



Air Force A-10C Thunderbolt IIs prepare to launch on training mission from Thessaloniki, Greece, during exercise Swift Response 23, as part of Defender 2023, May 12, 2023 (NATO)

A New Army Air Force

By R.D. Hooker, Jr.

After 75 years, it is time. The U.S. Army needs its own airplanes for sound reasons that deserve careful consideration. This bold assertion should draw a strong reaction from Airmen, but the simple truth is that close air support (CAS) for the Army runs counter to everything an independent, strategic air force stands

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for. In war after war, bitter inter-Service rivalry recurs over the use of airpower. In the end, the Army needs fixed-wing combat aircraft for the same reasons that the Navy and Marine Corps do. Moreover, the Army cannot get reliable CAS from the Air Force, and its unique needs are Service-specific.¹

Make no mistake. Airpower is the crown jewel of the U.S. military; it can move faster, strike harder, and generate greater effects than all other forms of military power. In theory, we operate as a joint force, synergistically applying military capabilities in all domains to achieve

effects greater than the sum of the parts. In practice, we are far from this ideal.

This claim is most apparent in airpower doctrine. Close air support has occupied the lowest priority for the Air Force since its inception in 1947; almost the first act of the newly independent Air Force was to disestablish the Tactical Air Command.² From the beginning, Air Force leadership argued that “centralized planning and decentralized execution” represented the best way to apply airpower.³ While “strategic” missions maximize the employment of Air Force assets under Air Force commanders,

CAS requires close coordination and integration with ground commanders, violating the tenets deemed essential for the optimum employment of airpower.⁴ Conflict over the use of airpower in what the Army calls the “close” fight (that is, in close proximity to ground troops) is a recurring feature in all wars.⁵ The synergistic use of both air and ground forces in this medium can produce striking effects, as the enemy is forced to fight in multiple domains simultaneously.

Army doctrine is heavily dependent on airpower, which enables the flexible and powerful concentration of combat power more than any other capability on the battlefield.⁶ From the perspective of most Airmen, however, CAS is seen as a wasteful dispersion of airpower for tactical and not strategic ends.⁷ As Carl Builder noted in his classic *The Masks of War*, “Losing the freedom to apply airpower independently to decisive ends is to lose that which pilots have striven so hard to achieve for much of the history of the airplane. Thus, close air support will always be an unwanted stepchild of the Air Force.”⁸

In the space between strategic bombing and CAS lies air interdiction, and here the struggle for control also continues, as it has throughout the history of military aviation.⁹ Air Force leaders argue persuasively that only air commanders, operating under broad guidance from the joint force (usually a theater or combatant command) commander, possess the expertise to direct the air interdiction battle. While the need for coordination is agreed on by all, the selection of targets and the execution of air interdiction missions in time and space remain contested. Ground commanders establish control measures (such as the Fire Support Coordination Line, or FSCL), usually well forward to facilitate future maneuver and to shape the battlespace before the enemy makes direct contact with friendly ground-maneuver forces. Army doctrine states that the ground force commander *controls* all fires short of the FSCL, including air-to-ground fires.¹⁰ In contrast, Air Force doctrine omits “control” in favor of “coordinate.”

Joint doctrine attempts to split the difference by stating “attacks on surface targets short of the FSCL must be controlled by, *and/or coordinated with*, the [ground] force commander.”¹¹

Beyond the FSCL, air units must *coordinate* to prevent fratricide or hindrance to ground operations but are not subject to ground control. As air strikes in the form of air interdiction may take place on either side of the FSCL, the tensions are apparent. Ground commanders usually favor a deeper FSCL at the limit of ground systems, including rocket artillery and Army aviation, which can extend dozens or even hundreds of miles deep. Air commanders, conversely, prefer an FSCL set closely to the ground force (that is, at the limit of tubed artillery fires, perhaps 40 kilometers) to maximize freedom of action for air units.¹² Both land and air advocates argue their positions in terms of maximizing battlefield effects. But the drive for autonomy and control is surely a central concern.¹³

