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JFACC: Key to Organizing Your Air Assets for Victory

JEFFREY E. STAMBAUGH

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Examining the plans for America's aviation forces, Senator Sam Nunn, Capitol Hill's recognized defense expert, ignited a firestorm by asking if the United States needed and could afford its "four air forces." While few military professionals will have much of a say on the larger issues of roles and missions that underlie Senator Nunn's questions, those who aspire to command forces in battle must consider a parallel issue. The services are locked in a debate over the purpose and functions of the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC). While the debate addresses roles and missions, its significance lies in the fact that its outcome will influence the effective use of airpower in combat. Prospective joint force commanders must therefore understand the JFACC debate and know how to organize air operations before the drums of war begin to beat. This article looks at the background of the JFACC concept and then addresses a major point of disagreement: whether the JFACC commands or coordinates the CINC's air component. Finally, it will outline a role for the JFACC in a joint operation, equal in contribution and importance to ground and naval commanders.

JFACC Background

The JFACC concept is a simple one. First, it involves a joint force, one composed of forces from more than one service. Second, the JFACC, in the person of the officer in charge, is an "air component commander." Essentially, the JFACC runs the entire air operation for the joint force commander. Since it was codified into joint doctrine only with the publication of Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Pub 26 in 1986, the position and responsibilities of the JFACC are relatively new.[1]

The nature of warfare, the airpower assets of the different services, and airpower doctrine all drive the need for a JFACC. Joint operations are the norm rather than the exception for the foreseeable future.[2] Air warfare is probably our most joint current medium. Here's what the Department of the Navy recently said about airpower: "Joint operations between naval and Air Force strike assets--including carrier-based aircraft, land-based naval expeditionary aircraft, land-based Air Force aircraft from both local and distant bases, and Tomahawk missiles from surface and attack submarines--have become standard." [3] It should also be clear that the ability of US forces to operate successfully in combined operations is directly related to our skill in conducting joint operations.

From a sheer numerical perspective, the Navy and Marine Corps bring a lot of airpower to the joint force. In Desert Storm Navy and Marine Corps aircraft constituted about 33 percent of the US air armada and dropped about 28 percent of the total US weapons' tonnage during the war.[4] Therefore, a failure to successfully integrate the airpower of all services represents a serious loss to the joint force.

According to USAF doctrine, a tenet of aerospace power is that airpower assets are theater assets and should be centrally controlled by an airman.[5] While not everyone accepts it, this tenet is firmly based on historical experience. It is also at the heart of the JFACC concept. The Allied campaign in North Africa during World War II began with airpower parceled out to various commanders, including ground commanders. The limitations of this arrangement quickly became apparent, particularly during the battle at Kasserine Pass. During the 1943 Casablanca Conference, Roosevelt and Churchill approved a new command structure that centralized control under an airman.[6] This new concept quickly found its way into Army doctrine: "Control of available airpower must be centralized and command must be exercised through the air force commander if this inherent flexibility and ability to deliver a decisive blow are to be fully exploited." [7] As Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Eisenhower invoked this new doctrine by insisting upon a single air commander reporting directly to him.[8]

As aviation forces shrink, common sense says we need centralized control. For example, the vast majority of fuel

offload capability resides in USAF tanker aircraft. The same applies for aerial surveillance capability. Clearly, we need an integrated air plan if the Navy and Marine Corps are to receive adequate support from USAF tankers and surveillance aircraft. Moreover, the Navy and Marine Corps maintain superb electronic warfare aircraft that the Air Force would like to integrate into the theater plan for such assets.

This mixing and matching of assets points out a key characteristic of airpower--its seamless nature. Battle lines can be easily drawn for ground forces, but that's not so with air forces. Air assets can launch from bases hundreds of miles apart and simultaneously converge on a target. Those same forces can repeat that performance only a few hours later on another target located hundreds of miles from the previous target. Obviously, optimum use of such assets demands a theater view.

Furthermore, centralized JFACC control of these theater assets allows their integration in the joint force commander's campaign plan. The JFACC develops the air portion of the campaign and applies the available assets to achieve the desired effects. Centralized control enables a level of asset integration not otherwise possible.

