

## LeMay Center Essay

**PROMPT:** How should [AFDP 1-1, Mission Command](#), change the way the Air Force organizes, plans, or executes at the operational level of war?”

Title: USAF Mission Command: *Cultural, Organizational and Operational Change to Meet Future Demands*

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## Executive Summary

**Thesis:** Mission Command should drive the force to become modular and scalable in organizational structure, build "Mission Style" orders into procedures, and deeply sow the Mission Command philosophy into the culture.

**Discussion:** The United States Air Force has adopted the Agile Combat Employment operating model that requires a Mission Command philosophy of command and control to be successful. Mission Command is viewed as a philosophy of leadership that would empower Airmen to operate in uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing environments through trust, shared awareness, and understanding of commander's intent. Unfortunately, some cultural, structural, and operational challenges must be overcome. General Curtis LeMay developed a checklist leadership style counter to Mission Command that has reverberated through Air Force history but can be overcome with training and education. The Air Tasking Order used to drive planning and operations stifles flexibility, initiative, adaptability, and the bias for action necessary for a Mission Command leadership philosophy. Incorporating commander's intent into the planning and execution process can provide a more permissive environment facilitating effective Mission Command. The Air Force is predominantly structured with flying squadrons built only to fly. The squadron commander relies on adjacent units to provide the support necessary to execute his mission. Adopting a model similar to the Marine Corps Air Combat Element would allow the Air Force to use its existing structure for administrative training and operations but assemble purpose-built, modular flying squadrons that unify different flying platforms, maintainers, and other enablers to facilitate Mission Command when necessary. Abolishing LeMay's checklist leadership style, seeding commander's intent into Air Force operational culture, and adopting the concept of rotational, purpose-built squadrons will make Mission Command effective, creating the most formidable Air Force the world has ever known.

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## *Biography/Preface*

### **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Brian Blaine is an infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps. He is currently a student at the Air War College and will on the staff next year at Air Command and Staff College.

### **Preface**

When the “Mission Command” prompt hit my inbox, I was drawn to it as it offered the opportunity to write down how I see the philosophy of command that I have lived for my entire officer career. Mission Command was introduced to me as a young sergeant in 1998 at the Marine Corps Sergeants Course, and I studied it again as a new lieutenant at the Basic Officer Course in 2004. Little did I know I would find myself leading men in vastly distributed environments requiring a Mission Command philosophy to succeed. BJ Niblett's quote, "We are the sum-total of our experiences," applies twofold when experienced under arduous conditions. As a first lieutenant in Ramadi, Iraq, the Task Force I led was operated out of Joint Security Station Eagle Base, an hour and 45-minute movement along Main Supply Route Mobile from the battalion headquarters in Camp Ramadi. My Area of Operations (AO) extended another hour to the east toward Falluja, putting me, at times, almost three hours from my boss's supervision and support. Though I was the most distant flank, our entire battalion was similarly distributed through the battle space. Now retired Colonel Mike Saleh was the commanding officer for that battalion. He sermonized Mission Command as the unit's leadership philosophy before that deployment, and I watched him successfully lead our battalion that way for eight months. A few years later, as a captain company commander, my company was 250 men, making up seven platoons distributed across 13 disparate positions along 80 linear kilometers of the Helmand River in Garmser District, Afghanistan. It took five days to conduct an effective battlefield circulation, and my only communication with some of the positions was High-Frequency Tactical Chat that worked off a tactically built antenna. As a major, I had a recruiting command with 31 recruiting substations covering 180K square miles stretched across Iowa and Nebraska, extending into South Dakota, Illinois, and Wisconsin. It was an 8-hour drive to my farthest recruiting substation. Mission Command was a must. As a battalion executive officer, our battalion deployed as CENTCOM's Crisis Response Force with our headquarters in Kuwait, but we had companies in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Africa. Finally, as an infantry battalion inspector and instructor, my headquarters was in St Louis, but the instructor staff were distributed across the south in Springfield, Little Rock, Montgomery, and Nashville. I was lucky to be introduced to a Mission Command philosophy early in my career and even luckier to have a great mentor to watch as he led through Mission Command in combat conditions. I have practiced Mission Command for 20 years and will continue to learn and refine my philosophy of employing it.

