

# Finishing Strong in Iraq

## Why the Air Force Must Be the Last to Leave Operation Iraqi Freedom

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*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"*

—"If," Rudyard Kipling

Of the virtues Kipling speaks about in his poem "If," the United States Air Force certainly has demonstrated a willingness to "hold on" in Iraq, "serv[ing its] turn" long after everyone else has gone. This rang true after the 1991 Gulf War. In fact the Air Force never really left Iraq, carrying out Operations Northern and Southern Watch throughout the 1990s and into the next decade, and then prepping the battlefield for nearly two years prior to the invasion of 2003.<sup>1</sup> A sustained Air Force presence will prove just as necessary in the waning months of Operation Iraqi Freedom, particularly during the drawdown of ground forces. Therefore we must manage our expectations, not assuming that airpower needs will decrease proportionally with Army force strength or follow the same timeline. Air Force planners must guard against making "business decisions" when they determine our force requirement for the remainder of Iraqi Freedom, focusing instead on operational planning to drive those verdicts. Clearly airlift will have its predictable place in force redeployment, but other enablers like intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), close air

support (CAS), and tactical air control parties (TACP) will be critical to America's success. Due to a strong gravitational pull from Operation Enduring Freedom for resources and because of doubts about airpower's efficacy in a mostly nonkinetic environment, the Air Force will have to show temperance by maintaining a robust war-fighting capability until the completion of ground-force redeployment.<sup>2</sup>

What factors will compel the Air Force to sustain a strong presence in Iraqi Freedom? First, airpower will have to uphold its current role in the counterinsurgency fight. The Air Force already pays a hefty mortgage in Iraqi Freedom—multiple fighter and reconnaissance squadrons as well as other miscellaneous aircraft, plus thousands of Airmen who perform myriad missions ranging from planning to policing.<sup>3</sup> Second, the Army has assumed responsibility for Anbar Province from the Marine Corps, so without Marine aviation, Army helicopters and Air Force fighters and reconnaissance aircraft must perform the same missions over all of Iraq with fewer assets. These requirements have stretched resources, necessitating some creativity to ensure reliable com-

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mand, control, and communications over long distances. Finally, ISR, CAS, and TACP resources are essential to detecting the enemy and protecting convoys during the exodus of 120,000 American forces and their equipment, which will undoubtedly draw enemy attacks.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the Air Force must keep its withdrawal a half step behind the Army's, sustaining its current roles and commensurate force strength until the very last troops leave Iraqi soil.<sup>5</sup>

*The support role of airpower is usually the most important and effective mission in guerilla war.*

—James Corum and Wray Johnson,  
*Airpower in Small Wars*

## Iraqi Freedom: The War We Have, Not the War We Might Want or Wish to Have at a Later Time

The current counterinsurgency in Iraqi Freedom demands specific airpower capabilities and a substantial footprint of Battlefield Airmen to carry out related support and liaison functions. Air component missions in Iraqi Freedom are typified by ISR, CAS, and aerial electronic attack (AEA).<sup>6</sup> As of November 2009, assets of the combined force air component commander (CFACC) flew at least a couple hundred hours of CAS, ISR, and AEA every week—substantially fewer than in the summer of 2009. However, the flying has not appreciably decreased because fixed-wing air capabilities become more—not less—important as ground combat power shrinks. In relative terms, Air Force support personnel should not re-deploy on the same timeline as Army brigade combat teams (BCT) when they leave the theater because there will still be an enemy to observe, jam, and kill if necessary. Furthermore, the months ahead hold too many tactical uncertainties. The seating of a new Iraqi government could cause a spike in violence that

might require every bit of air support the CFACC can provide. Couple that with a huge Iraqi battlespace, and Air Force resources in Iraqi Freedom suddenly begin to look scarce. For these reasons, a precipitous withdrawal of aircraft and Airmen is out of the question.

