

Outsourced Flight Support: Airborne Tactical Advantage Company



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on October 10, 2011

Categories: [Aerospace](#), [Programs & Tech](#)

Tags: [Military News](#), [Training and Simulation](#), [US Air Force](#), [US Marine Corps](#), [US Navy](#)

Comments: [No Comments](#)

Share this Story 25 [More »](#)

A trio of ATAC Kfir aircraft. An Israeli aircraft derived from the French Mirage, and designated F-21 by the Navy, the Kfir was once in the Navy inventory as a dedicated adversary aircraft. Photo courtesy of ATAC

The second in our series on outsourced flight support profiles Airborne Tactical Advantage Company, better known as ATAC. As in the [first profile](#), we take a look at how this commercial contractor provides support to the U.S. military and interacts with the DoD as well as discuss its potential going forward.

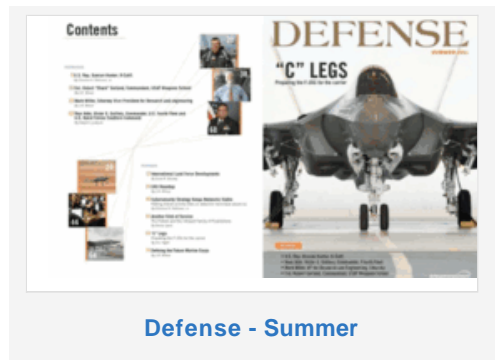
ATAC is one of the most advanced, longest-lived providers of outsourced flight support to the U.S. military. For nearly two decades the company has offered airborne tactical training, threat simulation and research and development support for the U.S. Navy and other clients.

Headquartered in Newport News, Va., at Newport News-Williamsburg International Airport/Patrick Henry Field, ATAC operates a fleet of tactical aircraft suitable for a variety of training and simulation missions. The firm owns and leases a mix of fighter/attack aircraft, including six Israeli Aircraft Industries Kfir C2s, 15 MK 58 Hawker Hunters, and two McDonnell Douglas A-4N Skyhawks. Two Aero Vodochody L-39s will soon join the fleet.

Company pilots are ex-Navy and Air Force, most with U.S. Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program (TOPGUN) or [U.S. Air Force Weapons School](#) credentials. Maintenance personnel are primarily ex-military as well, with many years of experience and the requirement to conform to a military oversight program.

ATAC was launched in 1994 when two Air Force Academy graduates, Jeffrey Parker and Larry Payne, saw an opportunity. By the mid 1990s, hefty military downsizing had almost completely stripped the Navy and Air Force of the adversary squadrons which had long provided organic "red air" or adversary training for active duty fighter squadrons. Parker and Payne started ATAC with the idea of providing commercial tactical flight services to fill in the gaps.

Latest Edition
[View all Publications »](#)



Featured Industry Profiles / White Papers
[View all Aerospace Profiles / Papers »](#)

HESCO Bastion
Concertainer: Engineered Force Protection

Concertainer units are the benchmark in force protection for many military organizations including the US...

Arnold Defense and Electronics, LLC

Since 1961, Arnold Defense and Electronics, LLC has been the leading supplier of rocket launchers...

Upcoming Events
[View all Events »](#)

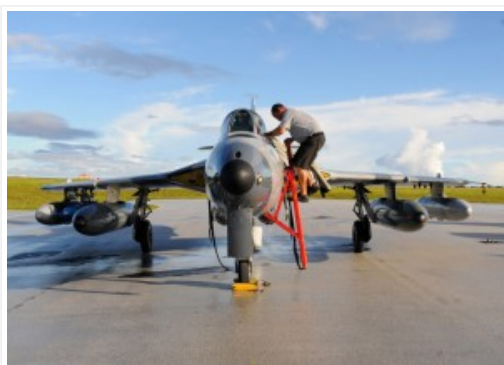
Your browser does not appear to support JavaScript, but this page needs to use JavaScript to display correctly. You can visit the HTML-only version of this page at:
https://www.google.com/calendar/hosted/faircountmediagroup.com/showTitle=0&showPrint=0&showTabs=0&showPrint=0&src=faircount.com_10mbpdk2qd8l40group.calendar.google.com&color=%232F6309&ctz=America%2FNew_York

Links
[View all Links »](#)

Ironically, it was the Navy that first took up ex-Viper driver Parker and T-37 flight instructor Payne on their offer. ATAC was initially a subcontractor to Flight International/L-3 Communications, supporting the flight test community at NAS Patuxent River, Md. The Navy remains the company's primary customer today, procuring their services via a Commercial Air Services (CAS) contract managed by Naval Air Systems Command's PMA-207. It's an arrangement much like the one the Navy has with Omega Air Refueling Services, Inc.

