The Purple Team:
Aerial Counter-IED, Insurgent Interdiction

CPT MAT KILGORE AND CPT SEAN STAPLER

"Engine power control levers to fly; systems, CDUs and PDUs are all in the normal operating range. ENG RPM 100 percent; fuel 2,300 lbs. Caution advisory is good; avionics is now as required; crew passenger mission equipment check.

"Black 36, you good to go?"

"We are up Bluestar; let's roll."

The feel of the UH-60L helicopter breaking contact with the ground sends a thrill through all the Soldiers and crew members on board. The 11-man team, consisting of one squad of Infantry Soldiers from Task Force (TF) Iron, one interpreter, and two Navy explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) technicians all know that their chain of command has entrusted them to safely execute one of the most dynamic and fluid mission sets of their career — aerial counter-improvised explosive device (IED) and aerial quick reaction force. The mission set was born out of a need to provide better security over the expansive and dynamic environment of Regional Command (RC)-West, Afghanistan.

Throughout Operation Enduring Freedom, air assault operations and air movement tactics have been an important part of counterinsurgency operations. The challenging terrain of Afghanistan as well as the dispersion of maneuver forces has made Army Aviation a valuable resource crucial to movement, maneuver, and sustainment of light Infantry across the battlefield. As NATO maneuver forces withdraw from Afghanistan, it has become more important than ever to combine Army Aviation and Infantry to achieve effects utilizing an economy of force. Recently, the Soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 108th Infantry's TF Iron; 3rd Battalion, 158th Aviation's TF Storm; and EOD technicians from Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Paladin successfully used air movement and air assault tactics at the patrol level to interdict insurgent activity in the wide expanse of RC-West.

Photos courtesy of authors

A UH60L helicopter inserts ground troops on a small hill top to overwatch friendly convoys moving through a valley in Farah Province, Afghanistan.

The Problem Set: RC-West and the Ring Road

Physical terrain in Afghanistan covers a large spectrum from mountainous river valleys to wide arid flatlands. The provinces of Baghdis, Herat, Farah, and Ghor in western Afghanistan are a similar microcosm and constitute the same variation. Populous areas are few and far between with minor agricultural collectives filling in a small amount of the gap. Forward operating bases with significant logistical support activities, much like the populous areas, are also scarce. This leaves a challenge for maneuver forces attempting to secure terrain or reach out to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) for mentoring missions while still sustaining long-term framework operations. Highway 1 or the "Ring Road" remains a critical artery in western Afghanistan to move troops, supplies, and equipment. The International Security Forces Afghanistan (ISAF) as well as ANSF, civilians, and arguably criminals and insurgents rely upon it as a principal line of communication. The primary concern of TF Iron during this period was a section of this route more than 300 kilometers in length from Herat City to the Nimroz provincial border, a large area to secure with very little combat power and Afghan security force presence.

During the preparation phase for deployment, it became apparent to both TF Storm leadership and the Alpha Company "Blue Stars" that they were going to be asked to cover a massive expanse of terrain with limited aviation assets. The TF would have a relatively small number of assault, heavy lift, and attack assets to cover the entirety of RC-West's area of responsibility (AOR). Due to this constraint, TF Storm began to cross-train mission sets throughout the different airframes. The TF developed a training plan that included the introduction of reconnaissance operations across the UH-60 assault platforms. The thought was to cross-level UH-60s and AH-64s to spread abilities and weapons platforms throughout the RC and to diversify the airframes capabilities. This mission set would be designated as a "purple team" based on the color designation given to attack (red) and assault (blue) airframes. At the same time, the "Blue Stars" conducted situational training exercises for vehicle interdiction training. This training provided air crews with the experience of conducting a dynamic mission set that would require a high level of skill and crew coordination and prepare them for future operations while deployed.

The inclusion of purple teams also facilitated the

Two UH-60L aircraft attempt to locate landing zones in Afghanistan's Gulistan River Valley. An AH-64 can be seen providing cover in the far background.

needs of RC-West. At the time, there were many requests for attack assets that were unsupported due to the limited amount of airframes and a lack of "bank time," the cumulative amount of flight time available before the next major maintenance event by aircraft type. This was leaving a limited amount of resources available to dedicate to the security of Highway 1. By cross-leveling attack and assault air frames, TF Storm was able to cover twice as much territory in support of forces on the ground.

