

At first glance, SrA. Zach Sherwood looked like a typical soldier on patrol in Gurbuz, Afghanistan. Clad in standard Army fatigues with an M-4 slung over his body armor, Sherwood moved in formation with the squad of Army scouts as the unit made its way toward the home of a suspected Taliban facilitator, located in this bustling district in the country's eastern half.

As the scouts from 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, and units from the local Afghan police moved into position for the predawn raid, Sherwood took his post alongside them, helping secure the perimeter around a mud-brick compound. It wasn't until the suspect was already in custody and the platoon moved in to clear the compound that it became evident Sherwood was not your average soldier.

Sounding like an air traffic controller, Sherwood began calmly calling in the platoon's position and map grid coordinates to brigade headquarters at nearby Forward Operating Base Salerno in Khost province. The coordinates would be used to direct US warplanes to drop heavy ordnance near the platoon's position should it become trapped from enemy fire.

As the scouts and Afghan police wrapped up the mission, Sherwood was again on the radio calling in the unit's position and grid coordinates, just in case the squad came under fire on their return to Salerno.

Once done, Sherwood slipped back into soldier mode as he and the rest of the Army platoon plodded through the farm fields surrounding the compound and returned to the convoy of mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles waiting to take the unit back to base.

Airmen who live among soldiers are a relatively small community within the Air Force. But in the wadis and mountain valleys of Afghanistan, airmen like Sherwood and his fellow joint terminal attack controllers and tactical air control party members have built reputations as the emergency conduit for airpower when it is needed most.

"The people who know [us] are the people [who] matter," Sherwood said.

While Afghanistan's difficult terrain and austere combat environment have stymied US ground forces for years, the country's permissive airspace has been a vast hunting range for US and coalition airpower flying overhead. As a result,

The JTAC Imperative

By Carlo Muñoz



USAF photos by MSgt. Jeffrey Allen

an entire generation of combat air controllers has honed its trade in Afghanistan, pushing tin and putting bombs on target during some of the worst firefights of the war.

Recently, however, the Air Force's JTAC and TACP communities have seen their role on the Afghan battlefield change. Military leaders have increased restrictions on the use of airpower in combat, while simultaneously pushing for Afghan forces to take over fighting operations.

These initiatives, part of the gradual drawdown of US and NATO combat operations in the country, are often met with skepticism and outright frustration by the combat controllers, JTACs, and TACPs remaining in Afghanistan.

TACPs are particularly chafing at the new rules of engagement, saying they put more of an emphasis on protecting Afghan civilians than defending American and allied ground forces. The rules of engagement, according to one senior Air Force noncommissioned officer, "have left a lot of bad guys breathing" who wouldn't be otherwise.

Endgame

When SSgt. Thomas Jenn was last stationed at FOB Salerno

in eastern Afghanistan in 2004, the base had the moniker "Rocket City"—due to the multiple rocket attacks launched by Taliban forces against the outpost.

Back then, Jenn was one of 40 battlefield airmen in 20 Air Force JTAC and TACP teams directing close air support for American forces fighting in Loya Paktia—an area consisting of Paktia, Paktika, and Khost provinces, abutting the Afghan-Pakistan border. "There was more of everything," Jenn said during an interview at Salerno this past July.

This formidable presence helped pound insurgents from above. As Sherwood said, "This is a war built for JTACs."

The effectiveness of JTAC and TACP teams on Afghan battlefields prompted the Army to request a significant increase in their numbers in theater leading up to President Obama's 2009 troop surge and the subsequent arrival of more troops in the country. Defense firms responded to

Below left: SrA. Cristobal Galindo, a USAF joint terminal attack controller, walks a riverbed with US soldiers in Afghanistan. Below: Soldiers check out a ravine where enemy insurgents could be hiding. The battlefield airmen mission is winding down in Afghanistan, but the fighting continues.

Who will call in air strikes in Afghanistan after 2014?



demand, cranking out newer, more advanced equipment and technology for them.

But as the Afghan war grinds to a close, JTAC and TACP teams have seen their personnel and resources slowly draw down.

Jenn returned to Salerno in 2013 as the noncommissioned officer-in-charge for teams in Loya Paktia and now has 12 TACPs and JTACs to coordinate fixed wing CAS for all three of his provinces. Air Force TACP and JTAC forces in Regional Command-East, Loya Paktia's region, have been "stripped thin" as operations evolve and as America winds down its involvement, said Jenn.

More than half the 66,000 American troops in Afghanistan are scheduled to begin rotating back to the US this spring, in preparation for the White House's 2014 deadline to have combatants out of the country.

