

The Air Force's seven groups of "battlefield airmen" will get tougher training and more members.

The Ground Warri



In this exercise, A1C Michael Warner, combat controller, provides cover while the rest of his combat control team prepares to check wind direction and velocity.

Photo by SSGT. Scott P. Stewart

ors of Airpower

Operation Anaconda, the March 2002 battle against Taliban and al Qaeda fighters in the mountains of Afghanistan, profoundly changed the Air Force's relationship with the Army. The battle revealed a deep operational rift between senior air and land force planners, a rift that both services have subsequently worked hard to repair. Anaconda also served to highlight the importance of airmen who work in far forward areas, where little support is available.

In fact, some officials point to the March 4, 2002, struggle for a place called Takur Gar as the moment in which these so-called "battlefield airmen" gained permanent prominence, though that specific term did not then exist.

Today, the Air Force is taking a number of steps aimed at making its group of battlefield airmen a more effective force. A new, centralized training program is in the works; the community is growing; and the service is working closely with the Army to maximize capabilities.

Seven USAF specialties are now officially part of the battlefield airman community. These are: combat controllers, special tactics officers, tactical air control party personnel, pararescue jumpers (PJs), combat rescue officers, conventional battlefield weathermen, and special operations forces weathermen.

Two battlefield airmen died at Takur Gar. They were awarded Air Force Crosses for their efforts to save their stranded partners.

TSgt. John A. Chapman, a combat controller, was assigned to the initial assault team whose helicopter took a direct hit from a rocket-propelled grenade. In the ensuing confusion, a Navy SEAL, Petty Officer 1st Class Neil

C. Roberts, fell from the helicopter, and the team returned to recover him. Upon landing, the rescue crew members immediately found themselves surrounded by well-armed enemies occupying the high ground around the site. Chapman died charging a dug-in enemy machine gun, trying to buy his companions enough time to reach safety.

Later, a reinforcing helicopter arrived at the scene. It also took heavy fire, and four Army Rangers soon were dead. Aboard that helicopter was SrA. Jason D. Cunningham, a pararescue jumper, who immediately began caring for the wounded, repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire in order to move injured teammates to safety. Cunningham received a mortal wound while carrying an injured crew member at an elevation of 10,000 feet.

A handful of other battlefield airmen were also present for the Takur Gar firefight, and they contributed greatly to the recovery of trapped and wounded troops and the eventual defeat of the enemy, all under the most difficult conditions.

The battlefield airmen who earned Silver Stars for their contributions on Takur Gar included an enlisted terminal attack controller, a combat controller, and a pararescueman. They fought off the enemy, called in air support (including the first-ever strafing mission by an F-15E), and helped coordinate the exfiltration after the 17-hour battle.

Saving the Day

This handful of battlefield airmen "saved the day" at Takur Gar, one official said, and the Air Force quickly realized that these skills would be ever more important in modern war.

In Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003,

the battlefield airmen exerted an influence disproportionate to their numbers. Officials say the battlefield airmen and special operations forces from all services were able to control large sections of enemy territory with limited numbers.

In June 2003, Gen. John P. Jumper, Air Force Chief of Staff, ordered creation of a "ground warrior team" to "identify synergies and processes by sharing information on ... acquisition, sustainment, and modernization programs" for the gear battlefield airmen would need in the future. Much of the equipment these warriors used had been obtained in an ad hoc manner—or borrowed from the Army.

In February 2004, then-Air Force Secretary James G. Roche brought the concept of battlefield airmen to the public, when he called their performance in Iraq "a powerful lesson that won't be forgotten."

But the various specialties had traditionally trained separately and had varying levels of preparation when it came time to deploy. Roche called for them to be consolidated "under a common organizational and training structure [to] strengthen the combat power they bring to the field."

Closer coordination with the Army also was needed. "We're going to exercise our air and ground together in ways that assure that our Army leaders understand ... what air and space power can do for them," Jumper said at the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla., in February 2004.

USAF's seven battlefield airman specialties are spelled out in Air Force Policy Directive 10-35, published this February. They "primarily operate as surface combatants removed from traditional air base support, logistics, and sortie gen-



Battlefield airmen comprise less than one percent of the Total Force, but frequently generate major effects. Combat controllers such as A1C Dale LaFleur (foreground) secure landing zones in hostile territory and direct precision airpower from the ground.

eration efforts,” said Maj. Gen. Teresa Marné Peterson, director of operations and training on the Air Staff.

According to the policy directive, these are the airmen who “directly assist, control, enable, and/or execute operational air and space power functions in the forward battlespace independent of an established air base or its perimeter defenses.”

One Percent Solution

All battlefield airman specialties are low-density, high-demand fields and have extremely high operating tempos. They are equipped like land forces, including M-4 machine guns to fight on the ground, and they may be subjected to “the most austere conditions for extended periods.” There are only about 3,200 such airmen, less than one percent of the force.

