



Air Force Staff Sergeant Joshua Poticha, crew chief assigned to 157<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Group, New Hampshire Air National Guard, marshals 157<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing's 11<sup>th</sup> KC-46A tanker, Pease Air National Guard Base, New Hampshire, December 11, 2020 (U.S. Air National Guard/Aaron Vezeau)

# Air Mobility Command

## The Meaningful Maneuver for Joint Force Victory

By Michael A. Minihan

In April 2021, General Jacqueline Van Ovost, filling the role of commander of Air Mobility Command (AMC), penned a white paper titled *Accelerating Change for Rapid Global Mobility: Delivering Joint Force Success in the High-End Fight*.<sup>1</sup> She outlined AMC's

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deliberate shift in mindset and tactical approach to staying ready to compete with the high-end adversaries of tomorrow. Fifteen months later, AMC has found itself as the linchpin for several high-profile global operations, including the retrograde of forces from Afghanistan ending the decades-long war, followed by the largest noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) airlift in history. Currently, we are execut-

ing an ongoing surge operation and delivering billions of dollars of military aid and support to Ukraine alongside North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies and partners to counter Russian aggression.

These, and the often-unnoticed daily operations, continue to spotlight the unique strategic advantage that AMC offers the joint force. The past year's events have shown a reliance by our nation's

leadership on AMC's Rapid Global Mobility (RGM) capabilities and the expectation that the command will deliver this unique capability anywhere and anytime. Throughout its storied history, AMC has demonstrated time and again the ability to remain agile and adapt to any challenge. However, the demands we face now and into the future will present our most daunting challenges.

Future conflicts will be the most demanding, ambiguous, contested, and violent that any of us has ever known. Our next fight will require resilient, unrivaled Mobility Air Forces (MAF) Airmen ready for the environment posed by our pacing competitors, most notably the People's Republic of China (PRC). To secure victory for America, the joint force will require the placement of forces to achieve the strategic advantage in conflict, also known as maneuver. AMC will be the meaningful maneuver for the joint force, and we will deliver victory.

### **Rapid Global Mobility: Rarely Mentioned, Always There**

Historically considered an enabling force, AMC has become the Department of Defense (DOD)'s premier platform to project, connect, maneuver, and sustain our joint force during major combat operations. When the President of the United States directs action, whether it be combat operations, humanitarian support, or any tasking the joint force can execute, it is always assumed that AMC will be able to deliver the forces and equipment needed. When U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) needs lethality or hope moved, and moved at tempo, the first call is to AMC. Through its precise execution of our RGM mission, the command ensures the joint force remains armed with the decision advantage through unrivaled airlift, air refueling, aeromedical evacuation, command and control (C2), and global air mobility support.

Serving in multiple roles as the Air Forces Transportation to USTRANSCOM and the lead major command in charge of executing the Air Force's core mission of RGM, AMC

must orchestrate a unique balance of readiness, capability, and capacity. For USTRANSCOM, AMC must supply the readiness and capacity to meet the current daily demand of the joint force and be ready for the big fight tomorrow. For the Air Force, AMC guides and matures the related investments to sustain and develop required RGM capabilities across DOD. Both functions are presently strained fiscally with an aging fleet of aircraft. In addition to these roles and responsibilities, AMC has an obligation to organize, train, and equip for both entities by cultivating a healthy and resilient force of mobility warriors and their families. This latter role is arguably the most important, as we are charged with preparing the force to operate with the proper focus and mindset in line with what will be expected of them at a tempo never experienced by an air component in combat.

### **Readiness: Nobody Is as Ready as They Think**

If General Van Ovost's white paper was the firing of the gun at the starting line, Operation *Allies Refuge* (OAR) was the first lap in a litmus test of the command's intent to accelerate as called for by Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Charles Q. Brown, Jr.'s, action orders from *Accelerate Change or Lose*.<sup>2</sup> Over 17 days in August, 124,000 U.S. and Afghan personnel were airlifted out of Afghanistan—all of them from one runway. The tempo and location required for the operation did not allow for land or sealift solutions—like what our military will face, and can expect, during a conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. During those 17 days, our mobility forces were significantly tested for the first time in decades. They were tested, and they delivered on the world stage. While there were immense challenges, there were also opportunities for creating additional capacity and efficiency in the future. As with any operation, extensive data capture and debriefing occurred at every level, producing volumes of actionable findings. The Department of the Air Force commissioned one such effort through the LeMay Center's Air Force Lessons

Learned department.<sup>3</sup> Despite what the study describes as a “miracle of aviation and logistics,” several essential takeaways are shaping Ukraine support operations and the command's current approach to deterring the PRC. Notable challenges and takeaways from the OAR experience include command relationships (COMREL), authorities, and our interoperability with not only the joint force but also the whole of government, as the Department of State was the lead Federal agency for the operation.

