

Understanding Airmen: A Primer for Soldiers

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*If you don't love Soldiers,
you have no place in my
Air Force.*

— General Hal Hornburg

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PHOTO: Maintainers finish working on F-16 Fighting Falcons, 6 June 2007, at a base in Southwest Asia. F-16s flew six close-air-support missions on that day in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. (U.S. Air Force photo)

THE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT QUEST for victory in Iraq is putting enormous stress on the entire U.S. military establishment. As is predictable in such situations, one way the stress manifests itself is in a rising tide of interservice antagonism as the warfighting debate becomes more passionate.

This rivalry often seems more intense between the Army and the Air Force. Soldiers suffer most of the casualties in Iraq and are rightly concerned about the support they receive. Unfortunately, some Soldiers question the Air Force's role or denigrate it. Many Soldiers appear to believe that the Air Force is filled with people who, as the former chief of staff of the Army put it, are obsessed with "things that go fast, make noise, and look shiny."¹

Airmen, however, see themselves as part of a service that has been at war in the Middle East for 16 years, was key in defeating Iraq's conventional forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and is very much in today's counterinsurgency fight. Despite this, Airmen feel that the Army under-appreciates and misunderstands them. Many Airmen are concerned, for example, that the Army's new Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, trivializes airpower's role by confining it to a 5-page annex in a 282-page text.

Honest disagreements as to how to address the greatest threats of the 21st century are the premise for some of the contentiousness. Sure, some of it is sheer service parochialism on both sides, but much of it is simply a mutual lack of knowledge. Much of that is, in turn, the fault of the Air Force, which often does a poor job of explaining itself.

Airmen—rather naively—believe that the Air Force's spectacular successes speak for themselves. Because the Air Force does so many things so efficiently—from air defense to airlift to precision attack to reconnaissance to operating and controlling the Global Positioning System (GPS) satellites—it might appear to the Army (and everyone else) that all this is "easy" to do.

Airmen do see their service as unique. While it is certainly true that America's "airpower" includes the vitally important air arms of the other services, it is an article of faith among Airmen that the United States has only one Air Force—one service that focuses on maximizing options for decision-makers by optimizing airpower. To an Airman, airpower includes air, space, and cyberspace power in all its many dimensions.

Airmen contend that airpower's flexibility, range, and payload make it capable of applying force at tactical, operational, and strategic levels across the entire spectrum of conflict. Of course, the Army and the other services can do so as well. However, Airmen believe that what makes airpower different from land and sea power is the fact that it can assert U.S. military muscle literally anywhere in the world with a *velocity* that none can equal. To an Airman, the ability to act quickly is the coin of the realm in the 21st century, as is airpower's ability to apply combat power in a way that puts relatively few Americans at risk.

Scarcely anyone disputes the supremacy that U.S. airpower now enjoys in the dimensions in which it operates. To achieve that dominance, the Air Force is vastly more technology-dependent than the other services need to be, and that fact greatly influences Air Force culture and thinking. Obviously, the Air Force operates in environments that are only accessible by mastering technology, but it is really more than that.

The sheer sophistication of the technology counts a lot, perhaps even as much as the skill of the Airman wielding it. For example, from the first moment jet aircraft appeared in World War II, they had an immediate and radical impact. By comparison, when mechanized units first appeared on the battlefield in World War I, they had little effect on the war. It took decades for mechanization to evolve into the decisive force it became. No aviator—however skilled and courageous—can consistently overcome an opponent who deftly operates technologically superior equipment.

As a result, Airmen, aware of the long lead-time needed to develop complicated aircraft, always press to acquire the most advanced systems far ahead of potential adversaries. This can be a source of irritation to the other services where technological advantage changes the calculus of battles more slowly.

This scientific orientation is one reason the Air Force considers itself, rather immodestly, to be the most forward-thinking of the services. There are many consequences to that self-assessment. The Air Force identifies the past with obsolescence, and for the air weapon, obsolescence equates to defeat. This is why, for example, FM 3-24's heavy reliance on experiences in long-past counterinsurgency efforts does not always resonate with Airmen the same way it does with Soldiers.

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Examining the past for “lessons learned” is certainly something Airmen value, but they know today's capabilities easily dwarf yesterday's technological limit. Historical models are of limited value in an Airman's mind because the nature of the air weapon gives him a keen appreciation of how quickly technological change can alter the warfighting equation.

Airmen may also not read FM 3-24's slogan of “learn and adapt” as the unqualified good the manual touts it to be. While “adaptability” is certainly an important military virtue, when we juxtapose it with “learn,” it strikes Airmen as too defensive and reactive. To Airmen, this sounds a lot like absorbing the first blow and then bending to the enemy by trying to figure out how to fight him on his terms (just do so “better”). That is not the Air Force “way.” In air warfare, the first blow can be fatal to relatively fragile aircraft. This makes Airmen extremely offensive-minded, and they are more inclined to take an “anticipate and shape” approach than a “learn and adapt” process. An Airman likes to seize the initiative and force the adversary to fight on his terms—terms in which he believes his superior technology and training will give him the advantage.

