

# Bridging the Cultural Divide

## Understanding in the Joint Environment

By better articulating how all military engineers contribute to a common purpose, beyond component tasks, a greater shared understanding can be achieved across the joint community.

By Maj. Vincent A. Rea, RA, M.SAME, USAF

Every year, the U.S. Air Force provides several Field Grade officers the opportunity to attend a sister-service, professional military school. Upon graduation, these officers return leading airmen in their primary specialty, armed with valuable lessons from their joint education.

As a student in the 2016 U.S. Army Command & General Staff College's graduating class, I attained a clearer picture of how the other military branches perceive the role of airpower in warfare. I also became aware of how that perspective differs from a typical Air Force officer's point of view. After reflecting on this disparity, I developed a stronger vocabulary to describe cultural differences that result in miscommunication between the joint services. As an officer in the Air Force's engineer community, it is vital to understand our role within the larger context of the Air Force. By better articulating how engineers contribute to a common purpose, beyond our component tasks, we can achieve shared understanding throughout the joint community.

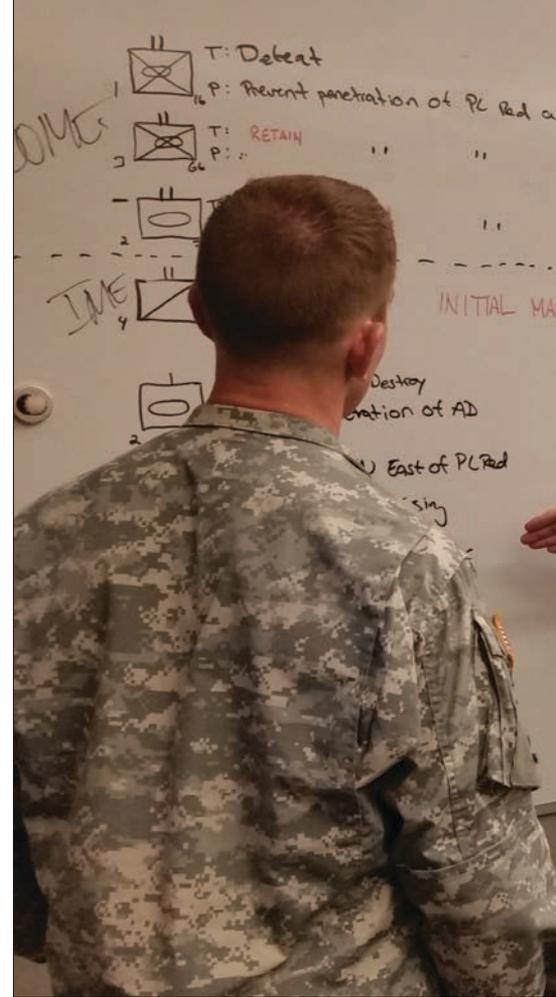
### DEFINITIONS MATTER

During 15 years of joint operations in multiple theaters, engineers were tested with employment in challenging environments. The evolution of the airman's involvement in ground maneuver during that time showcases Air Force contributions to the joint fight. Strategic leaders in all uniformed services continue leaning on

engineers to solve complex problems on the battlefield, often asking for far more than just airfield construction. Regrettably, despite recent impacts on two major military campaigns, senior U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps leaders do not generally view Air Force engineers as having the same level of war time proficiency as land-component engineers. Similarly, leaders in the Air Force engineer community have anecdotally conceded the argument that airmen are not "combat engineers" in the sense that they are not Sappers. This argument is not an indictment of the Sapper institution, nor of their capabilities or training; rather, it is an agreement that Air Force engineers are not formally trained to enable the same type of movement and maneuver. Regardless, fundamental engineering principles are constant across all services. A combat engineer removes obstacles to movement and maneuver. Air Force engineers pass the litmus test by removing obstacles to employing airpower in combat.

To be effective joint partners and equally recognized in the joint environment, Air Force officers of all specialties must understand and use a common language in joint operations. We must dispense with our aversion to the doctrine that lays out that language. At the same time, we must articulate what distinguishes us from the other services. For example, to enter the Civil Engineer career field, the Air Force demands officers obtain a formal degree in an engineering discipline, after which the Air Force Institute of Technology spends tremendous additional resources cultivating technically proficient officers with an accredited, graduate-level education.

In the 21st century, installations are a battlefield. At the tactical level, Remotely Piloted Vehicle missions and cyber activities are controlled from government buildings, while providing effects direct to the warfighter. At the strategic level, Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile silos are launched from a facility. In each case, the



The U.S. Air Force provides several Field Grade officers the opportunity each year to attend a sister-service, professional military school. These officers then return to their primary specialty after graduation, armed with valuable lessons from their joint education. PHOTOS COURTESY U.S. ARMY COMMAND & GENERAL STAFF COLLEGE

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Air Force engineer's responsibilities rest firmly within the combat realm, particularly so in contested environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

### SYSTEMS-FOCUSED CULTURE

To better explain the difference between Air Force expectations for engineers, and those of the joint community, officers must understand why those divergent perspectives exist. Specifically, Annex 3-34 of Air Force doctrine distinctly describes airpower as not only the aircraft that delivers it, but



“coordinated activities [between] elements in the warfare system.” This same document identifies the installation as a key component of a triad, that includes the “weapon system” and “weapon support system.”

The land component, by contrast, traditionally views combat power in terms of a unit’s ability to lethally move and maneuver. Counterinsurgency missions have reduced the frequency of offensive military operations and increased the value of stability operations. Presence trumped maneuverability, and made strategic basing and installation engineering more valuable.

The joint community continues to take for granted the role of the installation in providing airpower. This diminishes opportunities for engineers to propose valuable input during operational planning. Understanding our own doctrine, and relating it to joint doctrine, could help the combined arms community incorporate vital facility and infrastructure considerations earlier in the planning process.

The installation-culture does not easily translate between services because of disparate philosophies. One large difference is the scale at which each component contributes to warfare. Though it does not denote the

importance of the contribution itself, the dissimilarity reminds us that each branch serves a specific purpose under a common overall objective. Air Force engineers strive to embody their service manifesto, “Global Vigilance, Global Reach, Global Power for America.” They focus on weapon systems and their employment through a worldwide installation network. Conversely, the Army focuses on individual soldiers and their ability to carry out a mission, within precise parameters of time and place, “to fight and win our nation’s wars.”

On an Army post, facilities support training for yet unknown missions. On an Air Force base, current operations often bleed into future operations with no discernable transition. This allows the Air Force to “Seize the Initiative,” and the Army to mobilize to “Dominate,” as stated in the joint phasing concept. Consider an infantry soldier’s rifle. It is his primary means of defense, and his most compelling concern is its effective operation. Such is the case for airmen and their airbase. During wartime, the soldier and airman both employ their weapons in equally important ways, but the Army invests predominately in its soldiers and the Air Force in its installations.

## RELATING THROUGH DOCTRINE

My joint education experience provided me with many important lessons, primarily a refined understanding of the cultural differences between the air and land components. I realized, however, that such gaps can be transcended by increased familiarization with our doctrine.

Improved doctrinal competency fosters a common vernacular and yields more fruitful engagement between components. My time at the Command & General Staff College has shown that the joint community accepts the Air Force’s contributions to operational planning. The only request is that we help build shared understanding by utilizing common, joint terms. This is true not just for Air Force engineers, but all Air Force officers.

There is a need to facilitate dialogue about the military engineer’s mandate within joint operations. If doctrinal fluency can spark inter-service discourse, which is my belief, then the next step is to find additional means to close the cultural gap.

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