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When the stakes are high, air liaison officers hold the cards, and . . .

They Deal the Aces

by SSgt. Craig Pugh
AIRMAN Staff Writer

Readying for a jump. A1C Charles Daniell (below) checks Capt. Michael McKett's equipment. Capt. David B. Beatty (right) traded fighters for an ALO tour.

Capt. Michael L. McKett jumped from the back of a C-130 into the black sky during a night paradrop. A few hours later he dodged massive Army tanks as he directed Air Force fighters to targets on the reservation at Eglin AFB, Fla.

Capt. David B. Beatty parachuted into heavily wooded Virginia hills with a battalion of 82nd Airborne paratroopers. During maneuvers he and his company of airborne soldiers fought off an attack during a mock battle.

At Fort Hood, Texas, Maj. Thomas E. Rodgers rode shotgun in an OH-58 *Scout* helicopter dashing over and around the treetops as he pinpointed ground targets for swarming *Cobra* gunships and tank-busting A-10s.

Before the three Air Force officers "joined" the Army, they flew jet fighters. And they will fly again, but for now each is an air liaison officer (ALO) assigned directly to an Army unit. The ALO's primary function is to help the Army field commander obtain tactical air support when it's needed. The job of delivering the knockout punch from the air is a responsibility of tactical air units. Their support of ground forces during wartime is a high priority mission.

The air liaison officer slots are filled by pilots and weapons systems officers experienced in fighters. They have dropped bombs, fired missiles, and attacked ground targets with 20mm and 30mm cannons. They come from Tactical Air Command, U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Alaskan Air Command, and Pacific Air Forces units. During the two years they serve as ALOs, they learn a great deal more about the close air support missions they will return to when it's time to climb back into the cockpit.

As ALOs, the aircrewmen are close enough to the action to see and hear the impact of munitions and observe the results of air strikes. Thus, the fighter crews experience firsthand both sides of the tactical air support business. And this valuable expertise makes them all the more effective as future tactical air leaders.

"Being an ALO is an eye-opening assignment for a fighter pilot," said Capt. McKett, air liaison officer assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division's 3rd Brigade at Fort Bragg, N.C. "The men of the 82nd are among the best light infantry in the world. It's a challenge to work with them and keep up with them."

The former F-111 pilot acquired that respect for the Army unit quickly.

The 3rd Brigade deployed to Fort Stewart, Ga., then spent eight days planning a 1,000-man paradrop that included soldiers and marines. Capt. McKett carefully worked out the tactical air support details with battalion and brigade commanders and staff members and, when it was time to put plans in action, he strapped himself into a parachute and flew to the drop zone along with the troops.

Maj. Terry Buettner (right) lends a hand on Lt. Col. Clayton J. Johanson's parachute harness.

Before their arrival at the Eglin AFB area, however, 18 "heavy droppers"—C-141s and C-130s—roared in low to paradrop tanks and jeeps on the huge Florida military reservation. When Capt. McKett and the airborne jump force hit the silk at 4:30 in the morning, their equipment was on the ground waiting for them. In the field exercises that followed, the ALO directed TAC A-10s that provided the aerial firepower in support of his brigade. As usual, he lived in the field with members of the brigade.

Another field exercise he worked as an ALO included the deployment of five battalions—about 3,500 soldiers—and tactical air support units assigned to the maneuvers.

"I was in charge of all the air support," Capt. McKett said. "When the exercise was over I found my self-confidence had really gone up. This job will do that. The Army looks to you for air cover and they expect to have the answers. When they need that airpower they want it right now! When you're the guy who's bringing it to them, and you see how it dovetails with their battle tactics, you learn more about close air support than you thought possible."

From battalion up through brigade, division, and corps levels, each command has air liaison officers who help plan, coordinate, and direct close air support.

When battalions in the front lines encounter enemy resistance that can only be overcome by air support, the commander turns to his ALO for assistance. The ALO radios the request up to the air support center at corps level. As the request is transmitted, it is monitored by brigade and division levels. If not disapproved by brigade or division, the corps ALO, usually an Air Force colonel, coordinates the request with the corps commander, a three-star general officer, who decides whether to approve or withhold air support. The ALO's role, at each level of command, is to advise Army commanders how the Air Force can assist their troops and what kind of firepower can do the job best.

