



USAF photo by SSgt. Richard Williams

The rise of “joint expeditionary taskings” has pushed airmen to train harder for ground combat.

MSgt. Patrick Seiler (c), a convoy driver assigned to a combined joint task force regional support team, is briefed at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan.

Thinking Outside the Wire

By Megan Scully

As combat rotations and the demand on the military increase with the surge of forces into Afghanistan, Air Force leaders are perfecting the art of turning even the greenest of airmen into skilled ground warriors.

The last eight years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan have marked a significant cultural change within the Air Force, with officials placing a greater emphasis on expeditionary and combat skills training as airmen find themselves on the ground operating alongside the Army and Marine Corps.

“Our deployments are a lot different from the ones 25 years ago,” said CMSAF James A. Roy. “Our airmen are on the leading edge, fighting terrorists alongside our joint and coalition partners.”

During a visit to the US Central Command area of operations in December, Roy said deployment training was an issue that came up constantly, with airmen emphasizing that they want the right mix of skills to operate in a deployed environment. “They want those skills to include the most up-to-date lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, which the deployment training sites I visited are constantly incorporating to

USAF photo by A1C Anthony Jennings



Airmen “recover” after discovering a simulated improvised explosive device during counter-IED training at Eglin AFB, Fla.

give these warriors the best training possible,” Roy said.

Prior to 2001, only certain specialties received advanced weapons training and other skills—such as emergency medical training and improvised explosive device detection—now considered necessary to

operating on the ground. Now, no airman deploys to a hostile environment without a certain degree of training on how to operate in the enemy’s backyard.

“I think our attitude has changed,” explained Maj. Gen. Mary Kay Hertog, the commander of 2nd Air Force at Keesler

AFB, Miss., adding that airmen have embraced a new warrior ethos. Hertog, a self-described “ground-pounder” from a security forces background, is charged with overseeing all airmen throughout the Joint Expeditionary Tasking-Individual Augmentee training pipeline at Army training sites around the country. Second Air Force also provides an around-the-clock operations center for pre- and postdeployment support.

For Hertog, the Air Force’s advances in combat training since 2001 are a point of pride. In a service once focused only marginally on ground combat skills, airmen at all levels are now getting training critical to their overseas deployments and are operating ably alongside the ground services.

“I think the Air Force as a service has truly benefited from being able to work these JET [joint expeditionary tasking] missions,” Hertog said. “I think it has increased our credibility with our sister services [and] increased our self-confidence.”

In addition to the JET training conducted for airmen by the Army, the Air Force has also in the last year established a tiered training construct for its own expeditionary training. The tiered system takes airmen from basic training through preparation for a hostile environment. The effort is aimed at airmen who, during deployment, operate largely “inside the wire” but are sometimes in areas where they could be vulnerable to enemy attack—such as when they are moving from one location to another.

In a combat zone where there is no defined front line, airmen need to learn a certain degree of hands-on combat skills, combat lifesaving, and defensive firing positions in order to operate for any period of time in enemy terrain.

“We want the worst day of your deployment to be while you’re with us,” said Brig. Gen. Richard T. Devereaux, commander of the Air Force Expeditionary Center at JB McGuire, N.J., which is the Air Force’s center for advanced expeditionary combat support training and education.

“We want to stress you the hardest. We want you to make your mistakes here,” said Devereaux.

Four years ago, 2nd Air Force gained responsibility for overseeing the training of airmen who received nontraditional taskings to deploy with other services, and ensuring they are prepared for tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2008, the Air Force changed the nomenclature of what had long been



USAF photo by MSgt. Andy Dunaway

USAF security forces airmen in Iraq frequently deployed to patrol dangerous parts of Baghdad.

known as “in-lieu-of” taskings to “joint expeditionary taskings” to properly characterize the Air Force’s “combat-focused mind-set and our joint posture,” according to a December 2008 statement from Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz.

“Our airmen deliver game-changing capabilities in air, space, and cyberspace for combatant commanders in a multitude of ways around the globe,” Schwartz wrote at the time. “We must ensure that those who contribute by serving in the JET role are appropriately recognized for the magnitude of their service.”

Adapting as Needed

To Hertog, part of the cultural change within the Air Force has been recognition of the contributions of those airmen who do not sit in cockpits, but are contributing every day to operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. For many airmen, their JET deployments have been the highlights of their career in the Air Force, she said. And, she added, their contributions have been acknowledged by the rest of the Air Force.

“The support side of the house has suffered the majority of the casualties,” Hertog said. “Truly the rest of the Air Force has appreciated what the nonflying community has brought to bear.”

Each year, about 8,000 airmen go through JET training, where they spend 30 to 70 days learning how to deploy with the Army. “Many didn’t appreciate going through the training at the time,” Hertog said. But after they deploy, 2nd Air Force routinely gets feedback that “this made the difference.”

The Air Force also advocates on behalf of their airmen going through JET training. USAF sends in commanders and small staffs to each location to make sure airmen are taken care of, and their concerns with equipment or the training are addressed. Recently, airmen who had to get certified on crew-served weapons complained they had to report 10 days prior to their combat skills training—although they had plenty of “white space,” or downtime, during their training time to get qualified. The Air Force worked with the Army to eliminate downtime and build the crew-served weapons training into the curriculum for certain airmen, allowing them to stay home longer before their deployments.

