

## COMMAND AND CONTROL OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AVIATION: TIME FOR A CHANGE

BY

COLONEL CLAYTON M. HUTMACHER  
United States Army

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U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**COMMAND AND CONTROL OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AVIATION:  
TIME FOR A CHANGE**

by

Colonel Clayton M. Hutmacher  
United States Army

Colonel Paul P. Cale  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## ABSTRACT

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Currently, all Army Special Operations Aviation (ARSOA) forces deployed in support of combat operations are under the operational control of a Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC). The JSOAC Commander commands and controls all airpower in support of the overall Joint Force Special Operations Component Commander (JFSOCC) mission. This practice is contrary to Army doctrine that stipulates that Army Aviation operates as a maneuver force in the ground commander's regime, integrated into the combined arms team at the tactical level.

The JSOAC is largely a United States Air Force (USAF) manned and led organization and is a peer to the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF), reporting directly to the Theater Special Operations Command Commander. This command and control structure consistently creates friction and animosity between the JSOTF, JSOAC and ARSOA. ARSOA is best employed directly under the JSOTF Commander, rather than under the current construct as a component in the JSOAC as prescribed in USSOCOM Directive 525-8.



## COMMAND AND CONTROL OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS AVIATION: TIME FOR A CHANGE

This paper seeks to determine if employing Army Special Operations Aviation (ARSOA) as a component of a Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) effectively optimizes command and control structure to maximize the effectiveness of ARSOA. ARSOA exists for the primary purpose of providing rotary wing support to the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) Commander.

This inquiry delves into the following areas: 1) a definition of the problem, 2) a description of a JSOAC, 3) historical examples of ARSOA employed in combat operations under both a JSOTF and a JSOAC, 4) current U.S. Air Force (USAF), U.S. Army, and Joint doctrine on the command and control of Special Operations aviation, 5) cultural differences between USAF and U.S. Army Aviators, 6) JSOAC personnel manning and the challenges that presents for ARSOA, 7) Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) concerns with placing air assets directly under the control of the JSOTF.

### Is There a Problem?

During recent combat operations, it appears that SOF is consistently achieving success at disrupting enemy operations around the globe. ARSOA plays a critical role in supporting the SOF ground commander. If ARSOA is ultimately accomplishing their mission, why should they change the way they are operating? This research paper will include a review of survey responses from senior SOF leaders as well as recent experiences from an ARSOA commander to reach a conclusion on the best command and control for ARSOA in the future.

In the opinion of the Commanding General of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), ARSOA is most effectively employed as a maneuver asset under the direct control of the JSOTF Commander.<sup>1</sup> In a memorandum to the USSOCOM Commander, the USASOC Commanding General voiced his opposition to the current practice of employing ARSOA as a component of a JSOAC:

Army Special Operations Aviation (ARSOA) best supports the ground force commander when all ARSOA elements are OPCON to the JSOTF Commander. Subordination to a JSOAC leads to an unclear and ambiguous chain of command structure and hinders the ability of the ground force commander to best tailor ARSOA aircraft to meet mission requirements. Army Special Operations Aviation, like Army Aviation as a whole, is a maneuver asset. As such, it must be directly responsive to the JSOTF Commander.<sup>2</sup>

While perhaps the joint doctrine of employing ARSOA under the command and control of a JSOAC may not be totally dysfunctional, is it providing the SOF ground force commander the most effective rotary wing support possible under the JSOAC command and control construct? The USASOC Commanding General obviously believes the current command and control relationship is adversely impacting the level of support ARSOA provides to the SOF ground force commander, and feels strongly enough to formally raise the issue to the USSOCOM Commander.

GEN (Ret.) Doug Brown, a former USSOCOM Commander, expressed his concerns in the following quote drawn from a survey question<sup>3</sup>:

Q: Does the current USSOCOM directed command and control doctrine (USSOCOM directive 525-8) provide the JFSOC Commander with the most capable and agile aviation force possible? Is ARSOA best employed under the current construct as

a component of a JSOAC as prescribed in SOCOM Directive 525-8, should the current command relationship be modified, or should ARSOA be under the direct control of the JSOTF Commander as per current Army doctrine?

A: No. While there are things such as coordinate airspace, acquire non SOF Air Force aviation support and support flight operations with weather, flight following and host of other enablers the fact is that it is a mix of culture that does not provide the optimum support to the ground commander and never will. In an attempt to become more joint capable over the years the Army SOF aviation commanders have agreed and at times have been forced to adhere to the Air Force based principle of a JSOAC. It has never worked. The culture of efficiency of the Air Force and the culture of direct support and a close relationship to the supported unit that is embedded in Army Aviation is non-compatible. The JSOAC is traditionally USAF heavy when in fact the preponderance of the assets can often be Army...

