

Close Air Support:

Aviators' Entrée Into The Band of Brothers

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Historians and psychologists have come to a general agreement on why men endure brutal combat. The noted US Army field historian, S.L.A. Marshall, said it best: "I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of the war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or presumed presence of a comrade." What Marshall is noting and what scholars of military combat psychology second, is that the key factor is the "primary group"; "Men fight because they belong to a group that fights. They fight for their friends, their 'buddies,' those people immediately around them with whom they have formed powerful social bonds."¹ This band of brothers relationship has been popularized in the writings of Stephen Ambrose in, *D-Day*, *Citizen Soldiers* and *Band of Brothers*. Movies like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* cogently and dramatically illustrate this theme.

There is a band of brothers too among aviators. Air Force historian Mark K. Wells, in a study of the 8th Air Force and British Bomber Command in World War II, echoed Marshall: "The truth is their motivations to combat had less to do with patriotism and glorified self-image than it did to their unwillingness to let down their buddies and their desire to get on with their jobs."² There is intense loyalty among aircrew of a squadron. The bond between men flying in the same aircraft can be especially pronounced, between pilot and weapons system operator, or navigator, etc. Bomber crews probably most closely approximated the fellowship and loyalty common among infantry units; indeed Wells notes that the bomber crews "acted more like a band of brothers."³ For both infantry and aviation the overpowering emotion is loyalty to their comrades, the intimate group—failure to fully support their fellow warriors, "those to whom they are bound by friendship and camaraderie, is their greatest fear."⁴

Nevertheless, their worlds are entirely different. The infantryman, even on today's high tech battlefield, fight for long periods of time in primitive conditions; they engage the enemy personally; they see, hear and smell him; they watch him die from bullets they have shot; they have a personal and physical awareness of their fellow warriors and the enemy. pilots fly high over the battlefield though, out of the enemy's line of fire except for the briefest stretches, then fly home to a safe environment, clean sheets and good chow. Rarely do they get a sense of the personhood of the enemy—rather, they fight another machine.

The two groups have definite opinions of each other: Aviators believe that their training, schooling and skills have lifted them out of the grinding cauldron of ground warfare, something they are most happy for. Whereas infantrymen consider aviators "flyboys," who get all the glamour and girls while they did all the fighting. One Marine infantry officer, (and noted writer, James Brady), noted that "Like most infantrymen [I] was publicly contemptuous of flyers, calling them "Airedales" and "flyboys"....⁵

The gulf between tactical pilots and infantrymen would seem to be an almost unbridgeable chasm, but such is not the case. In the mission of close air support these two military cultures merge, albeit temporarily, and while they do a powerful dynamic is created between the two. Emotional bonds are developed that are similar to those characterized as a band of brothers.

In World War II's Italian campaign, B-26 "Marauder" crews of the 42nd Bomb Wing reported, "There is a great difference in the mental attitude of aerial crews when 'close-in' Army targets are attacked as opposed to the normal strategical [sic] target. Crews will fly through intense flak to a 'close-in' target and do an excellent piece of work. Ten days later the same crews will fly into just as intense flak to attack a bridge or supply dump and do only a fair job." A personnel exchange program had preceded these operations and continued while the B-26s supported these troops. In this exchange, men of each unit experienced conditions in the other unit; this perhaps influenced and facilitated better air support—it certainly enhanced mutual respect and understanding.⁶

Pre-combat bonding is cited in studies as an important factor in creating group cohesion and inter-group cohesion; group cohesion is cited as a key factor to sustain men in combat. A 2003 US Army study of why men fight that focused on Gulf War troops concluded that it took "weeks and months for a bond of trust to develop between soldiers."⁷ Another study remarked on the importance of esprit de corps for creating a system of social cohesion or social support (as mental health professionals refer to it) with groups larger than one's immediate associates.⁸

The Marine Corps has institutionalized the bonding process between its air and ground elements through mutual training between air and ground officers initiated at the very beginnings of their careers and carried through in tactical training and formal schools as they progress up the ranks. Marine Corps doctrine too stresses the subordination of aviation to the ground war—that the primary function of aviation is to support ground combat units. This no doubt pays benefits in that training, tactics and enthusiasm for the close air support mission is enhanced and prioritized. Beyond esprit, it also addresses an important aspect for the creation of unit cohesion and good fighting morale. As military psychologist Frederick Manning said, this is the sense that the infantryman is "firmly embedded in a network of mutual obligation... a confidence that in times of difficulty one has someone who is willing and able to help is at the heart of unit cohesion."⁹ The Marine Corps' formal system of air support, mutual air-ground training and esprit de corps creates this network of mutual obligation. Robert P. Keller a Marine fighter pilot veteran of World War II and Korea remarked on this: "There is lot of valorous Air Force action in support of ground troops, undeniably [but] we're [Marines] we are blood brothers."¹⁰