The JET training has evolved over the years as the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan have changed. Currently, JET airmen preparing for deployments with the Army are undergoing 60 to 70 days of training to support provincial reconstruction teams, to train for counterinsurgency operations and IED detection, and to gain cultural training and basic language skills. They also learn rules of engagement and combat lifesaving skills.

Over the last several years, the training focus has shifted from defending an area to reconstruction efforts to building police and military forces. The focus could change again as combat needs shift. “‘Building partnership capacity’ is where we’re headed now, but we’ll adapt to whatever the combatant commander needs,” Hertog said.

At the Air Force Expeditionary Center, the mission is to build power from the ground up. The center’s philosophy is

that the Air Force cannot apply power in airspace or cyberspace without the ground support airmen who often must operate in austere environments.

Until a year ago, expeditionary training for ground support missions lacked standardization and had a significant redundancy built in. Airmen sometimes received it at basic training, other times at their home bases or at training ranges such as McGuire.

Four Tiers of Training

Last year, the Air Force developed a four-tiered approach that prepares airmen for expeditionary warfare in a “building block approach,” said Mike Senna, the chief of the special missions and expeditionary training division at Air Education and Training Command. The ultimate goal, Senna said, is a “standard presentation of forces” to the combatant commanders.

The first tier is what airmen receive during basic training or commissioning. The training is foundational and sends the message that the Air Force is “expeditionary in nature,” he added.

The second tier, which is primarily computer-based with some classroom time, is done at home bases to prepare airmen to deploy into permissive environments to perform Air Force missions. Everyone receives at least Tier Two training. For many airmen, their expeditionary training will end at this point.

The third tier is for those airmen who are tapped for deployment and are going to a location in hostile terrain and need training in advanced combat skills, combat lifesaving, defensive firing positions, IED identification and recognition, convoy operations, and defense operations in urban terrain. These are environments that “our airmen never thought they would have to operate in, but find themselves in today,” Devereaux said. The basic Tier Three course is Combat Airman Skills Training, a 10- to 11-day course where all ranks are in the same class and live in the same dormitory setting. The CAST course is held at McGuire, Camp Bullis in San Antonio, Tex., and Camp Guernsey, Wyo.

During the CAST course, airmen work not only on combat skills, but also on leadership skills, such as resolving administrative and other issues that arise among group members.

There are other Tier Three courses, based on specialties and missions. Transportation specialists, for instance, run through an intense 60-day combat



USAF photo by S/A. Christopher Griffin

A trainee enters the last leg of the tactical course at Lackland AFB, Tex. A new, tiered training system begins in basic.

convoy course focusing on the challenges of driving convoys in Iraq and Afghanistan. Airmen who go through JET training are essentially given credit for Tier Three training, but it is separate from the tiered system.

Not all airmen deploying to hostile environments receive Tier Three training—only those who may be operating outside the wire. An F-16 unit going to Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan does not go through Tier Three training because it is considered a secure location. The same is true for A-10 units that have operated out of Balad, Iraq.

The Air Force also built a fourth tier into the expeditionary training construct to address new and emerging training requirements dictated by a specific mission or by a new requirement from the field.

The Air Force has not officially executed Tier Four yet, but is currently creating a training requirement involving explosive ordnance disposal.

Devereaux acknowledged there is a “potentially infinite” number of Tier Four training requirements, particularly when dealing with a constantly changing enemy. “When you’re in the middle of a war, it’s never static,” Devereaux said. “The bad guys, the enemy, are always changing their tactics and techniques.”

With tens of thousands of airmen logging valuable ground training and experience after nearly a decade of war, the Air Force sees potential for expeditionary training extending well beyond

the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hertog said she sees possibilities with US Africa Command, as well as with operations in Latin American countries. There are recovery and humanitarian relief skills learned during expeditionary training that are valuable in situations such as the response to the earthquake in Haiti earlier this year, she said.

So far, the feedback from airmen who have taken the JET and tiered expeditionary courses has been positive. Airmen quickly realize during their deployments the value of what they have learned, Senna and other officials said.

“The most important feedback we get are the students that graduate from training courses [and] say, ‘Thank you, because your training was spot-on and appropriate for what I needed,’” Devereaux said.

Now, the Air Force must learn how to sustain airmen’s combat skills in between overseas deployments.

“A lot of this is perishable, it’s muscle memory,” Hertog said, and the question is, “What do you do with these great warriors we have built?” Sustaining those combat and survival skills means making them a priority and building it into time at home station. This would be similar to the emphasis on maintaining physical fitness, something Hertog requires of herself and her staff.

The Air Force has “come such a long way,” Hertog said. “I would hate to see us backslide” by letting combat skills decline through a lack of use. ■

Megan Scully is the defense reporter for National Journal's CongressDaily in Washington, D.C., and a contributor to National Journal and Government Executive. Her most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “The Little Airlifter That Could,” appeared in the July issue.