For the first time in recent memory, a large-scale operation in a relatively short contingency duration spanned multiple geographic combatant commands (GCCs)—U.S. Central Command, U.S. European Command, and U.S. Northern Command—as efforts to deliver evacuees to temporary safe havens quickly evolved to a global effort. The cross-GCC effort created challenges with COMREL, doctrinally designed to ensure a unity of command. The uncertainty of global command relationships led to elevated risk to mission and risk to force, as the GCC boundaries posed challenges to the effective and efficient coordination and execution of requirements.

Perhaps no echelon absorbed the brunt of this whirlwind effort more than the 618<sup>th</sup> Air Operations Center (AOC), located at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Our AOC is DOD's largest and only continually manned of its kind, charged with global C2 across the full spectrum of air mobility mission sets. It was not more than a few days into the operation that the 618<sup>th</sup> AOC established new processes to meet the tempo of operations. The restructuring of key battle rhythm events and the standing up of unique planning and operations cells specializing in collecting whole-of-government-approach data sets are now enduring approaches that will ensure future unity of command. The refinement of C2 concepts following OAR for cross-command operations is already being tested and validated with operations supporting Ukraine. A return to doctrine and a renewed understanding of tactical control versus direct support have produced improved communication during the MAF's current NATO

support operations. Future conflict involving the United States and the PRC will span the boundaries of multiple GCCs, including the U.S. homeland.

OAR also highlighted that current and future conflicts drive the need for improvement of interoperability among other Services, including integrated data systems. Evident at both the tactical and the strategic levels was a lack of understanding, by the joint force, of MAF capability and capacity. This, in turn, led to several parallel lines of effort, hindering the tempo required. Moving forward, as mobility assets increase participation in joint-level exercises, the benefit of recognizing common operating practices, including tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), will only help reduce the fog and friction of joint future combat operations.

### Looking Forward: Next Fight Reality

OAR forced AMC to acknowledge that the cultural paradigm shift General Van Ovost called for is overdue. While our Airmen performed brilliantly in the retrograde of forces throughout the summer of 2021 and the record-breaking NEO, it is clear that the future of warfare will be very different and magnitudes more difficult. Outside of the first few days of the OAR missions from Hamid Karzai International Airport, our mobility forces were uncontested in their operations. Any semblance of a contested environment was brought about organically by the stress that the surge event put on our mobility support system, the operations tempo required to accomplish the mission, and the fact that the entire exfiltration occurred from a single runway. From a modern warfare perspective, the entire operation was accomplished in a permissive, uncontested environment. This luxury will not be afforded in future conflicts with a peer competitor. The battlespace will be contested in all domains—and likely at all times. The MAF will be required to operate in these contested domains and the contested environment for the joint force to win.

As AMC and the Air Force transition away from the counter-violent extremist

organization posture of the past two decades, the command is aggressively preparing for a high-end fight while keeping our eyes on the Pacific. The 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) makes it clear that our pacing threat is the PRC.<sup>4</sup> The strategy prioritizes multidomain defense of the homeland against the PRC, deterrence of both attack and aggression from the same force, and a resilient joint force. The NDS contends that DOD will advance these priorities through integrated deterrence, campaigning, and building enduring advantages.

### Fight Club: Not Perfect, Just One Step Ahead

AMC does not strive for immediate perfection but rather to stay one step ahead, to outmaneuver, and, frankly, to win. Late last year, the mobility team was charged with understanding the assumptions of the future fight, finding potential gaps to success, and paving an aggressive way forward to closing those gaps to ensure victory for the joint force. Current initiatives such as AMC's "Fight Club" are aimed at just that. Driven by lessons learned and informed analysis, Fight Club is AMC's newest and prolific cross-functional team tasked with critically analyzing the pacing threat and the current plans. It accomplishes this by identifying potential gaps, determining how to close them, and posturing air mobility forces to win anytime and anywhere.

