



Air Land Sea Application Center

Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia

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Less Is More

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An A-10C Thunderbolt II flies over a group of tactical air control party specialists (Photo by A1C Kenneth Boyton, USAF).

Introduction.

The Joint Staff first published Joint Publication (JP) 3-09.3, *Close Air Support (CAS)* in 1995. Since then, CAS practitioners have refined the procedures, with the most current iteration published in 2019. Technology and tactical problems CAS team members face drove those changes. However, as the United States (US) military transitions its focus from limited to large-scale combat operations, warfighters should assess how well currently accepted best practices meet the desired intent of CAS procedures. This article asserts that some of the techniques used today are unnecessarily rigid. Depending on the experience and skill of the joint terminal attack controller (JTAC), current practices sometimes remove so much initiative from the flight or section leader

as to almost make the existence of flights or sections moot (CAS aircraft become a collection of individual planes rather than coherent units). As a result, the techniques miss the tactical intent or they make CAS procedures too inflexible for a dynamic battle against a capable foe.

Although a relatively new tactic, this article focuses on the game plan because it is subjective in execution—leading to a wide variety of techniques across the CAS community. Also, the game plan illustrates the trend toward removing initiative from flight/section leaders, which, inherently, makes CAS tactics less flexible. The table 1 illustrates how poor game plans change the CAS team from a cohesive group, working together to solve tactical problems into a collection of individual aircraft striving to meet sometimes ill-defined requirements. The author received the game plan described on the left several months ago.

Table 1. Game Plan Comparison	
Overly Rigid Game Plan	Minimal Game Plan
This will be Type 2, BOT, BDU-33 from number 2 followed by guns from number 1, one minute interval, two targets, two kilometers apart, one tank and one machine gun position, number 2 in the from west, number 1 in from the south, call ready 9-Line	This will be Type 2, BOT, two target locations, call ready 9-Line.
Legend: BDU—bomb dummy unit BOT—bombs on target	

The following is a brief history of the CAS Briefing (9-line) including the game plan, the current process for developing a 9-line, and recommendations for balancing control and initiative between the two sides of the CAS team to build cohesion among all CAS team members.

The CAS Team

The number of people a CAS team may comprise depends on the supported ground echelon or mission size. All the team members can be grouped into two categories: JTACs/forward air controllers (airborne) (FAC(A)s) and supporting aircrew. JTACs/FAC(A)s are the ground commander’s direct representatives. As such, they receive the ground commander’s intent and translate it into orders (or a 9-line) for the aircrew.¹ The aircrew executes actions based on the 9-lines to make the ground commander’s intent into reality. The 9-line, then, is the core mechanism by which the JTAC/FAC(A) communicates intent and restrictions to the aircrew, see figure 1.

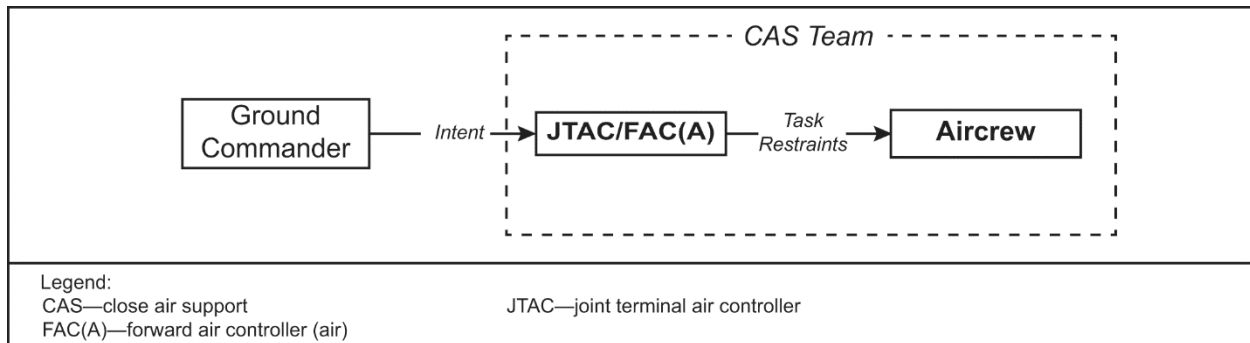


Figure 1. The CAS Team.