Because the logic seems so compelling, it may be incredible to an outsider that the three services did not cooperate on this point in the past: not in Korea and most certainly not in Vietnam. As the United States entered the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf crisis, the JFACC concept flew into an uncharted, and possibly hostile, environment.

In accordance with joint doctrine, General Schwarzkopf, the joint force commander in the Gulf War, appointed Lieutenant General Charles A. Horner, the CENTAF commander, as the JFACC. And whatever the assessment of the air campaign prior to land combat, and the support of the ground forces during the 100 hours, one aspect of air operations is clear: the JFACC process had its difficulties. Of the many problems the JFACC would encounter, none was more troublesome than the attitudes of the services.

The Navy and Marine Corps entered the JFACC process reluctantly. Senior Navy commanders vigorously opposed working in a joint operation, especially with an Air Force general in charge. Three months into Desert Shield, with war a mere two months away, the Navy was still searching for a way to sink the JFACC.[9] If the Navy fought the idea, the Marine Corps was downright defiant. Marine headquarters addressed messages to the "Joint Force Air Coordinator." [10] The USMC air component commander during Desert Storm made it clear in a postwar interview that he viewed General Horner as only a coordinator and that Marine air worked primarily Marine targets.[11] The Air Force bears partial responsibility for the air of discontent because it dealt high-handedly with the other services on occasion. Had it not been for General Schwarzkopf's firm support for the JFACC, the integrated air plan that severely damaged the Iraqi forces might have been the first casualty of the conflict.

Though handicapped by interservice disagreements, Horner held two aces at the operational level that overcame these problems and kept the disagreements out of the public's eye. First, General Horner had an abundance of assets available to conduct his air war. Second, the Coalition initiated hostilities at its choosing, then pounded the enemy for 38 days before beginning the ground war, which it again began at the time of its choosing.

In reality, Horner had a surplus of aircraft under his direction. In October 1990, when asked by President Bush what additional forces he would need to conduct offensive operations to oust Iraq from Kuwait, Schwarzkopf requested two armored divisions. When President Bush authorized the reinforcement he gave Schwarzkopf almost double the ground forces Schwarzkopf had requested *plus* 300 additional USAF aircraft and two more aircraft carriers.[12] The initial plan for the air campaign assumed 700 attack sorties each day for the first six days, subsequently dropping to 100 per day. Horner's air forces actually flew 1200 attack sorties per day at the outset of the campaign. The lowest daily sortie rate, the result primarily of poor weather, was still over 200. During the ground phase, the Coalition flew over 1700 attack sorties daily. This overwhelming force allowed all phases of the air campaign, which had been planned for sequential execution, to run concurrently.[13]

The other significant advantage for the prosecution of the air campaign--the total control held by the Coalition over the timing of the war's phases--provided several advantages. The commanders knew the air campaign would run for more than a month before ground action would begin. This knowledge allowed time to conduct strategic attacks in Iraq and begin to shape the battlefield. And although some ground commanders may have been uncomfortable with some of Horner's actions, Schwarzkopf felt that his instructions were being followed.[14]

The abundance of assets and the complete retention of initiative meant that the hard choices a JFACC could expect--that the JFACC was designed to deal with--simply did not arise. The ability to address everyone's needs overcame philosophical arguments about the best use of airpower. There was no bloodletting when the Marine Corps initially dedicated 50 percent and eventually almost all of its sorties to preparing the battlefield in front of Marine forces because the JFACC still had sufficient theater assets to meet other requirements.[15] Similarly, after the ground war had begun, the ground commanders could not complain about inadequate air support, because they received virtually all the Coalition had.

Desert Storm clearly represented a JFACC concept in its infancy. The Iraqis were foolish to allow the Coalition to dictate the war's timing and pace. The United States cannot count on foolish enemies and an abundance of airpower in the next war, however. The future can only be tougher for the JFACC, and the concept must move forward from its Gulf War experience.

The JFACC: Commander or Coordinator?

The most important issue, underlying all the other controversies, is the proper role of a JFACC: does the incumbent coordinate the use of separately commanded air assets, or does the JFACC command the joint air effort?

