



The Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Liaison Officer: A Critical Intelligence Node in Agile Combat Operations

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1. Purpose

General George Kenney, Commander of Allied Air Forces in the Southwest Pacific, 1942-45 famously said “Air power is like poker. A second-best hand is like none at all — it will cost you dough and win you nothing.” When the stakes are at their greatest, in the midst of major combat operations (MCO), the joint force must employ each asset prudently and judiciously to ensure maximized lethal combat application.¹ The United States Air Force (USAF) coined the framework, agile combat employment (ACE), in order to obtain the winning hand in a complex and potentially dangerous poker match. Furthermore, within ACE, expeditionary intelligence Airmen will form the contingency intelligence network (CIN), creating an interconnected web, serving not only to inform aircrew survivability, but maximizing the successful application and dominance of air power across all domains.

A critical node of this network, rapidly deployed in support of the 2022 Ukraine Crisis with Task Force (TF) Dragon, is the USAF Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Liaison officer (ISRLO), interwoven into the fabric of the joint force through association with the US Army (USA) and tactical air control party (TACP). Various economists and academics propose that data is “the oil of the 21st century,” while a key USA Colonel (O-6) deployed with the same task force confirms “the key to the success for the US forces in the future is going to be data-centric warfare.”² Arguably, ISRLO placement and access demonstrated the ability to quickly parse and disseminate pertinent information and connections critical to air and joint force successes. TF Dragon ISRLOs successfully demonstrated the global reach of the CIN in MCO through serving a ground to air and air to ground intelligence interlocutors between the air component A2 staff and operational ISR units and the land component G2, Corps and Division commanders and staff.

This article offers observations in conceptual and practical employment of ISRLOs in an expeditionary capacity whether in support of the USAF or its sister components. It can

be leveraged by MAJCOM and COCOM operations and intelligence staffs to identify appropriate emplacement and requests for forces, as well as apprise sister services of ISRLO capabilities, placement, and access. First, we propose a perspective of how to best employ ISRLOs embedded in support of multiple domains through liaising with ground and maritime partners in MCO, optimizing joint force air component commander (JFACC) capabilities to include surveillance, collection and processing assets and finished intelligence products in an austere, distributed/degraded environment in support of the combatant commander. Second, the success of interconnectedness and true distributed reach demonstrated in support of EUCOM's Operation New Normal (ON2) offers a blueprint for the codification of CIN best practices employable in a future conflict as a plug and play mechanism, especially amongst changing TACP and fires tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). Finally, this article highlights strengths demonstrated by the ISRLO specialty, while noting potential weaknesses to mitigate rather than succumbing to an achilles heel in the network. Ultimately, this article serves to advertise the role of the ISRLO in future all domain ACE operations, offer a CIN illustration in various phases of MCO, and to strengthen the greater combat air force (CAF) by increasing interaction between key operational warfighting echelons and air and joint force decision makers.

2. Multi-Domain Contingency Intelligence Network in Theater Air Control System/Army Air Ground System (TACS AAGS)

A Novel proposal to employ expeditionary TACP Intelligence Airmen (ISRLOs) in MCO

Traditional ISRLO duties focus on the triad of "advise, assist, and educate." Historically, they embed with USA corps, division, and subordinate echelons to leverage airborne and national ISR assets to satisfy commander's information requirements and targeting objectives.³ ISRLOs are often the sole USAF intelligence officer at echelon within the ground or special operations component. Their placement and access allow them to apprise the aligned unit commander on joint force collection operations, airborne ISR assets, and current/future employment. (See TACS/AAGS in Figure 1-1)