...It may be unreasonable for fixed wing assets such as fighters, tankers bombers and even AC-130 gunships to have a day to day relationship with the ground element but for a helicopter force that comes from the basic doctrine of being a combat maneuver element it is absolutely correct and increases the capability ten-fold.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in response to a survey from the author, Col Jamie Jarrard, a former JSOTF commander in Iraq, offered these observations concerning the ARSOA-JSOAC command relationship:

Q. What are the challenging aspects of the current ARSOA - JSOAC command relationship?

A. It is not the most efficient and hence effective command and control arrangement. Unity of command is a principle of war which has been tested throughout military history...The current arrangement requires more coordination which makes the TF less flexible and responsive to conditions on the battlefield.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of his experiences as JSOTF commander in Iraq, Col Jarrard, and GEN (Ret.) Brown appear to share the USASOC Commanding General's opinion that the current ARSOA-JSOAC command relationship does not provide

the JSOTF the most responsive rotary wing support possible. Moreover, experience has shown the current command and control arrangement to be a significant source of friction and frustration for ARSOA, JSOAC, and the SOF ground force commander, periodically leading to less than optimal rotary wing support to the SOF operator on the ground.<sup>6</sup> On one occasion the JSOAC commander disapproved a daylight exfiltration of the assault force by ARSOA. On another, when the ground force commander requested to use the helicopters for a different, higher priority mission, the JSOAC Commander disapproved the request and recalled the helicopters.<sup>7</sup> The concerns of LTG Mulholland, GEN (Ret.) Brown and Col Jarrard, coupled with the examples cited, more than justify a thorough analysis of the issue.

### What is a JSOAC?

A JSOAC is a command and control organization designed after a conventional Air Force theater-level command and control structure that controls all SOF air in theater:

The JSOAC is responsible for planning and executing joint special air operations, and for integrating, coordinating and deconflicting those operations with conventional air operations.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the key positions in a JSOAC are coded as either Air Force or Army billets.

Another important fact is that JSOACs usually stand-up only in response to a crisis or for an exercise. Individual augmentees taken from other AFSOC organizations normally fill the JSOAC staff positions. This ad-hoc nature of JSOAC manning often results in a less than cohesive organization, at least initially. This is not a significant issue for AFSOC units employed as part of a

JSOAC, but ARSOA tactics, techniques and procedures are often confusing and frustrating to a USAF officer working on a JSOAC staff.

The Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), which controls all air operations in the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) area of operations, is a current example of a USAF-led theater level air command and control organization. If there are no allied air forces present, this organization may also be referred to as a Joint Force Air Component Command (JFACC). Many of the JSOAC subordinate staff directorates even have the same name as the corresponding staff section in a JFACC, such as “Specialty Teams” and “Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR).” A standard JSOAC force model is 89 personnel, which is much larger than an ARSOA command and control element of approximately 10-20 personnel.<sup>9</sup>

After comparing the JSOAC and the JFACC, it is apparent that the JSOAC is an Air Force centric command and control organization. Although there is not a standard doctrinal template for an ARSOA command and control element, they are normally comprised of representatives from each of the standard headquarters staff sections, personnel (S-1), intelligence (S-2), operations (S-3), etc. and contain approximately 10-20 personnel, depending on the complexity of the mission.

#### ARSOA Combat Operations

“The invasion of Panama, known as Operation JUST CAUSE, was an unusually delicate, violent, and complex operation.”<sup>10</sup> The JSOTF’s principal missions were to capture President Manuel Noriega, to destroy the Panama

Defense Force's (PDF) ability to fight, and to rescue American citizens from an adjoining Panamanian prison.<sup>11</sup> The JSOTF executed multiple nearly simultaneous airborne, air, and ground assaults at H-hour in order to accomplish their missions. ARSOA and AFSOC forces were both critical elements to ensuring the success of these missions. Additionally, the fire support plans associated with each of these targets were extremely complex and required the coordination and deconfliction of ARSOA attack helicopters, AFSOC AC-130 gunships, conventional fixed wing and rotary wing close air support (CAS) aircraft.<sup>12</sup>

The JSOAC organization did not exist during Operation JUST CAUSE. The JSOTF staff, specifically the J-3 Air and Fire Support sections, completed all planning, to include the coordination, deconfliction and actual command and control of the air assets supporting the mission. The ARSOA and AFSOC assets conducted numerous joint operations, providing liaison and planning officers to the JSOTF to coordinate air and ground actions on individual objectives as required.