If the corps commander approves the battalion's request, many Air Force specialists already in place with the Army units go quickly into action. Air controllers guide the tactical fighters in, passing them off at the last moment to a forward air controller (FAC) in a spotter aircraft or on the ground who is in contact with the Army commander directly or through the ALO working with the battalion.

During a war, forward air controllers from tactical air support squadrons would serve as ALOs at battalion level. Trained, experienced ALOs would be assigned to brigade and corps command staffs—"far enough away from the battle to avoid exposure

to snipers, but close enough to feel the blast of incoming rounds," as one ALO described it.

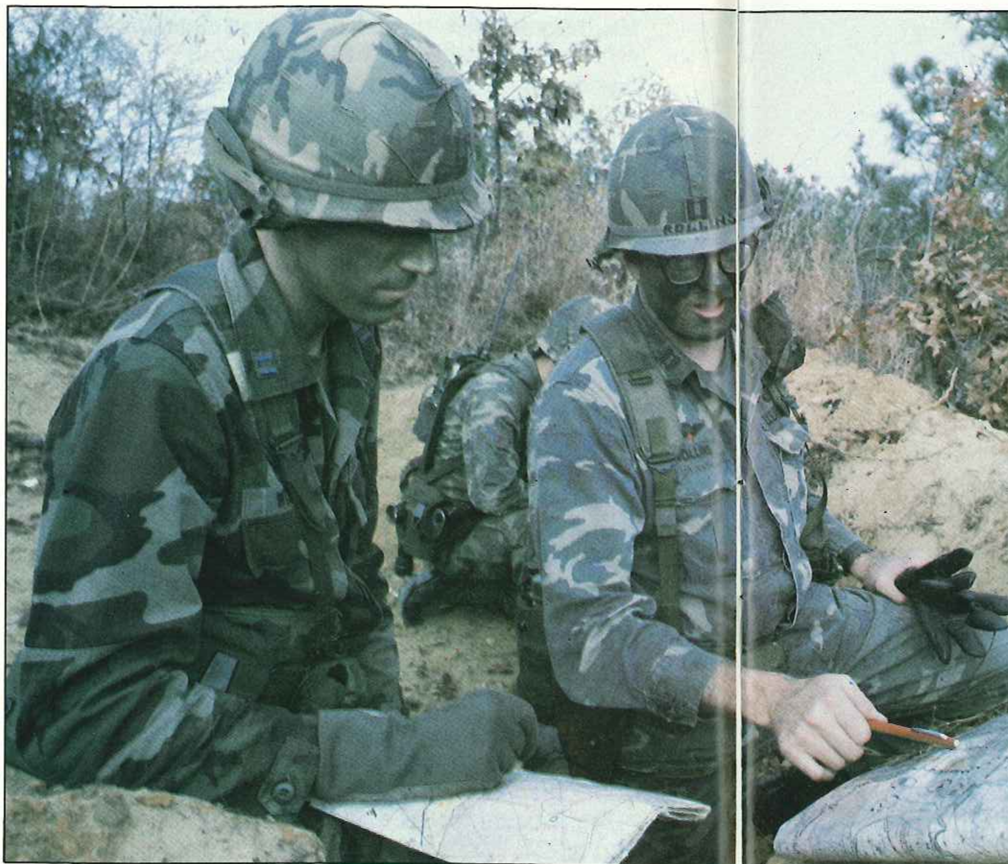
Without the air liaison officers working in the front lines, the air support request net could come to a grinding halt. Tactical aircrew members who spend two years as ALOs receive priority for weapon system of choice, commensurate with grade and training availability.

But even though ALOs gain career-broadening and personal satisfaction from their Army tours, TAC officials are sometimes hard pressed to fill ALO vacancies.

"Some pilots are reluctant to give up flying for two years," said Col. Gregg Parker, a pilot who also wears the Air Force parachutist badge and is director of operations for the 507th Tactical Air Control Wing at Shaw AFB, S.C.