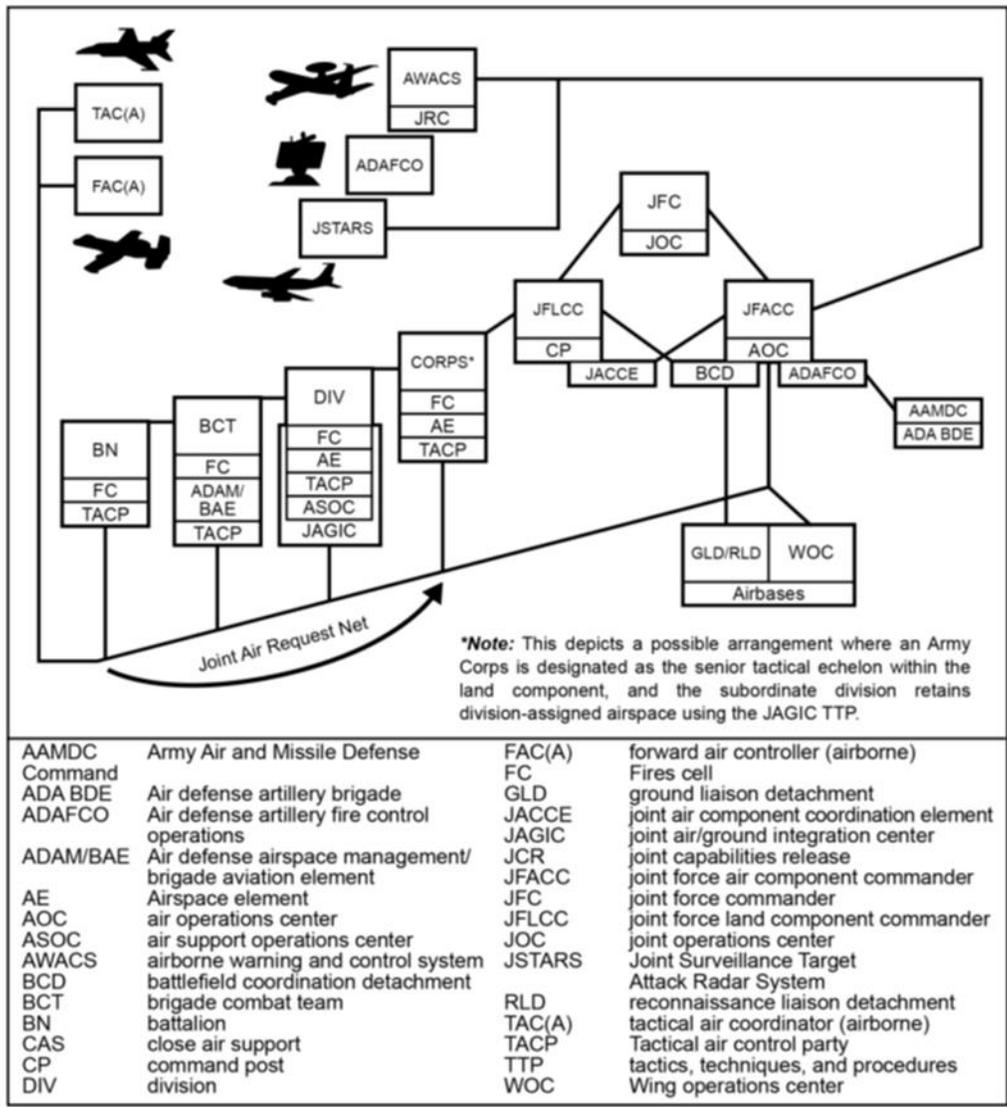


Figure 1-1. TACS/AAGS – Joint Air-Ground Integration Center (2019)

ISRLOs often use their flexibility of being “aligned, not assigned” to conduct *battlefield circulation* to their “downtrace units,” and to coordinate with the senior echelon of the TACS, the air operations center (AOC). Simply put, their distinct ability to travel to different distributed sites allows them to be a force multiplier when it comes to instructing and advising their supported unit on how to best leverage airborne ISR assets, the air tasking order cycle, and processing, exploitation, and dissemination (PED). The ISRLO’s high demand, low density asset optimization skillset proved extremely critical within the Global War on Terror (GWOT), providing overwatch in low/moderate intensity conflicts where aerial assets and niche capabilities were at a premium. The input from intelligence airmen with TACP experience on component staff often made the difference between success and failure of several ground operations

that depended on mission critical information only obtained via airborne ISR and associated PED.

