. One other area that we began to see the growth was During Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, where you began to see our joint partners needing airbases opened at multiple locations, just to be able to continue to accelerate the fight inside Iraq and Afghanistan.

And so, you saw a lot of our teammates that were moving forward into these locations, such as Al Takatum, Al Asad, Bagram Air Base, Mazar e Sharif, just to name a few to be able to establish that opening for the port. So, they'd be able to move forces in and be able to continue to run operations at the speed that was required.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Wow. [00:24:00] So, you had members on this, of the 621st on the ground opening up Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. And you were on the ground facilitating operations during the evacuation of Bagram. And we all know what those images look like. Would you mind sharing some of the challenges that were particularly unique to that situation of evacuation and how your airmen overcame them? Because I think we really need to highlight the creativity, the innovation, the grit, the perseverance, and frankly, the heroism of your airmen.

**Col Jason Herring:** Absolutely. it's funny when you think through that, and we look at the areas that, that our Air Force is trying to go with mission command, and you talk about being able to operate in a complex, uncertain environment, take minimal direction, and be able to make the mission happen.

And that's really what our airmen do on a daily basis. And it's absolutely what they did there when they closed Bagram. Because there was multiple challenges in that operation where you had several different forward operating bases, it [00:25:00] still had to collapse all the way back down to Bagram. And then, as they continue to prioritize the movement of cargo, expediting those lists, and both looking at what needed to go out via air versus what needed to go out via surface, but being able to work all the paperwork.

And then, as the base continued to close down and the personnel departed, it became that self-sufficient force that they had to provide their own security, food, and sustainment. And those were the challenges that team faced. You think about the pressure of just being able to quickly expedite the movement out of the country when you had so much of a high priority coming all the way down from the President on that movement. And what those airmen were able to pull off in such a short amount of time was nothing less than phenomenal.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Absolutely. There's, I just am at a loss for words for, really the mission set those airmen accomplished, in that particular situation. But let's cut to the challenges [00:26:00] that we're going to face today and in the future. You know, the 621st, it expanded in the heart of the Global War of Terror just because the demand for your mission set is there.

And we're now looking at a set of circumstances where peer competition is the pacing threat, China, the Pacific, and I anticipate that's going to even accelerate the demand. Just explode the demand for your airmen and for your mission set. So, what does that mean for the members of the 621st?

**Col Jason Herring:** It means that we have to get, continue to become more light, more lean, and more lethal in what we're doing. We've got to realize that our teammates will be those first ones in. And we've looked at this across the Pacific and this need to be able to really establish a small footprint. Create the opening for the base and then a follow-on air task force or follow-on expeditionary air base. That can then take over the communication side of the security side as soon as we've got them up and running. [00:27:00]

Because the next thing we're going to need to do is continue to move forward to the next base that's required to be open. And so, you're seeing, you're going to

see lighter packages that are developed, but also a lot more folks that understand the idea of mission command and can see what the big picture is for the operation so that they know how to clearly communicate the next event that needs to take place.

The other item that you're going to see is, as I talked about, becoming more platform agnostic. We've got to be able to support multiple different platforms from the middle of nowhere. You're starting to see this a lot in some of the exercises we're conducting, such as Emerald Warrior with AFSOC, you're seeing this in Agile Flag and Bamboo Eagle, where we're working alongside our CAF partners. And then you're seeing it also from a rotary wing side and, you know, unique example as we've added rotary wing maintenance as well as fighter maintenance to our wing capabilities.

We saw an example of this recently where a team was down working in [00:28:00] exercise and was able to help support a rotary wing airlift. Some maintenance on a platform that was going out to save a member's life that was out on a cruise ship and needed to be brought back into shore. These are the type of examples that, we're trying to grow in that additional capability where they can think outside the box but know how to execute a mission with very little guidance.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's incredible. Not just the mission command, but the fact that you're expanding your airmen's capabilities beyond just Air Mobility Command to be able to take into account the entire Air Force as well as the joint force, rotary wing fighter maintenance fueling, et cetera. We'll need to have that if we're going to be as flexible and unpredictable as well, we need to and peer conflict, but one thing that isn't really something we consider the heart of the AMC mission is force protection.