The 507th is the parent wing for the tactical air control parties in the eastern United States, while the 602nd TAIRCW, at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., supervises the tactical air control parties in the western United States. Both wings furnish the skilled airmen and equipment required to operate the air request net.

"Pilots who are reluctant to work as ALOs apparently think their skills will deteriorate, but we've found this to be untrue," Col. Parker continued. "On the bonus side, those who finish ALO tours are ahead of their peers in the close air support business. And when they return to flying units they tend to excel because they've seen the whole picture and better understand their roles and the mission."



Capt. Richard Wilson (left) pinpoints "enemy" positions with Army Capt. James Rollins and then (above) relays the coordinates to A-10s.

photos by TSgt. Ken Hammond, AAVS Charleston AFB, S.C.

Col. Parker's reasoning seems to apply to Capt. Beatty, who volunteered for an ALO job. "I was an F-4 backseater looking for staff experience," he said, "but I wanted a job with pizazz. The ALO assignment filled both needs. I'm going back to the cockpit after this stint, but the experience as a brigade ALO has been tremendous."

Capt. Beatty is one of those who scorns the eight-to-five routine in air-conditioned offices "flying LGD-6s—large gray desks with six drawers." He chose to serve his tour as an ALO with combat paratroopers. This meant jump training would be required.

"My brigade commander [an Army colonel] believes in presence on the battlefield," he said. "During field exercises I stay close to him as he races around from here to there controlling the battle. It's a real eye-opening lesson in leadership. This is the only job I know of where a junior flying officer can get such valuable career experience. The things I'm learning during this ALO tour are money in the bank toward my goal of one day being a flying squadron commander."

Maj. William G. Norman said some people "think you have to be a little crazy to give up the 'good life' and become an ALO. But here I am, an F-111 pilot who volunteered to jump out of airplanes at

Riders of the Wind

Just about everyone assigned to the Air Force detachment at Fort Bragg who jumps (about 50 airmen) strapped, buckled, tugged, and cinched his equipment into place.

Each man was carrying an extra hundred pounds, what with the main and reserve parachutes, ammo clips, machine gun, radios, and chewing gum. If he weighed 170 before suiting up for the jump, he came out at around 270.

"That's 270 pounds of rompin' stompin' steel and sex appeal," said Capt. Douglas Welch, an air liaison officer (ALO).

"Affected only by gravity," added Lt. Col. Clayton J. Johanson, another ALO. Jumpers have a special brand of humor.

The officers and enlisted members of Det. 1, 507th Tactical Air Control Wing, Fort Bragg, are a minority in the Air Force; they volunteered to be full-time ALOs and tactical air control specialists. They work for the 82nd Airborne Division and are responsible for seeing to it that the unit's tactical air requirements are met.

"We stand on the ramp [of the C-130] with the 82nd and put our knees in the breeze right along

with them," Capt. Welch said. "During *Reforger, Bright Star, Gallant Eagle*—anytime they need tactical air support, we're there to bring it in."

As that information is being assimilated, he asks: "How long do you have between the time you discover your main chute malfunctions and you get the reserve deployed?" Then he answers: "The rest of your life."

The humor will fade, though, when the rear ramp of the C-130 is opened and the rushing wind whips through the interior of the aircraft.

Each man will prepare himself mentally to ride the buffeting currents of air and wait for that assuring tug on his harness that tells him he has a "good" chute.

"Jumping is a curious mixture of fear, adrenaline, and excitement; then relief once you get out the door," said Capt. David B. Beatty, an ALO with the 82nd's 2nd Brigade.

Approaching the drop zone, the fear, adrenaline, and excitement start to build at 1,000 feet altitude.

"I get three big rushes when I jump," Capt. Beatty said. "When the ramp is lowered, when the green jump light comes on, and when I'm almost 20 seconds from hitting the ground."

What about leaving the ramp?

"Getting out of the airplane isn't hard. Peer pressure takes you out the door—you know you're going!"

