

A/TQ

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Carrying Freedom's Flag A/TQ

Cover Story

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*From Battlefields to Airfields –
The Role of AMC Assessment Teams in Operation Iraqi Freedom*

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From Battlefields to Airfields – The Role of AMC Assessment Teams in Operation Iraqi Freedom

by Colonel Gregory P. Cook

Introduction

The United States Air Force has evolved into a truly expeditionary force, as evidenced by continuing operations in support of the Global War on Terrorism. In the time period since the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, a number of Air Force forward operating bases were rapidly established around and inside combat zones, with Air Force units operating side by side with ground combat forces in austere, and often hostile, conditions. From Afghanistan to Iraq and throughout the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR), these forward bases have proven crucial to allied victories in both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The role of Air Mobility Command (AMC) has been central to these efforts, and the command has thus been given primary responsibility for establishing expeditionary air bases to support these types of operations in the future. As a result, new operational concepts and missions are being developed to meet this requirement, building on existing air mobility capabilities while incorporating the many lessons learned along the way.

At the root of AMC's new role is the realization that substantial airlift is required to establish forward operating locations or to enable the rapid introduction of combat forces and support capabilities deep into hostile or denied territory, especially in landlocked countries like Afghanistan. The most significant uncertainties and challenges faced by Air Force units revolved around the need to bridge the gap between airfield seizure forces and airbase opening forces, essentially to transform what had been a "battlefield" into an airfield. Yet Joint doctrine and operating procedures had not been fully developed to achieve these objectives, and thus the Air Force experienced some difficulties opening airfields in Afghanistan as a result. Ground force commanders had different priorities and perceptions than their Air Force counterparts, and it took longer than expected to ensure a safe operating environment for air mobility aircraft both in the air and on the ground before airlift operations could commence. What was missing from these base openings was the influence of an airman on the initial activities at the new airfield. Ground commanders often do not share an airman's sensitivity to the characteristics of mobility aircraft that make them highly vulnerable - larger, slower and less maneuverable than fighter aircraft, with predictable tactics for arrivals and departures.

Initially, the concept of a Global Mobility Task Force (GMTF) was developed to address these shortcomings and to prescribe the types of capabilities needed and the order in which they would be introduced to realize base opening objectives. The first and most critical requirement was the ability to rapidly assess the physical characteristics of a captured airfield and the surrounding operational environment to determine its capability to safely and effectively support air operations. To address this need, AMC worked with its two Air Mobility Operations Groups (AMOGs) at McGuire and Travis Air Force Bases to create four new, rapidly deployable, airfield assessment teams. These teams were to be manned, equipped and trained to work alongside seizure forces to assess and shape the operational environment of an airfield, initiate airlift operations and then lead the airbase opening process until follow-on forces and leadership arrive on scene. As the likelihood of war in Iraq increased, concept development turned quickly into real-world deployment and execution of the assessment team mission. Their successful employment during Operation Iraqi Freedom became history in the making, and ushered in a new era in air mobility and USAF operations.

Assessment Team Concept of Operations

The objective of the assessment team is to conduct rapid airfield assessment and basic preparations for follow-on forces. To accomplish their mission, a small, highly mobile, self-sufficient team would rapidly deploy and insert with any Department of Defense ground combat or airfield seizure force. The assessment team would survey the airfield, assess the operational environment, and then report their findings directly back to pre-identified decision makers via secure communications. This report would be the basis for development and sequencing of follow-on forces required to execute the base opening.

The teams were to organize as a deployable package that is light, lean, quick to deploy and employ, and easy to sustain, re-deploy, and reconstitute. For AMC, the teams would provide the command with a senior officer's "eyes on," first-person assessment of the operational environment. In a Joint force operating scenario, they would coordinate AMC and USAF needs and requirements with ground force commanders. In combat conditions, they would bridge the gap between airfield seizure and base opening forces, reduce the time for the start of airlift operations, initiate airfield opening actions and receive initial deploying forces.

