

Forward Air Controller – Joint Terminal Attack Controller

Jet aircraft directly supporting soldiers on the ground known as Close Air Support (CAS) are becoming more and more important for the current ISAF operations. Instances where air-dropped munitions are being used in ISAF self defence situations have increased over the last months. This is a clear indication that CAS has become the preferred method of fire support in Afghanistan.

Our tolerance for friendly troop losses is naturally low and therefore we use minimum-risk tactics when engaging hostile forces. Due to distances, difficult terrain and asymmetric tactics used by opposing military forces in Afghanistan, the organic fire support of own ground manoeuvre units is very limited. Air assets, however, generally operate in areas of good weather and are

unchallenged by air-to-air and rarely by ground-to-air threats.

Whilst speed, flexibility and precision are major advantages of air assets, CAS is often multinational, inherently joint and always a teamwork business. A manoeuvre unit's employment of CAS assets is the most significant force multiplier unfolding a massive psychological effect by the overwhelming impact of air-to-ground ordnance.

Conversely, poorly conducted air strikes can result in fratricide, unacceptable collateral damage and loss of public and international support. If things go wrong, scrutiny will fall on the holder of 'clearance authority' for weapon release: the Forward Air Controller (FAC) or Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC = US terminology).

The FAC is the key enabler in CAS operations, representing the intersection between "Land" and "Air" chains of command and functioning as the field-level interface between the services and different nations operating in ISAF. Traditionally FACs must excel in all traditional arts of soldiering as they cannot hamper the operations of the supported unit by deficiencies in his field training. He must understand the ground scheme of manoeuvre and be able to provide ground commanders with air expertise during their planning and decision making. FACs should be able to fire any weapon used by ground forces and operate the whole range of electronic devices from lasers to radios. They have to prepare requests based on information from various sources, directives, orders etc. in order to control, de-conflict and coordinate CAS missions with ground units' fire and manoeuvre – all this without exposing the pilot and friendly forces to unacceptable levels of risk. For many years this has been the solid foundation of good "FACing". Nevertheless, only ten years ago only few could have imagined the dynamic evolution that modern CAS has been through.

FACs often have no direct visual contact with the target or the aircraft. CAS strikes are often conducted from medium to high level, many of them in 'danger close' situations, i.e. enemy and friendly forces are in such tight proximity that weapons may have an effect on both. The high demand for CAS leads to FACs operating at company level and even as singletons supporting platoons, teams or convoys. The main change, however, has come with technology. The use of



ISAF Forward Air Controllers ...





... in action in Afghanistan Photos: Major Jiri Dedic, CC-Air Ramstein, A3

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), next generation targeting pods and full motion video kits all improve the FACs' situational awareness, target acquisition and ability to prosecute targets. With the addition of Forward Observers (FOs), FACs can work from locations of greater stand-off from the fight, allowing them to

cover far larger geographical areas. If properly addressed during the pre-deployment training, the consequent use of modern technology makes the CAS execution phase easier for FACs, especially when different sets of Rules of Engagement, national caveats and Collateral Damage Estimate processes are

taken into consideration. The pool of FACs amongst the NATO nations is not unlimited. And as lengths and frequencies of deployments are increasing, training FACs to acquire and maintain their qualifications is a great challenge. Not all NATO nations have FAC training installations of their own meaning that they have to rely on other Allies. Consequently common FAC skill-sets have to be standardised. A central 'school house' is required to improve standardization, evaluation, FAC and instructor training – the FAC community throughout the Alliance is clearly in need of their own NATO centre of excellence.

The increasing demand for FACs in terms of numbers and quality can best be seen in the current ISAF mission. Only recently established, the CC-Air JTAC Cell is contributing to investigating these very problems. Effective CAS requires "Air" and "Land" elements to operate as a functioning team. Therefore, spending billions of Euros and Dollars must not only cover aircraft and weapons acquisition or pilot training, but also training, standardization and equipment for the Forward Air Controllers. The team is only as strong as its weakest link.



USAF F-15E performs show of force

Photo: US Air Force MSgt Andy Dunaway