Over the past 8 months, the command has also given the nod to its Army roots, as the headquarters facilitated Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) drills with various cross-functional audiences. Unlike traditional Air Force exercises, which inherently tend to operate on assumptions, ROC drills go into detail about the operations to find inflection points where a planned scheme of maneuver between commanders may break down. The goal is not to be circuitous but to provide a more detailed look at the employment of the plans across slices of time left and right of "boom." While AMC's Fight Club focuses on the pacing challenge and problem sets of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the work is directly applicable to other

theaters, where the force will have similar challenges but with more partners, more land, and less distance to cover.

### Aggressively and Urgently Closing Gaps

The AMC strategy, released in March of this year, lays a framework for winning. It calls for a warrior culture "biased toward action, unencumbered by bureaucracy, and intentionally disruptive of the status quo," while moving swiftly to close gaps and continue to deter adversaries.<sup>5</sup> To effectively support the joint force in the future fight, the MAF must command, control, and communicate globally; navigate in degraded environments; conduct enroute logistics under attack; and operate at the highest tempo required to win. These four areas, described as mission imperatives, anchor the future focus. OAR, alongside Ukraine operations, are informing how we look at the Indo-Pacific region. We must think our way through the challenges ahead and drive the changes required for joint force victory.

The reality of recent operations has highlighted that MAF Airmen and the major weapons systems they employ are disconnected from the joint force and vulnerable in the anticipated environments of future conflict. The three prioritized capability gap bins described below align with the AMC mission imperatives and are guiding MAF operations, activities, and investments. The command intends to support the Secretary of the Air Force's Operational Imperatives by urgently and aggressively closing the following gaps.<sup>6</sup>

### Connectivity: Sense and Seize Opportunity

AMC's top priority is closing the connectivity gap. Mobility Airmen must be able to receive and transmit real-time C2, logistics, and threat information. Russia's alternative to this ability has been on display, as it struggles to meet its military objectives in Ukraine by relying on a conventional, top-down approach to connectivity. During a high-end conflict, a disconnected force would be unable to support the Secre-





Air Force Airman 1<sup>st</sup> Class Olivia Gerlach, 721<sup>st</sup> Aerial Port Squadron ramp services specialist, loads pallets of ammunition onto C-130 Hercules, on Ramstein Air Base, Germany, as part of security assistance package to Ukraine, August 7, 2022 (U.S. Air Force/Emma Quirk)

tary of Defense's and the President's objectives, leading to overall joint force failure. Just sensing data, though, will not be enough. Airmen must make sense of geographic and temporal opportunities to succeed on the next battlefield. The hallmark of AMC has been its global reach. The ability to project the joint force anywhere on the planet is a capability that resides only within the walls of the mobility enterprise. While having a global reach for materiel and personnel is critical, global reach of data is a game changer.

When it comes to combat, the side that can sense and make sense of data at the speed of relevance will win the fight. As the fastest and most agile arm of USTRANSCOM, our global presence

in the durable fabric of the Air Force's Advanced Battle Management System and Joint All-Domain Command and Control networks will enable the connection of data to decision. Where supply can meet demand at the point of need, victory will also reside. That is the business of AMC. Initiatives like employing the command's newest connected platform, the KC-46 Pegasus, in support of the Ukraine effort demonstrate our drive toward a faster decisionmaking capability and improved connectivity.

### **Survivability: Rather Survive in the Air Than Die on the Ground**

As Russia and China develop more advanced weapons, including hypersonic weapons, modernization of the

force is essential to ensure relevancy for MAF platforms in a future conflict. Despite this reality, the competition for scarce resources during an austere fiscal environment is not easily overcome. As a result, AMC faces difficult choices regarding sustainment, modernization, and recapitalization of its aging fleets. The stark reality is that today's fleet and enterprise are what we will bring to the fight. Paramount to closing this gap is aggressive pursuit of fortifying our airborne assets and operating bases with the knowledge and capabilities to survive in contested environments. While defensive systems are also essential, the reality of a peer conflict will dictate that survivability will be anchored on battlespace awareness. Outfitting the current fleet



with advanced capabilities such as the Tactical Data Link and exercising our ability to lift and shift at a moment's notice in and out of permanent and temporary nodes is essential to our ability to survive.

