Air Force Rescue

A Multirole Force for a Complex World

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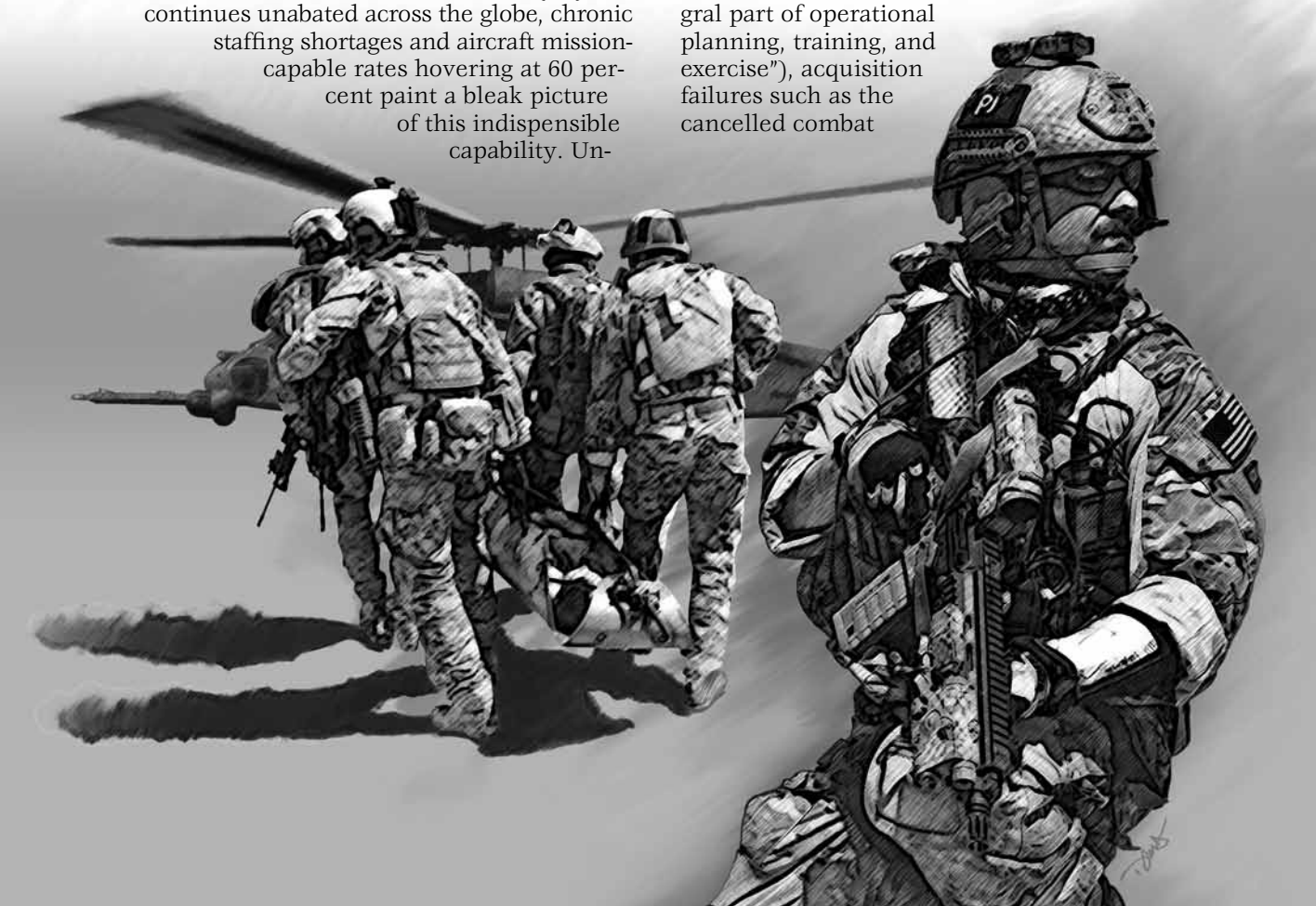
Although the Air Force rescue community boasts over 9,000 joint/multinational combat saves in the last two years and over 15,750 sorties in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom since September 2001, these impressive statistics cannot overshadow debilitating, systemic problems caused by rescue's ineffective organizational structure.[1] As demand for personnel recovery (PR) continues unabated across the globe, chronic staffing shortages and aircraft mission-capable rates hovering at 60 percent paint a bleak picture of this indispensible capability. Unfilled theater PR requirements and an inability to deploy rescue forces rapidly in response to crises like the Haitian earthquake highlight dangerous operational shortfalls. Additionally, a lack of Air Force rescue participation in combatant commander exercises (despite the mandate found in Department of Defense Directive [DODD] 3002.01E, *Personnel Recovery in the Department of Defense*, to "rehearse personnel recovery as an integral part of operational planning, training, and exercise"), acquisition failures such as the cancelled combat



