

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-99](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The use of ordnance delivered by aircraft to support U.S. military forces that are in close proximity to enemy forces on the ground requires detailed planning, seamless communications, and effective training. Mistakes in communications or procedures used to identify and maintain an awareness of the positions of friendly forces on the battlefield during CAS can result in the loss of U.S. military personnel.

Senate Report 116-48 and House Report 116-120, accompanying bills for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, included provisions for GAO to evaluate issues related to friendly-force identification capabilities in CAS missions. Among other things, this report evaluates the extent to which DOD has (1) implemented initiatives to enhance friendly-force identification capabilities during CAS, and (2) evaluated training for forces that participate in CAS. GAO analyzed documentation and interviewed officials regarding DOD efforts to develop and implement friendly force tracking capabilities for CAS; reviewed CAS training programs; and analyzed training data, including the number of hours that DOD used non-military contract aircraft for CAS training from 2017 through 2019.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 11 recommendations to DOD, including that DOD implement and assess initiatives to improve the interoperability of digital systems used in CAS and take additional steps to evaluate the training for certain forces that participate in CAS missions. DOD concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-21-99](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or RussellC@gao.gov.

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CLOSE AIR SUPPORT

Actions Needed to Enhance Friendly Force Tracking Capabilities and Fully Evaluate Training

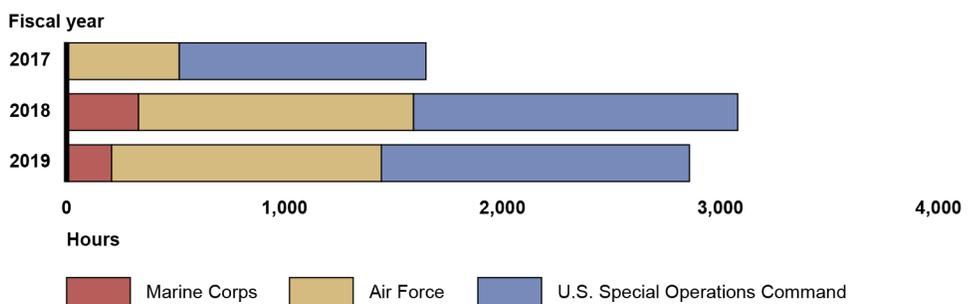
What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has made progress implementing initiatives to enhance capabilities that are used to identify friendly force locations during close air support (CAS) missions, but GAO identified additional actions that are needed to strengthen these efforts. Specifically,

- DOD has made limited progress in implementing 10 changes the department approved to address gaps in the interoperability of digital communications systems used to conduct CAS, hindering efforts to improve the speed and accuracy of information exchanges.
- DOD's efforts to assess the interoperability of digital systems used to perform CAS have been limited in scope. GAO found that DOD had formally assessed two out of 10 approved changes during joint service and multinational events, and these assessments were not conducted in a training environment that replicated capabilities of near-peer adversaries.
- DOD implemented a new capability in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility to help identify the positions of friendly forces during CAS missions. However, GAO found that DOD did not provide adequate training for personnel who operate it or conduct an evaluation to resolve implementation challenges that have hampered its performance.

DOD conducts evaluations of training programs for forces that participate in CAS missions, but GAO identified two areas where DOD can improve its efforts. First, the Army and Marine Corps have not systematically evaluated the effectiveness of periodic training for ground observers providing targeting information due to a lack of centralized systems for tracking training data and the absence of designated entities to monitor service-wide training. Second, the use of contract aircraft for training increased substantially between 2017 and 2019, but DOD has not fully evaluated the use of non-military contract aircraft to train air controllers for CAS (see fig.). GAO found that differences between U.S. military aircraft and contract aircraft (e.g., airspeed) can result in a misalignment of aircraft capabilities for certain types of training events. Without evaluating CAS training fully, DOD cannot have assurance that its forces are prepared to conduct CAS missions safely and effectively.

Number of Hours Non-Military Aircraft Were Used to Train for Close Air Support for Fiscal Years 2017 through 2019



Source: GAO analysis of Air Force, Marine Corps, and U.S. Special Operations Command data. | GAO-21-99