

# Increasing Marine Corps Lethality

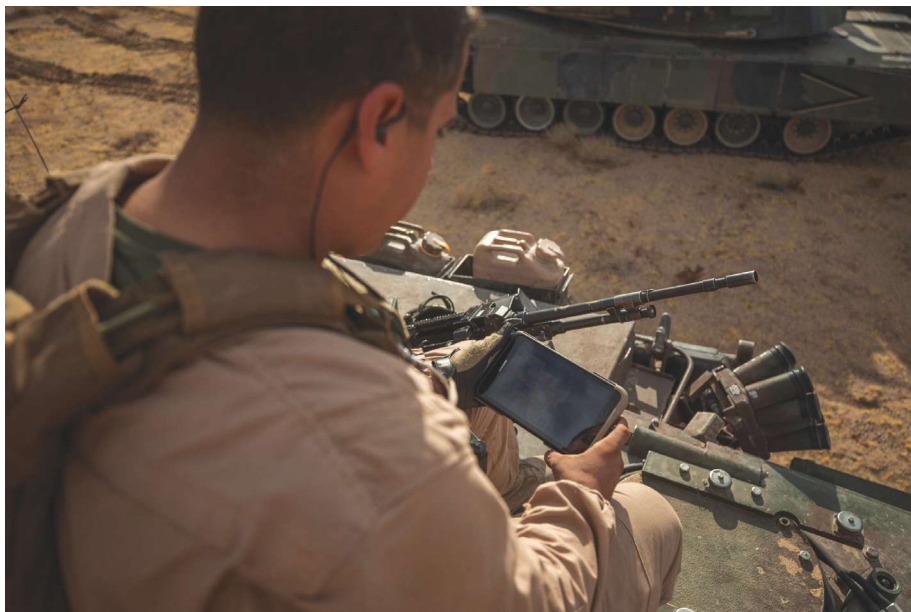
## 8002 as a primary MOS

by LtCol G.L. Topper

The intent for this article is to promulgate a concern that has not been addressed sufficiently to date: the secondary MOS for enlisted Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) is a critical shortfall in the Marine Corps force structure and lethality in effectively integrating the six functions of Marine aviation in support of maneuver forces.<sup>1</sup> This is based on the following main point, which will be elaborated on further in this article: based on personal observation during a career of offensive air support (OAS) as an attack pilot and as an air officer and forward air controller (FAC) of thirteen Integrated Training Exercises over the last three years, it has become apparent that the manning, training, and equipping of JTACs is far from optimized. Professionalizing the JTAC MOS as a primary MOS would greatly improve the continuity and lethality of this key billet in the Marine Corps.<sup>2</sup> As an additional benefit, a primary MOS would also decrease sortie requirements from the ACE for JTAC initial training support and decrease the throughput requirement for all school houses.

The importance of the JTAC regarding Marine Corps lethality cannot be emphasized enough. They are subject matter experts in combined arms in support of MAGTF operations. The JTAC skill set is incorporated into the fire support team and tactical air control party (TACP) organic to the GCE. It has been commonly observed at ITX and elsewhere that because of the secondary MOS of JTACs, we see JTACs being a critical shortfall to the effectiveness and efficiency of the FiST in conducting OAS and combined arms integration.

**>LtCol Topper is an active duty AH-1Z pilot who has deployed in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Operation ENDURING FREEDOM as an aviator (four deployments) and as an Air Officer/FAC (three deployments). He is presently the Aviation Lead for TTECG.**



**A JTAC with 1st Tank Bn, 1st MarDiv, provides digitally aided CAS during Exercise STEEL KNIGHT. (Photo by Sgt Miguel Rosales.)**

This is because of the secondary MOS nature of the JTAC MOS, which causes a lack of proficiency in basic JTAC responsibilities in supporting the GCE with OAS.

The current JTAC manning construct across the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) does not adequately support the overall warfighting effectiveness as an institution that prides itself on combined arms integration and lethality as a MAGTF. As a secondary MOS, the rotational career track does not allow for sufficient training or experience to have

truly capable, trained, and experienced JTACs prior to Marines rotating out of the JTAC billet and back to their primary MOS.<sup>3,4</sup>

By way of comparison, Air Force JTACs are primary MOS enlisted airmen and officers. This dedicated career track allows for much more continuity in training, standardization, and better equipment maintenance and procurement. The JTAC's duties in combat are such a critical lynch pin for effective OAS that keeping the MOS as a secondary MOS would be analogous to

asking OAS providers to execute their roles from a part time B-billet status, not something that anyone would be in favor of, or comfortable with.

