

Afghanistan

Joint and Coalition Fire Support in Operation Anaconda

By Lieutenant Colonel Christopher F. Bentley

Field Artillery Mission Statement (Revised):
“To destroy, neutralize or suppress the enemy
by cannon, rocket and missile fires *and to
integrate all fires into joint and
coalition operations.*”

Soldiers from 4-31 IN, 10th Mountain Division, descend a steep hill to link up with American and Canadian troops. Photo by SPC Andres J. Rodriguez, 55th Signal Company



The ability of the United States to wage unilateral military action is unquestionable. But the reality of modern warfare is that US military actions without coalition forces will be the exception rather than the rule. The mission statement of the Field Artillery should reflect this change.

A mission statement with the limit of “combined arms operations” neglects the changing dynamic of modern warfare and focuses fire supporters only on assets available to the US Army internally rather than on the entire spectrum available in joint and coalition operations.

To meet the intent of the Coalition Joint Task Force Mountain (CJTF-Mtn) commander (Commanding General of the 10th Mountain Division), fire supporters in the Afghanistan Joint Operations Area (AJOA) met daily to integrate and synchronize joint and coalition force operations. The successful employment of fires in the AJOA, specifically during Operation Anaconda in the Shah-e-Kot Valley, demanded an unprecedented level of interoperability among disparate agencies and organizations.

The enemy is elusive, intelligent and committed and has few fiscal constraints. His tactics are similar to the enemy we faced in rotations at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, but in an environment more rugged than that of the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California.

Modern war has been defined as limited and carefully constrained in geography, scope, weaponry and effects (General Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2001, Page XXIV). Ongoing operations in the AJOA validate that description and the need to revise the FA mission statement. When we revise the statement, we must revise the processes involved in meeting the commander’s intent.

Although much about Operation Anaconda is classified, I can address several important fire support lessons learned in targeting, fire support coordinating measures (FSCMs), fires execution and fire support team (FIST) resourcing and training. Undoubtedly in the future, more about this and other joint and coalition operations will be discussed in this forum.

Targeting Challenges. During the planning and execution of Operation Anaconda, we employed a combination of forces and assets. Planning started

with the targeting process and was refined throughout execution. Our targeting meetings were held daily at 1200, and the results were presented in a decision briefing for the commanding general.

Our *decide, detect, deliver* and *assess* (D³A) targeting methodology is basically sound. However, coalition and joint operations in the AJOA identified a shortcoming: we failed to precisely articulate desired effects *as a means*. The best analogy to explain what I mean is the continuing confusion between the artillery community and maneuver commanders about what constitutes a “destroyed” target—is the destruction 30 or 100 percent? Now apply this analogy to an operation involving a host of services and nations.

Failure to communicate explicitly the desired effects on a target may result in the wrong system or munition being used. This is especially crucial in joint and coalition operations where a broad array of platforms and munitions are available to produce effects on a given target.

For example, as effective as precision munitions can be against certain types of targets, they are not the optimum munition for every situation. The enemy in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) is not presenting the classic Battle Command Training Program (BCTP) Warfighter exercise target set. We face an opponent who chooses, in most cases, not to line up against our strengths.

While, I believe our intelligence and targeting systems are fundamentally sound, we must adapt to an enemy who doesn't present the type of tactical formations our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms are optimized to detect. In other words, the enemy “gets a vote.”

The division analysis and control element (ACE) is the nucleus of the target decision-making process. The FA intelligence officer (FAIO) usually is an integral part of that team. However, during Operation Anaconda, the 10th Division also conducted simultaneous operations in 10 other countries, and we did not have the benefit of an FAIO in Afghanistan.

Within the CJTF-Mtn fire support element (FSE) we quickly identified a division of labor to accomplish the FAIO functions. The FAIO takes the intelligence generated by the ACE, applies his fire support knowledge and assesses those targets that require engagement.



Photo by Senior Airman Bethann Hunt, 1st Combat Camera

Civilians on the battlefield or displaced civilians moving through the battlefield can be a virtual communications system for the enemy.

The FAIO is the subject matter expert on the capabilities and limitations of all assets, friendly and enemy. He then correlates the data and presents viable recommendations to the staff and commander.

Units must not allow the FAIO slot to become an “economy of force” position. Of all the positions in the division FSE, the FAIO is, arguably, the most important.

We also must reassess our traditional target categories due to changing tactical, operational and strategic parameters. During Operation Anaconda, we were not allowed to recognize some

targets in accordance with the prescribed target categories. For example, the enemy used trails as the primary lines of communication (LOC) to resupply, infiltrate and exfiltrate. Because LOCs identify strategic related infrastructure (such as bridges and railroads), legal constraints kept us from categorizing many LOCs as high-payoff targets (HPTs). Instead, we simply identified “trails” as HPTs.