### **Agility: The Lift and Shift for the Joint Force**

The permissive environments of the past several decades have led the joint force to rely on an uncontested combination of robust predictable supply chains, mobilization efforts, and fixed operating bases. Not only will this network be contested at home and on the forward edge of the battlespace, but also the tyranny of distance during a conflict in the Pacific will call for sustained Agile Combat Employment (ACE). The main idea of ACE is the complication of enemy targeting processes by enabling continued generation of combat power by dispersed forces. AMC continues to mature and address these challenges

with concepts such as multicable Airmen, which aim to enable the same combat support capability with a much smaller footprint of forces. It is not hard to imagine a Navy fighter aircraft landing at an austere airstrip in the Indo-Pacific and being refueled, rearmed, and launched by a single Airman from AMC.

Lessons learned by our Contingency Response (CR) forces have fed directly to our Expeditionary Center at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, and have shaped the development of how the MAF envisions employing its CR forces for the next fight. While our CR forces' main objective was base closures throughout Afghanistan, the method they used to accomplish this feat mirrored the ACE framework that will be required in the Indo-Pacific and has become the baseline of mobility forces training to date. Small, agile teams capable of operating nodes and generating the mission, often cut off from direct C2

support, are precisely what will enable the joint force to seize the opportunities required for success.

### **Closing the Gaps: Buying Down the Risk Left of Boom**

To close the gaps, our focus is on three lines of effort:

- making the best use of our current force and honing our TTPs
- extracting maximum value out of existing capabilities to further strengthen our force
- developing the decisive mobility force of the future.

The first two efforts cost us little to nothing to implement, save for the human capital required to be biased toward action, unencumbered by bureaucracy, and intentionally disruptive to the status quo—that and taking the risk required to accelerate change. As a commander of forces, risk mitigation and assuming undesired risk is one of the





Airmen from 332<sup>nd</sup> Air Expeditionary Wing forward deploy to support Afghanistan evacuation, August 21, 2021, from undisclosed location in Southwest Asia (U.S. Air Force/Karla Parra)

last areas one wants to look for answers, unless it can be done smartly and effectively for the warfighting Airman. We are willing to take the calculated risk to close these gaps.

### Conclusion: There Are No Railroads in the Indo-Pacific

Russia is showcasing that the conventional approach to military travel across land (or sea) has been eclipsed by modern warfare tactics where static lines of communication are easily targeted and disrupted. To overstate the obvious, a fight in the Indo-Pacific region will not even allow the conventional approach to be tested. While the MAF wrestles with the competition between preparing the force for a high-end conflict with a peer adversary amid a fiscally challenging season, one thing remains true: victory will be delivered on the shoulders of mobility Airmen, providing RGM so the United States can fight anywhere, anytime. There is

enough mission requirement to need millions more dollars and thousands more Airmen, but they are not coming. Despite our challenges and the difficult work ahead, the heroic efforts of our mobility Airmen will be called on once again to preserve the peace, prosperity, and prestige of America, and they will be ready to answer that call. Deterrence in words only goes so far in today's global environment, but AMC's proven ability to pivot and move volume at tempo can deter any adversary, if we accelerate and change. JFQ

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, *Accelerating Change for Rapid Global Mobility: Delivering Joint Force Success in the High-End Fight* (Arlington, VA: Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, 2020), available at <[https://mitchellaerospacepower.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/a2dd91\\_23804d27b3a04670b9f94caae836ef5e.pdf](https://mitchellaerospacepower.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/a2dd91_23804d27b3a04670b9f94caae836ef5e.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Q. Brown, Jr., *Accelerate Change or Lose* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Air Force, August 2020), available at <[https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/CSAF/CSAF\\_22/CSAF\\_22\\_Strategic\\_Approach\\_Accelerate\\_Change\\_or\\_Lose\\_31\\_Aug\\_2020.pdf](https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/CSAF/CSAF_22/CSAF_22_Strategic_Approach_Accelerate_Change_or_Lose_31_Aug_2020.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> Air Force Lessons Learned, "LeMay Center Executive Overview on DAF Participation in Operation *Allies Refuge* Lessons Collection," December 7, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> "DOD Transmits 2022 National Defense Strategy," Department of Defense, March 28, 2022, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2980584/dod-transmits-2022-national-defense-strategy/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael A. Minihan, *Air Mobility Command Strategy* (Scott Air Force Base, IL: Air Mobility Command, March 29, 2022), available at <<https://www.amc.af.mil/Portals/12/AMC%20Strategy%20cao%20March%202022/AMC%20Strategy%202022.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Pope, "Kendall Details 'Seven Operational Imperatives' and How They Forge the Future Force," U.S. Air Force, March 3, 2022, available at <<https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2953552/kendall-details-seven-operational-imperatives-how-they-forge-the-future-force/>>.