The idea of losing control of its assets is anathema to any service. During Desert Storm the Navy's real fear was that USAF officers would misuse their assets, not necessarily out of maliciousness, but out of ignorance.[16] In the same way, the Marines were concerned that air support would not be available when and where needed if they were to lose control of their aviation assets.[17] Even the Air Force is not above this concern. Going back to World War II, significant resistance to General Eisenhower's desire to establish a single air commander controlling all allied aircraft came from senior officers of the US Army Air Forces. They feared that the British officer likely to be named the air commander would misuse the rapidly maturing B-17 strategic bombing force.[18] No one is immune to the fears of losing control. To its credit, the Air Force strongly supports the doctrinal consensus that the JFACC should come from the component providing the greatest share of the air assets, and acknowledges that the JFACC need not always be an Air Force officer.[19]

While each of the services struggles with the idea of being controlled by an officer from another branch, the Marines are the strongest and most vocal opponents of the JFACC as a commander. This concern is not new; the Marine Corps addressed the issue when JFACC doctrine was under development.

In 1986, the JCS released an agreement entitled the "1986 Omnibus Agreement for Command and Control of USMC TACAIR [tactical aircraft] in Sustained Operations Ashore" simultaneously with its release of the new JFACC doctrine. The Omnibus Agreement sought to calm Marine fears over loss of control of Marine air. The Omnibus Agreement reads in part:

The Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) commander will retain operational control of his organic air assets. The primary mission of the MAGTF air combat element is the support of the MAGTF ground element. During joint operations, the MAGTF air assets will normally be in support of the MAGTF mission. . . . Nothing herein shall infringe on the authority of the Theater or Joint Force Commander, in the exercise of operational control, to assign missions, redirect efforts. . . .[20]

It is important to understand that the second sentence of the Omnibus Agreement summarizes Marine Corps doctrine concerning their air assets. Marines make no bones about the purpose of Marine air--to support the Marine ground combat element.[21] Interestingly, Marines do subscribe to the theory of centralized control, but that centralized air commander always reports to the MAGTF commander.[22] The real difference is that Marines believe Marine air should work for the Marines rather than supporting the joint force as a whole.

Marines have logical reasons for their retention of firm control over Marine air. First, Marine ground forces are relatively light on organic firepower (tanks and artillery). Thus, their aviation element provides needed additional firepower. Second, the aviation and ground elements train together; consequently Marines assert that their pilots can provide the best support for Marine ground forces.

Having discussed the Omnibus Agreement from the Marine perspective, we must also look at it through the joint force commander's eyes. First, and most important, the Omnibus Agreement firmly acknowledges the joint force commander's right and responsibility to organize the joint force however he deems best. Thus, should the joint force commander choose to give the JFACC operational control of Marine air, a concept that will be more precisely defined below, he would *not* violate the Omnibus Agreement. Second, it does not necessarily follow that such a choice would ignore the valid Marine concerns underlying the Omnibus Agreement. Under current joint procedures and assuming reasonable commanders, Marine air would still support Marine ground troops to *exactly* the level the joint force commander and land component commander deem appropriate. Finally, deciding how best to handle Marine air is "situation dependent," and it may be one of the joint force commander's toughest calls. Here are a few of the factors and issues that will influence the joint force commander's actions.

- When Marine Corps forces operate as a part of a large joint force operation, are they really acting as a MAGTF or are they simply another maneuver unit? For example, Marine forces ashore in Desert Storm were not an independent task force. Major ground combat units of other Coalition members flanked them on both sides. Furthermore, the Army's Tiger Brigade of the 2d Armored Division augmented the Marines.[23] When Marines are not truly operating as a MAGTF, do the terms of the Omnibus Agreement apply?
- The joint force commander has more thorny problems. Why do the Marines get their own air support when every other ground force commander has to compete for theater assets? After all, what ground commander would not want dedicated air assets whose sole mission was to support only his forces? Furthermore, are Marine units the lightest in terms of firepower, or could US Army light infantry forces claim that dubious distinction?
- The Omnibus Agreement discusses the release of "excess" Marine sorties, but the joint force commander has to be realistic. To a ground commander staring an enemy in the face, there is no such thing as an excess sortie. While it looks a bit ridiculous in hindsight, some ground commanders bitterly complained that they were not receiving adequate air support to prepare the battlefield during Desert Storm.[24] Therefore, if the exceptions contained in the Omnibus Agreement do apply to Marine units operating in a coalition or joint operation, joint force commanders should not expect Marine commanders to volunteer much of their air element for use at the theater level.
- Joint force commanders must prepare themselves to make hard choices using the Omnibus Agreement. What if, assessing the ground situation, the joint force commander decides that the Marine commander needs little, if any, air support to achieve the joint force commander's objective? Worse still, what if the Marine ground commander has a genuine need for all the support Marine air could provide, but another ground commander needs the airpower more? In peacetime, the answers may be easy and obvious. In wartime, not only will these be tough judgments, they will be controversial and emotionally charged.