search and rescue replacement (CSAR-X) program, and stalled funding for replacement HH-60s and HC-130Js foretell more gaps in capability.[2] Inadequate advocacy from major commands (MAJCOM) on behalf of rescue continues to frustrate even modest improvement in this heavily tasked and operationally indispensible asset.

To reverse the decline in rescue's ability to meet worldwide requirements, the Air Force must restructure its PR core function under a numbered Air Force (NAF) in order to consistently meet mandates outlined by the chief of staff and secretary of the Air Force in PR policy and doctrine documents.[3] This article examines the statutory and operational requirements for Air Force rescue, noting how this capability fits into joint and Air Force doctrine. It then addresses how shortfalls in the current configuration prevent the rescue community from meeting the operational demand, leaving huge capability gaps in regions of the world where rescue by other means is impossible. Keeping in mind the current organizational failure to leverage essential manpower and resources, the article recommends placing Air Force rescue under Eleventh Air Force to ensure strong advocacy for the ongoing recovery of isolated personnel.

Air Force Rescue: A Department of Defense Mandate and an Operational Necessity

Joint Publication 3-50, *Personnel Recovery*, assigns each military service primary responsibility for recovery of its personnel.[4] To meet this requirement, the Air Force needs a designated force capable of interdomain operations since it is the only service that must recover personnel outside its normal domain. Unlike the Air Force, the Army and Marine Corps have ground forces that dominate the land domain where they can use a multitude of fielded maneuver elements during rescue. Locally operating units can effect an expeditious recovery of any Soldier or Marine through simple retasking: "Army ground forces conduct recovery the same way they would execute a combat patrol similar to a raid or movement to contact to execute a link up operation. They use the same organization, planning, preparation, and support."[5] Similarly, a Marine PR mission "is planned and executed as a form of tactical raid and involves thorough maneuver, fire support, and contingency planning."[6] Clearly, the tactics, techniques, and procedures for both Army and Marine PR are compatible with those of their primary mission set. Moreover, the Navy operates in the sea domain where surface or subsurface assets can be retasked to recover a Sailor isolated in open water.[7] The Air Force, however, does not deal with isolating events in its air and space domain but in either the land or sea domain. There is no existing combat air force (other than rescue) whose tactics, techniques, and procedures are compatible with interdomain operations, and these capabilities and requisite skills cannot be created ad hoc. Without a dedicated rescue community organized, trained, and equipped to operate in this environment, the Air Force would have no one to execute the service's PR core function. No other Air Force weapon system has a primary mission set that includes integrated air, land, and sea operations and that stands ready for retasking to conduct recovery. Without a standing rescue force, the Air Force could not recover its personnel, and more complex joint missions would be jeopardized because of the informal nature of its sister services' PR capability.

If all services rely on ad hoc relationships to execute their PR responsibilities, interservice rescue in a more complex and challenging (higher-threat) environment becomes unacceptably risky. According to the (Adm James L.) Holloway Report, released in the aftermath of the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt in April 1980,

> An existing JTF [joint task force] organization, even with a small staff and only cadre units assigned, would have provided an organizational framework of professional expertise around which a larger, tailored force organization could quickly coalesce. The important point is that the infrastructure would have

> existed. . . . The JTF Commander would have had a running start and could have devoted more hours to plans, operations, and tactics rather than to administration and logistics.[8]

This analysis remains relevant today in that a standing Air Force rescue community provides the "existing JTF organization" that Admiral Holloway referred to over 30 years ago. Disparate, ad hoc PR resources can neither represent the Air Force nor provide sufficient assistance to the joint community. A standing Air Force rescue community will add methodical organization, experience, education, and planning to the joint PR system, thus helping to avoid the costly mistakes of the past.

