

### AFSOC adopting a “Globemaster” View

United States Air Force Doctrine for Air Mobility Operations, AFDD 2-6, states “airlift used in a special operations role provides commanders the capability to achieve specific objectives that may not be attainable through more conventional airlift practices.”<sup>1</sup> At present in the U.S. Air Force, airlift supporting special operations is sourced through two MAJCOMs, Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) and Air Mobility Command (AMC). While much of the special operations airlift capacity can be found within AFSOC, there exists no heavy lift capacity which has dedicated OPCON to the command. This capacity resides with Air Mobility Command’s C-17 SOLL II aircraft stationed at Charleston AFB, South Carolina. Currently, these aircraft and aircrew support special operations forces in a primarily ad hoc relationship, creating obstacles to effective execution and management of a critical mission. AFSOC has no standing OPCON of the heavy lift, direct delivery capacity which the C-17 offers. These aircraft and aircrews remain under the OPCON of AMC, however, if they were owned and under the OPCON of AFSOC, it would eliminate multiple operational difficulties, and better support USSOCOM in executing America’s counter-terrorism fight. The special operations airlift mission currently executed by AMC, C-17 SOLL II, should be transferred to AFSOC to enable smoother execution.

Currently, AFSOC utilizes several C-130 variants as the primary lift capacity for special operations troops and cargo. These aircraft are charged with executing AFSOC mission of being “America’s specialized airpower...a step ahead in a changing world, delivering Special Operations power anytime, anywhere.”<sup>2</sup> While the C-130 platform is a reliable and proven asset within AFSOC, it is hampered by age and airframe restrictions. AFSOC utilizes the MC-130H Combat Talon II to “provide infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply of special operations forces

and equipment in hostile or denied territory.”<sup>3</sup> These aircraft execute their demanding mission utilizing “terrain following and terrain avoidance radars capable of operations as low as 250 feet in adverse weather conditions.”<sup>4</sup> This unique mission is executed by well trained aircrew, solely trained to conduct these events. The MC-130H has a top speed is 300 mph, can carry 52 paratroopers, and has a range of 2,700 NM without air refueling, however can be unlimited with air refueling.<sup>5</sup> The maximum takeoff weight of a Talon II is 155,000 pounds.<sup>6</sup> While this is a solid special operations platform, it should be noted that special operators are cautioned that “the Combat Talon is not a rapid response force” and that “missions deep into heavily defended enemy territory require extensive preflight planning.”<sup>7</sup> The Talon II aircraft are used within the battle space, and lack capability to infiltrate special operations forces from outside the theater in a timely manner. If AFSOC seeks to stay “a step ahead in a changing world,” it unfortunately is limiting itself to an airframe of degraded or limited performance. A far more suitable choice for many AFSOC mission sets would be the C-17A Globemaster III.

The C-17A is a heavy lift strategic aircraft which also possesses many tactical airlift efficacies. A key asset of the C-17 is the ability to conduct global direct delivery missions. According to AFDD 2-6, “direct delivery is normally an intertheater flight that bypasses en route stops by airlifting personnel and materiel from the aerial port of embarkation (APOE) directly to forward operating bases (FOBs) within a theater.”<sup>8</sup> The C-17 is capable of 450 knots (.76 Mach), has global range with air refueling, and can carry 102 paratroopers or 170,900 pounds of cargo.<sup>9</sup> Note that the maximum cargo weight of the C-17A is greater than the maximum gross weight of a MC-130H aircraft. Equally impressive, this aircraft can operate from “small, austere airfields” and “takeoff and land on runways as short as 3,500 feet.”<sup>10</sup> Time and again, the C-17 has proven itself as a steadfast airlifter. Originally developed with a sizeable price tag

(approximately \$300 million each), it was doubted that C-17s would be used in a hostile, tactical environment. However, events since have repeatedly proven the C-17 as a staunch asset in such spartan locations. Most recently during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the C-17 has proven itself as the workhorse in providing key logistical support directly to the warfighter.

While primarily a conventional airlift and airdrop platform, C-17s are also being employed in a special operations capacity. Special Operations Low Level II (SOLL II) qualified aircrews based at Charleston AFB, SC augment AFSOC and JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) to execute covert/ clandestine missions of special operations forces. Vowing a motto to “deliver the sting”, the selectively-manned C-17 aircrews routinely train and operate with AFSOC and special operations units. SOLL II’s combat role is to “conduct clandestine formation or single-ship intrusion of hostile territory to provide highly reliable, self-contained, precision airdrop/airland of personnel and equipment.”<sup>11</sup> These AMC-owned C-17s possess some additional communications and navigation equipment which allow the Ground Forces Commander (GFC) and Airborne Mission Commander (AMC) greater capacity and battlespace intelligence. While these C-17s are not presently equipped with the MC-130’s terrain following or avoidance radar capability, they execute many of the same missions. In conjunction, the aircrew continually hones tactics and procedures to execute the mission as needed. One precept of SOLL II at Charleston AFB is the constant alert status to deploy and support special operations forces with a world-wide capability at a moment’s notice. These aircrew adopt a “no fail mission” mentality when supporting special operations, and their performance reflects that creed.