## Introduction

The 2022 National Defense Strategy directs the service chiefs to plan for a fight with peer adversaries, and China is the Secretary of Defense's number one priority. As a result, the United States Air Force (USAF) recognized that to become more survivable and lethal against a peer adversary, they must be capable of disaggregating their force. Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1, Mission Command, should drive the force to become modular and scalable in organizational structure, build "Mission Style" orders into procedures, and deeply sow the Mission Command philosophy into the culture. Decades of operating in uncontested garrisons have not required the change, but a looming peer adversary fight with China makes these changes crucial. This essay addresses USAF Mission Command in three parts: 1) a common understanding of Mission Command; 2) the current challenges in achieving Mission Command; and 3) recommended AFDP-1 changes.

## Part One (Mission Command)

Mission Command is not a new operating concept for the USAF but has yet to be fully imbued into organizational culture. The Air Force defines Mission Command as a philosophy of leadership that empowers Airmen to operate in uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing environments through trust, shared awareness, and understanding of commander's intent.<sup>1</sup> The definition of Mission Command is derived from the leadership philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*. This basic translation fails to encompass the true meaning of the far broader philosophy necessary for success in a chaotic and uncertain air and communications contested environment. However, Donald Vandergriff, a repeat guest lecturer at the Naval War College, asserts, "*Auftragstaktik*, or *Mission Command*, is not a Command-and-Control doctrine. It is not a Command-and-Control system. It is not a technology. It is not a ticket to a free-for-all. It is not a way to write short or no orders or to rely on verbal orders. *Auftragstaktik* is a cultural philosophy. It is the highest form of military professionalism. The overall commander's intent is for the member to strive for professionalism; in return, the individual will be given latitude in accomplishing their given missions."<sup>2</sup> Mission Command will cultivate an officer corps that will aggressively act to achieve the commander's end state without the need for further guidance. It is the ultimate command culture because it empowers by trusting the individual to best solve problems after extensive professional development.<sup>3</sup> Vandergriff points out Mission Command cannot be just a bumper sticker or technique. John Boyd, fighter pilot, and military theory expert, touts the German system as an example of "organic" command and control that avoids checklists and technical procedures to facilitate command; instead, they focus on leadership and the implicit bonds of a common operational outlook. He refers to this common outlook as the "orientation" that allows decentralization while retaining unity of effort in an uncertain and changing environment. Mission

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<sup>1</sup> United States Air Force, *Mission Command*, AFDP1-1, (Arlington, VA: Headquarters Air Force, August 14, 2023.) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Vandergriff, "How the Germans Defined *Auftragstaktik*: What Mission Command Is and Is Not," *Small Wars Journal*. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not>.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Vandergriff, "How the Germans Defined *Auftragstaktik*: What Mission Command Is and Is Not," *Small Wars Journal*. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not>.

Command must be woven into every aspect of the organization.<sup>4</sup> Some long-standing cultural, organizational, and procedural challenges prevent Air Force implementation of a Mission Command philosophy.

### **Part Two (Challenges)**

General Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff from 1961 to 1965, developed a long-standing culture rooted in centralization and checklist-type procedures necessary for the Cold War Air Force, as it was necessary to rapidly launch bombers carrying nuclear warheads. During the Cold War, a flight crew had 15 minutes to get their nuke-laden plane in the air from the moment Soviet bombers were detected.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the checklist leadership style has reverberated through Air Force history and still exists even though the Cold War exigence has passed. That style is detrimental to operating in a geographically dispersed, communications-degraded peer adversary fight. As a result, the Air Force is now struggling to instill in its officer corps the bias for action and innovative problem-solving skills necessary to operate in the absence of orders. Culture and process change is difficult, and the LeMay checklist mindset has existed as part of the Air Force culture for over 60 years, making the cultural change to an organization that values officers who execute with a bias for action with minimal information an almost wicked task. The Air Force's challenge is that adopting the Mission Command philosophy requires the force to jettison altogether the LeMay leadership philosophy that has driven the structure, procedures, and style of command and control for over sixty years.