Current Personnel Recovery Doctrine/Policy

DODD 3002.01E, the governing document that establishes how the military executes PR, clearly defines the latter as "one of the highest priorities of the Department of Defense."[9] Additionally, it tasks service chiefs with the responsibility to

> a. Ensure personnel recovery preparation efforts keep pace with changes in the global operating environment. . . .
>
> b. Be prepared to plan and execute personnel recovery operations with other interagency partners. . . .
>
> c. Be prepared to conduct interoperable and mutually cooperative personnel recovery operations with partner and host nations, including leveraging host-nation capabilities to rescue DoD personnel unilaterally whenever possible.[10]

Based on this direction, the Air Force secretary and chief of staff developed their guidance for the service.

Air Force policy and doctrine documents further detail the service's responsibility within the PR system. Air Force Policy Directive (AFPD) 10-30, *Personnel Recovery*, acknowledges that "the Department of the Air Force has primary responsibility for recovering Air Force personnel who become isolated in uncertain or hostile environments."[11] Consequently, the secretary declared his intent to "establish a global Air Force PR capability . . . [through] well-equipped, fully-manned, and dedicated PR forces."[12] Additionally, an *Operational Concept for Personnel Recovery*, signed by the chief of staff, not only acknowledges that the sister services routinely call upon Air Force rescue to recover their personnel, but also expands PR tasks to include civil and military search and rescue, medical/casualty evacuation, noncombatant evacuation operations, disaster response, mass rescue operations, humanitarian relief operations, theater security cooperation, specialized air and ground mobility, and reintegration of recovered individuals.[13] These documents refute the depiction of Air Force rescue as a single-purpose force used only to pick up downed fighter pilots during major combat operations. Unfortunately, decisions based on such a misperception lead to significant operational shortfalls between DOD/Air Force requirements and the Air Force's actual capability.

Operational Shortfalls

Although Air Force PR boasts a proud heritage and an impressive list of recent achievements since the beginning of Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, these accomplishments should not mask significant problems that undermine the realization of leadership's vision. PR currently falls short in three specific areas mentioned earlier: (1) "a global Air Force PR capability," (2) "uncertain or hostile environments," and (3) "keep[ing] pace with changes in the global operating environment." Taken together, these deficiencies pose a risk to Air Force, DOD, and US personnel operating across the globe.

A Global Air Force Personnel Recovery Capability

Elements of Air Force rescue stationed overseas cannot respond rapidly to taskings across their assigned areas of responsibility. Rescue forces allocated to US Air Forces in Europe

(USAFE) and Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) are based at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, United Kingdom; and Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan, respectively. In the United Kingdom, the 56th Rescue Squadron—the smallest in the US Air Force—has only five HH-60 helicopters and an associated Guardian Angel team; Kadena is home to 10 HH-60s assigned to the 33rd Rescue Squadron and Guardian Angel teams assigned to the 31st Rescue Squadron. These forces, which lack a fixed-wing aircraft element, have a combat radius of 195 miles without external sourcing.[14] Additionally, limitations in deployment range necessitate use of either helicopter tanker aircraft such as the HC-130 (which neither USAFE nor PACAF owns) or multiple ground-refueling stops at established airfields. To carry out strategic deployment, the air component may submit a special airlift mission request to compete with other priorities. In effect, the preponderance of the area covered by Pacific Command and European Command / Africa Command (other than Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa) remains outside the timely response of Air Force rescue forces, falling well short of the secretary's intent of maintaining a global PR capability. Unfortunately, aging aircraft exacerbate deficiencies in range and capability.