Early 2020: Intelligence Airmen assigned to CJTF-OIR and the Military Advisory Group-Iraq (MAG-I) worked with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to leverage ISR for Destroy-Daesh (ISIS) operations. CJTF Airmen leveraged joint ISR assets and PED to find, fix, and track Daesh positions. Airmen advocated for and procured ISR and PED to support the ISF, despite higher priorities simultaneously coupled with a reduction of forces in theater. Air advisors (in conjunction with CJTF ISR assets) trained the ISF on basic ISR operational employment, fusion, and analysis principles. Both lines of effort by expeditionary intelligence Airmen allowed some of the first successful ISF-led D-Daesh ground operations supported primarily with Iraqi offensive air power and organic ISR not enabled by special operations forces or unconventional means. Iraqi Security Forces might not have otherwise been as successful without input and assistance from the unique placement of intelligence Airmen.

ISRLOs typically embed operationally with the Army via the TACP, primarily via the joint air-ground integration center (JAGIC), air support operations center (ASOC), or the joint air component coordination element (JACCE) at various echelons of the TACS-AAGS.⁵ ISRLOs maintain situational awareness of and optimize theater and organic ISR assets to support ground operations. This enables critical support otherwise unavailable to conventional forces to assist with targeting and battle damage assessment collection. Within the USAF's new ACE framework, forward ISRLOs may assume an even more mission critical role of advising and assisting spokes in the field, far away from the hub. In ACE, multi-capable Airmen (MCA) are responsible for various facets of mission support. This includes communications, gathering, fusing, and disseminating information to their supported units, normally a broad variety of aircrew. This is tentatively known within Air Combat Command (ACC) as the CIN. The intent of the CIN is to maximize airpower success and aircrew survivability. Intelligence Airmen may be located at primary operating locations (OLs), wing operations centers (WOCs), contingency OLs, or even with aircrew in certain cases. They may embed with the TACP and CRC in future concepts such as the tactical operations center-light (TOC-L) and Air Control Integration Team (ACIT). Collection operations are necessary as well as the need to leverage the federated ISR enterprise for aircrew situational awareness and targeting. MCO will face a resource constrained environment paired with a densely populated enemy threat picture of integrated air defense system, air, space, maritime, ground and electromagnetic warfare.

The inherent *flexibility* of ISRLOs allows them to *circulate* to the WOCs, squadrons, and other OLs. In an updated CIN construct, ISRLOs should exercise their core competencies to advise, assist, and educate intelligence Airmen on ground operations and the totality of ISR collection operations to include sensors (and associated PED) in support of the respective theater. Innate knowledge of and direct liaison authority (DIRLAUTH) to the AOC and ISR units facilitates targeting and mission planning for tactical USAF units. The ISRLO can link Airmen in the combat intelligence cell (CIC) and mission planning cells (MPC) into the TACP (ASOCs & JAGICs) and flying

squadrons. This linkage offers enhanced targeting and threat reporting accuracy. (See Figure 1-2)

