

Advanced Sortie Production Course: Helping to Build Wing-level Sortie Production Experts

A Synopsis By: Air Combat Command Maintenance Management Division (ACC/A4M)



An F-15E airstrike destroys a target while observed from an RQ-4. A soldier is medically evacuated from the AOR on a C-17. An F-16 hooks up to a KC-10 somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. Supplies are delivered by a C-5 after a major disaster. What do all of these things have in common? Successful employment of airpower by highly trained and proficient aviators. To that end, how well professional maintainers and logisticians produce sorties is foundational to the United States Air Force's ability to reach out and achieve desired effects, anywhere around the globe and on a moment's notice. But, successful sortie production is far from accidental, so how successful is our Air Force at producing the sorties required? One measure of success is the annual flying hour program. As background, a unit's flying hour program is based upon a number of sorties and hours needed in order to train a squadron's aviators in their various mission sets. This requirement is balanced against the maintenance organization's ability to produce sorties and hours to achieve effective sorties. The headquarters then allocates hours to the units to meet those requirements. However, the Air Force doesn't produce home station sorties for the sole purpose of executing a flying hour program. In reality it's about producing combat-ready aviators.

During a recent FY16 Flying Hour Program Review, Mr. Tom Martin, ACC/A3 Flight Management Branch, reminded the assembled ACC A3 and A4 staffs: *"At the very beginning of fiscal year 2016, the Combat Air Forces (CAF) had over \$300 million worth of flying hours that were not distributed to wings because the wings could not produce sufficient sorties to use the hours. Instead of distributing all the hours at the*

beginning of the year and forcing wings to turn in un-executable hours through the year, we thought it better to just not push out the hours.” Even with this advance withhold of hours, CAF wings returned an additional \$138 million worth of flying hours to Headquarters, Air Combat Command because of under-execution. Although there are many factors which contribute to under-execution, such as a unit’s unplanned participation in an Overseas Contingency Operation, Operation Noble Eagle support, and more, a large portion of these additional un-executed hours were due to sorties not being produced. As the Air Combat Command Director of Logistics, Engineering, and Force Protection, Maj Gen (sel) Carl Buhler emphasizes *“a strategic problem facing the logistics community is our inability to tactically execute the sortie production mission.”*

So what is the impact on Air Force readiness and aviators who need those sorties to gain qualification, proficiency, and currency in order to fly real-world missions? As stated by Lt Gen Mark Kelly, *“[t]he number one problem our Air Force has today is we can’t produce the lines needed to train our aviators...for today’s fight and tomorrow’s high-end fight.”* Additionally, General Buhler witnessed first-hand the impact this is having on combat capability. During his travels throughout ACC, a few quotes General Buhler has heard from aviators include: *“if I write it up I won’t get a jet”...“spare jets are the exception, not the rule”...and “wow, we’re up to 55% Combat Mission Ready in a combat coded squadron.”* With a view to assist wings to produce sorties, several Major Commands (MAJCOMs) conduct various assessments of their assigned wings. In ACC, these assessments are called Sortie Production Assessments (SPAs) and have repeatedly shown common negative trends which detract from mission execution. According to Col Dave Belz, Air Combat Command Associate Director of Logistics, *“A culture exists where ‘just getting by’ is now the norm. Rather, we should do more to scrutinize our processes and personnel utilization to get the most out of what we do have.”*

As Air Force maintainers and logisticians, we take pride in executing the mission at the highest levels; however, there are some in our profession who believe the problem is “we don’t have

_____ resources.” True, today Air Force maintainers are 95% manned, but efforts are in work to address accessions, while leaders at every level need to work to retain the talented maintainers we have. Additionally, we know we don’t have all of the parts we need, but there are so many things that can be done, such as teaching system theory/fundamentals, enhancing troubleshooting, focusing on the ‘consumption chain,’ and training our maintainers.

Moving forward, we need to analyze the effective and efficient utilization of assigned people, examine and fix our processes, and look for every available way to execute the mission with the resources we have. This is how we will meet the requirement our service expects and demands from us.

So you may ask, “Where do I start?” You can start by asking the following. *Who do I define as a sortie producer? Are my sortie production personnel effectively utilized? Are my sortie production processes streamlined to ensure there is no wasted effort? Are my flying schedules built to maximize quality training for aviators or to just complete the flying hour program? Do my turn times afford the opportunity to fix aircraft prior to second-go? Are my training days laser-focused on training that directly impacts my ability to produce sorties?*

As for training, this is one area requiring immediate attention. In ACC alone, as of mid-October of 2016, there were over 959,000 open training tasks for sortie producers at the wing-level. Plus, with maintenance accessions forecasted to increase over the next few years, this training burden will continue to grow if not countered. In ACC, the Commander of Air Combat Command (COMACC) directed monthly training days for FY17. This will help train our logisticians, munitions experts, and maintainers, which leads to better troubleshooting. In turn, better troubleshooting leads to fewer parts consumed, higher aircraft availability, and higher mission capable rates...ensuring our aviators are combat mission ready and on the path to proficiency.

Another area to assist with sortie production is by analyzing the major SPA trends and take action to address each across your organization. In ACC, simply put, sortie production woes are

driven by a confluence of many process failures, such as: improper utilization of manpower (officer and enlisted), lack of senior maintenance leaders on swing shift, fractured processes between logistics readiness squadrons and maintenance squadrons, inefficient scheduling, insufficient maintenance training, supply chain process issues, and the lack of consumption chain discipline. These culprits can decrease morale, cause mission degradation, and, importantly, negatively impact a wing's ability to produce effective sorties.