Top commanders agree that aircraft and Airmen are too important to overall mission success to permit their hasty withdrawal. Lt Gen Charles Jacoby Jr., USA, commander of Multi-National Corps-Iraq, told Lt Gen Gilmory Hostage III, USAF, the CFACC, that when it comes to airpower in Iraqi Freedom, intelligence, air presence, and response to troops in contact (TIC) are the most exigent airpower needs of ground commanders.<sup>7</sup> The CFACC pledged his support and, despite the demand for additional resources in Afghanistan, resisted an early withdrawal of Battlefield Airmen as well as MC-12 and F-16 aircraft from Iraqi Freedom.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, some individuals would err even further on the side of conservatism, suggesting that the Air Force presence should actually *increase* during the final phase of ground-force redeployment. Lt Gen Mike Short, USAF, retired, recommended posturing Air Force forces in Iraqi Freedom to handle the most dangerous enemy course of action—one that features a marked upswing in violence: “If we spread ourselves too thin and Soldiers die because they didn’t get air support when they needed it . . . that would be a very bad headline for the Air Force.”<sup>9</sup> Depending on tactical requirements in-theater, this concept of boosting Air Force presence may or may not occur, but for the time being, the Air Force will stay in full force, and for good reasons—not the least of which is intelligence gathering.

*We think too small, like the frog at the bottom of the well. He thinks the sky is only as big as the top of the well. If he surfaced, he would have an entirely different view.*

—Mao Tse-tung

## In Counterinsurgency, Intelligence Is the Name of the Game

The skies over Iraq are laden with ISR aircraft, large and small, both manned and remotely piloted. With all-seeing eyes and other sensors, they detect, collect, and project all manner of activity into Army tactical operations centers. War fighters rely heavily on full-motion video feeds provided by aerostats, tower-mounted cameras, and aircraft to put eyes quickly onto hot spots when violence occurs. Many of these assets belong to the Army, but CFACC assets are still patrolling almost nonstop, providing nearly continuous coverage of specific interest areas and select lines of communica-

even as Iraqi security forces gradually assume full responsibility for maintaining peace. US forces often accompany Iraqi-led patrols, so as long as Americans are at risk, American aircraft should be available to perform missions to mitigate that risk. These missions include CAS even though the kinetic fight in Iraqi Freedom is almost nonexistent.

## We Almost Never Drop a Bomb Anymore, so Why Keep Close Air Support Around?

CAS is the CFACC's primary means of providing the presence and TIC response that ground-force commanders deem indispensable.<sup>11</sup> True, there are plenty of ar-

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tions in hopes of detecting a chameleon-like enemy. Although this persistent coverage rarely results in catching bad guys in the act, the data it provides becomes part of a body of evidence used to reconstruct events forensically after an attack occurs. Simply stated, it is detective work, and its value often goes unrealized until the evidence leads to the capture and arrest of the perpetrators. Even the Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System, sometimes viewed as too strategic an asset to make a tactical contribution, has provided moving-target indicator tracks connecting enemy rocket-launch sites to safe houses. Like footprints at a crime scene, they have led to the arrest of several terrorists.<sup>10</sup> We have no reason to believe that this kind of support will cease,

guments against keeping CAS platforms in the fight. For instance, TIC situations in Iraqi Freedom are rarer now than ever, and even when a TIC occurs, CAS is not always the first or best means of handling it. Division commanders decide which asset, if any, they will send to assist ground forces under self-defense conditions. Air weapons teams, which include Apache and Kiowa helicopters, are often the most practical choice because just about every BCT's battlespace has them, and they can respond quickly. Often, redirecting fixed-wing CAS from its primary mission to a TIC is cumbersome, especially considering that the aircraft will probably never drop a bomb.

Also, despite the permissiveness of the rules of engagement for TICs, weapons drops have become extremely rare, particularly in urban areas. Ground commanders hesitate to “go kinetic” with airpower when the strategic consequences of collateral damage are unacceptable. Making matters worse, the longer we operate without pulling the trigger, the more difficult it becomes to go kinetic. In short, we’ve tied our own hands.

However, as BCT battlespaces increase in size and their troop numbers shrink, speed and range will become essential in responding to TICs. Fixed-wing CAS offers the only viable option to quickly reach remote US patrols, training teams, or convoys under attack. More than likely, however, such a scenario would take place months from now.

