

Integration of Special Operations Forces and Airpower in Irregular Warfare

Examining the “FACs”

CDR John J. Patterson VI, USN*

The rapid, decisive campaign conducted against the Taliban by US special operations forces (SOF) in conjunction with the Northern Alliance and supported by US airpower in the opening phases of Operation Enduring Freedom captured the attention of military professionals throughout the world— allies and potential adversaries alike. Enthusiastic proponents heralded the campaign as a template for future military transformation, and even the less sanguine observers were forced to acknowledge an impressive synergy and economy of force in the SOF-airpower combination. The manifest operational benefits of modern airpower's key characteristics of precision, persistence, and reach have combined with SOF's unique attributes to impart a strategically significant synergistic effect. Particularly in the context of its unique relationship with SOF, airpower constitutes perhaps the single most effective asymmetric US advantage in the operational environment of irregular warfare (IW). Despite revolutionary advances in modern airpower, however, at least one area has progressed less consistently, arguably even losing ground from its historical zenith: the doctrinal and organizational aspects of air-ground integration in support of special operations. Yet, ironically, this critical nexus

of airpower and SOF, despite some degree of recent neglect, potentially offers perhaps the most return on investment in terms of operational effectiveness.

Through the Past, Darkly: Integration of Special Operations Forces and Airpower in Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group, 1964–72

As has often occurred throughout history—and perhaps military history in particular—a discriminating examination of the past may uncover keys that unlock future potential, though teasing out relevant lessons can become a deceptively daunting task, particularly if their historical context is conveniently forgotten. One such historical rose has bloomed in the thorny history of US counterinsurgency efforts in Southeast Asia: the highly successful integration of airpower in the operations of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) during its secret eight-year war in Laos and Cambodia.

*The author is an instructor at the US Army War College. A former F-14 Weapons School instructor, he has served as a forward air controller (airborne), joint terminal attack controller, and fire support officer for a joint special operations task force in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the wake of the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, Pres. John F. Kennedy appointed Gen Maxwell Taylor to lead a commission charged with analyzing the fiasco and making recommendations about avoiding a recurrence. Among other conclusions, the commission determined that Director William Colby's Central Intelligence Agency was increasingly engaged in operations beyond those of a purely intelligence nature.¹ Ultimately, it recommended assigning operational missions, including several ongoing operations in Southeast Asia, to the US military.² As a result, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara directed MACV to establish a covert unit under the auspices of Operation Plan 34A to assume responsibility for certain ongoing Central Intelligence Agency programs in Southeast Asia, effective 1 February 1964.³ Originally dubbed the "Special Operations Group," the name of the unit later changed to "Studies and Observations Group" in token deference to operational security. The unit included members of the US Army Special Forces, US Navy SEALs, and US Air Force Air Commandos operating loosely under the operational security umbrella of the 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam. MACV-SOG's charter called for conducting strategic reconnaissance, sabotage, interdiction, and personnel recovery operations in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam.⁴

On 2 November 1965, SOG's Reconnaissance Team Alaska entered Laos as part of Operation Shining Brass (code name for SOG operations in Laos, later changed to Prairie Fire).⁵ US forces extracted the team after it made contact with a superior enemy force on the fourth day "in country," but the team's "One Zero" (team leader) later returned to the area in the right seat of an Air Force forward air controller's (FAC) O-1 "Bird Dog" aircraft in order to locate airstrike targets identified during Reconnaissance Team Alaska's mission.⁶ SOG immediately recognized the utility of teaming a senior SOG operator with an Air Force FAC. Subsequently, SOG entered a formal agree-

ment with Seventh Air Force, as described by former SOG operator Maj John Plaster:

