



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

Doctrinal bias and organizational concerns can make the Army an unhappy customer, even in the age of precision weapons.

The Clash About CAS

NOTHING has sparked friction between the Air Force and the Army like Close Air Support. In recent years, however, Close Air Support was fading as a hot-button issue. Historical trends pointed to a decline in overall requests, and recent operations featured little or no true CAS.

Then came Operation Anaconda. The two-week campaign in Afghanistan during March 2002 touched off a major Army–Air Force imbroglio over Close Air Support. This time, what made the Army mad about CAS also went to the heart of the Army’s future transformation concepts.

The new debate over CAS erupted when Anaconda’s commander, Army Maj. Gen. Franklin L. “Buster” Hagenbeck, critiqued Anaconda fire support operations in an issue of *Field Artillery*, the professional journal of the “Redlegs,” published by the Army at Ft. Sill, Okla., home of the artillery branch.

In the interview, Hagenbeck spoke mainly about his fire support experiences and requirements but leveled several charges at the Air Force specifically. These included complaints about slow delivery of precision

By Rebecca Grant

At left, a USAF combat controller. At right, an F-16, one of the USAF aircraft that can perform Close Air Support. Army planners left CAS out of initial planning for Operation Anaconda.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto

weapons and objections to the procedure for processing CAS requests.

In stark contrast with soldiers who took part in the battles, Hagenbeck offered only lukewarm assessments of Close Air Support. He lauded Navy and Marine pilots for flying low-level missions. He admitted there were “some close support successes.” Still, the overall tone of the interview was critical of Air Force airpower.

This drew immediate reaction from the USAF Chief of Staff, Gen. John P. Jumper. “This is not the consensus of the leadership of the United States Army,” he said of Hagenbeck’s statements in an interview with *Inside the Pentagon*.

Private, high-level interservice meetings took up the issue. CAS for Anaconda was discussed in closed sessions during the annual Army–Air Force warfighter talks in October 2002. Hagenbeck later said his remarks were taken out of context.

On closer inspection, Hagenbeck’s critique raised issues critical to future Army and Air Force operations. Army commanders will face difficult choices when they deploy lighter, more agile forces. The Army’s dependence on CAS in fact may be increasing as future concepts bring about “distributed forces,” with units spread across a large battlespace.

Where CAS was once a mission in decline, it may again be a key component of planning for 21st century joint warfare.

The Decline of CAS

Until Anaconda, Close Air Support was out of the operational spotlight.

Classic Close Air Support provided additional “fires” for troops fighting to advance or struggling to defend territory. Even then, there were myths and misperceptions about how it was used and to what extent.

Historian Williamson Murray has written that Close Air Support for the German Army’s advances in 1939–41 “played a relatively small role in the Luftwaffe’s operations.” The German Ju-87 Stuka dive-bombers often attacked fixed targets deep behind the line of advance. US Army Air Forces had the same experience. For example, the P-47s used in Europe may have performed plenty of Close Air Support, but much of the low-altitude work was actually armed



An Army jumpmaster assists USAF SSgt. Chris DuBose, a combat controller with the 4th Air Support Operations Group, with his parachute gear. The 4th controllers help provide CAS for the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade.

reconnaissance. Pilots picked out targets in a designated sector and attacked at will, ripping through ammunition trains, vehicle convoys, and enemy command posts.

Statistically, CAS may have peaked in the Korean War. Even there, however, interdiction outweighed Close Air Support in the defensive operations against superior North Korean forces. Typical policy for Fifth Air Force allocated 96 CAS sorties per day or only 13 percent of its total sorties to support Eighth Army. Of the 24,000 sorties rung up by Far East Air Forces in October 1952, some 12.5 percent were dedicated to CAS, with the others going to air interdiction. In that same month, the Marines logged 3,600 support sorties, of which 36 percent was said to be CAS.

FEAF's most intense Close Air Support month was June 1953, and the count of dedicated Close Air Support sorties was still under 50 percent of the total.