This leads to another distinguishing aspect of Air Force culture. The other services proudly trace their heritage to ancient warriors and foreign armies and navies. The Air Force unapologetically revels in its status as the youngest service, uninhibited by thinking derived from the days before man conquered the air.

Although some criticize it for doing so, the Air Force admires much in the efficient and creative culture of civilian enterprises. The service recognizes that private enterprise played, and continues to play, an irreplaceable role in making and sustaining the United States as the world's foremost aviation nation. Given the many synergies and analogs that can exist with commercial aviation, it follows that

Air Force culture is more open to adopting the ways of business than are, perhaps, the cultures of the other services.

Airmen are proud of the warfighting success U.S. air and space supremacy produces. Serbs, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and Saddam Hussein's forces as well as today's Iraqi insurgents have all undergone what not a single American Soldier or Marine has suffered since the Korean War—the sheer torment and terror of death from hostile air attack. Because high-technology airpower can deliver persisting precision attacks in any weather, day or night, the effect is devastating. There is no escaping U.S. airpower.

Airmen believe that the precision revolution, along with air dominance, now produces an unprecedented ability to inflict a sense of helplessness that unhinges adversaries. Opponents who are slow to realize America's asymmetrical advantage in airpower suffer accordingly. A bitter Republican Guard colonel who survived America's air assault in 2003 castigated his leaders in *Time* magazine: "They forgot that we are missing air power. That was a big mistake. U.S. military technology is beyond belief."² Today, no military formation in the world can survive American-style air assault.

Yet, it is also true that Airmen's technological focus helps breed a culture of "assertive individualism" that is rather unusual in the armed services. Indeed, in the joint environment—especially with Soldiers—some view this trait as being unhelpful or even insolent. Why are Airmen this way? Some of this goes to the earliest history of flight: those who first stepped into flying machines were doing so against conventional scientific—and practical—wisdom. With that heritage, it is not surprising that an Airman's "DNA" inclines him or her to not accept the status quo and to ask "why" or, often, "why not?"

Moreover, as Airmen began to envision the military potential of flying machines, they ran into powerful bureaucratic and parochial resistance within the Armed Forces. The Airman's response was to question authority. Billy Mitchell is the obvious example, but there are many others. Hap Arnold, Claire Chennault, and Curtis LeMay, to name just a few, set a tone for the Airman's attitude that still resounds today.

Another element of Air Force culture that some Soldiers may find disquieting is its egalitarianism. Air

Force officers have never needed the formal social "distance" from its enlisted force that is common in the other services. Although the paradigm is changing, for most of its history, the Air Force, completely unlike its sister services, has been an organization in which mostly its *officers* fought, not its enlisted force. When the enlisted force did go into harm's way, such as members of crewed aircraft, the close comradeship of shared risk in tight quarters created traditions that shaped a somewhat different kind of officer/enlisted relationship than exists elsewhere in the U.S. military.

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Some critics imply that the Air Force's egalitarianism and other aspects of its culture make it undisciplined and the least "martial" of the services. The facts show, however, that Air Force culture does not equate to any deficiency in martial qualities when it really counts—in combat. Clearly, Airmen have paid the price in blood. For example, during World War II, more Airmen died in the European Theater of Operations than did Marines in all theaters of that conflict.

Admittedly, Air Force culture can be perplexing to outsiders. Rick Newman and Don Shepperd's recent book about Airmen during the Vietnam War, *Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail*, provides great insight. Although the Airmen the book describes plainly had what we might charitably call a casual approach to military etiquette and behavior, there is no question that in probing the Ho Chi Minh Trail they magnificently executed a mission that was among the most dangerous and demanding of any performed by any service during the entire war.

In the current conflict in Iraq, Airmen have demonstrated courage equal to that of the other services—and not just in the air. For example,



U.S. Air Force. TSGT Brian Davidson

Airman 1st Class James Blair coordinates air cover for Army 10th Mountain Division light-infantry Soldiers during operations in the Sroghar Mountains, Afghanistan, 2003.

Airmen in truck companies have proudly driven more than 7.6 million miles in over 1,100 convoys into Iraq without refusing any mission.³ In addition, Airmen were principally responsible for Operation Safeside, a highly successful “outside the wire” ground combat mission that “mounted 338 combat patrols [and] bagged 17 ‘high value’” insurgents while simultaneously suppressing attacks on Balad Air Base, Iraq.⁴

Nor is the Air Force undisciplined, as some seem to think. In fact, Airmen have, by far, the lowest rates of alcohol and drug abuse of any of the services, and their rate of disciplinary actions is much lower than those of the other services.⁵ Airmen also perform well under stress. After improper activities among guards at Abu Ghraib imploded into sadistic abuse, hundreds of Airmen later took up the difficult duties without further incident. Let me be clear. I note these matters not to embarrass any other service, but only to demonstrate that the Air Force is a highly disciplined military force of warfighters.