A negative side effect in keeping the enlisted JTAC MOS as a secondary MOS is the excessive burden placed on the schoolhouses that produce them. This strains the schoolhouses by having to produce vastly more JTACs than they would have to if it was a dedicated career field. It also strains Marine aviation even further in resource limited times. Amidst transition from legacy aircraft, coupled with ACE predeployment training priorities, the sortie requirement for initial JTAC training syllabus completion compounds the ACE present readiness problems (see Note 1). Making the JTAC MOS a primary MOS would relieve strain to the ACE and schoolhouses while also increasing the quality of terminal controllers in all aspects.

JTAC specific equipment for training and deployments is noticeably abject in large part because of the rotational nature of the JTAC MOS in its present construct. Because a large part to the revolving door that is the JTAC career field, the typical JTAC in the FMF shows up to ITX with their standard issue gear and a five-watt radio: no downlink capability, no 10-watt radio, and little to none laser designators/infrared pointers. They typically have no “advanced” capabilities (which should be the standard) such as: dual communications headsets, high cut helmets, flak adapters for retaining tablets, smoke grenade launchers, ability to conduct digital aided CAS, ability to communicate securely. Having the continuity in the MOS that comes from it being a primary MOS would allow for much improved equipment procurement, fielding, advancement, retention, and accountability along with being well trained to utilize all of the aforementioned equipment.

*Training.* While the various schoolhouses are impressive in their training and standardization efforts, once JTACs get to the fleet their initial skill levels degrade over time as they are often focused on other duties often having nothing to do with being a proficient JTAC.

Without conducting regularly scheduled TACP shoots, the JTAC skill set atrophies. This in turn diminishes the overall standardization and proficiency across the MOS, which would improve with its designation as a primary MOS. Primary MOS JTACs would have the ability to increase standardization in training, establish long-range operational and training plans, and make liaison with CAS and range support providers for better training opportunities.

A significant question that stems from this recommendation is who would be responsible for training and equipping primary MOS JTACs for deploying units? One possible solution could be establishing a unit designed to man, train, and equip FACs, JTACs, and joint fires observers to augment deploying units, subordinate to the MEFs. I recommend removing the associated radio operator billets for members of the TACP as they should all be proficient in using and maintaining their radios themselves. All members of the Marine Corps TACP could be permanent personnel trained and equipped at this unit, then sourced out for deployments to all units who need their capability at D-180 then return to their parent unit after deployment. They would have the benefit of TACP-specific focused training with the newest equipment of

the proper quality and quantity. They could also deploy as cohesive teams that trained together composed of air officers, FACs, and JFOs, which would further enhance the lethality of the TACP when attached to operational unit FiSTs and fire support coordination centers.

*A related topic worth mentioning.* Career FACs. With the addition of a FAC PMOS, the lethality of the FiST and their fire support coordination centers would be further enhanced. It would also increase training quality at all schoolhouses/Tactical Training and Exercise Control Group (TTECG)/Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One (MAWTS-1) by the reinforcement of their staffs with career FACs as permanent personnel and instructors in the TACP realm. These individuals could be selected through a competitive board to be granted a waiver to allow a select few Marine aviators/naval flight officers upon completion of a successful FAC tour to go into a parallel air officer and fires career track and remain competitive for promotion to start this primary MOS. Subsequent to this, a dedicated career track and MOS for new officer accessions could be established.

Regarding air officers, there is a good argument to be made to keep them as secondary MOS B-billet Marine avia-



**A JDAM hits the target. JTACs had taken part in a TACP course at Twentynine Palms. (Photo by LCpl Cedar Barnes.)**

tors who are subject matter experts in Marine aviation serving as augments to deploying GCE units and higher headquarters. The integration of the ACE with the GCE via the augment air officer is invaluable as the commanding officer's advisor on utilizing the six functions of Marine aviation.