Assessment Focus Areas

Initially, the assessment teams would gather data about the airfield, including runway, taxiway and ramp dimensions and conditions. They would also document obstacles that could interfere with aircraft operations, evaluate pavements for their strength, weight-bearing capacity and expected longevity, and identify types and conditions of airfield lighting and markings. They would analyze airfield operations facilities that could provide air traffic control, communications, and weather capabilities, and determine the availability of transportation, logistics, and base support assets. Finally, they would review security and force protection requirements, conduct threat assessments, and determine the friendly order of battle and its capability to respond to threats.

What do We Call Them?

Not surprisingly, what to call the teams became a point of significant discussion and confusion, as the name changed with virtually every new draft CONOPS or briefing. First they were called a Base Assessment Team or BAT, then a Contingency Base Assessment Team or C-BAT. Next came the Global Mobility Task Force Assessment Team (GMTF AT), which was shortened to Global Mobility Assessment Team (GMAT). The name that finally stuck, as the result of common usage, was Global Assessment Team, or GAT. The one common denominator in all these descriptors was that they were an Assessment Team (AT), and so the team commanders simply used that term when discussing their mission. At one point during the war, a media report probably coined the most descriptive term, that of a Global Airfield Assessment Team (GAAT), which truly captured the essence of their mission. They are globally oriented and capable, their mission is airfield assessment, and they are a small, specialized team of experts.

Assessment Team Makeup

AMC determined that the assessment team commander must be a rated colonel with extensive air mobility expertise. His role was to act as the primary point of contact for theater and command decision makers and serve as the principal liaison between his team and the ground and/or host nation forces. Since the assessment team commander was expected to be the senior Air Force officer on the scene, he would have much greater influence,



GAT Cook loads their equipment onto MH-53s at Bashur for their final leg to Kirkuk, Iraq. Col. Cook is in the foreground.

acting as the "airman in charge of the airfield" until an Air Expeditionary Group (AEG) or Wing commander arrived to take long-term command of the operation.

Primary team members also included a field grade operations officer who would lead the physical survey and deal with air operations issues, a Security Forces specialist who would work with ground forces to implement airfield security procedures and coordinate Joint force protection measures, and communications specialists responsible for establishing and maintaining all communications. An airfield management specialist and civil engineer were also required to survey and assess airfield capabilities, including the dimensions and weight bearing capacities of runways, taxiways and aircraft parking areas, and to evaluate facilities and supporting infrastructure. Their duties also included battle damage assessment and the identification of physical hazards and obstructions to aircraft operations, including unexploded ordinance. Finally, the team commanders retained the option to add augmentees as required to support the mission, with the potential to include specialties such as intelligence, logistics or finance and contracting, among others.

Teams Identified, Equipped and Trained

In the fall of 2002, the commanders and deputy commanders of the AMOGs were selected to develop and lead four assessment teams. They were Colonels Rick Martin and Pete Gray from the 615th AMOG at Travis AFB, and Colonels Greg Cook and A. Ray Myers from the 621st AMOG at McGuire AFB. Since the AMOGs already possessed extensive experience in surveying and establishing forward air mobility operating locations, it was clear to AMC planners that the AMOGs were the units most capable of completing this new mission. They already possessed AMC airfield survey teams, and for many years, their Tanker Airlift Control Elements (TALCEs) had already operated successfully in austere, sometimes hostile, environments throughout the world. TALCEs had recently written a new chapter in AMC operations in Afghanistan, providing direct support to ground combat operations and enabling AMC missions under challenging conditions, including under cover of darkness through the use of night vision goggles. Most importantly, AMOG units were highly mobile and equipped to operate completely independent of other units, with their own communications, tent shelters and other equipment items necessary to sustain their operations.

