

Spearheading Continuous Transformation: SETAF-AF as a Model for Expeditionary Division-Level Modernization

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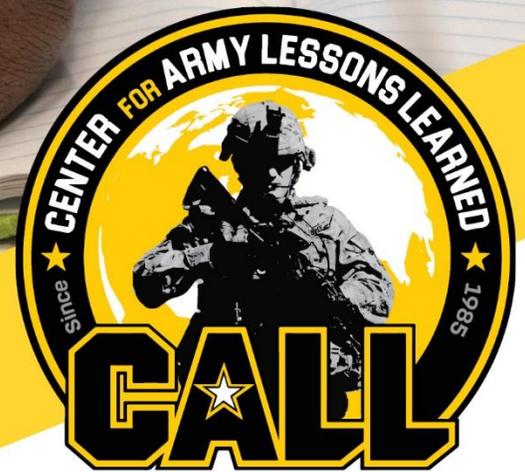
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Abstract

The U.S. Army is at a critical inflection point, reorienting from decades of counterinsurgency to face the high tempo demands of large-scale combat operations (LSCO). This strategic shift reveals a dangerous vulnerability: the traditional division-level command post (CP) is too slow, cumbersome, and susceptible to attack in a contested environment. The Army must transform its command and control (C2) structures, moving toward models that are distributed, resilient, and highly mobile to maintain overmatch against peer adversaries. True modernization cannot remain theoretical; it demands continuous, field-based innovation where new concepts and technologies are rapidly tested, refined, and adopted by warfighters.

This article argues that Southern European Task Force, Africa (SETAF-AF) is the ideal engine for this transformation. As the Army's most expeditionary division headquarters, operating daily across the complex joint and multinational landscapes of Africa and Europe, SETAF-AF functions as a natural laboratory for C2 innovation. Its unique posture and mission force it to confront the exact challenges of distance, dispersion, and interoperability that the Army must solve for LSCO.

Therefore, the Army must move beyond ad-hoc initiatives and formally designate SETAF-AF as its pilot organization for division-level expeditionary modernization. By properly resourcing and empowering this forward-postured command, the Army can create a feedback loop of continuous transformation, turning operational challenges into fielded capabilities. This initiative will enable SETAF-AF to spearhead the development of the doctrine, organizational structures, and technologies, including Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) applications, needed to build a more lethal and agile force, ensuring the division remains the decisive unit of action in future conflicts.

Introduction

Modern combat against peer and near-peer threats demands agile, survivable, and resilient mission command. The Army's continuous transformation approach embeds innovation directly into operations, ensuring modernization is ongoing—not reserved for peacetime. To dominate in LSCO and enable MDO, operational units must adopt flexible, distributed, and technologically enabled command structures.

The Army is executing the Army Transformation Initiative to maintain overmatch against near-peer adversaries. SETAF-AF, supporting both U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) and U.S. Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF), is well-positioned for operational deployments and concept testing in complex environments. This study identifies opportunities to refine SETAF-AF's organizational design, communications, fires, air deconfliction, and sustainment coordination to enhance its division-level capabilities, especially when supporting mobile brigade combat teams in expeditionary or transformation scenarios.

SETAF-AF's dual-hatted mission enables unique experimentation and innovation. Headquartered in Vicenza, Italy, SETAF-AF provides capabilities across three combatant commands: USEUCOM, USCENTCOM, and USAFRICOM. It stands ready to deploy, fight, win, and respond to crises.

Focused on Africa, SETAF-AF serves as a joint task force headquarters for U.S. Africa Command, ready to protect U.S. personnel, facilities, and interests. With extensive experience in contingency planning and operations, SETAF-AF partners with African land forces, directs Army activities on the continent, conducts security cooperation events, and sets the theater for strategic readiness.

High-profile activities include the African Land Forces Summit, the Chief of Staff of the Army's annual conference with African land chiefs, and the U.S. Africa Command's largest multinational, joint, all-domain exercise African Lion.