Vietnam saw abundant use of CAS, both in support of offensives and as equalizers for defensive operations. Massive, around-the-clock B-52 strikes helped South Vietnamese forces hold out in the face of North Vietnam's 1972 "Easter Offensive." In the period May 11–13, 1972, Army Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., senior US commander, shifted B-52 strikes around, within, and among the three major battle areas, giving each a sustained amount of air sup-

port. Abrams cautioned commanders to plan ahead for the days when they would have no B-52s.

A North Vietnamese report later testified to the effectiveness of the strikes: "The enemy mobilized a large number of B-52 strikes to viciously attack our campaign rear areas," it said. North Vietnamese forces walked away from that particular fight on May 15, 1972.

Stretching the Definition

In Operation Desert Storm, CAS played only a minor role, accounting for just six percent of the sorties. And even at that, a very flexible definition of CAS was pressed into service. For the Marines, the term CAS was applied to all sorties within five miles of the forward edge of the battle area. That bumped up the total number of sorties.

CAS had a prominent role in only two Gulf War actions. Gunships and numerous coalition fighter and attack aircraft helped turn back Iraqi forces during the Battle of Khafji, which took place in the period Jan. 30–Feb. 1, 1991. Then, during the 100-hour ground offensive at the tail end of the war, CAS aircraft joined the fray in two major tank battles. These were clashes between the US Army VII Corps and Iraq's Tawakalna and Medina Republican Guards Divisions on Feb. 26–27, 1991.

Air interdiction operations dwarfed Close Air Support. Both CAS and air interdiction were highly fluid.

With links to Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center aircraft, strike aircraft could be on target in as few as five minutes, wrote Lt. Col. Robert E. Duncan, USAF, in this magazine. (See "Responsive Air Support," February 1993, p. 74.)

After Desert Storm, the percentage of CAS in major air operations was close to zero. The next air campaign, Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia in 1995, featured no true Close Air Support at all. NATO aircraft did on many occasions attack Serb military vehicles in defense of UN-designated safe areas such as the city of Gorazde, besieged in 1994, but the two-week campaign itself concentrated on fixed targets and came at a time when battle lines were static, and, of course, no American ground forces were engaged.

The pattern recurred four years later in Operation Allied Force, the NATO action in the Balkans. Kosovo Liberation Army irregulars were active in many areas and on occasion provided tips about Serb force concentrations. No NATO ground forces engaged in the 78-day campaign. NATO airmen destroyed or damaged an impressive number of Serb tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery pieces, and military vehicles, but the sorties were not all true CAS procedures.

Anaconda, the 1,200-man operation against Taliban and al Qaeda forces in the Shah-e-Kot Valley of Afghanistan in early March 2002, brought Close Air Support for Army troops back to the forefront.

Expecting only light resistance and a large haul of prisoners, Army soldiers quickly found themselves under fire and without much organic support. One al Qaeda mortar team fired on a 10th Mountain Division unit for two days until killed in an attack by an F-16, followed by a mortar barrage.

In Anaconda, demand for CAS was high because ground forces did not bring in artillery. The plan called for using helicopters to rapidly insert soldiers, a major challenge in the rugged mountains. The terrain also made inserting artillery and counter-battery radars impossible.

Hagenbeck's Confidence

"We didn't consider bringing in 105s [the 105 mm artillery piece] because I knew we could accom-

plish the mission without them,” said Hagenbeck, who planned and led the operation. No one objected to leaving the 105s behind during mission planning, Hagenbeck added.

In his view, the question was hypothetical anyway: “I will tell you that the trade-off I would have had to make the first day would have precluded me from using 105s,” he explained to *Field Artillery*. “In that terrain, my choice would have been to either airlift in soldiers with their mortars, or 105s.”

It would have been a feat just to lower the huge artillery pieces into place. “To sling a 105 underneath a CH-47 and try to set it down in very rugged terrain, to include slinging in the ammo after it, would have been very difficult and dangerous,” Hagenbeck said.

