



# Air Land Sea Application Center

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## Combined Arms in the CAS Firefight

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*"We must remember that one man is much the same as another, and that he is best who is trained in the severest school."—Thucydides*



Airmen from the 13th Air Support Operations Squadron, 3rd Air Support Operations Group, Advanced Instructors Course, call indirect fire from close air support as part of the U.S. Air Force Weapons School during a joint training mission with Soldiers of C Battery, 2nd Battalion, 12th Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, near Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. (Photo by Sgt. Meghan Berry)

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*Note from the Editor: The shifting threat environment and return to strategic competition forced the United States Air Force to rethink the mission and force structure of Air Force Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) airmen, now known as Special Warfare. This article reminds the Joint Force that in the best of times integration of forces is a significant challenge. Only through close relationships, combined training events, and technological advances are TACP airmen effective in integrating Air Force assets with ground maneuver units.*

Much of the Air Force execution in the field of close air support (CAS) is technology based, utilizing systems and aircraft that are very useful in the CAS fight. Integrating this into training and eventually to the battlefield however seems to be less successful than one would expect. In the current fights overseas, and to better prepare the Army / Air Force team, realistic CAS training and integration must begin to be executed. The emphasis on reduction of collateral damage, integration of forces, precision and flexible systems, and justifying our weapons systems to the theatre commanders, requires training and doctrine that achieves effective combined arms. It cannot be ignored any longer; the current and future fight will be CAS-centric, requiring the most effective use of combined arms.

## **COMPARING AND CONTRASTING SERVICES**

Effective CAS requires detailed integration with the ground scheme of maneuver. The USMC integrates their pilots and ground officers at the earliest level, Officer Candidate School. Later in their career the chain of command puts forward air controllers (FACs) both on the ground and airborne, in a position to coordinate face to face with the ground commander, creating a trust between ground and air forces that makes for effective CAS. Work-up training utilizes live fire from artillery, aircraft, and ground forces integrated with realistic staff planning and execution. In short, the system trains to the highest and most severe standard prior to going into combat.

While the US Army has requested a greater amount of joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs) and is building a more robust air liaison officer (ALO) community, there is friction that exists in the training and execution of CAS. While the ground commander has a specific requirement for integration at his level, it appears that there is a break down. From training at the National Training Center (NTC) to execution in the field, there is no detailed face to face brief with aircrew and combined arms live fire training. It must be understood that the only justification for airpower in the CAS fight is to further the ground scheme of maneuver.

## **FAC(A) AND CAS AIRCREW INTEGRATION**

FAC(A) integration has been the topic of many articles and discussions as of late. Now with the possibility of a dedicated light attack/FAC(A) platform (OA-X), the situation continues to develop. Technology in weapons and sensors has also reached a peak. This is all great, but without realistic combined arms training and integration, a great opportunity may be lost.

First, the USAF FAC(A) communities must integrate into the ground scheme of maneuver. While it may seem like a waste of time to a fighter pilot, what must be understood is that, that one day sitting in on a briefing and making liaison with the ground commander will pay dividends when the FAC(A) is utilized to his full potential. Having the pilot flying the missions in the room with those he is supporting always builds trust. Without a dedicated effort from the regular flying community to make liaison, and relying only on ALO support, the effective use of CAS assets can be lost. On a day to day basis the ALO has the ability to influence and advise, but the aircrew must understand that building a team requires members to be in the same room. Failure to liaise leads to extended time in coordination on the battlefield, where lives and opportunities can be lost.

The FAC(A) is an extension of the tactical air control party (TACP). His conduit is the JTAC on the ground. The aircrew can gain the commander's trust through increased coordination and understanding on how responsibility is delegated to the FAC(A). This will further help the JTAC clear fires when everyone knows the command and control procedures prior to receiving the ATO schedule. In addition the FAC(A) will utilize his full potential on the battlefield, controlling more than just other aircraft, but all of the combined arms weapons available. This cannot be achieved without the full trust and coordination of the ground commander.

This FAC(A) pilot can also double as the expert on the scheme of maneuver (SOM) for the CAS fight when he returns to the squadron. Having a coherent point of contact is critical. Creating a network of pilots, ALOs, and ground commanders that can communicate critical information and integrate the fight, with a small effort put forward, is also essential.

