
Offensive Air Support



U.S. Marine Corps

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FOREWORD

Marine aviation traces its origin to 1912, when First Lieutenant Alfred A. Cunningham reported for naval aviation training. By 1914 Marines had started using aircraft and would see Marine aviation flying its first combat missions during the ending months of World War I. Through operations in Nicaragua, Haiti, China, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Southwest Asia, Marine aviation has distinguished itself as a formidable contributor to the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) combined arms team.

This publication focuses on the Marine Corps philosophy of command and control, planning, operations, and emerging concepts and capabilities for commanders and staff officers who are responsible for planning and executing offensive air support operations. Offensive air support doctrine first began within the Marine Corps in 1935 when the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual* was published and has developed over the past 65 years into today's Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-23, *Offensive Air Support*. This doctrine does not discuss the specifics of unit-level tactics and procedures. It provides insight as to how Marine aviation is used to shape the deep, close, and rear battlespace as an integrated combat arm of the MAGTF.

This publication supersedes Fleet Marine Force Manual (FMFM) 5-40, *Offensive Air Support*, dated 27 March 1992.

Reviewed and approved this date.

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To Our Readers

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Unless otherwise stated, whenever the masculine gender is used, both men and women are included.

OFFENSIVE AIR SUPPORT

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CHAPTER 1. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF OFFENSIVE AIR SUPPORT

Although the Marines started using aircraft as early as 1914, technology advances leading to offensive air support (OAS) did not come about until World War II. The ending months of World War I saw the Marine Corps flying combat missions from France. A shortage of Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots and surplus of RAF aircraft led to a beneficial partnership between the RAF and the Marines. The RAF and Marine squadrons operated along side each other in support of the British and Belgian ground forces that were gathering momentum against the crumbling German army. Their general mission assigned by General Pershing was to attack any rear-area targets that might hinder the Germans retreat. By the end of the war, 1st Marine Aviation Force, in its brief period of action, had lost 4-dead, shot down 12 Germans, and flown 57 bombing missions.

During the interwar years, OAS began to become integral to Marine Corps operations. In the air over Haiti, the Dominican Republic, China, and Nicaragua, Marine aviation assisted the ground operations, not only in combat, but also in reconnaissance, transportation, and supply. Close air support (CAS) became more effective due to dive bombing techniques and weaponeering. By trial and error, Marine aviation worked out basic tactics for CAS. By the end of the 1920s, the Marine air-ground team had become a reality. Major Roy Geiger and Colonel Rowell oversaw aviation operations as the *Tentative Landing Operations Manual* was published in 1935. In that historic document, Marine aviation's doctrine for reconnaissance, fighter escort, protection of the landing forces, artillery spotting, and CAS was formally established as the aviation units' responsibilities. The General Board of the Navy restated the Marine air's mission in 1939 to support the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) in amphibious landing operations and to support the troops once they had passed the beachhead. Marine aviation was to provide backup squadrons for the Navy's regular carrier squadrons.

When the United States entered World War II, the aviation doctrine developed at Quantico was used during the amphibious landings throughout the Pacific. OAS was performed time and again by forward-based aircraft of the Cactus Air Force on Guadalcanal in support of Marines on the ground. Unfortunately, Marine aviation resources (aircraft, aircrews, and support) had become so heavily involved with anti-air warfare (AAW) and air interdiction (AI) missions of land-based air power that

their original purpose, providing CAS for the men on the ground, had been subordinated if not completely forgotten. Marine aviation involved in action against ground targets during the early stages of action, seemed to be used against selected targets, as opposed to ground liaison-directed attacks against Japanese troops or fortifications immediately impeding an advance. Marines were given their targets before leaving the ground, vice receiving airborne instructions characteristic of CAS missions.

In February 1945, Marine CAS finally arrived during the drive to the Philippine capital of Manila, where the Marine SBD Dauntlesses were directed to provide CAS 20 to 30 miles ahead and behind the Sixth Army. These patrolling aircraft were available to support immediate CAS missions requested by the advancing ground forces. Development in CAS TTPs continued during the Philippine campaign with the use of radio communications to call in napalm attacks. A single very high frequency (VHF) channel could not carry all the traffic and the Marines switched to medium-frequency channels and napalm became one of the most successful weapons in the Philippines.

By 1950, Marine aviation was experiencing two major developments that would shape its foreseeable future: the advent of the jet and the helicopter. Carriers from which the fighters operated allowed more fuel and more on-station time; however, the short-legged jets could not loiter above the battlefield as compared to the propeller driven F4U Corsairs. AI missions were beginning to be dominated by the jet aircraft because of their range and speed. CAS and armed reconnaissance