Because of the importance, prestige, and exclusivity of the job, recruiting is “generally successful,” said officials at Air Combat Command, because “people are interested in these disciplines.”

Battlefield airmen, most of whom are assigned to ACC or Air Force Special Operations Command, have always been a small, elite force. Officials expect each specialty to grow in size in the coming years.

A variety of means will be used, said Peterson, who is leading the battlefield airman improvement effort. There will be “an increased recruitment effort,” including enlistment and promotion incentives, she told *Air Force Magazine*.

The tactical air control party (TACP)

community will see the largest increase; plans call for adding 800 members over a period of years. Battlefield weather teams will grow by 150 airmen; combat controllers by 122; and PJs by 101, according to projections.

The policy directive notes that battlefield airmen provide a wide range of specialized capabilities. These airmen perform reconnaissance and surveillance missions, conduct airfield surveys, perform battle damage assessment, mark assault zones, conduct information operations, perform field trauma care, and offer terminal attack control.

They break down this way:
 ■ **Combat Rescue Officers.** The CROs, commissioned search-and-rescue experts, are severely understaffed. In June, only 66 CROs were assigned, though 166 are authorized.

■ **Pararescue Jumpers.** Enlisted PJs also suffer from a staffing shortfall, largely attributable to very high washout rates among candidates. Of 642 authorized PJs, only 415 are in place.

■ **Special Tactics Officers.** There are only 67 of these combat control officers, by design the smallest battlefield airman specialty. The field is currently at full strength.

■ **Combat Controllers.** There are 441 authorizations for enlisted airmen who secure assault zones in hostile territory and control air traffic. Only 376 of the positions are filled.

■ **Battlefield and Special Operations Weather Teams.** Enlisted weather experts who operate in enemy territory are nearly at full strength, with 840 of the 843 authorized positions filled.

■ **Battlefield and Special Operations Weather Officers.** This small specialty is at full strength, with all 80 positions assigned.

■ **Tactical Air Control Party personnel.** The TACPs are the largest battlefield airman group. Airmen who control air strikes against targets near friendly forces have 1,415 authorizations, with 1,318 of them filled.

Last fall, ACC created the Joint Air-Ground Operations Office at Langley AFB, Va., to serve as the focal point for all Air Force efforts in support of



The Air Force’s combat weathermen will receive better tactical training to enhance their effectiveness in hostile environments. Here, TSgt. Kurt Rohl collects weather data to pass to Army helicopter pilots in Iraq.

ALOs and Expeditionary Combat Airmen

In addition to the battlefield airmen, the Air Force also counts on “expeditionary combat airmen.” Gen. John P. Jumper, USAF Chief of Staff, noted last October that these “other airmen on the ground” also require battlefield airman-like training. They will receive additional tactical training for their missions, which are typically performed outside of base gates, in war zones.

ECAs include air liaison officers (ALOs), combat convoy drivers, deployed Office of Special Investigations agents, and security forces routinely patrolling outside base fences. The Air Staff is “assessing what training gaps there are for the ... other deployed forces who require additional combat skills training to accomplish their assigned mission while deployed,” said Maj. Gen. Teresa Marné Peterson, Air Force director of operations and training.

These airmen, who are differentiated from battlefield airmen in that they typically do not go as far into the field or for as long, will receive their own tailored training courses before heading to the war zone. Some of this training, such as for combat convoy personnel, is already in place and has been highly successful.

Air liaison officers are usually pilots who come out of the cockpit for two years to serve as terminal attack controllers for ground units—very similar to enlisted tactical air control party personnel. ALOs are not considered battlefield airmen, however, because they only perform this mission temporarily before returning to the cockpit. Also, they typically do not go as far forward into the field as TACPs, a planning official explained.

Brig. Gen. (sel.) Michael A. Longoria, director of the Joint Air-Ground Operations Office at Langley AFB, Va., said that ALOs must be carefully balanced. The increasing number of Army Stryker brigade combat teams is driving an increased need for ALOs, he said, but the Air Force cannot “drain the rated community” to provide them.

Extending the typical ALO tour beyond two years isn’t really an option either, he said, because most are young captains that the Air Force needs as “full up rounds” as soon as they return to the cockpit. Pilots serving three-year staff assignments can be treated differently, Longoria told *Air Force Magazine*, because they are typically majors or lieutenant colonels who have already been flying for a decade.

Overall, Longoria said, ALOs have been “run right” since the 9/11 terror attacks. “There’s a new kind of ALO out there,” he said, one who has served well, bridged the gap between land and air forces, and provided “an important leadership core” for the Air Force to build on in the future.

ground forces. Past operations showed that USAF had “serious deficiencies in this air-ground domain that we can and must fix,” noted Brig. Gen. (sel.) Michael A. Longoria, JAGO office chief. The office’s two branches—a Battlefield Airmen Division and a Close Air Support Division—work closely with counterpart Army offices to improve operations where air warfare and land combat come together.