Meanwhile, the Army must cope with today’s full-spectrum missions even as its size and combat power dwindle. Ground commanders face an awkward period of dissonance between their mission and their force size in that they must fight today’s battle with tomorrow’s reduced strength. Combined Iraqi-US operations still take place in all quadrants of Iraq, but BCTs will soon find themselves physically unable to conduct full-spectrum operations across their entire battlespace. Consequently, they will have to either choose limited operations or transition to a new mission—something not scheduled to occur until after the seating of the new Iraqi government. In preparation for that choice, joint planning staffs must clearly define the roles and missions of advisory and assistance brigades in order to determine the necessary nature and scope of CFACC support. Undoubtedly, United States Forces-Iraq is working feverishly to define the end state of Iraqi Freedom and initiate Operation New Dawn, signifying the “evolving relationship with the Government of Iraq.”<sup>12</sup> That is the only way the CFACC—and, by extension, the Air Force—will

know when to stop flying and bring its Battlefield Airmen home.

*It is . . . Airmen who transform hunks of metal, buckets of bolts, microprocessors, and circuitry into the Nation’s war-fighting edge.*

—Gen T. Michael Moseley

## The Tactical Air Control Party: The Army’s Essential Link to the Combined Force Air Component Commander’s Airpower

CFACC aircraft could not perform many of their support roles without an adequate number of TACPs embedded with Army units throughout Iraq.<sup>13</sup> Because numerous Battlefield Airmen perform critical land-based functions in every facet of Iraqi Freedom, we will undoubtedly require a sustained presence of TACPs until the last US ground forces depart. This is a particularly large pill to swallow for the Air Force, considering the fact that the TACP career field is already stretched to the limit and that Afghanistan still has a large appetite for them. Granted, TACP numbers in Iraqi Freedom will slowly decrease as Army BCTs redeploy without replacements, but they must always be available as long as CAS remains an option. The Army has unequivocally stated that it needs fixed-wing CAS to maintain presence and TIC responsiveness.<sup>14</sup> Given the possibility—no matter how slight—that a CAS aircraft will drop ordnance in close proximity to friendly forces, a TACP will control those aircraft as required by joint directives. We hope we have correctly judged the numbers of TACPs we will need, but recent experience casts doubt on that assumption.

The number of TACP personnel who must support Iraqi Freedom will largely be determined by the number of BCTs; that is to say, fewer BCTs equal fewer

joint terminal attack controllers (JTAC).<sup>15</sup> The pooling of most TACPs at brigade level has worked fine so far, but some Army units at the tactical level are reaching a different conclusion. Specifically, as brigade battlespaces increase in size, TACPs may *not* have the necessary communications range to control CAS in support of a distant battalion.<sup>16</sup> Army brigades once content with pooling TACPs at brigade level are realizing that some battalions will need a collocated TACP; otherwise, they may have no CAS capability at all. Both services assumed that fewer CAS sorties meant that TACPs could support an entire BCT by employing type-two control from a brigade's tactical operations center.<sup>17</sup> In truth this assumption might not be practical because it would require a combination of technical solutions, TACP task organization, and utilization of the Army's joint fires observers (JFO).<sup>18</sup> A relatively new breed of fire-support Soldiers, JFOs receive training in the Airman's perspective and language of CAS, thus creating more leverage on the battlefield for air support to ground forces.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, they will emerge as critical players in the command and control of CAS in the waning months of Iraqi Freedom, especially as the Army commences its large-scale redeployment—with convoys stretched out across remote highways headed for the Iraqi border.

### “The Long Road Home”

During fiscal year 2010, compliance with security agreements between the US and Iraqi governments mandates that approximately 70,000 US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps personnel depart Iraq and that an additional 50,000 redeploy by the end of December 2011, for a total drawdown of 120,000 personnel.<sup>20</sup> To put this in perspective, a mere 23,000 troops redeployed between January and October 2009.<sup>21</sup> Relatively speaking, personnel are the easy part; equipment is the tough part.

As of December 2009, Iraq housed about 3.3 million pieces of US equipment, only a small portion of which will remain with the Iraqis as part of an authorized transfer outlined by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.<sup>22</sup> This daunting task will require a tremendous mobility effort by air, land, and sea, but the land movement will be the most dangerous.

