

Tactical joint Fires integration training at Fort Sill

A success story in a resource-constrained environment

By Lt. Col. Nick Sargent

Being based at Fort Sill, Okla. since July 2015, I quickly became aware of the almost daily live artillery training conducted on the East and West Ranges. What took a little longer to notice was that adjacent to West Range is Falcon Range, the busiest range in the Air Force. In fiscal year 17, Falcon Range hosted 3,026 aircraft sorties with 561 involving joint tactical attack controllers (JTACs). I therefore asked myself, is it possible to synchronize any of this training?

A lack of resources?

There is a perception across the U.S. services and U.S. Special Operations Command that there are not sufficient close air support (CAS) sorties available for JTACs, forward air controller (airborne) [FAC(A)] and joint Fires observer (JFO) certification and qualification training to meet the minimum standards articulated in the associated Joint Fire Support Executive Steering Committee (JFS ESC) memorandum of agreement (MOA). When considering training beyond these minimum standards, to achieve proficiency in what are perishable skills, this perceived shortfall is even greater. Whilst the statistics themselves are plain to see – over the past 15 years the number of JTACs, FAC(A)s and JFOs has increased as the number of close air support capable aircraft has decreased. I believe this statistical mismatch is exacerbated by a disconnect that exists when considering the planning of training between JTAC, FAC(A), JFO and CAS capable aircraft communities.

Coming from a much smaller military in the U.K., but having had the good fortune to work as an exchange officer for both the U.S. Marine Corps (2009-2011) and U.S. Army (2015-present), I look at the number of CAS sorties the U.S. services can generate for training with envy. As an outsider looking in, I suggest the U.S. services could be much more efficient with the assets that are available. Planning is the key. The challenge is identifying common training objectives across all CAS players, airborne and

ground-based alike, and then synchronizing training audiences in time and space.

Planning in combat

However, planning is a skill that has atrophied during recent campaigning over nearly two decades in the Central Command area of responsibility. CAS has been the most prevalent air mission on the air tasking order. Pre-planned CAS has been the exception and immediate CAS has been the norm. Pre-planned CAS existed essentially when air alert CAS was waiting for a higher priority immediate request, particularly as its ubiquitous nature and reach compensated for the limited range coverage of organic land component Fires assets. There is of course the contention that some missions were termed CAS but were not CAS when considering the Joint Publication 3-09.3 definition however, that is for another article. As transition back to large-scale combat operations occurs, a more proactive approach to CAS planning must be taken. CAS, in the context of counter-land operations, will compete with air interdiction for its apportionment and allocation of resources. Counter-land operations will also compete with other air missions for assets – strategic attack, offensive counter-air and defensive counter-air to name but a few – as it will likely be the same multi-role aircraft flying these missions. All this in the context of a contested or highly contested operational environment. Proactive planning for and requesting of CAS, in order to “compete” with the other tasks the joint force air component command is required to accomplish, becomes a necessity.

Planning in garrison

Air tasking order planning in combat is driven by a multitude of factors, in particular mission and targeting requirements, which generate an air asset in time and space. However, when planning in garrison it is frequently a unit’s maintenance schedule, more often than not established a year in advance to support a training and/or deployment cycle, which drives the avail-

ability of aircraft. Understanding this maintenance schedule reality, and other home station factors like approved takeoff and landing times, should not be overlooked by those planning CAS training from a ground perspective and can be accounted for by considering the following:

1. Identify potential “joint Fires” partners in your local area (account for flying units that are in proximity to your local range facilities), establish a network and build relationships.
2. Identify common training objectives, desires and goals based on higher headquarters’ tasking and guidance.
3. With all parties involved, simply ask “what can I offer you?”

By way of example, here is what was accomplished when these factors were considered recently at Fort Sill.

Re-establishing tactical joint Fires integration training at Sill

In 18 ½ weeks, the Field Artillery Basic Officer Leadership Course (FA BOLC) teaches Army second lieutenants the critical tasks required of a platoon leader, fire direction officer and fire support officer (FSO). Since September 2016, the FSO syllabus has included JFO MOA tasks. The FA BOLC’s capstone exercise, Red Leg War, sees student FSOs plan and execute the integration of Army and joint Fires with company-level maneuver.