Rush number one comes quickly as the C-130 loadmaster activates the hydraulic pistons that lower the ramp. The aircraft fills with the howling, shrieking noises caused by the wind and props.

The Air Force paratroopers stand and Maj. William G. Norman, the jumpmaster, faces them from the back of the aircraft and shouts out the jump-sequence commands. *"Hook up! Check static lines! Check equipment! Sound-off!"*

Each jumper checks his equipment and that of the man in front of him, then smacks the man on the shoulder: the A-OK signal. When the last smack hits the man closest to the ramp, Maj. Norman yells again: *"Thirty seconds to jump!"*

He strides confidently to the ramp edge. The chutists stand motionless, one behind the other, their braided, yellow-nylon static lines hooked to the wire cable overhead.

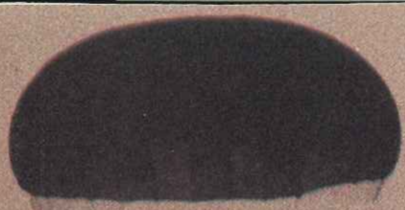
All eyes stare intently at Maj. Norman's back, then occasionally shift to the loadmaster and the brick-sized box with the red and green circles.

The red light glows, and they get ready.

The green light flashes. The loadmaster looks at the paratroopers and raises his arm, pointing to the light. Maj. Norman wheels around on the ramp, takes a few steps toward his men, crouches, and, grinning, flashes the thumbs-up signal with both hands. Then he turns again, runs to the edge of the ramp, and steps into the sky.

That starts the paratroopers' shuffle. One by one they half-step to the ramp's edge and leap; one by one their nylon static lines bunch up on the overhead wires until 50 of the yellow streamers are whipping in the wind.

Then, only the loadmaster, the photographer, and the writer are left. Despite the deafening noises, it suddenly seems very quiet in the large, empty C-130.—SSgt Craig Pugh



Fort Bragg. The job was just too good to ignore. I feel like I'm doing something important for the Air Force and for myself. My next assignment is in the A-10, which is what I want. Meanwhile, this job is exciting, and it's fun."

One of the things that makes the ALO role enjoyable to Maj. Norman and other ALOs is working closely with their teammates, enlisted tactical air control and command specialists—AFSC 275X0. More than one air liaison officer at Fort Bragg praised the 275s as among the most highly motivated and professional Air Force people they've ever worked with.

The tac air control specialists keep the communications network alive in the field. They talk "up" the request net to division and corps levels and back down to the battalion ALOs. They drive the radio-equipped jeeps that carry them and their ALOs around the battlefield areas. A gung-ho attitude seems to be a prerequisite for being a 275.

"My family's military oriented," said A1C Dan Hanneken, a 275 with Det. 1 of the 507th TAIRCW at Fort Bragg. "A couple of my cousins fought in Vietnam, where this job originated. I volunteered for the job because I knew I'd be out in the 'trenches' helping to coordinate tactical air strikes."

A1C Hanneken also volunteered to become a parachutist, and that's one of the reasons he's attached to the 82nd Airborne. "The job's everything I want," he said. "I've got 50 jumps and I've only been at it a year, plus I get to go out on the ranges and help work A-10s practicing ordnance delivery. It's great."

The tactical air control specialists are highly trained, well-qualified men who are committed to the close air support mission and are as comfortable as the Army troops working and living in field conditions.

Col. John F. Lewis, 507th TAIRCW vice commander, has served several ALO tours, including a "busy" stint in Vietnam with the 1st Calvary Division (Helicopter Reconnaissance) in 1967.

"The Army's been going into the field for more than 200 years now," he said with humor, "and you'd be surprised at the comforts they come up with."

Col. Lewis admits, however, that he's been around a lot longer than most ALOs, and that most of the younger officers have yet to acquire his sense of appreciation for "the good life" as viewed from the inside of a tent.

"I was in the field for a month out of the first six I was at Fort Bragg," Capt. Beatty said. "It helps if you like living in the outdoors because you do get cold, wet, and tromp around in the mud. But most ALOs learn to take that in stride."