What do we expect to happen as ground forces leave? We can count on opportunistic attacks with improvised explosive devices against US convoys, perpetrated by insurgent groups seeking to claim a final small victory. To mitigate these inevitable strikes, the CFACC will have to maintain a robust CAS, ISR, and AEA capability that can watch over and protect convoys and staging areas. According to Vice Adm James Winnefeld, USN, director of strategic plans and policy for the Joint Staff, “We intend to continue the drawdown in a manner that protects our military forces and civilians, exercises good stewardship of the resources provided to us, does not jeopardize the readiness of our military as we reset and leaves a stable, secure and self-reliant Iraq as a long-term strategic partner to the United States.”<sup>23</sup> Doing so will necessitate the continued participation of flying units, Battlefield Airmen, and many other Air Force enablers, resulting in a sustained Air Force presence until the very end.

*Until every brow is soothed and every hand is held. Until every song is sung and every battle won. Until everyone comes home.*

—Motto of the United Service Organizations

### Conclusion

Many factors will compel the Air Force to maintain a strong presence in Iraqi Freedom at least until the end of December 2011, when all US forces are scheduled to be out of Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Until then, airpower

will have to uphold its current role in counterinsurgency, do so across a vast battlespace, and conduct protective overwatch of convoys during the redeployment of ground forces and their equipment. These tasks will demand cooperation and expectation management between the Air Force and the Army to ensure a safe, orderly withdrawal and conclusion to Iraqi Freedom.

Wisely, the CFACC has already taken steps to pace Air Force redeployment correctly, yet planning staffs—particularly from the Air Force—must stay the course and resist the urge to shift manpower and air assets from Iraq to Afghanistan too quickly. The Army will have to take an active role in air integration as well, especially with regard to JFOs. As they attempt to provide air support to ground units spread out over greater distances, both services will solve key challenges with a combination of technical solutions, organization

of TACP tasks, and utilization of Army JFOs. These solutions, critical to mission success, will reduce potential US casualties upon withdrawal.

During the last two decades, Airmen have learned that they are often the first in and last out of an operation, so it should come as no surprise that the Air Force must stay in Iraq for the duration. Airpower roles are inextricably linked to the ground commander's needs, and for the moment in Iraqi Freedom, air integration in the realms of CAS, ISR, and AEA is critical to America's success. Although the "shooting war" in Afghanistan demands more resources—some of them (such as TACPs) already in very short supply—we must show restraint. As Kipling said, we must have the will to hold on "long after [our turn]" and be the last to leave. 🌟

Fort Riley, Kansas

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## Notes

1. Lt Gen Robert J. Elder Jr., USAF, retired, "Air-Mindedness: Confessions of an Airpower Advocate," *Air and Space Power Journal* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 11–18, <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj09/fal09/fal09.pdf>.

2. Sgt 1st Class Michael J. Carden, "Iraq Drawdown on Track, Policy Chief Says," American Forces Press Service, 21 October 2009, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=56339> (accessed 17 November 2009). The phrase "completion of ground-force redeployment" refers to all remaining US forces as defined by the president. Assuming that the United States maintains some military-advisory personnel in Iraq with a self-protection force, the ground-force commander will have to define the end state in terms of numbers of troops. Depending on what the new government of Iraq decides regarding its future security cooperation, a sustained US Air Force presence is conceivable.

3. JoAnne O'Bryant and Michael Waterhouse, *U.S. Forces in Iraq*, CRS Report for Congress RS22449 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service,

24 July 2008), <http://openocrs.com/document/RS22449/2008-07-24/download/1006/>; and Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, CRS Report for Congress R40682 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2 July 2009), <http://openocrs.com/document/R40682/2009-07-02/download/1013/>. The CRS reports 13,050 Airmen stationed in Iraq (10,800 active duty, 1,200 Air National Guard, and 1,050 Air Force Reserve) as of June 2008. These figures include only Airmen serving on Iraqi soil. They exclude the roughly 8,000 Airmen in Qatar and 2,000 in the United Arab Emirates (cited in R40682) since they may also support Operation Enduring Freedom. Although the numbers have decreased since 2008, they remain significant.

