The DASC

Enlisted controllers

by Maj Joel N. Rea

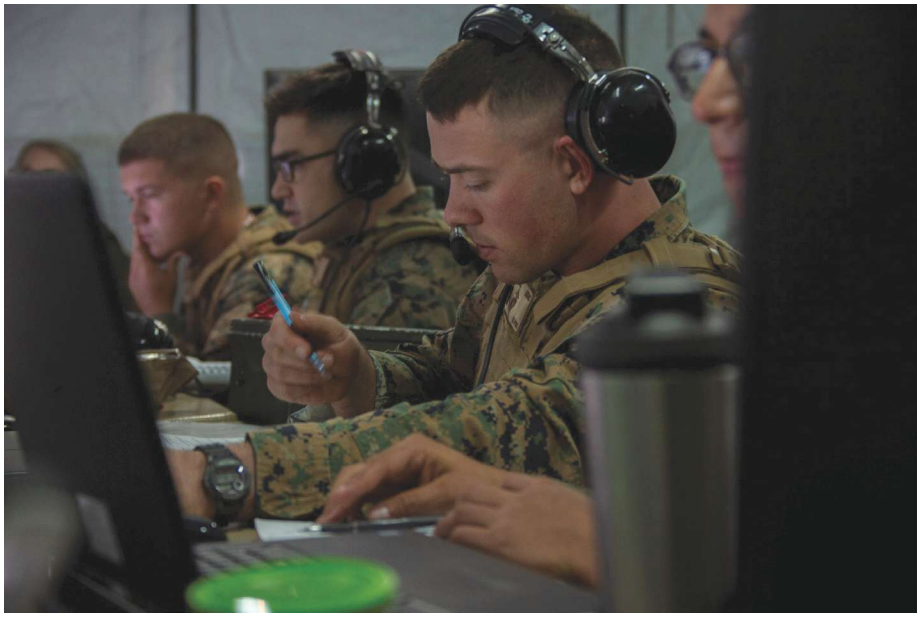
>Maj Rea is an Aviation Command and Control Officer (7202) assigned to the MAGTF Staff Training Program. He wrote this article in 2018 while attending the Expeditionary Warfare School.

In 1994, 1stLt Richard Ebel, an Air Support Control Officer (7208) stationed with Marine Air Support Squadron 3 (MASS-3) in Camp Pendleton, wrote an article in the *Marine Corps Gazette,* "titled Personnel Management and the DASC," expressing his discontent over a specific misuse of human capital within the air support community. In his article, he argued that the sole purpose of a Marine Corps officer is to provide leadership and that, except for newly minted Marine aviators, a Marine officer should only be assigned a role where interpersonal leadership is required. An officer performing as an aircraft controller in the direct air support center (DASC) has no leadership responsibilities. 1stLt Ebel reasoned that enlisted crew members of the DASC both can and should perform as aircraft controllers instead of officers.[1] Unfortunately, he provided minimal evidence to support his argument. This lack of supporting evidence may have detracted from the verity of his conclusion. It is time to readdress this issue. Enlisted crew members (7242) should replace 7208s as the DASC's aircraft controllers. Unequivocally, enlisted crew members are capable of performing the duties of aircraft controllers in the DASC. Employing 7242s in the capacity of aircraft controllers better aligns the DASC with the practices of other Marine aviation command and control agencies, facilitating enhanced interoperability. Additionally, enlisted controllers allow the DASC's 7208s to fulfill mission critical (and emerging) operational assignments better suited for officers.

The enlisted members of the DASC community are eminently capable of performing as aircraft controllers. There is much to commend 7242s. They are not mere radio operators. 7242s perform at the intersection of the Marine Corps' air-ground team. This responsibility places them in a high-pressure, high-volume aviation command, control, and communications (C3) context from their earliest days in the Fleet Marine Force. 7242s develop both an appreciation for the combined arms methodology of the MAGTF and a mental schema for the spatial and temporal dimensions of the MAGTF's unique battlespace.[2] The cognitive skills of DASC net operators are highly complementary to the activity of controlling aircraft.