Under current joint doctrine the authority and command level of the JFACC is strictly up to the joint force commander. In fact, current doctrine does not *require* that a JFACC even be established. However, as was noted earlier, joint force commanders who want to use their air power properly will probably want to establish a JFACC. The JFACC provides unity of command over the air effort. The JFACC keeps the assets focused to achieve the campaign objectives specified by the joint force commander. Moreover, the JFACC brings the knowledge and experience required to coordinate and integrate all air assets in a campaign plan. While the turmoil surrounding application of the JFACC concept to the hard realities of combat might be dismissed as "joint growing pains," consider this analogy. Would soldiers be comfortable executing a scheme of land warfare designed and controlled by an airman acting as the land component commander? Of course not, and that's why airmen look to another airman, the JFACC, to plan and control the air operations.

Before examining the relationship between a joint force commander and his JFACC, a few definitions are important. The idea of command under joint doctrine is a multi-layered affair, but two aspects of it are sufficient here to get to the heart of the JFACC challenge. Operational control (OPCON) of an organization entails virtually total control of it. Joint force commanders and service component commanders normally exercise operational control over assigned assets. Tactical control (TACON), on the other hand, allows detailed direction of operations to accomplish missions without assigning full control of any organization so designated.[25] The difference, however slight to those not accustomed to interservice operations, is a crucial one in combat.

Joint force commanders can be expected to give their JFACCs tactical control of service air elements. The initial draft of Joint Pub 3-56, *Command and Control Doctrine for Joint Operations*, states that the joint force commander may give the JFACC operational control, but notes that usually tactical control is sufficient to manage the air campaign.[26] The Air Force also believes that tactical control is the appropriate level of JFACC authority.[27] From the perspective of those who fly the aircraft, tactical control tells the various air assets where to fly, when to fly, and what to do while aloft. The JFACC should generally not need authority beyond this on a daily basis. Certain issues would require either that the JFACC negotiate directly with other commanders or that the joint force commander become involved. For example, when the JFACC has only tactical control authority, he cannot tell a unit how many sorties to fly. Should the JFACC want a unit to fly more sorties than proposed by the commanders of the air assets, the JFACC would have to negotiate with the commander who has operational control of the units to obtain the additional sorties.

Given that the JFACC has tactical control of air assets, the JFACC should normally control all fixed-wing assets operating in the joint force operating area with these exceptions (note--for this and all following discussions the focus is on scenarios with significant land operations):

- sorties required by the naval component commander to perform maritime missions, to include defense of afloat forces
- USMC air when Marine ground/amphibious forces are operating independently from the rest of the joint force
- special operations aircraft when performing special operations missions

The JFACC should normally control only limited numbers of helicopters. There are two reasons for this exception. First, because helicopters do not possess the speed and range of the other air assets, they are not truly theater assets in terms of reach and effect. Second, attack, observation, and most utility helicopters directly support the ground scheme of maneuver and are best left under the control of the ground commanders. This is not to say that the JFACC could not use these helicopters in certain situations. With regard to helicopters, however, the JFACC will usually need to control only search and rescue helicopters.

Airpower is more than aircraft, of course, and the JFACC has a legitimate interest in those other assets too. Although employment of the Navy's Tomahawk land attack missiles (TLAMs) probably should fall under the JFACC, control of Army tactical missiles (ATACMS) requires more thought. The JFACC can build a strong case for controlling at least some of the joint force's ATACMS, but on a case-by-case basis rather than as a doctrinal matter. Nevertheless, assets with theater reach (range and effects) that do not by doctrine fall under JFACC direct control should coordinate with the JFACC to the maximum practical extent.