Through the 1990s, ATAC pioneered outsourced adversary support and training, becoming more and more familiar to Navy leadership. The firm operated on short term contracts for L-3 Communications/Flight International through the year 2002, when a new CAS contract led to the split of ATAC and L-3 to simplify operations. The company turned an important corner between 2004 and 2005, when it acquired the ability to simulate enemy airborne jamming.

Recently retired Navy Capt. Thomas "Trim" Downing, ATAC's director of adversary programs, is a former air wing commander (CVW-11), TOPGUN CO and Joint Strike Fighter Requirements Office head. He explains that in the wake of the U.S./Indian joint exercise "Cope India 2004" (wherein USAF F-15Cs were famously defeated in limited ACM engagements with Indian AF fighters) the Navy got serious about EW. ATAC's ability to offer red-air training complete with realistic enemy jamming simulation impressed naval leadership.



Michael Picatti, a maintenance contractor with Airborne Tactical Advantage Company, boards a MK 58 Hawker Hunter aircraft to conduct preflight maintenance during Valiant Shield 2010 at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, Sept. 16, 2010, a joint training exercise with Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force units focused on engagement of units at sea, in the air, and on land. DoD photo by Senior Airman Nichelle Anderson, U.S. Air Force

"I've been working with ATAC since I was the CO of TOPGUN in 2004," Downing recalls. "I had flown against them many times throughout my career. When I was the CO at Fallon was in the period right after the 'Cope India' exercises. One of the lessons to come from that experience was that the practice of electronic warfare (EW) had advanced in other parts of the world while we in the Navy had stagnated in that area to some extent. By that time, every threat airplane out there had an [EW] pod."

"One of the key attributes of ATAC is that we can gain capability rapidly," he continues. "Probably the most important thing ATAC did during that period was bringing onboard a jamming capability. That was really valuable for Navy flight crews to train against and increased our credibility. In fact, we now carry jamming pods on about 95 percent of our sorties. We actually carry pods that are government furnished equipment and they are very sophisticated."

[Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines](#)

[Kings of War](#)

[MARSOC](#)

[4GWar](#)

[Special Operations Command-Pacific](#)

[U.S. Naval Institute Blog](#)

[Asia Security Initiative](#)

[The Best Defense](#)

[NAVSPECWARCOM](#)

[Coast Guard iCommandant](#)

[Wired Danger Room](#)

[The Coast Guard Compass](#)



To date, ATAC has delivered more than 24,000 flight hours of support to the U.S. military. With aircraft stationed at NAS Point Mugu, Calif., NAS Fallon, Nev., MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii and Naval Air Facility Atsugi, Japan, ATAC is a part of most of the Navy's major training exercises and evolutions.

The firm's pilots and aircraft can be found participating in JTFEX and COMPTUEX exercises, Strike Fighter Advanced Readiness Program (SFARP) training, Air Wing Fallon training, Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor (TOPGUN) training, unit level training and Airborne Air Intercept Controller training. In the air-to-ground/sea arena, ATAC conducts JTAC (Joint Terminal Attack Controller)/FAC-A training, simulated close-air-support training, and subsonic and supersonic air-to-surface missile simulations, among other missions. R & D sorties have also been conducted in support of ship self-defense programs, RAM-TSS (Rolling Airframe Missile Program) and the ALE-50/55 towed decoy systems.

"We've participated in every one of the COMPTUEX, JTFEX and [NAS] Fallon Air Wing training cycles since 2005," says Downing. "We've flown over 1,100 hours of JTAC support in the last two years. There's a great need for JTACs with the current conflicts and the limiting factor in getting them trained was having enough airplanes available to get them their required controls."

An ATAC MK 58 Hawker Hunter fighter plane flies past a close-in weapon system (CIWS) 20 mm gun mount that will be tested during a towed drone unit (TDU) engagement. The aircraft will act as a tow aircraft for a TDU that will be engaged by the CIWS 20 mm gun mount aboard the amphibious transport dock ship USS Juneau (LPD 10). U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Michael D. Kennedy

ATAC has also continued to execute the "ship services" mission that has been a feature of its work since the company began operations, flying missile profiles against ships for initial air controller training for the ships' controllers.

"The operations specialists on cruisers and destroyers need a certain number of controls [controlling intercepts] during a certain time period in their training," Downing explains. "Let's say there's an Aegis cruiser with controllers in need of this training. We can run missile profiles against the ship so they can test themselves against that type of threat or we'll send a couple airplanes out to a ship to run intercepts to allow the ships' controllers to get their basic qualifications."