Enlisted Marines within the DASC have proven themselves capable of performing as aircraft controllers when given the chance. In 2014, the Air Support Control Officers Course in Twentynine Palms, CA, sent one of its sergeants through the aircraft controller course. He passed the course with high marks and displayed a high aptitude in the control and direction of simulated aircraft within a training scenario—the course's "practical application" module. Unfortunately, no enlisted controllers have been through the course since.[3] During the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the DASC and its subordinate elements were dispersed to support multiple maneuver forces. DASC crews regularly employed enlisted crew members as aircraft controllers to overcome personnel shortfalls. These enlisted controllers received on-the-job training vice a formal course of instruction and proved to be highly proficient.[4]

Circumstances favor the employment of enlisted aircraft controllers. As the



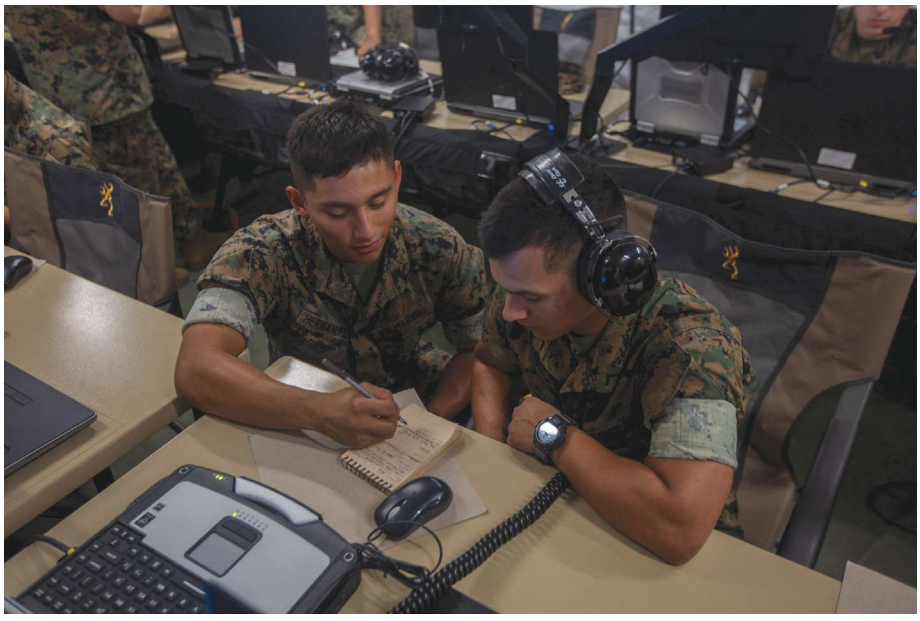
Marines working in the DASC have proven themselves capable of performing as aircraft controllers when given the opportunity. *(Photo by LCpl Garardo Cano.)*

technological capabilities of the Marine Air Command and Control System (MACCS) change, the employment of Marines in the MACCS must also change. Of the new kit procured by the MACCS in recent years, the two most prominent of these major end items are the AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar and the Common Aviation Command and Control System. These new capabilities facilitate interoperability of personnel and equipment across the MACCS.[5]

In the early 2010s LtCol (then-Major) Jeremy "Beef" Winters, former Weapons and Tactics Instructor C3 Department Head and former CO, MASS-1, anticipated the changes brought by this new equipment. LtCol Winters developed and tested a multifunctional air operations center concept. He used the aforementioned equipment sets to fuse the operational capabilities of the tactical air operations center (TAOC) and DASC.[6]

Higher headquarters also desires a more efficient use of personnel within the MACCS, of which the DASC is just one component. Over the last few years, both the Aviation Expeditionary Enablers Branch of HQMC and the former Deputy Commandant for Aviation promoted the idea of a "common controller" in the MACCS. This common controller is an enlisted Marine who is trained to control aircraft across various MACCS agencies and across all six functions of Marine Corps aviation.[7] The common controller concept is a key enabling factor for LtCol Winters' multifunctional air operations center concept. Interchangeable controllers enable interchangeable, modular agencies.[8] The two agencies in the MACCS with the most complementary mission sets are the DASC and TAOC. Thus, the common controller concept should begin with controllers capable of controlling aircraft in both the DASC and the TAOC.

Regarding the common controller concept, the DASC is behind the power curve in comparison to the other agencies within the MACCS, specifically the TAOC. The TAOC already employs enlisted controllers in the tactical control of aircraft. These enlisted tactical air defense controllers (TADC) attend a thirteen-week training program, the Air Defense Electronics Operators Course, prior to joining their first operational unit.[9] If given the opportunity to attend the Air Support Control Officers Course, these TADCs would be ready to control aircraft in the DASC. Thus, it takes minimal institutional energy to turn the TADCs of the TAOC into common controllers.



Marines conduct training with the Common Aviation Commanmd and Control System at MCAS Futenma, Okinawa, Japan in 2019. *(Photo by LCpl Ethan LeBlanc.)*

> ***... the DASC needs a mandatory training syllabus for enlisted controllers.***

Despite the inherent aptitudes of 7242s, the DASC needs a mandatory training syllabus for enlisted controllers. According to the *DASC Training and Readiness Manual* (T&R), the governing document for training DASC Core Model Minimum Requirement crews and crew members, the role of aircraft controller is open to enlisted crew members in the DASC only in an elective capacity. Enlisted crew members may perform as controllers as part of the Core Plus (4000-level) curriculum. Core Plus indicates that completion of these T&R events does not contribute to the overall readiness of the MASS.[10] The DASC needs to move the enlisted controller curriculum to the 1000 through 3000 levels, thus coupling this training to each squadron's readiness.

