

# Who's in Charge? Commander, Air Force Forces or Air Force Commander?

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*"I've got the stick."*

*"I've got the conn."*

*"Sir, I accept command."*

Sometimes different words, appropriate at different levels, all say the same thing. Let's imagine that you are now in control (of the aircraft, the ship, or the unit) and have both the authority and responsibility that go with the position. But exactly what (or whom) do you have authority over and responsibility for? What is the extent of your authority? Of your responsibility? To whom are you responsible for the consequences of your decisions and actions? A new commander must be able to answer these essential questions. On the surface, the answers might appear simple and obvious, but in practice many people have found that what they think they understand doesn't reflect the real meaning.

The Fall 1998 edition of *Airpower Journal* included Brig Gen John Barry's article "Who's in Charge? Service Administrative Control"—an excellent overview of the role and authority of an Air Force commander as we understood the position at that time. In the 15 years since the appearance of that article, Airmen have gained much better comprehension of the command of Air Force forces (AFFOR), especially with the help of publications such as Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*; the *Air Force Forces Command and Control Enabling Concept* and its implementing program action directives; and practical experience in Op-

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erations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.<sup>1</sup> As General Barry foresaw, “Command authority has once again become a serious subject of discussion . . . in light of the multiple contingency taskings our Air Force has responded to.”<sup>2</sup> It is appropriate to revisit the issues raised by the general in light of our experiences since fall 1998.<sup>3</sup> Discussion of the command and control of AFFOR, especially in deployed operations, first requires a common understanding of three critical terms: *Air Force commander*; *commander, Air Force forces*; and *chain of command*.

## Air Force Commander

*The beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right names.*

—Confucius

It is important to distinguish between an Air Force commander and a commander, Air Force forces (COMAFFOR). They are not necessarily synonymous titles. The former refers to any Air Force commander within a service context. The latter is reserved exclusively for the senior Air Force commander directly responsible to a joint force commander (JFC) within a joint context. Just as all tigers are cats, but not all cats are tigers, so is every COMAFFOR an Air Force commander, but not every Air Force commander is a COMAFFOR.

What is an Air Force commander? Interestingly, neither Air Force nor joint doctrine includes an official definition of the general term *commander*. Rather, definitions refer to a specific level of position of commander (e.g., JFC, service component commander, joint force air component commander). We find the best official description of a commander in Air Force Instruction (AFI) 38-101, *Air Force Organization*: “an officer who occupies a position of command pursuant to orders of appointment or by assumption of command according to AFI 51-604.”<sup>4</sup> AFI 51-604, *Appointment to and Assumption of Command*, and AFI 38-101 go into the particulars regarding the various levels and types of Air Force units for which a commander may be designated, but neither

provides more details about or a definition of an Air Force commander.<sup>5</sup> From the available description, however, we may conclude that an Air Force commander is an Air Force officer in charge of any Air Force unit or organization. All Air Force commanders are cats.

## Commander, Air Force Forces

A COMAFFOR, though, is a different animal. Let's start with the basic definition: "The title of COMAFFOR is reserved exclusively to the single Air Force commander of an Air Force Service component assigned or attached to a JFC at the unified combatant command, subunified combatant command, or joint task force (JTF) level."<sup>6</sup> Three critical terms are embedded in this definition: *joint force*, *joint force commander*, and *service component command*.

- A joint force is one composed of significant elements, assigned or attached, of two or more Military Departments, operating under a single JFC.<sup>7</sup>
- joint force commander. A general term applied to a combatant commander, subunified commander, or [JTF] commander authorized to exercise combatant command (command authority) or operational control [OPCON] over a joint force.<sup>8</sup>
- Service component command. A command consisting of the Service component commander and all those Service forces, such as individuals, units, detachments, organizations, and installations under that command, including the support forces that have been assigned to a combatant command or further assigned to a subordinate unified command or joint task force.<sup>9</sup>

According to joint doctrine, for every level of joint force that has AFFOR assigned or attached to it, there exists an Air Force service component command. Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, notes that "all joint forces include Service components, because administrative and logistic support for joint forces are provided through Service components."<sup>10</sup> The commander of the Air Force service component command is the COMAFFOR.

