

Improper Close-Air-Support Integration During Planning at Battalion Level: a Threat to Future Operations?

by SFC Morgan S. Wallace

As the Army fought across multiple theaters over the past 17 years in support of the Global War on Terrorism, it became primarily engaged in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. For the Army to achieve success in a COIN environment, we had to adapt our tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) to win the hearts and minds of the local populace.

A byproduct of these adaptations was the attrition of TTPs necessary for successful unified land operations (ULO). This situation improved once the 2018 National Defense Strategy outlined the Defense Department's revised strategic goals to refocus brigade combat teams' training to better align with ULO; now tactical units focus their training on decisive action supporting ULO.

While this transition was much needed, one area that tactical units still struggle with is the integration of close air support (CAS) in planning and executing decisive action. To achieve greater success against a near-peer enemy, our units must resolve this shortfall.

Limited CAS training

There is no instruction on CAS integration and limited instruction on coordination-and-control measures for both CAS and indirect-fire support in the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Course, Cavalry Leader's Course (CLC) or other NCO professional-development courses. This is unfortunate because cavalry units, whether a scout troop or tank company, are usually the first elements to gain contact with the enemy during decisive action.

While there is limited CAS planning at the company level, it is crucial that battalion planning elements create and integrate coordination-and-control measures for CAS. One of the key elements of CAS is the "ability to mass joint fire support at a decisive point and to provide the supporting fires needed to achieve the commander's objectives."¹ However, this cannot occur without thoughtful and detailed coordination-and-control measures by elements on the ground.

This means that CAS assets should be preplanned and prebriefed. It is this preplanning that often falls through the cracks. Things such as fire-support coordination measures, coordinating altitudes, kill boxes and engagement-area planning are just a few of the crucial planning measures battalions must be capable of preparing.

Battalion planners often do not properly plan for CAS simply because they are unfamiliar with these concepts. This results in more attention going to the ground-maneuver plan and the indirect-fire plan, ultimately relegating CAS to a less decisive role and resulting in a less effective plan.

To properly understand how to best integrate CAS into planning, the planner must have a thorough understanding of what CAS is, how it can support ground maneuver and what the necessary coordination measures are to improve integration. A complete understanding is more than just knowing that planes show up and drop bombs. Instead, planners must know how CAS requests are processed, what airspace coordination-and-control measures accomplish and who can control the planes once on-station.



Figure 1. An AGM-65 Maverick missile flies away from a U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt attack aircraft. A complete understanding of CAS is more than just knowing that planes show up and drop bombs – planners must know how CAS requests are processed, what airspace coordination-and-control measures accomplish and who can control the planes once on-station. (U.S. Air Force photo by MSG Michael Ammons)

Joint Firepower Course

The best way to gain a complete understanding is to attend the Joint Firepower Course taught by the Army Joint Support Team-Nellis, Nellis AFB, NV. The course focuses on how the Army and Air Force work together to integrate air assets to accomplish decisive action. Upon graduation, the Soldier is awarded the additional skill identifier (ASI) 5U (tactical air operations).

The course is beneficial to planners who will integrate CAS with the maneuver and indirect-fire plan. The course culminates in a practical exercise (PE) that requires a battalion staff, along with Air Force liaison officers, to plan a mission that closely integrates CAS, artillery and maneuver forces. The PE further reinforces the importance of understanding tactical air operations while conducting mission planning.

5Us limited

Information gained in the Joint Firepower Course is indispensable to any maneuver leader from the platoon level up. Unfortunately, the Joint Firepower Course is not a well-known course. However, according to the armored brigade combat team's (ABCT) modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for a combined-arms battalion (CAB), the S-3, assistant S-3, operations sergeant major and a sergeant first class should all hold ASI 5U.

Another more pressing and potentially dangerous issue is the fact that there are no 5U positions within an ABCT cavalry squadron's MTOE – the only 5U-qualified position in a cavalry squadron is typically the squadron fires-support officer. However, the cavalry squadron is ideally the first element of a brigade to make contact with the enemy; therefore, we need more subject-matter experts planning and integrating CAS within that formation.

Furthermore, 19D and 19K Soldiers cannot hold the 5U ASI until they become a 19Z. Conversely, 11B Soldiers can hold the ASI 5U without restrictions and no requirement to be 11Z. Considering that armor and cavalry are usually the first elements to engage the enemy in high-intensity conflicts and are crucial to effective large-scale maneuver, this must change.

Recommendations

My first recommendation would be to make the Joint Firepower Course more readily available to units and maneuver military-occupation specialties. It is currently only taught at Nellis AFB or at locations that have requested a mobile-training team (MTT). With limited funds to send Soldiers to schools, courses like the Joint Firepower Course are prioritized less than other courses such as airborne, air-assault or Pathfinder. This is where the MTT becomes an asset; it is more cost-effective to pay for an MTT than to send more than 100 students to Nellis AFB. However, commanders must recognize the training's importance and be willing to bring the training to their units.

My second recommendation would be to open the ASI to 19D and 19K (Skill Level 3 and 4). Armor and cavalry leaders who have completed the course could be valuable assets to both CABs and cavalry squadrons.

Finally, if the Army wants to become more proficient at integrating CAS, it needs to add more 5U positions in the cavalry squadrons and fill each one with experienced maneuver leaders.

CAS integration into armor and cavalry units is imperative in creating more lethal armored formations. We must recognize this begins with proper planning, coordination and integration at battalion level. We must train our leaders and planners to properly integrate this crucial asset to succeed during ULO. Once we have increased the number of planners who have ASI 5U, we can begin to increase our integration of CAS, which ultimately will lead to more lethal maneuver units.

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Notes

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Close Air Support*, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, Government Publishing Office, 2014.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

ASI – additional skill identifier

CAB – combined-arms battalion

CAS – close air support

CLC – Cavalry Leader's Course

COIN – counterinsurgency

MTOE – modified table of organization and equipment

MTT – mobile-training team

NCO – noncommissioned officer

PE – practical exercise

TTPs – tactics, techniques and procedures

ULO – unified land operations