With potential combat operations looming in Iraq, everyone felt a great sense of urgency in fielding this new capability as quickly as possible. The first challenge for AMC and the four commanders was how to properly train and equip the assessment teams to conduct their mission. Assessment team members needed to be familiar in the tactics, techniques, and procedures of the supporting ground force combat maneuver units, including the Army, Marines and Special Operations Forces (SOF). Air Mobility Liaison Officers and Army Ground Liaison Officers assigned to the AMOGs were tasked to provide this training. AMC then equipped the teams with a new satellite communications system capable of providing dependable, secure and non-secure, data and voice communications. Team members were outfitted with personal tactical and force protection gear that mirrored the ground forces they were expected to operate with, including night vision goggles and night capable weapons. Small tactical vehicles were purchased to enable greater airfield mobility and allow the teams to be transported via helicopter when required. Chemical warfare equipment was standard issue. As they focused on equipping and training their teams, the commanders also began extensive pre-mission planning and coordination.

Preparations for War

With war plans for operations in and around Iraq being refined, AMC assigned the four assessment teams areas of responsibility and identified the key ground combat units that they were expected to operate alongside. Colonel Martin's team was given the Northern sector of Iraq and was expected to stage from Turkey to work with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, while Colonel Myer's team was assigned the Southern sector, where he

was aligned with the Army's V Corp combat units. Colonel Cook's team was aligned with SOF units, with anticipated operations in Western Iraq, and Colonel Gray's team was to be held in reserve while they continued to develop and exercise the assessment team concept of operations. Since these assessment teams were a new and unknown capability, AMC and the commanders made a concerted effort to contact their associated units to develop working relationships with their combat planners and staffs, and to explain to them assessment team roles and capabilities. This effort was to pay great dividends during subsequent combat operations in Iraq.

Now immersed into contingency planning, the teams gathered imagery and information on potential operating airfields in their areas of responsibility, recognizing that data on airfields in Iraq was dated or unreliable. All quickly realized that the Iraqis had deliberately sabotaged most useable runways by obstructing them with discarded military vehicles and piles of rocks, dirt and other materials. No one knew what lay beneath, although there was some speculation that the obstructions might also be booby-trapped with conventional or chemical weapons.

Command and control relationships were also defined, with the Director of Mobility Forces (DIRMOBFOR) in the CENTCOM Combined Air Operations Center holding responsibility for identifying assessment team requirements and operating locations, then coordinating their tasking through AMC's Tanker Airlift Control Center at Scott AFB. AMC's Crisis

Action Team would also be monitoring assessment team operations to provide reach-back information and support from the command. This was possible only because of the teams' secure, dependable long-range communications capability. The stage was now set for the GATs to be put into action.

February – March 2003:

The GATS Deploy Forward

GAT Myers was the first to leave home station, departing McGuire AFB in early February 2003 bound for their staging location in Kuwait. Upon arrival, they began final coordination and preparation for forward movement with Army forces into Southeastern Iraq. In the meantime, they also surveyed the newly constructed Udari Army Airfield in the Kuwait desert. GAT Martin deployed to Italy in March to join up with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, survey Italian airfields and discuss war plans for an Iraqi Northern front. When Turkey refused to support these plans, and the strategy in the North changed, GAT Martin moved to Qatar to prepare for operations in other sectors. GAT Cook also deployed forward in early March to the Egyptian air base at Cairo West, where the team spent ten days and helped establish a USAF tanker Air Expeditionary Group

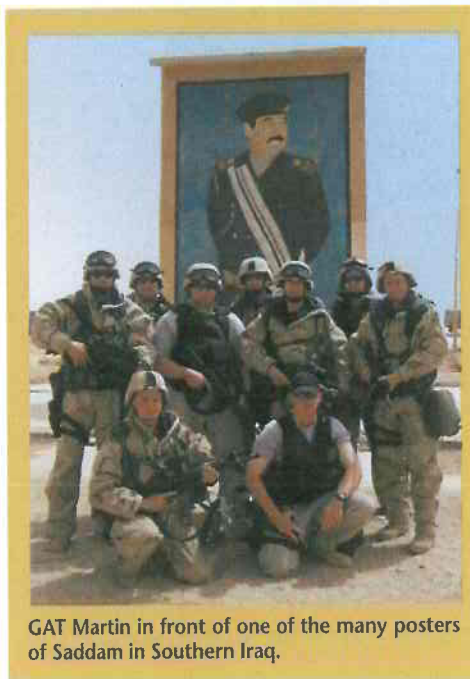
operation. They then moved to another forward operating location much closer to Iraq, where they planned and coordinated their anticipated missions in Iraq with SOF forces. When the war began on March 19th, the GATs were postured and ready for their mission.