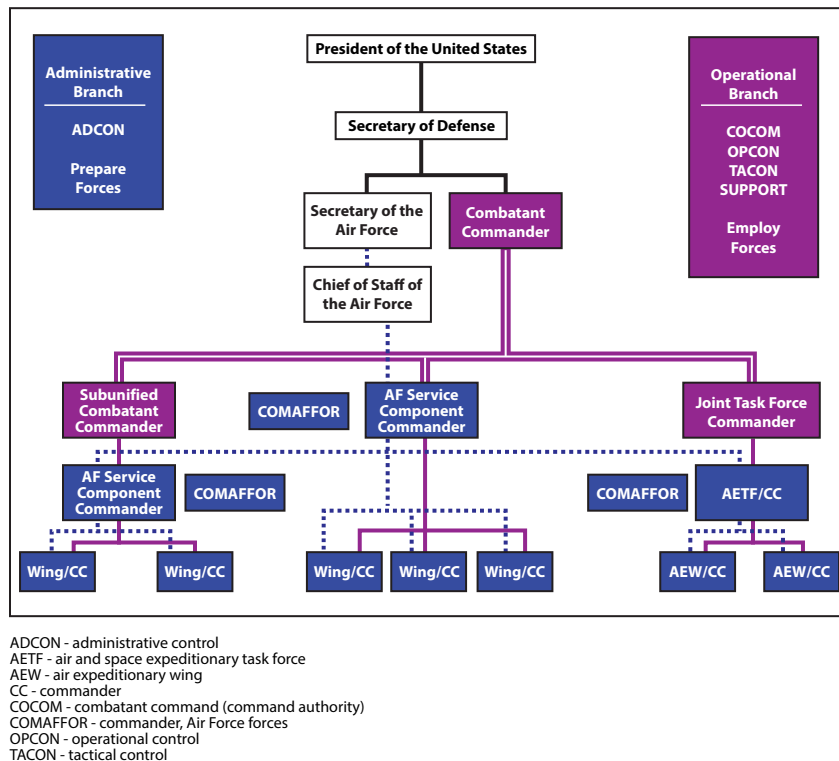
From these interrelated definitions, we can determine four key elements of a COMAFFOR:

1. The position of the COMAFFOR and its associated authorities and responsibilities apply *only* within the context of an organized joint force.
2. The COMAFFOR is the US Air Force service component commander within that joint force and presents the single Air Force voice to the JFC.
3. The JFC normally delegates OPCON (the authority to organize commands and forces and employ those forces to accomplish the assigned mission—in colloquial terms, the authority to put forces in harm's way) over all assigned or attached AFFOR within that joint force to the COMAFFOR.
4. No Air Force commander intervenes between a COMAFFOR and the JFC to whom that COMAFFOR is assigned or attached.

## Chain of Command

The third point for potential confusion comes in the description of the chain of command as well as the commander's authorities and responsibilities within that chain. Even the term *chain of command* promotes uncertainty. Use of the singular noun *chain* implies that it is a single line stretching from the commander in chief to the most junior Airman in the field. But as described in joint and service doctrine, the chain of command actually includes two separate but interrelated branches—the operational and the administrative (see the figure on the next page).<sup>11</sup> The operational branch (in purple) runs from the president through the secretary of defense to the commanders of combatant commands and then to the Air Force service component commanders. The administrative branch (in blue) runs from the president through the secretary of defense to the service secretaries and then—to the extent determined by the service secretary or allowed by law—

through the service chiefs to the service forces. The two branches diverge at the secretary of defense and then reconverge at the Air Force service component commander, the most senior Air Force commander immediately subordinate to the JFC.



