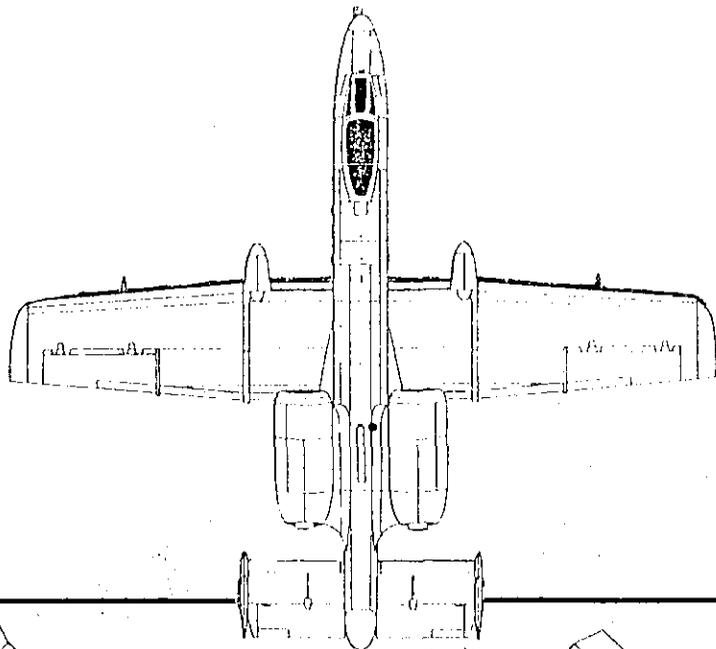
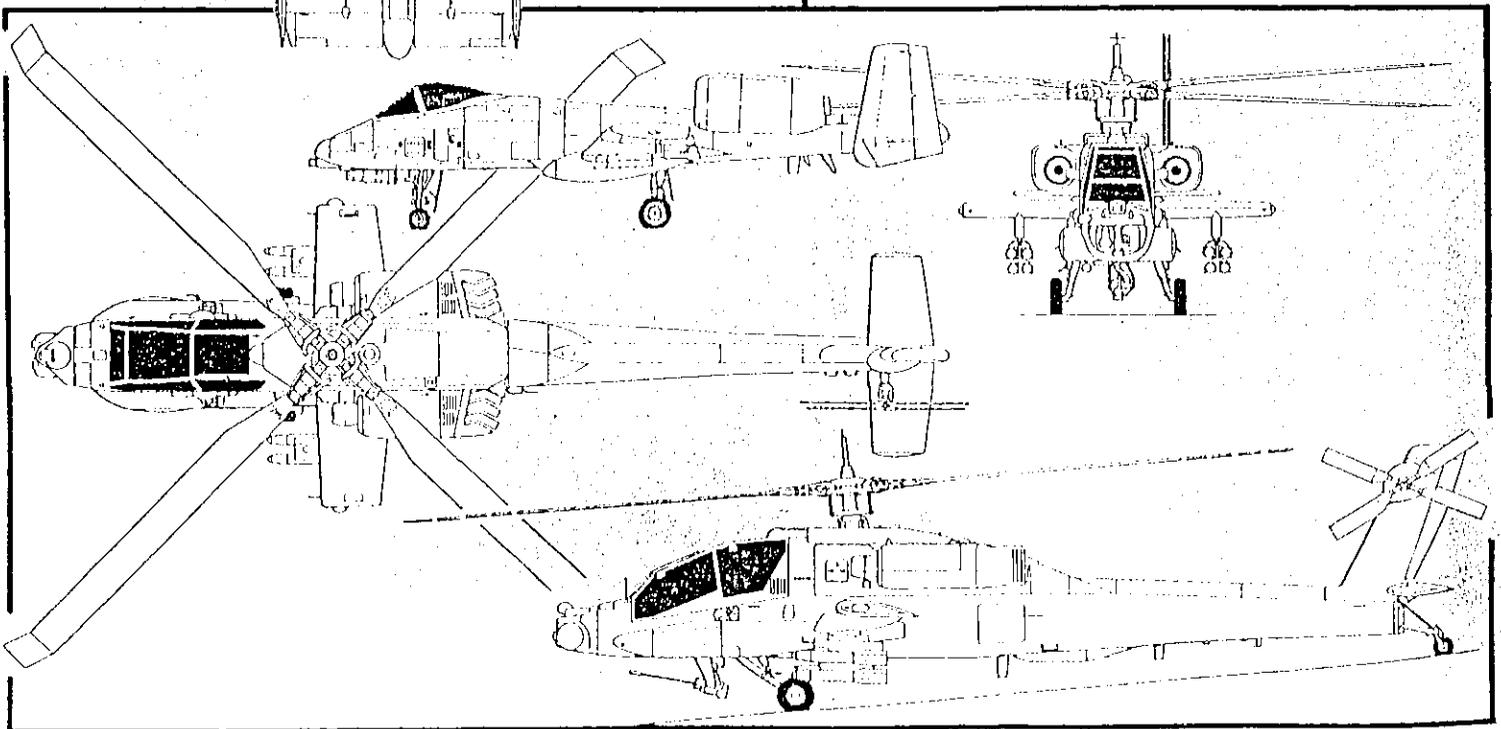