The Air Tasking Order (ATO) is a robust tool to guide a centralized planning effort that inhibits Mission Command in decentralized operations. The ATO is a detailed plan with specific instructions for each air mission. It specifies the type of aircraft to be used, the targets to be attacked, and the timing of the operations. Its rigidity and top-down approach stifles flexibility, initiative, adaptability, and bias for action, all things required for the Mission Command philosophy of leadership that the USAF needs. Dr. David “Rock” Bottomlee, the Air War College Dean of Academics, states that Operation DESERT STORM is a striking example of the combat effectiveness of airpower.<sup>6</sup> Though Rock's statement is true, the operation succeeded despite using the overly prescriptive ATO. In a similar essay, Air Force Major Michael Fisher noted that Former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Larry Welch, when addressing the overly detailed ATO, explained,

“I believe we overcontrolled in Desert Storm. We did focus on CINC’s intent. . . but it took 5000 pages and 72 hours to produce an ATO. We need to adjust our control to what is necessary . . . we could do a lot more stuff over the phone—kill these targets—and do it without tons of paperwork. A centralized, orchestrated air campaign is important; but I say a 5000-page ATO is not the way to accomplish that.”<sup>7</sup>

The ATO eliminates the squadron commander's ability to exercise Mission Command and does not even give him the necessary Mission Command tools to do so. The current ATO’s rigidity makes effective Mission Command impossible. The Air Force needs a redesigned ATO or a new planning tool to facilitate decentralized decision-making and execution in line with the principles of Mission

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Fischer, “Mission Type Orders in Joint Air Operations: The Empowerment of Air Leadership” (Thesis School of Advanced Warfighting Studies, 1995).12.

<sup>5</sup>L. Douglas Keeney, *15 Minutes: General Curtis LeMay and the Countdown to Nuclear Annihilation* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012), 3.

<sup>6</sup> James Bottomlee, Comments to Author, November 25, 2023.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Fischer, “Mission Type Orders in Joint Air Operations: The Empowerment of Air Leadership” (Thesis School of Advanced Warfighting Studies, 1995).55.



Command to enhance the effectiveness of air operations in a future fight. Though deeply rooted challenges like the prescriptive ATO exists, change is possible.

### Part Three (Change)

For Mission Command to be fully adopted by the Air Force, it must be thoroughly understood and then disseminated into every aspect of what the organization does. German leadership considered the individuality of the fighting man and his freedom to have a bias for action to solve problems as the key to superlative German performance.<sup>8</sup> Educate the force on the German military culture of Mission Command that made them successful after the interwar period. The German use of *Auftragstaktik* discussed previously, and the much lesser-known German principle of *Selbständigkeit* are central to change. In the German Army culture, an officer rarely reprimanded a subordinate for showing initiative.<sup>9</sup> This is where the term *Selbständigkeit*, authority to change an order, became vital to the culture that fuelled German success. The term *Selbständigkeit* was used by the Germans often, while *Auftragstaktik* was hardly discussed, if at all.<sup>10</sup> Through *Selbständigkeit*, the German military's success in teaching its officers how to think within the philosophy of Mission Command was overwhelmingly successful. Adopting the concept of *Selbständigkeit* to do the same will incentivize creative problem-solving with the bias for action for execution in the absence of orders. The Air Force is excellent at educating its warriors but falls short in incentivizing them to have a natural bias for action because they only train to the expected capability instead of pushing past it to failure. Though seemingly disregarded, Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson addressed that concern at the 2018 Air Warfare Symposium when she stated, "It's time to take risks. It's time to productively fail."<sup>11</sup> She was highlighting that the Air Force needed to start challenging itself in training to progress. Always train to failure while praising aggressive action and creative problem-solving. The result will be commanders that set conditions for subordinates to execute aggressively on minimal guidance. *Auftragstaktik*, coupled with *Selbständigkeit*, creates leaders that can operate in contested and distributed environments. Building a climate that promotes a bias for action by promoting initiative and creative decision-making cannot only be done by training to *Selbständigkeit*; it also requires trust.

Trust is the final element of building a Mission Command philosophy into culture, but not just trust; it must be vulnerability-based trust. Vulnerability is the foundation upon which Mission Command is built. Vulnerability-based trust stands in contrast to a more standard definition, which centers around the ability to foresee a person's behavior based on experience. For example, a squadron commander might "trust" that his executive officer will be the first in the office and last out of the office because

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Vandergriff, "How the Germans Defined Auftragstaktik: What Mission Command Is and Is Not," *Small Wars Journal*. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not>.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Vandergriff, "How the Germans Defined Auftragstaktik: What Mission Command Is and Is Not," *Small Wars Journal*. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not>.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Vandergriff, "How the Germans Defined Auftragstaktik: What Mission Command Is and Is Not," *Small Wars Journal*. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not>.