First, this will examine the unique characteristics that make SETAF-AF a natural incubator for modernization, detailing its expeditionary posture and complex operational environment. Next, it will analyze the key findings from SETAF-AF's ongoing operations, highlighting the urgent requirements for updated C2 structures, resilient communications, and integrated intelligence capabilities. Finally, the article concludes by presenting a set of specific, actionable recommendations for how the Department of the Army can formally charter SETAF-AF as its premier pilot for division-level transformation, ensuring that hard-won operational lessons translate into enduring capabilities for the entire force.

A Uniquely Positioned and Postured Command

SETAF-AF occupies a critical posture with responsibilities across three combatant commands. To support mobile brigade combat teams (MBCTs) in dispersed and austere conditions, it must modernize its command-and-control doctrine, invest in small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS), and integrate joint command and control (C2) tools to remain ready to be a part of or the headquarters for a globally deployable joint task force (JTF). This posture allows for unique opportunities SETAF-AF can leverage for forces not only in Italy, but across Europe and Africa due to its unique partnerships and equities across NATO's Southern Flank.

“Innovation must be executable at speed and scale—prototyping without fielding is failure.”

LTG (Ret.) Neil Thurgood¹
Architect of rapid acquisition models

Commanders and staffs employ knowledge management techniques to add clarity to information, speed its dissemination, and support situational understanding and decision making.² SETAF-AF, when called upon would be responsible for understanding, planning, directing, controlling, and sustaining the force in any given operation. Effective execution at speed and scale depends on the staff and commanders' ability to rapidly disseminate information, issue clear guidance, and provide timely feedback. Army leaders, commanders, and staff at echelon face a continuously increasing flow of information. They must apply knowledge management techniques to improve clarity, speed dissemination, and support situational understanding, enabling effective decisions and actions.

¹ LTG (Ret.) Thurgood, Neil. "Professional Development Reading Program-Touch Point". Presentation to SETAF-AF and related organizations via MS Teams. 18 June 2025.

² Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0 *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*. 31 July 2019. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34403-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf

The operational success of a validated deployable headquarters depends on the effective management of its core technology: mission command systems, end-user applications, information services, data, and the supporting network infrastructure. Commands deploy tactical radios at all echelons. These radios provide users the capability to conduct interoperable voice communications. Tactical radios use high-frequency, ultra high-frequency, and very high-frequency bands; satellite communications; and multiband radios.³ Figure 1 illustrates the operations process.