The JSOTF accomplished all of their missions and overall, operation JUST CAUSE was successful, at least from a military perspective. It is important to point out that the planning for Operation JUST CAUSE went on for over a year and involved multiple full scale rehearsals. The in-depth planning and the associated rehearsals were, without a doubt, a primary reason that not only was the air support provided in support of SOF's objectives successful, but the JSOTF's mission was accomplished.

Like Operation JUST CAUSE, ARSOA and AFSOC were integral to the myriad of missions undertaken by SOF in Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM. These operations constituted the largest deployment of SOF since the creation of USSOCOM in 1987.<sup>13</sup> The CENTCOM requirements for SOF were significant. SOF units representing virtually every capability resident in SOCOM deployed in support of Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM.

The JSOAC command and control construct still did not exist during this operation. ARSOA and AFSOC missions included infiltration and exfiltration of SOF ground forces, combat search and rescue (CSAR), CAS, direct action (DA), casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) and SOF resupply.

There were also several significant differences between Operation(s) JUST CAUSE and DESERT SHIELD/STORM. First, there were only limited, tactical level rehearsals conducted prior to the onset of combat operations. Second, CENTCOM stood up a JFACC to coordinate and deconflict all air operations in the CENTCOM area of operations, requiring the JSOTF staff to coordinate all conventional air support directly with the JFACC.<sup>14</sup>

Ensuring SOF received the critical support required from JFACC aircraft was, like Operation JUST CAUSE, the responsibility of the JSOTF(s) staffs. ARSOA executed numerous DA missions several hundred miles inside Iraq; each mission required support by JFACC EW and CAS aircraft. The support ARSOA received from JFACC assets was always timely and effective. Overall, the JSOTF successfully accomplished all of their missions. Moreover, during the multiple joint after action reviews (AAR) of the JSOTF's missions, neither the

JSOTF nor the JFACC raised coordination or aircraft deconfliction as a significant issue.

The actions of TF Ranger during Operation GOTHIC SERPENT in Somalia is the final example provided of ARSOA combat missions executed with ARSOA under the command and control of the JSOTF. Their mission was to capture Somali war lord Mohammed Farah Aideed along with his key leaders. TF Ranger executed a total of seven missions in Mogadishu, Somalia. ARSOA was responsible for providing critical assault, CAS, and CASEVAC for each of TF Ranger's missions.

In many ways this mission was less complicated than the previous examples. However, a significant difference between the previous two operations listed and GOTHIC SERPENT was the time sensitive and dynamic nature of the missions executed. During Operations JUST CAUSE and DESERT SHIELD/STORM the initial missions were of a more deliberate nature, allowing adequate time for planning, briefing, rehearsing, etc.<sup>15</sup> A "flat" and direct chain of command between ARSOA and the SOF ground force commander during GOTHIC SERPENT proved essential for prosecuting time sensitive targets (TSTs). A command relationship of ARSOA as a subordinate element in the JSOTF also gave the ground force commander more flexibility to tailor his rotary wing force based on the mission or enemy situation on extremely short notice. An example of that flexibility occurred during the seventh mission, when ARSOA crews responded to numerous mission changes and contingencies in a battle

that lasted over 18 hours, providing timely and effective rotary wing support to the ground force in spite of intense combat.<sup>16</sup>

Operations ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) and IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) are the first major combat operations that employed ARSOA as a component of a JSOAC. During the initial engagements in OEF, ARSOA, with the support of AFSOC fixed wing air refueling aircraft, provided the assault and CAS helicopters for numerous raids on high value enemy targets deep inside Afghanistan. Additionally, ARSOA and AFSOC provided aircraft and crews to support infiltration, exfiltration, resupply, and CSAR in support of a second JSOTF operating in northern Afghanistan. To this day both JSOTF's in OEF remain dependent on ARSOA to provide timely and flexible mobility to support assaults against heavily defended and often fleeting enemy targets. In OIF, ARSOA also supports two separate JSOTFs operating across the width and breadth of Iraq.

In OEF and OIF, ARSOA operates under the command and control of two separate JSOACs. While security classification concerns prevent a more detailed explanation of current operations and tactics, open media sources regularly run stories of successful SOF missions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the devastating effect they are having on enemy operations.