**Figure. Air Force forces within the chain of command.** (Derived from Air Force Doctrine Document 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, 14 October 2011, 89, fig. 7.1, [http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af\\_cv/publication/afdd1/afdd1.pdf](http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_cv/publication/afdd1/afdd1.pdf); and Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, 25 March 2013, II-10, fig. II-3; IV-3, fig. IV-1; IV-6, fig. IV-2; IV-10, fig. IV-4; IV-11, fig. IV-5, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1.pdf).)

### *The Chain of Command for an Air Force Commander*

Determining the chain of command for an Air Force commander depends upon the color of the hat worn by the next-senior commander

above. If that commander wears a purple hat, then the Air Force commander responds to both a joint and an Air Force chain of command. Within the joint structure, the Air Force commander is under a combatant commander and possibly either a subunified combatant commander or a JTF commander. Furthermore, as previously discussed, an Air Force commander whose next senior commander wears a purple hat is the COMAFFOR.

The COMAFFOR commands the AFFOR, defined by the *Air Force Forces Command and Control Enabling Concept* as the “USAF component assigned to a [JFC] at the unified, subunified, or Joint [JTF] level. AFFOR includes the COMAFFOR, the AFFOR staff (A-staff/personal staff), the [air and space operations center], and all USAF forces and personnel assigned or attached.”<sup>12</sup> Neither the program action directive nor Air Force doctrine offers further definition or modification to that of the *Enabling Concept*. Instead, Air Force doctrine relies upon the previously cited joint definition of a service component: “A command consisting of the Service component commander and all those Service forces, such as individuals, units, detachments, organizations, and installations under that command, including the support forces that have been assigned to a combatant command or further assigned to a subordinate unified command or joint task force.”

Depending upon the specific joint force involved, the AFFOR may be either permanent units (numbered air force / wing / group / squadron) or expeditionary (numbered expeditionary air force / air expeditionary wing / air expeditionary group / air expeditionary squadron) or some mixture of both. Note that nothing in the Air Force or joint description of the COMAFFOR mentions aircraft. The COMAFFOR is the senior Air Force commander over all AFFOR, including the people, installations, and organizations assigned or attached to a JFC, whether or not those organizations include aircraft.

As shown in the figure, the chain of command above the COMAFFOR flows from both the separate operational and administrative branches so that, in effect, the COMAFFOR answers to two masters. Within the

operational branch, the COMAFFOR is subordinate to the JFC (a purple hat). Within the administrative branch, the COMAFFOR is subordinate to the next-superior Air Force commander (a blue hat). Thus, the COMAFFOR could be in a potentially awkward position if the orders coming from his or her operational-branch JFC conflict with those from the administrative-branch Air Force commander. In that case, the administrative-branch authority is subject to the operational-branch authority, and the JFC's orders take precedence.<sup>13</sup>

For AFFOR below the COMAFFOR, the next-senior commander wears a blue hat, and the issue is less challenging. Since the two branches merge at the COMAFFOR, the chain of command for AFFOR below the COMAFFOR (including subordinate Air Force commanders) comes from a single point. Whether subordinate AFFOR commanders employ forces (operational branch) or prepare them for employment (administrative branch), the source of the authority for both branches comes from the COMAFFOR. In terms of a joint force, the COMAFFOR is part of that chain of command and is the senior Air Force commander within the joint force. This arrangement, which provides unity of command for AFFOR responding to orders from both the joint operational branch and the service administrative branch, is the critical link to unity of command.<sup>14</sup>

For AFFOR not assigned or attached to a JFC (e.g., Air Force Materiel Command and Air Education and Training Command forces or Air Combat Command forces not deployed or attached to a JFC for contingency operations), the situation is even simpler. In these circumstances, there is no purple-hat commander and no COMAFFOR—only an increasingly senior series of Air Force commanders. In these cases, the operational branch of the chain of command does not exist. The Air Force commander in these circumstances remains under the administrative branch of the chain of command only and exercises administrative control (ADCON) as delegated from his or her Air Force senior commander.



