

# JFO Sustainment

## A Critical Requirement

*In June 2006, Sergeant First Class Jared C. Monti, 3d Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, found himself in a firefight and outnumbered nearly four to one. His patrol was pinned down and in serious danger of being overrun. Monti, a certified joint fires observer (JFO), immediately returned fire and sought cover from the hail of incoming enemy rounds. He calmly assessed the situation, informed headquarters and initiated calls for indirect fire and close air support (CAS). He provided target data to a joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) located at his battalion's tactical operations center. The results of the indirect fires and CAS neutralized the enemy force.*



*By Lieutenant Colonel G. Todd Lang*

**T**his situation was precisely the reason that in 2004 United States Army, United States Air Force, and United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) leadership identified the need to provide additional training to forward observers in the execution of joint fires, particularly CAS. In fact, members of the joint CAS community were amazed at how fast the JFO Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed. From concept to three general officer signatures in only a few months is “lightning fast” for the joint community. The JFO concept is proving so successful that the United States Marine Corps, United States Navy, and a number of other nations’ militaries are moving toward signing a revision to the JFO MOA under the auspices of the United States Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM).

The JFO adds joint capability to deliver all types of surface-to-surface fires efficiently, support air-delivered fires that are not CAS (such as AC-130, close combat attack, and air interdiction), and facilitate timely and accurate targeting for a qualified JTAC in situations that are CAS as defined in Joint Publication (JP) 3-09.3, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support (CAS)*. As a perishable competence, these tactical-execution skill sets require considerable initial training and continuation training to keep the JFO force ready and relevant.

### Initial Training

**T**he Fires Center of Excellence (CoE) at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, is currently the lead agency in the U.S. military for conducting JFO training. Between August 2005 and

October 2009, the JFO Course at Fort Sill produced 1,603 certified JFOs and can sustain more than 600 graduates per year at current production levels. As of October, there are more than 2,000 JFO graduates in the Army, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force. In the United States Army, the JFO program is suited especially to the forward observer—military occupational specialty (MOS) 13F fire support specialist—and course graduates receive an additional skill identifier (ASI) of L7.

The collaborative development of the JFO program of instruction meticulously follows JFO MOA guidelines. Students are trained carefully and comply via a “go/no-go” system with 17 items on the joint mission task list (JMTL). Because JFOs will coordinate fires in close proximity to friendly troops—and they have a skill set recognized worldwide by JTACs, pilots, and maneuver unit commanders—there is no exception to meeting the JMTL. Maneuver unit commanders, JTACs, and pilots should feel confident that, upon certification, JFOs can access joint fires in a timely, efficient, and safe manner—if they maintain their qualification.

As of 1 October 2009, the JFO ASI is a modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) requirement for Army units—it no longer is optional. Organizationally, each maneuver platoon should have one qualified JFO (with the exception of armor platoons, which should have one per maneuver company).

The results of a Fires CoE Joint and Combined Integration Directorate breakout of this requirement—by maneuver unit

in the Regular Army and Army National Guard—show that the Army alone needs 2,261 qualified JFOs filling JFO MTOE billets. This number does not include officers, fires NCO leadership, or any military transition team (MiTT) aspiration of two JFOs per team.

Additionally, the L7 ASI does not guarantee that a Soldier is available to fill a JFO billet in the force. The JFO is required to be qualified—not just certified—to perform JFO tasks. Qualification requirements dictate that a JFO successfully complete initial certification training, maintain semiannual training currency, and pass a recurring JFO evaluation every 18 months. These requirements are detailed in the JFO MOA and are similar to fire support team certifications; however, the JFO MOA and MTOE combination make JFO qualification a requirement. It is important to note that all JFO production plans to meet force requirements assume that JFOs are being sustained.

### Why Train JFOs?

**I**n the joint and coalition communities, common ground leads to common goals and increased motivation to work together. In today's high operations tempo world, motivation is critical. Good ideas are not enough—we must also be motivated to implement them. Limitation of resources is a common ground that all Services and countries can understand. Specifically, in this community there is a shortage of manning, qualified instructors, sorties, and equipment. These things are very expensive and are required for success.

