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TRANSLATIONS

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Transformation, How Significant is the Role of an Airfield Station?¹

——News Investigation of a Certain Southern Theater Command Navy Aviation Airfield Station Improving Core Support Capabilities for Combat Preparation

By Gao Hongwei, Shen Hongquan, and Zhang Tong²

On a summer morning, a combat alarm suddenly sounded at a certain island reef airfield³ in the South China Sea. The on-duty pilots responded to the order and quickly boarded aircraft. With a command, two fighters accelerated down the runway and took off, rapidly heading towards the target airspace to investigate and verify the foreign aircraft conducting close-in reconnaissance. Moments later, a helicopter also took off and urgently flew to carry out a combat readiness patrol mission. The personnel of a certain Southern Theater Command Navy aviation airfield station, who carry out support tasks all year-round, are already accustomed to such scenes and handle them with ease.

In recent years, with the expansion of mission tasks, multiple services and multiple aircraft types organizing training at the same Southern Theater Command Navy aviation airfield station has gradually become the norm. In the face of increasingly heavy combat training support tasks, they closely monitor powerful enem(ies), accelerate transformation and construction, and have achieved a historic leap from single aircraft-type support to multiple aircraft-types support, from small flying periods of short-term deployed training support to large flying periods of regularized deployed training support, and from daytime simple meteorological conditions support to all-weather support, with core support capabilities being comprehensively enhanced.

Accelerate the Dismantling of "Walls" in Our Thinking

With blue seas and blue sky and a coconut breeze blowing, several different types of combat aircraft successively land on the runway. In the control tower command room, Ma Ruigang, a flight line flight support command staff officer from a certain Southern Theater Command Navy aviation airfield station, precisely issues a series of support commands. The officers and enlisted personnel respond to the orders, quickly rushing toward the combat aircraft to conduct inspections, refill oxygen, refill nitrogen, and refuel... Soon, the combat aircraft soar into the sky again.

¹ 高宏伟 [Gao Hongwei], 沈宏权 [Shen Hongquan], and 张通 [Zhang Tong], 转型, 一个场站的作为有多大 ["Transformation, How Significant is the Role of an Airfield Station?"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], 14 July 2023, p. 3.

² **Translator's Note:** Gao Hongwei is South China Sea Station reporter for *People's Navy*, and Shen Hongquan and Zhang Tong are special correspondents.

³ **Translator's Note:** The unnamed "island reef airfield" discussed in this article is almost certainly referring to the aviation facilities on Woody Island in the Paracels.

"This scene was unimaginable before. Now, we fly the equivalent of a year's worth of missions in just one week, and the aircraft types are also more complex and diverse." Ma Ruigang explained that in the past, the airfield's hardware infrastructure was outdated, often facing water shortages and power outages, with harsh living conditions. They mainly undertook temporary deployed training support tasks, involving single aircraft types with few flying periods, basically just supporting their own "island airfield station."

In recent years, with the adjustment and reform of the organizational structure and the completion of airfield renovation expansion project(s), the mission of this airfield station has also changed. The fundamental approach to generating combat power lies in transformation. At the beginning of the transformation, the work unit faced many difficulties, including personnel shortages, a shortage of backbone support personnel, and outdated hardware facilities. The most challenging issue was that due to the long-term garrisoning of the unit there, the thoughts and concepts of the officers and enlisted personnel were difficult to change in a short time.

The corrosion of thought is more terrifying than the corrosion of gun barrels. The airfield station's Party Committee body at the time held several Party Committee meetings and special-topic operational meetings, in order to accurately grasp the higher authorities' important directives on transformation and construction. Extensive mass discussions were initiated on topics such as "how to view unit transformation and how to devote ourselves to transformation" and "how individuals contribute suggestions for transformation," guiding everyone to contemplate, plan, and promote transformation while orienting themselves and finding the right direction. Starting from ideological education, focusing on "enhancing the sense of responsibility and mission among officers and enlisted, and cultivating a spirit of dedication to their posts," they vigorously conducted thematic education, dual-competition evaluations, and typical model cultivation, guiding officers and enlisted personnel to focus on their positions, strengthen their skills, and strive to resolve prominent contradictions and issues in combat preparation and warfighting.

