Air Force Personnel Recovery—Global Structure for Global Success

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Issue. With a proud heritage and an impressive list of achievements since the beginning of operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, the Air Force rescue community has yet to reach its full potential because of significant shortfalls in a number of areas. While the desire for stability is laudable for a community that has moved between commands twice in recent years, maintaining an organizational structure that sacrifices force/capability development for constancy imperils the rescue community's long term success. Currently, there is insufficient senior leader advocacy and strategic vision development/employment, which is required to revamp how rescue educates, trains, equips, tasks, and command and controls its forces. This is leading to suboptimal outcomes for the Air Force's most diverse conventional/irregular capability.

Background. Understanding that "words matter," discussion of oft misused terms is advisable. The terms combat search and rescue (CSAR), Personnel recovery, and Rescue are routinely used interchangeably to the detriment of the community. *Personnel recovery* is a function that is vast in scope and best viewed as a system DOD implements through multiple methods, each of which has an associated set of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). *CSAR* is Air Force's method of choice. *Rescue* is a mission set that focuses on the end-state of saving lives. The United States conducts these missions directly through the personnel recovery function, or indirectly through irregular initiatives. Rescue saves lives, but has many other strategic implications beyond preserving the force, such as stopping enemy propaganda, avoiding intelligence collection, and maintaining the moral high ground. At the same time, Rescue saves lives with functions beyond personnel recovery, such as advising and assessing partner nation forces to increase their ability to execute a rescue mission. Unfortunately, there is no neat relationship between Rescue and Personnel recovery.

Personnel recovery, currently one of 12 Air Force core functions, remains of debatable importance in the minds of many Airmen. While the chief of staff of the Air Force clearly touted the community's capabilities in his 14 September 2010 address to the Air Force Association, the most compelling piece of the argument involves examining the issue of domains. Both the Army and Marine Corps operate in the land domain where an isolating event can be mitigated with forces capable of affecting a recovery by reassigning the task to the nearest or most capable ground unit. The Navy operates in the sea domain where it can retask any number of surface or subsurface assets to affect a recovery should a Sailor become isolated. The Air Force operates in the air and space domains. Unfortunately, if the Air Force experiences an isolating event, the recovery will take place on land or at sea, not air or space. If there were no dedicated Air Force Rescue community—capable of operating in a complex coordinated interdomain environment—the service would lack the requisite capabilities needed to recover downed or missing personnel. There are simply no other Air Force personnel capable of conducting such operations. The only way to meet the obligations laid out in DOD Directive 3002.01E, Personnel Recovery in the Department of Defense and Joint Publication 3-50, Personnel Recovery is with a well organized, trained, and equipped Rescue community. Since the service clearly has a "rescue bill to pay," the critical question facing decision-makers is how to modernize outdated paradigms while building and maintaining a capable and productive personnel recovery force that can operate in a complex strategic environment.

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The Personnel Recovery Operational Concept expands the uses of rescue beyond traditional CSAR and into a broader definition that uses the rescue "ends" of saving lives to justify an expansive list of capabilities including humanitarian aid, disaster response, security cooperation, aviation advisory, and a broad array of air diplomacy missions. Additionally, the Air Force Irregular Warfare Tiger Team Report recommends using rescue forces in a building partner/building partner capacity role because their inherent humanitarian nature provides access to countries that would otherwise shun US military assistance. These visions will never be reached unless Air Force Rescue forces are organized under a single commander whose only focus is personnel recovery/rescue: development of forces, doctrine, equipment, and employment TTPs. If left in a system where rescue forces are dispersed across the combat Air Force (CAF), plugged into existing CAF Operations Groups (as they are overseas) and CAF numbered Air Force's (NAF), and led by senior officers newly arrived to the Rescue community, the capability will continue to remain on life support. When three of 11 active duty operations squadrons are under the command of nonrescue groups and NAFs—with no organizational ties to the rest of the Rescue community—there is no *raison d'être* to further the cause of the community and mediate between internal conflicts of opinion. How can we gain synergies and effectively manage a service core function and the force it executes without a single voice?

Personnel Recovery/Rescue currently has no command opportunity beyond the 23rd Wing commander. Thus, the last time a career Rescue–Airman can inform the service or advocate for the community is as a colonel. The limited path to flag officer, through 23rd Wing command, has the maximum *potential* of producing one brigadier general every two years. Additionally, any Rescue professional that attains flag officer rank is pulled out of the rescue chain of command and put into assorted positions, none of which relate to personnel recovery. This results in suboptimal decision-making in support of a strategic vision, and training and equipping initiatives. Unless Air Combat Command (ACC) is willing to place a senior Rescue–Airman in charge rather than leaders with no background in personnel recovery/rescue, serious problems that threaten the strategic and operational use of rescue assets will persist.

Recommendations. Two courses of action have the potential to alleviate current inefficiencies. First, move Rescue to the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Overseas units will fall under SOC leadership either by creating Rescue Groups (add HC-130Js and/or LIMA aircraft while recapitalizing an aging HH-60 fleet) or attaching overseas squadrons to the 352nd or 353rd Special Operations Group. The last attempt to bring Rescue into AFSOC failed because rescue assets were not fully integrated into the command. When rescue forces deployed, they did so under the Combined Forces Air Component Commander. If Rescue is moved into AFSOC, it is imperative they integrate with SOC when they deploy, either under a theater special operations command for irregular warfare missions or a joint forces SOC/combined forces SOC for more conventional operations.

Second, remission 11th Air Force as a Rescue NAF under ACC. The NAF will maintain operational control (OPCON)/tactical control/administrative control of all rescue forces—in the continental United States or overseas, active, guard, and reserve. With the impending release of the new Unified Command Plan, Alaska will fall under OPCON of Northern Command/ North American Aerospace Defense Command so it follows that Alaska defense forces would fall under 1st Air Force, freeing 11th Air Force for retasking. This allows for the addition of a Rescue NAF with **no** increase in manpower requirements. By creating a Rescue NAF, there will be a single voice and vector that will attend tackle the organize, train, and equip functions necessary to achieve maximum results from a truly multidimensional Rescue community.

There are obvious branches to this concept: Bring the entire Rescue NAF underneath AFSOC to increase their ability to manage the large addition of forces, in essence combining the two options. Additionally, broadening the scope from a Personnel Recovery/Rescue to an IW NAF either underneath ACC or AFSOC would create an organization focused on balancing Air Force efforts in the irregular fight with those preparing for future conventional employment.

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