Low availability of weapon systems and low reliability rates hamper Air Force rescue's efforts to project global PR. For calendar year 2010, rescue's rotary-wing weapon system, the HH-60, recorded an availability rate of 53 percent and a reliability rate of 74 percent.[15] That is, on any given day approximately half of the helicopters are available to fly, and, of those, only three-quarters don't break before completing the mission. Rescue's fixed-wing weapon system, the HC-130, has an equally low availability rate of 51 percent.[16] Finally, the combat air force's Guardian Angel weapon system (including pararescue personnel; survival, evasion, resistance, and escape specialists; and combat rescue officers) continues to hover around 60 percent manning with no increase expected in the near term.[17] These factors, coupled with higher-than-programmed usage and major depot delays, deter commanders from appropriately employing rescue.[18] For example, the commander of US Africa Command sent a request for additional rescue assets to the Joint Staff for action, but the force provider, Air Combat Command (ACC), denied it, based on deployment rates and equipment availability. Thus, an inadequate overseas presence and concerns about fleet reliability directly lead to operational shortfalls.

Uncertain or Hostile Environments

The Air Force's rescue aircraft do not have the equipment they need to operate in adverse weather conditions. Current configurations on both the HH-60 and HC-130 lack the terrain-following radar critical to all-weather, low-level, and landing operations. Consequently, regulations limit operations to those conducted via visual low-level and visual self-contained approaches to suitable airfields and helicopter landing zones.[19] To recover personnel during bad weather, rescue forces would have to accept extremely high levels of risk or wait for better conditions—options that fall well short of the chief's intent of "rescuing anyone, anywhere, anytime."[20]

Currently, rescue cannot meet that intent without placing an undesirable burden on other forces. Improperly equipped rescue aircraft require augmentation from outside forces to lower mission risk. Special operations forces conduct high-risk operations because their equipment is designed to operate in that environment. A rescue scenario involving a penetrating mission inside defended airspace would likely task such forces because they have the electronic countermeasures equipment and defensive gear that rescue forces lack even though the latter have the requisite skills to conduct these missions. Such a situation makes special operations forces unavailable for their own primary mission.

Keeping Pace with Changes in the Global Operating Environment

National strategic documents recognize the need for proficiency in irregular warfare (IW). The new national security strategy confirms

US dedication to "more effectively advance our interests in the 21st century" through security, prosperity, values, and international order.[21] The national defense strategy extrapolates these objectives into defending the homeland, winning the long war, promoting security, deterring conflict, and winning our nation's wars.[22] These two documents share the theme of needing to develop and maintain partnerships as the cornerstone of peace and security. Nurturing partnerships and building partner capacity (BPC) through efforts designed to support, train, advise, and equip a host nation's security forces promote a strong coalition team that maintains the capacity, will, and capability to act. Although it is the premiere force for carrying out this task, Air Force rescue remains unexploited.

Rescue's untapped IW capability for BPC underlines a significant Air Force problem in keeping pace with the operating environment. The global environment has driven strategic leadership to direct investment in forces capable of building partnerships and increasing their capacity, but the Air Force has yet to task and resource its most fitting BPC asset—rescue.[23] Additionally, the lead for IW operations—Special Operations Command—calls for general-purpose forces to perform missions primarily viewed as special operations activities: "Rebalancing [general-purpose forces] to conduct IW will expand joint force operational reach. . . . The results will be improved capability to operate against adversaries . . . and an expanded ability to . . . achieve US strategic objectives."[24] IW/BPC applied to rescue enhances a partner's ability to support its military and civilian population. It reinforces national sovereignty and improves security, prosperity, and international order, as exemplified in Air Force Doctrine Document 3-22, *Foreign Internal Defense*:

> The availability of dependable CSAR and [casualty evacuation], especially at night, has dramatically improved the willingness and ability of host nation ground combatant forces to engage in operations they may otherwise be less motivated to perform. This was particularly noticeable in the Philippines during the years immediately following the September 11, 2001, tragedy. Philippine ground forces would not engage terrorists at night knowing there was no night [casualty evacuation] capability available. Ground combat teams began night operations immediately after the Philippine Air Force acquired this capability provided by Air Force [Special Operations Command] combat aviation advisor . . . trainers.[25]

With all evidence pointing to the significant strategic impact of an Air Force rescue community tasked with BPC, this capability nevertheless remains unexploited, leading one to inquire about the Air Force's view of this significant shortfall.

