

COMBAT CONTROLLERS - A MARINE'S "EYE-IN-THE-SKY" POINT OF VIEW

"I need you now...I need you now!" And then the radio fell silent. These words will forever be etched in my soul as the last transmission on the fires net from SRA Mark Forester on 29 Sep 2010. He is one of your fallen. An American hero who gave all. A man of character, compassion, love, commitment and patriotism. A combat controller and one you should all try to emulate.

Mark is the man who brings this old Marine fighter-attack pilot to you tonight. He fell under my watch and I took it personally. As Marines, we never leave anyone behind and in the case of Mark, I felt as if he was one of my own. When I returned home I felt compelled to travel to his parents and be one of the many to remind them what a hero their son was. I never dreamed this small act of tribute would blossom into so many amazing relationships. I now have a new family in the Foresters, and I feel as welcome here in your presence as I would at a Marine Corps graduation.

Many of you know Mark from his name etched on the brick outside the schoolhouse...the second to the last name called today during your moving push-up ceremony, but Mark is a man many of you never knew personally, and quite frankly a man I never knew personally either. For those of you in the room who did know him you were no doubt lucky based on the many stories I have heard and the caliber of the amazing people I have met since who claim to have lived in his awesome shadow. For me, I only knew a voice- a voice named JAG 28. This voice had personality, confidence and professionalism. This voice loved what he was doing. This voice was my mission. This voice gave all.

BGen Ham, fellow Colonels, SMSgt McHarney, fellow warriors, friends, family and esteemed graduates, thank you for the absolute honor of spending this sacred evening with you. For such an elite special fighting force to allow a common Marine like me to share this experience with you humbles me beyond words. In my dealings with your community, I have found an esprit de corps not unlike the tightest Marine Corps units I have witnessed. I had previously thought we Marines held the patent on this concept of brotherhood; however, I'll be reporting back to the Commandant that the Air Force CCT community has stolen our moral high ground in this area.

When SMSgt McHarney asked me to be your GOH for tonight I responded, "absolutely," without hesitation. It was an opportunity to honor SRA Mark Forester while giving back to a community I feel uniquely close to. I wouldn't miss this for the world. In fact, I had to reschedule my change of command ceremony for last week in order to deconflict with tonight's ceremony, much to the chagrin of my commanding general and then I had to cut my wife's mega Disney vacation by a few days as well. I'm still paying for that one but believe me it is worth it!

So this was going to be easy, right? I was an Air Force brat as a kid (I know Air Force), I've been a FAC (JTAC), speaking publicly in front of my Marines is something I do as a commanding officer all the time, and I've gotten to know a few Combat Controllers over this past year pretty well- too easy, right? So when I sat down to gather my thoughts on what to talk about why did I have such a hard time? What do I really know about these "Combat Controllers?" My dad was a pilot not a "snake-eater". Yeah, I was a FAC but you Combat Controllers are much more than just traditional FACs operating with traditional infantry battalions and you have much wider mission sets- I've never jumped out of an airplane! I turned to Mr. Gene Adcock's book, *"The Eye of the Storm"* for help and started reading about your history...that didn't help at all! It just reinforced how much I didn't know and intimidated this career Marine as it built you up to be giants among men with your impressive battle lineage. Thanks, Gene!

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So, what I realized is I shouldn't come in here tonight and try to talk about how to be the best combat controller...I'll leave that for the next speaking event by someone wearing a red beret. What I will talk to you about is a bit more personal and something I can speak with authority on. I aim to inspire you to excel in your chosen profession, give you a bit of confidence to put in your kit bag when it is dark, lonely and scary and lastly honor the man known as JAG 28.