After a 10 year absence, the Air Force once again routinely supports institutional training at the Army’s Fires Center of Excellence, Fort Sill.¹ At the time of writing, there has been fighter and bomber support to four Red Leg War exercises since October 2017, with support planned for each of the 17 exercises out to the end of Fiscal Year 2019. During Red Leg War, student FSOs put their JFO skills to the test – requesting, adjusting and controlling cannon artillery Fires; providing target information to JTACs and FAC(A)s in support of CAS missions; and conducting terminal guidance operations. So far, live and dry CAS

¹ <https://www.army.mil/article/196484>.

missions have been executed by F16s, T38s and B52s controlled by JTACs and FAC(A)s, and supported concurrently by live artillery suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD).

How was this achieved when resources are perceived to be scarce?

The planning technique used the combined lines of effort outlined above – along with networking and relationship building, identification of common training objectives and asking “what can I offer you?” Planning was collaborative in nature involving all stakeholders, training audience as well as training enablers. Notably, training enablers played a critical role. The Fort Sill Range Operations developed new weapons danger zones for CAS targets outside the existing target set; the two local airspace control agencies were also critical, ensuring that non-exercise participants could continue to train with minimum of impact and that exercise participants (air and ground) could optimize the use of local military operating areas and restricted airspace.

The foundation for planning this level of joint integration started with establishing a network of and relationships between joint Fires players within a 200 mile radius of Fort Sill. From an Army perspective this included the Army Multi-Domain Targeting Center, U.S. Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill Range Operations and Fort Sill Army Radar Approach Control. From an Air Force perspective this included 80th Flying Training Wing, 138th Combat Training Flight and 457th Fighter Squadron. This network is ever expanding.

Once the network was established and relationships built, aspirations and objectives for training opportunities were discussed. In doing so, common JTAC, FAC(A) and JFO training objectives were identified by cross-referencing the three JFS ESC MOAs and service training regulations. Examples included:

- Live CAS attacks with JFOs providing targeting information to JTACs and FAC(A)s, while integrating live artillery SEAD.
- Lateral and altitude separation techniques in order to mass Fires on a common timeline using USMC SEAD procedures.
- JTAC-FAC(A) battle handover.
- FAC(A) live artillery call for fire.

Finally, having asked “What can I do for you?” the battalion commander of 1st Bat-



An A-10 Thunderbolt II conducts a show of force over an observation point during a combined arms maneuver live-fire exercise at the Orchard Combat Training Center, Boise, Idaho in Sept. 20, 2018. (1st Lt. Robert Barney/U.S. Army)

alion, 30th Field Artillery (part of the USAFAS) offered a dedicated firing unit for one hour per day with 50 rounds in support of JTACs and FAC(A)s conducting call-for-fire training as the primary training audience. On two occasions, 138th Combat Training Flight integrated contract CAS night sorties scheduled to support their pre-JTAC Qualification Course instructor cadre work up.

The result is the establishment and continuation of outstanding tactical joint Fires integration training.

Although resources are finite, better planning can and will lead to better tactical joint Fires training opportunities for JTACs, FAC(A)s, JFOs and CAS capable aircraft alike. This planning must account for the training schedule of each community, endeavor to synchronize these schedules where resources are available in the same time and space, and consider the common training needs of each community.

For further information on tactical joint Fires training opportunities at Fort Sill in FY19-FY20 during Red Leg War, please contact the author. In particular, opportunities exist for CAS capable flying units as well as FAC(A)s. Upcoming Red Leg War dates are as follows:

1. Class 5-18, Oct. 15-19, 18
2. Class 6-18, Nov. 26-30, 18
3. Class 7-18, Jan. 14-18, 19
4. Class 8-18, Feb. 11-15, 19

5. Class 1-19, March 18-22, 19
6. Class 2-19, May 13-17, 19
7. Class 3-19, June 17-21, 19
8. Class 4-19, Aug. 5-9, 19
9. Class 5-19, Oct. 14-18, 19
10. Class 6-19, Nov. 18-22, 19
11. Class 7-19, Jan. 13-17, 20
12. Class 8-19, Feb. 17-21, 20

Lt. Col. Nick Sargent is the Army Multi-Domain Targeting Center Joint Integration chief. Sargent was commissioned in 1996 from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst into the Royal Artillery. His service has been predominantly in the operational force with peacekeeping deployments to Cyprus, Bosnia and Kosovo, and combat deployments to Afghanistan (four), Iraq and Libya. The majority of his appointments have been fire support and targeting related, including battery commander of 148th Commando Forward Observation Battery, Second in command of 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery, Naval Gunfire Liaison Officer and Air Officer. This is his second exchange tour in the U.S. having previously spent two years as I Marine Expeditionary Force's Assistant Force Fires Coordinator. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Sports Science and Business Studies from Brunel University and is currently reading for a Master of Arts degree in 'Airpower in the Modern World' with King's College London.