



The Mitchell Forum

The Limited Utility of Mission Type Orders for ACE... and A Better Way to Execute Mission Command

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The Thing About Airpower

Every domain has unique characteristics. For airpower, one of its most unique characteristics is its reach—the ability to launch from any location worldwide, traverse vast distances, and employ with precision at any place on the globe. Another distinctive characteristic of airpower is interdependence. Rarely does one aircraft operate alone. For example, a bomber that takes off from the United States to operate in the Arabian Gulf requires tankers, airborne early warning, electronic warfare support, and defensive counter air. A third unique characteristic of airpower is the fact that it is perpetually in low supply and high demand. The joint force has an insatiable appetite for airpower. There will never be enough of it.

These unique characteristics make airpower inherently reliant on command and control (C2). In order to make sure the right airplane is in the right place at the right time, a single airman must have command authority to decide where an aircraft will go and how it will be used (and conversely, decide where it won't be used). Once that decision is made, the employment of airpower must be planned, coordinated, and communicated. Someone must decide which routes these aircraft will use and when they will take off; they must decide what weapons they will carry and how much fuel they need; they need to coordinate diplomatic clearances with foreign countries; they must decide upon rules of engagement. The list goes on.

The Thing About the Air Component

The process of deciding where and how airpower will be utilized, then planning and coordinating its employment, is the epitome of operational-level C2. Traditionally, the functions of operational C2 are conducted by an air component, which consists of both an Air Force forces (AFFOR) staff and an air operations center, under the



An A-10 refueling from a KC-135 assigned to the 28th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron above eastern Afghanistan in December 2019.

Source: [U.S. Air Force photo](#) by Staff Sgt. Daniel Snider.

authority of an air component commander who typically also serves as the joint force air component commander (JFACC). The air component has the training, systems, and manpower to perform the necessary operational C2 functions. Those functions include developing the air component's strategy for airpower, determining basing requirements, coordinating inter- and intra-theater logistics, weaponeering, prioritizing targets, and planning the next day's master air attack plan (MAAP).

To effectively conduct air operations, the air component commander must have the authority to task the aircraft as well as the ability to conduct the aforementioned planning functions. These requirements typically drive air components to retain operational-level C2 functions at the component headquarters level simply because subordinate headquarters don't have the authorities, systems, or manpower to perform these operational C2 functions themselves.

An Experimental Exception: MTOs in Afghanistan

In 2019–2020, Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) took advantage of a unique opportunity in the operational environment to experiment with delegating operational C2 functions to a subordinate echelon by issuing mission type orders (MTOs) to the Air Expeditionary Task Force–Afghanistan (AETF-A). Through a convergence of good conditions, the subordinate headquarters had both the authorities and the capabilities to perform the required operational C2 functions to effectively employ airpower.

The AETF-A commander had all the necessary aircraft assigned to him in the U.S. Forces Afghanistan theater: fighters, tankers, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), electronic warfare, and mobility aircraft. He also had a planning staff in the air support operations center that was closely tied in with the joint task force (JTF) commander's staff and had the

capacity to align with the JTF's strategy, prioritize targeting, and plan the next day's operations. Moreover, his theater was remote. There were hundreds of miles of airspace between his forces and the next nearest area of operations, meaning that aircraft based in Afghanistan had limited utility to other theaters and would not likely be pulled away to perform other missions. Additionally, basing and logistics were very well established and defined. Finally, there were few, if any, complex weaponeering requirements. There were no integrated air defense systems to penetrate or take down, the airspace was largely uncontested, and there were few requirements for over-the-horizon support. It was the perfect scenario to delegate C2 authorities, roles, and responsibilities to a subordinate command. In other words, conditions were ideal for a more decentralized command and control, through the issuance of MTOs, to result in successful mission outcomes.