The GATs Go To War

March 22-31:

GAT Myers Opens Tallil Air Base

The first airfield expected to be captured was Tallil in Southeastern Iraq, and there was a comprehensive plan in place to revive air operations at the field that had been coordinated between air and ground combat planners throughout the AOR. GAT Myers played a significant role in those plans. As the 3rd Infantry Division (3ID) fought its way towards Tallil, the GAT was not far behind. Traveling via Army ground convoy, GAT Myers entered Iraq on March 22, and arrived in Tallil on March 23 just hours after 3ID had captured the field. In the ensuing days, the team completed its survey of the field despite ongoing combat operations in the vicinity, coordinated security and force protection issues, and helped clear the blocked runways of obstructions. Finally, they endured the "mother of all dust storms" that slowed the opening of the field for two days. The first C-130 landed on March 27, carrying with it lead TALCE elements from the 621 AMOG. The air base was officially open, and its capability to support air operations grew dramatically with each passing day. A-10 aircraft were operating from the



GAT Martin in front of one of the many posters of Saddam in Southern Iraq.

field by March 29, providing close air support for U.S. ground forces as they approached Baghdad and attacking Iraqi forces throughout the area. With full-up mobility and combat air operations underway and an AEG commander now in charge of the airfield, GAT Myers returned to Kuwait on March 31 to prepare for their next mission.

March 29 – April 15:

GAT Martin Gets "In the Dirt" at Bushmaster

In the meantime, GAT Martin was tasked to help the Army build and certify a C-130 capable dirt airstrip codenamed "Bushmaster" near An Najaf, Iraq at the height of combat operations. Flying first into Tallil via C-130, they traveled via ground convoy on March 29 to the Bushmaster construction site. For the next two weeks, they were deeply involved with the Army Corps of Engineers in the technical details of establishing a forward operating base literally "out of the dirt" to support combat operations. Contending with dust, wild dogs and camels, the team overcame many obstacles to enable the effort. The only C-130 dirt runway established during the war, Bushmaster played an important role in supporting the Army's V Corp operations in Southern Iraq. With their mission complete and the need for Bushmaster diminishing as the war progressed, GAT Martin finally departed on April 15.

March 31 – April 2 and April 5-16:

GAT Cook Opens the "Wild, Wild, West"

GAT Cook first entered Iraq on March 31, moving forward from their staging base to assess an isolated airstrip in the Western desert which SOF forces had seized and begun operating from. Lacking any significant infrastructure except for a well-constructed runway, taxiways and parking ramp, Cook's team determined that the airfield could be used to support extensive air operations, although everything required to do so would have to be flown in. It was a classic bare base scenario in the making. After returning to their staging base, the GAT was called back on April 5 to fully open the base. Assisted by a 621 AMOG TALCE who arrived shortly after, the base quickly became a major air mobility operations hub in Western Iraq. Their operations enabled the movement of heavy ground combat forces to the region, sustained SOF operations in the area, and supported USAF search and rescue operations from the airfield. The base also served as a hot refueling stop for A-10s conducting attack operations. The GAT remained there until they received their next tasking on April 16.

