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Feasibility of an Air Liaison Officer Career Field

Improving the Theater Air-Ground System

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Summary

Our investigation of the feasibility of an air liaison officer (ALO) career field was initially prompted by a recent suggestion submitted within the U.S. Air Force’s Innovative Development Through Employee Awareness (IDEA) program.¹ The IDEA suggestion, previous research, and analysis conducted during the course of this study confirmed several advantages of this proposal.

Research and literature have been generated on this subject—some of it very recent and some going back 20 years. We evaluated the research, papers, and published articles on the subject. We then interviewed current tactical air control party (TACP) personnel, ALOs, and U.S. Army commanders to determine whether the conclusions of two previous studies (Olivero, 1999, and Wisher, 2004) were still valid. Finally, we added a personnel flow analysis, having determined that no one has yet looked at the career field flow and staffing issues.

The most recent requirement for ALOs is specified in a 2008 memorandum of agreement (MoA) between the Army and Air Force. The MoA is consistent with and supports joint doctrine published in Joint Publication 3-09.3, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support (CAS)* (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2003). The authorization structure is specified in the MoA.

¹ There have been two IDEA submissions suggesting the creation of an ALO career field in the past 10 years, Knox (1998) and Wisher (2006). The Air Force responded to the Knox submission in the past but had not yet responded to the Wisher submission as of this writing.
Why Bother?

The current system, in which duty as an ALO is restricted to career aviators, is, at least on the surface, meeting the requirements for air-ground support. If this is true, why seek to change it? Our analysis suggests five reasons that an ALO career field is a better option than the current system.

It is arguable that the current system provides ALOs who are trained and educated in Air Force and joint doctrine. However, interview comments suggest that inexperienced ALOs have allowed Army commanders to micromanage the use of TACP resources, to the detriment of the mission. Also, some experienced TACP personnel commented that “trained” ALOs have doctrinally misused TACP capabilities on their own initiative. The misuse of TACP resources suggests that the ALO system needs review to uncover why mistakes are being made. Career ALOs with more extensive experience in ALO duties and in the mentoring of other career ALOs would be more likely to properly apply Air Force doctrine in combat. (See pp. 13–15.)

The current system provides a sufficient number of ALOs, but it struggles to fill ALO billets—as seen by the use of nonstrike aviators to fill ALO slots and by frequent mismatches in terms of grade requirements. The current system requires from six to 12 months of a 24-month ALO tour for a new ALO to become fully proficient, meaning that the trained ALO will be fully productive only 50 to 75 percent of the time. (See pp. 15–17.)

The current system suffers from lack of continuity in pursuit and follow-up of initiatives to improve the ALO product. Interview comments suggest that new ideas, programs, and processes introduced by a previous ALO tend to be lost with each two-year rotation. Also, the lack of experienced ALOs (beyond two years) in Air Staff and headquarters positions results in poor long-range planning for the improvement of the Theater Air-Ground System (TAGS). (See pp. 17–19.)

The current system results in a high-morale force, but TACP enlisted personnel overwhelmingly agree that an officer ALO career field will provide greater leadership and morale for the TACP force. (See pp. 19–20.)
The current system is marginally more expensive to operate than a career force. A career force might eliminate some of the current aircrew requalification training costs associated with the current system. A program of one-third noncareer ALOs (strike aviators) and two-thirds career ALOs could save $20 million annually (the cost of requalification training) if pilots currently serving as ALOs remained instead in flying jobs. However, these savings would not be realized if, as is probable, pilots who would otherwise serve ALO tours instead served in rated staff positions. Permanent-change-of-station (PCS) costs are slightly lower for a career ALO force. Other costs are negligibly different between the current system and a career ALO system. (See pp. 21–24.)

Can a Nonrated or Nonstrike Aviator Do the Job?

Historically, only aviators could control aircraft, only aviators could function as battalion ALOs, and only aviators could serve as brigade-and-above ALOs. Each of these stances has been abandoned over time. (See pp. 25–27.)

Systematic surveys of current and past ALOs and TACPs have shown that the majority agree that nonrated officers can do the ALO job. The majority also agree that rated experience is not necessary for the ALO job. (See pp. 27–29.)

The Air National Guard (ANG) has had a nonrated ALO program for more than 18 years. While most of the ALOs have deployed only as battalion ALOs, some have deployed recently as brigade ALOs. According to Army officers assigned with the ANG ALOs in combat, they have performed exceptionally well. The U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) has also started using nonrated officers in similar roles. (See pp. 30–31.)

The data from the history of the TACP force, the experience of the ANG, surveys of current and past ALOs, and the recent experience of the USMC support a conclusion that nonstrike aviators and non-aviators can do the ALO job.
Is an ALO Career Force Feasible?

An ALO career field is feasible, and a number of options are presented in Chapter Five. Figure S.1 shows our recommended option, a mix of career ALOs and strike aviators. It accesses individuals into the ALO career field as second lieutenants (14 per year). It requires that lieutenants be placed in billets currently designated for captains, preferably in the air support operations center (ASOC). It still uses some rated officers, providing information exchange between Air Force strike units and Army ground units. It reduces the demand on rated officers by 68 percent (119 per year, to 38 per year). (See pp. 33–47.)

We conclude that an ALO career field is feasible and would be beneficial to the U.S. Air Force.

Figure S.1
Recommended Option: Mixed Force of Career ALOs and Aviators
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In Peoria, Illinois, Maj Lee Wheeler, a nonrated ALO, arranged our trip. Lt Col Jerry Croegaert (ANG, Commander, 169th Air Support Operations Squadron) led a very informative large-group meeting and participated in equally useful one-on-one interviews, as did MSgt Mike McKee, Lt Scott Grotbo, MSgt Steven Salander, SSgt John Oliver, and other members of the 169th.

At the Air Combat Command (ACC), Col George Bochain, David Gaedecke, and other ACC staff provided excellent feedback on conclusions.
Email discussions and observations from Brig Gen Mike Longoria, Col Ron Watkins, Col Tom Webster, and Lt Col Neil Roghair added further clarity to the issues involved in assessing the ALO force.

Corey Johnson provided excellent background and input based on his experience. Robby Robinson’s (Air Education and Training Command staff) questions on unintended consequences provoked the train of thought presented in the latter portion of Chapter Five. Lt Col Todd Serres (Air War College student) also provided a number of new thoughts on the subject. LTC Joel Hamby (U.S. Army and Joint Chiefs of Staff) provided useful information from an Army user perspective.

This work would not have been undertaken if not for the efforts of Lt Col Ray Knox, Maj Mark Wisher, and Capt John Olivero, whose reports, work, surveys, and insight provided the foundation for a potential ALO career field.

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