During that time, from the leadership of the airfield station to ordinary enlisted sailors, everyone was searching for problems and gaps, clarifying shortcomings and bottlenecks. Members of the Party Committee took the lead in going deep into the first line of the grassroots and squad and platoon dormitories, guiding officers and soldiers to liberate their thoughts through face-to-face pulse-taking and one-on-one assistance. With a spirit of daring to carry out self-revolution, they conducted a thorough ideological overhaul and cleanup of outdated concepts, methods, and experiences that were no longer suitable, eliminating the old notions of "just maintaining the status quo" (*shou tanzi*) and "muddling through" (*hun rizi*) among officers and enlisted personnel, and helping them quickly adapt to the needs of a combat unit's situation and tasks.

To attract the phoenix, one must first build a nest; to perform a play, a stage must be set. The Party Committee of the airfield station believed that amidst numerous difficulties, uniting people's hearts is the first step. To create an environment that retains personnel, they adhered to the principle of "grassroots are paramount, personnel are first." With the support of higher authorities and local government, the Committee vigorously promoted the construction of the troops' infrastructure, completing supporting facilities such as company barracks, headquarters buildings, transition training buildings, flight crew communities, auditoriums, and cold storage facilities. They implemented support projects such as airfield supermarkets and discount barber shops for sailors, improving the working and living conditions of officers and enlisted personnel to the greatest extent and making every effort to solve the practical difficulties of officers and enlisted personnel.

The mission is as heavy as a mountain, and the journey is long. Thanks to a series of effective measures, within a short period of time, the officers and enlisted personnel of the station gained a brand-new mental outlook. They have a clearer goal of adjusting their mindset to prepare for warfare, settling down to learn warfare, and dedicating themselves to practicing warfare, with a more determined pace in their transformation.

Building a "High Ground of Support" through "Talent Elevation"

"Aircraft veered off the runway on landing, combat aircraft 'caught fire,' and the 'pilot's' life is in imminent danger..." In the face of crisis, the emergency response subunit swiftly mobilized to the combat position, racing against time to carry out the rescue.

The island in June is sweltering with heat. On the competition field, with the commander's order, the airfield station's mass billet training competition activities officially commenced. "One sailor is bleeding from the head and has a leg fracture, and it needs urgent treatment!" After the referee's order, four sailors quickly and covertly advanced towards the target while carrying equipment. From discovering the injured, guarding the scene, and transferring the injured to stopping bleeding and ensuring ventilation, bandaging, stabilizing, and transporting for further medical care, the entire process took much less time compared to the past.

"We extensively carry out mass billet training competitions, promoting training through competition and promoting warfighting [abilities] through training, to build and cultivate a contingent of talent with solid capabilities and comprehensive qualities." Deputy Director of the airfield station Sun Feng stated that previously, the unit's backbone personnel force was weak, and even the oxygen and nitrogen necessary for combat aircraft flight were produced by work units off the island and then transported to the island via gas cylinders.

Without oxygen, humans struggle to survive, and combat aircraft can only "get grounded." The airfield station Party Committee learned from this painful experience and, after coordination with many parties, a group of technical backbone personnel, including oxygen production technician Luo Gansheng, were successfully transferred in and began to try to make the station self-sufficient in oxygen and nitrogen.

"The pressure was high at that time, and everyone was waiting to see the results." Although Luo Gansheng was somewhat famous as an "oxygen production expert" in other work units, he still felt uncertain in the unfamiliar environment on the island. Squad Leader Luo secretly made up his mind and began to work busily with his comrades in the operation room, researching equipment performance, working overtime to carry out repairs and calibrations, and consulting with brother work units to verify the feasibility of operations.

After all preparations were in place, the day for oxygen production finally arrived. Luo Gansheng dove into the operation room and worked for over 10 hours straight. When the last bottle of oxygen passed inspection, he, who was usually serious and unsmiling, was as happy as a child.

Time flies. Today, Squad Leader Luo has trained batch after batch of key personnel. The airfield station's oxygen and nitrogen production capabilities are becoming increasingly standardized, specialized, and efficient. The station has cumulatively produced over 10,000 qualified bottles of oxygen and nitrogen and supplied them to various types of combat aircraft, completing all support tasks with zero errors.