Baseline Skill Set

One area where improvement was clearly needed was in establishing a baseline skill set for all battlefield airmen. To that end, USAF is in the process of establishing a Common Battlefield Airman Training course, to be run by Air Education and Training Command. CBAT will serve as a starting point for all battlefield airmen training, smoothing out some inefficiencies—and deficiencies—in the old, stovepiped training set-up. CBAT will follow basic training and teach operational teamwork, weapons, and ground navigation skills.

Improving baseline training was most important for combat weathermen. The new training will be “additive,” Longo-

ria said, to enhance their ability in the field.

Another airman said that, in the past, combat weathermen were often “thrown into the fire” without proper preparation and that they needed to be trained as “full up killers” if they were going to continue

to be used in forward areas.

However, USAF officials know that the service must take care not to damage proven battlefield airman training regimes “developed through hard experience,” Longoria said.

After CBAT, battlefield airmen will progress to their individual specialty training, which is extensive. Schedules must be coordinated with “specialty schools” frequently run by other services. Combat controllers, for example, must go through air traffic control school, Army airborne training, survival school, and combat dive training—all before a first duty assignment.

USAF is picking up more and more of the training responsibility. “The Air Force is standing up its own Combat Dive School to handle the increased requirements,” said Peterson. Also in the works is a battlefield airman-focused survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) course, to increase survival skills in the ground combat environment.

The PJ course, in particular, is “very tough,” Longoria noted. About 60 percent of PJ candidates wash out; that is actually a good thing, because the washout rate used to be 90 percent. The improvement has come by spreading the pain of the demanding standards over the duration of the program—instead of having nearly all candidates immediately fail the water trials.

High Standards

There is now an emphasis on coaching PJ candidates to get through the program, something that can be done without



Air Force security forces (pictured), convoy drivers, and air liaison officers are expeditionary combat airmen. They too will receive additional training. Here, (l-r) SSgts. Daniel Harris, Paul Davignon, and Ross List undergo urban warfare training.

USAF photo by Ann. Jeffrey Hall



A pararescue jumper with the 410th Air Expeditionary Wing jumps from a C-130 into Afghanistan. High standards for each battlefield airman make it difficult to enlarge the specialty.

sacrificing quality. “The standards are the standards,” said AFSOC chief Lt. Gen. Michael W. Wooley. “We have not lowered anything” to increase staffing, he said in an interview. (See “The Air Commandos,” March, p. 32.)

Peterson added that attrition will be reduced by giving candidates more time to “meet the arduous physical and mental challenges associated” with the training.

The Air Force is also increasing its practical cooperation with the Army. Prominent Air Force officers addressed the issue of tactical air control in a 2003 article in the Army’s *Field Artillery Journal*. USAF must “make certain TACPs have the same level of agility and survivability that their Army counterparts have,” wrote Maj. Gen. David A. Deptula and Col. Sigfred J. Dahl.

This requires them to have the same equipment and vehicles as soldiers with the Army’s new Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCTs). “That means our TACPs need Stryker vehicles,” wrote Deptula (who ran the combined air operations center during the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom) and Dahl (who has twice served as an air liaison officer with the Army).

This vision became reality in June, when TACPs and battlefield weathermen at Eielson AFB, Alaska, became the first airmen with Strykers, which fall somewhere between Humvees and

Bradley Fighting Vehicles in terms of speed, size, and armor. Specially equipped Strykers will be staffed by joint USAF-Army teams, explained Col. Ronald L. Watkins, chief of the JAGO Battlefield Airmen Division.

The vehicles themselves are Army property, with the specialized equipment being provided by the Air Force. Watkins said that up to 35 Strykers will eventually be outfitted so that joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs) and battlefield weathermen can accompany

the SBCTs—with Army drivers and fire support personnel on board.

Up to Speed

Deptula and Dahl also argued for clear delineation between highly trained joint terminal attack controllers, which for the Air Force include TACPs and air liaison officers, and more generic fire support personnel, such as the Army’s new joint fires observers (JFOs). “Any terminal attack controller must have a level of training and currency equal to that of a TACP,” they wrote. “This is not an issue of merely filling out and reading a nine-line CAS briefing form. It takes advanced situational awareness and weapons systems knowledge.”

The Army’s transformation into a more agile force means that there will be a greater number of independent units, each with less “organic” firepower. As the federally funded think tank RAND noted in a recent report, a “newfound Army confidence in the accuracy and responsiveness of air-delivered fires will result in increased Army requests” for air support and interdiction.