The success the JSOTFs are enjoying in OEF and OIF would appear to indicate that ARSOA operating under the command and control of a JSOAC is not having an adverse impact on the JSOTF's ability to conduct time sensitive, high risk combat operations. Is this the case, or are there significant opportunity costs having ARSOA under the command and control of a JSOAC? Col Scott

Howell, a former JSOAC commander, acknowledges this issue in his survey response:

Q. What are the challenging aspects of the current ARSOA – JSOAC command relationship?

A. Speed in responding to emerging, time-sensitive targets. In the man-hunting, direct action portion of the SOF mission set, speed can be the difference in mission success or a lost opportunity. The CJSOAC processes have not been conducive to responding to time-sensitive, tech-int driven targets.<sup>17</sup>

Historical examples only provide one piece of the puzzle. There are many other factors that require examination in order to make an informed recommendation for the future. A discussion of the differences between U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army and USSOCOM directives or Joint doctrine is a factor we will consider in the following section.

#### Service vs. Joint Doctrine

U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army and USSOCOM doctrine provide relevant insights into how each entity views the most effective use of their air assets. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks of each doctrine is essential to making an informed decision on the best command and control mechanism for ARSOA.

U.S. Air Force doctrine espouses the position that air power is a scarce strategic asset, too valuable to be under the operational control of any ground force at the tactical level. Below are excerpts from two official USAF doctrinal manuals that capture the Air Force's firmly held belief that centralized control, by an Airman at the theater or joint task force level, is the most effective method for employing air and space power in a conflict.

*Centralized control* of air and space power is the planning, direction, prioritization, synchronization, integration, and deconfliction of air and space capabilities to achieve the objectives of the joint force commander. *Centralized control* of air and space power should be accomplished by an airman at the air component commander level who maintains a broad theater perspective in prioritizing the use of limited air and space assets to attain established objectives in any contingency across the range of operations. *Centralized control* maximizes the effectiveness of air and space power; however, it must not become a recipe for micro management, stifling the initiative subordinates need to deal with combat's inevitable uncertainties.<sup>18</sup>[*emphasis added*]

During joint operations, *centralized control* of theater air assets is the most effective way to employ aerospace power...<sup>19</sup>[*emphasis added*]

At the strategic and theater level there is little, if any, argument against the Air Force's doctrine of centralized control, decentralized execution. The U.S. Air Force's air operations during DESERT SHIELD/STORM are an excellent example of the strategic effects of airpower. The U.S. Air Force-led air campaign was, by all accounts, a decisive force in destroying the Iraqi armed force's ability to fight, and clearly underscores the advantages of centralized control of air power at the theater level. The U.S. Air Force teaches the doctrine of "centralized control, decentralized execution" to all airmen while attending USAF professional military education courses. The U.S. Army views their aviation force in a much different manner.

The U.S. Army has a more ground centric and tactical view on the employment of their aviation force. The U.S. Army does not view their tactical aviation units as a separate air arm and instead view them as a critical

component to the Army's combined arms team, as stated in FM 1-100 "Army Aviation Operations" below:

Aviation operates in the ground regime.

This cardinal principle defines aviation's role as an element of landpower. Aviation is a component of the combined arms team, *not the air component of the US Army. [emphasis added]*

Aviation's primary mission is to fight the land battle and to support ground operations. Aviation is comprised of soldiers, not airmen, and its battlefield leverage is achieved through a combination of reconnaissance, mobility, and firepower that is unprecedented in land warfare.

Aviation greatly enhances the commander's ability to apply four fundamental principles of war- maneuver, mass, surprise, and economy of force.<sup>20</sup>

The U.S. Army obviously has a fundamentally different approach from the Air Force as to the role and employment of their aviation assets, and for very good reasons. The U.S. Air Force has a strategic mission that is truly global in nature, and is a significant element of national military power in their own right.

U.S. Army aviators view themselves as a tactical maneuver element that exists only to support the ground force commander and his scheme of maneuver. While the missions, targets and subsequent effects of ARSOA are often strategic in nature, at the end of the day ARSOA, like conventional Army Aviation, exists for the sole purpose of supporting the ground force commander. The U.S. Army's firm conviction that ARSOA's main purpose is to support the SOF ground force commander is clear in the excerpt below from Army FM 3-05.60 "Army Special Operations Forces Aviation Operations":

Dependent upon mission requirements, it may be determined that the JSOAC may not be the best method to C2 the SOAR. Experience has shown that in certain circumstances

efficiencies are gained when SOAR assets are directly under the C2 of the combined JSOTF, who task organizes the SOAR to best meet mission requirements.<sup>21</sup>

Another argument is that while ARSOA is part of the Army, their missions are significantly different from their conventional Army Aviation counter-parts and Army doctrine does not apply to ARSOA. This is not the case; while it is true that SOF does not “hold terrain” like conventional forces, the tactics and techniques employed by SOF during assaults or raids are remarkably similar to those of conventional units. SOF missions are assuredly of a higher risk and routinely involve assaults against strategic level targets, but the tactics employed remain virtually the same.