April 10 – 30:

GAT Myers Establishes Mobility Hub at Baghdad International

On April 4, 3ID seized Saddam International Airport, which was promptly renamed Baghdad International Airport and turned into a major focal point for continuing combat actions in and around the capital city. The airport had fallen into disrepair and the preferred landing runways on the military side had been cratered by U.S. bombing attacks in the preceding days. Yet it was clear that Baghdad would have to be reopened quickly to support the continuing war campaign and the reconstruction efforts that were sure to follow. Thus GAT Myers was called in to begin that effort, and they were inserted on April 10 in a C-130 that landed on a makeshift runway established on an undamaged taxiway under blacked out conditions. After the GAT completed their initial assessment and basic preparations for follow-on forces, AMC aircraft began to land within two days, with a 621 AMOG TALCE the first to arrive to establish AMC support operations. From that point, the flow of aircraft grew continuously as the airport became the major air mobility hub in Central Iraq. The opening of the commercial runway on April 23 further increased its importance and signaled that the airport was well on its way to full recovery. The flow of major commanders and distinguished visitors to Baghdad was one of the challenges the team successfully contended with during their tenure there. With major airfields now operating in Southern, Western and Central Iraq, attention now turned to the front in Northern Iraq.

April 16 - 28:

GAT Cook Opens a Northern Hub in Kirkuk

On April 15, GAT Cook was directed to head north to establish another USAF operations hub in the city of Kirkuk. They departed the next day via C-130 for Bashur, where the 86th Contingency Response Group from Ramstein Air Base in Germany had established a forward operating base to support the 173rd Airborne Brigade's operations in the area. Together, they had seized and established Bashur in the largest airdrop operation since World War II, which was further enabled by follow-on airland operations. The 173rd had just moved the bulk of its force to Kirkuk, however – where they had taken and occupied the military air base on the edge of the city. But its supply lines from Bashur were badly strained, and a request was put in to USCENTCOM to shift sustainment operations for the unit to Kirkuk. The Joint Forces Air Component Commander for USCENTCOM also wanted to establish an



GAT Myers loads their equipment at Kuwait en route to Baghdad International Airport.

A-10 forward operating base there, so the GAT was charged with opening the airfield. Moving by MH-53 to Kirkuk on April 17th, the team found itself in a chaotic, uncertain operational environment. While the airfield survey was easily accomplished and the undamaged airport ready to receive aircraft, the security assessment was infinitely more difficult. Armed clashes between Iraqi factions within the city, coupled with looting, fires and explosions just outside the airfield perimeter, were cause for concern about the safety of arriving aircraft. The GAT worked closely with the 173rd to mitigate these concerns, and the first fixed wing aircraft, a C-17, arrived on April 19th with a TALCE from the 615th AMOG on board. Within days, the airport had been

transformed into a fully functional air base, with hundreds of airmen working to build a long-term capability at the field. By the time they departed on April 28, a new Air Expeditionary Group had been established at Kirkuk.

Summary

For the assessment teams, every situation they encountered was unique, and there was no single formula for success. During the course of their operations, the assessment teams fulfilled multiple roles, many times because they were the only personnel capable of performing the task at hand. In addition to their assessment duties, they became de facto AMC liaisons in the field with Joint force commanders and acted as interim USAF command elements. As such, they provided base engineering leadership, directed airfield operations, coordinated airbase defense and force protection requirements, and served as the airbase communications center. They not only provided air mobility leadership and expertise, they also worked on the ramp to load and unload aircraft, coordinate cargo and passenger handling needs, and perform other mission essential tasks. Flexibility and adaptability were the keys to their success. They learned that under combat conditions, even established airfields will likely be severely degraded or inoperative, thus bare base operations must be assumed in planning. Night low light conditions and the use of night vision goggles for operations are also now the norm in the interest of force protection.

In the end, the assessment teams played a pivotal role in Operation Iraqi Freedom. They performed airfield assessments at seven Iraqi airfields, opening up four for full-scale air operations and one for limited C-130 operations. From Tallil and Bushmaster to Baghdad, Kirkuk and the Western desert, these airfields were used to sustain and conduct combat operations that contributed to a quick allied victory. The teams turned a concept into reality at the height of combat operations, overcoming a multitude of challenges through innovation, ingenuity, and outright leadership. They validated the underlying precepts of the emerging Global Mobility CONOPS, demonstrating that airfields can be assessed and opened in minimum time under even the most challenging of operational environments. In so doing, their successful employment during Operation Iraqi Freedom became history in the making, and ushered in a new era in air mobility and USAF operations.

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