The 9-Line and the Game Plan

The purpose of the 9-line is to “help aircrew in determining if they have the information required to perform the mission.”² JP 3-09.3 says the 9-line “does not dictate the CAS aircraft’s tactics.”³ The original 1995 JP 3-09.3 included these exact phrases, and they have not changed in 25 years. The doctrinal verbiage emphasizes the basic process described in the CAS team section (in the previous paragraph). The 9-line is a standardized format for a JTAC/FAC(A) to communicate the ground commander’s intent, targeting information, and restrictions to aircrew so they can deliver the desired effect. CAS procedures intend for the aircrew to have maximum flexibility regarding tactics (as constrained by ground commander’s or JTAC’s/FAC(A)’s restrictions).

There are few differences between the 1995 and 2019 9-line versions. However, the nuances within each 9-line have undergone numerous revisions for a variety of reasons. The current game plan is the result of a slow evolution which began in 2003.

The 2003 JP 3-09.3 required JTACs/FAC(A)s to “broadcast the type of control in use upon aircraft check-in,” and mandated that “Type 1 is the default method of control.”⁴ The 2009 JP 3-09.3 eliminated this requirement, instead directing that type of control be coordinated during the fires approval process and the 2014 edition added that type of control should be communicated prior to the “In” call.⁵ In addition, the 2014 edition introduced the method-of-attack concept (bomb on target [BOT] or bomb on coordinate [BOC]), reflecting the proliferation of GPS-guided munitions and experience gained in Iraq and Afghanistan, and added the game plans—“a concise and SA enhancing tool to inform players of the flow of the following attack”—while setting the minimum information required: type of control and method of attack.⁶ In 2019, JP 3-09.3 dropped “SA enhancing” from the game plan’s description, suggesting the authors desired to emphasize “concise” rather than the more subjective “SA enhancing.”⁷

In a period of 11 years, for a variety of excellent reasons, the CAS team evolved from a fire control methodology focused on a single, area-based type of control that disregarded additional techniques or procedures to a more flexible system. The current system gives a JTAC/FAC(A) six choices for each attack: three types of control and two methods of attack for any target. At the end of this decade-long transition, the game plan was added to ensure the JTAC/FAC(A) and aircrew shared a clear understanding of expectations and standardized game plan passage prior to the 9-line.

The intent of the game plan is to enhance aircrew SA, just as the intent of the 9-line is to allow aircrew to determine if they have sufficient information to attack. In both cases, the aircrew is the target audience. Even though the aircrew are the supporting players in the CAS team, the aircrew are the people who either will or will not achieve the ground commander's desired effects. This means that JTACs/FAC(A)s should construct 9-lines that provide necessary target and engagement information, then design game plans that allow aircrew maximum flexibility in the given situation to achieve the desired effect.

The Logic of the Game Plan

The game plan's addition to CAS procedures likely stemmed from several factors. First, the elimination of assumptions about control type and the addition of attack methods created a need to standardize when a JTAC/FAC(A) should pass that information for a given attack. Second, the nature of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq coupled with technological change simultaneously decreased the pre-mission detailed integration between aircrew and JTACs/FAC(A)s while rules of engagement demanded increased levels of control by ground commanders to mitigate collateral damage.⁸ Finally, differences in the fires approval processes between the US Army and US Marine Corps meant that Marine Corps CAS tended to be more specific about ordnance and timing restrictions. These trends meant that the attack requirements in the 2004 to 2015 period could be unusually specific compared to CAS tactics from earlier years. A game plan could alleviate some of those variables by essentially communicating to the aircrew, "here's what's about to happen, call ready for the details."

The game plan is a reasonable solution to these issues and serves a needed purpose but, as with any tool, misuse can hinder rather than help progress. The point of the game plan, beyond simply control type and attack method, is for a JTAC/FAC(A) to recognize a potentially confusing 9-line and preempt that confusion by clearly articulating the conceptual attack before going into details. In this author's experience, when game plans do not achieve this purpose, it is typically because the game plan is unnecessarily complicated and/or overly controlling.

The Game Plan as a Concept Briefing

Discussions of the game plan often focus on required items: type and method per the JP 3-09.3, or type, method, ordnance, and interval (TMOI) per the US Marine Corps' MAWTS-1 TACP TACSOP.⁹ The next part of the discussion, then, usually turns to whether certain additional elements of the passed game plan add value or detract from overall SA. Rather than debate which elements should or should not be required in a game plan, JTACs/FAC(A)s should think more about how they develop the "concept of the attack," with an emphasis on how much control is required by the JTAC/FAC(A), then create a concise statement to prepare aircrew for the attack.