<sup>11</sup> Gideon Grudo, "The Status Quo Needs to Go," *Air and Space Forces*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-status-quo-needs-to-go/>.

he has done so for some time. Vulnerability-based trust is deeper, extremely difficult to achieve, and extremely powerful. Lencioni, the author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, states:

“The absence of trust is a massive waste of time and energy as team members invest their time and energy in defensive behaviors and are reluctant to ask for help from – or assist – each other. Teams can overcome this dysfunction by sharing experiences, following through in multiple ways, demonstrating credibility, and developing vital insight into the unique characteristics of team members.”<sup>12</sup>

Just as the practice of *Selbständichkei* must start with leaders, so does trust; a commander must demonstrate that he or she is comfortable exposing personal weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, and mistakes.<sup>13</sup> Vulnerability-based trust requires shared experiences over time, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members. However, a leader can take a focused approach and dramatically accelerate the process.<sup>14</sup> The unit leader must risk losing face in front of the team or unit so that subordinates will take the same risk themselves, and most importantly, the leader must create an environment that does not punish vulnerability. Even well-intentioned teams can dampen trust by chastising one another for admissions of weakness or failure.<sup>15</sup> The fastest way for a leader to build trust is to allow subordinates to see their shortfalls and vulnerabilities and own them. When speaking to "Wounded Warriors" about resilience, I often start my talk with an unrevealing story about myself. The audience and I collectively laugh at my inadequacies, resulting in increased trust rapidly being achieved through vulnerability. Vulnerability-based trust lays the foundation for a culture that incentivizes initiative over results, cultivating an organization that executes violently to achieve a common goal. *Selbständichkei* and vulnerability-based trust will help develop Mission Command philosophy into the Air Force culture. However, the commander must give subordinates a tool to direct their bias for action and use their creative problem-solving skills.

Commander's intent given to subordinates in the form of mission-type orders provides subordinates the direction needed to execute in a geographically distributed, communications-degraded environment. Captain Adolf von Schell, a German Exchange Officer to the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the 1930s, translated *Auftragstaktik* into mission tactics: “In the German Army we use what we term "mission-type orders"; orders are not written out in the minutest detail, a mission is merely given to a commander. How it shall be carried out is his problem. This is done because the commander is the only one who can correctly judge existing conditions and take proper action if a change occurs in the situation.”<sup>16</sup> Executing through mission-type orders is to act on commander's intent. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication-1 (MCDP-1) asserts:

“The purpose of providing intent is to allow subordinates to exercise judgment and initiative—to depart from the original plan when the unforeseen occurs. There are two parts to any *mission*: the task to be accomplished and the reason or intent behind it. The intent is thus a part of every mission. The task describes the action to be taken, while the intent describes the *purpose* of the

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2002), 221.

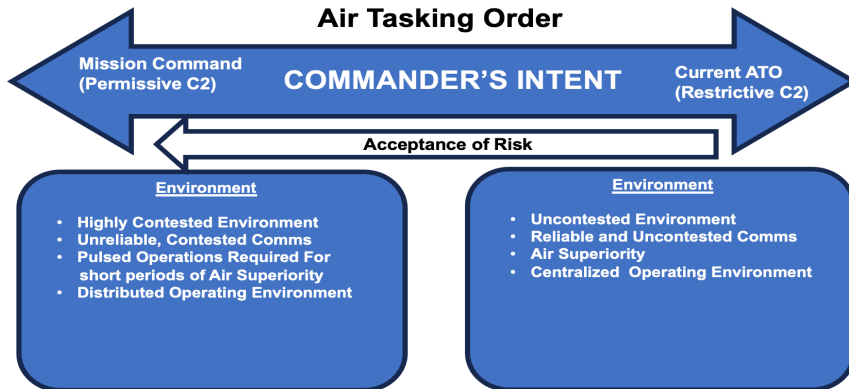
<sup>13</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2002), 235.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2002), 236.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2002), 242.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Vandergriff, “How the Germans Defined Auftragstaktik: What Mission Command Is and Is Not,” *Small Wars Journal*. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-germans-defined-auftragstaktik-what-mission-command-and-not>.

action. The task denotes *what* is to be done and sometimes *when* and *where*; the intent explains *why*.<sup>17</sup>



Scalable C2. Figure (1)