While these teams were effective at increasing the coverage for ground forces operating in the area, they still faced some challenges in effectiveness. Visualizing and positively identifying an enemy emplacing an IED or laying a rocket were not always conditions that allowed for release of munitions — depending on the circumstances and location. Most situations required troops on the ground to positively identify a hostile intent or action and direct attack aircraft to fire. This restricted a purple team's ability to release munitions except when in direct support of ground forces or in direct response to enemy fire. Possible enemy encountered enroute to or from an objective had to be referred to ground forces that may or may not be able to act; this was not an incredibly efficient method when fighting a hard-to-detect enemy with many avenues of escape.

Aerial Operations at the Patrol Level

In order to counter the threats ISAF and ANSF were facing and be as efficient as possible with available rotary and EOD resources, planners and commanders from both Aviation and Infantry task forces designed an aerial patrol to augment TF Storm's purple teams. The design process resulted in an airmobile force (with organic close combat aviation support) that could identify IEDs from the air and then quickly react to secure the site and destroy the device. In addition to Infantry and EOD, additional enabling capabilities included a combat medic, a forward observer trained in joint fires who could control supporting unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) platforms or fixed-wing aviation support, and an interpreter. These capabilities not only reinforced the effectiveness of the ground force, but increased the team's flexibility to respond to a variety of situations on the ground and in the air.

With the inclusion of a second UH-60, an "indigo team" was created. The availability of a second assault aircraft increased the size and capability of the ground force from an Infantry squad with enablers to a small platoon with the same enhanced capabilities. Increasing the size of the ground force reduced the risk significantly of operating independently and increased the team's overall range by performing missions without dedicated ground support nearby. Additionally, the flexibility to add machine gun or light mortar teams to the indigo configuration made the team much more flexible and able to handle a wider range of circumstances encountered on patrol. While both these concepts are relatively simple, the execution was something that had not been attempted by either task force before and required a reasonable amount of support from Infantry, Aviation, and EOD communities in order to properly prepare and execute .

With all necessary units committing forces to participation, a refined task organization and concept was put into practice beginning with general air assault refresher training and gaining familiarity between all elements involved. The aircrews, disposal technicians, and ground force all went through classes on the ground followed by multiple aerial situational training exercise lanes covering IED identification, aerial insertion, coverage, and extractions. This allowed all elements involved to go through the "crawl, walk, run" stages of training and quickly become proficient in the mission and gain a level of comfort with each other. Key to this fusion was the ability to execute training missions at real combat speed under actual conditions in sector. The team would respond to an imaginary IED at a predetermined place on the road to rehearse actions on the objective. These training missions were essential in building synchronization between the ground force, the aircraft, and the supporting disposal technicians to ensure efficient and decisive execution during actual missions. When coupled with a regular combined planning process (including operations and intelligence updates) and truncated air mission briefs prior to execution, the system soon became standard procedure and was integrated into the units' normal patrol cycles and mission schedules.

During training and eventual execution of missions, the capabilities of the teams

quickly became evident. Not only was the team incredibly effective at responding to found IEDs and clearing repetitive placement sites, they also proved useful at several tasks including vehicle and personnel interdiction to deny enemy access to key terrain, screening or providing advance guard for convoys, and providing a highly mobile reserve force for current operations. Additionally, they were able to counter indirect fire by patrolling known points of origin during high probability launch times. Specifically, the indigo team's ability to conduct split operations under a single command proved effective in interdicting multiple individuals or vehicles at once. They could also secure an IED site for reduction with one element while interdicting a possible triggerman with the other element.

