

DefenseNews

New Gear Speeds U.S. Airstrike Requests

By MICHAEL HOFFMAN

Tech. Sgt. Brandon Story recently returned from Iraq, where he called in airstrikes for U.S. Army Special Forces units. A joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) for 10 years, Story likens the evolution of the tactical air control party to Fred Flintstone moving into the era of “The Jetsons.” And in this aspect of warfare, the digital revolution has just begun.

Starting this fall, JTACs will send target coordinates directly to pilots from laptops — Itronix MR-1 GoBooks — small enough to strap to the front of their body armor. The laptops also compute coordinates and display full-motion video collected from local aircraft and blue force combat locations.

At the same time, new A-10C Thunderbolt II jets are set to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan with new displays that will show both the coordinates sent from JTACs and images of what the target looks like.

The A-10Cs from the 354th Fighter Squadron at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., and the 74th and 75th fighter squadrons at Moody Air Force Base, Ga., are also equipped with Litening II targeting pods and a video datalink capability so they can fire precision missiles.

“The upgrade in the avionics goes from 1970s technology and puts it on par with the advanced fighters like the Strike Eagles,” said Maj. James Krischke of the 354th, who flew one of the A-10Cs in a recent training exercise. “It’s like trading in a ’78 Chevelle for a ’05 BMW.” From June 14 to 20, pilots and tactical air controllers slogged through the swampy pine groves of central Florida during the exercise, dubbed Atlantic Strike VII. The exercise provided the first opportunity for both sets of airmen to train together with the new technology.

Since Operation Enduring Freedom began in 2001, the Air Force has worked to digitize and shorten the process of calling in airstrikes. One way is to advance methods and gear for JTACs.

In April, the Air Force deployed its new vehicle-mounted communications system designed to use these high-tech tools and directly connect JTACs, the Air Support Operations Center and pilots through a series of satellite connections called the ASOC Gateway.

The Gateway is connected to the Link-16 and the Enhanced Position Location Reporting System Situational Awareness Data Link networks. But the Military Rugged Tablets — the computers airmen now use — are stationary or vehicle-mounted. So are the Rovers — Remotely Operated Video Enhanced Receivers — JTACs use to view drone feeds.

So until the fall, JTACs are restricted in their mobility when sending digital coordinates.

“There has been a real shift to provide increased capability, and we’re right on the cusp of fielding newer capabilities that have never existed before,” said Master Sgt. Matt Nugent, Air Combat Command Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) requirements lead.

That will change when TACPs get a new 8-pound laptop called the Mini Video Receiver III that will perform like a Rover, displaying feeds and moving maps. About 80 will be deployed to Iraq in July and another 140 will be sent to stateside units, Nugent said.

“It’s so light I’ve seen guys strapping them to their backpacks,” said Staff Sgt. Justin Cremer, a JTAC with the 682nd Air Support Operations Squadron.

However, MVRIII’s can’t transmit coordinates, as do the 2-pound GoBooks. They will display full video and imagery from aircraft in the area and allow JTACs to use Falcon View mapping software. The handheld computer will attach to the MVRIII and the JTACs’ radios that will connect the new computers to the Gateway.

Further down the road, JTACs might get laser rangefinders small enough to attach to their rifles. Currently, they use laser rangefinders that are about half the size of a cereal box. Using them in a firefight means putting their weapons down, Story said.

“It’s really aimed at allowing them to range targets without having to take their weapons off the target,” he said.

“During a firefight, the last thing you want to do is pull your weapon off and find your rangefinder.” TACPs tried out two test models for the new, smaller range finders during Atlantic Strike.

“I am excited about this new technology,” Nugent said. “But while technological advancements are great, this will not completely replace the basic JTAC skills that include using a map, compass and radio. If the new gear goes down, it’s important JTACs still have those basic skills.” TACPs from the Air Force, Army soldiers from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, Marines from the Air Naval Gun Fire Liaison company, and air controllers from Denmark and Canada — nearly 800 personnel — executed airstrikes in simulated combat conditions during Atlantic Strike.

They trained on the range and in downtown Avon Park, Fla., to allow troops to practice tracking high-value targets within a dynamic civilian population using targeting pods attached to aircraft that flew overhead.

Tech Sgt. David Bickel, a 13-year JTAC now assigned to the 10th Special Forces Group, which just returned from Iraq, helped design training iterations in the northern tactical range to simulate conditions in downtown Baghdad and what he described as “the chaos that comes with it.” Role players outfitted in traditional garb fired high-caliber blanks and unarmed artillery shells that whistled over TACPs while they practiced ranging targets and using their new digital tools to call in airstrikes.

Story, who helped oversee training at the southern tactical range, said certain problems did occur. The GoBooks

picked up the imagery and video sent down from the aircraft, but had trouble communicating with the Gateway and sending coordinates to pilots.

He said he remains confident, however, that the GoBooks will be ready and working properly once they are deployed this fall. ■



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

Going Digital: Joint terminal attack controllers review map data during the recent Atlantic Strike VII exercise, during which airmen trained with new technology.