**SAMPLE AIR TASKING ORDER**

ATOCONF MESSAGE SETS (BREAKOUT KEY)  
 MSNDAT / MSNNO / PKG / CALLSIGN / NUMACTYPE / AMSN /

ALRT / SCL1 / SCL2 / SIF1 / SIF2  
 MSNLOC / TIME ON STATION / TIME OFF STATION / LOCATION

NAME / ALTITUDE / REQUEST NUM / LOCATION TGTLOC / TIME ON TGT / TIME OFF TGT / T

DMPI / REQUEST / COMMENTS  
 CONTROL / TYPE / CALLSIGN / PRIMARY FREQ / SECONDARY

FREQ / REPORT POINT / COMMENTS  
 FACINFO / CALLSIGN / PRIMARY FREQ / SECONDARY FREQ /

REPORT POINT / SUPPORT UNIT ID / COMMENTS ELECBMT / CALLSIGN / PRIORITY / LOCATION / ALTITUDE /

TOS / TFS / PRIMARY FREQ / SECONDARY FREQ RECDATA / REQUEST NUM / PRIORITY / TIME ON TGT / LTIOV /

REC MSN TYPE / COVG TYPE / IMAGERY TYPE / IMG QUALIFIER / COVG MODE / TGT CODE / PRINT SCALE / DELIVER ADDRESS  
 TRCPLOT / INITIAL POINT / RADIUS, WIDTH OR ELLIPSE AND

QUALIFIERS  
 REFUEL / TANKER CALLSIGN / TANKER MSNNO OR TANKER

TAGAN / ARCP / ALTITUDE / ARCT / OFFLOAD / TKR FREQ 1 / TKR FREQ 2

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ATO A: FAA000 UNCLAS EXER//  
 MSGID/ATOCONF//AOC// PERID/OO0000Z/TO:OO0000Z//  
 AIRTASK/ATO A//  
 TASKUNIT/353TFS// MSNDAT/AF003/-/GMAN11/4XA10A/GCAS/15M/A1/-/31511-// TGTLOC/-/-/-//

AMPN/SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER// MSNDAT/AF004/-/GMAN15/4XA10A/GCAS/15M/A1/-/31515-//  
 TGTLOC/-/-/-//  
 AMPN/SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER// MSNDAT/AF005/-/GMAN21/4XA10A/GCAS/30M/A1/-/31521-//  
 TGTLOC/-/-/-//

AMPN/SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER//

MSNDAT/AF001/-/GMAN01/4XA10A/CAS/-/A1/-/31501-// TGTLOC/121330Z/121350Z/B1234-12345/FTAFLD/  
 303645.7N1202739.1W/123B/BOMB DUMP//  
 AMPN/SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER// MSNDAT/AF002/-/GMAN05/4XA10A/CAS/-/A1/-/31505-//  
 TGTLOC/121530Z/121550Z/B123412345/FTAFLD/ 303645.7N1202739.1W/124B/BOMB DUMP//

AMPN/SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER// TASKUNIT/59TFS// MSNDAT/FT0011/-/GLIDER01/4XF15/DCA/-/D5/-  
 /31401-// TGTLOC/-/-/-//

AMPN/SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER// MSNDAT/FT0015/-/GLIDER05/4XF15/DCA/-/D5/-/31405-// TGTLOC/-/-/-//  
 AMPN SEE UNIT REMARKS 1, 2, 3, ACEMAKER//

RMKS//

CI in an ATO. Figure (2)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, MCDP 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Marine Corps, June 30, 1991), 4-19.  
<sup>18</sup> United States Air Force, *Air Warfare*, ADD2-1, (Arlington, VA: Headquarters Air Force, August 14, 2023.) 91.

The ATO that General Larry Welch addressed as rigid and overly detailed must be readdressed to allow the flexibility necessary and with concise direction facilitating the warfighter to execute in the absence of orders. Mission-type orders are the way to do that. This does not mean scrapping the refinement of the ATO that has been through decades of use. It means understanding when to be prescriptive and when to be more permissive depending on the operating environment and willingness to accept risk for mission success. The “Scalable C2” image in Figure (1) prescribes commander’s intent as always necessary. However, it allows the commander to decide based on the operating environment to be more prescriptive, as in the current ATO, or more permissive, as with a purely Mission Command approach. Air Force Doctrine Document 2–1 *Air Warfare* was designed to support Air Force Doctrinal Publication 3-0 *Planning and Operations* by providing a more detailed look at air warfare fundamentals, planning, and training. It provides an underdeveloped mention of the end state as part of an additional planning tool. When providing a sample ATO, it fails to address the commander's intent to be communicated to subordinate units. The "CI in an ATO" image, as represented in Figure (2), displays how that could be done as part of the current ATO. After commander's intent, the document could be as restrictive or permissive as the commander desires, allowing subordinates freedom to achieve mission accomplishment as the situation dictates.