Civilians on the battlefield or displaced civilians moving through the battlefield can be a virtual communications system for the enemy—a characteristic emerging on the modern battlefield. As we continue to define the contemporary operating environment (COE), we must identify acceptable tactical target categories.

ISR Capabilities. We have an exceptional suite of ISR platforms. But what was clear early on was the immutable importance of terrain to an enemy who didn't want to be found. Afghanistan's rugged terrain is, in and of itself, a combat multiplier. It provided the enemy sanctuary, especially as he studied how we employed our systems. He learned that any large group of his forces quickly became a target list entry.

Our aerial ISR platforms did provide some “stand-off reconnaissance” that helped us select helicopter landing zones (HLZs) and gave aircrews some idea about the terrain. Additionally, the Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) supported our surveillance and reconnaissance (SR) teams as they infiltrated and exfiltrated.



The Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) supported our surveillance and reconnaissance (SR) teams as they infiltrated and exfiltrated. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Scott Reed, 1st Combat Camera)



4-31 IN soldiers make eye contact with an enemy bunker in the Shah-e-kot Valley during Operation Anaconda. (Photo by SPC Andres J. Rodriguez, 55th Signal Company)

But it was apparent that imagery intelligence (IMINT) and the Predator were not going to identify robust target sets to engage when facing an enemy employing asymmetrical operations. Once we put our SR teams in and established a more intricate human intelligence (HUMINT) network, we did a better job of confirming or denying targets and particular enemy courses of action (COAs).

Overall, we learned that the synchronization of all intelligence means is imperative; more importantly, we learned that incisive and thoughtful analysis must complement raw intelligence data. Our challenge was to work with a number of incongruent agencies that normally do not work together and paint a solid ISR “picture” for the commander—a picture he could use as the basis for action.

Actionable intelligence is crucial. After the Gulf War, General Norman H. Schwarzkopf stated, “If you took all the intelligence products that I had access to during the conduct of combat operations, you could easily fill several large warehouses; however, very little of it was actionable.” What is notable about General Schwarzkopf’s quote is that he stated that after fighting on a linear, symmetrical battlefield against a nation-state enemy. Our intelligence challenges in AJOA were exacerbated many fold as we fought a non-state actor operating on an asymmetrical battlefield.

While the learning curve was steep, we developed solid ISR patterns that supported our targeting process. We

were able to inject ourselves into the enemy’s decision cycle, forcing him to become a casualty, surrender or seek sanctuary in neighboring countries.

Fire Support Coordinating Measures. FSCMs, both permissive and restrictive, must facilitate the tactical ground commander’s ability to fire and maneuver. Doctrinally, permissive FSCMs facilitate movement while restrictive FSCMs protect friendly forces, innocent civilians and designated facilities, sites, etc. However, in a nonlinear environment involving multiple organizations and agencies, many of the FSCMs used were restrictive.

Restrictive FSCMs were the routine control measure to facilitate fires and maneuver during Operation Anaconda. This translated into well over 200 FSCMs across the various joint and coalition, conventional and unconventional forces.

Very quickly, the FSE made FSCM management a full time job for the FSE day and night shift NCOs. These stellar fire support sergeants adroitly managed a chaotic situation during Operation Anaconda; they coordinated and deconflicted FSCM as six million pounds of ordnance was dropped into a very tight valley.

In a joint and coalition environment, it is critical to clearly articulate the purposes, merits of and differences between restricted-fire areas (RFAs) and no-fire areas (NFAs). The enemy uses all terrain features, natural and manmade, to mask his movements and engage friendly forces.

During Operation Anaconda, the CJTF-Mtn FSE found the preponderance of issues with FSCMs originated with the other government agencies (OGAs) of the United States operating in theater. Most OGAs wanted large, comfortable NFAs over each of their positions—many of which covered key terrain of interest to joint and coalition unconventional warfare (UW) and SR teams. NFAs, by their nature, would deny these UW and SR teams the flexibility to engage targets in those areas. Instead, we used RFAs.

The use of RFAs allowed the approving ground tactical commander to engage targets as deemed necessary. RFAs facilitated UW and SR team movement and allowed us to set the conditions for future engagements.

The moral and legal imperative of the commander is to provide his soldiers all the resources they need to achieve victory. We wanted to establish permissive FSCMs over certain terrain features for the purpose of suppression; yet due to legal constraints, we were not allowed to establish doctrinal, permissive FSCMs.

Our goal was to achieve the desired effects and have the flexibility to deliver unobserved munitions on targets, as determined by the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and all-source intelligence. For this purpose, we were allowed to establish special engagement zones (SEZs)—frankly, a euphemism for a free-fire area (FFA). Once the terminology was approved, we established SEZs along known and suspected infiltration and exfiltration routes. This became our “deep/interdiction” fight, setting the conditions for the close fight.

