



Air Land Sea Application Center

Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia

<https://www.alsa.mil>

Maneuver Combat and the Integration of Air Force Special Warfare: Leveraging TACP Expertise Against a Near-Peer Threat

By Captain Cameron Urquhart

Tomorrow's Airmen are more likely to fight in highly contested environments and must be prepared to fight through combat attrition rates and risks to the nation that are more akin to the World War II era than the uncontested environment to which we have since become accustomed. The forces and operational concepts we need must be different. Our approach to deterrence must adapt to the changes in the security environment.

Charles Brown, Jr., Gen, USAF
Chief of Staff of the Air Force¹

The Future Fight

General Brown echoes what the Air Force enterprise has realized for the last several years. We are not postured for the next fight against a near-peer threat such as China or Russia. The tactical air control party (TACP) under the newly minted Air Force special warfare (AFSPECWAR), must transition from a community that focuses primarily on close air support (CAS), multi-domain command and control (C2) functions during Phase III operations, to a career field that can be doctrinally relied on from the onset of Phase I operations who answers the needs of the combined force air component commander (CFACC), keeping in line with the chief of staff's new directives.

TACPs can no longer rest on their laurels of liaison and terminal control alone, they must acknowledge the struggles that our nation faces in the next conflict. The Air Force developed a map for the TACP weapon system in the latest **AIR FORCE SPECIAL WARFARE (AFSPECWAR) TACTICAL AIR CONTROL PARTY (TACP) WEAPON SYSTEM VISION 2030**. In this four-page document, the USAF Deputy Chief of Staff states that: "The TACP weapon system (WS) is not currently postured to provide 'joint lethality in contested environments'... from the tactical to strategic planning level as laid out in the National Defense Strategy ...the improved TACP WS will provide effective air-minded integration to joint elements to enable stand-in sensors, link stand-off shooters, and provide all domain effects for joint commanders."² This battle-hardened community of joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs) must evolve to be joint partners in all domains; kinetic and non-kinetic subject matter experts across the all-domain spectrum.

Evolution of Tactics From Counterinsurgency (COIN) Operations to Near-Peer Threats

For the last two decades, the United States military has fought a COIN war in the Middle East which has equated to, among other things, the use of precision strike against insurgents in mostly uncontested environments. As General Brown illustrated in his strategic approach, *Accelerate Change or Lose*, the Air Force needs to learn how to fight in an environment akin to the Second World War. For special warfare TACPs that means internalizing the Army's ground scheme of maneuver and refining how they can integrate fires that do not have the requirement for JTAC employment. Annex 3-03, *Counterland Operations*, states that since World War I, "Airpower added a synergistic element to conventional ground forces because of its ability to attack behind enemy lines and support offensive breakthroughs ...Airpower has proven invaluable in supporting friendly ground maneuvers by diverting, disrupting, delaying, or destroying an enemy's operational military potential."³



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Patrick Pettus, a special warfare mission support member assigned to the 3rd Air Support Operations Squadron, conducts small unit tactics at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, June 17, 2020. The 3rd Air Support Operations Squadron (ASOS) Airmen conducted the airborne training to maintain operational readiness. The focus on readiness demonstrates the installation's resiliency and posture for the future throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jonathan Valdes Montijo)

The joint force fundamentally understands that airpower plays a pivotal role from the start of a major engagement. The Air Force as a whole, however, lacks the ability to successfully integrate into the ground scheme of maneuver as well as an understanding for battlespace geometry. The terms forward line of own troops (FLOT), fire support coordination line (FSCL), coordinated fire line, and phase lines are joint doctrinal terms that must be added to the Air Force's lexicon. TACPs are uniquely suited to be the lynchpin due to their ability to integrate from the company level through the corps providing both terminal control, liaison capabilities, and C2 across all domains. "The TACP WS should integrate not only with traditional air, land, and sea-based capabilities, but also cyber and space capabilities to provide the full suite of joint all-domain operations to defeat future adversaries in a highly contested and denied environment."⁴