In training there has to be a dedicated effort at Green Flag and other large force exercises (LFEs) to build this liaison. Having flight crews fly via helicopter or drive to the NTC at Ft. Irwin for a face to face brief will be required. The Army in turn must have its commanders put forward an effort to accommodate the air fight into the training. All planning must be integrated, despite who is being supported, and who is supporting. The USAF and USA must develop or integrate objectives and exercises into phased training, varying between supported and supporting exercises for all units.

### **COMBINED ARMS COORDINATION**

The battlefield is more dynamic than ever before. Technology at the lowest levels has helped bring this along. CAS was thought to be a thing of the past, but increased urbanization and development of our enemy's capabilities has changed that dramatically. It will be the challenge of the future to make use of the lessons learned and develop our schools and training to address these challenges.

The USAF CAS aircrew and FAC(A) are extensions of the ground commander. The JTAC is the conduit and the training must reflect this understanding. It is not possible to simulate working with the ground scheme of maneuver. To do so will only cause great confusion when forces have to work together for the first time on the battlefield. It is imperative that CAS aircrew understand combined arms, the coordination necessary, and be able to execute on an event-based timeline.

Finally the FAC(A)/JTAC community must train to a more severe standard. Combined arms integration must be achieved. Simulation of artillery is not acceptable; aircrew must see real life challenges in working with indirect fire assets and agencies. Working with USMC and US Army rotary-wing aircraft must also be coordinated. The integration at the staff level will help the USAF FAC(A) understand the clearance of fires better as well. It will be up to HQ USAF and HQ USA to listen to the lower level commanders to find the perfect way to task assets to each prospective school and LFEs.

### **JTAC / ALO TRAINING**

A greater link between the professional JTAC and CAS aircrew must be made. USMC aircrew have a direct link to the FAC on the ground, they are all USMC aviators. While the career ALO program may work towards this, there has to be a true integration of the

CAS fight in the USAF. Setting a standard and developing greater coordination between the ground controller and aircrew will help to build teamwork prior to stepping onto the battlefield.

The USAF JTAC community requires greater combined arms integration in training at all levels. In the JTAC Qualification Training, Air Combat Command must put forward an effort to build a course that has fully supported air training. With a new JTAC memorandum of agreement (MOA) coming out, the time is right to support a full MOA compliant school much like that of Expeditionary Warfare Training Group Pacific/Atlantic (EWTG PAC/LANT) in the USMC. There are currently limited live sorties for JTAC trainees to train on. Therefore, USAF JTACs receive academic, simulation, and some live training and are finishing live control for certification at their home units. The USAF needs to increase training opportunities at the schoolhouse so that trainees are full-up, certified JTACs upon graduation. Having the training increased at the school house will create greater standardization across the community.

Developing an advanced JTAC Instructor or JTACI course that utilizes assets from either Fighter Weapons School or integrating it into Red Flag exercises can build a link between the subject matter experts (SMEs) in the air and on the ground. While this standard may not be driven at the weapons school itself, the integration into the platforms training as support for the JTACI will build an understanding and trust that will hopefully transcend into the air support operations center (ASOC) and eventually the Army tactical operations center (TOC). Currently these exercises only utilize JTACs as support elements. This is an opportunity lost to forge a true air-ground team.

To integrate, the ALO attached to Army units and his JTACs must become fully integrated into the staff and participate in training exercises that include combined arms from both USA and USAF. While there will be reluctance at many levels, the change will be worthwhile when fighters put ordnance on target, with the commanders full intent achieved. This shift in mindset for the ALO will be difficult and will require backing from his leadership, but the benefit will be better coordination and an officer that understands the unit he is supporting. The ALO tour should be taken as a career building experience. This will require USAF leadership to view it as such.

## **CONCLUSION**

Combined Arms CAS requires a large amount of detailed planning and integration. It has large staff planning considerations and challenges. The USMC has refined these skills to a high standard, the USAF and USA owe it to the men and women on the ground to learn from the Marines and develop a truly combined arms team that trains to the highest standard, in the most severe realistic training.

This list of items may seem long and lofty, but it can be achieved by giving teeth to the experts and schools that already exist within the USAF and USA. Integration of aircrew into the fight, conducting live fire combined arms training, and developing our professional JTAC, FAC(A), and ALO can be achieved. There must be emphasis put into combined arms, otherwise we face the possibility of not being fully prepared for future conflicts, risking lives and success on the battlefield.

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