I am *not* advocating we include the term “SEZs” in our doctrine. We have established Army and joint doctrinal terminology, but there are times when working with joint and coalition forces that the doctrinal terms may not be appropriate or understood.

It is imperative to establish proper terminology early, ensuring all forces understand the meaning. This terminology must be based on the enemy’s most dangerous COA instead of his most likely COA.

Fires Execution. During the first 24 hours of Operation Anaconda, we serviced more than 30 troops in contact with close air support missions. As successful as we were, we must not extol the efforts of fixed-wing support alone.

All available organic ground indirect fire support systems were employed

during Operation Anaconda. Of the 34 mortars available to Task Force Rakkasan, 26 were employed in support of task force troops in the Shah-e-Kot Valley. These systems provided timely, responsive, all-weather suppressive fires in support of ground forces. The remaining eight tubes were positioned as force protection assets at Kandahar and Bagram.

Within the first 48 hours of Operation Anaconda, the commander of Task Force Rakkasan recognized the need for responsive, massed fires with multiple shell-fuze combinations. The task force established a “mortar battery,” combining 120-mm and 81-mm mortars and positioning the battery within the constraints of the weapon systems. The task force FSE provided tactical command and control, while the CJTF-Mtn FSE established procedural and doctrinal control with joint and coalition forces.

The time constraint placed on CJTF-Mtn in planning hindered the responsiveness of the targeting process. In the AJOA, a majority of the fire support assets available were aviation and subject to the air tasking order (ATO). The ATO required aviation assets be coordinated 36 hours out. There was little time for flexibility in the sequence of the daily targeting meeting with all coalition and joint liaison officers (LNOs), the approval of the HPT list (HPTL) and the pilot’s pre-mission briefing.

The ATO is the best mechanism available to coordinate the hundreds of human and mechanical pieces involved in getting air on station, but it is conversely inflexible and not well-suited to support a nonlinear, asymmetrical battlefield.

The ATO must be flexible enough to change aircraft and munitions packages as the intelligence picture changes by the minute. Increasing the flexibility of the ATO cycle is imperative to responsiveness in today’s COE.

Precision-guided munitions (PGMs) are not “silver bullets” for every target engagement. The array of armament packages in any ATO should be structured to respond rapidly to any situation.

In terms of quantities and percentages, more precision munitions have been dropped in support of Operation Enduring Freedom than any

other military operation to date. A large percentage of the targets struck with these munitions do not fit into the more traditional target category of high-value targets—those targets that affect the enemy’s centers of gravity. Traditionally, high-value targets are bridges, factories, military headquarters, communications nodes, motor pools, etc. But in Operation Anaconda, the targets we needed to engage were enemy maneuver elements on foot, mortar and heavy machinegun positions and specific terrain features.

Our PGMs were very effective against fixed targets; however, not all targets on the Anaconda battlefield were stationary. PGMs take too long to arm and deliver to attack small mobile targets and targets of opportunity. Although PGMs give the US military an unparalleled ability to strike any point on the earth precisely, the time required to mensurate a target’s coordinates and determine the desired mean point of impact (DMPI) to ensure the PGMs can hit the target is generally a luxury troops in contact don’t have.



The task force established a “mortar battery,” combining 120-mm and 81-mm mortars and positioning the battery within the constraints of the weapon systems.

(Photo by SGT Keith D. McGrew, 55th Signal Company)

The Army AH-64 Apache helicopter performed exceptionally well in Operation Anaconda. However, the limiting factors of altitude and terrain clearly detracted from what these helicopters were designed for: to stand off and attack armored formations. They were brilliant in their air assault escort roles, allowing us the flexibility to position fixed-wing aircraft in orbits near ground troops.

The optimum USAF close air support (CAS) platform was the A-10 Warthog. The A-10’s capability to deliver a variety of munitions responsively and perform the duties of a forward air controller-airborne (FAC-A) greatly enhanced the ground force’s ability to fire and maneuver.

Bomber and strike aircraft also provided CAS during Operation Anaconda, but these aircraft were limited by the inherent design of their airframes. In some cases, the inabilities of aircraft to break self-imposed USAF altitude restrictions, slow their strike speed down or strafe the battlefield (the latter in the case of the bombers) restricted these aircraft’s abilities to deliver timely munitions in close support of troops on the ground.

The AC-130 gunship emerged as the platform of choice at night. Its effectiveness was *amazing*. The enemy began referring to it as the “Spitting Witch.”

Every light infantry division needs an AC-130 squadron. These platforms should be available for all light infantry training and military operations around the world.

FIST Resource and Training. Our FIST soldiers must understand how to employ the AC-130, and our forward observers (FOs) must be certified—not just trained—to employ all CAS assets, thereby making the fire supporter more universal.