USSOCOM’s doctrine for the command and control of ARSOA is contained within USSOCOM’s directive 525-8 and states:

When there are joint special operations aviation assets in theater, the Joint Forces Special Operations Component Commander (JFSOCC) normally designates a Joint Special Operations Air Component Commander (JSOACC). **The joint special operations air component commander normally will be the commander with the preponderance of assets and/or greatest ability to plan, coordinate, allocate, task, control, and support the assigned joint special operations aviation assets.** *[emphasis in original]*<sup>22</sup>

USSOCOM’s directive supports the USAF doctrine of centralized command and control of air assets at the theater level, but conflicts with Army doctrine that dictates Army Aviation is part of the combined arms team, integrated at the tactical level.

There are clear benefits to employing ARSOA under the command and control of a JSOAC. Having all aviation assets under the control of a JSOAC provides the JFSOC Commander with a single point of contact for all things “air.”

Additionally, coordination and deconfliction between AFSOC and ARSOA aircrews is simpler by having all units under a single commander. GEN (Ret.) Brown also addresses the complications associated with having two separate aviation units supporting the JSOTF:

Q: What would be the operational impacts, on both ground and aviation forces, of moving ARSOA out from under the command and control of the JSOAC?

A: Two aviation chain of commands. The burden of coordination would be on the ground unit. There would be room for error due to a lack of coordination and standardization between the aviation units. Operation Rice Bowl that failed at Desert One was an example of multiple chains of commands that were poorly coordinated with catastrophic results.<sup>23</sup>

U.S. Army Col Steve Mathias, a former JSOAC staff officer, expresses similar concerns in his survey response to the author:

Q. What are the positive aspects of the current ARSOA-JSOAC command relationships?

A. The positive aspects of the current ARSOA-JSOAC command relationship are: The JTF Commander has a single point of access to all Air Assets; The JSOAC Commander is better suited to understand the risk and mitigation process associated with aviation operations; If provided the requirement the JSOAC Commander is better suited to fulfill the requirement using all available assets vice the JSOTF Commander only having Army RW platforms to choose from; The JSOAC Commander is also inherently better suited to facilitate Personnel Recovery operations.<sup>24</sup>

USSOCOM directive recommends, not mandates, that ARSOA be under the operational control of a JSOAC. However, it has become the default position of the theater JFSOCC to place all aviation assets under the command and control of a JSOAC. While the doctrinal differences are distinct, culture is

another area that presents challenges for ARSOA operating as a subordinate element of a JSOAC.

### Service Culture Conflicts

U.S. Air Force culture and their approach to mission support for the SOF operator on the ground varies considerably from ARSOA. Unlike ARSOA, a JSOAC is a peer organization to the JSOTF. This is how both JSOACs in the CENTCOM area of operations have been operating since they deployed in 2001. AFSOC's aversion to working directly for the SOF ground tactical commander is in line with their parent service culture.

AFSOC's peer-to-peer approach to supporting the JSOTF is in direct contradiction to ARSOA culture that prefers a subordinate role, working directly for the JSOTF Commander. The 160th SOAR teaches soldiers that ARSOA exists for the sole purpose of supporting the SOF operator on the ground. Moreover, the regiment specifically recruits officers and non-commissioned officers who have prior service as a SOF ground operator, due to their experience and mission focus. Moreover, they believe it is essential to their ability to continue providing SOF forces the level and quality of support they have come to expect. In separate and diverging responses to the same survey question, GEN (Ret.) Doug Brown (U.S. Army) and Col Scott Howell (USAF) reflect the cultural differences between ARSOA and AFSOC in this way:

Q. What are the challenging aspects of the current JSOAC to ARSOA command relationship?

A.(GEN Brown) Clash of cultures. Two different and distinct ways of supporting the ground commander. Both get the job done but having the helo force directly linked to the ground commander and

having a physical presence in his operations center (not just an LNO) is incredibly positive.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand:

A.(Col Howell) I never think it's smart to have aviation TACON or OPCON to a ground force. From my vantage point they get the same result with a DIRECT SUPPORT relationship. With TACON, the ground force commander can, according to doctrine, dictate tactics, techniques and procedures that are well beyond his scope...<sup>26</sup>

These two distinctly different approaches to the mission have been a source of tension between AFSOC and ARSOA since the JSOAC was first established. Col

Howell acknowledges these differences in his survey response below:

Q. What are the challenging aspects of the current ARSOA – JSOAC command relationship?

A. Cultural differences in the employment of SOF air between the Air Force and the Army bring challenges to the day to day machinations of SOF air.<sup>27</sup>

The unique and distinctly different cultures of both AFSOC and ARSOA present significant challenges for both entities. These unique cultures represent the values and identity of each organization and it will be a difficult proposition to get either organization to change to accommodate the other. Manning a JSOAC is another challenge, especially for ARSOA, which enjoys considerably lower manning levels than their counterparts in AFSOC.