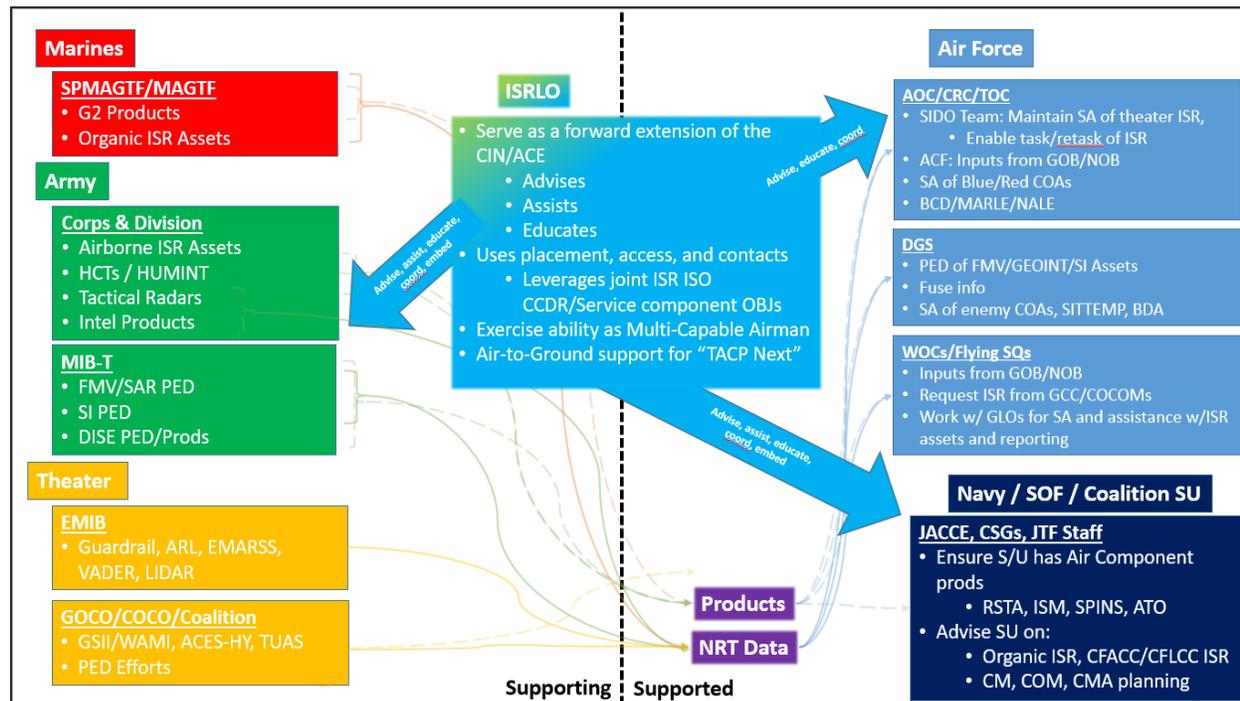


Figure 1-2. Conceptual ISRLO Employment in PHI/PHII

Critical to achieving various component objectives is the ISRLO's ability to function as a *forward extension* of the CIN in PHASE (PH) I and II of a MCO. Through *placement, access, and relationships*, ISRLOs facilitate not only air component ISR in support of the ground force, but may leverage US Navy (USN), SOF, and USA ISR and establish contracts with applicable support agencies (collections, targeting, and PED) to support the JFACC or joint forces maritime component commander (JFMCC). The ISRLO will be in a unique position to liaise with Lead Wing and ACE elements to bring joint ISR, planning, and PED capabilities to bear. Further, ISRLOs may be in the position to leverage joint support organizations, like combat support agencies (CSAs), US Marine Corps (USMC) air-ground task force (MAGTF) elements, and USA Military Intelligence Battalions (MIBs) or multi-domain task forces (MDTFs) to support joint efforts in PHI/II. To do this, the intelligence Airman should be stationed in/deployed to appropriate locations to leverage their flexibility.

2020-2021: Intelligence Airmen (to include an ISRLO) exclusively positioned to work with CJTF-OIR, SOJTF-OIR, and sister task forces synchronized disparate organizations and assets to support malign actor targeting efforts within the Combined Joint Operations Area. Planners scheduled and established contracts with USAF, SOF, and coalition ISR assets to enable collections on theater priorities. Intelligence airmen regularly coordinated with the 609 AOC/ISR to develop unique layered ISR operations with theater ISR. NTISR and PED expertise from the SPMAGTF was further leveraged to enhance lethal and nonlethal targeting efforts within the OIR CJOA. Planning and targeting support continue to this day in the form of the CJTF Multidomain Effects

Division (MDED), a combination of lethal and nonlethal fires fed in part by a system established and facilitated by intelligence Airmen.⁶

Blueprint to Codify CIN best practices (as employed by TF Dragon in EUCOM)

The success of interconnectedness and the true distributed reach of the USAF intelligence network demonstrated in support of EUCOM's ON2, offers a blueprint for the codification of CIN best practices employable in a future conflict as a plug and play mechanism. Two USAF ISRLOs forward deployed with TF Dragon in their mission to assure North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners and deter Russian aggression in early 2022. Their function, as JFACC ISRL Os, was to optimize collection capabilities and air threat intelligence awareness in support of the ground force through advising, assisting, and educating USA counterparts. These individuals concurrently provided additional insight into the ground force collection concept, border crossing points, routes of interests and non-combatant evacuation safe havens to the air component, streamlining oversight and communication. Ultimately, commanders and directors from both services relayed the resounding success of the intelligence network provided by a few key individuals embedded throughout the TACS-AAGS.