Instead of attempting such a risky operation, Hagenbeck chose to rely on Close Air Support. His soldiers, facing heavier-than-anticipated resistance, were without the means to return fire, aside from their mortars and small arms. Al Qaeda fighters were holed up in defensive positions from which they rained down fire on the coalition task force.

In short order, requests for Close Air Support deluged air controllers. However, Army planners had failed to coordinate CAS in advance. The CAOC learned of the pending operation only hours before its planned start. The situation was not ideal for airmen or soldiers. Instead of preplanning hundreds of sorties in advance as was done for Desert Storm, the CAS for Anaconda at first resembled a free-for-all.

The ABCCC aircraft system was slated for retirement and was not deployed to the theater. Without ABCCC to sort through the CAS requests and prioritize the missions of strike aircraft, the job was even tougher. Officers flying in E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft and working from the Combined Air Operations Center struggled to sort out dozens of urgent requests from troops under fire.

Effective CAS was made all the more difficult by lack of time for prior planning. Hagenbeck did order an air strike about 20 minutes prior to the start of the operation, but he placed little reliance on it. His belief was that “air campaigns are most effective against fixed targets.”

Moreover, Hagenbeck did not want to bomb the Shah-e-Kot caves too heavily. US Central Command planners wanted to capture al Qaeda sites and exploit them for clues to the nature of the terrorist organization and plans for upcoming attacks. That was another factor, along with the estimate of lower resistance, that argued against preparatory bombing, in Hagenbeck’s view.

200 Coordinating Factors

Providing fire support for Anaconda was an intricate and complicated matter. More than 200 fire support coordinating measures were in place at the peak of the fighting. In addition, other government agencies wanted no-fire zones in their operating areas, Army Lt. Col. Christopher F. Bentley, Hagenbeck’s deputy fire support coordinator, said in another *Field Artillery* article.

The coalition task force had 34 mortars. It positioned 26 in the firefight and left eight behind for defense of the airfields at Bagram and Kandahar.

Because the force deployed light, the “vast majority” of fire support measures was provided by air assets, noted Bentley. He observed that they were “dependent on the USAF TACP”—meaning, the Tactical Air Control Party, an Air Force member assigned to the Army unit to call in support. At the same time, according to Bentley, independent special reconnaissance and uncon-

ventional warfare teams were “all operating simultaneously and all demanding the same fire support resources.”

Simply put, the request system jammed. It was forced to work 30 points of contact in the first 24 hours.

Nonetheless, CAS provided not only tangible firepower but also a kind of psychological lift.

Cpl. Landon Perry, a Canadian soldier who took part in the assault, told reporters that entry into the combat zone was “unnerving.” However, he went on, “once you hit the ground and see the number of troops out there and the massive air support, your confidence builds pretty quickly, and you feel fairly secure in what you’re doing.”

The CENTCOM commander, Gen. Tommy R. Franks, claimed success for Anaconda and praised his soldiers for making the operation work. “You did it with violent execution,” said Franks.

Hagenbeck, though, was not pleased with the Close Air Support he received from outside the Army. He praised the Army’s Apache helicopter crews as “extraordinary” but gave the Air Force little more than a passing grade.

“The Air Force had to work through airspace management,” Hagenbeck said. “Aircraft were stacked up to the ceiling and could only be flown in, in a few numbers.” Another big complaint was that it could take “anywhere from 26 minutes to hours (on



US soldiers watch a CH-47 drop off Canadian troops for Operation Anaconda. The mountainous terrain prevented the Army from bringing in heavy artillery, putting a heavy burden on CAS aircraft.

US Army photo by Spc. Andres J. Rodriguez

occasion) for the precision munitions to hit the targets.”