4. Carden, "Iraq Drawdown on Track."

5. Although US Airmen are helping to rebuild the Iraqi Air Force, the author doubts that it will have sufficient capacity to replace US airpower by 2011. Presumably, available Iraqi airpower will focus on supporting Iraqi forces. In addition, US reliance

on Iraqi airpower to support US forces may not be politically feasible.

6. AEA is used extensively for convoy protection. Although the Navy and Marine Corps are the primary providers of AEA, this enabler will remain the most valuable airpower contribution in Iraqi Freedom, especially during ground-force redeployment. The availability of sufficient Navy, Marine, and Air Force AEA to satisfy the Army's needs, given the size and number of convoys, remains uncertain. The timing and tactics of redeployment convoys will have to adapt to AEA coverage and vice versa.

7. Lt Gen Gilmory Hostage III, CFACC (remarks to members of the 368th Expeditionary Air Support Operations Group staff, 24 August 2009).

8. *Ibid.*

9. Lt Gen Michael Short, USAF, retired, former CFACC, interview by the author, 30 October 2009.

10. Author's personal experience, Headquarters MND-B, Baghdad, Iraq, 2009.

11. Hostage, remarks.

12. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates to Gen David H. Petraeus, commander, US Central Command, memorandum, 17 February 2010, <http://a.abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/08144-09.pdf>.

13. A TACP is "a subordinate operational component of a tactical air control system designed to provide air liaison to land forces and for the control of aircraft." Joint Publication (JP) 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*, 8 July 2009, GL-18, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp3\\_09\\_3.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_09_3.pdf). It includes US Air Force members who communicate with most of the AEA and ISR assets that perform missions for ground commanders. The logical link between sky and ground in an Army tactical operations center, these members become particularly valuable when air assets are rerolled to perform alternate missions.

14. Hostage, remarks.

15. Under the current task organization in Iraqi Freedom, most TACPs are pooled at the brigade echelon and provide support to battalions on an as-needed basis. Consequently, the number of TACPs is smaller than the one outlined in a memorandum of agreement between the US Air Force and the US Army: "The USAF will provide a TACP to each US Army maneuver unit, corps through battalion, for liaison and terminal control of CAS missions." United States Army and the United States Air Force, subject: Army / Air Force Liaison Support, memorandum of agreement, 23 January 2008.

16. This depends on the quality of satellite communications and the remotely operated video-enhanced receiver, which allows TACPs to view signals from the aircraft's advanced targeting pod.

17. "Type 2 control is used when the JTAC requires control of individual attacks and *any or all* of the following conditions exist: JTAC is unable to visually acquire the attacking aircraft at weapons release, JTAC is unable to visually acquire the target, and/or the attacking aircraft is unable to acquire the mark/target prior to weapons release" (emphasis in original). JP 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*, xv.

18. Technical solutions suggested in this article pertain primarily to communications. Several options will improve reliable, long-range communications. First, satellite communications can provide position reporting and communicate with supporting aircraft, including those flying CAS. A second option involves installing ground-based repeater stations or, possibly, repeaters mounted on aerostats; unfortunately, the latter are vulnerable to sabotage by insurgents and to weather limitations (e.g., winds), which periodically require grounding the aerostats. A third option—airborne communication repeaters such as roll-on, beyond-line-of-sight enhancement and the battlefield airborne communications node—can surmount communications challenges posed by long distances and high terrain. A fourth option calls for putting a JTAC in an airborne platform or including a forward air controller-airborne in selected CAS formations. Ensuring complete communications reliability would probably require using two or more of these options.

19. "A JFO is a trained and certified Service member who can request, adjust, and control surface-to-surface fires, provide targeting information in support of Type 2 and 3 CAS, and perform [terminal guidance operations]. *The JFO adds joint warfighting capability but cannot provide terminal attack control during CAS operations.* JFOs provide the capability to exploit those opportunities that exist in the operational environment where a trained observer could be used to efficiently support air delivered fires, surface-to-surface fires, and facilitate targeting" (emphasis in original). JP 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*, II-10.

20. Carden, "Iraq Drawdown on Track."

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

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