A report by the Air Force's IW tiger team, chartered by the chief of staff to determine IW requirements and gaps, characterizes Air Force rescue as a correctable problem in the context of successful operations in today's global environment.[26] The report contends that having more US forces perform BPC and theater security cooperation activities widens the gap between PR requirements and capability. Additional numbers of personnel operating in remote locations overseas increase the demand placed on an already strained PR, medical evacuation, and multimission fixed- and rotary-wing force. Research further reveals that the Air Force rescue community provides an organizational framework with skill sets that could be applied to fill an additional gap in air adviser capability.[27] Finally, the report advocates that expanding and resourcing that community to execute IW/BPC missions facilitate elimination of a strategic shortfall in persistent presence.[28] To fully implement the recommendations of the tiger team, the Air Force must acknowledge shortages in its current equipment inventory.

In the report, such deficits come to light when both the PACAF vice-commander and the Air Forces Africa commander discuss their desire for light, fixed-wing aircraft. PACAF's vice-commander deems PR essential in all countries (both developed and developing) but acknowledges the ineffectiveness of Air Force rescue as currently equipped: "The tyranny of distance, terrain, and island environment drive demand for light STOL [short takeoff and land-

ing] fixed-wing and light rotary-wing aircraft as forces operate in remote areas of Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and the Oceanic island nations."[29] Similarly, the Air Forces Africa commander calls for fixed- and rotary-wing platforms that allow the Air Force and partner nations' air forces to conquer the "tyranny of distance" and lack of infrastructure. The solution, the commander contends, does not involve acquiring more strategic lift but creating regional reach with rugged, affordable light and medium fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft. Applying this air capacity to medical evacuation as well as search and rescue yields high payoffs in terms of protecting our personnel, building partnerships, and legitimizing the government.[30] The lack of "technology appropriate" equipment leaves US personnel operating in remote locations without PR support. Furthermore, it leaves our partner nations without affordable, reliable equipment to build their capacity through rescue air advisers. The shortfalls described above reflect a larger problem identified by analysis of the Air Force's PR structure.

The Root of the Problem

We can trace Air Force rescue's deficiencies to an ineffective organizational structure. Current efforts to "fix" these issues do not work because they attack symptoms rather than the problem. Unless this approach changes, the community will continue to experience the same difficulties—hence the need for a root-cause analysis that will remedy core issues.

Air Force rescue's ailments and resultant shortfalls stem from an inability to meet the responsibilities specified in AFPD 10-30. In this policy document, the secretary of the Air Force tasks ACC to

> Advocate for PR policies and strategic guidance and assist with determining PR forces requirements.
>
> Advocate for adequate programming, standards, and policies that foster both interoperability and enhanced PR capabilities.
>
> Advocate for training, standards, and requirements to maintain an effective PR command and control (C2) architecture.[31]

Although well intentioned and supportive of PR, ACC has global responsibilities that have prevented it from fulfilling those tasks. For example, 78 HC-130J and 141 CSAR-X recapitalization requirements validated by the Joint Requirements Oversight Council remain unfilled.[32] The failure to emphasize PR and advocate/prioritize at the MAJCOM level resulted in cancellation of the CSAR-X program and a reduction of the HC-130J program to 37 aircraft with as few as one aircraft delivered a year in the current program objective memorandum. Statements made by former secretary of defense Robert Gates in his budget recommendation reveal the debilitating second-order effects: "We will terminate the Air Force Combat Search and Rescue X (CSAR-X) helicopter program. This program has a troubled acquisition history and raises the fundamental question of whether this important mission can only be accomplished by yet another single-service solution with single-purpose aircraft."[33] The classification of Air Force rescue as a "single-purpose" community starkly contrasts the chief of staff's multidimensional description found in the *Operational Concept for Personnel Recovery*, mentioned previously. Unfortunately, in a system where perception is (or becomes) reality, such a viewpoint assures that programming decisions will continue to cause shortfalls in meeting combatant commanders' requirements. If the root problem persists, ACC will continue to lack the equipment necessary to meet the demands of AFPD 10-30.