JFACC's Role As a Commander

Having appointed a JFACC to command the air effort, the next issue is to establish the JFACC's role within the joint campaign. Again, the focus is on a theater campaign where land operations predominate over maritime operations. Nonetheless, certain features of the following discussion are relevant to campaigns in which maritime forces predominate.

The joint force commander should first make the JFACC responsible for control of the air. This obvious beginning point is readily accepted. This requires coordinating the activities of Army surface-to-air missile units with those of US and allied aircraft in the theater. The mission of tactical ballistic missile defense is still evolving, but the JFACC will likely emerge as the overall commander of that effort.

A second job for the JFACC is air support of engaged forces. The JFACC and staff can aid the engaged commanders by advising them on how best to apply the airpower apportioned for direct support missions. To preclude any semantic quarrels, "direct support" simply means sorties flown either to aid forces engaged in close combat or to strike targets that, while not currently engaged in combat, will have a near-term effect on the battle. The JFACC also complies with the joint force commander's apportionment direction and assigns the prescribed percentage of sorties to provide direct support. Furthermore, the JFACC maintains the command and control means that are used to provide air support to engaged forces.

Here we need to consider an aspect of emerging joint doctrine that overshadows the previous two issues in its potential effects on the concept of a "supported commander" in a theater. A statement published by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1992 provides guidance for joint doctrine under refinement or development. The statement uses the term "supported commander" to suggest that battlespace allocation can include assigning responsibility for certain parts of the theater to commanders subordinate to the joint force commander.[28]

The term "supported commander" carries considerable weight under joint doctrine. Normally this term applies to the commanders-in-chief of unified and specified commands--now termed combatant commanders--or occasionally to joint force commanders.[29] However, General Powell's 1992 statement used the term supported commander in reference to the subordinate land, naval, and air component commanders operating under a joint force commander. From context, it appears that "supported commander" now includes the functional or component commander within a joint force assigned primary responsibility within a specified zone or task.[30]

The 1992 statement then couples the idea of supported commander with partitioning the theater. According to the doctrinal statement, "The Joint Force Commander may define lateral, rear, and forward boundaries that are sized, shaped, and positioned to enable land or naval forces to accomplish their mission while protecting deployed forces." Such areas would then become the responsibility of the supported commander.[31] Existing joint and service doctrine both support and condemn this partitioning.[32] Whether it is a good idea remains untested and hence unproven.

In view of all this, the JFACC could assume a new, vital role as the JFACC should be the supported commander for any areas not otherwise assigned to another component commander. Perhaps the strongest argument for this is common sense; the JFACC alone can conduct significant combat operations in areas that lie beyond the limits of Army or USMC commanders. While the idea of an airman as a supported commander may seem revolutionary, in reality there is increasing support for this idea from a number of sources. Two publications from the Joint Staff, as well as the Chairman's 1992 doctrinal statement, identify the JFACC as either the individual normally responsible for interdiction or as the supported commander for that task.[33] General Powell's statement also labels the JFACC the supported commander for strategic attacks.[34] Moreover, this idea is already at work in Korea. US Forces Korea developed a concept called the "Deep Battle Synchronization Line (DBSL)." The concept has two main features: first, the deep battle addresses all operations beyond the immediate vicinity of friendly ground forces, and second, the JFACC is responsible for the deep battle.[35] The Army's latest FM 100-5 adds veiled support to this concept by somewhat loosening the tie between the deep and close battle.[36] Major General L. D. Holder, in a recent *Military Review* article, called this "radical stuff" and noted with concern the possible doctrinal implications for joint operations.[37] Thus, the idea of the JFACC as a supported commander, responsible for the areas outside the proximity of friendly forces, appears obvious and sound. There is, however, a hitch.

The problem of where to draw the dividing line between the various commanders immediately arises. The Army believes the deep battle to be extremely important and plans to fight the deep battle.[38] Appropriately, no strict mileage definitions exist for how "deep" the deep battle goes. Rather, the deep area extends to at least where events may affect the close battle within the 72 hours following the assessment.[39]

No matter the exact definition, the Army needs airpower to fight much beyond its own position. Cannon and rocket artillery can fire only about 12 and 20 miles, respectively. Although the ATACMS is truly a deep weapon, the total buy of ATACMS is only programmed to be 2000 missiles.[40] Thus, the JFACC could match the firepower of the entire ATACMS force with only 500 F-16 sorties. The ATACMS is a welcome addition to the arsenal with its responsiveness, range, and lethality. However, you cannot plan to fight much of a deep battle with ATACMS alone.

