



INTEGRATION OF LEGAL SUPPORT IN THE AIR OPERATIONS CENTER

Last Updated: 24 January 2020

Judge advocates and paralegals are usually integrated into the various divisions and cells within an [air operations center](#) (AOC). Legal support to an AOC is categorized as a specialty team designed to assist the AOC commander and all AOC divisions. In addition, legal support is provided to assist special functions within a core team such as targeting and rules of engagement cells. As a specialty team, judge advocates and paralegals are not directly assigned or dedicated to support a particular division, but are available to support demands from the entire organization.

The [commander, Air Force forces](#) (COMAFFOR) should ensure their judge advocates and paralegals are made part of the joint legal staff and the level of legal support meets the COMAFFOR's requirements when performing duties as the [joint force air component commander](#) (JFACC) as well as the AOC commander's requirements. The nature and scope of air operations, the operations tempo within the AOC, and the requirements of the supported commander normally determine judge advocate and paralegal resources given to the AOC.

Legal support in an AOC is provided by judge advocates and paralegals with training and security clearances commensurate with their duties. Paralegals assist judge advocates in identifying legal issues and supporting functions and processes within an AOC, but **only judge advocates may provide legal advice or render a legal opinion.**

STRATEGY DIVISION

Judge advocates and paralegals assist the strategy division by evaluating legal issues raised by the operational environment and the objectives of the supported commander. Within the strategy division, judge advocates and paralegals concentrate on long-range planning to support the development, refinement, dissemination, and assessment of the JFACC's plans and operations in support of the [joint force commander's](#) (JFC's) strategy and the [joint air operations plan](#) (JAOP). Judge Advocates and paralegals give tailored legal services to support the planning requirements of the strategy division.

As the JAOP is developed and objectives are identified, judge advocates and paralegals review mission objectives found in the strategy and identify legal constraints that may restrict or prevent certain courses of action. Judge advocates assess the intent of the

commander, analyze the proposed course of action in light of the limitations and constraints found in law, policy, the rules of engagement (ROE) or other guidance, and advise the commander on the lawfulness of each course of action. **The primary role of the judge advocate is to ensure the proposed strategy, including branches and sequels, is consistent with the law, policy, and orders from commanders that govern the operation and to address any legal constraints that may affect joint or coalition forces.**

COMBAT PLANS DIVISION

Judge advocates and paralegals provide commanders assistance in developing legally acceptable plans and orders that support the JAOP and the guidance issued by the JFC. Within the combat plans division, judge advocates facilitate the conversion of strategic guidance into executable plans and orders.

Judge advocates and paralegals participate in an iterative planning process to assist commanders in identifying, prioritizing, and selecting specific tasks to be accomplished and targets to be engaged with available resources. In this capacity, judge advocates advise personnel who produce the following: [targeting](#) effects, [master air attack plan](#) (MAAP), [air tasking order](#) (ATO), and [airspace control order](#) (ACO). Judge advocates and paralegals participate in target list development, production of the MAAP, drafting [special instructions](#), and publishing the ACO and the final daily ATO.

Judge advocates review proposed tactics, targets engaged, and weapons employed for compliance with international law, domestic law, ROE, and applicable national policy. Judge advocates focus on ensuring tactics, target engagement, and weapons employment are consistent with the [law of war](#) and ROE. For example, a judge advocate may serve on a joint targeting coordination board or advise a commander on the requirements to protect cultural property and to minimize collateral damage during an air strike. **Although the ultimate decision whether to strike a target rests with the commander, judge advocates review proposed targets and identify legal considerations.**

COMBAT OPERATIONS DIVISION

Within the combat operations division, judge advocates and paralegals concentrate on evaluating the legality of employment options designed to support the overall assigned objectives. Accordingly, judge advocates provide legal advice concerning personnel recovery operations and attacks on dynamic targets. For example, when attacking dynamic targets, a judge advocate considers factors affecting positive identification of the target including the sufficiency and accuracy of target data, the requirements of the law of war, compliance with the ROE, and safeguards against a friendly fire incident. Additionally, judge advocates play a significant role in ensuring that the appropriate approval for the strike has been obtained from the targeting engagement authority and higher-level authority, as required.

Commanders should fully integrate judge advocates and paralegals into combat operations processes so that orders will not unnecessarily restrict lawful actions or inadvertently permit unlawful activities.

Judge advocates and paralegals should maintain situational awareness to identify legal issues resulting from the execution of planned or time-sensitive operations. Judge advocates monitor and evaluate tactics, technology, capabilities, or other conditions to identify legal issues that may impact an operation. They recommend commanders modify, or forward a request to modify, ROE when conditions or circumstances warrant changes to those rules. Judge advocates and paralegals advise on the changing nature of operations during execution with the goal of ensuring the legal integrity of military operations. Judge advocates and paralegals properly integrated within the combat operations division are in the best position to understand and identify legal issues that may affect an operation. Judge advocates remain available to provide immediate legal advice on targets of opportunity and other dynamic operational requirements.

Because of the urgent nature of dynamic targeting, judge advocates should provide critical legal advice immediately. Judge advocates and paralegals need to be forward-thinking, anticipating potential legal issues for time-sensitive targets. Commanders should seek legal advice if conditions change during air operations. Judge advocates assess targets and form sound legal opinions based on national and other policy, ROE, and the law of war to support the commander's objectives.

If a possible law of war violation or friendly fire incident is discovered, reported, or reasonably suspected, commanders should immediately involve their judge advocates and paralegals.

When a possible law of war violation is identified, judge advocates and paralegals review all available information to assist the commander in determining if the information is credible, thus is a reportable incident. If a formal investigation is requested by higher authority, advise and assist the cognizant military criminal investigative organization. When a possible friendly fire incident occurs, judge advocates and paralegals review all available information; and if commander directed, judge advocates and paralegals help initiate or assist in investigations. Upon receipt of an initial report of any suspected law of war violation or friendly fire incident, judge advocates and paralegals advise the operational chain of command on measures to ensure preservation of evidence and information to support future investigations or inquiries.

AIR MOBILITY DIVISION

Within the [air mobility division](#), legal officers advise on actions taken to plan, coordinate, task, and execute air mobility operations. For example, judge advocates may advise the air mobility control team on interpretations of international agreements, risk to ground objects from airdrops, overflight rights, and landing rights.
