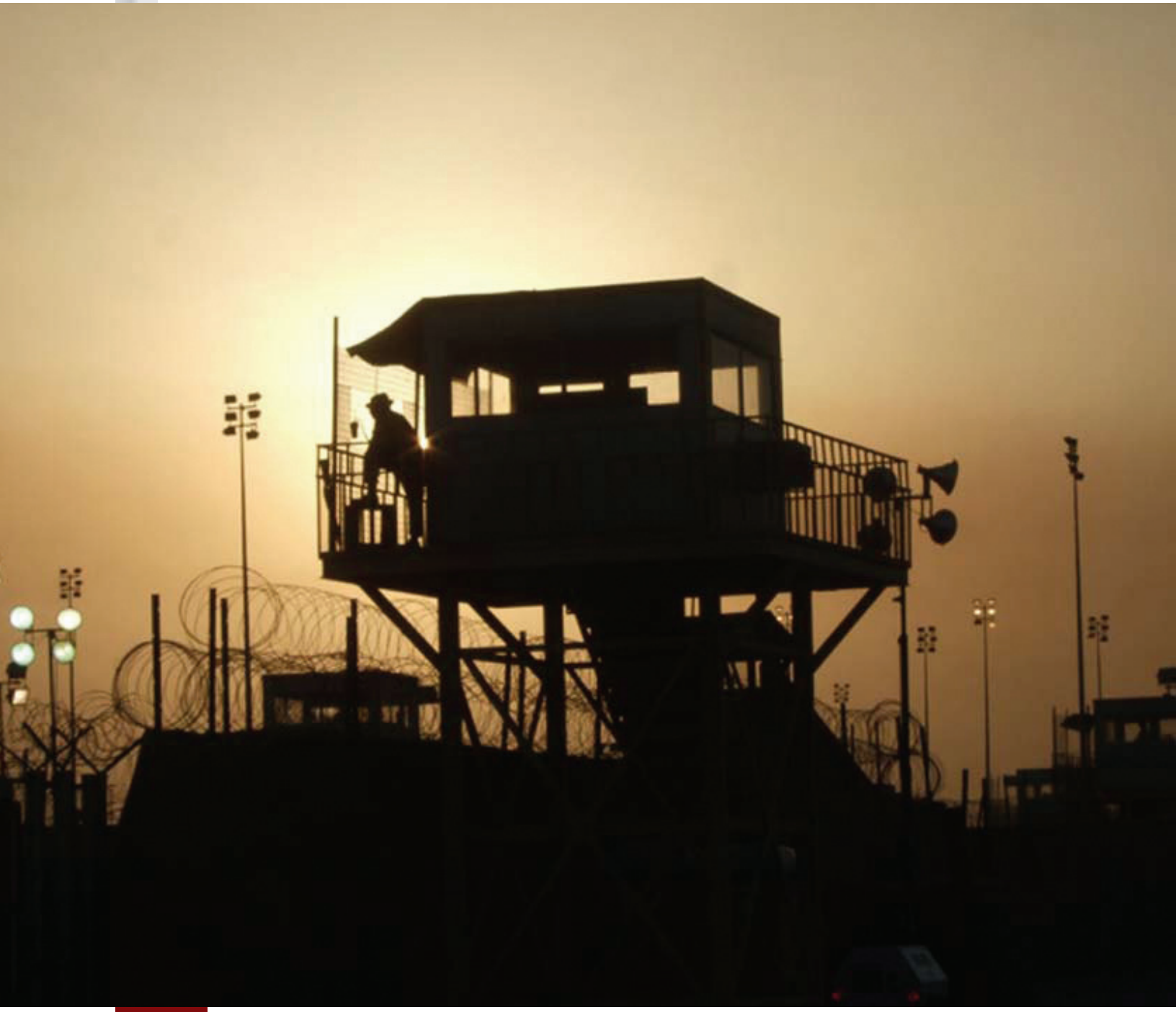
AN IDEA AHEAD



OF ITS TIME?

The Challenges of Space Operations in the Fires Brigades

BY MAJ JASON R. KALAINOFF

Of the many assignments that an Army Space Operations Officer can fill, a position on the staff of a Fires Brigade is unique. Aside from the 1st Space Brigade, Fires Brigades are the only brigades authorized an officer from Functional Area 40 (FA40) on their Modified Table of Organization and Equipment; all other positions for FA40s occur on the staffs of division-level units or higher. Operating as part of a brigade-level staff presents special challenges for what are typically among the most-junior Space Operations Officers. Although these positions certainly offer unique opportunities, maintaining these positions may not be in the best interest of the Army, the functional area, and the FA40s assigned to the Fires Brigades.