In a conflict with a near-peer threat, the necessity to balance CAS, air interdiction (AI), and strike coordination and reconnaissance (SCAR) is paramount. TACPs' bread and butter is CAS, which is defined as air action by aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and require detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces. This form of fire support is best suited between the FLOT and FSCL and differs greatly from AI which is defined as air operations conducted to divert, disrupt, delay, or destroy the enemy's military surface capabilities before it can be brought to bear effectively against friendly forces, or to otherwise achieve objectives that are conducted at such distances from friendly forces that detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of friendly forces is not required. (Annex 3-03, *Counterland Operations: AI Fundamentals*). AI and SCAR do not require a JTAC to deploy munitions, but at the tactical level, the TACP is essential in collecting data across multiple domains and funneling it to the appropriate agencies to ensure that the joint force commander's (JFC) objective is achieved. At the operational level (corps staff) and during Phase I/II, TACPs are crucial in integrating fires long of the FSCL and aiding AI and SCAR to peel back layers of integrated air defense systems (IADS) by being the connective tissue between the air operations center (AOC) and the ground maneuver elements, ultimately allowing an increase in air superiority and a permissive environment.

During the early phases of a major conflict, TACP operators would be vital acting as the connective tissue, linking the tactical and operational levels. Currently, TACPs are manned from the battalion level, through the corps/joint air component coordination element, with additional personnel at the AOC. No other career field has the same representation of personnel at so many echelons during combat operations. As the Air Force moves into the all-domain fight, TACPs are already strategically poised to fill the gap with their newly minted TACP integration unit type code layout that include all-domain subject matter experts, but above all else, they have the knowledge base of how to integrate crucial information for both the air and ground war. Ideally, AFSPECWAR operators will be the premier ground tactical C2 entity, projecting an advanced mesh network from within the anti-access area denial (A2AD) threat environment. This will be done through a combination of increasing manning at echelons above the division to aid in coordination and integration, as well as sending operators into the threat zone and controlling kinetic and non-kinetic fires.

Ramifications for the Joint Force, and the Limitations that Must be Addressed

As mentioned in the previous section, special warfare TACPs will be crucial during Phase I and II of a conflict to integrate the Air Force component commander's objective with the land component commander's to achieve the joint force commander's goals within the area of operation (AO). During the first phase of an operation, the Air Force's primary concern is disrupting military centers of gravity, degrading the enemy's IADS, and disrupting enemy forces deep behind enemy lines before those maneuver elements can make their way into the corps AO (once ground forces are in the AO). One of the key limitations to this balancing act in the joint environment is understanding each branch's definition of "the deep fight".



An A-10 Thunderbolt II from the 190th Fighter Squadron, Idaho Air National Guard executes a show of force during a training exercise with the 124th Air Support Operations Squadron, IDANG and the Brazilian Air Force tactical air control party specialist at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, June 12, 2019. The Brazilian Air Force was training with the 124 ASOS TACPs and the 12th Combat Training Squadron TACPS during NTC. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Senior Airman Mercedee Wilds)

The FSCL is the key term when delineating between each branch's deep fight and JP 3-09, *Close Air Support*, defines the fire support coordination line best; "The FSCL delineates coordination requirements for the joint attack of surface targets, while also facilitating the expeditious engagement of targets of opportunity beyond the coordinating measure, this applies to all fires of air, land, and maritime-based weapon

systems using any type of munition against surface targets”⁵. The air component views the FSCL as a restrictive fire support coordination measure when regarding the area short of the coordination measure. The joint force air component commander (JFACC) cannot employ fires short of the FSCL without coordination with the joint force land component commander (JFLCC). The FSCL is a significant consideration during interdiction operations. The FSCL is primarily used to establish C2 procedures for planning and execution purposes.

Understanding how the FSCL impacts the battlefield is vital to the TACP mission at the corps level because it helps in delineating CAS, AI, and multi-domain operations. As we look forward to a near-peer fight, this dedication to integrating fires across all domain spectrums will be one of the main factors that reduce friction within the joint operations. For starters, this means TACPs need to revamp their approach to joint exercises at locations such as the National Training Center (NTC) and the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC); and Warfighter Exercise (WFX) participation. Instead of focusing on the liaison and control as it pertains to CAS, AFSPECWAR operators have to start integrating joint all-domain command and control functionality into the fight. Using all domain control teams (ADCTs) and deep strike reconnaissance teams (DSRTs) within the scenarios and more importantly, teaching the army echelons how that capability will achieve the ground commander’s effect.