February - July 2022: The TF Dragon ISRLOs showcased the ability to act as a CIN multiplier and extension in ACE. They served as the forwardmost Air Force Intelligence Liaison to the AOC/ISRD with access, placement, and the right-fit personality. They are required to embody a well-rounded knowledge of joint, coalition, and SOF ISR operations to include key collections management principles of Collection Operations Management (COM), Collection Requirements Management (CRM) and Collection Management Authority (CMA), employment, layering, PED, tasking and further fusion of collected data.

There are five key lessons learned for the ISRLO from deployment to the European theater in 2022. Most importantly, as a liaison, understanding the geography and environment in which you operate is critical, to include the layout of local and combatant command relationships. Secondly, in high operating tempo and times of uncertainty, interconnectedness through virtual syncs, be they daily, hosted by the intelligence directorate of the air component, or weekly amongst the air centered ISRLO network, allowed for the extended CIN enterprise to clarify operational priorities and practical applications. In these meetings, elements throughout the TACS/AAGS recalibrated focus in order to become more effective advisors and identify and act upon operational shortfalls. Air component-centered syncs also ensure USAF members embedded throughout the joint force avoid falling into a sort of Stockholm syndrome, constantly connected to, and advocating for the JFACC CIN while articulating embedded unit ground-truth realities, priorities and discoveries. Thirdly and tangentially, ISRLOs relayed their embedded unit's ground scheme of maneuver (GSOM), concept of collect and named areas of interest to the federated air and PED support enterprise, particularly those in a reach back support capacity. Fourth, in an advisory function, USAF ISRLOs assisted in bespoke collection and oversight TTPs tailored to supported niche unit priority areas like enemy unmanned aerial system detection and reporting. Lastly, uniquely, but importantly, air intelligence liaisons plucked aligned-unit applicable

threat data and collection capabilities based on broader IC and CIN fusion capacity, maximizing joint force operational understanding and enhanced battlefield awareness.

Finally, the most recent employment of ISRLOs in PHI/II of large scale combat operations demonstrated, despite a consistent quest for full automation in joint all-domain operations and C2, operational integration remains a people business. LNOs embedded with TF Dragon, reaffirmed a fundamental truth, that data and net-centric warfare requires human based relationships. In spite of a myriad of service endorsed multi-domain operations projects to include Advanced Battle Management System, RIDGEWAY and CONVERGENCE, technology ranging from hardware like graphic user interfaces to the software of common operating pictures, cloud networking, storage and connectivity is secondary and only work with the first point of human relationships in place. That said, the XVIII ABN Corps innovation projects continue to rightfully focus on “insight-based warfare” with collaboration between government, industry and the intelligence community (IC). Ultimately, we continue to move forward on “[bringing together] as much data as we can, and then rapidly make sense of that via insight,” as referenced by a key USA leader with whom the ISRLOs often coordinated to optimize USAF intelligence in joint force operations.

Changing TTPs, Doctrine, and Information Gaps

In the ever-developing world of tactics, ISRLOs and TACP support within the CIN/ACE construct are beholden to such beliefs. This rings true amongst current CAF lines of effort focused on changes in the air-ground enterprise. Efforts such as “TACP Next,” the TACP unit type code redesign, and operational test and evaluation of the TOC-L/ACIT concepts force the reexamination of the traditional roles of the ISRLO. ISRLO support to the ground component has been reaffirmed and codified in the new 2021 Army Air Force MOA (AAFMOA) for Liaison Support. That support, however, is specifically focused on (PH III operations to include MCO. While the TACP IC has insights into sustained combat operations related to PHIII and PHIV, we must pay credence to possible information gaps to the ISRLO in MCO. We must also ensure to be on the forward edge of TTP development to meet the changing needs of the TACP, USAF, and other joint supported units.

