



PLA Air Force Pilots Cross-Train as Infantry Platoon Leaders

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying article details a recent push to cross-train some PLA Air Force pilots as infantry commanders to give them a greater understanding of the operations, tactics and methods of other services and branches. (In the PLA, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Forces are services [军种] and branches [兵种] are their component arms, such as Aviation, Air Defense, etc.) The fourteen pilots are assigned to an unidentified infantry battalion under the PLA's 83rd Group Army located in central China.

China's military aspires to be fully capable of combined and joint operations. However, despite the rapid adoption of new equipment, and reorganization of units at all levels, some basic functions such as air support continue to lag behind. As noted in the article, part of the motivation for the initiative came from experience in exercises, where pilots demonstrated poor timing of attack runs due to lack of understanding of the situation on the ground.

While the Chinese military has practiced air support missions (and until recently fielded large numbers of a dedicated ground-attack aircraft, the Q-5), close air support and airstrike directions appear to be carried out somewhat differently than the United States. Rather than forward air controllers, target guidance groups [目标引导组] are in charge of carrying out airstrike support [空军火力支], distinct from close air support [近距离空中支援] in US terminology.

According to Chinese military press, the use of laser guidance systems for artillery and airstrikes appears to be more common than before. Inter-service and inter-branch communication continues to be a major point of emphasis. While air to ground strikes appears to have become a routine part of training for pilots of multi-role fighters such as the J-10, and the PLAAF has held the "Golden Dart" [金飞镖] air competition focused on air-to-ground attack since 2014, working together under realistic conditions is more difficult. To gain additional experience in this skillset, China has also begun practicing air support in previous iterations of the joint China-Pakistan "Shaheen" air exercise and the "Aviadarts" competition held with Russia. (See "China and Pakistan Hold 8th "Shaheen" Joint Air Exercise" in this issue of *OE Watch*.)

These skills will become even more important as the number of strike platforms continues to increase. The PLAAF, PLA Naval aviation, and PLA Army Aviation units will all be expected to communicate clearly among themselves as well as with PLA ground force or PLA Navy Marines.

The cross-training program, which is apparently in its second year, is another step forward for the PLA to bridge the substantial service and branch-level divides it faces. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

“The brigade realized that if the pilots are not familiar enough with the characteristics of ground assault forces, group training methods and operational modes, it will become difficult for the pilots to carry out the full range of missions such as ground attack, seizing and controlling after landing, calling in airstrikes, etc.”

Source: “14 pilots serve as acting infantry platoon leaders,” *China Military Online*, 20 August 2019. eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-08/20/content_4848588.htm

In mid-August, a batch of special “platoon leaders” was ushered into the infantry battalion of a brigade under the PLA 83rd Group Army. Fourteen pilots will be trained as the acting platoon leaders together with the officers and soldiers of the infantry battalion. Inter-disciplinary service and multi-post training, such a cadre’s growth planning have become a beneficial attempt for the brigade to explore the cultivation of compound talents.

During military training and war preparation, the brigade considered the deep integration of air and ground combat professionals to be the key to the improvement of combat capacity. In an air-ground coordinated training, a pilot missed the best fire coverage period due to his unfamiliarity with the tactics of the infantry commander during assault, resulting in the failure of the entire operation. The brigade realized that if the pilots are not familiar enough with the characteristics of ground assault forces, group training methods and operational modes, it will become difficult for the pilots to carry out the full range of missions such as ground attack, seizing and controlling after landing, calling in airstrikes etc.

In this regard, the brigade has arranged pilots below the battalion level to take on duty during the infantry battalions training in the past two years. In taking advantage of field training and large-scale exercises and training tasks, it has trained the combat skills of acting cadres in alternate appointment, and strived to create a group of pilots featuring “fine flight skills, having expertise in assault, good combat coordination and commanding ability.”

Wang Haiyang, a pilot who has previously served as the deputy battalion commander of an infantry battalion, is the first combined battalion-level commander trained in the brigade. At the beginning, it was hard for him to transfer from flight specialty to ground position, but with increased practice in the ground post, the effect of integration training became more and more evident. Today, he can both fly a jet fighter and organize a ground assault detachment charge.



The emblem of People's Liberation Army Air Force.

Source: 解放的高加索 via Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/Emblem_of_People%27s_Liberation_Army_Air_Force.svg, Public Domain.