JP 3-09.3 Chapter V, Section 2, provides an excellent description of how JTACs/FAC(A)s should develop a target engagement plan. Table 2, below, lays out the process defined by JP 3-09.3, and relates it to a question-based process used by the author. The doctrine clearly states that "the intent is not to dictate aircraft tactics but to offer a plan that meets the ground commander's intent."¹⁰ However, given the nature of game plan development it is common for JTACs/FAC(A)s to go into greater detail than required.

Table 2. Simplifying Engagement Process	
JP 3-09.3 CAS Target Engagement	Simplistic Process
1. Develop targeting data	1. Where is the target?
2. Request air support	2. What do we want to do to the target?
3. Develop game plan	3. How will we engage the target with the resources we have to achieve that effect?
4. Determine target correlation method	4. What is the simplest way to find the target that allows us to engage it as determined in step 3?
5. Develop attack geometry	5. Do we need help to engage the target? If so, what?
6. Determine SEAD requirements	6. How do we put this all together? (complete attack plan/geometry)
Legend: CAS—close air support JP—joint publication SEAD—suppression of enemy air defenses	

When addressing how to engage the target, JTACs/FAC(A)s should begin game plan development from the perspective that tactics—which includes aspects like timing—are the aircrew’s prerogative. Once JTACs/FAC(A)s pair assets to targets, the JTAC/FAC(A) should provide the task (effect) and build a container of restrictions for the aircrew to operate within, while allowing aircrew as much flexibility as possible. Setting too many unnecessary conditions causes the aircrew to lose tactical flexibility and may put the aircrew into risky positions or cause the aircrew to fail to deliver the desired effect. By providing a simple game plan—an attack concept—the aircrew can match the best tactics to the situation and mitigate the this issue. Perceiving the game plan simply as an attack concept into which the aircrew can fit their tactics helps mitigate this issue.

The Concept in Practice

If the JTAC/FAC(A) looks at the game plan as a concept brief and allows the aircrew to select tactics within a set of constraints, the game plan will help build SA and set conditions for an effective attack. The following narrative illustrates how a JTAC/FAC(A) might use a different mindset to come to a better overall game plan and, ultimately, a more effective and efficient result.

The ground commander nominates a machine gun position and single, stationary tank north and northeast from the company’s position respectively. The JTAC/FAC(A) has only one flight of fixed-wing fighters on station, and the ground commander wants both targets struck as soon as possible. The JTAC/FAC(A) quickly plots both targets, builds a description, and determines the nearest friendly positions. Considering the targets and the aircraft’s remaining ordnance, the JTAC/FAC(A) determines that a Type 2 bomb on target attack is the best approach. The JTAC/FAC(A) could pass two 9-Lines, one for each target, but decides that a single 9-Line will be faster and provide sufficient situational awareness. Assessing the friendly and target positions, the JTAC/FAC(A) identifies that different attack restrictions are required for each target (see Figure 2).

This is another indication that two 9-Lines may be the best choice, but for argument's sake this JTAC/FAC(A) will proceed with a single 9-Line. With a complete picture built, the JTAC/FAC(A) is ready to pass the game plan.