CLOSE

Air Support



The Debate
from
A FAC'S Perspective
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The continuing debate between the Army and the Air Force over the future of close air support (CAS) raises a number of questions: Can the Army provide its own CAS? If it cannot, how can the Air Force increase the quality of CAS for the person who needs it most, the U.S. infantryman? With the Air Force's A-10 aging and the Army's Apache helicopter coming on line, what is the future of CAS?

Close air support evolved into its present form through the development and fielding of the A-10 in the 1970s. With a dedicated Air Force plane for use against tanks, a marriage of sorts was made between it and Army helicopters to form Joint Air Attack Teams (JAATs). Attack helicopters and A-10s, combining their attacks to improve their individual survivability, increased the effective firepower available to the field commander. This partnership resulted in today's CAS concept--close coordination with ground troops, survivability, and tank-killing power. But today's high tech battlefield is extremely hostile to slow-moving aircraft. Add to that the need for all-weather, day-or-night capabilities and a replacement for the A-10, and the crux of the problem for future close air support is laid out.

The present limitations on close air support focus on the A-10 and the Army's ability to fund and field enough attack helicopters. The A-10, built for survivability and sheer tank-killing power (with its 30mm gun), would be spread across a large front in any war in central Europe. With only six squadrons of A-10s in the theatre, the amount of CAS we could expect to have available from the Air Force is of primary concern. Joint Air Attack Team tactics work well, but JAAT is presently a unilateral U.S. concept; our NATO allies do not provide for it or practice it. When that fact is coupled with the scarcity of airborne forward air controllers (FACs), the ability to closely control aircraft and hit specific targets is quite limited.

When a FAC has to use indirect control because he cannot get into the air to observe enemy positions, CAS aircraft have to stay in the target area longer to locate, identify, and then attack a target. This increased exposure severely cuts into the survivability of the aircraft. Using a JAAT orchestrated by an aviation commander helps solve this problem, but the helicopters and the coordination needed to employ this team are not always there.

This leads to the second problem with our current CAS--the funding and fielding of enough Army attack helicopters. The budget cuts for Fiscal Year 1988 allow for only 77 of the 120 Apache helicopters requested. The money for the development of the next line of Army attack helicopters (the LHX, or light helicopter, experimental) was also cut considerably and the full-scale engineering development for the LHX was delayed until 1989. This means the LHX cannot be fielded in the mid-1990s as scheduled. This span of time before the next Army attack helicopter arrives, along with the limited acquisition of Apaches, does not sup-

port the arguments of those who want the Army to provide its own close air support.

Several suggestions for meeting the interim needs are now being discussed by both the Army and the Air Force. The Air Force is considering several programs that include procuring F-16 aircraft to fill the CAS role or upgrading and producing new A-7s. The F-16s can provide all-weather weapon delivery, and they are available now for the CAS role. In addition, a contract was recently awarded for the upgrade of two A-7Ds for the Air Force to use in conducting feasibility flight testing. The Air Force could conceivably upgrade as many as 335 A-7Ds for the CAS role.

Other suggestions for the CAS mission include the Navy's V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft (armed with a 20mm gun, Maverick air-to-surface missiles, and Sidewinder air-to-air missiles), and also the F-18, the Harrier, and the Tornado. In the interim, however, the Army needs more money and quicker LHX development; to fill the gap until the LHX comes on line, it needs more Apaches.