**JTACs.** If a unit has the resources, a JTAC should be placed with every unit that may need air support. The Air Force must pursue its increased JTAC production plan aggressively because JTACs are the focal point of CAS operations with or without JFOs. With the Army transformation in full swing, keeping up with the demand for JTACs is no easy task.

JTACs start out by earning their Air Force Specialty Code 1C4 enlisted terminal air controller (or MOS) at Hurlburt Field, Florida. Success here is not guaranteed—the entry requirements are stringent, and the “washout” rate is high. After seasoning as a 1C4, their air support operations squadron (ASOS) may nominate them for the JTAC qualification course. This course is four weeks long and is only Phase 1 of qualification (initial qualification training). Upon graduation, JTAC candidates must receive Phase 2 from their home units before becoming fully mission-ready (mission qualification training). This training is both expensive and time consuming.

To abide by the JTAC MOA, a JTAC must comply with multifaceted qualification requirements. At a minimum, JTACs must control live aircraft a minimum of six times every 6 months (the JTAC MOA allows for two of these to be performed in Joint Forces Command accredited simulators). More specifically, JTAC continuation training involves training such

as day and night controls of live munitions, target marking, and terminal guidance operations. At any time, if any of these requirements are not met, the JTAC immediately becomes non-qualified.

Manning in the Air Force is especially tight at this point due to the recent elimination of 40,000 Air Force positions. In this environment, doubling the number of JTAC positions demonstrates the Air Force's commitment to this battlefield Airman program.

The number of JTACs planned by fiscal year 2012 allows for habitual alignment down to the maneuver battalion level and a pool of JTACs aligned with certain maneuver companies. Habitually aligning down to the maneuver platoon level would require the Air Force to triple its planned number of JTACs. Even if the Air Force could produce this many JTACs (which it cannot), it could never sustain this many of them according to the worldwide standards set by the JTAC MOA. There simply are not enough sorties. To exacerbate this problem, every F-35 aircraft produced will replace two A-10 aircraft or F-16 aircraft, reducing training opportunities even more.

In the current dispersed environment, organic fire support may not be available, and there are a large number of small-unit operations. All of these circumstances leave the Services two options—either do not worry about the maneuver platoon's access to joint fires, or come up with a suitable alternative.

If a commander anticipates that a planned maneuver will require CAS, it is incumbent on the commander to plan to deploy a JTAC with that company (or even to the platoon, assuming JTAC availability). Knowingly planning a maneuver that will require CAS without a JTAC, thereby forcing an emergency fire support situation, would be a careless violation of doctrine and simply not prudent. This leads to a very suitable alternate—the JFO.

**JFOs.** The skill set a JFO brings to a platoon commander is impressive. The skill that gets the most attention is working with a JTAC to get CAS. This alone is quite an accomplishment, considering JFOs are trained for day or night missions using very different tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) and using a large variety of munitions, fuses, aircraft and guidance methods safely and in close proximity to friendly troops. (These missions may include using coordinate-dependent weapons that require precise coordinates or laser-guided bombs that require detailed knowledge of communications, laser codes, and TTP to guide these weapons.)

But a JFO brings more than this; he is also proficient at surface-to-surface call for fires, naval call for fires, AC-130 call for fires, and close combat attack five-line call for fires—if *he maintains his qualification*. With this skill set, he is truly a joint fires observer. The skill set is very flexible and easily can be adapted to different missions—it is good for the War on Terrorism, and it is good for any war that may arise in the future.

I often hear the comment that “a forward observer can do these things, so a JFO does not really add value.” This is dead wrong and just talk—he must be trained to execute the skill properly. In the first 1,000 JFOs trained, almost none started the training with the required skills, and 138 could not execute safely even with the intense training they received from highly trained instructors.

A Joint Fires Observer is a trained Servicemember who can request, adjust, and control surface-to-surface fires, provide targeting information in support of Type 2 and Type 3 close air support terminal attack controls, and perform autonomous terminal guidance operations. *Joint Fires Observer Memorandum of Agreement*, 14 November 2005.