During the period in which the AETF-A was executing under MTOs, the AETF-A staff did all their own planning

for air operations, very similar to how an aircraft wing would develop and publish a daily flying schedule. Once planning was complete, they merely informed the AFCENT combined air operations center (CAOC) about their plan, and the CAOC would in turn put the AETF-A missions on the next day's air tasking order (ATO). What this means is that the MTOs shifted the responsibility for master air attack planning from the CAOC's combat plans division directly to AETF-A. This delegation of responsibility created some efficiencies within the AETF-A, and it was perceived to have increased responsiveness to the JTF commander's local requirements. It also eased some of the burden on the air component staff in the CAOC. However, the marginal gains were short-lived.

In 2020, the operating environment began to change. Tensions between the United States and Iran escalated, and it became necessary to pull airpower assets and staff personnel out of Afghanistan to use them elsewhere in the Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility. As



Air Force F-16s fly over Afghanistan in March 2020.

Source: [U.S. Air Force photo](#) by Tech. Sgt. Matthew Lotz

AETF-A's inventory of assigned aircraft depleted, so did their ability to plan and task internally. Without the ability to organically plan and task the employment of airpower in their area of operations, MTOs were no longer efficient or effective.

The Applicability of Mission Type Orders during Agile Combat Employment _____

Doctrine does not prescribe how to use MTOs, it only suggests that MTOs can be used as applicable to enable mission command.¹ The way they were used in Afghanistan in 2019 to enable a subordinate headquarters to build their own MAAP was probably one of the most aggressive and forward-leaning ways to apply MTOs to date. However, the primary lesson learned from this MTO experiment is, when measured by the subordinate headquarters' ability to effectively plan and execute operational C2 functions that are normally performed by the air component, *the utility of MTOs is inversely correlated to the subordinate headquarters'*

requirement for external support and coordination. The more external support and coordination a theater requires, whether in terms of assets or planning, the less effective MTOs will be. This lesson has implications for the utility of MTOs during Agile Combat Employment (ACE) operations.

Air Force doctrine defines ACE as “a proactive and reactive operational scheme of maneuver executed within threat timelines to increase resiliency and survivability while generating combat power throughout the integrated deterrence continuum.”² The purpose of ACE is to complicate the enemy's targeting by disaggregating forces in theater based on the operational scheme of maneuver. ACE requires decentralized authorities and empowered commanders that have the authority and ability to act in the absence of direction from higher headquarters.

In a contested theater where commanders are exercising a dynamic scheme of maneuver to increase resiliency while generating combat power, employing MTOs



Air Force personnel assigned to U.S. Air Forces Central Command load cargo into a C-130 Hercules in the CENTCOM AOR.

Source: [U.S. Air Force photo](#) by Staff Sgt. Daniel Snider.

the way they were used in the AETF-A would probably not work. An air expeditionary wing (AEW) commander in an ACE environment will likely not have sufficient assets under his or her command to effectively package airpower, the persistent ability to communicate with external support assets, or the appropriate staff in place to replace the MAAP process or conduct other functions that are normally part of the air component's air tasking cycle.

This reality by no means invalidates the utility of MTOs entirely. MTOs can be useful in other ways. For example, MTOs can articulate the combined forces air component commander (CFACC) intent. They can help clarify command relationships during ACE, they can establish priorities, or they can codify and designate authorities in the event of degradation or denial. Yet, MTOs aren't a substitute for the air tasking cycle. Simply put, the effective use of airpower at the tactical level requires the C2 functions that are normally conducted at the operational level by the air component.

A Better Way

Moving forward, instead of trying to find ways to substitute or delegate air tasking cycle processes, perhaps our efforts are better spent on making air component systems and processes more resilient so the ATO will still be available, even in a contested or degraded environment.

The new doctrine of "distributed control" is a key component of this resiliency. The critical air component processes that today exist in a single physical location must be distributed (or at least be highly distributable) if they are to survive in a peer conflict.

Another key component of operational C2 resiliency is how we store, access, and use data systems. Transitioning from localized, proprietary, on-premises data to a cloud-based environment would allow air components to collaborate across echelons throughout the

planning process. In the event of temporary disruption, all parties would retain the most current version of the plan.

The addition of advanced software could likewise automate many of the manual functions used today during the planning process, allowing air components to compress the air tasking cycle and create space to allow for contingencies should they experience temporary disruptions in connectivity.