After next April's Afghan presidential elections, the remaining 32,000 US forces will begin their final draw-down, officially ending full-time combat operations for the US in Afghanistan. As part of that strategy, Afghan National Security Forces were officially given the lead from American and NATO forces for the country's security and combat operations during a ceremony at Bagram Airfield this past June.

As a result, the current mission for Jenn's JTAC and TACP units in Khost has consisted mostly of armed overwatch of joint, Afghan-led combat operations. "The bulk of the

missions have been like that" with the Afghan National Army "mixing [CAS] in," according to Jenn.

Evidence of the drop-off in US-led CAS operations is laid out in the combat airpower statistics for Afghanistan operations, issued in August by Air Forces Central Command.

American warplanes put iron on target in Afghanistan more than 2,000 times through August 2013. Even if American forces maintain that pace throughout the end of the year, that number will pale in comparison to the more than 4,000 times US aircraft dropped ordnance in the country in 2012.

Even the 2012 figure is dwarfed by the nearly 5,000 times American aircraft dropped weapons in Afghanistan the year before.

"I definitely don't get to control as much as I used to," said SSgt. Daryl Cooper, a five-year veteran of the JTAC and TACP community, in an interview at Combat Outpost Wilderness in Paktia province. As the JTAC for Gunfighter Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment at COP Wilderness, Cooper served three previous combat tours in eastern Afghanistan, including one in Kunar province in 2011—during the most violent days of the war.

A COIN War

In June, Cooper called in four joint direct attack munitions on a suspected Taliban safe house near the Khost-Gardez Pass close to COP Wilderness. The strike came after an Army



USAF photo by MSGT Jeffrey Allen

mortar team from Gunfighter Company killed four militants who had just fired their mortars into the outpost.

While more Taliban fighters came to retrieve their dead in pickup trucks, US forces tracked the convoy back to the safe house in a nearby village. After establishing positive identification, Cooper called in F-16s to drop weapons. More than a dozen suspected Taliban fighters were killed in the strike.

Eight years ago, that strike would have been a run-of-the-mill call for Cooper and other JTACs and TACPs, but under current rules of engagement for air strikes, it became a rare opportunity for him to ply his trade.

There is tension between the JTAC mission and the evolution of the Afghan war. Air strikes have long been a source of friction between US and allied commanders and their counterparts in the Afghan government.

Afghan officials in Kabul, led by President Hamid Karzai, have long argued American airpower has killed scores of civilians alongside Taliban fighters. In February, Karzai banned Afghan forces from calling in allied air support after 10 Afghan civilians died when NATO warplanes carried out a strike on three insurgent commanders in Kunar province.

This led top American and NATO commanders to place severe restraints on when, where, and how coalition fighters and bombers can drop their ordnance.

The restrictions, according to Jenn, are a clear example of how top US and coalition leaders are more concerned

about the public perception of Afghans than the safety of American and NATO forces in the field. While Jenn was adamant that one errant bomb could in fact swing a pro-US district or province to the Taliban, he said there also are “hundreds of bad guys who should be dead” and are not—due to the stringent rules of engagement.

Waging war in an area as violent as the Khost-Gardez Pass with extreme sensitivity to civilian casualties and collateral damage, has had an effect on JTAC and TACP operations, according to Cooper.

Afghan insurgents rely on shoot-and-scoot tactics, preferring quick-hit ambushes and mortar attacks. This requires battlefield airmen like Cooper to react quickly to identify the target and deliver ordnance.

Afghan insurgents continue to adapt their tactics. By launching mortar attacks or ambushes from heavily populated areas or distributing propaganda in the aftermath of an air strike, Taliban fighters try to generate and exploit outrage.

Cooper said the tension between targeting the enemy and making sure civilians are safe always exists in combat. “It’s nerve-wracking” to call in bombs on target, knowing how

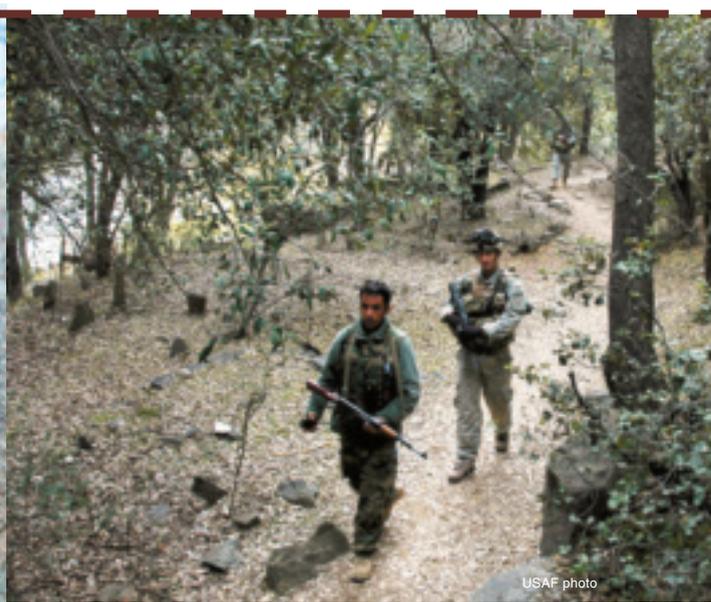
Below left: An Army OH-58 Kiowa crew communicates with Galindo to provide cover for soldiers on a foot patrol in Afghanistan. Below: Army 1st Lt. Andrew Adams and JTAC SSgt. Joshua Dickey use night vision goggles to scan a battlefield in Afghanistan for threats.