How Special Warfare Plays in Future Warfare Through the JAGIC and Fires Integration

The joint air-ground integration center (JAGIC) is the result of decade long Army-Air Force integration effort led by Air Combat Command’s Joint and Combined Integration Directorate. At its core, the JAGIC takes an air support operations center (ASOC) crew and integrates it with the division’s staff making a current operations integration center (COIC). The COIC is comprised of the ASOC, division TACPs, fire support element, C2, air and missile defense (AMD), and aviation personnel. The JAGIC is responsible for integrating air-to-ground effects within the division battlespace, as well as managing the air asset collocation amongst the subordinate brigades. The Joint Force Quarterly article, *Bridging the Gap from Coordination to Integration*, sums up the role of the JAGIC best as; “... collocates the decision-making authorities from the land and air components with the highest levels of situational awareness, that is, the senior air director and deputy fire support coordinator... This arrangement also ensures support of JFACC objectives and intent and requirements of the JFC.”⁶

The JAGIC is a crucial war-fighting function in terms of major combat operations against a near-peer threat and though the liaison and control mission of the TACP will not change, there is the potential to build on the all-domain aspect and keep the WS in line with the 2030 vision. Using the TACP C2 construct, under the JAGIC AO, we can employ TACP DSRTs, comprised of 4-6 personnel, including 2-3 Army Scouts and 2 JTACs. During Phase III operations and while supporting a ground maneuver element, the purpose of this team would be to deploy short of the FSCL within the division’s “deep area” and collect targeting information to either action on with air-to-ground munitions or surface-to-surface fires, effectively extending the reach of both air and surface capabilities, as well as extending the all-domain network beyond the FLOT. The

DSRT would be an extension of the JAGIC and report their findings directly to the COIC to help degrade and attrite those enemy maneuver elements before reaching the FLOT.

The Air Force's ACE in the Whole

Agile combat employment (ACE) is the Air Force's solution to how it will extend its capability in a near-peer fight. Not only projecting air power beyond the FSCL, but maintaining air superiority to achieve the CFACC's objectives. Under the ACE construct, fighter wings will push their aircraft to forward air refueling points (FARPs) much in the same manner that brigade combat teams (BCTs) employ their organic rotary wing assets. "ACE operations require greater risk acceptance throughout the chain of command. ACE involves higher risk activities like integrated combat turns, specialized fueling operations, or wet wing defueling to maintain momentum. Operations inside an adversary's integrated air defense system, landing sites operating with limited defenses, short notice dispersal operations, etc., may also be necessary." ⁷

This configuration allows the fighter wing to keep its assets closer to the fight instead of returning to its established airfield. With the Air Force leaning towards the ACE concept and the Army working on building the multi-domain task force (MDTF) within Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), TACPs are in a unique position to align themselves with the MDTF's long-range fires supporting the JFACC during the initial stages of a major conflict and then focusing on the JFLCC's objectives once ground forces are in the area of operation. The white paper titled *"Disaggregated TACP C2 Mission Network Capability"* briefly touches on this new opportunity known as the DSRT, which was previously touched on in the last section. Under ACE within Pacific Air Forces, special warfare TACPs are part of the ADCT. Whereas the DSRT is best utilized as an extension of the division for shaping targets before they hit the FLOT (Figure 1), the ADCT is co-located at the main operating base and forward operating stations and is responsible for the C2 structure (datalink, voice communications) as well as limited ASOC functions such as sortie allocations for the fighter wing.