Each day a 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron FAC, with a USAF code name Covey, would fly over southern Laos to assist SOG; in return, SOG would detail an experienced recon man to ride with the FAC, to help look for targets, select LZs [landing zones], plan insertions and extracts, and stay in radio contact with the recon teams. Called "Covey Riders," *these SOG old hands saved many lives because they understood exactly what those on the ground were going through, resulting not just in an economy of language or effective use of air support, but an unanticipated psychological dimension that was hard to explain.*⁷ (emphasis added)

On the other side of the cockpit, Maj Reginald Hathorn served as an Air Force FAC with the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron, operating from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base in support of SOG's Prairie Fire and Heavy Hook (code name for SOG operations in North Vietnam) missions in 1968 and 1969.⁸ Hathorn tells a similar tale regarding both the success of the special operator-FAC teaming concept and the Air Force's reciprocation of the commitment by assigning only the most skilled and experienced pilots to fly SOG support missions: "The 23rd's pilots who flew . . . for the 5th Special Forces under MACVSOG, were the most experienced pilots the 23rd had . . . as possibilities of engagement with NVA [North Vietnamese Army] forces was [sic] certain to be 100% over time. . . . Therefore, it was imperative that the 23rd FAC be a mature, highly experienced pilot and Forward Air Controller."⁹ Clearly, special operators and their supporting FACs had reached a consensus regarding the operational value of the "covey rider" arrangement. Encapsulating the strategic impact of SOG operations in Southeast Asia, Plaster labels them "the most successful economy of force in US history," estimating that "at one point each American Green Beret operating in Laos was tying down six hundred NVA defenders, or about one NVA battalion per SOG recon man in

the field.” Despite high losses, the SOG kill ratio rose as high as 150:1, as documented by MACV in 1969.¹⁰

Similarly, in his insightful study of the integration of close air support (CAS) among conventional forces, Maj Michael D. Millen, USAF, turns his attention to Southeast Asia, extensively surveying FAC (airborne) (FAC[A]) operations in the Vietnam War. He examines the role of the FAC(A) in the successful conduct of CAS, noting that “most importantly with regard to this research, the Air Force’s methods of detailed integration in planning and Air Force and Army interaction were significantly different at the tactical level than they have been since.” He further asserts that “in Southeast Asia, unlike conflicts since, the FAC(A) was assigned to a flying squadron, a Tactical Air Support Squadron, but attached to an Army maneuver unit as part of the TACP [tactical air control party]. *In this era, the FAC(A) truly was an extension of the ground commander, and since he planned alongside, and lived with, the supported unit, his planning was quite detailed and wholly integrated*” (emphasis added).¹¹ Millen’s observations further lament the current failure to apply this integrated FAC(A) concept.

Forward to the Present: Integration of the Forward Air Controller (Airborne) and Special Operations Forces

At present, each service that possesses tactical fixed-wing aircraft maintains a nominal FAC(A) capability.¹² The Air Force’s capability resides primarily with the very able, purpose-built OA-10 but also extends to selected F-16 crews. The Navy retains a handful of FAC(A)-qualified aircrews in each of its two-seat F/A-18F squadrons, while the Marine Corps maintains FAC(A) capability in the AV-8B, UH-1N/Y, AH-1W/Z, and F/A-18A/C/D, considering FAC(A) a primary mission for its F/A-18D squadrons.¹³ All aircrews flying FAC(A) mis-

sions designated by an air tasking order must be current and qualified in accordance with their respective service requirements, though the latter differ slightly. FAC(A)s from the various services have flown missions in support of SOF engaged in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, including a secretive joint Air Force and Navy task force based on shore that included Navy F-14 FAC(A)s in direct support of SOF Task Force 20 operators who conducted counter-high-value individual missions in Iraqi Freedom during March and April of 2003.¹⁴ Although this arrangement evidently experienced success from an operational standpoint, Navy leadership appears to have resisted the precedent of basing the service’s tactical aircraft ashore.¹⁵ In any case, it has not recurred to date, nor has a service established any other habitual training or enduring operational support relationship between a FAC(A) and SOF unit. Nevertheless, individual SOF combat controllers and fire support officers have attempted, with varying success, to initiate relationships in-theater using liaison officers and unit standard operating procedures on a sporadic, ad hoc basis. Additionally, unofficial associations have developed between both the Air Force Weapons School and Navy Strike Fighter Weapons Schools and selected SOF units for the purpose of coordinating the development of tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Role of the Forward Air Controller (Airborne): Past and Present