Various ambiguities exist, such as what specifically PHI and PHII operations will look like. The duties, roles, and responsibilities of the ISRLO will vary based on COCOM and unit. ISRLOs in EUCOM have rapidly built connections and contracts with the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Existing NATO intelligence partnership checks have been cashed, both to facilitate information sharing and to allow easier TACP integration into host-nation bases and infrastructure. TTPs in the INDOPACOM AOR are under development by both CONUS and OCONUS units. ISRLOs have integrated with the USN in exercises such as RIMPAC and WARFIGHTER Exercises. Further testing is being conducted on the “TACP Afloat” concept, where ISRLOs and TACP embed on carriers and USN ships. The purpose is to strengthen joint partnerships, to test redundancy and flexibility in island and ocean warfare, and to practice fighting in a degraded environment. Compare both COCOMs to formalized support in the CENTCOM AOR, where ISRLOs have had ten years to develop TTPs, build relationships, and write numerous AARs on the subject.

Further examination is required to determine the deployability and interoperability of ISRLOs within the CIN construct. The importance of *where* and *whom* the ISRLO supports cannot be understated. This will determine the extent of manning and systems requirements an individual or team may deploy with. Finally, interoperability and communication with external agencies must be mentioned. ISRLOs will not only have to rely on air component ISR assets, but those from sister services. The ability to leverage USA (E-MIB, corps & division G-2s), USMC, and USN (carrier-based ISR) assets will make or break support of CFACC or CFMCC weights of effort. Conceptually, there may be an eventual scenario where the ISRLO must rely on NATO coalition ISR assets to support US Forces on the ground in a European country, or even work with the USN and USMC to help establish a mesh network to bridge PED and communications capabilities with USAF ISR supporting multiple ground units in the First and Second Island Chains. In contested and denied environments, ISRLOs may require increased understanding and proficiency of leveraging space-based assets, working together with the US Space Force and national organizations. Established contracts should be employed to capitalize on the flexibility, knowledge, and personality of the ISRLO and maximize placement and access.

3. Capitalizing on Strengths and Avoiding Weaknesses

Finally, this article highlights strengths demonstrated by the ISRLO career field, while noting potential weaknesses to mitigate rather than succumbing to an achilles heel in the network. Ultimately, each initiative has an achilles heel, be it a screw, a router, the target acquisition radar or an individual.

The ISRLO has several strengths that enable successful execution as the most-forward USAF intelligence entity, especially in an MCO. The strongest attributes of the ISRLO are oftentimes their personality, placement, and access. ACC and the TACP community emphasize self-sufficiency and outgoing personalities in the officers they furnish for the role of ISRLO.⁷ Additionally, ISRLOs often come from diverse ISR operations backgrounds with years of experience in their respective fields before moving to the TACP. *A fundamental truth instructed to the new liaisons is that credibility leads to freedom of action.* This also allows the ISRLO to have unique accesses, whether out in the field through the GFC, JFMCC, or with regards to certain caveats and special accesses that wouldn't normally be afforded to standard USAF line officers or intelligence personalities in other branches.

ISRLOs can further use their experience as a high demand, low density (HDL) human asset. Their inherent knowledge of ISR assets coupled with their breadth of various processes, capabilities, and ability to reach back to the greater IC make them a niche capability.⁸ They're taught to leverage prior contacts through past battlefield circulations, assignments, and deployments. Their innate knowledge of IC processes and organizations, contacts, and codified DIRLAUTH in EUCOM, INDOPACOM, and CENTCOM to different air component squadrons and groups maximizes their flexibility on the forward edge of the battlefield.

ISRLOs are inherently trained as MCA due to proximity to the TACP. They're able to use their resiliency and flexibility to further mission accomplishment because of proficiency in fitness, frequencies (communications), firearms, field skills like first aid

and land navigation and fortitude to overcome obstacles. This solidifies their unique ways of thinking, finding solutions, and approaching modern battlefield problems. They embrace Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman Colon Lopez's words, are we the 'ready warriors' the Air Force expects us to be? Are we the capable force according to Air Force standards, and not to our personal arbitrary rules?