Esprit can be a powerful factor. Consider the case of former Marine fighter pilots who resigned from the Marine Corps and became Air National Guard F-16 pilots. They deployed to Iraq in early 2004. When becoming aware that the Marines were involved in fierce combat in Fallujah, they made determined efforts to get assigned to CAS missions over Fallujah instead of other missions where combat was not occurring, even if it meant circumventing the established control procedures. One of them thought to himself: "I don't care anymore, I don't care if I get counseling, I don't care if I get lectured, I'm beyond that, because my Marines are dying down there and we need to go help these guys out." Later when flying a CAS mission for the Marines at Fallujah, he told his wingman, "We're going to do good today—we're going to go put some hurt on those sons of bitches."¹¹ Another Marine pilot who had joined the same unit told an air controller, "There are Marines who need air support, I'm willing to lose my wings over the whole thing, to give these Marines air support."¹² Their feelings were similar to Marine flyers from the Korean and Vietnam Wars who devised means to get around command and control systems that prevented them from giving CAS to ground Marine units.

Despite the power of esprit de corps, the psychological studies of Manning contend that the most powerful means of bonding is the actual combat experience.¹³ His contention is supported by Marine Corps General Keller whose testimony speaks of the power of combat (not necessarily esprit de

corps) to create a bond (paradoxically, many of the Marine pilots had not flown true battlefield CAS prior to the Korean War). But Keller asserts that it was flying CAS during the Pusan Perimeter battle that he “got religion, [because] when the chips are down and you saw what those troopers had to do, hell you would almost run your airplane in the ground to take out somebody.” Another Korean War Marine Corsair flyer echoed this, “I was strafing some troops one time and my guns froze up, and I was going to show them, I was going to go down and cut their heads off....”¹⁴ The bonding qualities between air and ground because of battlefield Marine CAS was affirmed by Maj Gen O.P. Smith who led the ground Marine units at Pusan. He remarked afterwards: “A bond of understanding (between brother Marines on the ground and air) has been established....”¹⁵

The desire for pilots to give all to support ground troops is not peculiar to the Marine Corps. An Air Guard pilot flying in Iraq asserted, “Screw it [the rules of engagement preventing flights below a certain altitude]! If guys down there need you to make noise, I don’t care how low and fast I need to go, I’m going to get down there to let them know I’m there.”¹⁶ Another Guard pilot, formerly US Air Force, noted that service did not matter when it came to CAS, “We would literally do anything to stop our guys from being hurt, yeah they’re Marines, but they’re our guys, they are as much our guys as any other Army guy, it doesn’t matter that they’re not Air Force, they’re our guys.”¹⁷ Like infantrymen or aviators do for their own ilk, CAS pilots, as aviation historian and veteran A-10 pilot Doug Campbell notes, “take lethal risks” to save “truly beleaguered soldiers.”¹⁸ During the Anaconda Operation in Afghanistan, when an Air Force F-15E ran out of precision bombs, the crew resorted to strafing the Taliban in support of threatened ground troops. Fittingly enough, Rebecca Grant, an Air Force analyst and writer, cited this as an example of the “sacred obligation” Airmen feel that they have to support troops on the ground.¹⁹ Regardless of service, indeed pilots do consider CAS a “sacred obligation,” just as ground troops consider assisting one another of absolute highest importance. One US Army infantryman, a veteran of the Gulf War, noted, “I take my squad mates’ lives more important than my own.” Another noted, “You have got to trust them more than your mother, father, girlfriend or wife, or anybody. It becomes almost like your guardian angel.”²⁰