#### AFSOC and ARSOA Manning Levels

USSOCOM directive 525-8 makes it clear that the JSOAC is to be a joint organization manned by AFSOC and USASOC personnel, with other service elements of SOCOM contributing manpower as required based on mission requirements:

The JSOAC will be manned primarily by personnel from AFSOC and USASOC with additional manning from NAVSPECWARCOM, MARSOC, and JSOC as required.<sup>28</sup>

While the intent of USSOCOM with regards to manning is clear, the reality is AFSOC personnel man the preponderance of the positions in a JSOAC. The easy answer to ensuring the JSOAC has the requisite ARSOA expertise is to force USASOC to provide the appropriate number of personnel to man the JSOAC. AFSOC would no doubt welcome the relief provided by USASOC manning their fair share of the positions, but not all units are equals concerning personnel authorizations. The disparity in manpower between the AFSOC and ARSOA is the next topic for discussion.

Manning levels vary greatly between AFSOC and ARSOA. AFSOC's 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing (1<sup>st</sup> SOW) is equipped with a total of 75 aircraft and manned by 5,815 airmen. A Colonel commands 1st SOW.<sup>29</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> SOW is further broken down into four functional Groups, each commanded by a Colonel and all located on Hurlburt Field, FL. Of note, the 1<sup>st</sup> SOW commander also has command responsibility for Hurlburt Field and a portion of the personnel in some of the Groups are responsible for base operations functions and are not available for deployment. Additionally, the 1<sup>st</sup> SOW Commander has no institutional training responsibilities for his airmen, as the Special Operations Training Group located at Kirtland Air Force Base, Albuquerque, NM has that mission.

In comparison, the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR is equipped with a total of 184 aircraft and manned by 2,993 Soldiers. A Colonel also commands the 160th SOAR. The regiment is organized into 6 battalion size elements, each commanded by a

Lieutenant Colonel. The 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR is also a geographically dispersed organization, with units at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, GA, Fort Lewis, WA, and Fort Campbell, KY. The Army recently approved upgrading the 160<sup>th</sup> Deputy Commander position from a Lieutenant Colonel to a full Colonel, authorizing a total of two Colonels in the regiment. Also, the commander of the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR has command responsibility for the Special Operations Aviation Training Battalion (SOATB), which conducts all institutional training for the Regiment.

Clearly, the authorized manning for ARSOA in relation to aircraft is significantly less than it is for 1<sup>st</sup> SOW. Additionally, the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR's subordinate battalions reside at three separate installations, literally spread across the United States. Moreover, the JSOAC commander position requires a qualified ARSOA or AFSOC officer in the grade of Colonel; with the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR having only 2 Colonels authorized in its' manning documents, they can ill afford to give up one of their two Colonels, for six months to a year, to serve as a JSOAC commander.

Of note, earlier this year the Army approved the stand-up of the Army Special Operations Aviation Command (ARSOAC), a Flag Officer headquarters to relieve the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR of their training and research and development responsibilities. The ARSOAC will provide oversight for ARSOA much the same way AFSOC does for its subordinate units. The ARSOAC will achieve fully operational status in 2013. However, the establishment of the ARSOAC only added 102 additional personnel billets and two Colonel positions to ARSOA's force structure; the remaining 42 slots of the 144 man ARSOAC headquarters

came from the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR and recoded USASOC staff positions.<sup>30</sup> The approval of the ARSOAC does provide additional manpower for ARSOA to assist in the manning of a JSOAC, but it is difficult to determine to what extent until the ARSOAC achieves fully operational status.

All of these factors combined make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for ARSOA to provide qualified and experienced personnel to man one, let alone numerous JSOACs, without leaving critical command and staff functions in the regiment or battalion headquarters under manned. The fact that there has never been an ARSOA officer commanding a JSOAC underscores the challenges ARSOA has with manning JSOACs.