These issues may seem esoteric, but in fact they are critical to success in war. At least through the end of the Cold War, the military Services were preoccupied with *domain dominance*: for the Army, successfully defending against the Red Army in Western Europe; for the Navy, gaining and maintaining sea control against the Soviet fleet; and for the Air Force, gaining and maintaining air supremacy against the Warsaw Pact. (Although the AirLand Battle doctrine of the 1980s emphasized—given the clear inferiority of North Atlantic Treaty Organization land forces—the close integration of air and ground units, this was to occur *after* the gaining of air superiority.) With the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of peer competitors at sea and in the air, the land battle—that is, the attack of ground targets—became a focus for all Services. Service rivalries intensified as defense budgets and force structure came down, particularly with respect to use of airpower against ground targets rather than against an enemy air force.¹⁴ Legislation from the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization

Act of 1986 notwithstanding, air-ground integration became more, not less, difficult, even given modern advances in rapid and secure data and voice transmission.

There are several examples. The Air Force Tactical Air Control Party (TACP), required by the Air Force for controlling CAS, is not embedded in ground force units in peacetime and is often understaffed in wartime. (The Air Force’s recent decision to cut its TACP force by 44 percent underscores its lack of commitment to the CAS mission.¹⁵) Army forward observers are trained by the Army to control air strikes but (except for special operating forces) not certified by the Air Force. Air Force fighter units rarely train with Army ground units for CAS or air interdiction in peacetime. Despite hard lessons learned as far back as the western desert in World War II, air and ground component headquarters are not co-located to enable face-to-face communication and personal relationships.

A clear example of reluctance to support the Army in the close fight can be seen in the consolidation of all Air Force platforms under a single joint force air component commander (JFACC) for both Iraq and Afghanistan. This arrangement ensured that neither four-star theater commander, though designated as joint force commanders, enjoyed direct control of fixed-wing combat aircraft—at best, they could request or cajole. Located in the combined air operations center (CAOC) in Qatar, the three-star JFACC—always an Air Force officer—functioned as the air component commander for both theaters and reported to the commander of U.S. Central Command in Tampa.

Here the principle of “unity of effort” was disregarded in the interests of Service autonomy. The JFACC/CAOC organization was optimized for large-scale campaigns where hundreds of sorties might be flown per day. But in a counterinsurgency scenario, where infrequent, low-level tactical engagements are the norm, this approach proved problematic. Large strike packages were not needed, as the operational requirement

was not to attack fixed locations or large concentrations of troops. Rather, immediate CAS was most often needed with speed, responsiveness, and the ability to employ ordnance near friendly troops; these characteristics were more important than the size of the air support. The issue first boiled to the surface following February 2002's Operation *Anaconda*—the first large-scale battle in the Afghanistan war since 2001—when Army commanders criticized what they perceived as poor CAS.¹⁶

In highly publicized engagements in Afghanistan, such as the Battle of Wanat in 2008, the Battle of Kamdesh (Combat Outpost Keating) in 2009, and the Battle of Ganjgal in 2009, friendly ground forces came close to annihilation when attacked by much larger insurgent forces. Though Air Force fighters and bombers eventually responded, they were late on the scene and unable to drop ordnance or employ their gun systems close to friendly positions.¹⁷ The very capable AC-130 gunship, ideal for providing close aerial fires where the air defense threat is low, was reserved exclusively for the use of special operations forces and flown only at night. The gunship played no role whatever in supporting conventional forces. While CAS always remained a tool, its centralization at high levels impeded its flexibility and usefulness. One solution—to provide each theater commander with an organic JFACC, along with streamlined and decentralized authorities—was viewed as inhibiting “the ability to swing assets” between Operation *Iraqi Freedom* and Operation *Enduring Freedom* and the ability to “leverage the full capabilities of the CAOC.”¹⁸