Conversely, ISRLOs have their weaknesses. Primarily, their flexibility and exclusivity oftentimes as the only USAF intelligence officer on a ground staff can result in command relationship problems. ISRLOs are often subject to misuse and micromanagement. This is exhibited both by aligned ground staff (long-term collection manager, EEI writing, staff briefer) and assigned air staff (USM, solely ULI support, restricting battlefield circulation). Furthermore, in reference to the USAF feeding and caring aspect, recent deployment experience to the European theater demonstrated that because intelligence personnel are not inherently tied into the TACP equipping system, many were unprepared for inclement weather.

Personalities come into play; the TACP community seeks those with balanced attributes. In some cases, ISRLOs can either be too aggressive or too timid. Bridges can be burned because of assertion, or ISRLOs can overextend themselves in their roles & responsibilities. Additionally, timid officers might not be outgoing enough to make the right personal connections or attend the right meetings to ensure their supported units know how to properly leverage ISR. This also extends into greater ACC and TACP intelligence leadership not being consulted on ISRLO employment/manning decisions. TACP senior intelligence officers have former ISRLO experience that can inform commanders on how and who to optimally employ the niche intelligence capabilities of the attached 14Ns and 1N0s.

Finally, ISRLOs are currently limited by experience and employment in permissive environments. The next fight will initially occur in a non-permissive domain, where communications and security will consistently change.⁹ The presence of an air defense bubble with SAMs and IADS also presents a unique problem set. A degraded/denied environment may prevent effective execution of collection operations management (COM) over ISR assets (from SIPR and JWICS-based clients like mIRC, IDEX, BODHI, PRISM, and MIST). Air defense zones will also prevent effective collection via airborne ISR, one of the primary subject matter areas ISRLOs are trained and practiced on.

4. Conclusion

ISRLOs are the USAF's offer to the joint community to answer the call for an embedded expeditionary contingency intelligence node, with the distinct ability to convey joint needs to the USAF, and vice versa. They are the forwardmost USAF intelligence liaison to the AOC/ISRD with access, placement, optimal personality, and a well-rounded knowledge of joint/coalition/SOF ISR operations to include COM/CRM/CMA, employment, layering, PED, tasking and further integration. The ISRLO program has been so successful that the USA has jumped on the niche bandwagon with their own version. The reconnaissance liaison officer (RLO) can integrate the DGS and CIN into USA intelligence efforts, especially where equities cannot be represented by the traditional BCD or ground liaison officer (GLO) construct.

As a military and a service, we find ourselves again in a great power competition as our adversaries quickly narrow the capability gap. Just as the USAF intelligence community and CIN must evolve to meet the needs of ACE, so must the ISRLO community. Now is the optimal time to increase ISRLO integration outside traditional USA channels, to advertise and integrate our unique capabilities to our sister services like the USMC and USN. AF decisionmakers should encourage ISRLO flexibility and maximize employment opportunities outside of normal unit-level intelligence and TACP functions. These opportunities include the following:

- Capitalize on TDYs or extended trips with MAGTFs or to carrier strike groups.
- Integrate early and often with joint coalition forces during exercises and training rotations (ULCHI FREEDOM series, RIMPAC, AGILE SERPENT, USMC Weapons and Tactics Integration).
- Foster unique ways of thinking by sourcing ISRLOs and allowing them to participate in TTP development and refinement internally and external to the TACP enterprise.

These ideas coupled with increasing integration and feedback of ISRLO support to customers means more feedback and data for our USAF decisionmakers. The ISRLO is the perfect lynchpin to help break the service-centric mentality and ego inherent within certain USAF institutions. The words of USA Future's Command's PROJECT CONVERGENCE bears scrutiny to our case, "We must maintain overmatch at all costs." The ISRLO is the USAF intelligence liaison who ensures the USAF's contribution to overmatch within current and future conflicts.

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End Notes.

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