FY09 student nonprogression attrition (failures) in the Fort Sill JFO course was approximately 20 percent. We simply cannot afford to just *say* the Soldier can do this—we must provide the training that the Soldier deserves.

Another comment I hear is, “If JFOs cannot do Type 1 CAS, then they are useless to me.” Again, this is dead wrong. Today’s technology significantly reduces the situations requiring a person on the ground to see the aircraft, see the target, and assess nose geometry before issuing clearance. In fact, the number of Type 1 controls being accomplished in theater is almost zero.

### Sustainment: The Road Ahead

**I**t now is critical to the long-term success of this program for units to comply with the sustainment requirements of the JFO MOA. It is *unacceptable* to the worldwide joint fires community to not comply with the JFO MOA. Because this community routinely is held to the high standards of the JTAC MOA, all eyes are watching the United States Army right now for worldwide leadership of the JFO program. A properly executed sustainment plan will cement the JFO program, earn the mutual respect of a very particular joint fires community and, most important, keep JFOs proficient at their skills.

If resources do not allow for a JTAC, JFOs should be placed with units that may need air support—for many reasons. Using existing 13Fs (and junior fires officers), a program objective memorandum (POM) increase of manpower is not required. This MOS is suited for this job due to his location on the battlefield and existing training on artillery ordnance, fusing, weapons effects, and targeting according to the commander’s intent.

A JFO requires only an incremental increase in equipment (still a substantial commitment from the unit); he is already battlefield-equipped. Also, JFOs do not require a forcewide increase of live sorties, the single most difficult asset required for JTAC sustainment worldwide. Finally, while working with a JTAC, the JFO logs a CAS “event,” and the JTAC logs a “control.” While this live JTAC interaction certainly is recommended, the JFO can log his sustainment events on a simulator.

If done properly, simulator training can be an outstanding training event; if not done properly, the event adds no value and is a waste of time. For meaningful simulator training, you must have a suitable and maintained simulator, a training plan, and a subject matter expert (SME) to ensure that proper training is accomplished. Consistent self-paced or buddy training with no SME involvement does not prevent negative training or the atrophy of skills learned.

The cost of the JFO program is drastically less than a JTAC, and this is what makes the program viable. This, combined with



Photo by MSG Lee A. Power

**Soldiers from the 3d IBCT, 10th Mountain Division, call in a CAS 9-line brief via AN/PRC-117F Radio System while JFO instructors evaluate.**

the JFO’s battlefield placement and relevant skills experience, solidifies the JFO concept. The added fact that the concept uses existing doctrine and existing chains of command (Theater Air Control System/Army Air Ground System) makes the concept rock solid.

### Sustaining JFOs

**J**FJO managers should work with their aligned ASOS for JFO sustainment. CAS events are a large part of JFO sustainment, and a strong relationship with the ASOS will “bear fruit” with JFO sustainment as well as combat training center (CTC) spinups and combat. The most successful JFO-JTAC operations typically come from units with this strong relationship.

JFO managers can reference <<https://www.us.army.mil/suite/page/387833>> (requires Army Knowledge Online [AKO] log-on) for specific information on JFO sustainment, JFO course prerequisites, and a course description. The core JFO sustainment document is the JFO MOA (which is scheduled for a major new release in November 2009), but the Army will soon publish Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (ATTP) 3-09.36, *Joint Fires Observer* (unclassified). This manual offers more details on how to sustain JFOs and incorporates changes from the new JFO MOA and the new JP 3.09-3. This manual is scheduled for release in November 2009 (with the new JFO MOA).

All JFOs graduate from Fort Sill with 6 months of currency. If they exceed 6 months without accomplishing all 13 semiannual events (see figure on page 44), then they become *unqualified*, but they are still *certified* JFOs. It is important to note that if a JFO deploys qualified, he remains qualified until redeployment. An unqualified JFO can accomplish the 13 semiannual events with a commander-designated qualified trainer, and he’s “back in business” (unless it has been more than 24 months). JFOs who have been unqualified for more than

## Joint Fires Observer Semiannual Requirements

- 6 Live or Simulated Surface-to-Surface Call-for-Fire Events
- 6 Fixed- or Rotary-Wing Events
  - 2 Live or Simulated Laser Terminal Guidance Operations (TGO) Events
  - 1 Live Type 2/3 Control with JTAC
  - 1 Live or Simulated Night Target-Marking Event
  - 1 Simulated as Nonqualified JTAC
  - 1 Live or Simulated Abort
- 1 Live or Simulated AC-130 Call-for-Fire Event

24 months must accomplish the 13 semiannual events and complete a comprehensive evaluation.