Those who understand flying know that "one's livelihood depends on the weather" is the norm for flying units, and the accuracy of weather forecasts directly affects whether flight training can be carried out. Engineer Peng Yiwu of the airfield station's meteorological station felt deeply about this: previously, the equipment allocated at the station was relatively outdated, and there was a shortage of forecasting talent, leading to significant errors in weather forecasts. Everyone was flustered every time they faced an assignment.

When carrying out transformation and construction, how does one enable officers and enlisted personnel to be competent in their posts? With regards to this, the airfield station accelerated the upgrading of meteorological station equipment, leveraging the advantages of local weather department(s), and deeply promoted the upgrade and transformation of integrated meteorological forecasting platform(s). Experts and scholars were invited to provide lectures and guidance, and officers and enlisted personnel were organized to carry out on-site study and go out for external cultivation and training; at the same time, the meteorological station regularly carried out billet training activities, adopting patterns such as billet rotational training, actual-equipment instruction, and billet qualification certification, breaking down the boundaries of specialization and cultivating "one specialty, multiple capabilities" composite technical talents.

Over a few years, the meteorological station underwent a transformation. With the exponential increase in support tasks, the officers and enlisted personnel got a better grasp of the equipment, deepened their specialized knowledge, and operated at full speed, making the forecasting work more timely, accurate, and efficient. As a result, they have received multiple honors, including being recognized as a grassroots construction advanced work unit in 2018 and being awarded a group third-class citation in 2019.

"In the past, we did not have our own medical team, and medical service support mainly relied on local hospital(s)." The airfield station's medical team leader Liang Yu said that the airfield station medical team was established in January 2018, with an outpatient center, an observation ward, a psychological consultation office, an officer and enlisted physiotherapy office, a training injury rehabilitation treatment center, and other departments. It officially began operations in September of the same year, and it is mainly responsible for the airfield station's daily outpatient services, psychological consultation, flight support, and mass combat casualty care training and other tasks.

In recent years, the outpatient service of the medical team has averaged over 2,000 patient visits annually, effectively solving the problem of personnel having difficulty seeing a doctor. At the same time, it has vigorously carried out training in mass combat casualty care, organized psychological assessments for officers and enlisted personnel, and conducted health physiotherapy and training injury rehabilitation. The support capability of the airfield station has been developed from scratch, progressing from weak to strong.

Since this transformation and construction, the airfield station has focused on training with new equipment and new force(s), strived to maximize the effectiveness of weaponry and equipment, and researched and formulated a series of regulations such as the "Airfield Station Detailed Support Regulations" and the "Multi-Aircraft-Model Support Manual." It has closely monitored key difficult issues such as air collision avoidance, bird [strike] harm prevention, and meteorological forecasting. It has improved support measures and methods, and vigorously promoted the transition of flight support from passive to proactive, from single-item to systematic, from extensive to precise, and from low efficiency to high efficiency. These changes have achieved a reshaping and leap in aspects such as thinking, equipment allocation, and support capabilities, quickly forming the capacity for support throughout the entire station.

To vigorously build a talent contingent and improve the [talent] cultivation system, creating a situation in which people are suited to their posts and their talents are fully utilized, this airfield station has organized over 800 sessions of professional rotational training and backbone personnel group training, selecting and sending people for schooling 120 times. With on-the-job training and billet-based talent development as the basic approaches, methods such as studying off-site, inviting instructors for teaching, and cultivating academic institutions have also been used to enhance the level of talent cultivation. The station has organized general training for all personnel, rotational training for backbone personnel, in-depth training for top personnel, and mutual training, taking "new knowledge and new skills" as the teaching emphasis, striving to improve the informatization knowledge level of officers and enlisted personnel, and accelerating the cultivation of a technical and composite talent contingent. As of now, the station has trained over a hundred support personnel in multiple aircraft types and over a hundred "one specialty, multiple capabilities" professional backbone personnel. Support capabilities have been significantly improved.

Open Up the Vision of Innovation with a Spirit of Responsibility

"The flight line pavement was not cleaned thoroughly, the lounge management standards are not high, and some support vehicles drove too fast..." As combat aircraft return, inside the airfield control tower, flight line support command staff officer Zhang Qijing begins the day's flight support review.

