

5th BCD reimagines liaison to the Air Force intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance community

By Capt. Robert Vadney

The 5th Battlefield Coordination Detachment has the distinction of owning all four of the Army's Reconnaissance Liaison Detachments designed to support the Air Force's medium-altitude remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) enterprise. Each RLD is comprised of a military intelligence sergeant 1st class and a captain who has completed his key developmental position charged with integrating Army and Air Force intelligence efforts. As the Air Force continues to grow and evolve this capability, the BCD must keep pace or risk finding itself in an unfavorable position to integrate a capability that is on the cutting edge of warfare.

With this objective in mind, 5th BCD is moving ahead with a two-part plan to modernize its liaison support to the Air Force ISR enterprise: first, we are renaming the RLDs to intelligence

support to targeting detachments (ISTD), and moving them from the MQ-9 flying squadrons to the intelligence producing elements called distributed ground stations (DGS); second, we are recommending that the ground liaison detachments be moved from the MQ-9 Squadron up to the group level in order to make the best use of limited Ground Liaison Detachment (GLD) personnel. This move will ensure that aircrews continue to receive proper air to ground integration support, and open up a new realm of intelligence and targeting integration between a powerful Air Force ISR structure and Army units on the ground.

To understand this realignment, we need to provide some background on the aircraft and the organization built to support its unique capabilities and demands. Initially the medium altitude RPA ISR capability existed

as reconnaissance squadrons – hence the name Reconnaissance Liaison Detachment – equipped with unarmed MQ-1B Predators. As the strengths of the RPA in counterinsurgency operations were realized, it was upgraded to carry ordinance, and eventually redesigned entirely to become the MQ-9 Reaper that exists today. And while the Army now flies the MQ-1C, the MQ-1B was retired from active duty Air Force service last year, leaving only the MQ-9.

All active duty MQ-9 Squadrons are now designated as attack squadrons instead of reconnaissance squadrons, reflecting the expanded mission set and focus on what the Air Force dubs “Persistent Attack and Reconnaissance.” This shift in focus towards attack means that the MQ-9 Squadron itself is mostly concerned with flying the aircraft and employing its weapons, leaving the ISR functions to the DGS and



A U.S. Air Force MQ-9 Reaper flies during Red Flag-Alaska 19-2, June 19, 2019, at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska. (Senior Airman Daniel Snider/U.S. Air Force)

the supported unit's collection managers. This means that the flying squadron's needs are now best fulfilled by the FA personnel in the more traditional GLD; just like other attack wings have relied upon for decades to assist them with air-to-ground integration.

The "MQ-9 Enterprise" as it is often called, functions as three separate pieces operating in concert in what is known as Remote-Split Operations (RSO). The first piece is the Launch and Recovery Element: a forward deployed squadron that launches and lands the aircraft with line-of-sight controls and handles things like maintenance and ordinance. The second piece is the Mission

Control Element (MCE) – what is typically thought of as the actual flying squadron – which flies the sortie via satellite communications from ground control stations scattered around the continental U.S. The MCE has multiple sets of pilots and sensor operators who fly the aircraft in shifts over its 20 plus hour sortie. The third element is less commonly thought of as being part of RSO, but is the focus of our shift in liaison support – the DGS.

Each of the primary DGS is an intelligence group, like an MI brigade, that is part of a larger system called the Distributed Common Ground System which does all the processing, exploitation,

and dissemination (PED) for Air Force ISR assets across the globe. This includes MQ-9 full-motion video (FMV), high altitude imagery (U-2 and RQ-4), as well as the spectrum of sensor packages carried by RPAs.

The Air Force does not let a single MQ-9 fly without analysts monitoring the FMV feed, or other sensors, who are qualified to identify objects or events detected during the sortie. Screeners are the only ones allowed to make "callouts" in the internet relay chat window to the supported unit, neither the pilot nor sensor operator are qualified to do so. These screeners are responsible for answering the supported

unit's essential elements of information, and producing the end of mission products they requested. Also on the same operations floor, but separate from the PED cell, each DGS has an Analysis and Reporting Team (DART) that is concerned with fusing multiple sources of intelligence to answer specific questions for supported units.