#### AFSOC Senior Leader Concerns

The final area to be examined is AFSOC senior leaders' concerns with placing ARSOA assets directly under the control of the JSOTF. One of their arguments is that if the ARSOA is subordinate to the JSOTF Commander, aircraft and crews would be unavailable to support other JSOTFs or SOF units even if their mission is a higher priority. Col Howell articulates this in his survey response below:

The positive aspect of the CJSOAC is that the Joint Force Commander, CFSOCC in this case, has one single Commander & HQ Commanding and Controlling all air units/assets, as well as one Commander & HQ working all theater-wide air issues, vice disparate JOCs/TOCs each working with only part of the overall picture.<sup>31</sup>

Another worry is that the ground force commander does not sufficiently understand the vulnerabilities and limitations of aviation and may plan an operation that presents unacceptable risk to the aircrews. If the JSOAC works

directly for the JSOTF Commander, the aircrews may be in a position where they receive command pressure to execute a mission regardless of the risk involved.

Army Col Steve Mathias and Air Force Col Howell share the same reservations in their survey responses to the author:

Q. Is safety increased or decreased by ARSOA being part of the JSOAC, if so how?

A. (Col Mathias) I think safety is increased by ARSOA working for the JSOAC. This is particularly the case if the JSOTF Commander with DS authority further delegates the RW force to a SOTF. The SOTF Commander may make employment decisions that do not consider all risks. An example is Robert's Ridge. Much has been written in the unclassified forums about the "SOTF" Commander's decision to land on the mountain top vice the planned HLZ. It is arguable that the JSOAC would have had the situational awareness to advise against that decision. The follow on decisions to attempt immediate recovery were also made by the "JSOTF" or "SOTF" level Commanders. My argument here is not without holes. The JSOAC likely did not have the appropriate SA to make an informed decision and thus would have deferred to the JSOTF or SOTF Commander to make the decision.<sup>32</sup>

A. (Col Howell) It is increased—by having one HQ working the airspace/ROZ/route deconfliction, the air C2 plan is enhanced and all the air players share the same situational awareness on all assets. Additionally, many safety issues regarding CJSOAC are ground related, flight line issues which are enhanced under a single Air C2 construct.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, ARSOA believes that subordinating air assets to the JSOTF alleviates bureaucracy, improves responsiveness to the JSOTF and reduces miscommunications between the operator on the ground and the air assets supporting him.

Experience has shown that operations officers of the different JSOTFs frequently release air assets to other units if they have a higher priority mission.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the JFSOC Commander retains the authority to intervene if his

subordinate JSOTFs are not sharing assets when appropriate. As far as aircrews potentially receiving pressure to execute high risk missions, Army Regulation 95-1 (Flight Regulations) addresses that issue for ARSOA by clearly designating the approval authorities for high and extremely high risk missions:

...brigade commanders and above for high-risk missions, and the first general officer in the chain of command for extremely high risk missions.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, when a JSOTF Commander understands there is unacceptable risk to the aviation assets, he is nearly always responsive and modifies the plan accordingly.<sup>36</sup> AFSOC senior leader concerns with the apportionment of air assets between JSOTFs, along with the possibility of JSOTF Commanders employing ARSOA on extremely high risk missions, do not reflect reality and in any case, the theater level commander retains veto authority in both instances. Col Howell expressed another long term concern with moving ARSOA out from under the JSOAC:

Culturally, if ARSOA moves away from the CJSOAC, I think we do a disservice to our force over the long run. Instead of building a true joint team that becomes more effective over time, adopting best joint practices from each tribe—we drive a wedge between the service component's air forces. Over time, you'll have a group of 0-6 commanders and flag officers who aren't steeped in joint SOF air—only their portion of it. That's harmful to the effectiveness of joint SOF.<sup>37</sup>

Will moving ARSOA under the command and control of the JSOTF damage the prospects for a joint SOF force over the long term? Perhaps a change in the command relationship will remove this source of animosity and improve the relationship between the two entities? Placing both services in a command relationship that is counter to their respective service cultures has been a consistent source of friction since the JSOAC was first established.

Removing this source of irritation may actually improve the relationship between AFSOC and ARSOA. Moreover, ARSOA requires AFSOC support to operate and there will always be a working relationship between the two. Finally, there are numerous joint SOF billets that provide opportunities for officers of both services to develop an understanding of their SOF air counter-parts.

### Conclusion

The historical examples of ARSOA operating as part of a JSOTF and as part of a JSOAC appear to support the conclusion that ARSOA can effectively support the SOF operator on the ground in either scenario. During Operations JUST CAUSE, DESERT SHIELD/STORM and GOTHIC SERPENT, ARSOA clearly demonstrated their ability to accomplish complex and time sensitive missions while reporting directly to a JSOTF. However, in Operations ENDURING and IRAQI FREEDOM there is evidence indicating that in some cases the presence of a JSOAC adversely impacted ARSOA's ability to successfully execute complex, time sensitive combat missions against fleeting targets.

