

‘Framing the Problem’ of Integrating Army Aviation in the BCT

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Successful brigade combat teams (BCTs) at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) leverage division-level capabilities to solve brigade-level problems. When fully integrated into the BCT’s combined arms maneuver, the combat aviation brigade (CAB) provides an aviation task force (AvTF) with a powerful leverage point for the BCT in the decisive action (DA) fight. Successful CAB integration provides the commander with options through air assault, attack aviation, reconnaissance, and other aviation core competencies. These options, when employed effectively, provide a capability currently unmatched by our adversaries. At JRTC, the BCT is flooded with a non-organic capability and often struggles to marshal the team in a combined arms fight. This article is not an all-encompassing “to do” list for integrating aviation into the BCT’s plans and operations, nor is it a simple restating of doctrinal tasks from Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-04.1, *Aviation Tactical Employment*. The goal is to promote discussion in the BCT staff, provide the BCT commander topics to cover when issuing planning guidance, and encourage synchronization between the AvTF and the BCT.

To achieve this goal, ask yourself or your staff, “What can the AvTF do for the BCT in a DA training environment? What items should be addressed in commander-to-commander dialogue on the road-to-war and during the Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation? What do the BCT and AvTF staffs need to discuss to be successful?”

Trends at JRTC demonstrate that Army aviation is underutilized, often employed for on-call attack and limited air movements after initial entry operations. The drivers behind the low utilization are many, but often stem from a counterinsurgency (COIN) hangover and the lack of understanding regarding what questions to ask among the staff when planning and preparing for operations. The following questions, broken down by three major operations



Soldiers from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division conduct an air assault during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 19-04 at Fort Polk, LA, on 18 February 2019. (Photo courtesy of JRTC Operations Group)

typically conducted during DA rotations under the superordinate task of mission command, assist the BCT and AvTF staff to forge a lethal combined arms team.

Mission Command

The philosophy of mission command is most critical to integrating aviation capabilities into the BCT's operation. Shared understanding of the commander's intent and, above all, establishing mutual trust are imperative to achieving the commander's intent. ATP 3-04.1 states that mission command is the "foundation for air-ground operations" and provides the "legitimacy of empowerment... from the air mission commander through brigade commander." That legitimacy relies on the mutual trust built between the BCT and supporting CAB task force. In order to build shared understanding of what the BCT can trust the AvTF to provide, consider the following:

- Does the BCT staff understand AvTF crew/asset availability over space and time?
- Has the BCT staff created a scheme of maneuver early enough with the AvTF to allow massing assault or attack assets at the decisive point?
- Is the AvTF liaison officer (LNO) the "right person for the job" and able to speak on behalf of the AvTF commander? Are there enough LNOs? Is the LNO employed as the assistant brigade aviation officer (BAO) or as the voice of the AvTF commander?
- The BCT commander should ask if the LNO is a pilot-in-command, air mission commander, or flight lead, and ask the AvTF commander what mission sets (attack, assault) are represented in the LNO team.

The science of mission command is increasingly important as the battlefield geometry between the BCT and the supporting AvTF grows. A mismatch exists in the current Army-level fielding distribution of mission command systems, resulting in technical gaps between aviation brigade formations and the BCT's capability to leverage digital command and control (C2) systems. Imagine the BCT operating on a four-lane divided highway (Warfighter Information Network-Tactical Increment 2), while the AvTF is on a parallel frontage road using Joint Capabilities Release (JCR), FM, and a dial-up modem to build shared understanding. BCT and aviation leaders must address these tactical compatibility challenges during home-station training. These certification events help commanders understand the capabilities and limitations of their linked (and delinked) C2 systems to best illustrate to their staffs on how the units will share information. Too often, the lack of interoperability hinders synchronized staff actions between the BCT and AvTF.

- What is your staff doing to keep the AvTF on the same planning horizon as the BCT? Is the BCT's on-the-move mission command system capable of transmitting data to the AvTF line-of-sight C2 systems?
- If the BCT wants to use the Army Airborne Command and Control System (A2C2S) console, when was the last time the AvTF conducted a full validation exercise of it? Does the BCT commander understand exactly what systems the A2C2S provides during the flight?
- Are the BCT and AvTFs operating on the same UHF waveform for satellite communications (SATCOM)? Can the BCT's command posts communicate with aircraft on SATCOM?

Joint Forcible Entry (JFE)

Successful mission command integration sets the conditions for the opening event of most JRTC DA rotations — the JFE. According to Joint Publication 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations*, JFE operations "seize and hold lodgments against armed opposition" while neutralizing the enemy and establishing conditions for follow-on forces to enter the area of operations. At JRTC, these are normally air assault or airborne operations aimed at expanding lodgment and protecting key infrastructure. JFE air assaults are combined arms maneuvers conducted to seize key terrain or attack the enemy where it is most vulnerable, not to move a force faster than it would move by foot or vehicle. A well-planned air assault throws the enemy off balance and presents multiple dilemmas to the adversary.