USAF photo by SSgt. David Salantri





USAF photo by Capt. Erick Saks



USAF photo

Above left: TSgt. Jonathan Oliver, a JTAC, reviews operation plans and maps on a mountaintop in Afghanistan. Above: A1C Adam Green patrols with an Afghan National Army soldier.

that mission could be exploited to the benefit of the enemy in a COIN-type war, Cooper said.

Sherwood, however, said JTACs and TACPs train for everything from a permissive battlefield such as Afghanistan to an actively denied airspace like Iraq in the early stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom and, more recently, the Libya air campaign. Seeing and knowing the ramifications for dropping ordnance in a COIN war has caused terminal attack controllers “to take that extra five minutes” to assess a target before dropping bombs.

The battlefield experiences gained by airmen during the course of the Afghan war have “built a better generation of JTACs down the road,” Sherwood added.

One proposal to eliminate the enemy’s propaganda efforts is to create an Afghan version of the service’s JTAC and TACP corps. By having Afghans call in CAS, the Taliban narrative of Americans killing civilians could be blunted.

Today, JTAC and TACP teams already are using intelligence gleaned from Afghan forces to call in air strikes, said Jenn.

Still, Air Force personnel employ numerous checks on JTACs calling in weapons, even if it is based on Afghan targeting, he said. “We won’t employ [ordnance] on what they tell us,” he said. “We can’t [just] take their word for it.”

The Afghan Piece

Afghan forces are nowhere near being able to stand up their own JTAC or TACP units. According to the Air Force controllers on the ground in eastern Afghanistan, they won’t be anytime soon.

Jenn was skeptical about whether Afghans will be able to carry out the air control mission once US and coalition forces leave the country by the end of 2014.

Building a JTAC is not easy. On average, it takes two to three years to turn out a competent Air Force TACP or JTAC. The service’s JTAC schoolhouse is at Nellis AFB, Nev. Processing “every piece of information [it takes] to [piece together] this puzzle ... and figure out what it is” before you drop bombs is staggering, Jenn said.

With a country having one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, getting an Afghan soldier to understand the nuances involved in the JTAC mission would be akin to “asking an illiterate man to read you the headlines in the newspaper.” Afghans are learning how to call in heavy

artillery and mortars during indirect fire missions, but as far as fixed wing CAS operations, “we are a long way from that,” Jenn said.

Even if US trainers could find a handful of Afghan troops that could take on the complexity of the JTAC or TACP mission, the Afghans don’t have nearly the resources on the ground or in the air, Jenn said. The current inventory of the nascent Afghan air force consists of Mi-17 helicopters, used primarily for troop transport and resupply missions. American air advisors plan to equip the AAF with Mi-24 attack helicopters in the near future to support ground operations.

However, there are no mid- or long-term plans to outfit the AAF with the necessary arsenal of fixed wing attack aircraft needed to employ the kind of air support JTACs and TACPs specialize in.

“We have the capabilities to get them to that point,” said Sherwood. “But I think it is a [big] leap.”

In addition, American commanders are still faced with the problem of how to make sure Afghan forces can keep fighting once US forces pull their air support.

US military leadership, including the top commander in Afghanistan, Marine Corps Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., has repeatedly said the lack of air support tops the list of Afghan concerns for maintaining security in the country.

As the American withdrawal creeps forward, senior combat commanders in the country are aiming to keep some level of US airpower in the skies above Afghanistan up until the very end. “We have the CAS, and if all hell breaks loose we will employ it,” Jenn said.

But when asked how Afghan forces will fare once US airpower—and the JTACs who orchestrate it—go away completely, and they are forced into a straight-on fight with the Taliban, Jenn demurred.

“There is no good answer for that,” he said. ■

Carlo Muñoz is a defense and national security correspondent for The Hill newspaper in Washington, D.C. He has covered US military operations in Afghanistan, South America, Cuba, and the Asia-Pacific. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.