

## CREATING A CULTURE OF JOINT-LITERATE AIRMEN

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As joint, cross-domain operations increasingly lead the way in how our military wages war, Air Force senior leaders are required to know and to understand joint strategy. However, the Air Force has missed an essential piece in solving the joint puzzle. That is, our Airmen, NCOs, and CGOs—those who actually execute the mission—are left behind as an afterthought; this has resulted in a fundamental knowledge gap in the overwhelming majority of our Air Force as to how they fit into the joint fight. So the question becomes, “How do we teach Airmen to fully understand their role in the joint fight?”

In order to wholly understand this issue, it is important to recognize that there are two distinct underlying objectives. The first originates from an interoperability emphasis, which has been the traditional joint education focus. This objective asks, “How do we learn to execute joint operations with our joint partners?” This question has been tackled through the Officer Professional Military Education Policy (OPMEP).<sup>1</sup> Despite rigidly outlining the need for joint understanding at all levels, the cognitive learning and broader knowledge-based approach that has been dictated in the OPMEP is grossly insufficient for successfully instilling an understanding of and assigning value to the importance of the topic.

The second objective is derived from a culture-focused interpretation. This objective asks, “How do we create an Air Force culture in which Airmen at every level internalize their role in the joint fight, understand how their work feeds the Air Force mission, and how those missions feed the larger joint force?” Despite these objectives being distinct, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, fostering a joint culture will necessarily positively impact the Air

Force's ability to not only produce effective participants in the joint fight, but to produce joint *leaders* in the joint fight.<sup>ii</sup> Instilling an understanding of joint culture early will ensure that our future leaders are joint-minded from the beginning, which will increase their potential trajectory of filling the coveted joint leadership roles for which Air Force leaders are often overlooked.<sup>iii</sup>

Concerns have been voiced regarding whether inspiring an increased perspective of the joint world so early in an Airman's career might erode the Air Force culture.<sup>iv</sup> However, the Air Force culture struggles with a fragmented, job-specific lens *because* Airmen do not know or understand their role in the joint fight. Giving Airmen a more robust appreciation of their role in the joint world will help them to differentiate and appreciate their contribution; this will not create a greater chasm but, rather, will reinforce Air Force culture and pride in the effects that airpower brings to the fight.

Outlined here are three generalized steps that will ensure this understanding is instilled across the USAF while minimizing the time cost to our Airmen, who already bear an enormous burden with current mission and training requirements. The first step is to ensure the system values joint understanding and experience. Perceived stigmas associated with joint assignments as a CGO must be systematically dismantled. Assignments and training that are valuable to career progression and advancement will incentivize personnel to seek those experiences. Joint experience, not just in the current joint billets as an FGO, must be measured, recorded, and rewarded. As this is implemented, joint experience and understanding will be more widely valued and personnel will naturally seek out these opportunities.

The second step is to make broader use of carefully planned digital networking tools. Success using networking options is very sensitive to the details of execution, but networking also yields extremely high return for the level of demand on our Airmen's time. A common

issue with current tools is that there is little incentive for the initial population to get invested, so projects wither from lack of interest. Initial interest in these platforms must be incentivized; the metric from the previous step may provide opportunities to do just that. One potential execution of this type, a joint experience mentoring interface, would require Airmen receiving credit for the joint service to register for a period of time as a joint mentor with their basic background and joint experience in an available database. Airmen who are straight out of BMT or potentially deploying to a similar location could find these individuals with relevant information and contact them in order to ask questions.

The third step that would reinforce the joint mindset across all levels of the Air Force is targeted toward mid-tier joint learning. The premise behind this step is that a joint understanding at the squadron level requires that the NCOs are driving the conversation. Additionally, research has shown that the most effective way to learn is to teach, a phenomenon known as the protégé effect.<sup>v</sup> The third step would be most effectively implemented by establishing a joint education emphasis with a follow-on capstone for the NCO Academy. This capstone would require NCOs to take their joint learning back to their squadron and have a conversation with their junior Airmen about the relevance of what they've learned.

Operating in a joint world is the way of the future for our service members, and we are grossly hindering the growth of our junior leaders, both enlisted and officers, by failing to equip them with the knowledge, understanding, and experiences necessary to thrive in the joint environment. By placing a concentrated emphasis on the joint warfight, and by incentivizing joint experience, the Air Force will initiate a much-needed cultural paradigm shift, which will result in producing joint-minded Airmen who feel conviction in their purpose, their mission, and their role in the joint fight.

## REFERENCES

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