The strongest argument for Army fixed-wing combat aircraft is the relentless effort by Air Force leaders to retire the A-10, the only platform specifically designed for the CAS mission, in favor of other “multi-mission platforms.”¹⁹ This effort began in 1986, shortly after the A-10 was fielded. Today, the F-35 is touted as the optimum replacement for the A-10. Far more expensive to procure and operate, unarmored, and with a small weapons load and poor mission

availability rates, the F-35 has limited operational range and loiter time and is clearly unsuited for the CAS mission.²⁰ Accordingly, Air Force leaders are unlikely to risk it for close air support.²¹

Nevertheless, one Lockheed senior executive predicted the F-35 will be “eight times more effective than legacy fighters in prosecuting missions against fixed and mobile targets.”²² With regard to other Air Force fighters—all of which were designed principally for the air-to-air role—the claims about their efficacy in the ground attack or CAS role are exaggerated to the point of approaching the fanciful. The essence of CAS is the ability to drop ordnance “danger close”—that is, near ground troops in extremis. Except for the A-10, no Air Force fighter can do that. These arguments belie the often-repeated claim that “CAS is a mission, not a platform.”²³

Air Force officials also argue that the A-10 is a “40-year-old Cold War relic” that cannot survive on the modern battlefield. That argument also fails to stand up to scrutiny. In recent years, strong congressional support has seen the A-10 receive multiple upgrades in avionics and flight controls, refurbished wings, stand-off weapons, cockpit improvements, and other enhancements.²⁴ Today—as in the 1980s—the operational concept for employment of the A-10 calls for achieving air supremacy and suppression of enemy air defenses. This translates into effective joint operations, combining Army field artillery and air defense as well as Air Force (and potentially Marine Corps and Navy) airpower to reduce or eliminate the enemy's air-to-air threat and degrade the opponent's integrated air defense system.

Well-armored, able to operate from austere forward airfields, and able to fly at low levels using terrain masking, the A-10 can be both survivable and effective. More than twice as fast as the Army's AH 64-D/E attack helicopters and far better protected, the A-10 is significantly more capable than Army attack aviation, a critical capability the Army relies on and deems survivable. With its high mission availability rate, armor protection, prodigious weapons



load, strong electronic countermeasures, and night and all-weather capability, the A-10 remains today by far the best CAS platform in the world.²⁵

How would the A-10 be integrated into Army aviation? With 281 A-10s in service, the current inventory could support an 18-ship squadron in the combat aviation brigade of each Army division, with 101 left over for training and spares. Alternatively, a wing of three squadrons could support each Army corps. Army forward observers would assume the mission of controlling CAS. Army A-10 pilots could serve in Army maneuver battalions and brigades as forward air controllers, as in the Marine Corps. Transferring the A-10 from the Air Force to the Army would also give the Army primacy for CAS, freeing the Air Force to focus on the air supremacy,

Army National Guard officer candidates enrolled in Washington Army National Guard's 205th Regimental Training Institute Officer Candidate School Phase III execute platoon raid and air extraction at Leschi Town Collective Training Facility on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, July 24, 2022 (U.S. Army National Guard/Adeline Witherspoon)



air interdiction, and strategic bombing missions it prefers.

Transitioning the A-10 from the Air Force to the Army is of course more complicated than merely transferring the platform. Significant DOTMLPF²⁶ issues are involved, as when the Army embarked on the massive fielding of the helicopter in the 1960s. However, these measures are straightforward and well-understood and do not constitute an argument against the move. The sole justification for such a move must be the overall effectiveness of the joint force. The long history of inter-Service friction and congressional intervention over the CAS mission argues for remedial action. Service rivalries should not be determinative here.

Even so, although the Air Force is pushing hard to retire the A-10 from

service, it will almost certainly resist its transfer to the Army. Ever since the 1948 Key West agreement on Service roles and missions, Air Force leaders have strenuously opposed fixed-wing combat aircraft for the Army. Yet the A-10 represents an airplane the Air Force does not want, for a mission it does not like.²⁷ Now—before the next big war—is the time to reconsider roles and missions and rationalize the employment of airpower across the joint force. Service rivalry will be reduced as the Army will no longer have to fight for CAS during intense ground combat. Like the Marine Corps and Navy, it will possess the means and capabilities to apply aviation in support of its mission while the Air Force focuses on those tasks that only it can execute. The time is right to set conditions to prevail in Great Power competition. Let's move now. JFQ

Notes

¹ For a detailed discussion, see R.D. Hooker, Jr., "Airpower in American Wars," *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016), 121–134.