Which is exactly how infantrymen often refer to supporting aircraft—guardian angels. Recall the closing scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, when the P-51s roared over blasting the German tanks. Capt. Miller, near death, called them, “angels on our shoulders.”²¹ Barry Enoch, a Vietnam War Navy SEAL characterized the “Black Ponies” as a US Navy OV-10 squadron that provided them air support with angel-like qualities: “Today we reflect back on times when we were faced with overwhelming odds, fondly remembering the OV-10s as our “Green Angels...winged guardians with a like spirit of the Navy SEALs.”²² A Korean War Marine infantryman remarked, “They [Corsairs] were like dark guardian angels. God bless those valiant young pilots who shepherded us to Hagaru.”²³ These angels had the ability it seemed to deliver salvation. A soldier whose unit had barely escaped being overrun by Chinese in the Twin Tunnels battle in 1951 by the timely arrival of fighter/bombers that laid waste the Chinese attackers (and delivered salvation): “I was not ashamed to admit tears were in my eyes when I saw those planes.”²⁴

Losing a guardian angel took the infantrymen aback. In Korea, PFC Jack Wright, a Marine infantryman described watching a Corsair that had been providing CAS get shot down: “One Corsair came down, dove behind the hill, the smoke came up, but the Corsair didn’t. If you ever wanted to see a bunch of men suddenly go quiet—we just looked at one another.” After the Marines found the crashed fighter and the pilot’s body, he noted, “One pilot for an estimated enemy company. The odds didn’t mount up. We figured we were the losers.”²⁵

If infantrymen come to regard CAS aircraft as saving angels, the pilots themselves come to think of themselves as a force for good. Some A-10 pilots characterize flying combat CAS as doing “the Lord’s work.”²⁶ Killing is done for a righteous cause. Marine Lieutenant General Keller said, “We [pilots] are not people who go out and kill; we are people who go out and save Marines’ lives. We’re lifesavers, we’re not killers.”²⁷ An Air Guard F-16 pilot, referencing Iraq war operations, echoed this: “With CAS you are directly helping American people, soldiers and Marines on the ground who are almost always in direct contact with the enemy; to me it’s the most noble thing we do...you feel a lot less sorry for people when you’re killing them, when they’re trying to kill people who are on your side that you know.”²⁸

If the pilots and their aircraft are given a high and noble character, the pilots ennoble and idealize the infantrymen. Often CAS pilots regard them as youthful innocents—kids, boys who are caught in a bad situation, but bearing up bravely nevertheless. Marine Korean War pilot Emmons Maloney remembered that all he and fellow pilots had to do to remain motivated to keep flying air support missions “was look down and see a group of Marines huddled around a bonfire trying to keep warm.”²⁹ An Air Force pilot flying out of Kirkut reflected his admiration for the ground troops: “There were Army guys leaving the base, going downtown [to Kirkut] and they lost several guys while we were there...every time they left the base they didn’t know if they’d come back.”³⁰

A key ingredient that pulls the aviator into the ground battle is the forward air controller, who is with the infantry unit and is in radio contact with the pilot. This is the human link that spurs emotions in the pilot to provide saving air support. This phenomenon is aptly described by this young Marine captain flying a Harrier in support of Marines fighting in Ramadi in 2004: “Your heart aches for the guy on the ground when he’s going through that, you have no idea, you can see the fight but it looks like something you would see on TV, we’re so damned desensitized to it, until he keys that mic and you hear that urgency and terror in his voice, and then it becomes your complete focus to make that stop, to help them.” To make it stop, this pilot, defying the rules of engagement that prohibited aircraft flying below a few thousand feet, dove to 500 feet, and at 500 knots strafed the building where the insurgents were holed up.³¹ An Air Force pilot flying air support in Fallujah echoed this: “When you know people on the ground, you know them by name, or you’ve been talking to them on the radio for two hours, you start getting attached to this person, you don’t want them to get hurt, you realize twhat the chances of someone hurting my airplane is very, very small, you decide in your mind that you’re going to do whatever it takes to help these guys out.” He summed up his experience flying battlefield CAS in Iraq as, “the single most moving experience I’ve ever had.” He was a lieutenant colonel with over 2700 hours flight time, mostly in fighters.³²

In conclusion, it is evident that close air support evokes powerful emotions between air and ground warriors, quite unlike feelings between other units that provide supporting fires. It’s true that artillerymen and sailors firing naval guns provide effective support, but CAS pilots personally become part of the ground battle. In many cases they see troops on the ground and certainly the troops see the support aircraft. On the other hand because they are only temporarily part of the battle and operate in different natural elements, each has an idealized opinion of the other. CAS pilots are angels that bring salvation from the skies. Infantrymen are youthful innocents relegated to horrific combat in brutal conditions, who, being fellow Americans, are worthy of protecting and saving at any cost.