Unfortunately, the current arrangement with regard to C-17s and the special operations mission is flawed. Special operations forces are not guaranteed the support of C-17 aircraft

because they are under the OPCON of AMC and Tanker Airlift Control Center (TACC). TACC prioritizes requests of all worldwide airlift support using mathematical formulas and criteria, and may determine that other conventional missions have higher priority. While striving to be efficient in operations, this bureaucracy could create a lack of effectiveness in supporting counterterrorism and direct action missions. USAF doctrine in AFDD 2-6 clearly shows the pitfalls of such a system, stating that “SOF units usually request support through the joint force special operations component commander (JFSOCC) and the special operations liaison element (SOLE) in the AOC. When SOF units require intratheater airlift in excess of available assets, or their airlift requirements exceed the capacity of assets in the theater, the JFSOCC or the SOLE in the AOC will coordinate appropriate support.”<sup>12</sup> No guarantee exists that special operations forces will receive the required support. This is not representative of an efficient or timely usage of the AOC or SOF personnel. Such an arrangement does not support America’s premier warfighters with a constant, reliable method to get them and their equipment “there”. The concentration of special operations heavy lift capability only within AMC and TACC also creates operational level complications.

While no glaring inconsistencies have emerged with the performance of the C-17 SOLL II aircrews in conducting their mission, the success is due to herculean efforts by aircrew, leadership, and support personnel. The C-17 SOLL II aircrew are managed and governed under the same regulations (AFI 11-2C-17 Volume 3) as all other C-17 aircrew.<sup>13</sup> These AMC-based Air Force Instructions (AFIs) were created primarily for conventional forces, not to execute a no-fail mission. Use of conventional regulations to execute a clandestine mission could limit the aircrew and could force critical decisions upon a mission or aircraft commander. One example of the problem is the method of waiver protocol. Waivers are essentially higher headquarters

approval to break a rule. If a C-17 SOLL II aircrew needs a waiver for crew duty day to execute a mission (while in execution), they are required to get approval from the “MAJCOM/A3/DO with mission execution authority for active duty, AFRC, or ANG units flying MAJCOM-directed missions.”<sup>14</sup> The waiver request would flow from the aircrew, through 618<sup>th</sup> TACC, through AMC Standardization and Evaluation pilots and leadership, then to the AMC/A3. Other than the aircrew requesting the waiver, none of these would necessarily have SOLL II experience or detailed knowledge of the mission.<sup>15</sup> The insanity is palpable; particularly since there is no requirement for a SOLL II qualified pilot to recommend a course of action to the commander who is charged with granting/denying the waiver.

Another complicating factor is that in execution, a SOLL II mission also has a dual chain of command, running between JSOC and AMC. AMC and JSOC have arranged the command and control in a classified manner, but there is a clear lack of clarity regarding who makes the decisions. The dual chain of command creates confusion and causes delay in crucial life-threatening decisions. Additionally, messages can become distorted, creating confusion to the aircrew and operator, with a greater chance of problems. If these aircraft and aircrews were to be AFSOC assets, they would be restricted solely by HQAF and AFSOC-generated AFIs. AFSOC would change the crew duty day and other waiver protocols to flow to an AFSOC Director of Operations, not an AMC general who may not fully comprehend the mission or requirements. Additionally, because AFSOC focuses on support of the special operations warfighter, they could potentially possess a more liberal approach than AMC. This approach would free C-17 SOLL II leaders and aircrews from a decentralized command arrangement, and create informed unity of command to enhance mission effectiveness.

With AFSOC ownership of C-17s, the MAJCOM would now be able to truly follow the AFDD 2-7 Special Operations doctrine. According to this document, “the AFSOF mobility mission area includes the rapid global airlift of personnel and equipment through hostile airspace to conduct operations and to enable air mobility across the spectrum of conflict.”<sup>16</sup> AFSOC would possess an organic heavy lift component to move forces and equipment globally in hours, not days. A homogenous heavy airlift force within AFSOC would allow for greater cooperation, training, and compatibility across all aircrews and special operations users. Additionally, some restrictions may be currently encumbered in executing SOF missions due to mixed-airframes which would not be the case if solely executed by C-17s. Presently using multiple platforms and coordination tolerances, the mission is restricted by the least capable aircraft in the operation. With this barrier removed, mission capabilities would expand if an AFSOC-integrated C-17 force were allowed to execute independent of other airframes. With C-17s conducting most of the traditional MC-130 roles, the Talon aircraft would be freed for employment in more specialized missions of SOF employment. These airframes may also be converted to AC-130s for interdiction or vital communications/PSYOPs platforms which are High Demand/Low Density (HD/LD) assets.

