



## Democratizing Airpower: Air Mobility's Role in Joint Fires

By Major Nicole D. Pearl, USAF

*"Losing one's ship in peacetime is incompetence. Being unable to sensibly risk it in wartime is cowardice." — Royal Navy proverb*

### Introduction

Technology is rapidly transforming how the Joint Force can sense and make sense of the operating environment, and the stage is set for a revolution in the way this information enables warfare. For decades, traditional airfield survey relied on small teams spending hours on site, supported by several lift and fires aircraft, depending on the threat. Now, an airfield can be surveyed by remote means. Traditionally, airfield survey data would be hand typed into a PDF and staffed through the chain of command, languishing in bureaucratic purgatory. Now, airfield status can be passed through tactical datalinks, and command approval can be attained in minutes rather than weeks. The Air Force (AF) has recently codified changes to regulations that pave the way for the agile and dynamic air mobility operations we will need in the future. Authority to approve and control airland operations, however, remains nested in a small, specialized career field of Airmen. With the right training, tools, and authorities, joint and coalition warfighters could fulfill these duties, enabling unprecedented global access and maneuver.

### Background

The proposed Fixed-Wing Tactical Landing Zone (Tac LZ) Brief is included in the draft Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Joint Application of Firepower (JFIRE) dated 3 August 2022, currently under World Wide Review. This 12-line briefing is directly transcribed from the Tactical Landing Zone Survey in Department of the Air Force Manual (DAFMAN) 13-217, *Drop Zone, Landing Zone, and Helicopter Landing Zone Operations* and the brief's inclusion in the JFIRE has sparked some debate among the JFIRE community.<sup>1</sup> Some contend that the JFIRE is focused on the direct execution of fires missions, therefore a non-fires brief is irrelevant to most JFIRE users. This article argues that air mobility, while a distinct function, is an integral counterpart to fires within the parent concept of maneuver. Recent decades attest to the close proximity of fires and mobility; future warfighting concepts only accelerate this interconnection.

The JFIRE is highly used at the tactical level across the services, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and coalition forces to put requisite tools in the hands of operators. New regulation changes democratize air mobility operations beyond AF stovepipes and equip joint warfighters to maneuver in complex battlespaces more effectively.<sup>2</sup> Analysis and wargames indicate a critical need to increase speed in decision-making and execution; this article summarizes updated AF regulations that delegate and expand airland mission authorities accordingly and recommends the next steps for warfighters throughout the joint community. Inclusion of the Tac LZ Brief in the JFIRE is the first step in exercising and refining new dynamic joint mobility and fires tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) in a repeatable and risk-mitigated manner.

### **Expanded Maneuver**

The nature of war may be unchanging, but as the Joint Force prepares for future conflicts, the changing character of war is palpable. We will need to operate with unprecedented speed and synchronize effects across domains. To do so, we will need to receive, process, and share information at the tactical edge, and delegate authorities lower and more broadly. Success in these endeavors will rely heavily on both joint synchronization and integration with our Allies and partners.<sup>3</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff introduced the idea of *expanded maneuver* in the latest Joint Warfighting Concept. As General John Hyten, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explains, “in every area that an adversary can move, you have to figure out how to fill that space in time before they can move.”<sup>4</sup>

Joint doctrine reminds us that movement, maneuver, and fires are complementary warfighting functions.<sup>5</sup> In particular, air mobility is essential to joint fires providing speed, range, and mass that may be unattainable by ground vehicles. If not directly providing kinetic effects, air mobility assets move the personnel, weapons, ammunition, fuel, and equipment that do. And in most missions, these same aircraft fulfill a critical casualty evacuation role to the fires mission.