**Recommendations (By Priority)**

*Primary MOS.* Make the JTAC MOS a primary MOS for increased Marine Corps lethality at all organizational levels in incorporating the six functions of Marine aviation in support of the MAGTF. Offer a FAC lateral move options for a select few aviators and naval flight officers while growing the FAC MOS as a primary MOS “from street to

to determine fleet procurement and training requirements for the next five years. Host an annual JTAC training and readiness review. Schedule teams of JTAC-evaluators from MAGTF TC’s four subordinate organizations to inspect the MEF JTAC programs. Publish a JTAC newsletter on a semi-annual basis. Codify all of the above in a revision of *MCO 3311.1, Operations and Readiness*, (Washington, DC: April 2016).

*Unit leader education.* Educate leadership at all levels on “what right looks like” regarding JTAC/TACP manning, training, and equipping. Various potential methods to do this: incorporate a brief specific to this in existing commander’s conferences, conduct briefs

***If a primary MOS is created for enlisted JTACs, along with the other recommendations listed in this article, it would greatly advance and enhance the lethality of the Service as a whole.***

fleet.” Conduct a formalized doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities process at HQMC to support this effort.

*JTAC parent command.* Establish a colonel command subordinate to MEF responsible for manning, training, and equipping of all deploying air officers, FACs, JTACs, JFOs. This would ensure units deploy with a well-trained and unified team of with the right training, proficiency, and the right equipment.

*JTAC/TACP program manager.* Assign MAGTF Training Command (MAGTF TC) as the JTAC program manager, supported by its subordinate units/instructors at Expeditionary Warfare Training Group Pacific, Expeditionary Warfare Training Group Atlantic, MAWTS-1, and Tactical Training and Exercise Control Group. MAGTF TC conduct an annual TACP conference to register fleet trends and report to Training and Education Command on all things related to manning, training, and equipping of the TACP. Host an annual operational advisor group

focused on unit leaders at the annual JTAC conference, and publish articles geared to unit leadership in the semi-annual JTAC newsletter.

*Marine Corps Systems Command JTAC augmentation.* Lend additional manpower, funding, and resources to Marine Corps Systems Command to improve JTAC specific equipment acquisition, accountability, and maintenance.

In summary, the long pole in the tent regarding Marine Corps combined arms integration and effectiveness is often the proficiency of the TACP, specifically the enlisted JTAC proficiency in supporting OAS. If a primary MOS is created for enlisted JTACs, along with the other recommendations listed in this article, it would greatly advance and enhance the lethality of the Service as a whole. The professionalization of this critical MOS is long overdue. It should be considered as a critical vulnerability to the lethality of the Service and corrected in the most expedient manner possible.

**Notes**

1. Disclaimer: The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps or any other governmental agency. References to this article should include the foregoing statement. Quotation from, abstraction from, or reproduction of all or any part of this document is permitted provided proper acknowledgement is made.

2 Reference data from the following three briefs for quantitative analysis supporting the thesis: JTAC MOS Working Group, August 2019 by POG 70; USMC TACP Requirements 13 November 2019 by PP&O; Joint Terminal Attack Controller, Forward Air Controller, and Joint Fires Observer Requirements January 2015 by Combat Development and Integration; The JTAC Program Way Ahead by 11th Marines.

3. This is not to say no JTACs are effective at executing CAS procedures. In the last two wars, JTACs made mission on the whole, even as a secondary MOS. This article seeks to offer a way to improve the Marine Corps warfighting lethality based on the potential for conflicts with future peer adversaries where TACP effectiveness could be a major combat multiplier or degrader based on the manning, training, and equipping of JTACs.

4. The quality of schoolhouse training is by no means part of the issue at hand in this author’s opinion, having most recently graduated from EWTGLANT spring of 2018, and previously graduating from EWTGPAC and MAWTS-1 AOD courses. All of these schoolhouses provide quality initial, refresher, and advanced JTAC/FAC and Air Officer training. This training could potentially increase even further in quality and quantity with a primary JTAC MOS.

*>Author’s note: Many thanks to LtCol Allain, LtCol Kellner, Maj Robillard, Maj Dodge (TTECG) for their detailed reviews of the article, and to MSgt Sharp (PP&O, POG 70) for supporting with reference data. Also, Maj Breville and GySgt Roye (MAWTS-1) for hosting a discussion with subject matter experts from all MEFs, HQMC, EWTGPAC and EWTGLANT during the annual JTAC T&R conference, which provided invaluable additional input to this article.*