Gentlemen, you have chosen a profession not a job. Your chosen profession is a profession of arms, and you are at the tip of the spear. As of tonight you are entering an elite band of brothers that I only wish I could be a part of. But this "*rite of passage*" accepting your red berets is just the beginning. A profession requires a lifelong commitment to training, learning and betterment in your trade. In your case, it requires a commitment to excellence because what you do affects people's lives. As I look out among your proud faces and those of your families and instructors I am reminded of me 16 years ago. It was 1995 when I sat in similar chairs with my family earning my "wings of gold" in Kingsville, TX. Wow, what an accomplishment. I had been in the Marine Corps just over three years, during which time all I had done is train. I'd trained for almost a year to be an infantry officer and then just over two years to be labeled a "*naval aviator*" with my "*rite of passage*" winging ceremony. This was, to that date, the proudest day in my, and no doubt, my parents' lives. My greatest achievement- boy had I accomplished something. I was finally in the brotherhood of Marine aviators, a brotherhood much larger than yours but filled with men with similar dreams and goals built upon foundations of hard work, dedication bravery and patriotism.

What I didn't realize that night was just how much I still had to learn. Getting my wings meant I had been "*accepted*" but it didn't mean I was ready. I could not drop my pack, despite the heavy load I had felt for years on my aching shoulders- hey, as a **Marine** pilot I rate using this "*pack*" metaphor...I've done my fair share of humping! Anyway, I still had over a year of more dedicated training to learn how to fly and fight the F/A-18, but what I didn't realize was how much MORE beyond that there was. Yes, I completed that follow-on training and joined my first fleet F/A-18 squadron "*ready for combat*" but I didn't know what I didn't know and I sure am lucky I had another year and a half to "*season*" before baptized in combat during the Serbia/Kosovo conflict. There were real people shooting real missiles at me and real people on the ground with my real bombs going "*BOOM*" next to them. Luckily for me all went well. Since then I committed myself more than ever to always be ready. I continued to learn, grow and refine my skills with multiple qualifications, flight leadership designations and tactical schools which prepared me for an additional three combat tours. And through all that I am still not good enough. Even as a commanding officer I am still learning and perfecting my combat trade, every day.

You, too, have arduous follow-on training after receiving your red berets tonight. You will then join your teams and be defined "*combat ready*" by the USAF. In our troubled times with the high demand for your skills I have no doubt you will not have the same "*seasoning*" time I was afforded. You must be ready on arrival to your teams. Celebrate tonight, take some well-deserved leave and then put your head into the wind and attack your next challenge. Every training day behind you is a training day you'll never get back. Make the most of every opportunity because you do not know what skill, knowledge or physical strength you will be asked to draw on in a critical moment in the future. In the end, you **MUST** be ready, failure is not an option. This drive will be with you for the rest of your career, and you will soon find the edification of accomplishing career goals is short-lived, continuously looking to the next horizon as you

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pass each milestone. When the fire to stoke the professional coals begins to fade, it is time to hang up the boots. Until then, it is 100% all the time. Nothing else is acceptable.

To the families, you must be proud. But you probably don't realize just how proud you should be. If you've ever seen the movie *Meet the Fockers*, remember the "*Wall of Gaylord*"? Bottom line is Gaylord's parents made ribbons for 10th place and they were proud of their son beyond words. That said, you parents have unconditional pride in all your sons do...but you don't need this kind of pride tonight. They earned *TRUE* pride. They are in an elite crowd, the smallest, toughest, most highly trained group in the entire Air Force. Elite isn't strong enough of a word but it is all I can come up with. Be proud.

So what can I offer you warriors in your kit bag for combat? Quite simply, confidence. Confidence in your tremendous training and in the support you will garner from men like me.

One of the overriding things that runs through a man's mind as he prepares for combat is, "Will I be ready?"..."How will I react?"..."Am I good enough?" These are natural questions and quite frankly they are healthy. Any man who arrogantly steps on the battlefield for the first time without a little introspection is a man I don't want to be standing next to. With these questions comes a razor sharp will to overcome, survive and conquer our fears. Gentlemen, what you will find is that your training has conditioned you more than you know. Your training has prepared you with Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) but it has given you much, much more. It has given you the presence of mind to flourish during times of stress, see clearly in the fog of war and the unwillingness to accept failure of an assigned mission in the shadows of those who have gone before you. Most importantly it has taught you that the worth of another teammate is above your own...and knowing that everyone feels this way is empowering. You will be amazed how your victorious attitude will drive you running forward to the sound of the guns in the face of danger and your finely honed TTPs will give you the tools to win when you get there. Falling back on muscle memory and training just happens and you will be amazed at how naturally it occurs. Whether it is rolling in on a danger close strafing attack or storming through a door as the third man in a stack it is all the same- training will take over. The good news for you is you are the most highly trained warriors out there so you start out with a distinct advantage over the enemy. Bottom line: Be confident in yourselves.

