

Sourcing JTACs

Increasing options to meet the high demand

by Capt Joseph Kang

The Marine Corps prides itself in its ability to provide organic air support to its ground units in the fight. In order to effectively integrate aviation to the ground scheme of maneuver and fire support plan, Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) perform an essential role in the employment of aviation assets in support of the ground commander. Not only do they provide terminal control of aviation assets, JTACs also integrate aviation operations with supporting arms. These low-density, high-demand individuals are highly sought after to ensure effective use of aviation assets in support of ground operations. As the demand continues to grow for terminal controllers, the Marine Corps continues to pull from only a select few MOSs, which constrains the source for potential JTACs. Adding Direct Air Support Center (DASC) Marines as a JTAC sourcing

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option provides the Marine Corps with a viable and sustainable solution to the challenges of the growing demand for terminal controllers.

The demand for terminal controllers has increased dramatically over the past decade.¹ Marine terminal controllers are comprised of JTACs and Forward Air Controllers (FACs). A JTAC is defined as “an individual with a ground combat arms background, who coordinates, integrates, and directs actions of combat aircraft engaged in [Close Air Support] CAS and other Offensive Air Support operations.”² A FAC is essentially a JTAC who is also an aviator. According to the Deputy Commandant for Aviation:

Currently there is a validated requirement for 344 JTACs and 262 FACs for a total of 606 groundbased controllers. This need translates to a requirement to produce 220 JTACs annually ... [The] demand for JTACs and FACs continues to grow with expectations that the total requirement will increase again.³

As the demand for JTACs increases, the sourcing pool remains stagnant. The same set of MOSs are taxed year after year.

The JTAC selection process limits the ability to source from MOSs not within its current parameters. The acceptable JTAC candidates are from the ground combat arms and aviation communities. According to the *2018 Marine Aviation Plan*, the primary JTAC feeder MOSs are: 0802 (artillery officer), 7315 (UAS operator), 0302 (infantry officer), 1802 (tank officer), 1803 (Assault Amphibious Vehicle officer), 0861 (scout observers), and 0321 (reconnaissance man).⁴ FACs are sourced from 75XX aviators regardless of platform and CAS experience. Although the current pool of MOSs is vital and absolutely necessary in creating an effective terminal controller team, the current process selects from roughly less than two percent of the entire Marine Corps’ MOS inventory.⁵ There are other MOSs available to help produce JTACs; however, under current parameters, the Marine Corps is overlooking available sourcing options.

Another factor to consider is the capacity to sustain the JTAC community. The current feeder MOSs have a high turnover rate. This will only get worse,



Marines from the Direct Air Support Center could provide another source for JTAC certification. (Photo by PFC Nicholas Baird.)

especially on the aviator side, as the Marine Corps is struggling to meet pilot requirements: “As of October 2016, the Marine Corps only had 829 (current inventory) of the required 1,070 fixed-wing FW jet pilots (target inventory) necessary to fill critical positions within the entire force.”⁶ Currently, JTACs serve a term of 24–36 months and FACs even shorter. According to *MCO 1301.25C*, “the tour length for FACs serving at the battalion level will normally be less than 14 months.”⁷ The relative shorter FAC time makes sense as aviators are high value assets and needed in the cockpit. An aviator is also the most expensive manpower asset to train and maintain.⁸ Although aviators play an essential role in the JTAC/FAC team, it is not cost effective to have aviators out of the cockpit, which ultimately effects sustainment efforts. The high turnover rate coupled with the decreasing support from aviators will result in a higher demand for an already low-density community.

The Marine Corps should broaden its sourcing options to the JTAC pipeline. The focus should be to identify MOSs that could acclimatize to the demanding role of a JTAC and also help with sustaining the terminal controller community. The *2018 Marine Aviation Plan* describes a JTAC as:

a specially certified and qualified service members and aviators who, from a forward position or airborne, direct the action of combat aircraft engaged in close air support and offensive air operations ... and perform autonomous terminal guidance operations (TGO), the low density, high demand teams are sought after to support the ground fire support plan and have proven absolutely critical to mission accomplishment.⁹

Essentially, a JTAC is the MAGTF’s terminal guidance controller of CAS aircraft in support of the ground fire support plan. MOSs that understand aviation and fires employment would produce ideal JTAC candidates.

A community primed for sourcing JTACs are Marines from the DASC. The DASC is the MAGTF’s principal air control agency responsible for the procedural control of aircraft in direct



The high demand for qualified JTACs requires new sourcing options. (Photo by LCpl Michael Neuenhoff.)

support of the ground commander and usually co-locates with the highest fires approving agency, the Fire Support Coordination Center.¹⁰ *MCWP 3-25.5* depicts the DASC’s role as:

The DASC processes immediate air support requests; coordinates aircraft employment with other supporting arms; manages terminal control assets ... and procedurally controls assigned aircraft ... The DASC controls and directs air support activities that affect the GCE commander’s focus on close operations and air missions that require integration with the ground combat forces.¹¹

DASC controllers and operators are the MAGTF’s aviation command and control (C2) professionals, specializing in the close integration of the aviation plan with the ground scheme of maneuver. These are Marines that are familiar with the employment of CAS aircraft as well as the integration of groundbased supporting arms. By opening up the JTAC community to the DASC community, the demand for JTACs will be easier to achieve with a MOS that already has a baseline understanding of both aviation and groundbased fires in support of the ground scheme of maneuver.