A very useful tool for JFO managers is the recently released JFO online familiarization course, designed to prepare Soldiers for the formal course. The two-week formal course is very busy and a bit like drinking from a firehose. The 23.5 hours of online training introduce students to the materials, which should increase their success rate at the JFO course. This online course also is an excellent way for JFOs to review portions of the course to help them with their sustainment training, especially when preparing for their evaluation every 18 months. The online course can be accessed at Joint Knowledge Online (JKO)—via Defense Knowledge Online or AKO—by clicking on “Take Courses” under JKO Tools and enrolling in the Joint Fires Observer Familiarization (JFOF) (requires log-on).

Considering that Armywide there are nearly 39,000 JFO events to be accomplished every 6 months, the most significant sustainment tool being developed is the online database for electronic tracking of currencies (within the existing Digital Training Management System (DTMS)). The contract for this effort is established and the database should be fully functional in April 2010. Other efforts to help JFO sustainment at Fort Sill include developing trainer support packages and working with the United States Army Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation (PEO-STRI) in an effort to upgrade call-for-fire trainer scenarios and to connect them with the Distributed Training Operations Center (DTC). The DTC then will schedule opportunities for units to work directly with JTACs in the virtual environment. This is an intriguing opportunity that will be complementary to working with units’ aligned ASOS to participate in CAS opportunities.

### Summary

The JFO is an important piece of the puzzle that has been missing. With the Air Force working to increase the number of JTACs and the Army working to increase

the number of JFOs, we have an achievable harmony in sight. There are still some in the Army who will be happy only if the Army has JTACs, and there are some in the Air Force who only want to work with JTACs. These people must realize that the JFO–JTAC team is the only viable course of action when you consider the resources required. They also must understand—now that the JCAS leadership has committed to the JFO–JTAC concept—that recommended improvements in the joint fires arena will be much more likely to succeed if they are within the framework of the JFO–JTAC doctrine.

The success of the program is evident when Soldiers like Sergeant First Class Monti can access joint fires to neutralize an engaged enemy force. But there are other long-term benefits, including growing a much more “joint-minded” force. JFO training greatly increases a Soldier’s joint knowledge, and the follow-on sustainment activities greatly increase joint interaction. This is a perfect building block for future joint leaders.

Today’s maneuver unit commander has nearly the perfect excuse to not meet JFO MOA requirements. An almost unbelievable period of back-to-back deployments puts an incredible responsibility on these commanders. Their requirements are awing, especially since their actions and training have life-or-death consequences in today’s War on Terrorism. But it is for precisely this reason that JFO sustainment training should be high on their priority lists.



*Lieutenant Colonel Lang, Oklahoma Air National Guard, is the commander of Detachment 1, 138th Operations Group at the Joint Fires Center of Excellence, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He has worked at the Fort Sill Joint Fires Observer Course since August 2005. Previously, he was a combat-mission-ready F-16 pilot with assignments at Homestead Air Force Base (AFB), Florida; Kunsan Air Base (AB), Republic of Korea; Luke AFB, Arizona; and Tulsa Air National Guard Base, Oklahoma, with combat sorties during Operations Northern and Southern Watch. He also served as an OV-10 forward air controller (airborne) at Osan AB, Republic of Korea, and Wheeler AFB, Hawaii. During this time, he also served as a joint terminal attack controller (previously known as ground forward attack controller) and battalion air liaison officer at Camp Red Cloud, Republic of Korea; Camp Casey, Republic of Korea; and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.*

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**Note 2.** Sergeant First Class Jared C. Monti was killed in Afghanistan on 21 June 2006 as he attempted to help two fellow Soldiers who had been wounded when they were attacked by a large enemy force. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor on 19 September 2009.

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