To the families, know that the training I speak of is the best. Your son's are the best. As a Marine pilot and former FAC, I am arguably very credible on the evaluation of combat control and across four combat deployments I have never seen the quality of a CCT matched. Knowing this should give you great peace of mind.

You men should also derive much confidence from others who support you. The reason the Marine Corps is so powerful a fighting force today is because we realized the power of combined arms, and specifically Close Air Support, years ago during the Banana Wars. In 1920 Major Alfred A. Cunningham, the father of Marine Aviation, said, "It is fully realized that the only excuse for aviation in any service is its usefulness in assisting troops on the ground to successfully carry out their operations." This attitude prevails today in my Marine Corps as we don't go anywhere without our air support. As a pilot I consider myself 100% a supporting element to the Marine Air Ground Task Force. Everything I do I do for guys like you. *YOU*, are my mission.

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But there is much more than just a pilot behind your support. I may squeeze the trigger and release ordnance, but in the case of my squadron there are over 200 Marines committed to you. During our recent combat carrier deployment ISO OEF, my Marines floated for seven months off the coast of Pakistan as we launched our eight hour missions ISO ground forces. While over a thousand miles away, my Marines slaved away on that flight deck and in the cramped spaced below- for you. "No better friend, no worse enemy" is our motto and we hold true to this ethos. The night before our first combat mission I gathered the whole squadron together and I talked about the importance of what we were about to do. I talked about the young men with dusty boots walking the streets of Marjeh and other unnamed places. I talked about how they walked those streets with an enemy lying in wait wanting to kill them and they lived with that fear. I talked about how they did their mission with confidence in their training, equipment, leadership and in the man on their left and right. But I added they lastly did so with the courage forged by knowing that when things got really bad then we would be there. We had the power to make the bad things go away. My Marines rallied to that cause and NEVER complained, with an unprecedented 100% combat sortie completion rate. It was eye-watering. Failure was not an option...sound familiar? To them, you are the man on their left and right. You, men they don't even know, are their brothers and they will never let you down. You are why we exist. When I told them about Mark Forester falling, they took it personally and rallied like never before. His sacrifice inspired the entire ship as well as our families back home. One man's sacrifice was unacceptable to those of us who support. This is the power and will of the force behind you. This is an impressive revelation, but even more so when realizing my squadron is just a microcosm of the whole of who is behind you when you are in harm's way, across all service lines.

So, I've lectured you on never being satisfied and tried to give you a bit of confidence in what you are about to do. As far as I see it I am the only thing standing between you and your red berets, so let me move on to what is really important for me to talk to you about. Let me talk a few minutes about Mark Forester.

Commanding: When I think about Mark I think of him commanding the battlefield and the radio. He just plain took charge. Let me tell you a story about our first engagement together and you'll see what I mean.....in the end, **combat command** is what I think Mark did **vice combat control**. He instilled confidence in all and set the tone of all our future work together. We will do well to learn the lesson of being commanding from Mark.

Vignette

At this point in his presentation, Colonel Latt strayed from his script just long enough to relate a short story about Forester and his command and control over his area of responsibility; a combat air-traffic-control zone typically referred to as the combat airhead.