A DASC Marine can provide the Marine Corps with a sustainable solution to the enduring demand for JTACs.

This would also increase the depth of knowledge of aviation C2 professionals across the MAGTF. Unlike some of the current feeder MOSs, the JTAC profession would not be a foreign concept to DASC Marines. As JTACs and DASC Marines are both a type of aviation C2 professional, transitioning qualified DASC Marines into the JTAC community would develop a more well-rounded aviation C2 team and also force multiply aviation C2 professionals across the MAGTF. A DASC Marine is also not constrained like an aviator that needs to be rushed back to the cockpit, some who will never see another FAC tour again. Instead, a DASC Marine could transition between DASC and JTAC tours, which would bolster aviation C2 capabilities at either assignment. Not only will this help sustainment efforts but make for a more efficient overall aviation C2 team.

Sourcing Marines from the DASC community into the JTAC pipeline will integrate aviation C2 subject matter experts across the MAGTF. The combination of ground combat arms, aviators, and aviation C2 professionals provides a more versatile terminal controller team for future complex challenges. The *Marine Operating Concept (MOC)* states that the MAGTF “must be a tailorable, flexible, and versatile

force capable of responding to any crisis across the full range of military operations (ROMO).¹² Opening the JTAC pipeline to other MOSs not only helps the challenges of meeting JTAC requirements but also meets the commandant's demand for a more versatile and flexible force.

Some would argue that the JTAC community should only be reserved for those executing the employment of fires or that the demand increase is a sustainment issue instead of a sourcing one. However, there are non-fires centric MOSs that are just as capable of becoming JTACs and are not bound to the short turn over time like FACs. The DASC community is a perfect example of an MOS that should be considered. Not only is it the MAGTF's principle aviation C2 agency that integrates supporting arms by co-locating with the senior Fire Support Coordination Center (principle fires approving agency), the DASC also controls all the ACE commander's aircraft in support of the ground commander.¹³ Like JTACs and FACs, DASC Marines are heavily involved in the integration of fires and the routing and safety of flight of the MAGTF's aircrafts and will be a perfect addition to the terminal controller community. Reevaluating and changing the selection process means that the Marine Corps will be able to source from MOSs like the DASC to help combat the challenges of a growing demand for terminal controllers.

Skeptics might also argue that not all MOSs are suited for the demanding JTAC course. While it is true that the course is demanding, the DASC community can provide individuals that are better suited to endure the demands of the course than some of the current feeder MOSs. Prior to attending the JTAC course, candidates must complete a primer course that focuses on the following training events: fixed-wing CAS platform capabilities, rotary-wing CAS platform capabilities, CAS munitions, nine-line procedures, simulated CAS practical applications, execution template, and airspace deconfliction.¹⁴ A freshly minted DASC controller and operator already possess a baseline knowledge for five of the seven primer

course events as they graduate DASC entry level school. With a minimum rank of sergeant to attend the JTAC course, the enlisted DASC candidates would be seasoned operators. The same would be applied to the officer side, as the typical DASC officer in zone for a b-billet would have completed two back to back DASC tours and would be a seasoned controller. This makes controllers and operators from the DASC an excellent sourcing option for enduring the challenging JTAC course and follow-on tour. Although the current JTAC feeder population brings a wealth of knowledge to the terminal controller community, the preparation and suitability of DASC Marines matches or even surpasses those that are currently eligible to attend the JTAC course.

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The *Marine Corps Operating Concept* describes that the Marine Corps is at a time to "evolve the MAGTF" and to not let its "construct remain static."¹⁵ Adaptation to the future challenges requires changes to processes that do not work as effectively as it should and tapping into hidden resources already available. The Marine Corps JTAC selection process is fixated on using ground combat arms Marines and its aviators but should expand to consider other means. The DASC would not only produce ideal and sustainable JTAC candidates but also force multiply aviation C2 professionals across the MAGTF. Hopefully, the Marine Corps will have a sustainable solution to the JTAC demand requirement for the future complex environment, only now with a more diverse and capable group of terminal controllers across the MAGTF.

Notes

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3. Deputy Commandant for Aviation, *2018 Marine Aviation Plan*, (Arlington, VA: 2018).
4. Ibid.
5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 1200.17E, Military Occupational Specialty Manual*, (Washington, DC: August 2013).
6. Eric Scherrer and Jack Ramthun, "Proposed Solutions to Marine Corps Aviation's Fixed-Wing Pilot Shortage," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: May 2017).
7. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 1301.25C, Augment of Aviation Officers as Air Officers and FACs*, (Washington, DC: February 2012).
8. Gabriel Fabbri, "MATSG-21: Changes Allow Student Aviators to Soar," *Leatherneck*, (Quantico, VA: May 2015).
9. *2018 Marine Aviation Plan*.
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11. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Reference Publication 3-20F.5, DASC Handbook*, (Washington, DC: May 2016).
12. Gen Robert Neller, *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century*, (Washington, DC: September 2016).
13. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Tactical Publication 3-20D, Offensive Air Support*, (Washington, DC: May 2016).
14. *Marine Corps Order 3311.2*.
15. *Marine Corps Operating Concept*.