Rules of Engagement for Operation Enduring Freedom as a whole mandated that aircraft could strike some targets under standing ROE, while others, especially fleeting targets such as individuals driving in sport utility vehicles, had to be cleared by CENTCOM. Those rules, like other unique features of the Afghan war—such as altitude, terrain, unexpected resistance, and the desire to find out what was in the cave complexes before bombing them—accounted for many of the complications of Anaconda.

CAS and Transformation

However, the larger question centers on the connection between the lessons of Anaconda and the role of CAS in the Army’s concept of future operations. It is in this critical area that Anaconda uncovered some disturbing assumptions that bear directly on Army transformation concepts.

Anaconda pointed out all over again that Close Air Support is highly demanding for two reasons: Time to help is limited, and each mission requires terminal control. In terminal control, a qualified liaison on the ground (or in the air) talks directly to the pilot or aircrew of a strike platform to guide weapons onto targets. The art of CAS starts with that vital chain of communication.

When CAS works, it works well, as soldier accounts from Anaconda

attested. “Air strikes and Apache helicopters destroyed most of the enemy mortars in those first two days,” Warrant Officer Scott E. Prochniak and Maj. Dennis W. Yates, both of whom were involved in the battle, wrote in *Field Artillery*.

The problem with CAS, despite the glowing gratitude of soldiers who’ve seen it work, is that both soldiers and airmen regard it as inefficient. Soldiers inevitably and understandably prefer organic fires, starting with “the smallest caliber weapon at your disposal,” said Yates. “The normal sequence goes: mortars of varying calibers, then artillery, and Apaches, and close air.”

Soldiers plan to have CAS available, but in the strictest sense, they don’t plan to use it. It’s truly an emergency measure. If someone’s called for CAS, something has already gone awry. Maybe there are more enemy forces in the area than expected, as with Anaconda. Maybe enemy troops turned up in an unexpected location, as so often occurred in Vietnam. Maybe they are putting up resistance and presenting an opportunity for decisive victory, as with the Gulf War tank brawl at the Battle of Medina Ridge. That calls for more of what the Army sees as fire support, and most soldiers would far prefer it to come from an asset under their immediate control, such as 105s. It’s been an article of faith for soldiers since World War II that heavy artillery in position is preferable to

summoning fighter aircraft. Hagenbeck called ground-based indirect fires “indispensable, absolutely indispensable” for the close fight. If for some reason, artillery is not present, CAS becomes the alternative.

Airmen see CAS as a sacred obligation. An F-15E pilot who ran out of bombs then strafed an al Qaeda position to support troops under fire proved it yet again. But CAS is not the optimum employment of airpower in support of land forces. Airpower in the close fight is devastatingly effective but not necessarily efficient. Air is at its most efficient working deeper, through armed reconnaissance or deep attack of enemy forces. The need for terminal control inevitably restricts the flow of sorties that can be safely moved into an area.

For example, in Desert Storm, the air component planned 50 sorties per hour for a battlefield more than 124 miles long. Few of the sorties were used for CAS. Most of the assigned aircraft were sent on to strike interdiction targets beyond the battle edge because the ground forces didn’t need them. When facing light resistance, a heavy Army division simply may not need much Close Air Support (providing, of course, that the joint air forces hold air superiority).

For lighter forces, it’s a whole different matter. Hagenbeck complained to *Field Artillery* that the Air Force did not have enough ground forward air controllers or Enlisted Terminal Attack Controllers “in their inventory to support every ground maneuver element” in the fight. Hagenbeck cited the example of one platoon whose ETAC was extracted after the first day. Until the controller was returned, “not even the battalion commander could call in Precision Guided Munitions.” Anaconda stalled during the first few days because of the problems created when platoons in firefights had no artillery and no means to call for air support.

Firepower for the Objective Force

The “platoon fight led by platoon leaders,” as Hagenbeck described it, made Anaconda a preliminary test of concepts the Army holds dear in its transformation plans. While it was unintentional, Anaconda ended up staging a test of what happens to

USAF photo by TSgt. Steve Fautisi



Even some skeptical about Air Force CAS efforts had praise for AC-130 and A-10 aircraft. This A-10 is part of the 354th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron in Afghanistan.

small or lightly equipped units that are trying to hold out under attack while spread out across the battlefield.