Millen’s survey of Southeast Asian FAC(A) operations reveals broad consensus among his sources regarding the role of the FAC(A): “All made it clear that the FAC(A), and more specifically the slow FAC, . . . was the linchpin of CAS in South Vietnam. They attribute the FAC’s success primarily to his ability to maintain an integral knowledge of the ground commander’s plan and force ar-

ray, and to translate that knowledge and understanding into fire support in the form of CAS.¹⁶

According to the 2003 version of the joint doctrine manual for CAS, “the FAC(A) is normally an airborne extension of the TACP” and thus ultimately of the supported commander on the ground.¹⁷ The 2009 version of that manual retained this longstanding definition of the FAC(A) role but augmented it with a more detailed enumeration of the roles and missions of the FAC(A), including radio relay, reconnaissance, control of indirect fires, asset coordination and deconfliction, battle damage assessment, target marking and designation, generation of coordinates, suppression of enemy air defenses, and terminal attack control.¹⁸ That version culminates with the key observation that “the FAC(A) must be capable of executing the desires of the ground commander in day, night, and adverse weather conditions; integrating fires on the battlefield; mitigating fratricide; and conducting detailed planning and integration with the maneuver element.”¹⁹

Key Characteristics of Forward Air Controllers (Airborne)

Several attributes of FAC(A)s advantageously position them to fulfill this difficult but critical role. First and most obviously, they have an airborne perspective. FAC(A)s view the battlefield from the same vantage as the CAS aircraft they control: a decidedly macrolevel, two-dimensional, “bird’s-eye” view (in contrast to the three-dimensional view of the ground joint terminal attack controller [JTAC], which is dominated by a limited horizon, vertical development, and microterrain). Moreover, FAC(A)s, usually experienced providers of CAS themselves, possess a deep knowledge of aircraft, sensor, and weapon system capabilities and limitations, as well as unmatched familiarity with ordnance-delivery profiles, weaponeering limitations, and the effects of air-delivered weapons. Second, FAC(A)s typically have

more training and experience in the realm of the supported ground commander than typical aviators who perform CAS. Often, the best of the FAC(A)s have served as JTACs on the ground. The only service that institutionalizes this practice, the Marine Corps, includes FAC tours as mandatory elements of its aviator career path, although the other services can cite selected examples of such personnel. Interestingly, Navy FAC(A)s, whose program parallels that of the Marine weapons school—Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One—are the only current service FAC(A)s to date who must universally qualify as ground JTACs prior to commencement of the airborne portion of the FAC(A) syllabus. This requirement imbues them with at least some nominal appreciation for the JTAC’s and ground commander’s perspective. Derived from their unique position and experience, the ability of FAC(A)s to bridge the perspective/knowledge chasm between air and ground assures their enduring value.

Integration and Beyond

Major Millen’s superb study includes interviews with numerous FAC(A)s who had recent combat experience in Iraqi Freedom regarding their roles and responsibilities in facilitating the effective integration of CAS. His findings uncover a universal consensus that “FAC(A) requirements for detailed integration, both in planning and execution, are significantly different than for a simple CAS sortie.”²⁰ Similarly, Millen identifies the tactical payoff for this increased requirement of the FAC(A): “As a general rule, the more detailed the FAC(A)’s knowledge, the less information he will have to pass to the CAS aircraft for them to employ effectively. This enables him to utilize more aircraft in a given time period, thereby striking more targets and increasing CAS efficiency and effectiveness.”²¹