So, what does that look like in the modern era? Because as you're opening up these austere bases, you will need to take into consideration how do you do base defense, whether or not that's [00:29:00] ground-based air defense or against, you know, guys just outside the wire.

I kind of expect that you've got some experience in this, especially considering closing days of Bagram, which you just talked about, I mean, showing security that involved keeping the local population off the runway. So, it might also, as I mentioned, include missile defense. So, how will the 621st engage in this part of the equation?

And are there other units that you partner with that you would depend on to execute the security and base defense functions?

**Col Jason Herring:** Lucky, it's a great question and it's one that's constantly on my mind because it's all about resourcing our forces and ensuring that they are secure out there. And then we've trained him appropriately. So, our continued response group members, they train daily to be able to go out and perform security measures, not only from a room clearings, to providing defensive fighting positions, to protecting one another. Along with the convoy operations to ensure that they have [00:30:00] best security and the best safety when they go out into the field.

And so, when I look at this, like, I talked about earlier, it really all depends. We're made to be able to go from the permissive into the hostile environment. And so, if it's a significantly hostile environment, it may be that we rely on an organization like the 173rd Airborne Brigade that provides that airfield seizure, and then we would be the follow-on force that would open up the air base.

If it's a base, it's already established. It's in an unsafe environment. And then we might be looking at the 20th Base Defense Group to provide additional security if it's outside of our own. Overall, when we're in these small locations, it's all about being able to provide our own internal security.

And this is why we've been so focused on getting secondary weapons working with IMSC has been a great partner to get additional weapons and then looking at what type of vehicles we need to be able to maneuver, but still provide security for our forces.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Really, [00:31:00] truly the Swiss army knife, if you will, of air base operations, right?

But so, you also mentioned mission command, and I'd really like to dig into a little bit what that command and control looks like, from the 621st perspective over the last decades; connectivity has been really assured, right? I mean, we've been able to have the thousand-mile screwdriver, and really be connected to the air operations center. But things are likely to be more challenging in a peer fight, especially as you're hopping around and opening up bases.

You spoke a little bit to the initiative of your airmen as well as a combat comms element to that begins to establish those communications. So, how does that mission command factor into your training? How do you actually empower and

train airmen to be empowered to execute in a generally understood set of principles based off of their best judgment?

**Col Jason Herring:** And this is where the exercise come in so handy, right? As I talked about it earlier on, [00:32:00] we have airmen that come in from multiple different AFSCs and they, Kind of grow up and silos or stove pipes. And so, what we have to do is really break them down into understanding how to work as a team, but also how to take kind of clear guidance.

One of the courses that we actually run through at the initial part is called the devil raider development or devil development. and it teaches them not only to work alongside one another, but it teaches them logistics and how they would actually be able to operate in a contested environment.

And so, we use that along with the connectivity, you know, we've been having a major push inside Air Mobility Command about getting greater connectivity across the board, and General Minihan, he gave us guidance of trying to get 25% of the fleet connected by 2025. And my guys, my team is, I need you to be 100 percent by 2024.

And the reason for that is being the smaller teams on the ground, we're going to be relied upon to be able to receive [00:33:00] information and guidance back from our headquarters and then be able to pass it along to aircrew. Whether it be in the wider communities or whether it be in our mobility communities. So, that they'll know exactly what the next tasking is to be able to go out and execute.

And so we build that in the training models, but we also are using that through testing different capabilities and exercises where we will cut their comms and then they'll have to figure out how to operate and be able to provide that capability when they're isolated.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Any lessons learned from that?

**Col Jason Herring:** So, we actually were able to pick up some lessons from Mobility Guardian, and by dropping some of the communication capabilities, we were able to drive our airmen to go back to their pace plans to be able to figure out how to operate. But we also saw them take the initial guidance that was given from the operation and those initial operational orders. And then still be able to execute and work into [00:34:00] the plan as they awaited for their comms to come back up.