The Air Force is predominantly structured with flying squadrons built only to fly. The squadron commander relies on adjacent units, such as maintainers and air controllers, to provide the support necessary to execute the mission. This practical training model works well through an ATO when flying out of secure and controlled environments, as the Air Force has done for the last 20 years. It facilitates the massing of assets to support the flyers and provides quality training within each job specialty. A wholesale change of that culture to structure units that can execute Mission Command in an ACE environment is unnecessary and likely challenges quality training within the boutique occupational specialties, significantly reducing training readiness. Lieutenant General James C. Slife, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, HQ USAF, announced to the students at the Air War College that there was a movement to develop rotational forces like the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) that will be called an Air Task Force (ATF).<sup>19</sup> Similar to a MEU, the ATF will be commanded by a colonel and have a full command element and logistics element to support the flying squadron.<sup>20</sup> This concept is not new to the Air Force; a similar model was tried in the 1990s at Mountain Home Air Force base with great operational success.<sup>21</sup> The only drawback was the cost of execution. This cost would be mitigated with General Slife’s proposed ATF because it would operate off a rotational model, much like the MEU. To truly provide the ATF the structure to employ Mission Command, they should take it one step further and adopt the Marine Corps' purpose-built squadron, facilitating a more robust hub and spoke model that the Air Force-ACE specifies.

The Marine Corps Air Combat Element (ACE) is a purpose-built, modular flying squadron that unifies different flying platforms, maintainers, air defense, and air controllers under the command of a lieutenant colonel with six months to train together before certification and deployment. This purpose-built unit can swiftly deploy and sustain air operations in any environment. Though designed to fit the Marine Corps' expeditionary needs, the proven effectiveness of the Marine Corps

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<sup>19</sup> Lieutenant General James C. Slife, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, HQ USAF

<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant General James C. Slife, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, HQ USAF

<sup>21</sup> Kyle Rempfer, "Bombers, fighters, and tankers unite: Will the Air Force rebuild composite wings to fight near-peer foes?" *Air Force Times*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.airforcetimes.com>.

ACE model is ideal for meeting the requirement to structure units for USAF-ACE capable of operating in a distributed environment. A USMC-ACE is a composite squadron purpose-built for its mission. The composite squadron includes (12) MV-22B Ospreys, (4) CH-53E Super Stallion heavy lift helicopters, (4) AH-1Z Super Cobra helicopter gunships, (3) UH-1Y Huey utility helicopters, (6) AV-8B Harriers, (5) RQ-21s and (2) KC130J Hercules that are always on call.<sup>22</sup> Assets from up to 10 different squadrons combine to build the USMC-ACE to a force strength of approximately 500 Marines and sailors, including Air Traffic Control, Air Defense, Aircraft Maintenance, and Aviation Logistics and Supply.<sup>23</sup> The modular squadron's adaptable and flexible nature ensures air operations continuity while minimizing vulnerability. By leveraging its unique capabilities, the modular squadron would foster cohesion and synergy among various components, enabling seamless integration of platforms, maintainers, air controllers, and air defense personnel. This integration would enhance overall performance, responsiveness, and effectiveness, ultimately allowing the Air Force to purpose-build squadrons to meet operational requirements.

### **Conclusion**

The Air Force is at a critical juncture adopting ACE as the operating model requiring a Mission Command philosophy to be successful. The cultural change can happen through the seeding of Selbständigkeit and embracing of vulnerability-based trust. Education followed by the practice of training to failure can guide that change. Purpose-built, modular, composite squadrons provide the structure for that new culture of Mission Command philosophy to work. A redesigned ATO provides actionable commander's intent, giving the subordinate commanders of those purpose-built squadrons the direction, they need to have a bias for action and be creative problem solvers in execution. However, the challenges of overcoming such a deeply entrenched culture of centralization coupled with the rigidity of the ATO have stalled the transition to Mission Command. Using the German model for cultural change, mimicking the Marine Corps' model of purpose-built, modular squadrons, and shaping the ATO to scale how prescriptive or permissive it is while simultaneously providing commander's intent will echo Mission Command through the force, making ACE effective and creating the most formidable Air Force the world has ever known.

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<sup>22</sup>Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Amphibious Readiness Group and Marine Expeditionary Unit Overview* (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Marine Corps, accessed November 1, 2023),12.

<sup>23</sup> Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Amphibious Readiness Group and Marine Expeditionary Unit Overview* (Washington, DC: Headquarters US Marine Corps, accessed November 1, 2023),12.