The Army also talks of using its aviation forces, both to insert ground forces or as stand-alone attackers, to fight the deep battle. However, Army doctrine also uses terms like "very complex" and "significant risk" to describe the use of its aviation assets in the deep battle.[41] Thus, the vast majority of firepower capable of going deeper than 20 miles will most likely be fixed wing. Considering firepower and the Army's desire to plan 72 hours in advance, a line drawn beyond the ground forces' present position to where they will be conducting significant combat operations in 48 to 72 hours seems a logical place for the boundary. Rather than a set mileage, the line must consider factors like the enemy, friendly objectives, terrain, projected versus actual rate of advance, and weather. According to General Powell's statement, variables like the operational environment and actual versus projected rates of maneuver drive the revision

of the boundaries.[42] At a minimum, the joint force commander should review the boundaries daily.

This idea of naming functional or component commanders as supported commanders does not change the joint force commander's role. First, the joint force commander and his staff develop the campaign plan. From that plan, the joint force commander establishes objectives for each subordinate commander. Second, only the joint force commander can ensure the synchronization of the air, land, and maritime operations plans.[43] The apportionment decision represents a tremendous synchronization opportunity and is a clear communication of the joint force commander's priorities. Finally, the joint force commander must personally intervene in campaign planning when necessary. For example, the Air Force's initial draft for the Desert Storm air operations plan did not include daily attacks against the Iraqi Republican Guard; that changed immediately after the Air Force briefed General Schwarzkopf.[44]

One of the joint force commander's staff elements, the Joint Targeting Coordination Board (JTCB), should be examined carefully. This board provides a forum within which each service can nominate targets for inclusion in air operations,[45] a process that is of great importance when there are fewer aircraft available than target opportunities. If the JTCB works directly for the joint force commander, the latter must limit it to broad guidance lest it usurp the prerogative and responsibility of the JFACC. If the JTCB issues detailed guidance, essentially telling the JFACC exactly which targets to strike, the JFACC truly would become a mere coordinator. In those commands in which the JTCB works directly for the JFACC there is slight chance of conflict.

The joint force commander and subordinate component commanders must understand how best to integrate their allocated direct support sorties into their operations. When direct support sorties are aiding ground troops engaged in close combat, the ground forces should continue to select the specific targets for aerial attack. However, as the distance from friendly forces increases, commanders should shift to mission-type orders. Using this idea, the supported commanders and joint force commander describe the desired effect, and the specific targeting is left to the JFACC staff. Army and joint doctrine both prefer mission-type orders in the latter case.[46]

Of course, this means the JFACC staff must be capable of effectively targeting the air assets to achieve the desired effects. To facilitate this, the JFACC staff should be truly joint, melding in experts on ground and maritime warfare.[47] A key contributor to this "jointness" already exists--the Army's Battlefield Coordination Element (BCE). The BCE acts as the Army Component Commander's liaison with the JFACC and staff and, interestingly, performs many of the functions mentioned for the JTCB. Ideally, the BCE would represent all land forces rather than having multiple service/nation coordination cells. The BCE, particularly because of the expertise it offers, will grow even more important under this proposal. Moreover, airmen themselves will need to learn more about the other operating environments to fully exploit airpower in joint warfare.

Conclusion

One of the first challenges a joint force commander will face is how to organize his air assets: a joint force needs one airman in charge--the JFACC. Making such a decision will likely create controversy, particularly if Marine air is involved. But organizing to win is more important than the absence of interservice controversy. Opting for a strong, empowered Joint Force Air Component *Commander* under current and emerging doctrine regarding supported commanders in a joint operation is a first, and essential, step toward victory.

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45. Joint Pub 3-56, p. II-18.

46. *Ibid.*; FM 100-15, p. 3-11.

47. The US Atlantic Command and US Pacific Command JFACC concept of operations requires the JFACC staff to be a joint staff organized when the JTF is formed. USAF does not agree with this concept. C. R. Larson and P. D. Miller, unpublished document, "Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) Concept of Operations," US Atlantic Command and US Pacific Command, 15 January 1993, p. 2.

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