² In 1950, the Tactical Air Command was reestablished due to the Korean War, but was again deactivated in 1992.

³ "Between 1950 and 1990, the Air Force produced 15,600 fighter aircraft. Only 707 were designed for close air support. This is the true measure of priority." James G. Burton, *The Pentagon Wars: Reformers Challenge the Old Guard* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 22.

⁴ For example, the tenets that "airpower is an inherently strategic force," that it is "primarily an offensive weapon," and that "airpower's unique characteristics require centralized control by airmen." Phillip S. Meilinger, "10 Propositions: Emerging Airpower," *Airpower Journal*, Spring 1996, 2, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA529781.pdf>.

⁵ “The Air Force’s obvious distaste for CAS has been well documented since its independence and has profoundly affected how the service has executed CAS. . . . The Army has always had to make do with less close air support than it believes necessary because the Air Force has usually decided when, where, and how it will support the Army. While the Air Force finally developed arguably the finest CAS platform ever designed, it did so only because it was forced to by congressional pressure and has . . . attempted to push the aircraft out of its inventory or to the reserves. It is obvious why the Army would fear a major component of its fire support could disappear at any time and distrust exists between the services concerning the subject.” Rhett B. Lawing, “American Armed Forces’ Service Culture Impact on Close Air Support,” *Chronicles Online Journal*, December 18, 2006, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASP/journals/Chronicles/lawing.pdf>.

⁶ “The A-10 was somewhat forced on a reluctant Air Force by the needs of the Army. Prior history and experiences in World War II by both the Allied and Axis powers had helped shape the doctrine of the Air Force to emphasize strategic bombing and air superiority over CAS.” David R. Jacques and Dennis D. Strouble, *A-10 Thunderbolt II (Warthog)—Systems Engineering Case Study* (Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH: Air Force Institute of Technology, 2010), 13, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA530838.pdf>.

⁷ “CAS . . . is a tactical mission that has languished within a strategically oriented service.” Lawing, “American Armed Forces’ Service Culture Impact on Close Air Support,” 5.

⁸ Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 37.

⁹ *Air interdiction* is defined as “air operations conducted to divert, disrupt, delay or destroy the enemy’s military potential before it can be brought to bear effectively against friendly forces or to otherwise achieve objectives that are conducted at such distance from friendly forces that detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of friendly forces is not required.” See Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-03, *Counterland Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Air Force, October 21, 2020), 6, https://www.dctrine.af.mil/portals/61/documents/afdp_3-03/3-03-afdp-counterland.pdf.

¹⁰ See Field Manual (FM) 3-09, *Fire Support and Field Artillery Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, April 2020), 4-3, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN21932-FM_3-09-000-WEB-1.pdf.

¹¹ Joint Publication 3-09, *Joint Fire Support* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, April 10,

2019), A-5 (emphasis added), https://www.jcs.mil/portals/36/documents/doctrine/pubs/jp3_09.pdf. Army doctrine is unambiguous: “The appropriate land or amphibious force commander controls all air-to-ground and surface-to-surface attack operations short of the FSCL.” FM 3-09, B-2.

¹² Air Force doctrine is critical of Fire Support Coordination Line (FSCL) placement beyond the range of field artillery: Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (the invasion of Iraq in 2003) “employed all the existing [fire support coordination measures]. . . . The deep placement of the FSCL reduced the efficiency of airpower. . . . [T]he area between the maximum range of land fires and the established FSCL created a sanctuary for enemy forces. . . . History has shown that placing the FSCL too deep is detrimental to overall joint force effectiveness.” AFDP 3-03, 77–78. Interestingly, Air Force doctrine states that the “FSCL is normally placed near the maximum range of tube artillery.” AFDP 3-03, 70. This placement is the prerogative of ground—not air—commanders, and Army doctrine states no such thing. See Army FM 3-09, B-2–B-3.