From August 2007 until May 2009, I served as the Brigade Space Operations Officer for the 41st Fires Brigade based at Fort Hood, Texas. During my twenty-two months there, the Brigade conducted home-station operations, pre-deployment training, and a deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Unlike some of my fellow FA40s, I had the advantage of an immediate supervisor and Brigade Commander who were supportive of my efforts to focus predominately on Space operations. Despite this support and the greater opportunities for Space-related work that is present during a deployment, I spent very little time working on Space-related tasks. Based on my conversations with other FA40s assigned to Fires Brigades, it appears that fielding Space Operations Officers at the brigade level may be an idea that is ahead of its time.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of being a Space Operations Officer in a Fires Brigade is that the small number of field grade officers and the large number of field grade duties — reports of survey, AR 15-6 investigations, special events planning — creates a situation that is ripe for reassigning the FA40 to non-Space tasks. Most of the majors on a brigade staff fill primary staff positions such as the S1, S2 or S3. Throughout recent history, these positions have been the backbone of the brigade staff and most commanders are hesitant to pull one of these primary staff officers away from his assigned duties to focus on other tasks. The position of Brigade Space Operations Officer does not benefit from the same historical significance. When short-term or intermediate-term requirements arise that require a field-grade officer from the brigade staff, the Space Operations Officer is an obvious choice. Using the FA40 to fill this position meets the immediate requirement while leaving the primary staff to focus on their duties. In a non-scientific sample of four FA40s who have deployed to Iraq with a Fires Brigade in the last two years, each was reassigned to a non-Space duty such as Visitor Bureau Officer in Charge, Night Battle Captain or Non-Lethal Planner. Although it is not uncommon for the Space Operations Officers at the division level to be assigned part-time additional duties that are not related to Space, the larger number of field grade officers on a division staff allows for the existence of specialists, as opposed to the greater need for multi-function officers at the brigade level. In addition, having more field grade officers on a division staff allows additional duties to be spread more thinly and more evenly across the staff

Even with the most supportive commander, an FA40 assigned to a Fires Brigade may find that there is little Space-related work for him to do. During their Space Operations Officer Qualification Course, newly-inducted FA40s learn that they are expected to be subject matter experts in Space force enhance-

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ment areas such as: intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; position, navigation, and timing; satellite communications; blue force situational awareness; and Space control. Although Brigade Commanders generally recognize the importance of most of these areas, mechanisms already exist to ensure that brigade-level units have access to this information. Ideally, critical Space information flows from the Division Space Support Element to the division primary staff officers and from there to the brigade primary staff officers. This is the method through which Brigade Combat Teams typically gain access to Space products or information, although the actual efficiency of the method varies from unit to unit. A Space Operations Officer at the brigade level could attempt to interject himself into this system, but it is difficult to see the benefits of doing so.

Having an FA40 on the brigade staff should allow him or her to focus on the Space-based capabilities or products of specific interest to that brigade. Doctrinally, the primary task of a Fires Brigade is to conduct strike operations. To fulfill this task, the Multiple Launch Rocket System battalions in the Fires Brigades have the capability to use precision-guided munitions that are dependent on the Global Positioning System (GPS). One can certainly envision situations in which the health of the GPS constellation was at question or the position data collected by the receivers was of less-than-optimal accuracy. In cases like these, it is possible that the Brigade Commander might want his FA40 by his side, giving a final "thumbs up" before launch. In recent years, however, the GPS constellation has been maximized to the point of providing consistent, albeit far from perfect, support for the employment of Precision Guided Munitions. In addition, as the nature of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has changed, the role of the Fires Brigades has changed as well. In recent deployments it has not been uncommon for Fires Brigades to assume non-traditional missions, serving as battlespace owners or providing security along Main Supply Routes. If Fires Brigades are not being employed in their traditional roles, it should not be surprising that the FA40s assigned to those brigades experience a similar identity crisis. Although the need for brigade-level FA40s to support precision-guided munitions may increase in the future, at this point the Division Space Support Elements can adequately provide for the needs all of their subordinate brigades, including the Fires Brigades.

Given the limited need for FA40s in the Fires Brigades, assigning officers to fill these slots has notable impacts on both the individuals involved and the Space community as a whole. For the individual FA40s, spending three years assigned to a Fires Brigade can potentially be the equivalent of spending three years working out of your Military Occupational Specialty. Since assignments at the brigade level are typically given to the most junior FA40s, this can result in the atrophy of much of what the individuals learned during the Space Operations Officer Qualification Course. Their next Space assignment then becomes their first Space assignment, potentially leaving only one additional assignment before the officer must make a decision on retirement. Fortunately, most senior officers in the functional area are very aware of these challenges. Junior FA40s frequently receive the advice that they should do their best to show their commander what Space-based assets can offer him, but in the end they should focus on doing their best on whatever task they are assigned, whether it is related to Space or not. Although this type of advice does help relieve some of the anxiety a junior Space Operations Officer might feel when tasked to work outside his functional area, it would be better to not put officers in these positions in the first place.

Beyond the impact on the individuals, assigning FA40s to Fires Brigades would only tie up a limited resource that might better be used elsewhere. With only 235 FA40s throughout the entire Army Active Component, using six of them to fill what are essentially branch immaterial positions in the Active Component Fires Brigades does not appear to be the best use of our Space cadre. There have been a number of proposals for additional FA40 billets during the last several years. Shifting the personnel authorizations from the Fires Brigades to the most promising of these proposed positions has the potential to benefit the Army as a whole at little or no cost.

There may be a time in the future where the increased dependence on Space-based assets or the instability of the Space environment may require FA40s to be assigned to not just the Fires Brigades but to the Brigade Combat Teams as well. For now, however, brigade-level requirements can be handled adequately by the Division and Corps Space Support Elements. Reassigning personnel authorization from the Fires Brigades to elsewhere in the Space community offers a potential benefit to the Army at no cost and presents greater levels of professional development for the assigned officers.