It was a unique piece as well, where we realized how important some communication capabilities that we were able to test out from new systems that have been lacking. Both in personal devices that the members could walk around with that would showcase where folks were located. All the way to communication systems that allowed us to send messages directly from the forward operating bases to the main operating base and all the way back to higher headquarters for execution.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Wow. I, you know, I bet that Mobility Guardian just really drove airmen to the edge of their endurance and I appreciate you sharing some of those lessons learned and experiences. I'm sure it made everyone sharper, but as you go through those exercises, I'm also certain that you discover some blimp facts that really pose challenges and help you focus on, elements that could potentially constrain our ability to operate.

I mean, I [00:35:00] only imagine how hard it is to ensure availability of things like fuel at these forward austere locations. Everything from spare parts, to food, to medical supplies, fresh water, right? Potable water. So, how are you addressing that?

**Col Jason Herring:** We've been looking, working with our innovation team to look at items where we can pull water out of the air to be able to generate potable water. We've been looking at areas where we can reduce the generator size and the footprint where it takes less resources and it's lower weights.

We've also been trying to cut down on some of the heavier equipment that we have and trying to reduce the footprint of the airlift requirement that's there. Along with looking at smaller airframes, that have the potential to be able to move teams in a faster means, but also provide them into smaller locations that we might be required to operate out of.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's really interesting. So, you mentioned working with your host nations. [00:36:00] How do you train with your allies and partners to support this kind of distributed forward edge mobility operations?

**Col Jason Herring:** So, it's a bit of a combination and it depends on what the requirement is that exists. We'll give you an example of working with our Japanese partners.

During Mobility Guardian, we were able to go in and alongside them work on specialized fueling operations. They have C 130s. We have a C 130 platform as



well, but going in with them to be able to have air advisors on the ground that provide the subject matter expertise of working on the cultural side to our subject matter experts from the airbase opening mission inside the continued response groups to really be able to help the Japanese develop their own expeditionary capabilities.

But work alongside us so that we could have the potential to, to share platforms, share movement should we be required to fight alongside one another?

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** It's so important that the 621st is working with our coalition partners like Japan, [00:37:00] what you just spoke about, because that's going to be key to all of the operations we have within the Pacific, as well as our joint and coalition partners around the rest of the globe as well.

So, you're expanding your capabilities though, to support more than just mobility. And you spoke a little bit to this earlier to support maintenance, specifically CAF expeditionary forces. You mentioned rotary wings and fighters during agile combat operations. Could you talk a little bit more about this?

**Col Jason Herring:** Yeah this, has been a major movement that has occurred over the last several years. I think some of the, some of this came uh, Lucky from out of watching the theater contingency response groups and how they were working alongside ISR platforms.

They were working alongside fighter platforms that are in not only Europe, but also in the Pacific. This recognition that to really be the force that our Air Force needs at the front edge is that we're going to have to be able to support any partner, anywhere, and any time. And so, we started to expand it out over the last 3 [00:38:00] years. Really starting with aircraft maintenance, because, you, we saw this as the means. Oftentimes our rotary wing maintainers are also doing forward air refueling points and they're also doing specialized fueling operations and so some areas that we could expand out looking at, sling load training for helicopters, knowing that there may be times that we can't get an aircraft onto an airfield until we've fully assessed it, but maybe a rotary wing could bring our forces in.

So, we've been trying to expand out to be able to recognize that whatever Air Force needs us to do that we're right there on the edge to at least establish the initial support mechanism until the following forces can show up.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** The 621st is really expanding the scale and the scope of your mission focus, and you've just spoken to so much of that.

And you've also talked about some of the recent exercises your team has participated in, and the list is long. Recent ones I've read about include Valiant Shield, Red Flag Alaska, Turbo Distribution, [00:39:00] Exercise Stormcrow, and there are so many more. As you look across all of these, what are you learning?

**Col Jason Herring:** The big key takeaways that we're learning is that we're getting better as a force, as an Air Force as a whole about expeditionary movements. About being able to quickly explode into a theater and then work alongside one another, recognizing that we're not going to have all the capabilities that you would typically want to be able to execute. The other areas that we're seeing is, that assistance that we're gaining from partner nations and how we're working together as teams. One of the concepts that our CSAF is pushing right now is this term "collective agility." Where they're trying to move into a means of working together with partners working together across joint lanes to be able to support one another in the rapid movement so that you're putting the firepower at the right place at the right time. And that's where you see that our teams are really starting to come in.