Actually, field exercises aren't as common as many expect. Much of the air liaison officer's duty time is spent at the fort planning tactical air support for scheduled exercises and coordinating the details with the fighter squadrons that will fly the missions.

Many discover their ALO tours are the exact change of pace they've been looking for.

"I wanted a break—a diversion," Maj. John R. Gaydeski said, pausing while an A-10 he was directing pulverized a target on the range at Fort Bragg with 30mm rounds. "Flying in fighters is the greatest thrill I can think of, but I wanted the excitement of a new challenge. I sure found it," the former F-4 and F-111 weapons systems operator proclaimed.

ALOs like Maj. Gaydeski, jump-qualified and assigned to Army airborne units, are few in number, and most are assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division, with jobs at various levels of command. The majority of ALOs are assigned to ground units at such Army forts as Knox, Riley, Hood, and Carson.

Airmen like A1C Daniel Hanneken are half the ALO team.

Airborne or not, ALOs are characterized by a certain jauntiness and pride, an attitude that rubs off while working closely with Army units that would be in the thick of battle in wartime.

"A sense of urgency underlines everything you do in this job," Maj. Gaydeski said, "especially with the 82nd Airborne because we're attached to the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force. We know if trouble flares up anywhere in the world there's a good chance an airborne unit will be going there. Most of us make a point to keep current—watch the news, read the news magazines, and stay in touch with what's happening in the world."

That attitude of readiness is pronounced at Fort Hood and in the famed 6th Cavalry Brigade (Air Combat), where Maj. Rodgers is responsible for tactical air support.

"The Sixth Cav is a full-bore helicopter outfit," he explained. "We have recce helicopters—the eyes and ears of the commander—and we have *Cobra* attack squadrons. The recce people locate the targets and the *Cobras* go in for the kill." Attached to the U.S. Readiness Command, the 6th Cav is poised to go anywhere, any time.

Maj. Rodgers, a pilot for 11 years and most recently an A-10 weapons and tactical instructor, felt an ALO tour was appropriate at this stage in his career. "I understand the need for the ALO," he said, "the need to have someone in the middle greasing the skids, making the airpower support as effective as possible."

Capt. Charles Damratoski, also a Fort Hood ALO, tailors close air support for laser-targeting tanks of the 1st Cavalry Division's 2nd Brigade. "During exercises," Capt. Damratoski said, "two tank battalions square off. One gets air support and the other doesn't. I work with the one that does." He likes being on the winning side.

The tank units seek to grab and hold enemy territory while suffering minimum casualties, the captain explained. The newest tactic for achieving that is termed JAAT—Joint Air Attack Team. As the artillery blasts the enemy, the OH-58 helicopters seek out the enemy armor. As armored targets are located, the *Cobras* are employed from their holding areas to the rear. As a coordinated action, the A-10s work with the *Cobras* and *Scouts* to deliver the knockout punch.

Tactical unit commanders emphasize that ALOs perform a tough job that's no cakewalk. "It can be a long two years," explained Col. James H. Martin, 507th TAIRCW commander. "An ALO is at a fort and he's not flying. But he's worth his weight in gold while working close air support and when he returns to the cockpit. We know that person has taken the time and made a special effort to invest in his career and in the tac-air mission, and that he'll become a better, all-around airman as a result.

"Our advice to the young aircrew member with five or six years in the Air Force—maybe 20 more to go—is to get the most out of his career by serving an ALO tour, going back to his unit, and continuing to grow," Col. Martin added.

"Being an ALO requires some adjustments," explained Maj. Gaydeski, who recently finished a two-year tour at Fort Bragg—then extended it. "It's not for every guy out there in a fighter. First off, you should probably have the warrior instinct. Most of us do, I think, and that helps. Knowing we might be where the action is when the guns go off doesn't bother us. After all, what are we training for?

"I suspect all ALO jobs are probably not as exciting as being with an airborne unit," he continued, "but jumping out of an airplane isn't for everyone. In general, there are many rewards that come with being an ALO, regardless of the assignment."

Tactical air support is the Army commander's ace in the hole, and the air liaison officer is there to make sure he is dealt a winning hand.