Millen’s research then turns to investigating how the FAC(A) acquires such detailed knowledge. His subsequent analysis

of current joint organization and doctrine shows that existing allocation and tasking processes (air tasking order) and command and control architectures do not support attainment of the required level of FAC(A) knowledge for routine, detailed integration of these controllers into the supported ground commander's scheme of fire and maneuver, despite doctrinal acknowledgment of its necessity for the effective employment of FAC(A)s.²²

One key point concerns sortie allocation.²³ Millen's study highlights a degree of continuity in FAC(A) tasking as a critical necessity for attainment of the requisite level of situational awareness. The majority of the study's respondents indicate a desire for repeated assignments to support the same maneuver units, or at least service the same area of operation on successive missions, in order to acquire the degree of familiarity and situational awareness they believe necessary for optimal effectiveness.²⁴ Coupled with adequate aircraft endurance, this continuity of allocation allows the FAC(A) to develop the high degree of situational awareness necessary to effectively control the delivery of ordnance in close proximity to friendly troops and civilians. Both Hathorn and Plaster recount numerous examples of FAC(A)s controlling fires within 100 meters of friendly forces in Southeast Asia (well within the "danger close" distances for the ordnance involved) with impressive regularity.²⁵ Given that they controlled unguided weapons exclusively, delivered from aircraft with a best-case 10-mil delivery accuracy, this feat represents an astounding degree of professionalism and nerve.²⁶ Despite revolutionary improvements in precision derived from technological advancements in modern aircraft and weapons, delivering ordnance at the desired place and time (i.e., on target) remains highly dependent upon the situational awareness of the fallible human who performs terminal control. As previously noted, in the case of the FAC(A),

current doctrinal organization, allocation processes, and command and control architecture do not accommodate the degree of continuity in FAC(A) allocation necessary to ensure this level of situational awareness consistently.

If current doctrine and organization contain serious shortfalls in accommodating the doctrinally specified level of "detailed . . . integration" of the FAC(A) into the ground scheme of fire and maneuver, the cohesive human element of air-ground integration remains completely unacknowledged. Long ago, the US Army recognized the deleterious effect of its individual personnel-rotation policy upon unit cohesion and effectiveness. Nor are individual infantry platoons (let alone SOF units) routinely expected to play tactical "pickup games" in mission assignments with lives at stake. Yet, an analogous situation has, in fact, transpired with respect to doctrinal organization and allocation of FAC(A)s since the conclusion of the Vietnam War. In the case of SOF, which has already demonstrated that establishment of an organic, direct-support aviation arm with enduring training and operational relationships is both practical and inherently valuable, such a conspicuous oversight becomes all the more inexplicable.²⁷

Beyond doctrinal roles and missions, the true value of FAC(A)s resides in their ability to bridge the operational domains of air and ground. More often than not, the crux of that bridge is a very human bond between aviators and Soldiers or special operators. The bridge must begin with a mutually firm, elemental grasp of the nature, objectives, capabilities, and limitations inherent in both environments. This part of the bridge is built through both parties' technical mastery of the tools of the trade and comprehensive knowledge of the tactics, techniques, and procedures comprising the tactical doctrine of both air and ground. Such a common understanding enables what is drily referred to in doctrine as *integration*. But to achieve its full potential, the bridge must ultimately rest upon a founda-

tion of that distinctly human element gained only through the continuity of relationships based on shared life-and-death challenges known as *trust*. Perhaps that is, in fact, the “unanticipated psychological dimension” which Major Plaster finds difficult to explain.