The most successful air assault operation during a CTC rotation is typically the JFE assault, largely because the level of coordination between the AvTF and the BCT is at its peak at the end of reception, staging, onward movement and integration (RSO&I). The BCT is typically not focused on a close tactical fight and dedicates planning and rehearsal time to this combined arms operation. Later in the rotation, with the BCT staff focused on bayonet-range targets in



Paratroopers assigned to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division take up defensive positions after landing during an air assault as part of a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation at Fort Polk, LA, on 2 November 2015. (Photo by SSG Jared Gehmann)

front of them, the energy to plan and synchronize tends to fall to the wayside. To help counter this tendency, BCT commanders and their staffs should ask themselves:

- Does the BCT own the timeline for this combined arms maneuver, or is the BCT staff letting subordinate battalions “work it out” on their own?
- How flexible is the intelligence collection plan for the operation? What is the backup plan if weather prevents launch?
- Is the AvTF using its unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) to augment maneuver or is the BCT staff attempting to task them as part of the intelligence collection (IC) plan? Did the brigade spectrum manager account for multiple frequencies needed to support the additional UAS and has the brigade engineer battalion (BEB) UAS platoon contacted the AvTF to exchange the laser codes and uplink/downlink frequencies needed to facilitate manned-unmanned operations?
- Is the BCT willing to assign battlespace in front of the cavalry squadron to the AvTF, enabling them to conduct a screen during scout infiltration? Does the BCT staff understand the math associated with aerial security missions (example: how long a troop of eight AH-64s can doctrinally provide a screen over a given boundary or area of operations)?
- Does the BCT order consider the AvTF as a singular entity in the priority of fires, or does it reflect the AvTF serving as the sensor for a ground unit, possibly with a higher priority of fires?
- Has the AvTF offered to infiltrate the BCT’s dismounted scouts? Could you deceive the enemy through false scout infiltrations? Did the AvTF offer to create caches through things like low cost/low altitude (LCLA) aerial resupply?
- What crews/aircraft are available when the BCT commander anticipates JFE/assault mission execution? What is the trade-off for massing assault assets? Are you prepared to have limited aerial sustainment operations for 36 hours to shift aircrews away from a “massed asset” mission? The same question applies to massing attack assets.
- What is the follow-on support plan for the ground force? Did the AvTF plan to sustain the ground force commander by air and are the attack aviation assets available to provide firepower at their most vulnerable time?
- Is your staff familiar with the air assault planning process (AAPP) and the events associated with it? The air mission coordination meeting (AMCM), the air mission brief (AMB), and the combined arms rehearsal (CAR) are the big-ticket items critical to the success of these missions. The “96-hour air assault planning process” was originally designed for a full-size BCT assault. Can your unit do a smaller mission in a shorter timeframe?

- Has your staff considered a smaller force inserted further into the enemy’s area to present the “multiple dilemmas” outlined in doctrine?
- Did the staff consider an artillery raid to eliminate a high-payoff target? Does the AvTF have the lift assets synchronized in space and time to conduct both the assault and artillery raid?
- Did your brigade support battalion (BSB) conduct the proper fuel testing on their M978 fleet to support aviation refuel operations if necessary? Is the BSB prepared to receive tactical control (TACON) of a forward arming and refueling point (FARP)?
- Does the AvTF plan to establish a FARP and tactical command post forward to extend the operational reach of the BCT and the AvTF?

Defense

FM 3-0, *Operations*, states that defensive operations “deter or defeat [an] enemy offense... gain time... and develop conditions favorable for offense.” The goal of defensive operations is not as simple as surviving the opposing force (OPFOR) onslaught. When division-level enablers such as the CAB and division artillery (DIVARTY) are successfully requested and integrated, the defense can defeat the enemy and force culmination or capitulation. The BCT staff often defaults to COIN-based attack aviation planning and assumes attack weapons teams (AWTs) are available on short notice. These plans fail to develop engagement areas in the BCT deep fight and count on AWT support to defeat mechanized forces in a close fight. In the defense, it is critical that attack aviation is massed, with detailed intelligence triggers and a layered collection plan aimed at determining the time and place of the enemy main effort. The BCT often fails to fully utilize lift/assault forces in the defense, and the AvTF fails to offer solutions to BCT sustainment or protection challenges with Black Hawk and Chinook assets.