Finally, we should not accept the narrative that disruption and degradation are binary. As communications technology advances, the number of communications pathways increases exponentially, providing more opportunities for redundancy. The current crisis in Ukraine provides an excellent example of friendly forces working through degradation to ensure continued access to communications. At the tactical level, understanding ROEs and commander's intent is important, but it is not a substitute for operational level C2. Because of airpower's unique reliance on C2, for decades U.S. commanders have dreaded a scenario in which they have zero communications. Without any communications, a wing commander doesn't know when to launch aircraft or where to send those aircraft. Those aircraft don't operate alone—they need to meet up with a package in order to be properly employed—which means they need to know, at a minimum, when they need to be at a specific location. The point is that the likelihood of actually having zero communications in today's environment is very small. There are enough pathways to get enough information through to enable commanders to generate forces at the right time in the right place. Then those aircraft can employ with commander's intent. But commander's intent alone doesn't solve the operational C2 problem of knowing when and where to be—that still requires C2.

If we can modernize and organize the C2 enterprise in a way that ensures enough data can get through, despite degradation, then MTOs don't need to replace the air tasking cycle.

Mission Command

Although MTOs cannot and do not need to replace the functions of the air tasking cycle, they can still serve to enable mission command by delegating authorities and responsibilities for functions that are not part of the air tasking cycle. For example, MTOs can empower commanders with the authorities and trust to make decisions to defend their base, move their people and assets, and protect their logistics routes. Rather than attempting to replace the air tasking cycle, MTOs should serve to communicate the CFACC's intent to the field and empower subordinate commanders with the authorities to make the best possible decisions in line with the overarching air campaign.

As opposed to the way they were used in Afghanistan, in this same period AFCENT also issued MTOs to the Air Expeditionary Task Force–Levant (AETF-L) in Iraq and Syria. These MTOs were much more scaled-down and did not attempt to replace the air tasking cycle processes. Instead, they focused on delegating tactical level decision making authorities to “give commanders and operators the context and authority they needed for combat decision-making at echelons of command or in the cockpit.”³

The AETF-L MTOs more closely aligned with the doctrinal definition of mission command as an “approach to C2 that empowers subordinate decision-making for flexibility, initiative, and responsiveness in the accomplishment of commander's intent.”⁴ The AETF-L leveraged these delegated authorities on a number of occasions to do things like launch sorties or reposition airborne aircraft

in real-time based on tactical conditions, within the bounds of CFACC intent, but without explicit AOC direction or approval (although they provided coordination in arears).

Although the AETF-L MTOs were much less aggressive than those of the AETF-A, they also did not stand the test of time. The constant turnover and organizational realignments in that theater simply overcame the initial intent of the MTO experiment, *suggesting that mission command is best established by a culture, not by an order.*

Conclusion

Although MTOs were successful as a replacement for the air tasking cycle for a short time during the AETF-A experiment, the utility of using MTOs in this manner will be limited during ACE. The unique characteristics of airpower require a degree of planning and coordination that MTOs cannot replace unless a commander has all the necessary assets, connectivity, and expertise under their command to effectively plan and execute airpower without external support. The good news is that the U.S. ability to plan and communicate in a contested and degraded environment is rapidly improving. Through distribution and modernization, we can ensure that the ATO (or a similar organizing mechanism) will get through.

Airpower's natural reliance on C2 does not detract from an AEW commander's authority or his or her ability to execute mission command. Mission command isn't about orders, it's about trust. It's about ensuring airmen understand that the purpose of their mission is more important than their explicit task. The best use of MTOs is likely as a mechanism to convey commander's intent as part of a culture of mission command. ✪

Endnotes

- 1 [Air Force Doctrine Publication 1, *The Air Force*](#), March 10 2021, p. 12.
- 2 [Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21, *Agile Combat Employment*](#), August 23, 2022, p. 2.
- 3 Alex Grynkewich and Antonio Goldstrom, “[The AETF Today: Enabling Mission Command of Airpower](#),” *Air and Space Power Journal*, Summer 2020.
- 4 [Air Force Doctrine Publication 1, *The Air Force*](#).

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