Limitations were also obvious. The aircrafts station time made maximizing availability through precise planning crucial. Allowing assault aircraft to break station with troops on the ground supported by attack aircraft increased station time significantly and allowed for continued ground operations without considerable increase in the risk to the troops. The normal tactical limits of a small, lightly armed ground force also played a role in the decision to insert ground forces into a particular area. Consideration was given as to whether or not a request for a motorized reserve would be required to accomplish the mission. Any time that a ground quick reaction force was outside a certain response time, the ground force commander and air mission commander had to decide whether the risk to ground troops outweighed the immediacy of the requirement to reduce the IED. This was most prevalent in urban or populous areas where attack aircraft rules of engagement were more restrictive and the ability to withdraw or reinforce troops in contact would be considerably more difficult.

Operation Shrimps Net: Tactical Test of the Aerial Patrol

In July 2012, TF Iron assisted Italian army forces in the retrograde of personnel and equipment from two remote outposts in the Gulistan River Valley, Farah Province, Afghanistan. With support from TF Storm, TF Iron dedicated forces to conduct aerial patrols in support of this retrograde with significant success. The 3rd Platoon, B Company, TF Iron; U.S. Navy EOD technicians from CJTF Paladin; and aircrews from the 3rd Battalion, 158th Aviation, 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, manned indigo and purple teams for over 16 hours a day for nearly 10 straight days. The first patrols, conducted prior to execution of the operation, were tasked with reconnaissance of the river valley. Purple teams returned with significant intelligence on the geography, pattern of life in populous areas, and the trafficability of possible routes. As the movement into the valley to retrograde the Italian bases began, indigo teams acted as an advance guard to interdict insurgents forward of the main body, identify and reduce IEDs already in place, and reinforce any elements that came into contact. On day one of the operation, these teams successfully identified, secured, and reduced two IEDs forward of the main body's arrival, preventing the injury and damage that could have resulted from an enemy detonation. The flexibility of the aircraft and the mobility of dismounted ground forces allowed the teams unrestricted access to the difficult terrain where the IEDs were located.

Throughout the remainder of the operation, these aerial teams found and reduced three more IEDs ahead of the main body in support of forces securing the valley in preparation for withdrawal. Additionally, these teams interdicted moving vehicles and groups of personnel encroaching on the security of the main line of communication and route of advance as well as directed attack helicopter ordnance on an enemy command and control node. These actions kept a well-hidden enemy continuously off balance and under cover, restricting their freedom of movement and ability to command and control insurgent cells in place along the valley. Overall, the mission was a success in large part to the actions of these aerial teams, their incredible capabilities, and their persistent presence on the battlefield.

The Way Ahead: A Closer Relationship Between Infantry and Aviation

It is no secret that a combined arms force can bring significantly more to any operation than combat arms operating separately. Airmobile and air assault tactics are regularly used in support of operations to achieve surprise and audacity, as well as increase a commander's reach on the battlefield. Likewise, using these tactics in day-to-day counterinsurgency patrols can be a powerful weapon against a fluid and flexible enemy. Making utility and attack aviation forces available at the battalion task-force level on a regular basis in both training and deployment can ensure an effective and lethal team develops that can respond to a variety of threats.

In training, utility aviation and Infantry should be closely linked to ensure a comfortable relationship with each other in combat. Making aerial and air assault tactics part of a regular training plan with support from higher level commanders that control these assets is essential to building a properly prepared force in both communities. An Infantry force that continues to develop these skills and can understand the capabilities of aviation will enable maneuver commanders to better utilize this valuable asset in the overall maneuver plan. Likewise, aviators who continue to train with Infantry increase their skill set and learn the needs of the maneuver commanders that they may be asked to support. An increasingly paralleled training relationship is, in short, mutually beneficial to both communities as well as incredibly valuable to the operational units that these teams ultimately benefit.

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CPT Sean J.R. Stapler is currently serving as commander of A Company, 3rd Battalion, 158th Assault Helicopter Battalion, Katterbach, Germany. He deployed as part of Task Force Storm to Shindanad, Afghanistan, and was in charge of 10 UH60L helicopters, four CH47F helicopters, and 75 Soldiers. He has also completed two other deployments to Afghanistan as part of the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade out of Fort Bragg, N.C. One deployment was as a platoon leader in A Company, 2nd Battalion, 82nd CAB in 2007 in RC South (Kandahar) and East (Jalalabad), and the other was as an assistant S3 in 2-82 in RC South (Zabul Province) in 2009.