The technological emphasis in the Air Force does, however, create a heavy demand for personnel who are extremely tech-savvy. This can produce challenges because the Air Force often competes directly with private industry for the same high-quality people. As a group, Airmen have ready options in civilian life. Fortunately, so far the Air Force has been very effective in recruiting and retaining the right people.

How does the Air Force do it? Actually, the answer has much to do with another misunderstood feature of Air Force culture, the emphasis on quality of life. All services recognize the importance of their people, but in the Air Force there is special deference to the axiom “recruit the individual, retain the family.” Specifically, the Air Force does not want to place its Airmen in the position of having to choose between the quality of life they could easily acquire for their families in the civilian world and what is available to them in the service of their country.

For that reason, the Air Force is unapologetic about having the finest, most family-friendly bases in the Armed Forces. To fill its ranks, the Air Force believes putting resources into quality of life improvements is more cost-effective than spending dollars on recruiting. Consequently, the Air Force spends the least on recruiting, yet has not been obliged to lower standards.

The technological orientation of Airmen that makes them so attractive to private industry also creates a perspective about warfighting that often differs from that of others in the Armed Forces. Airmen are the leading proponents of a way of war that seeks to benefit from technological advantage by substituting it for manpower in achieving victory. Although no Airman relishes the notion of killing another human being, when required to do so, Airmen do not seek the “fair fight” or the glory of close combat.

Rather, Airmen shamelessly seek to destroy adversaries with as little risk to themselves or friendly forces as possible. They always look for ways to subject the enemy to the impersonal machine against which the human cannot stand, however determined. In short, Airmen are disciples of George S. Patton Jr.’s view that the object of war is to get the other guy “to die for his country.” Airmen are proud of the fact that, for example, the

Serbs were forced from Kosovo during Operation Allied Force without the need to put a single American Soldier in harm's way.⁶

Still, few issues more frustrate Airmen than the apparently intractable belief among some Soldiers that the Air Force is wedded to a notion of "strategic bombing" at the expense of ground forces. It seems that no amount of data shakes that belief. Forgotten, it appears, are events such as 1968's Operation Niagara where B-52s poured 60,000 tons of high explosives on North Vietnamese troops, shattering their siege of the Marines at Khe Sanh. More recently, the statistics from Operation Iraqi Freedom show that over three-fourths of the strike sorties were in kill boxes or were otherwise close air support efforts.⁷

Providing support to U.S. troops on the ground is relentlessly imprinted on Airmen. As General Hal Hornburg, one of the Air Force's most distinguished combat veterans and the former commander of the Air Combat Command, put it, "If you don't love Soldiers, you have no place in my Air Force." Today's Airmen do "get it"—yet, sadly, the myth of Air Force indifference to Soldiers seems to persist.

All of this said, it is quite true that Airmen do not do enough to understand the cultures of their

sister services. That deficiency is one the Air Force is attempting to address through better training. Thousands of Airmen are also achieving a greater appreciation of the Army by working with Soldiers as augmentees or "in lieu of" forces at various forward locations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Regardless, no real Airman will ever suggest that there is a better army than the U.S. Army. Our Army is the finest ever seen in the history of warfare, not just because of the quality of its training and equipment but because of the valor and patriotism of its Soldiers. Those qualities are above any debate, and Airmen are honored to serve beside their brothers and sisters in green. **MR**

NOTES

1. General Peter Schoomaker, "Ground Truth, Interview," *Government Executive*, 14 September 2006, <www.govexec.com/features/0906-15/0906-15s1.htm>.
2. Terry McCarthy, "What Ever Happened to the Republican Guard?" *Time*, 4 May 2003, <www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,449441.00.html>.
3. Compare Gerry J. Gilmore, *Alleged Troop Mutiny was 'Isolated Incident'*, *General Says*, 18 October 2004, American Forces Press Service, <www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2004/n10182004_2004101805.html>.
4. See Rebecca Grant, "Safeside in the Desert," *Air Force Magazine* (February 2007) <www.afa.org/magazine/feb2007/0207desert.asp>.
5. See Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Personnel, 2005* (December 2006) <www.ha.osd.mil/special_reports/2005_Health_Behaviors_Survey_1-07.pdf>.
6. See, generally, "Operation Allied Force," *Global Security.org*, 27 April 2005, <www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/allied_force.htm>.
7. See U.S. Central Air Forces, *Operation Iraqi Freedom—By the Numbers*, April 2003, <www.au.af.mil/au/awcl/awcgate/af/oifcentaf.pdf>.

HAMSI

**Dull heat and dust choke my soul,
As bright red life drips, drips,
Into this place of brown and waste.**

**The shallow smiles I see,
Are only for our money,
Their sullen stares behind bright veils,
Are more the timbre of reality.**

**Dried ochre was once his life,
That I can't scrub away,
No matter how hard I try, and try.**

**And I'd never have been here,
If it weren't for their hate,
Of the green and joy,
I've left behind.**

—LTC Sean Michael Salene, USMC