### *The Authorities of an Air Force Commander*

Which authority does the Air Force commander need? Well, it depends upon what that commander is tasked to do. Will he or she order forces into harm's way? If so, then the commander needs operational branch authority of either OPCON or tactical control. As described in JP 1, these include

- authoritatively directing all military operations and joint training;
- organizing and employing commands and forces;
- assigning command functions to subordinates;
- establishing plans and requirements for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities;
- suspending subordinate commanders from duty; and
- providing local direction and control of movements or maneuvers to carry out the mission.<sup>15</sup>

For force employment, the COMAFFOR supplies this operational branch authority for all subordinate Air Force units through the exercise of OPCON as delegated from the JFC (purple hat). Normally, the COMAFFOR will retain OPCON at his or her level. However, depending upon the operational circumstances and mission requirements, the COMAFFOR does have the authority to further delegate all or some portion of OPCON to a subordinate Air Force commander. Therefore, as the service component commander to a JFC, the COMAFFOR is responsible for employing the Air Force component in response to the JFC's orders.

But what if an Air Force commander is preparing forces in accordance with Air Force standards to go into harm's way? Even when this occurs in response to OPCON (e.g., a mission rehearsal or joint exercise prior to deployment), an Air Force commander exercises ADCON to provide properly equipped, manned, and trained AFFOR for tasked missions and functions. With this blue hat and ADCON, the COMAFFOR ensures the Air Force component's proper organization, training,

equipment, and sustainment for employment. Again referring to JP 1, AFDD 1, and AFI 51-604, we see that the authorities of ADCON include

- administration and support responsibilities identified in Title 10, *United States Code*,
- organization of service forces,
- control of resources and equipment,
- personnel management,
- logistics,
- individual and unit training,
- readiness,
- mobilization and demobilization, and
- discipline.<sup>16</sup>

The figure above shows that the COMAFFOR, as the service component commander, also exercises service ADCON over all assigned or attached AFFOR. ADCON, the authority necessary to fulfill military department responsibilities for administration and support, runs from the president through the secretary of defense to the secretary of the Air Force. To the degree established by the latter or specified in law, this authority then runs through the chief of staff of the Air Force to the Air Force service component commanders assigned to the combatant commanders and to the commanders of forces not assigned to the combatant commanders. ADCON is not a war-fighting authority in the sense that it does not include the authority to direct military operations. However, it remains critically important to a war fighter since a commander cannot employ forces unless they have been properly prepared and sustained for the tasks they will perform.

As mentioned previously, the operational branch takes precedence over the administrative branch. For example, arranging the service organizational structure to meet operational mission requirements would normally be a responsibility of the service administrative

branch carried out solely under ADCON. However, the operational branch's authority of OPCON does include the authority to "prescribe the chain of command to the commands and forces within the command."<sup>17</sup> Consequently, with OPCON a JFC may direct the reorganization of assigned and attached AFFOR even if doing so is not in accordance with Air Force standard practice. JP 1 also asserts, however, that such change should occur in consideration of service input: "With due consideration for unique Service organizational structures and their specific support requirements, organize subordinate commands and forces within the command as necessary to carry out missions assigned to the command."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, with regard to unit integrity, it notes that "component forces should remain organized as designed and in the manner accustomed through training to maximize effectiveness. However, if a JFC desires to reorganize component units, it should be done only after careful consultation and coordination with the Service component commander."<sup>19</sup> At this point, the position of the COMAFFOR as the point of convergence between the operational and administrative branches can become critically important. The COMAFFOR, an expert in the capabilities and limitations of AFFOR, understands the impact that reorganization of the latter will have on their ability to attain operational objectives.