Although ACC acknowledged inefficiencies with organizational structure in its memorandum announcing establishment of a PR division at command headquarters, this represents only one of the two major organizational steps required to correct the problem.[34] The fact that ACC has responsibility for five of 12 service core functions (including PR) means that a small community like rescue struggles to receive attention. Compounding the problem, the rescue mission lies outside the "mainstream" menu of ACC's capabilities and re-

quirements. The combat air force leadership's lack of familiarity with rescue results in an absence of strategic guidance as reflected in the recently published strategic plan, which describes PR as "part of our pillars but . . . not necessarily on par with the previously mentioned core functions" (e.g., air superiority, global precision attack, C2, global integrated ISR, etc.).[35] By identifying "our priorities, challenges, and the imperatives the [combat air force] must deliver in support of our Nation's security requirements," the plan also points to a major organizational deficiency.[36] Clearly, if the Air Force wishes to become a part of this strategic dialogue, it needs a rescue organization led by a senior leader. Otherwise, rescue will continue to be the "lesser pillar" directed by a staff unequipped to meet the requirements of AFPD 10-30.

A Rescue Numbered Air Force for Strong Leadership and Advocacy

The only way to implement permanent fixes to operational shortfalls is by meeting the secretary's and chief's PR mandates through a reorganization of the Air Force rescue community under a rescue NAF. At first glance, creating a new NAF seems to be at cross purposes with the former secretary of defense's statement on budget efficiencies of 6 January 2011.[37] However, Air Force actions enumerated in that statement include consolidating three NAF staffs. Although creating a NAF might prove too costly, remissioning an existing one in order to meet war-fighter needs is exactly in line with the secretary's intent. A NAF having operational control of all rescue forces will correct two critical problems caused by the current structure by providing a robust, cross-functional (rescue) staff and an experienced flag officer who reports directly to the ACC commander. These improvements will equip ACC to fulfill the advocacy demands of AFPD 10-30 and the requirements of PR's C2 architecture.

A robust, cross-functional staff can create PR policies, strategic guidance, force/programming needs, training standards, and C2 architecture that will eliminate operational shortfalls. ACC's new PR staff division (ACC/A3J stood up in December 2010) operates within the Directorate of Operations; it is neither chartered nor empowered to meet AFPD 10-30's cross-functional requirements. A rescue NAF structure, however, would mirror ACC and Headquarters Air Force staffs to ensure that personnel executing the Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) processes have justifiable/defendable PR inputs. Additionally, the structure expedites establishment of a rescue air and space operations center (ASOC). This concept, similar to Air Force Special Operations Command's Twenty-Third Air Force/623 ASOC would simultaneously execute PPBE procedures while forming the core of PR C2 architecture. By filling the manpower, intelligence, operations, logistics, plans/requirements, communications, and analysis/assessment billets, the NAF will focus functional expertise on meeting the Air Force's PR responsibilities. The synergy gained will yield a plan that eliminates existing shortfalls, answers PR C2 architecture concerns originally raised by the Holloway Report, and provides the NAF commander with information to drive advocacy properly.

The unfiltered, direct (commander-to-commander) communication (formal and informal) between the NAF and MAJCOM command structures assures advocacy for PR prioritization in the MAJCOM and Air Force road maps, both critical to the PPBE process. Additionally, persistent general officer interaction with air component commanders yields greater understanding of the service's PR capabilities. The resultant inclusion in theater security cooperation plans, operational plans, and combatant commanders' integrated priority listings (which highlight capability gaps) will also feed the PPBE process. The NAF commander's advocacy of PR policies, strategic guidance, force/programming requirements, and training standards will assure compliance with AFPD 10-30 and position the Air Force rescue community to eliminate operational deficits.

Implementing a Rescue Numbered Air Force

A solution that acknowledges current fiscal constraints is vital to successful implementation of this plan. After the former secretary of defense tasked the services to find more than $100 billion in overhead savings over the next five years, each one proposed to eliminate no-longer-needed headquarters.[38] Proposing another headquarters on the heels of Global Strike Command, the secretary's guidance to the contrary, seems daunting. However, in accordance with that guidance, if the Air Force identifies a superfluous headquarters, it can "keep the savings . . . generate[d] to reinvest in higher priority warfighting needs."[39] In this case, if the Air Force eliminated an unnecessary NAF, it could apply the funds saved to a functional rescue NAF. The key then, becomes finding an expendable NAF.