Opportunity Knocks

The Air Force has received initial funding to support the fielding of 15 light attack armed reconnaissance (LAAR) aircraft in fiscal year 2011, 12 of which will be combat coded.²⁸ Specifications of the aircraft’s armament include up to two 7.62 mm minigun pods, two 500-pound-class precision munitions, two 2.75-inch rocket pods, and the AGM-114 Hellfire missile, complemented by the LAAR’s advanced avionics, communications, sensors, data links, and full-motion-video capability.²⁹ The aircraft must operate from austere forward locations and provide a nominal five-hour endurance with a range of 900 nautical miles, a ceiling of 30,000 feet, and an estimated operating cost of only \$1,000 per flight hour.³⁰ Funded under the Air Force’s OA-X program, the aircraft will conduct missions envisioned to include FAC(A). LAARs are scheduled to attain initial operational capability with a 24-aircraft squadron assigned to Air Combat Command as soon as 2013. Despite ongoing source selection, candidates currently include the Embraer EMB-314 Super Tucano (now successfully employed by the Colombian Air Force in the counterinsurgency role) and the Hawker Beechcraft AT-6.³¹

Longtime proponents of reviving a dedicated “slow FAC” platform from the storied lineage of the O-1, O-2, and OV-10, employed so successfully in Southeast Asia for counterinsurgency applications, no doubt are excited by the prospect of a modern version equipped with the latest avionics, sensors, and precision-guided munitions for possible counterinsurgency employment in Afghanistan and beyond. The LAAR program appears to signal a programmatic and

cultural shift toward recognizing the value of a purpose-built light attack platform to the IW fight; however, there remains the greater question about whether the services will properly integrate this platform so that it provides optimal support to the customer.

Recommendations

The Air Force and US Special Operations Command should seize the opportunity presented by fielding a purpose-built light attack aircraft tailored to IW; doing so will allow them to implement a parallel doctrinal reorganization that re-creates the successful relationship between SOF and Air Force FAC(A)s assigned to tactical air support squadrons in Southeast Asia. Lt Col Michael Pietrucha, USAF, envisions just such a successful outcome in which future hypothetical light attack detachments “gave aircrews direct exposure to the units they supported, raised the confidence level of participants, and facilitated the detailed integration and planning necessary for a successful air-ground team.”³²

The LAAR program represents a promising technological and programmatic step toward more effective SOF-air integration, but the organizational aspects of this integration are at least as critical to the operational performance and strategic impact of the SOF-air team. Accordingly, the Air Force and Special Operations Command should do the following:

- When a LAAR squadron attains initial operational capability, assign it to Air Force Special Operations Command to be attached under tactical control of a joint special operations task force operating in Afghanistan as soon as practicable in order to develop an effective concept of operations for optimal SOF-air integration. This would likely include a scheme of distributed “hub and spoke” operations that would capitalize on the LAAR’s expeditionary field capability, facilitate integrated planning

with supported units, and improve on-station and response times.

- Assign only the most experienced volunteer FAC(A) aircrews to SOF support squadrons, thereby building both an experienced cadre and organizational trust.
- Initiate selective “closed loop” personnel assignment of designated SOF-support FAC(A) aircrews as SOF fire support officers during nonflying joint assignments as a means of enhancing FAC(A) understanding of and familiarity with SOF tactics, techniques, and procedures and requirements.

As for the Air Force Weapons School, it should reexamine the utility of FAC(A) sector operations as a way of leveraging the distributed operations capability of the LAAR to increase FAC(A) continuity and situational awareness in support of conventional general-purpose forces, with whom a unit-embedded FAC(A) organizational scheme might prove impractical.

Conclusion

The complementary capabilities and characteristics of SOF and modern airpower represent a symbiotic relationship that af-

fords a degree of synergy to IW, which, if properly leveraged, will contribute significantly to maximizing the strategic effectiveness of the US military’s counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. Modern revolutions in the precision, persistence, and reach of airpower have further assured the innate effectiveness of the SOF-airpower team, but progress in one critical area of SOF-air integration has lagged technological advances: FAC(A) integration.

