Civil Aviation’s Tactical Role in Uplifting US Military in Dynamic Theaters

Industry and Government Must Work Together to Sustain This Vital Resource

By Don Wetckam, Chairman, AAR Airlift
Photos courtesy of AAR Airlift
It's no secret that the civil aviation sector provides valuable support to overseas Department of Defense (DOD) operations worldwide. The Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) is a strategic asset that augments the DOD's organic airlift capacity in times of expanding requirements. The CRAF executes long-haul personnel and cargo transport services to and from major hubs, many of which sustain longstanding OCONUS [Outside Continental United States] DOD bases. The somewhat routine nature of these routes supports a robust CRAF upon which DOD can call to meet urgent/emergency tasks. As such, the Part 121 operators who make up the CRAF benefit by having mid- to long-term visibility into DOD international air transport requirements.

But what about the tactical support requirements at the other end of those large hubs? More and more, US military forces are spread thin, whether in remote corners of combat zones in Afghanistan or far-flung jungles of sub-Saharan Africa. Rather than permanent or semi-permanent bases, these camps may be active for only a matter of months, before the mission moves on to new territory. Even in places like Afghanistan where US ground forces have been present since the early 2000s, the changing nature of sectarian violence in various regions demands constant reallocation of resources, and thus, an agile logistics support network to sustain it.

**SIGNIFICANT ROLE PLAYED**

A handful of Part 135 operators deliver a substantial portion of the DOD’s tactical intra-theatre airlift support to meet this ever-present set of requirements. Although lesser known than the CRAF, the sheer magnitude of personnel and cargo moved by these Part 135 operators is significant. For example, AAR Airlift, which has been operating fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft in Afghanistan since 2004, has logged over 242,000 flight hours transporting more than 2 million passengers and delivering over 238 million pounds of mail and cargo in and around Afghanistan. At the peak of the US presence in Afghanistan, AAR Airlift had more than 40 aircraft in-country, and operated from eight bases. While AAR Airlift had the largest aviation footprint of any DOD contractor during the surge, it was only one of several contractors delivering this vital service in support of US Central Command operations, which demonstrates the scope of DOD’s reliance on this civil contractor community to execute missions.

Rather than flying designated routes requiring multi-day stopovers like the CRAF carriers, tactical airlift providers embed operations for extended periods of time—sometimes years—living and working alongside the military units they serve. Therefore, Part 135 operators supporting DOD units overseas face a unique set of challenges in executing their customers’ missions.

**UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF TACTICAL SUPPORT**

The embedded nature of tactical airlift operations requires a robust maintenance and logistics support apparatus. Line and base maintenance functions must often be performed without the benefit of traditional hangar facilities. Inventory analyses must take into account both the harsh operating environment, which may reduce mean time between key component overhauls, and the lead time required for the transport and customs clearance of critical spares.

Operating in semi-permissive environments comes with elevated risk. In concert with contracting officials and commanders in the field, operators develop unique protocols to understand and safely manage those risks, and use daily intelligence reports and threat analyses to inform day-to-day operations. Again, this differs from how the CRAF is managed, with global operations administered centrally from the Tanker Airlift Control Center. On any given day, US Transportation Command commanders know what capability is available within the CRAF fleet, whereas the tactical operations are decentralized. To a large extent, this management approach is driven by necessity, as commanders in the field may have access to the best intelligence information to direct tactical resources. Nonetheless, the overall commercial tactical airlift support fleet is not managed as one strategic asset.

**RAPID STAND UP**

The commercial sector has repeatedly demonstrated its agility and ingenuity when faced with changing requirements. When military commanders had an urgent requirement to establish a tactical airlift unit at a remote base in Afghanistan, AAR Airlift fielded a turnkey, two-helicopter operation less than 30 days after notification. And industry has developed new capabilities to support the warfighter, like a fixed-wing, precision airdrop capability to resupply troops engaged in active hostilities, or night vision operations for aerial recovery and licensed medical treatment of injured soldiers. When industry delivers these capabilities, it’s done in coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration, the government contracting officer, in-theatre leadership, and in compliance with host-nation regulations. The tactical airlift sector is extremely adaptive in building service solutions to meet the challenges in the field.

**COMPLICATED LOGISTICS REQUIREMENTS**

With these feats come the back-end support functions. Part 135 operators embedded with military units use a rotational workforce to get the job done. So in addition to ensuring the skills, training, and qualifications of its highly regulated workforce, companies are also responsible for pre-deployment exercises such as obtaining work permits or travel visas; morale, welfare, and recreation resources, including connectivity to family stateside; and sometimes life support to include lodging, meals, and medical care.
The tactical airlift support providers deliver a highly specialized service, which solves a complex problem for DOD forces. And while the nature of conflicts around the world may change, the need for commercial long-haul and tactical airlift support will remain. The use of industry resources allows the DOD to focus its resources on capabilities squarely on its warfighting mission. Industry also helps support covert operations. When a large military presence may be unwelcome by locals or undesirable to commanders, the commercial providers are able to deliver a low-key presence to augment Special Operations forces.

**READINESS AT RISK**

As we’ve seen, this industry has proven to be an invaluable asset in its ability to adapt, respond, and embed as a true mission partner. When the surge is over and the dust settles, what’s next for these tactical airlift providers?

Without a long-term strategy to promote the health of the industry—such as the long-haul routes that feed a lifeline to the Craf when operational requirements are low—these tactical support operators must turn to new markets. Some support friendly nation governments and militaries, or find work in the non-governmental organization marketplace such as the United Nations or World Food Programme. For instance, AAR Airlift landed a contract in 2015 to provide the first commercial search and rescue service to the UK Ministry of Defence in the Falkland Islands, building on AAR’s expertise of embedding with military operations and delivering highly specialized aviation operations in austere environments. Still others seek utility work overseas, such as firefighting or construction. While seasonal work can be profitable, the cost to ferry or transport these aircraft often makes chasing one-off jobs an impractical long-term business strategy. Under the current ad-hoc approach, when an urgent DOD requirement for tactical airlift support arises, the commercial aircraft and associated support assets may not always be available for immediate mobilization into theatre in the same way a 747 can. The support elements required to deploy this type of operation are much greater.

**NEED COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC-PRIVATE APPROACH**

A more comprehensive approach to the procurement and contract management of this tactical force would further enhance safety in these high-risk environments and strengthen the future viability of this crucial capability. Safety is paramount for all aviation professionals, and the commercial tactical airlift industry occupies a space unlike any other. Due to the unique mission sets this industry delivers, procurement, contract management, and regulatory oversight must all be aligned so that risks can be appropriately assessed and managed.

Additionally, a strategic approach to the management of this industry would deliver enhanced services and responsiveness for DOD forces. The tactical airlift providers truly deliver a turnkey service, which requires a high level of technical expertise and institutional knowledge. An approach, which recognizes the significant contribution and long-term need for this resource, would provide enhanced stability for the industry, foster healthy competition, and drive innovation.

In addition to the traditional/historic war-fighting efforts, for the foreseeable future, it's likely DOD missions will continue to expand in pursuit of non-state actors as well, elevating the role of tactical airlift support operators. The effective strategic management of this critical resource can further enhance mission success. **DTJ**

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