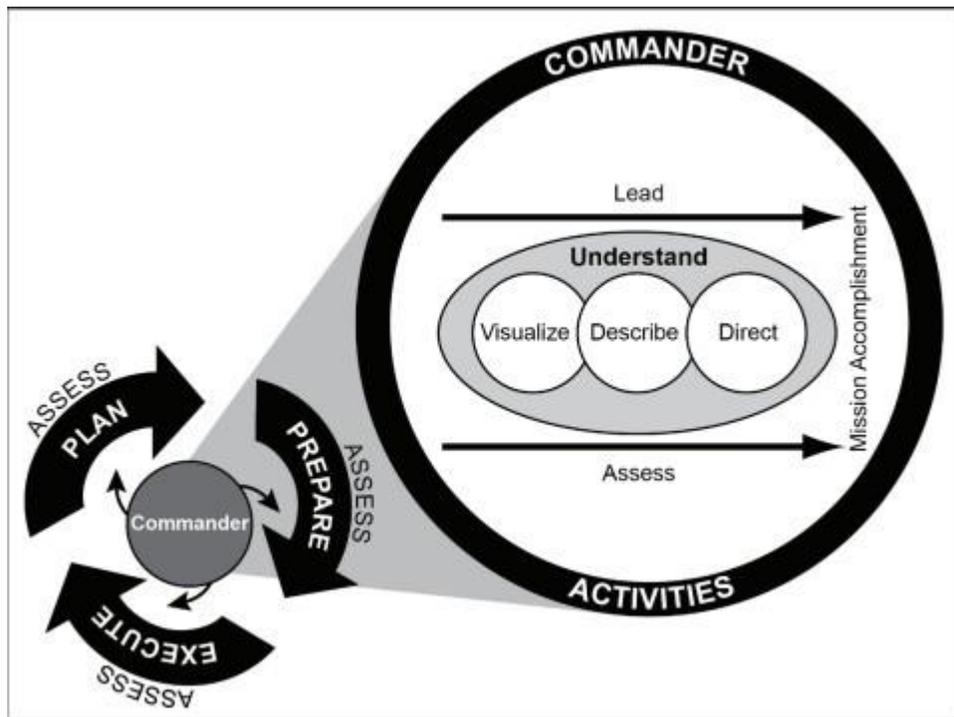


Figure 1. The Operations Process.⁴

Senior leaders are saying that the future battle will not use radios. SETAF-AF continues to work using legacy mission command systems that enable the commander and staff to execute the mission which all function separately and incorporated to provide the commander the “single pane of glass” common operational picture (COP) to sustain and support future combat operations. The sheer number of systems, their usability demands, and the expertise required to operate them do not naturally support modularity or distributed command posts (CP). Enabling more agile, resilient, and decentralized models is imperative. In a CP, the COP is the product of

³ Field Manual (FM) 6-0 *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*. 16 May 2022. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN35404-FM_6-0-000-WEB-1.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

knowledge and information activities, running estimates, and battle tracking. The COP is designed around the commander's requirements, is based on shared information, and facilitates collaborative planning and the achievement of situational understanding.

There is a need for updated doctrine and SOPs regarding distributed command post (CP) operations. Figure 2 below illustrates an example of an analog battle tracking system.

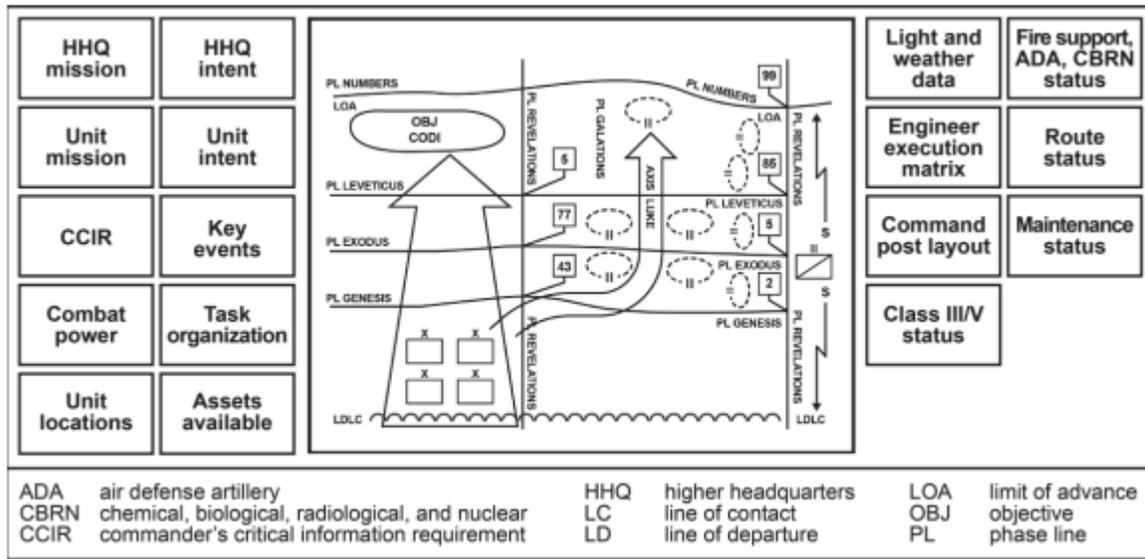


Figure 2. Example of an analog battle tracking system.⁵

Currently, units are utilizing digital COPs that function as little more than digital versions of the analog format. Persistent dilemmas in communications such as stove-piped information flows and reliance on unauthorized systems when standard channels fail—continue to undermine operational cohesion. In today's battlefield, networks are the backbone of mission command, enabling real-time coordination, shared situational awareness, and synchronized actions across dispersed units. Yet their growing importance also makes them prime targets for disruption and disjointed operations amplifying risk to force and risk to mission. As adversaries refine their ability to exploit these systems, securing and hardening network infrastructure is no longer optional—it is essential to sustaining effectiveness in contested environments.