A successful defense determines indicators of the enemy’s decisive operation (with a plan to identify those indicators), establishes obstacle belts to force the enemy into designated engagement areas (EAs), and delivers the required firepower when the enemy presents itself in those EAs. Desynchronized defenses fail to utilize all the enablers at their disposal to achieve those goals. To assist in mitigating the impact of a desynchronized defense, BCT and AvTF commanders and staffs should ask the following questions:

- Did our best attack aviation planner work with the BCT S3 to provide input for the concept of the operation? Did the BCT fire support officer (FSO) play a role in the development of the AvTF EAs, and are the requisite graphic



An Apache assigned to the 5-159th Army Reserve Aviation Command engages a target during a live fire at Fort Polk on 1 August 2018. (Photo courtesy of JRTC Operations Group)

control measures understood and disseminated at all levels? Are attack aviation routes (and other airspace control measures) depicted in the airspace control order and do they facilitate rapid indirect fire mission?

- Do the BCT and AvTF S2s work jointly to develop named areas of interest, facilitating enemy destruction in established EAs? Is there a sensor-to-shooter rehearsal planned?
- Is air volcano available? Did the BCT assign a headquarters to lead the volcano operation, such as the BEB, and assign a supporting headquarters, such as the AvTF?
- Does the plan support the lead time required to load and launch the air volcano? Is the BCT able to dedicate the UH-60 assets needed for air volcano without affecting assault missions?
- Will the AvTF treat air volcano as a combined arms mission with the BEB and conduct the supporting rehearsals?
- Is the AvTF medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) platoon postured to weight the main effort? Are routes to/from Role 1 and 2 medical treatment facilities in the air control order?
- Did the BSB establish pre-packaged loads of critical supplies, and are pre-planned pickup/landing zones established? Did the AvTF participate in the sustainment rehearsal?

Attack

When rotational units conduct offensive operations, they are imposing their commander's will upon the enemy. The purpose of the attack — or offense — is to defeat or destroy enemy forces or seize key terrain. Many of the questions posed earlier in the article are relevant to the attack. Successful AvTFs fully integrate into the BCT planning cycle, are considered a maneuver element within the BCT, and find ways to apply aviation assets to achieve key tasks within the BCT commander's intent. The AvTF commander should review the BCT commander's intent and propose near-fully staffed aviation missions aligned against key tasks, such as an artillery raid to destroy a high-payoff target or an air assault to seize key terrain commanding an avenue of approach. Successful BCTs in the attack discuss the following while preparing for their mission:

- If the conditions for a battalion-sized air assault are not present, would multiple company-sized assaults present just as much of a dilemma for the enemy? Is the BCT using aviation to seize key terrain through air assaults? Does the BCT plan to use attack aviation to interdict the enemy mechanized force and prevent the enemy from committing his reserve?
- Is the AvTF trained on counter-radar terrain flight techniques to facilitate attack of targets in the BCT deep fight with minimal joint fires/electronic warfare support?
- Does the BCT airspace plan facilitate rapid clearance of fires while balancing flexibility for aviation assets?
- Is time available to plan a joint strike mission? Is a subordinate headquarters tasked with integrating joint tactical air controllers (JTACs), attack aviation planners, air defense/airspace planners, and the BCT FSO to accomplish that task?
- Are the maneuver battalions and AvTF postured to infiltrate combat power rapidly to key terrain in order to delay, disrupt, or provide early warning to the main effort?
- Does the BCT JTAC understand how the AvTF functions as a maneuver asset vice a close air support (CAS) platform?
- Is the AvTF involved in BCT targeting meetings? Did the BCT assign high-payoff targets to the AvTF with associated BCT-enabling assets to prosecute the target?
- Can the AvTF rapidly move BEB counter-mobility teams forward to delay enemy movement?
- Did the BCT and AvTF S2 teams determine as many landing zones as possible within the BCT area of operations? Did the CAB terrain section provide landing zone (LZ) analysis?
- Is the BCT main effort allocating AvTF assets accordingly? For example, is the BCT prepared to allocate MEDEVAC platforms only to the main effort, leaving supporting efforts without aerial evacuation platforms?

Conclusion

BCTs succeed in the decisive action training environment through successful integration of enabling capabilities. That integration cannot happen overnight during RSO&I at a CTC and requires frequency and repetition. Units must

develop habitual training relationships, conduct multiple iterations of staff processes, and validate their systems prior to departure from home station.

The aforementioned planning considerations will not automatically result in a winning plan. However, framing the BCT problem through the lens of these questions or discussion points will result in a combined arms team with a better understanding of the gaps in its plan and a path to improved enabler integration. The AvTF must leave the BCT's planning process with the knowledge of what key tasks can be addressed with aviation assets. Using this problem-framing exercise, the AvTF can remain on azimuth during parallel planning and align their assets to the BCT's specified, implied, and key tasks.

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