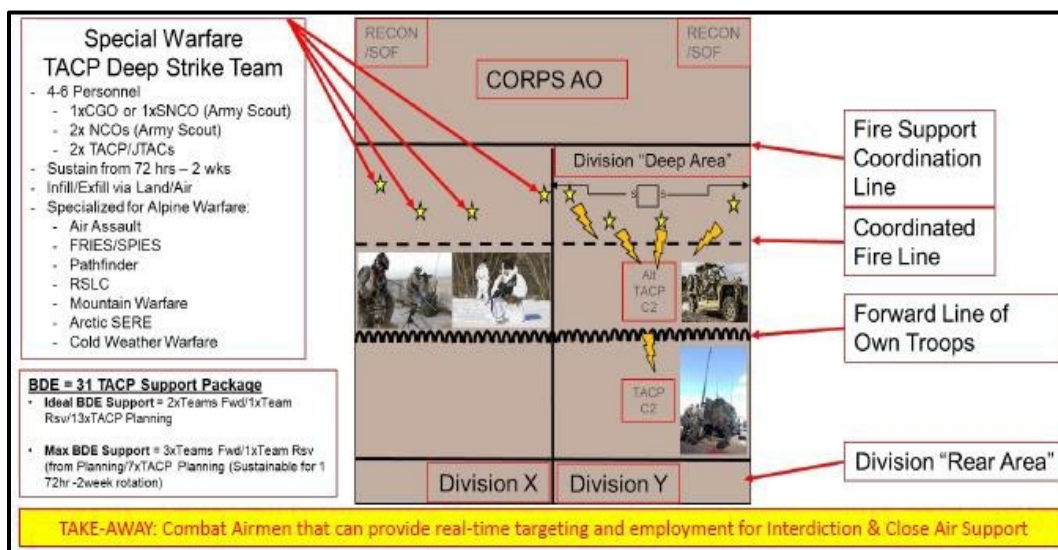


Figure 1. Example of Deep Strike Team within a Division Battle Space

This would be a major change to the TACP's concept of fighting in a major operation. Instead of JTACs only deploying during the Phase III operations to support a ground maneuver echelon, they would be stepping into the fight earlier to facilitate the JFACC's success in Phase I and II operations. As stated earlier in this paper, TACPs are uniquely suited to integrate with all facets of combat operations and more so within the forward operating cluster, through a standard theater air control system style footprint that would be adapted to support ACE operations. The headquarters element would be centralized with the wing operations center at the main operating base, facilitating reach back to the AOC while ensuring C2 redundancies to the forward station locations. Capitalizing on this structure, TACPs will have small ADCT teams that can rapidly deploy to as many as six forward operating locations to provide a litany of capabilities such as conducting landing zone operations for fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, maintaining C2 from mission type orders received from the main base of operations, precision strike, and integration capabilities.

Conclusion

As the TACP community transitions to the newly minted AFSPECWAR moniker and looks to the next near-peer fight, the community must transition from a CAS-only mindset to a multi-domain C2 functionality, keeping in line with the chief of staff's new directives. This evolution will be achieved through the creation of the ADCT and DSRTs that will aid in the Air Force's ACE by creating a datalink network within the A2AD environment and providing kinetic and non-kinetic fires. Moreover, as TACPs continue to accumulate all domain expertise, they have to increase the manning of personnel above the division level to include representation at the AOC to successfully integrate all of the capabilities required in a joint fight to achieve the JFACC and JFLCC's objectives.

References

Brown Jr., Gen Charles. "Accelerate Change or Lose". Aug 2020

Caraway, Troy. Green, Robert. Neal, Curtis. *Bridging the Gap from Coordination to Integration*. National Defense University, Joint Force Quarterly. Issue 67. Pg 98-100. 2012

Deputy Chief of Staffs. "*Air Force Special Warfare (AFSPECWAR) Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Weapon Systems Vision 2030*"; Deputy Chief of Staff. 12 May 2020.

Hairfield, Capt Austin. "*TACP Participation in the Air Force's Advanced Battle Management System (ABMS) On-Ramp DEMO #2*". Wheeler AAF, HI. 15 Oct 2020.

Holmes, Maj Gen James. "*Air Combat Command Tactical Air Control Party Command and Control Concept of Employment*". 10 Jun 2020.

Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, Annex-3-99 *DAF Role in Joint All-Domain Operations (JADO), Key Considerations for Agile Combat Employment (ACE)*. 8 Oct 2020.

Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, Annex 3-03 *DAF Counterland Operations*. 21 Oct 2020

Rings, Maj Nathan. *“Disaggregated TACP C2 Mission Network Capability”*. White Paper, Wheeler AAF, HI, Nov 2020.

Disclaimer. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

End Notes

¹ Brown, Charles, Jr., “Strategic Approach: Accelerate Change or Lose,” pg 3.

² Deputy Chief of Staffs. “Air Force Special Warfare (AFSPECWAR) Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Weapon Systems Vision 2030.” Pg 2.

³ Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, *Annex 3-03 DAF Counterland Operations*. 21 Oct 2020

⁴ Chief of Staffs. 2030 Vision, pg 2.

⁵ Joint Publications 3-09.3

⁶ Caraway, Troy. Green, Robert. Neal, Curtis. *Bridging the Gap from Coordination to Integration*. Pg 98.

⁷ Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, *Annex-3-99 DAF Role in Joint All-Domain Operations (JADO), Key Considerations for Agile Combat Employment (ACE)*.