Firepower is more important than ever in the Army's future plans. "The long-term goal of the Objective Force is to dominate, as part of a joint force, the future battlefield through integration and effective, concentrated firepower," reported the Association of the US Army in an August 2002 study.

The Army's transformation to the Objective Force will take decades. But the Army has already begun testing bridging concepts such as Stryker light armored vehicle brigades. The Stryker Brigade Combat Teams now training at Ft. Lewis, Wash., are ultimately supposed to learn to deploy within 96 hours. By the end of the decade they will take delivery of Stryker vehicles that can range 300 miles at speeds of up to 60 mph. Each Stryker Brigade Combat Team will also be an information node with its own reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities, unmanned aerial vehicles, and reachback for logistics requests, up-to-date intelligence, and long-range fires. When problems emerge for these teams, Navy and Air Force units have to bring up firepower via Close Air Support and interdiction.

This is the key issue for CAS in the future. Aside from questions about the need to deploy within 96 hours, perhaps the major operational issue for the Stryker brigades is whether they'll be able to hold out and survive if they hit unexpected enemy resistance. Distributing forces widely enables the land force to control ground fast; the theoretical drawback is that it makes pockets of soldiers vulnerable if the enemy concentrates. Leaving CAS arrangements to the last minute, as with Anaconda, or failing to work out the balance between air-delivered and organic fires could spell disaster the next time.

Sprawling future battles will only complicate matters. The operating



USAF photo by TSgt. Mike Buytas

AC-130 gunship crewmen of the 16th Special Operations Squadron load a 40 mm gun. Lt. Col. Christopher Bentley was critical of Air Force CAS in Anaconda but said, "Every light infantry division needs an AC-130 squadron."

area for Anaconda was about 60 square miles, according to Franks. A land component fanned out across a wider battlespace generates a high potential demand for Close Air Support. They have to be able to hold out until Close Air Support can be directed to the right targets—and it may be more than 26 minutes.

Instead of the 1,200 US infantrymen of Anaconda, the Stryker brigade in a larger scale future conflict may deploy several thousand soldiers, potentially increasing the volume of CAS requests.

Hagenbeck and Bentley spoke most favorably about A-10s and AC-130s. However, their taste for Precision Guided Munitions was two-sided. "PGMs take too long to arm and deliver to attack small mobile targets and targets of opportunity," Bentley claimed. Hagenbeck echoed similar thoughts. Disturbingly, comments each made about the time required to coordinate an Air Tasking Order (Bentley said 36 hours) signaled that even field-grade fire support coordinators still don't understand that the CAOC keeps sorties on call for emerging targets and pop-up requests.

The major lesson the Army took away from Anaconda was that it wants more "fires"—preferably its own.

"The ground force needs a highly lethal, all-weather indirect fire capability organic to the force," said Hagenbeck. He also called for "training and certification for our observers to call in JDAMS—any precision munitions or air support—to be universal observers."

Bentley said, "Every light infantry division needs an AC-130 squadron."

The need for good fire support is beyond dispute, but blaming the Air Force for Army shortcomings is not the way to transform. The Army itself has an obligation to evaluate its plans for lighter forces and equip them to defend themselves until CAS arrives. Anaconda showed the risks of doing otherwise.

If the Army of the future is to fight successfully in a large, distributed battlespace, it must understand the basics of CAS—what it is and what it isn't. No air force in the world can guarantee the safety of an infantry unit inserted in tough terrain without proper "organic fires," as the Army would say. The lighter, faster Army forces of the future still have to be able to defend themselves for a minimum period and cope with the unexpected. CAS will remain a sacred obligation for airmen—but heavy reliance on it rarely is the preferred way to win wars. ■

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