We must realize, though, that ADCON is not exclusive to the COMAFFOR; for attached forces, the home-unit Air Force commander receives a share. For operations as part of an Air Force service component to a joint force, the COMAFFOR holds ADCON authorities over the AFFOR but not total ADCON. The latter includes all actions related to administration and support of service forces from initial accession to final separation for either home-station or deployed functions. As described in AFDD 1 and both the *Enabling Concept* and its implementing program action directives, those elements of ADCON necessary to prepare and sustain the AFFOR for operational employment should be specified to the COMAFFOR. The home-unit commander retains the remaining elements. For instance, the gaining COMAFFOR normally should have authority and responsibility for providing safe and secure

billeting for deployed forces, but the authority to maintain personnel records and oversee family housing at the home station remains with that station's commander. The elements of ADCON specified to the deployed COMAFFOR and those retained by the home-unit Air Force commander should be spelled out not only in the service G-series orders that establish the expeditionary organization but also in the deployment orders that attach forces to that organization.<sup>20</sup>

## So Who Is in Charge?

Returning to the original question, we can offer a simple answer: the properly designated Air Force commander is in charge of AFFOR. An Air Force commander

- is a service commander within the administrative branch of the chain of command;
- may also be a service commander within the operational branch of the chain of command when assigned or attached to a joint force;
- exercises ADCON to organize, train, equip, sustain, and discipline AFFOR to meet service standards;
- receives service support from the next-higher Air Force commander through the service ADCON chain; and
- responds to orders from the next-higher Air Force commander in the service chain.

In addition to these responsibilities and authorities as an Air Force commander, a COMAFFOR

- is the senior Air Force commander *within the operational branch of a designated joint force commander*;
- exercises OPCON to employ forces in response to orders from the JFC directly above him or her in the operational branch of the chain of command;

- exercises ADCON to organize, train, equip, sustain, and discipline AFFOR in accordance with Air Force standards and procedures *in order to execute the OPCON orders*;
- receives service support from the next-higher Air Force commander through the service ADCON chain; and
- responds to ADCON orders from the next-higher Air Force commander in the service chain *as long as these orders do not conflict with the OPCON orders from the operational chain*.

In the event of a conflict between the two branches, the authority of the operational branch takes priority over that of the administrative branch.

Therefore, whether you are an Air Force commander or a COMAFFOR, you remain responsible for the Airmen under your command and have the requisite authority to carry out that responsibility. You've got the stick. Have a great flight. ✪

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## Notes

1. See Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, Organization, and Command*, 14 October 2011, [http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af\\_cv/publication/afdd1/afdd1.pdf](http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_cv/publication/afdd1/afdd1.pdf); and Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Forces Command and Control Enabling Concept* (change 2) (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 25 May 2006). (Hereafter *AFFOR C2 EC*.)

2. Brig Gen John L. Barry, "Who's in Charge? Service Administrative Control," *Airpower Journal* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 31.

3. Note that this article limits itself to the discussion and description of an Air Force commander of Air Force forces; for that reason, it does not address the role and authorities of the joint force air component commander—a joint commander.

4. Air Force Instruction (AFI) 38-101, *Air Force Organization*, 16 March 2011, 15, [http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af\\_a1/publication/afi38-101/afi38-101.pdf](http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a1/publication/afi38-101/afi38-101.pdf).

5. AFI 51-604, *Appointment to and Assumption of Command*, 4 April 2006, 1-2, 5-8, [http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af\\_a3\\_5/publication/afi51-604/afi51-604.pdf](http://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a3_5/publication/afi51-604/afi51-604.pdf); and AFI 38-101, *Air Force Organization*, 19-64, 94-98.

6. AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 55.

7. Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, 25 March 2013, I-16, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1.pdf).

8. *Ibid.*, GL-8.

9. Ibid., GL-11.
10. Ibid., IV-3.
11. Ibid., II-9; and AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 55.
12. AFFOR C2 EC, 50.
13. JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces*, II-11; and Title 10 *United States Code*, *Armed Forces*, pt. 1, chap. 6, sec. 165.
14. AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 55.
15. JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces*, V-6.
16. Ibid., V-12; AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 57–58; and AFI 51-604, *Appointment to and Assumption of Command*, 2.
17. JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces*, V-6.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., V-18.
20. AFDD 1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, 74; and AFFOR C2 EC, 12.



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