For special operations forces of the last two decades, Gen Hyten’s mandate to rapidly aggregate and disaggregate has been a mainstay of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. AF Special Operations Command (AFSOC) aircrew and special tactics airmen are well versed in the general idea of rapid aggregation and disaggregation to support joint fires. As the United States’ (US) footprint in Afghanistan condensed and forward operating bases were abandoned, the concept of mission support sites emerged. On a nightly occasion, MC-130s would dutifully pack their cargo compartment with ground force personnel and rearming/refueling teams, seizing abandoned airfields that could act as tactical lily pads for Army helicopters and ground teams to launch assaults. Over the course of a few hours, the airfield would be secured and controlled by AF special tactics teams, as Army lift and fires helicopters transitioned to and from their target, all while fixed-wing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and fires aircraft covered the “vertical flank.” Hours later, the airfield would collapse, and the war machines would disappear into the darkness.

### **Expanded Maneuver in Tactical Execution**

DAFMAN 13-217 governs drop zone, landing zone (LZ), and helicopter LZ operations, to include survey and assessment procedures and processes for all AF aircraft and

personnel. Recent changes to this regulation open new and dynamic opportunities for air mobility assets to integrate with joint and coalition units. Through training and certification in LZ operations, joint warfighters can be empowered to employ airpower to achieve multidomain effects.

Traditional survey procedures required an on-site evaluation by teams of specially trained and certified surveyors, usually AF Combat Control Teams/Special Tactics Officers (CCT/STO) in combat operations. These members gather all pertinent data for safe aircraft landing operations, such as the airfield dimensions, surrounding obstacles, weight bearing capacity of the surface, any damage, ruts, potholes, etc. Depending on the threat and operational environment, on-site survey may be impossible, or may jeopardize tactical speed and surprise, placing the mission or the CCT at risk. Thanks to innovations in airborne and on-orbit imaging, Tac LZs can be surveyed with high fidelity and confidence by teams of imagery analysts and certified surveyors from any location.<sup>6</sup> This allows our aircraft to operate at more locations and with less lead time, and most importantly, with little to no signature.

Removing the requirement for on-site survey does result in some transference of risk that must be accounted for and mitigated to the maximum extent practical. One means of reducing risk is by utilizing an LZ Safety Officer (LZSO), a role that could be fulfilled by any joint warfighter.<sup>7</sup> AFSOC maintains the validated LZSO syllabus and provides LZSO training, and Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1) conducts a validated course for US Marine Corps personnel. The training covers LZ assessment and airfield control/operations, preparing attendees to direct air mobility operations in the place of a highly specialized controller. Typical LZSO classes last two weeks and include five days of classroom instruction plus five days of field/live fly instruction. Classes are conducted in person at Hurlburt Field, Florida, Robins Air Force Base, Georgia, and Yokota Air Base, Japan. For course information contact HQ AFSOC A3TA- Special Tactics, [AFSOCA3.A3TA.SpecialTactics@us.af.mil](mailto:AFSOCA3.A3TA.SpecialTactics@us.af.mil), <https://usaf.dps.mil/sites/AFSOC-A3/A3T/A3TA/ST> or <https://hcs.usmc.mil/sites/mawts1/> for more information concerning LZSO training. LZSOs must conduct an academic review and LZSO event every 12 months to maintain currency.

For contingency operations, certified LZSOs can instruct other Department of Defense personnel to perform LZSO duties.<sup>8</sup> Sister service and partner nation personnel can attend both AFSOC and USMC courses, but current regulations stipulate that sister service LZSO certification outside of contingency operations is coordinated through a memorandum of agreement. While we build a vision of the future that is “integrated by design,” there is no established program to unify or validate partner nation LZSO/LZ Survey training.<sup>9</sup> AF Special Tactics and joint ground units have dedicated years of effort to training and building relationships with partner and Allied forces to build their capacity, ensure placement and access, and fortify a global air infrastructure. If these forces cannot integrate with US airpower, we are sacrificing critical warfighting capability. AFSOC must prioritize this strategic engagement opportunity. Future updates to the DAFMAN 13-217 must include provisions for sister service and partner nation personnel to be qualified without restriction upon successful course completion and remove this bureaucratic hurdle.