Historically, in both doctrine and practice, the FAC(A) has served as a critical nexus in the effective assimilation of SOF and airpower. Lacking until recently the prospect of a slow FAC platform tailored to IW operations, as well as the doctrinal command and control architecture and organizational relationships to facilitate the level of detailed integration into the ground scheme of fire and maneuver required for optimal effectiveness, SOF-air integration has fallen short of its full potential. The Air Force’s LAAR program presents a unique opportunity to realize that potential, but only by properly implementing the organizational and relational aspects of its integration. In CAS—as in all human endeavors, from basic troop leading to statecraft—relationships matter. ✪

Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Notes

1. William Colby himself was a storied veteran of the Office of Strategic Services’ Jedburgh covert operation, which organized resistance behind German lines in World War II.

2. John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America’s Commandos in Vietnam* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 22–23.

3. *Ibid.*, 23.

4. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

5. *Ibid.*, 40.

6. *Ibid.*, 41.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Reginald Hathorn, *Here There Are Tigers: The Secret Air War in Laos, 1968–69* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), xii–xiii.

9. *Ibid.*, 221.

10. Plaster, *SOG*, 355.

11. Michael D. Millen, “Improving Detailed Integration in Close Air Support Planning and Execution” (thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), 16, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA428778&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>.

12. The term “forward air controller” (FAC) has become “forward air controller (airborne)” (FAC[A]) to distinguish it from the US Marine Corps’ term for a naval aviator serving as a joint terminal attack controller on the ground.

13. Joint Publication (JP) 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*, 8 July 2009, 1-3, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_09_3.pdf.

14. Tony Holmes, *US Navy F-14 Tomcat Units of Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 69–75.

15. *Ibid.*, 69.

16. Millen, "Improving Detailed Integration," 17.

17. JP 3-09.3, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support (CAS)*, 3 September 2003, II-14, accessed 24 August 2010, [http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp3_09_3\(95\).pdf](http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp3_09_3(95).pdf).

18. JP 3-09.3, *Close Air Support*, 8 July 2009, I-3.

19. *Ibid.*, III-38.

20. Millen, "Improving Detailed Integration," 30.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 30–60.

23. *Ibid.*, 51.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Hathorn, *Here There Are Tigers*, 222; and John L. Plaster, *Secret Commandos: Behind Enemy Lines with the Elite Warriors of SOG* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 280.

26. One mil equals one meter of weapon dispersion per 1,000 meters of slant range to the target.

27. Both the Air Force's 1st Special Operations Wing and the Army's 160th Special Operations Avia-

tion Regiment exemplify this type of direct-support aviation arm with established organizational and habitual training relationships.

28. Marcus Weisgerber, "The Light Attack Aircraft," *Air Force Magazine* 93, no. 1 (January 2010): 58, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2010/January%202010/0110aircraft.pdf>.

29. "USAF Receives First Funding for LAAR Aircraft Programme," *airforce-technology.com*, 11 December 2009, accessed 4 August 2010, <http://www.airforce-technology.com/news/news72193.html>.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*; and Eric Palmer, "Funding for USAF's Light Attack Armed Reconnaissance Aircraft," ELP Defens(c)e Blog, 9 December 2009, accessed 4 August 2010, <http://ericpalmer.wordpress.com/2009/12/09/funding-for-usafs-light-attack-armed-reconnaissance-aircraft/>.

32. Lt Col Michael W. Pietrucha, "Seeing the Whole Elephant: Envisioning a Successful Light Attack Program for the US Air Force," *Air and Space Power Journal* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 48.

Your Air & Space Power Publisher
 Currently seeking manuscripts on Air & Space Doctrine,
 Strategy, History, and Biographies of Pioneer Airmen

AUPRESS
 AIR UNIVERSITY PRESS
 155 N. Twining Street
 Maxwell AFB AL 36112-6026

For catalog or information, call
 334-953-2773/6136 DSN 493-2773/6136
 Fax 334-953-6862 Fax DSN 493-6862

<http://aupress.au.af.mil>

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression, academic environment of Air University. They do not reflect the official position of the U.S. Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force or the Air University.