Release of the new Unified Command Plan offers the perfect opportunity to re-mission an existing NAF. The plan realigns Alaska and associated forces (Eleventh Air Force) under the operational control of US Northern Command (NORTHCOM)/North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and the administrative control of ACC. ACC should shift "Alaska defense forces" and realign them under First Air Force, NORTHCOM/NORAD's existing air component. This action would permit separation of the Eleventh Air Force staff structure from the maneuver forces and its redesignation as a rescue NAF. The Eleventh's current approved standing strength of 477 officers, enlisted personnel, civilians, and contractors provides enough billets to meet the service's PR policy requirements, giving ACC a no-cost avenue to remedy Air Force rescue's debilitating issues. Once in place, the NAF will have to take action to eliminate existing shortfalls.

Eliminating Shortfalls

Creating Air Force rescue groups overseas that are tasked and resourced to meet both PR and BPC needs would eliminate deficiencies and standardize force presentation. Rescue operates as a "triad" of fixed-wing, rotary-wing, and Guardian Angel weapon systems, each contributing to a synergy capable of mitigating current "global PR capability" deficits. Increased speed and range of fixed-wing rescue elements, along with in-flight helicopter-refueling capability, give the air component commander a more responsive and flexible force. The associated increase in capability and resources directly results in theater coverage across greater distances and terrain. Additionally, a rescue group structure's inherent C2 capability would prove invaluable during deployment. To repeat the observation of the Holloway Report, quoted earlier, it would "[provide] an organizational framework of professional expertise around which a larger, tailored force organization could quickly coalesce . . . [giving rescue] a running start and . . . [the ability to devote] more hours to plans, operations, and tactics rather than to administration and logistics." Finally, the additional manpower associated with a rescue group brings an inherent capacity increase that can simplify compliance with the chief of staff's *Operational Concept for Personnel Recovery*. After the establishment of the rescue group structure and the attainment of global PR capability/capacity, the proper equipping of forces will rectify shortfalls associated with operating in hostile or uncertain environments while enabling rescue to keep pace with the changing global environment.

Previously acknowledged capability gaps identify inadequate equipment as the main roadblock to operating in hostile environments and remote locations, a problem corrected by adding radar and radar-jamming countermeasure suites to both the HC-130 and HH-60; additionally, incorporation of a roll-on/roll-off precision strike package for the HC-130 would provide for limited organic self-defense. Finally, conducting both PR and BPC tasks in remote locations calls for light fixed-wing rescue squadrons. Current Air Force programming includes procurement of light mobility aircraft for delivery to Air Mobility Command. If the service refocused these efforts and shifted delivery to ACC, both PACAF and Air Forces Africa would have the remote PR/BPC access they need to operate in their theaters. The key to doing away with all exist-

ing shortfalls lies in putting a mechanism in place to work within the system to guide the development of Air Force rescue.

Conclusion

The Air Force rescue community is essential to joint doctrine and operations. Commanders and their troops clearly benefit tactically from the availability of rescue, and the US government benefits operationally and strategically from its ability to deny the enemy an opportunity to exploit captured US personnel. Unfortunately, weak advocacy at the MAJCOM level for personnel and equipment leaves over 40 percent of the rescue demand unmet. Failure of programs such as CSAR-X and HC-130 recapitalization to meet validated force requirements, combined with chronic personnel shortages and declining aircraft availability rates, foretells a worldwide decline in Air Force rescue's capability and capacity for contingency operations. Unquestionably, those forces cannot meet the secretary of the Air Force's requirement for global PR without dramatic improvement in their organization, training, and equipment—which a rescue NAF would provide. By elevating the needs of Air Force rescue and its contribution to the joint and coalition communities at the Air Staff, the service can meet the growing demand for its global rescue. Renewing our commitment to the rapid recovery of isolated personnel will inspire confidence among our international partners that Air Force rescue professionals will answer the call around the world so that others may live. ✪

Notes

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