Bringing these proposed changes to fruition conveys the essence of expanded maneuver. In the future, by maintaining a small cohort of LZSOs, joint and coalition units operating in austere and dispersed locations could employ air mobility, assisted by USAF- or coalition-certified surveyors remotely. When a potential LZ is surveyed and approved remotely, the organic LZSOs could then make dynamic LZ assessments and direct aircraft landing operations with the JFIRE Tac LZ Brief as their guide. The capabilities and impacts of a relatively small group of experts would now be multiplied across the battlefield and airpower brought to bear in previously unimaginable ways.

## **Taking the Right Risks**

By democratizing air mobility authorities and employing TTPs codified in joint publications, fixed-wing aircraft can be leveraged to support fires with speed and surprise. Success in complex and unpredictable operations is not borne from a lack of structure; rather, it depends on having a structure that amplifies and empowers dynamic warfare. With the right authorities and tools in our regulations and TTPs, our warfighters can harness agility throughout the joint functions.

Such changes to our TTPs underscore a change in the way we assess and accept risk in tactical execution. After years of low-intensity conflict in familiar areas of responsibility, we've driven risk down and pushed command authorities up. Now we face a threat to the world order. Our risk calculus should not and cannot be the same. The Joint Force collectively agrees that authorities must be delegated down, but authorities alone will not help our warfighters take the right risks. War is inherently chaotic and uncertain; "The side that anticipates better, thinks more clearly, decides and acts more quickly, and is *comfortable operating with uncertainty* stands the greatest chance to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative over an opponent."<sup>10</sup> Dynamic operating constructs and agile tactical tools provide the supportive framework for our force to thrive in complexity, take the right risks, and defeat our adversaries cognitively and kinetically. The JFIRE as an instrument for this change is widely disseminated, printed on waterproof paper, and carried in the pockets of the joint warfighter. The Tac LZ Brief should be the newest tool in their toolbelt.

## **About the Author**

Major Nicole Pearl is an MC-130 Pilot and Weapons Instructor. She is currently serving on the Air Staff at the Pentagon.

## **End Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Department of the Air Force Manual (DAFMAN) 13-217. *Drop Zone, Landing Zone, and Helicopter Landing Zone Operations*, 19 APRIL 2022. [https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af\\_a3/publication/dafman13-217/dafman13-217.pdf](https://static.e-publishing.af.mil/production/1/af_a3/publication/dafman13-217/dafman13-217.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> DAFMAN 13-217

<sup>3</sup> Milley, Gen Mark A. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Written Statement to House Armed Services Committee Hearing: Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Budget Request*. 5 April 2022. [https://armedservices.house.gov/\\_cache/files/3/6/36fd4325-7e13-4740-b11d-0bf40add0af1/AE30A700A0EEDE824E32BCFBA71E839F.20220405-fc-witness-statement-milley.pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/_cache/files/3/6/36fd4325-7e13-4740-b11d-0bf40add0af1/AE30A700A0EEDE824E32BCFBA71E839F.20220405-fc-witness-statement-milley.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Hyten, Gen John. *Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chair on Defense Technology*. CSPAN video. 38 mins. 26 July 2021. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?513684-1/joint-chiefs-staff-vice-chair-discusses-defense-technology#!>

<sup>5</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Fires Support*. JP 3-09. Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 10 April 2019. [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_09.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_09.pdf)

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<sup>6</sup> DAFMAN 13-217, paragraph 4.2.6.

<sup>7</sup> The requirement for an LZSO or controller may be waived by a SOG/CC or COMAFSOF. DAFMAN 13-217, paragraphs 4.8, 4.9

<sup>8</sup> DAFMAN 13-217, paragraph 4.8.1.5.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Gen C.Q. 29 Aug 2022. *Gen. Charles Q. Brown, Jr. on Air Force Defense Strategy and Innovation*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjUarTTzkrE>

<sup>10</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army. *The Operations Process*. ADP 5-0. July 2019.

[https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN18126-ADP\\_5-0-000-WEB-3.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18126-ADP_5-0-000-WEB-3.pdf)

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