If providing precision fires means “employing fires precisely where needed in the appropriate volume to achieve the desired outcome” (Major General Michael D. Maples, “Looking Back 200 Years and Forward to Continue the Legacy,” March-April 2002, Page 1), then the Army fire supporter must become the premier observer. In the article “Universal Observers: Punching our FIST into the 21st Century” (May-June 1979), author Lieutenant Colonel Vance Nannini outlined this need.



The best intelligence or assessment capability available to CJTF-Mtn continues to be the soldier on the ground. (Photo by SPC Andres J. Rodriguez, 55th Signal Company)

Our young soldiers are the best in the world, yet they still don't have the best resources and training to employ fire support from all platforms—not just fires that come out of a tube or launcher. Once we resource and train universal observers, we will be able to provide precision fires with precision maneuver, making the operational and tactical land power decisive.

Part of resourcing our fire supporters is effective communications capabilities. Operation Anaconda was not an FM “push to talk” fight. Our FSEs and FISTs in the fight did not have the communication packages to talk to all delivery platforms.

We must look for other options, such as the MBITR M-117 radio. This system has FM, UHF, VHF and satellite communications (SATCOM) capabilities in one package with a greater range than current radios. Additionally, it runs on the same AA batteries the FISTer carries for his night observation devices (NODs), precision lightweight global receivers (PLGRs), etc.

In Operation Anaconda where the vast majority of fire support is provided by air assets, the FIST is dependent on the USAF TACP for Air Force support. Independent SR and UW teams were all operating simultaneously and all demanding the same fire support resources. If the TACP is taken out of the fight, in most cases there are not redundant certified observers or equipment to fill the gap. An example is when 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry (1-87 IN, 10th Mountain

Division, part of Task Force Rakkasan) took mortar rounds on its HLZ five miles from the nearest TACP and could not call in Air Force air assets.

We should send fire support officers (FSOs) and fire support NCOs (FSNCOs) to the Joint Fire Power Control Course (JFCC) during the FA Officer Basic Course (FAOBC) and FA Basic NCO Course (FABNCOC), respectively. At the unit level, leaders must be responsible for sustaining their training and qualification as “TACPs.”

Our FOs must be certified as ground forward air controllers (GFACs). This may be a sore spot with the Air Force, but I believe it to be nonnegotiable.

Very few of our FOs are trained to be universal observers. And until they are, we must do a better job of integrating our USAFTACP into ground maneuver training and operations. We cannot continue to operate with an add-on conglomerate of Air Force personnel, especially during combat operations. We must train and fight as a team.

In Operation Anaconda, the brigade and battalion task force FSOs and FISTs were at “the tip of the spear,” and they performed magnificently. However, to ensure continued quality, we must fill these positions with our most experienced officers. The brigade FSO position must be the second branch-qualifying job for a major (after battalion S3 or XO), and the battalion FSO should be a post-battery command captain.

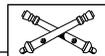
As a branch, we must clearly articulate the significance and importance of

these critical fire support positions to the Army. The brigade FSO position must be seen as our “vote” for future battalion command. Using post-battery command captains as battalion FSOs raises their credibility with battalion task force commanders. To ensure the quality of these fire support positions will take discipline and patience from the Field Artillery community. We owe the ground tactical commander our best and brightest.

Conclusion. The best intelligence or assessment capability available to CJTF-Mtn continues to be the soldier on the ground. For all the advantages provided by the Predator, Global Hawk, P3AIP, U2, and all the other high-tech national assets, nothing came close to the intelligence yielded during sensitive site exploitation (SSE) operations conducted by soldiers at the end of Operation Anaconda.

The lessons learned in the AJOA continue to emerge as we prosecute the War on Terrorism. Fire supporters proved, once again, that trained soldiers and leaders help the maneuver commander bring synergy and firepower to bear. Soldier power is hard to replicate by any other means.

The author wishes to thank the following for their input into this article: Major Lou Bello, Assistant Fire Support Coordinator (AFSCOORD), 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry); Major Brad Herndon, 2d Brigade FSO, 10th Division; Major Dennis Yates, 3d Brigade FSO, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault); and Captain Scott Taylor, 1-87 IN FSE, 10th Division.



Lieutenant Colonel Christopher F. Bentley, until recently, served as the Deputy Fire Support Coordinator (DFSCOORD) in the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), Fort Drum, New York, deploying to Afghanistan for Operation Anaconda. He now commands the 3d Battalion, 6th Field Artillery, 10th Mountain Division. He also has served as a Fire Support Officer and Fire Support Coordinator in the 25th Infantry Division (Light), Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, and the 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina; and as an Observer/Controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana. Among other assignments, he commanded B Battery, 7th Battalion, 8th Field Artillery in the 25th Division, and served as the S3 for the 1st Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment in the 82d Airborne Division.