To that end, the reality is we produce unit level logistics readiness officers, munitions officers, and maintenance officers who understand and execute daily mission requirements to positively impact sortie production. To address this reality, ACC with the support of the Air Force Logistics Board recognized the need to overcome field-level sortie production problems with advanced tactical level training. The answer? The Advanced Sortie Production Course was created at the Advanced Maintenance and Munitions Officer School (AMMOS). AMMOS instructors, along with 95 subject matter experts (including ACC SPA team members) began course development. The subject matter experts' diverse background and experience base spanned multiple MAJCOMs and Air Force Specialty Codes.

In order for this course to meet the requirement, a focused approach was needed to develop advanced lessons. While shaping the curriculum, the course development team relied heavily on the SPA findings of units producing sorties for a wide range of aircraft, from fighters to airlift to ISR, including Active Duty, Reserve, and Guard units. By capturing SPA trends and translating those into actionable lesson plans, ASPC graduates will be able to help their organizations increase sortie production.

Many of the subject matter experts were on-hand and participated in teaching lessons for the inaugural course which started on 13 September 2016. For the ASPC curriculum of 102 lessons, the majority address the levers of change...people, processes, and resources. Additionally, 80 of the 102

lessons are new or heavily modified from previous curriculum. The staff also worked closely with the A3 community during lesson development to capture the operations perspective throughout the curriculum. Team Nellis also helped with course development, execution, contracting, and base support areas.

ASPC graduates will return to their wings as the “go-to” problem solvers for all aspects of sortie production. *“ASPC focuses on perfecting the skills and tactics that logistics leaders employ, whether at home station producing sorties to ensure units are prepared for the next fight, or while deployed to an austere location to fulfill their tasking,”* said Maj. Andrew Glindmeyer, AMMOS Director of Operations. *“It’s critical that we build a cadre of leaders at this level that are adept at effectively utilizing the resources we have to solve those challenges.”*

“I have high expectations that ASPC will deliver highly educated, humble, credible and approachable officers back to their respective wings with an advanced set of techniques and procedures which will assist them in solving sortie production issues through effective analysis and application of people, processes and resources,” said Lt Col Joe DePorter, AMMOS Commandant. *“I couldn’t be more proud of the exceptional instructors and support staff, who have put in a tremendous amount of time and effort for more than six months in making the new ASPC a reality.”*

To emphasize “why we’re here” to students, General Buhler begins the course by spending the entire first day teaching the effective use of people, processes, and resources as the levers of change. He describes, in detail, the readiness issues facing the Air Force, plus provides



background of the issues he’s seen during the SPAs. General Buhler’s commitment to making this a

world-class course is further enhanced by extraordinary support from the Commander of Air Combat Command. Gen “Hawk” Carlisle personally visited the inaugural class and spent two hours with the students during which he explained *“sortie production is just as important as our Air Force core functions as it underpins everything. It’s right up there with air superiority, space superiority, etc.”*

Following Gen Buhler’s lessons, Dr. Gary Orren from Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, provides a two-day seminar on negotiation and persuasion, giving students a practical skillset to bring back to their wing and further their effectiveness. Student feedback for this seminar has been extremely positive: *“Hands down the best leadership seminar I’ve participated in during my 21+ years in the Air Force!”... “This is the single most important material for ANY future job or career. The presentation by Dr. Orren was exquisite and on-point!”*

Other highlights of the newly developed lessons include: in-depth discussions on Ready Aircrew Program and Combat Mission Ready, managing maintenance manpower, the science of troubleshooting, CAF and MAF flying/maintenance scheduling, the flying hour program, supply chain networks, consumption chain processes, logistics information systems, and training programs. To ensure the course maintains its advanced level, students also undertake four in-class exams, eight exercises applying advanced concepts, three off-sites, and a CAPSTONE event which culminates previous exercises and lessons into a week-long critical thinking exercise.

Testimonials from the initial class demonstrate just how important this course is for the logistics community at large: *“When we heard General Buhler speak about the focus on sortie production, how sortie production should be our number one priority at the wing, and the ways to fix it, it was really refreshing.”... “The Advanced Sortie Production Course is shaping up to be one of the best educational experiences I’ve had in the Air Force. I’m grateful for this opportunity to learn amongst the top maintenance officers in our command and in the Air Force. I’m looking forward to returning home and applying these new tools in shaping and producing combat capability.”... “The new ASPC curriculum is filled with actionable TTPs geared towards sortie production*

and has been as intense as I thought it would be. It's week three and I already have 24 action items on my to-do list."

Although ACC is the lead for course development, the course spans all sortie producers across all MAJCOMs and is designed for 21A/M/R Captains and Majors with up to 16 students per class. In fact, the inaugural class demographic of sixteen officers is made up of thirteen 21As, one 21R, and two 21Ms, from Air Combat Command, Air Mobility Command, and Air Force Global Strike Command.

There are no AFSC or MAJCOM quotas, and the selection board consists of colonels from the MAJCOM staffs with competing officers and is hosted by ACC/A4 who chairs the selection board. If you have questions regarding the course and the nomination process please contact Lt Col Aaron Buck at aaron.buck@us.af.mil for more information.