When C-17 SOLL II was established at Charleston AFB, SC, as the 437<sup>th</sup> OGS, it was during a time of limited inventory of C-17s and lift capacity existing in AMC. Since then, the C-17 fleet has dramatically grown, and is at full operational capacity within the USAF. In October 2009, the U.S. Senate added provisions for production of ten additional C-17s which the USAF did not want, and has no plans to beddown.<sup>17</sup> Presenting an overview of his command to ACSC AY10 students, then AMC Commander, General Lichte, indicated that he was unsure of where he would put ten more C-17 aircraft, or how they would be utilized.<sup>18</sup> These “unneeded” ten C-

17 aircraft present an excellent opportunity for AFSOC to adopt C-17s and the SOLL II mission. In doing so, AFSOC should also examine how other MAJCOMs, such as PACAF, AFMC, AFRC, AETC, and the NGB, incorporated the C-17 into their operations, and maintained a relationship with the lead MAJCOM of AMC.<sup>19</sup> These sister MAJCOMs can provide a lessons learned approach to integration of a new airframe, personnel, and asset to AFSOC.

To completely administer the SOLL II mission as AFSOC C-17s would require some equipment augmentation. While already equipped with additional navigation and communications equipment, these aircraft could be enhanced with electronic capabilities resident in the MC-130 fleet. The addition of the Combat Talon's Terrain Following/Terrain Avoidance Radar (TF/TA), Precision Ground Mapping Radar (PGM), Electronic Countermeasures (ECM), and Infrared Countermeasures (IRCM) would prove invaluable to C-17s.<sup>20</sup> These would allow C-17 SOLL aircrew to operate with an all-weather capability in a higher threat area than present. Aircrew would be required to train extensively on this equipment, and not fly other baseline C-17s outside of AFSOC. A more robust selection criteria and internal training would emerge to continually sharpen the required skill sets. These aircrews would not be subject to the hectic schedule and mission management of AMC and TACC. Instead, the selectively manned AFSOC C-17 units would be allowed to hone their skills for execution of the mission. When not training or being utilized by AFSOC, these aircraft and aircrews could augment AMC missions just as PACOM C-17s do. However, this would be a tertiary responsibility, with the primary focus being support of the warfighter.

If AFSOC were to have complete OPCON of C-17 SOLL II missions, there would be a greater connection and familiarity between the special operations troops and the aircrew that fly them. Relationship building between units and capabilities can only increase mission

performance in demanding environments, such as covert/ clandestine operations. While there is currently limited interaction, a closer relationship between the customer and aircrew would eliminate many cultural barriers that currently exist between the two. A byproduct of the new arrangement would also allow for more secrecy to be inherent to the mission. At present, with AMC owning the SOLL II mission, often times when those aircraft and aircrew are alerted to support the warfighter in a sensitive mission, it is anything but. The entire command and control element of TACC and AMC become aware of the mission and closely monitor the progress of the aircraft. This gargantuan bureaucracy maintains limited OPSEC, particularly with high emphasis missions. In fact, such a mission generates a higher interest and focus, when it should be kept as quiet as possible. OPSEC is imperative to success with these types of missions.

The currently OPCON arrangement between AFSOC and AMC hinders special operations missions. The details of this arrangement are classified, but clearly do not empower the aircrew with centralized command and control. It is clear that AFSOC needs the mission sets that a C-17 possesses, but there is a resistance to fully integrate the C-17 into the MAJCOM. This is a result of last minute saves to make the mission work by AMC SOLL II aircrews. There is also a resistance within AMC to abdicate the SOLL II mission and the aircraft/aircrew required to AFSOC. This “power struggle” is to the detriment of supporting special operations missions. AFSOC should aggressively seek ownership and full OPCON of the C-17 SOLL mission and heavy lift capabilities to best support the special operations warfighter.

Jim Harris, Major, USAF  
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<sup>1</sup> AFDD 2-6, Air Mobility Operations, 35.



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- <sup>2</sup> US Air Force AFSOC Factsheet, <http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=156>.
- <sup>3</sup> US Air Force MC-130 Talon I/II Factsheet, <http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=115>.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Special Operations Forces Reference Manual, 5-14.
- <sup>8</sup> AFDD 2-6, Air Mobility Operations, 42.
- <sup>9</sup> US Air Force C-17 Globemaster Factsheet, <http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=86>.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Special Operations Forces Reference Manual, 5-51.
- <sup>12</sup> AFDD 2-6, Air Mobility Operations, 35.
- <sup>13</sup> AFI 11-2C-17 Volume 3, Addenda B (Draft), 1.7.
- <sup>14</sup> AFI 11-2C-17, Volume 3, 4.3.2.
- <sup>15</sup> Gonyea to the author, e-mail.
- <sup>16</sup> AFDD 2-7, Special Operations, 13.
- <sup>17</sup> Airforce Magazine, 1 October 2009. <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/Features/modernization/Pages/box100209senate.aspx>
- <sup>18</sup> Lichte, "Air Mobility Command" (paraphrase).
- <sup>19</sup> US Air Force C-17 Globemaster Factsheet, <http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=86>.
- <sup>20</sup> Special Operations Forces Reference Manual, 5-13.

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<http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=115> (accessed 10 November 2009).