We saw this recently in [00:40:00] Bamboo Eagle, where we went from not only running a main operating base. But then breaking our team into smaller organizations and allowing them to be dynamically tasked by the expeditionary leader to say, hey, this is where I need to put the right platform. And so our teams were going out there to support those operations.

And so we're, continuously learning new processes, new ways to create the relationships. That are forged and needed should conflict arise.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's incredible. And I know that any warfighter out there who's focusing on their specific job but knowing that ACE is going to be part of this is grateful to understand and know that your team will be there supporting them.

But what factors keep you awake at night? I mean, what are the, some of the things as you're looking at the expanding scope of your responsibilities, your teams, what are your worry beads?

**Col Jason Herring:** Yeah, Lucky, I kind of always laugh when I hear that question. I always think back to General Mattis. I think he provided the best quotes that where he says [00:41:00] "nothing, Uh, I keep other good night."

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Amen. Amen.

**Col Jason Herring:** But for my side, really, what keeps me up is just knowing that I've done everything in my power as wing commander to be able to provide with my forces with the resources they with the training that they need, along with just the time to be able to work along together as a team.

We recently changed our priorities across the wing to developing a community of ready warriors, and it's all about building that internal teamwork. Because when you're out in the middle of nowhere and you're really alone and unafraid, it's all about the airmen beside you that are working with one another.

And that's what keeps our members safe. I will say this, you know, we've done an outstanding job with our leadership teams of picking the right people to come out and lead, and, you know, as long as I know that I've resourced them, I know that these leaders are going to go out and execute. And you saw this in Niger when we just did the withdrawal [00:42:00] there from 2 bases.

As soon as we got the team in from our 1 Contingency Response Squadron, you know, I didn't even ask questions after that, because I knew that they had the right leaders in place. They knew what they were doing, and they knew how to deliver the mission for our nation.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** That's awesome. I mean, I think that when I'm getting out of this conversation is the CRW is going to be the foundation of our combat operations in the Pacific because I, you know, I'm not going to want to do ACE unless I got to CR person with me, CR airman with me.

**Col Jason Herring:** No, that's absolutely right. And that's what we want. And that's the inspiration that you see from our airmen on a daily basis. It's just that drive and that motivation. Like I talked about it earlier, I've told them that they can't stay here for long, even though you start seeing a lot of folks that want to come back and they see this mission set is such a critical one that they don't want to leave.

And that's says a lot for what our Continued Response airmen do.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** Yeah, but as you push them out to the rest of the fleet, whether or not that's still an Air Mobility Command, or Air Combat Command, or [00:43:00] the other MAJCOMs out there, I think we also need to have a piece of the culture that you're building here at the 621st.

So, before I let you go, what is one last thing that you'd either like our listeners to know or one last, you know, What's one key message you want people to remember after this conversation?

So, Lucky, I think the one thing I'd like our listeners to take away is, when there's just not, there's a wicked problem and folks just don't understand what force they're going to be required that there's a lot to be said for leaning on us as that go to wing.

Because really what our airmen do is they take chaos, and they turn it into order for our nation.

Thank you. like I said, if I'm going to be doing an ACE in the Pacific, I definitely want a Contingency Response airman with me. So, we're out of time, but thank you for an awesome conversation.

Colonel Herring, thanks.

**Col Jason Herring:** Thanks, Lucky.

**Heather "Lucky" Penney:** With that, I'd like to extend a big thank you to our guests for joining in today's discussion. I'd also like to extend a big thank [00:44:00] you to you, our listeners, for your continued support and for tuning into today's show. If you like what you heard today, don't forget to hit that like button and follow or subscribe to the Aerospace Advantage.

You can also leave a comment to let us know what you think about our show or areas you would like us to explore further. As always, you can join in on the conversation by following the Mitchell Institute on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or LinkedIn, and you can always find us at [MitchellAerospacePower.org](http://MitchellAerospacePower.org).

Thanks again for joining us and have a great aerospace power kind of day. See you next time.