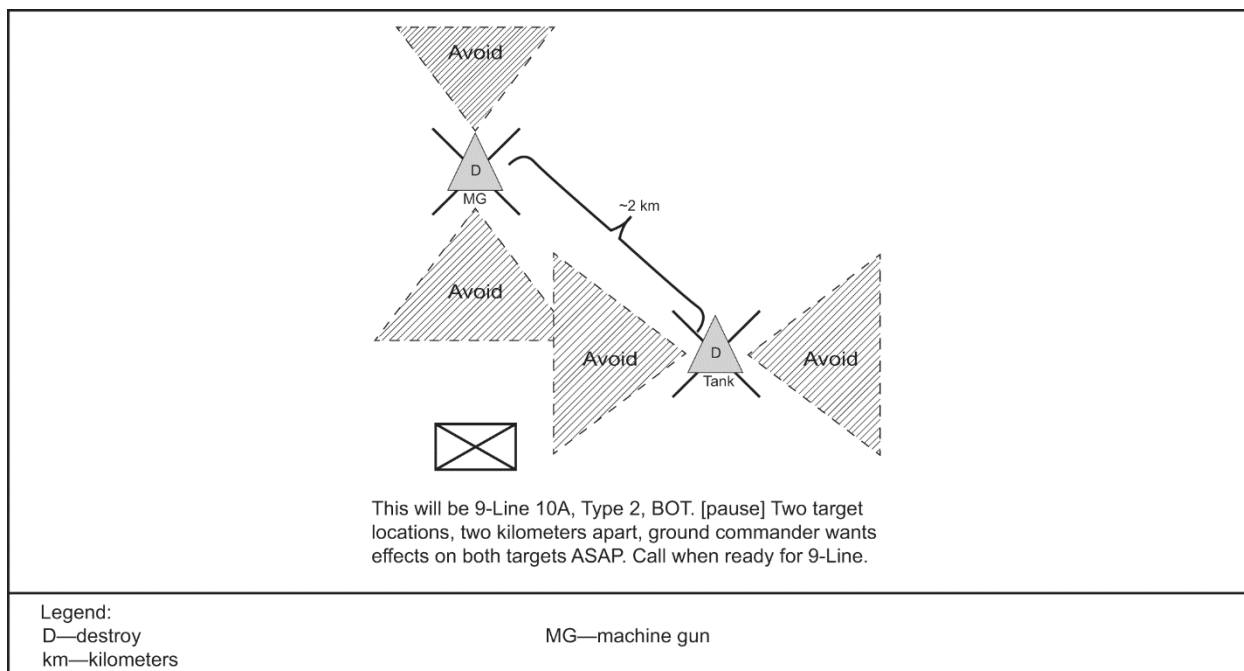


Figure 2. 9-Line Example.

At this point, the JTAC/FAC(A) passes the full 9-Line, choosing the tank as the target for Lines 4, 5, and 6 since it is slightly closer to friendlies and a higher priority. In the remarks and restrictions, the JTAC/FAC(A) passes the second target description and location, final attack heading restrictions for each target, and desired effects. The JTAC/FAC(A) used the game plan and the remarks/restrictions to build a container within which the aircrew have the flexibility to strike the targets in the best way they see fit. Once read-backs are complete, the JTAC/FAC(A) completes correlation with the aircrew. Then, since the aircrew now understand the restrictions placed upon them and have target SA, they are now in a position to make the best decision on tactics.

“...That machine gun nest is your second target, call tally.”

“Tally.”

“Go with tactics when able.”

“Number one will be in on the tank from the south with guns, then number two will be in on the machine gun nest from the west with bombs, expect 45 seconds between aircraft.”

“Copy all. Push when ready. Call in with direction.”

While the tactics the flight/section leader determined were not grossly different from the original game plan, the above attack flow is *much* simpler for the flight/section leader to lead the fighters through. Additionally, since the JTAC/FAC(A) did not build tight cuffs around the aircrew's actions during the game plan, there was no need for the time-

consuming discussion that might have resulted as the flight/section leader tried to turn the unwieldy game plan into something more conducive to the aircrew's training and habit patterns. The game plan the JTAC/FAC(A) passed in this scenario was simply a concept: two targets, quick effects. That is *what* the ground commander wanted. The JTAC/FAC(A) gave the aircrew the freedom to determine *how* to deliver those effects.

Conclusion

Game plans arose in the last fifteen years to serve a necessary purpose. However, the CAS team must strive not to lose sight of the purpose of game plans—establishing the basic concept for an attack before going into details. If game plans become almost as long as 9-lines, or if they unnecessarily restrict aircrew action, then tactical effectiveness and, potentially, results suffer. JTACs/FAC(A)s should keep game plans as simple as possible—a concise description of what is about to happen.

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Endnotes

¹ Joint Publication (JP) 3-09.3 *Close Air Support*, 2019, III-30.

² JP 3-09.3, V-23.

³ Ibid.

⁴ JP 3-09.3, 2009, V-15.

⁵ JP 3-09.3, 2014, III-42.

⁶ Ibid., III-47, III-35

⁷ JP 3-09.3, 2019, V-21.

⁸ Mike Benitez, "How Afghanistan Distorted Close Air Support and Why It Matters," <https://warontherocks.com/2016/06/how-afghanistan-distorted-close-air-support-and-why-it-matters/>, June 29, 2016.

⁹ JP 3-09.3, V-4; MAWTS-1 *Tactical Air Control Party Tactical Standard Operating Procedures*, April 3, 2020, 52.

¹⁰ JP 3-09.3, V-4.

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