In recent years, such evaluations have become a daily part of his work. Reflecting on the changes over these years, Zhang Qijing feels deeply moved. At that time, he had just been transferred to the flight line support staff officer post, and the airfield station took on a mission supporting a brother unit with multiple-aircraft which had deployed there for training. Since the airfield station was just starting out in cross-service deployed training support, there arose questions about how to organize command, support processes, and handling of special situations for combat aircraft of different services and types. How to provide support for different aircraft with different main and auxiliary fuel types...There was no existing experience to draw upon, and challenges came one after another.

"The more transformation and construction reaches a critical point where difficulties increase with advances, the more we need the courage to press on in the face of challenges and make more arduous efforts to tackle the tough issues in reality." In the face of difficulties, the airfield station leadership did not back down. With a sense of urgency, they led a team to visit the unit(s)

deployed for training to understand the assignment situation, researched and broke down each step in the support process(es), scientifically formulated support plans, clarified workable timelines and responsible departments, constructed a clear task list, and ensured that flight support tasks steadily progressed according to the needs of unit(s) stationed for training. Through continuous exploration, practice, summary, and improvement, they have developed a complete set of deployed training support processes, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent improvement of support quality.

Throughout its transformation and construction, the airfield station has prepared with a focus on flight units and actual combat needs. Within mission requirements, they have seized training, carried out support, and promoted construction, gradually exploring and practicing to form an airfield support model unique to island and reef characteristics.

The airfield has a hot climate year-round, which is suitable for birds to inhabit and reproduce. Every year during migration season, over 100 species of birds forage for food on the island. "The bird situation is complex and variable, and we have developed our own unique measures for bird damage prevention," said Xia Yun, an airfield station vehicle service company commander, to the correspondent.

They established a bird strike prevention work leading small group, updated bird situation data in real-time, and vigorously carried out bird damage prevention work in accordance with comprehensive measures and practical results. Based on the life patterns, breeding stages, and biological characteristics of birds, they flexibly adopted measures such as setting bird nets, destroying bird nests, deploying strong acoustic bird deterrents, applying targeted bird repellent agents, and spraying ammonia water to ensure the effectiveness of bird control.

As transformation and construction deepen and the missions and tasks continue to expand, the airfield station faces more new challenges and difficulties. However, they always adhere to a clear orientation of combat readiness and warfighting, deeply grasping the requirements of "joint combat training, actual combat, and actual training." They regularly conduct more than ten types of special-situation drills, such as rapid runway repair, power outages, foreign aircraft emergency landings, and anti-air raid ground defense operations. They have formulated and updated more than a hundred plans and contingencies, including a "Rapid Runway Repair Plan," an "Anti-Air Raid Operations Plan," and a "Foreign Aircraft Emergency Landing Contingency Plan." The support chain for multiple aircraft types at this island/reef airfield has been continuously improved, and the units' rapid mobilization, emergency support, and other capabilities have been enhanced.

One early morning, due to the impact of a typhoon, there was a sudden power outage. The personnel at the airfield station quickly mobilized to carry out repairs and soon restored power, ensuring that the units deployed there for training could carry out their flight training as scheduled. On one occasion, a unit stationed there for training had a large number of personnel deployed there in a short period of time, and the airfield station personnel responded swiftly, making all necessary support adjustments within a day. When a combat aircraft encountered an emergency during landing and veered off the runway, the airfield station's arresting gear successfully stopped the plane, and the emergency mobility subunit reacted quickly and handled it successfully, avoiding property damage. In recent years, personnel at the airfield station have

also responded to emergencies over 100 times, providing support for military and local civilian rescue aircraft and successfully resolving numerous emergencies...

"Heart-to-heart" service, "zero-distance" support, and "practical" problem-solving have also received recognition and praise from superiors and the personnel of work units stationed there for training. In recent years, this airfield station has been rated as a "military training first-class work unit" by superiors for four consecutive years, recognized as a "grassroots construction advanced regiment" and "advancing in the new era advanced party committee body" by the Theater Command Navy in 2019, and honored as a "military-civil aviation airport joint support up-to-standard work unit " in 2020, as well as being rated as a "high-quality safe airfield station" by superiors five times.

The airfield station's honors room is filled with banners, reflecting the continuous rise of the station's comprehensive support capability, and clearly recording the units' progress in their efforts to strengthen the military. As time passes, what remains unchanged is the posture of struggle, and on the historical timeline, what is always clear is the footsteps of the pioneers. On the journey to strengthen the military, the officers and enlisted of the station are sweating and marching forward...