SETAF-AF, previously designated as an Army Service Component Command (ASCC), now operates as a Major Subordinate Command (MSC) under USAREUR-AF. This transition presents an opportunity for SETAF-AF to refine its structure and processes to meet future operational demands. As a division-like headquarters, SETAF-AF can provide two-star level task force (TF), joint task force (JTF), or combined joint task force (CJTF) command and control. However, they need additional capabilities to fully realize their potential. This gap

⁵ Ibid.

creates opportunities for transformation and experimentation with prototype solutions to enhance capabilities and increase training repetitions in the C2 Fix and Next-Generation C2 domains.

Key Findings and Implications

Finding	Implication for the Force
1. The Centralized Command Post Is Obsolete.	The traditional, division-sized command post (CP) is too slow to deploy, too large to conceal, and too vulnerable to survive on a modern battlefield. SETAF-AF's dispersed operations prove the urgent need to develop and codify doctrine for modular, mobile, and distributed C2 nodes that are resilient by design, not by fortification.
2. Network Resilience Is the Center of Gravity.	The ability to communicate across vast distances in a contested electromagnetic environment is the single most critical enabler. The Army must prioritize the fielding of a multi-path, resilient communications architecture—blending terrestrial and space-based assets—to ensure that even when primary systems fail, command and control endures.
3. Innovation Must Be Fielded at the Speed of Relevance.	Prototyping without fielding is failure. SETAF-AF's posture provides a unique opportunity to embed developers and test equipment in a live environment, creating a rapid feedback loop between the warfighter and the modernization enterprise. This model allows for continuous, iterative development of C2 systems, ISTAR platforms, and data tools based on immediate operational needs.

Table 1. Key findings and implications for the U.S. Army drawn from SETAF-AF's operational findings.⁶

Recommendations

- Designate SETAF-AF as a continuous transformation testbed; conduct quarterly exercises to validate SOPs, C2 architecture, and mobile ISTAR integration.
- Resource and authorize SETAF-AF to build additional redundancy into expeditionary C2 kits, including spares, rapid technology refresh cycles, and protected contractor support.
- Update doctrine and institutional training to codify distributed CP layouts and decentralized decision-making, aligning SETAF-AF with Army-wide transformation priorities.

⁶ LTC Logan, Vernon. *Key findings and implications for the U.S. Army drawn from SETAF-AF's operational findings*. 10 November 2025.

- Institutionalize Contested/Degraded Operational Environment (CDOE) training for CPs, emphasizing CP survivability, rapid displacement drills, and communications blackout scenarios.
- Ensure SETAF-AF's unit structure, equipment, and methodology remain modular for flexible command and mission adaptability.
- Institutionalize C2 Fix techniques in T2COM (formerly TRADOC) signal and maneuver courses; expand CPX rehearsals to include degraded network scenarios.
- Strengthen PACE plans to ensure seamless, secure, and robust communication transitions between environments; make distributed C2 a reality.
- Scale SRR sUAS fielding and direct fabrication tools/labs for these platforms; introduce automation and AI tools for real-time COP updates.
- Fund silent power and network-hardened CP kits to support resilient operations.
- HQDA to select units, define MOPs/MOEs, and ensure subordinate and higher headquarters drive and sustain the pace of transformation.

Conclusion

The era of unchallenged military dominance is over, and with it, the viability of the static, centralized division command post. The U.S. Army stands at a crossroads, where its ability to adapt its command and control structures to the realities of LSCO will determine its success on future battlefields. The institutional approach to modernization is often too slow to meet the urgent demands of a rapidly evolving threat landscape. The solution lies in empowering the formations that are already living the problem.

Southern European Task Force, Africa, through its daily operations in a complex and dispersed environment, has proven to be the Army's premier incubator for expeditionary C2 innovation. Its experiences have validated the urgent need for distributed CPs, resilient networks, and soldier-led innovation. These are not theoretical requirements; they are the essential ingredients for survival and victory in a contested environment.

The time for ad-hoc initiatives and pilot programs without sustainment has passed. The Department of the Army must seize the opportunity it has in SETAF-AF. By formally designating, resourcing, and empowering this uniquely postured command as its executive agent for division-level expeditionary modernization, the Army can create a powerful engine of continuous transformation. This is the most effective path to ensuring that operational lessons from the field are rapidly integrated into the force, forging a more agile, lethal, and resilient Army capable of winning the nation's wars.