FAC AIRCRAFT

The problem of the forward air controller's mobility is also being discussed, with the proposal that the A-10 be transitioned to the FAC mission. The Air Force wants to change the A-10 into the OA-10 and provide airborne FACs to support the CAS mission. Used in a FAC role, the OA-10 could still kill armor with its 30mm and Maverick missiles, and it could be used in a mid-threat environment. The A-10's loiter time and survivability in a lower threat environment make it an excellent choice for this role and allow for a better observation position for the FAC in calling in fast-moving aircraft--such as F-16s--on a target.

The use of fast-moving aircraft for CAS brings up the point of battlefield air interdiction (BAI) assets and the attack on the enemy's rear echelons. A brigade commander is expected to defend successfully against an attacking enemy regiment. In a prepared defense with artillery support, he can do this, but his main concern is the follow-on forces--the enemy's second and third echelons. The BAI mission is to disrupt and delay those follow-on forces to give the ground commander time between waves to rearm, resupply, and reinforce his units. An effective and timely BAI campaign on these follow-on forces can greatly reduce the need for CAS missions.

But the BAI mission is costly. It involves getting strike aircraft behind the FEBA with strike protection (F-15s), jamming support (EF-111, EC-130), and surface-to-air missile neutralization (F-4G Wild Weasels). These assets are limited, however, and the ground commander may well find himself stacked up against several regiments at a time or in rapid succession. To survive he will need the concentrated firepower that close air support can give him.

CAS firepower also faces technological limitations. The advent and fielding of Soviet reactive armor is a concern for all tank-killing systems. Can tomorrow's aircraft (either fixed-wing or rotor) still be effective against a T-80 tank that has reactive armor?

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The Army's AH-64 Apache

Self defense is another question in regard to future CAS aircraft. Soviet HIND helicopters armed with air-to-air missiles will be numerous at the front, and tomorrow's CAS aircraft must be able to kill them.

Although budget constraints limit the systems that might provide solutions to these problems, help is on the way. Improved TOW antiarmor weapons are being fielded. The LANTIRN (low-altitude navigation and targeting infra-red for night) system and infrared Maverick missiles provide the all-weather night capability that enables CAS aircraft to take advantage of the relative safety of darkness and bad weather. The addition of air-to-air missiles to Cobras, Apaches, and A-10s for self-protection is also being discussed.

From a forward air controller's point of view, several of these issues and questions are of prime interest. First, the limited FAC resources require survivability and maneuverability; second, everyone should understand that the FAC wants to support his Army commander with as much close air support as possible; and third, he wants to put bombs on target with the least possible risk to the aircraft.

The OA-10 proposal is an excellent one that would give a FAC both survivability and maneuverability. He would then have the aircraft's 30mm gun and Maverick missiles to help out when needed, and he would be able to coordinate the JAAT and advise the maneuver units. He would therefore be far more valuable to his Army commander. If he does not have the OA-10, the FAC needs to be airborne using Army helicopter support. Too, the addition of an enlisted FAC to the tactical air control party (TACP) would greatly increase the FAC's ability to coordinate CAS with

the commander on the ground and also to control airstrikes from either an OA-10 or a helicopter.

The new CAS aircraft should be the F-16. With its speed, maneuverability, self-defense capability, and LANTIRN system, it is an excellent CAS aircraft. F-16 units in place in Europe should involve themselves in the CAS mission now and evaluate the effectiveness of the JAAT. To provide a basis of information for future decisions, the JAAT should also be evaluated with such aircraft as the F-18, the Harrier, and the Tornado.

BAI assets also need to be increased with emphasis being placed on using air-scatterable mines. This ability to delay and disrupt the follow-on forces could only help the CAS battle. Army helicopter assets must also increase to improve the quality of CAS for the ground commander.

The final conclusion is that there is still a need for close air support from both fixed-wing and rotary aircraft, each complementing the other. But better training, better coordination, and better equipment is what we need to make close air support work. Increasing the FAC's ability to manipulate and coordinate the air battle in conjunction with the Army commander's objectives can only increase the quality of the air support. Upgraded equipment (VHF/UHF radios), F-16s, and more Apaches integrated by the forward air controller could provide the quality of support the U.S. infantryman would need if he had to face an attack in mass.

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