

Army JFO Instructor/JTAC deploys to Afghanistan

By Sharon McBride, USAFAS Outreach Officer

An Army Joint Fires Observer (JFO) instructor from 428th Field Artillery at Fort Sill, Okla., who is also a Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) has made history by being the first Army JTAC to deploy to Afghanistan with the 504 Expeditionary Air Support Operations Group (EASOG). As a Joint Effects NCO, SFC Derrian Richardson, deployed to augment tactical parties.

“I am working in a Joint Effects Cell (JEC), in the Combined Joint Operations Center (CJOC) in Afghanistan,” said Richardson.

This is a great experience that will improve invaluable once he returns to 428th Field Artillery as a JFO instructor. The JTAC QC is held at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. Typically, it is Air Force personnel who graduate from the difficult, four-week course to become Air Force Joint Terminal Attack Controllers. JTACs work alongside Soldiers to control precision air strikes, close air support and other offensive air operations. JTACS work as a part of a Tactical Air Control Party (TACP). The TACP is usually comprised of a JTAC (Joint Terminal Attack Controller) and supporting personnel, most often a JFO.

Allowing JFO instructors to attend the course became a great way to augment the quality of JFO instruction without having to station additional Air Force JTACs at Fort Sill, said USAF Lt. Col Walter Wilson, Commander, 6CTS Det-1, Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

“There aren’t enough JTACS to sufficiently cover the battlefield so JFOs are used as force multipliers in a strategic context,” said Wilson. “So in 2006, it was agreed on a limited case-by-case basis, no more than eight a year, we will teach your JFO instructors to become a JTAC.”

JTACs provide terminal control of both air and surfaced based fires at the tactical level— they are the ones on the ground “calling in strikes” on targets. Their training teaches them to be an additional targeting sensor.

“The TACP is now made up of more JFOs than JTACs. The guys training those JFOs should be of the highest quality instructors —close air support educated — as we can make them,” said Wilson. “We must ensure these JFOs get top-of-the-line training.”

The JFO course is designed to provide select personnel with training in engaging targets with AC-

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130, naval surface fires, indirect surface fires and on procedures for providing timely and accurate targeting information to a qualified JTAC for Type 2 and 3 Close Air Support (CAS) Terminal Attack Controls, and conducting Terminal Guidance Operations (TGO).

The JFO program currently focuses on providing training that enables those who become certified to quickly and accurately provide the information necessary for JTACs to prosecute targets and avoid fratricide and unnecessary collateral damage.

For JFOs, knowing how to communicate to other services' air support is vital. It's not just about the English language but the specific JTAC terminology that goes along with close air support. The Air Force and their JTACS talk in a different language. It's not really 'common sense' terms but very 'technical terms.'

"Every word has a paragraph of meaning assigned to it," said Wilson. "A slightly different word can mean an entirely different thing. It takes a highly-focused trained mind to get it right.

"Say the right words, in the right order in an environment where bullets are flying and the radio doesn't sound very clear... dust blowing everywhere... low visibility... if something goes wrong, the thing that goes wrong is collateral damage."

Without a JTAC or a JFO on the ground it's extremely different for aircraft to drop bombs. A lot of the targets that are engaged are close to friendly forces.

"I initially attended the JTAC Course so I could provide additional information as an instructor to students attending the Joint Fires Observer Course," said Richardson. "I could understand and provide the 'why' to my JFO students as to the reason they execute in the format that they do. I now know and understand information that is not captured during the JFO Target Brief, and can now translate that material to my students. For example, what the JTAC

is communicating during his Close Air Support Brief and what that JTAC sees as an overall picture."

Richardson explains, knowing the overall picture is important because a JFO is normally not focused on that, but only on their current operation. Their operation is usually smaller in scope, normally at Company level or below. A JTAC is focused on multiple operations and on a larger area of operation, most likely at Battalion/Brigade and below. JTACs must coordinate several layers of air and ground support, and it can be extremely valuable for JFOs to know and understand...to know exactly how all the layers work together.

A JFO extends the operational reach of the JTAC as his "eyes forward" providing targeting data, to include mensurated coordinates for Type II and Type III CAS. JFOs, in conjunction with JTACs, are trained to assist maneuver commanders with the timely planning, synchronization, and responsive execution of close air support.

The JTAC course provides JFO instructors with valuable knowledge that in turn will create the highest quality instructor and in doing so will we make the entire TACP better because they got top of the line training, said Wilson.

"We have to have the best possible trained JFOs," said Richardson.

A JFO with a radio integrating fires with exact precision on the enemy makes him or her a valuable asset to the Maneuver unit and a combat multiplier, Richardson explained.

Both JFO and JTAC courses are difficult, and take preparation to successfully complete.

"My recommendations for any Army Soldier planning to attend these courses is to learn the different forms of communication... from radios and targeting devices to reading maps in different scales," said Richardson.