

JFOs ARE A NICE START

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The Army and Air Force quickly determined that the concept of the tactical air control party (TAC-P) with its minimal number of joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) personnel was inadequate to support major combat operations in both the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters. Simply put, there are not enough JTACs to cover the battlefield. Over the past several years, the Field Artillery communities of the Marines and the Army have made efforts to push the capabilities of close air support (CAS) down to lowest level utilizing the joint fires observer (JFO) concept. The JFO is not meant to bypass the requirements of a qualified JTAC, but augment the ability of maneuver units below the battalion level to provide timely target information when the JTAC is not present in the target area.

This methodology to support the JTAC in the current operating environment yields successes, but as we reduce the number of forces and transition to an advisory role, we must look beyond the artillery community in order to ensure CAS capability continues to be a combat multiplier on the battlefield. Given the fire support structural design shortages currently inherent in ground combat maneuver battalions, the expanding area ground units must operate in, and the lack of training outside of the fire support community, ground commanders must shift their reliance for CAS from the JFO and empower small unit leaders to assume the role.

The fire support element (FSE) of maneuver battalions currently is not up to the JFO task for providing terminal guidance support below the company level. The current modern table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for the Infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) provides at best one forward observer (who may or may not be JFO qualified) to each platoon, and the heavy BCT cannot even do that. The equipping of the FSE further supports the assertion that the company level is the lowest by providing only one laser designator per company. When combined with the ever increasing requirements of company and battalion command post operations, it is likely that the employment of CAS at the company level must be a predetermined decision by the commander in order to ensure the JFO is specifically placed with the unit conducting the operation.

This company commander CAS decision is in direct contradiction to how forces both currently conduct operations in the current OE and are likely to conduct operations as a member of an advisory and assistance brigade. The majority of combat force activities take place at the platoon level conducting patrolling or specific operations within a company area of operation. Often platoon, section, and squad leaders are the executors with eyes on the ground, and the likely requestors of enablers such as fire support. Because these small unit leaders are the likely consumers of CAS, efforts should be made to facilitate their ability to employ



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Soldiers with the 3rd Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment determine a grid coordinate during a live-fire exercise at Fort Bragg, N.C., on 11 June.

CAS as described in the JFO methodology.

The JFO Course (JFOC) is currently offered at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.; Fort Sill, Okla.; and Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany; and should be expanded to support small unit leaders within maneuver companies. Currently, course requirements limit the training to field artillery personnel or members of reconnaissance units. Use of virtual training devices such as the JTAC Training and Rehearsal System (TRS) dome should be expanded or integrated into ground tactical trainers such as the engagement skills trainer (EST) or close combat tactical trainer (CCTT) to support training of maneuver leaders. Furthermore, efforts must be made to adjust equipment allocations in unit MTOEs to reflect changes in communications and terminal guidance technologies in order to promote air-ground integration congruent with the JFO “Eyes and Ears” concept.

Whether or not small unit leaders become JFO certified is irrelevant. Familiarity breeds confidence remains the basis of my argument. Although JFOs are an asset to the integration of air and land firepower, everyone acknowledges that the commander on the ground makes the final call when the circumstances warrant. Employing CAS will continue to be a critical requirement given the dispersion of ground forces and the need to provide indigenous forces with enablers to reinforce their efforts. Commanders and maneuver leaders at all levels would be served well to empower their subordinates with preparation and training to employ CAS before it becomes on-the-job training.

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