There are limits to how large the JTAC community can become, RAND noted. Constraints include a “shortage of qualified candidates, a demanding job that takes years to master, a shortage of training facilities, ... and heavy demands on strike aircraft that make it difficult for them to generate the necessary training sorties” needed to enlarge the JTAC force.

The Air Force will therefore work with the Army to allow its joint fires observers



Common Battlefield Airman Training will ensure that members of all seven specialties have the tactical skills they need to survive austere environments. Here, a PJ and a combat rescue officer train for a rescue.



For battlefield airmen such as these PJs in Baghdad, it is critical to have the right gear. The Air Force is working to ensure all battlefield airmen get lighter, more effective equipment.

to handle less dangerous requests, while the more difficult air support missions will still be handled by JTACs.

JFOs will be trained—partially by the Air Force—to “provide timely info,” said the JAGO’s Watkins. Missions would include a joint fires observer with “eyes on target,” relaying targeting information to a certified JTAC, who would coordinate the use of a strike aircraft. Working together, the JFO could then lase the target, Watkins said.

Another JFO mission could be to call in area attacks against targets when friendly and enemy forces are clearly separated.

But the most risky calls for fire, in close quarters, would be reserved for JTACs.

The cooperative relationship works for the Air Force, Watkins said, because otherwise the proliferating Stryker brigade combat teams could create a demand for an “unaffordable and unsustainable number of JTACs.”

Longoria noted that the Army wants to train up to 3,000 new JFOs, a number that will dwarf the Air Force’s TACP community.

Iraq and Afghanistan “lessons learned” studies also identified areas where battlefield airman equipment needed to be improved. A Battlefield Airman Operations Kit is being developed with the stated goal of improving capability while cutting in half the weight that must be carried into battle. The kit includes a laptop so operators can link directly to distant planners and receive updates.

There was a wide range of equipment problems to resolve. Clothing, rifles, body armor, eyeglasses, and helmets were among the gear the Air Force took a close look at. For example, in the past, TACPs and battlefield weathermen borrowed their mission equipment—used—from the Army. Air Force planners decided they needed to be supplied in-house with equipment they would own from assignment to assignment, and all are now Air Force-equipped.

Rugged Is Best

“Equipment is positively critical,” say JAGO officials. “Rugged, reliable, and capable equipment are the tools we use to plan, target, communicate, and execute battlefield airman missions.” For these airmen, “the human is the platform,” noted Col. Tracey Goetz, AFSOC requirements director.

Though they operate on the ground, battlefield airmen make full use of aircraft, both manned and unmanned. In a recent article, AFSOC commander Wooley observed that combat controllers are using unmanned aerial vehicles as light as two pounds to increase their situational awareness. They are using these UAVs to call in “air strikes on terrorist concentrations along the SOF teams’ route of travel far enough in advance to remove the threat before a ground firefight occurs,” he wrote in *Air and Space Power Journal*.

The JAGO office, meanwhile, is keeping a close eye on manned aircraft priorities and acting as an advocate for

close air support capabilities. Longoria said he continues to hear untrue rumors that the Air Force wants to abandon the CAS mission and the A-10. “No, we’re not getting rid of the A-10,” he said. “This is our workhorse,” and the fleet is being upgraded, not retired.

Also encouraging is the increasing use of advanced targeting pods on fighters and the demonstrated ability of bombers to perform CAS by using satellite guided weapons. Bomber CAS was “absolutely critical” to winning the war in Afghanistan, Longoria said.

Effective close air support does not just happen, however. CAS is something the Air Force must continue to train for, said Col. John V. Allison, chief of the JAGO Close Attack Division. “I don’t just show up over the battlefield in my A-10,” he said.

Allison noted that the Air Force builds up skills, beginning with fixed targets and advancing to unknown and dynamic targets. CAS is “always unknown,” time-critical, and in the proximity of friendly forces on the ground, which makes it one of the most difficult missions to perform.

These skills remain in use today. On June 20, USAF announced that an Air Force JTAC, “whose unit on the ground was under mortar attack, saw imagery from a nearby Predator assigned to another mission” and took control of the aircraft. After identifying the mortar launch site, the Predator was ordered to “strike with its Hellfire missiles.”

The press release notes that “the controller was able to see the imagery via a remote video system, which ... allows battlefield airmen to watch live video feeds from various sensors, such as the Predator.” The system has been “extremely effective ... because it actually gives the ground commander an ‘eyes on’ view of the target,” said TSgt. Juan Rodriguez, an air support operations center spokesman.

Battlefield airman skills are definitely a growth industry—the Global War on Terror will require more of these airmen to enable airpower, when “a large ground force isn’t necessarily viable” said Peterson.

And as RAND noted, “As adversaries adapt and move away from massed motorized forces operating in the open to dispersed, smaller forces exploiting difficult terrain, a well-practiced and developed air-ground partnership will be increasingly valued.”

The Air Force agrees. ■