These emotions can be created in an instant, when aircraft arrive on-station and a forward air controller keys his mic. They exist across all services, although the Marine Corps has institutionalized and thereby enhanced and turned this dynamic to more effective CAS through common training that

creates a powerful esprit de corps which has at its focus point an ennobled basic Marine rifleman—the reason why aviation (and all other supporting units of the Marine Corps) exist.

The existence of this dynamic hints at a peculiarly American democratic view of combat—that the infantryman in the eyes of society is fully worthy of lavish fire support. It has implications for training—that pilots receive adequate CAS training because when exposed to a battlefield scenario, their impulse is to pull out the stops to help troops on the ground, even to the point of defying rules of engagement and orders from air controllers. It also has implications for aircraft and weapons acquisitions: What happens when unmanned aircraft are used for CAS? Finally, it has implications for conduct of the air war, the need to balance what is actually required for air support as opposed to what ground troops have come to expect from their aviation ‘buddies.’

Finally it suggests what is at the root of the CAS debates that often characterize joint operations. Close air support has proven to be a hot button issue because it is an emotional issue, not only at the joint and command level but also on the battlefield. I suggest that there is a connection between the two. CAS creates an emotional bond between fellow warriors and to drive a wedge between them evokes an emotional response.

Notes

1. Simon Wesseley, “Twentieth Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2), 275-276. Marshall’s quote is included in Wesseley and is from Marshall’s *Men Against Fire* (New York, 1947), 42.
2. Mark K. Wells, *Courage and Air Warfare*, (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 93.
3. *Ibid.*, 94.
4. Lt Col Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 90.
5. James Brady, *The Coldest War* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 1990), 166.
6. Richard Hallion, *Strike From the Sky: The History of Battlefield Air Attack, 1911-1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian University Press, 1989), 183.
7. Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Raymond A. Millen and Terrence M. Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraqi War*, (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S Army, 2003), 12.
8. Frederick J. Manning, “Morale, Cohesion, and Esprit de Corps,” in *Handbook of Military Psychology*, eds. Reuvan Gal and A. David Mangelsdorff (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 461.
9. Manning, 465.
10. Lt Gen Robert P. Keller, USMC, interview by Fred H. Allison, 28 Aug 1998, Pensacola, tape recording, Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.
11. Lt Col Phil Sheridan interview by Fred H. Allison, 15 June 2005, Selfridge AFB, tape recording, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.

12. Maj Tom Richter, interview by Fred H. Allison, 15 June 2005, Selfridge AFB, tape recording, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.
13. Manning, 462.
14. Col Emmons S. Maloney, USMC, interview by Fred H. Allison, 15 Mar 1999, Vista, tape recordings, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico; Keller interview.
15. MSgt Fred G. Braitsch, Jr., "Dateline: Korea," *Leatherneck* 34 (April 1951), 48.
16. Captain Chris Melka, interview by Fred H. Allison, 15 June 2005, Selfridge AFB, tape recording, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.
17. Lt Col Nate Dickman, interview by author, 15 June 2005, Selfridge AFB, tape recording, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.
18. Douglas N. Campbell, "Plane in the Middle: A History of the US Air Force's Dedicated Close Air Support Plane" (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1999), 4.
19. Patricia Grant, "The Clash About CAS," *Air Force Magazine Online* 86 (January 2003), 8.
20. Wong, Kolditz, Millen, Potter, 10-11.
21. *Saving Private Ryan*, movie produced and directed by Steven Spielberg, for Paramount Pictures, 1998.
22. Kit Lavell, *Flying Black Ponies* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 111.
23. Martin Russ, *Breakout* (New York: Fromm International, 1999), 327.
24. Quote by a "Sgt Bass," in Twin Tunnels, 1 Feb 1951, Second Infantry Division Combat Reports, US Army Records of the Korean War, Texas Tech Univ Library, Lubbock, TX, 15.
25. Donald Knox, *The Korean War, Pusan to Chosin: An Oral History* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985).
26. Lt Col Douglas N. Campbell, e-mail to author, 1 May 2006, in author's possession, Spotsylvania, VA.
27. Keller interview.
28. Reynolds interview.
29. Col Emmons S. Maloney, response to author's questionnaire, 27 Jan 1999, in possession of author, Spotsylvania, VA.
30. Reynolds interview.
31. Captain Christian Rizzo, interview with Fred H. Allison 21 April 2005, tape recording, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.

32. Lt Col Darron Reynolds, interview by author, 15 June 2005, Selfridge AFB, tape recording, US Marine Corps Oral History Collection, Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA.

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