Every agency in the MACCS benefits from being more interoperable. A more interoperable MACCS is more useful to the MAGTF and thus more highly sought after. However, the DASC community's most credible objection to employing enlisted controllers is the question it raises of what to do with the 7208s once they are no longer responsible for controlling aircraft. The crux of this objection is a collective belief that the MASS will lose the preponderance of the officers delineated on its table of organization (T/O).[11]

The type of inchoate argument presented by 1stLt Ebel is perhaps why the DASC community has been so intransigent regarding this topic. He failed to give a fully formed recommendation of what to do with 7208s once they no longer control aircraft. He offered only one vague solution for how to employ the 7208s. In his estimation, lieutenant 7208s should apprentice under 7208 Senior Air Directors as soon as they join the Fleet Marine Force. Still, in this

calculation only one lieutenant 7208 (apprentice) is required where formerly there were two lieutenant aircraft controllers: the tactical air director and the helicopter director.[12]

The *DASC T&R Manual* calls for at least eleven qualified 7208 aircraft controllers per MASS. This according to the DASC and air support element Core Model Minimum Requirement.[13] Ebel's proposal would replace as many as eight of these 7208s with 7242s. Capt Douglas Thiry, another 7208 writing on the same topic in 1997, seemed to advocate for reducing the total number of 7208s by a greater margin. He recommended completely removing 7208 controllers from the T/O. Where 1stLt Ebel offered one potential role for former officer controllers, Capt Thiry is silent. He offered only that the ratio of officer to enlisted should be better "balanced" (i.e., reduce the number of officers).[14]

The MASS should not decrease the total number of officers on its T/O. It should matriculate 7242s into the aircraft controller syllabus without losing the corresponding number of officers. There are many roles for a 7208 to fill in the MACCS and across the MAGTF. There are many reasons to maintain the same number of 7208s on the T/O. A junior air director position, a more robust conception than the apprentice role proposed by Ebel, may be a crucial (future) role in the DASC for young 7208s to fulfill. The senior air director may need the assistance of a junior air director to effectively manage the DASC of the near future. This is especially true as the increase in technological capabilities causes the DASC to morph and expand its role inside the MACCS.[15] There are also numerous liaison positions across the MAGTF and the joint force which 7208s inevitably fill. A 7208's uniquely "macro" perspective of combined arms makes him highly qualified and sought after for these liaison roles.[16] In no way should the employment of enlisted Marines as controllers in the DASC result in a decrease in the number of officers on the MASS' T/O.

It is true that the purpose of a Marine Corps officer is to provide leadership. An officer performing the duties of an aircraft controller is a waste of human capital. It is also true that the enlisted members of the DASC are ready and able to perform as aircraft controllers if given the proper training. Additionally, the interoperability of equipment and the future convergence of agency functions within the MACCS creates a demand for a common controller capable of controlling aircraft across multiple agencies. The DASC should employ its enlisted Marines as aircraft controllers to facilitate this steady march of interoperability and modularity.

Marines tearing down the DASC following training exercise Midori Guardian in 2019. *(Photo by LCpl Garardo Cano.)*

Notes

1. Richard A. Ebel, "Personnel Management and the DASC: A Leadership Failure," *Marine Corps Gazette, (*Quantico, VA: May 1994).

2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *NAVMC 3500.120A, Direct Air Support Center Training and Readiness Manual*, (Washington, DC: February 2017).

3. Personal discussion between Capt Jason Hooten, Air Support Control Officer, and author on 10 October 2017.

4. Personal discussion between GySgt Christopher Bond, DASC Division Chief, MAWTS-1, and author on 15 October 2017.

5. Aviation Expeditionary Enablers Branch (APX), "The Marine Air Command and Control System," *Marine Corps Gazette,* (Quantico, VA: May 2014).

6. Jeremy "Beef" Winters, "Airspace Integration," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, Va: May 2013).

7. DC Aviation, *2017 Marine Aviation Plan,* (Washington, DC: 2017).

8. "The Marine Air Command and Control System."

9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *NAVMC 3500.119 w/ Ch 1, Tactical Air Operations Center Training and Readiness Manual,* (Washington, DC: April 2014.)

10. *DASC T&R Manual*.

11. Bond, discussion with author.

12. "Personnel Management and the DASC: A Leadership Failure."

13. *DASC T&R Manual*, 1-5 & 1-6.

14. Douglas B. Thiry, "Enlisted Air Control … Another Look," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 1997).

15. "The Marine Air Command and Control System."

16. "Personnel Management and the DASC; and "Airspace Integration."