*The first half of the story occurred a couple of days earlier in an area controlled by an Army joint tactical air controller (JTAC). The Army JTAC, obviously shaken by the close ground combat operations, called immediate support. Providing only basic pre-attack briefing, the JTAC cleared Latt's flight for immediate engagement. As Latt's flight rolled-in on the target, he came **face-to-face** with a set of AH-64, Apache helicopters. Latt immediately disengaged and went into a holding pattern until he could sort out the conflicting air; later completing the mission.*

*When Latt next encountered Forester, he was just a couple of days out from the earlier Apache incident. Naturally concerned about flight safety he quizzed Forester about possible conflictions. He said, Forester, with a firm and commanding voice responded: "**Don't worry sir; I own the airspace from here to the moon**". (Editor)*

Humility - By all accounts, Mark was an extremely humble man. In layman's terms, he didn't take himself too seriously. The battle on 29 September was lengthy and had some lulls in it. During one of the

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lulls.....I appreciated his humor and humility under times of stress. We will do well to learn the lesson of humility from Mark.

During the drive here I called Mark's brother and asked what he wanted me to say about Mark. He wanted me to talk about how "*selfless*" Mark was. So I will. **Selfless** - Mark ran to the sound of the guns...always. Near the end of that battle where he gave his life.....We will do well to learn the lesson of selflessness from Mark...the most important lesson of all.

We learn from Mark because it makes us better but also because by doing so we ensure he did not die in vain. He will always be remembered and his sacrifice honored. To you warriors and families, it should give you resolve and comfort to know you have entered in to such a family.

Dwight D Eisenhower once said, "History does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or the timid." Warriors, I'm here to tell you that this great Nation will soon entrust more than your fair share of freedom to you...and by virtue of your recent accomplishments, I can confidently say you are neither weak nor are you timid. You are heroes of this great Nation just due to you volunteering to serve. But I will highlight you are even more heroic by volunteering to serve in a dangerous and arduous capacity only chosen by few, and completed by even fewer. And you are heroes because you know in very short order you will be asked to put your training to use in the real world during real military operations and you accept this challenge with fervor...even anticipation. You are not a common group of men. You and your families should be eminently proud.

You have my heartfelt congratulations. I look forward to hearing "cleared hot" from you in distant lands. Until then, as we say in the Marine Corps, *Semper Fidelis*or Always Faithful.

JANUARY 30, 2011

Last weekend we had the honor of meeting Frank Latt, a U.S. Marine pilot who was providing Mark air support, with his F-18, the day he was killed. Frank contacted us just a few days after this happened and told us the details from his *eye-in-the-sky point of view*. He was able to show us on a map where that final battle took place. The story is very interesting and it was great to finally meet him.

Frank with Mark's Mom and Dad. (Family Photo)

MEETING LT.COL FRANK LATT



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He told us that after Mark's radio went silent, he had an emotional flight back to his carrier. He said even though no one had confirmed to him that his CCT had been killed, he knew it was so. He didn't know Mark's name at the time, so he started searching the DOD reports, and when he got some names, he began the internet search. This is where he came across Mark's info on Michael Andrew's website (www.michaelthemaven.com). He made contact with us, and planned to visit when he returned home. January 28, 2011 was a special day for the whole family. When we met him for the first time, it was with cameras and many people around, but as the seconds passed, the cameras seemed to disappear. The purpose of the cameras was a taping for a TV show that will air this Spring. The entire crew was very touched by the story of Frank and Mark and the relationship they had--not even knowing each other's names. Of course, this is common between pilots and controllers on the ground. We will post an update on this site, once we learn the premier date on Lifetime Channel.

Frank had worked with Mark on several missions and was very impressed with his skill, humor, and courage. After his initial radio meeting with Mark, Frank decided he would do anything this CCT asked him to do. Frank deserves great respect too. He's served several tours across the globe and has been in the Marines for about 20 years. We are grateful to him for his service and for reaching out to us. We will be seeing him again.

Frank and his wingman Kevin, did a flyover above our house in Haleyville Saturday morning. It was awesome. They were at 1000 feet and slow.



Frank and his wingman's planes have Mark's name on them. We'd like to see his name painted on a few of the bombs dropped in Afghanistan too.



Here are their planes parked in Birmingham. We were able to see these things up close and personal. Can you imagine being an enemy of the U.S. and they do a "show of force" about 500' above you? (Family Photos)

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*Mark Forester – the compassionate warrior, pictured here in the days just before his untimely death.
(Family Photo)*



Mark Forester is shown here shortly after graduation from Combat Control School. (USAF Photo)