The differences between USAF and Army doctrine regarding the employment of aviation are distinct and accurately reflect the priorities and mission sets of their respective services. While the JSOAC command and control organization is appropriate for and accepted by USAF units, it is considered cumbersome and bureaucratic by ARSOA.

As was stated earlier, the cultural differences between AFSOC and ARSOA aviators are significant and have been a source of animosity between

the two organizations. However, it is not a question of who is right or wrong; both cultures are appropriate for the distinctly different missions they perform.

It is also clear that without a significant increase in ARSOA manning, ARSOA will be unable to provide qualified personnel to fill their fair share of the JSOAC billets. To date, the Army has been unwilling to provide additional Soldiers in ARSOA for the express purpose of manning a JSOAC.

Theoretically, apportionment, coordination and deconfliction of all air assets would be easier with the JSOAC as the single point of contact. While the possibility does exist that a JSOTF Commander may task ARSOA to execute a mission with unacceptable risk, Army flight regulations mitigate this concern by requiring the first General Officer in the chain of command to approve extremely high risk missions.

The current command and control relationship is not optimum for the JSOTF, JSOAC or ARSOA. The issues discussed in this paper support removing ARSOA from the JSOAC and placing them directly under the JSOTF, with a coordination line to the JSOAC. This change will reduce the bureaucracy and increase ARSOA's ability to provide timely support to the SOF ground operator and may actually improve the relationship between AFSOC and ARSOA. ARSOA and JSOAC exchanging liaison officers would provide the necessary link between the JSOAC and ARSOA to facilitate apportionment, coordination and deconfliction information flow. This modification to the existing command and control relationship will provide the SOF operator, on the ground, with responsive

SOF rotary wing aviation support, while also ensuring effective communication and coordination between ARSOA and JSOAC headquarters.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> LTG John F. Mulholland, Commanding General USASOC, "US Army Special Operations Command Non-Concurrence with USSOCOM Directive 525-8, Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) Fort Bragg, NC 29 October 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The study was approved by the U.S. Army War College Institutional Review Board, control number AY11-03-USAWC, 12 January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> GEN (Ret.) Doug Brown, e mail survey response, September 14, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Col James Jarrard, e mail survey response, 15 August 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Author's personal experience as an ARSOA commander in a JSOTF.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> United States Special Operations Command, Directive 525-8 *Joint Special Operations Air Component*<sup>8</sup> (Headquarters United States Special Operations Command, MacDill AFB, FL. 18 June 2007) 4

<sup>9</sup> United States Special Operations Command, Directive 525-8, 8.

<sup>10</sup> United States Special Operations Command, History of United States Special Operations Command, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition (United States Special Operations Command MacDill AFB, FL. 31 March 2008)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>16</sup> Col Tom Sexton, U.S. Air Force, former 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR exchange officer and veteran of Operation GOTHIC SERPENT, interview by author, 17 November 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> United States Air Force, Doctrine Document 1 (Headquarters, United States Air Force, Washington DC 17 November 2003)

<sup>19</sup> United States Air Force, Doctrine Document 2-3 "*Military Operations Other Than War*" (MOOTW) (Headquarters, United States Air Force, Washington DC 3 July 2000)

<sup>20</sup> United States Army, FM 1-100 "*Army Aviation Operations*" (Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 21 February 1997), 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> United States Army, FM3-05.60 "*Army Special Operations Forces Aviation Operations*" (Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, Washington, DC October 2007), 1-9.

<sup>22</sup> United States Special Operations Command, Directive 525-8, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Col Steve Mathias, e-mail survey response, October 8, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, e mail survey response.

<sup>26</sup> Col Scott Howell, e mail survey response, October 21, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> United States Special Operations Command, Directive 525-8, 5.

<sup>29</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> SOW Command Briefing, briefing slides with scripted commentary, Hurlburt Field, FL. 21 September 2010.

<sup>30</sup> 2010 Army Force Design Update 09-01.

<sup>31</sup> Howell, e mail survey response.

<sup>32</sup> Mathias, e-mail survey response.

<sup>33</sup> Howell, e mail survey response.

<sup>34</sup> Author's personal experience.

<sup>35</sup> US Department of the Army, *Flight Regulations*, Army Regulation 95-1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, 12 November 2008), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Author's personal experience.

<sup>37</sup> Howell, e mail survey response.