The USAF and Air National Guard have utilized ATAC for adversary support in "Red Flag" exercises, F-15 Operational Readiness Evaluations, F-22 Raptor training and in support of Special Operations Command SOTAC (Special Operations Terminal Attack Controller) courses.

Though the Air Force does not embrace outsourced flight support the way the Navy does, the service avails itself of ATAC's capabilities via MIPR (Military Interdepartmental Purchase Request) money, effectively buying a few of the hours the Navy contracts for with the company.

"The Navy is 'the make-it-happen' service," Downing says. "We're smaller and whatever works best, that's the way we want to do it. For the Navy it became a matter of realizing that we were going to have to outsource or we weren't going to get the training we needed. So it's not emotional for the Navy anymore."

Downing and ATAC believe outsourced flight support, particularly the kind of support they offer, could expand.

“Things are going to be different in the new budget environment than in those of the past,” Downing opines. “We’re going to lose force structure and manpower. It’s well understood that manpower is where your long term costs are. If you look at what it costs for an ATAC flight hour, \$6,000, that covers everything. The Navy doesn’t sign up for Delta Dental and TRICARE or retirement payments or anything else when they utilize our services.”



An ATAC Kfir, one of several operated by the company as adversary aircraft. Photo courtesy of ATAC

“Organic adversary support is going to cost even more in the future when you consider the advanced capabilities you will have to present and the cost of operating aircraft like F-22 and F-35. Right now, 50 percent of the Navy’s red air is done out of their hide [operational budget].”

Airframe fatigue is another cost. Over the last decade, the Navy has transitioned its reserve air wing units (CVWR-20) from a force that picked up the adversary support mission which traditional aggressor squadrons once flew, to a force prepared to deploy in support of the GWOT. Consequently, active squadrons have been called on to provide their own red air support. This further stresses the Navy and Marine Corps’ existing airframes and contributes to the fighter gap which exists today.

ATAC also sees opportunity for growth internationally.

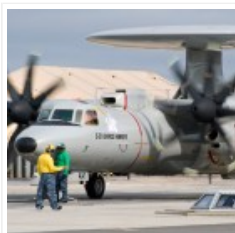
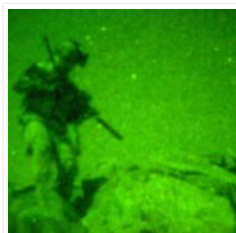
“There are RFPs out now from a couple entities in Europe,” Downing reports. “Asia hasn’t taken off yet but I think it will. The Middle East is also an area where I really think this concept will take hold. If you look at how many countries are buying the F-35 or trying to buy it, they’re all going to have the same issues as far as training.”

Now under long term contract, ATAC’s future looks promising in the near term. While the USAF may not be comfortable yet with significant outsourcing of tactical air services, the Navy’s relationship with ATAC has become more professional, productive and commonplace.

“When we walk into the auditorium at TOPGUN and sit down for a red air brief, it’s not a big deal for them to see us there,” says Trim Downing. “They’re very comfortable with who we are and how we are going to perform.”

Share this Story

Tweet



Leave a Comment



Large empty text area for comments with a small '5' icon in the top right corner.

Name *

Email *

Website

Notify me of followup comments via email

Submit Comment »

Not a DMN Member?

[Join Us!](#) or [LOG IN](#)

Categories

- [Defense-Wide](#)
- [Aerospace](#)
- [Land Forces](#)
- [Naval](#)
- [Spec Ops](#)
- [Homeland Security](#)
- [VA / MILMED](#)
- [Multimedia](#)
- [Profiles / Papers](#)

Tag Cloud

[Military News](#), [Issues](#), [Military History](#), [US Navy](#), [US Military](#), [US Army](#), [US Marine Corps](#), [US Air Force](#), [Research and Development](#), [Programs](#), [World War II: 70 Years](#), [US Coast Guard](#), [Centennial of Naval Aviation](#), [Fighter Aircraft](#), [Commentary](#), [Rotary-wing Aircraft](#), [C4ISR](#), [Small Arms](#), [Attack Aircraft](#), [Surface Ships](#), [Desert Storm Anniversary](#), [Armored Fighting Vehicles](#), [Logistics](#), [Training and Simulation](#), [Unmanned Aircraft Systems](#)

Our Newest Tweet

Follow us » on

DefenseMediaNet: Day 2 of #AUSA2011 - stop by booth #1569 to see everything DMN has to offer!
 Tuesday, October 11, 2011