Each DART receives an area of focus within their designated theater from the reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition annex of the ATO. The fusion lead then directs work on requests for information it receives through the Geospatial Enterprise TPED System, or other requirements directed by the DGS commander for the Air Component or other organization.

If you're still reading this, I assume it's because you are starting to realize the implications for intelligence sharing and targeting support that these DGS have the potential to provide. Few Army units understand the vast array of sensor packages that an MQ-9 can be outfitted with, or that it comes with the support of what is basically an MI brigade on the back end to help them pursue targets by filling intelligence gaps and fusing intelligence from across the network of Air Force intelligence systems. Currently, the DGS is poorly connected to ground units, and is therefore an underutilized resource for the ground force commander. With the movement of Army Intelligence personnel from the MCE to the DGS, ground forces gain an advocate and facilitator who can help them ask the right questions and receive better products sooner.

I'll give you an example. About a year ago, when we first started to explore the possibility of moving the RLDs to the DGS, we sent a reconnaissance liaison officer (RLO) down to one of the primary DGS sites for three weeks to identify possible areas to support. This DGS had recently been assigned specific "time-dominant

problems" as a fusion focus for the air component. The DGS was obviously aware that ground forces were working in the area, but were unsure who they were and what their mission was. The RLO contacted the ground unit's intelligence and targeting cells and in one afternoon pulled the ground unit's intelligence picture and targeting priorities. This enabled the DGS to understand what the unit was trying to accomplish, what they already knew, and what their intelligence gaps were, in order to determine what kinds of information would be pertinent to their mission.

Over the next three weeks, the DGS produced six major packages of intelligence for the unit, not just on their known intelligence gaps, but also on things that they did not even know existed. Having the ground unit's intelligence picture allowed the DART to confirm single source intelligence with sources from other types of intelligence, greatly strengthening some of their targeting packages. Much of what the DGS was able to provide to the ground unit was from within Air Force systems that were not easily queried by outside organizations due to network restrictions.

As with all intelligence, it's hard to quantify exactly how much this information helped the ground unit achieve their goals in the battlespace, but the RLO did help the DGS to confirm information they already had with second sources, and help them tap into intelligence that already existed within Air Force systems but would never have been discoverable by the ground unit otherwise.

The relationship the RLO helped to establish continued until the end of major operations in that area and the DGS was assigned to another. It's important to note that this relationship wasn't one that was specifically directed by the air operations center, but because an intelligence liaison was on hand to coordinate, an Army unit reaped very useful benefits. This kind of coordina-

tion was repeated several times over the last year as we continued to refine the concept.

With a solid proof of concept and concurrence from Fires Center of Excellence, Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence, the other BCDs, and United States Army Pacific Command; the 5th BCD is moving forward with the transformation of the RLD to ISTD. As the current RLD personnel stationed at Creech AFB are reassigned, the new ISTD positions will be filled at DGS-1 in Langley, Va., under the 4th BCD; DGS-2 at Beale AFB, Calif., under the 5th BCD; DGS-4 in Ramstein, Germany, under the 19th BCD; and DGS-5 in Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, also under the 5th BCD. The GLD at Creech will stay in place until the 12th Air Force Persistent Attack and Reconnaissance Operations Center moves bases to either Shaw AFB, S.C., or Tyndall AFB, Fla., in mid-2020. There is currently a GLD at DGS-1, owned by 4th BCD, who will be freed up to support another unit once the ISTD replaces it, and we are recommending that the 4th BCD send it to support the 25th Attack Group (MQ-9) at Shaw AFB who currently are without direct GLD support.

Since the Army just initiated a long overdue review of the Army-Air Force Liaison Memorandum of Agreement, now is the time for the BCD enterprise to reassess its liaison distribution to ensure that the right kinds of Air Force assets have the right kinds of support to ensure that the Army reaps the greatest benefits it can from the platforms it needs the most. This transformation is the right move to ensure the BCDs will be able to facilitate not only air-to-ground integration of the MQ-9, but also intelligence and targeting support from within the central hubs of the Air Force ISR enterprise.

Capt. Robert Vadney is an active duty field artillery officer who has served as a ground liaison officer to the 432nd Wing at Creech Air Force Base, Nev., since late 2016.