¹³ Both the Army and Air Force provide “connective tissue” in the form of battlefield control detachments (Army) posted in the air operations center and air support operations centers (Air Force) embedded in the command posts of major Army ground formations. These ameliorate but do not solve the fundamental issues raised herein.

¹⁴ An example of this phenomenon is the use of the term *counterland*, added to the Air Force lexicon only after the fall of the Soviet Union and an obvious play on the traditional “counterair.” See AFDP 3-0, *Operations and Planning* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Air Force, November 4, 2016), https://www.dctrine.af.mil/portals/61/documents/afdp_3-0/3-0-afdp-operations-planning.pdf.

¹⁵ Rachel S. Cohen, “Air Force Looks to Cut Nearly 50% of Tactical Air Control Party Jobs,” *Air Force Times*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2023/04/14/air-force-looks-to-cut-nearly-50-of-tactical-air-control-party-jobs/>.

¹⁶ Rebecca Grant, “The Echoes of Anaconda,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, April 1, 2005, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0405anaconda>.

¹⁷ A notable exception occurred on August 22, 2007, during a fierce attack on the 173rd Airborne Brigade’s “Ranch House” outpost in Kunar Province. In this engagement, Air Force A-10s responded quickly and were able to engage targets in the vicinity of the American outpost in “danger close” proximity to friendly troops.

¹⁸ Mike Hostage, “A Seat at the Table: Beyond the Air Component Coordination Element,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2010), 19, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA533557.pdf>.

¹⁹ Daniel Nasaw, “Why Is America Still Flying the A-10 Warthog, a Cold War Relic?” *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2023.

²⁰ In “stealth mode,” without externally mounted weapons, the F-35A carries only two air-to-air missiles and two joint direct attack munitions. The A-10, in contrast, carries up to 16,000 pounds of weapons as well as 1,174 rounds of 30mm ammunition versus the F-35’s 182 rounds of 25mm.

²¹ Benjamin Fernandes, “The Future of Close Air Support Is Not What the Air Force Thinks,” *War on the Rocks*, June 18, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/06/the-future-of-close-air-support-is-not-what-the-air-force-thinks/>.

²² George Standridge, then vice president for business development at Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Company, in “Lockheed Martin F22 and F35 5th Gen Revolution in Military Aviation,” *Space Daily*, February 22, 2006, https://www.spacedaily.com/reports/Lockheed_Martin_F22_and_F35_5th_Gen_Revolution_In_Military_Aviation.html.

²³ See John T. Correll, “The Ups and Downs of Close Air Support,” *Air and Space Forces Magazine*, December 1, 2019, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/the-ups-and-downs-of-close-air-support/>.

²⁴ Jamie Hunter, “The A-10 Warthog Is Preparing for Its Biggest Upgrade in Over a Decade,” *The Warzone*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.twz.com/37233/the-a-10-warthog-is-preparing-for-its-biggest-upgrade-in-over-a-decade#>.

²⁵ See Brian Boeding, “A-10: Hey Air Force, There’s More to Survival Than Hiding,” *Breaking Defense*, June 26, 2020, <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/06/a-10-hey-air-force-theres-more-to-survival-than-hiding/>.

²⁶ *DOTMLPF* is the standard military acronym for doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities.

²⁷ A striking example is remarks made in January 2015 by Major General James Post, vice commander of Air Combat Command, to a group of A-10 pilots, telling them not to give information to Congress about the Air Force’s attempt to retire the A-10: “If anyone accuses me of saying this, I will deny it. . . . Anyone who is passing information to Congress about A-10 capabilities is committing treason.” See Brian Everstine, “2 Star’s ‘Treason’ Comments Spark Call for an Investigation,” *Air Force Times*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2015/01/22/2-star-s-treason-comments-spark-call-for-an-investigation/>; Jake Miller, “Air Force General Relieved of Command After ‘Treason’ Comment,” *CBS News*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/air-force-general-relieved-of-command-after-treason-comment/>.