

Air Assault School:

Foundation of the Air Assault Nation

1LT Jonathan Reisher

While the Army transitions to a post-Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) posture, the future structure, funding, and even the list of potential adversaries remain ambiguous as ever. Since “no plan survives first contact,” the Army must continue to develop a force that is disciplined, flexible, physically capable, and tactically competent.¹ For this reason, many units across today’s Army are developing their own air assault school programs...

The U.S. Army’s use of the helicopter began during the Korean War but came into its own during Vietnam. Leaders utilized the maneuverability of airmobile operations to quickly shift Soldiers and equipment in the rugged topography of Southeast Asia. The Sabalauski Air Assault School (TSAAS) was founded on 31 January 1974 by MG Sydney Berry in response to lessons learned during the Vietnam War.² Since then, no other era in the history of our Army has witnessed an increase in the number of air assault school programs like the period since the GWOT.³ Organizations outside the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) contact TSAAS on a regular basis to get their Soldiers, agents, or employees into air assault programs. These organizations include Special Forces Groups, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), National Guard units, Air Force squadrons, and all of the Army’s 10 active divisions. This growing interest stems from what the school provides units and their leadership. Air assault operations provide commanders at the tactical and operational levels distinct advantages in unified land operations. Additionally, the air assault school program equips those commanders with capable, disciplined, and fit Soldiers with which to conduct air assault operations.



CH-47F Chinook helicopters from 6th Battalion, 101st Combat Aviation Brigade transport HMMWVs from the 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), during Operation Golden Eagle at Fort Campbell, Ky., on 8 April 2014. (Photo by SSG Joel Salgado)

Air Assault School

Despite age, gender, ethnicity, religion, or any other categorization with which one might identify, graduates of air assault school earn their wings solely by passing the air assault standard.⁴ A student is molded and conforms to tough physical and academic standards or they are unquestionably cut from the program. “Trained, disciplined, and physically fit air assault Soldiers” are the required traits of a TSAAS graduate, for these are the traits that win the nation’s wars.⁵ The school develops these traits during the 10.5 days of instruction and is called the gateway to the 101st Airborne Division because it compels students to achieve the division’s physical and technical standards.

A well-trained Soldier provides a unit with enhanced capabilities; for the 101st Airborne Division, it means an entire brigade can be moved in one lift. The division is the only unit in the world capable of conducting a brigade-sized air assault. However, what is often overlooked are the residual effects on the Soldiers who successfully complete the course. Air assault school creates healthy competition and elevates Soldiers who perform at a higher level than the Army’s minimum standards. Even the newest privates strive to earn their wings and prove that they belong. Leaders assigned to the division who are not air assault-qualified are required to attend the school — from team leader to the commanding general. The Air Assault Badge represents a goal to be earned: Soldiers at all levels push themselves to prove worthy of being in and leading air assault units. The school provides more than a skill set to the Screaming Eagles; it is also a way to unify and distinguish Soldiers.

Discipline begins with physical fitness, and air assault school is no different. It uses a mixture of physical events to challenge students. Students begin zero day with a two-mile run and an obstacle course, followed the next day by a six-mile road march. The culminating event of the school is a 12-mile road march the morning of graduation.⁶ In addition to physical corrective training, a common occurrence at air assault school, TSAAS has also added a two-mile Interceptor Body Armor (IBA) run, a four-mile formation run, and aeromedical physical training. The purpose for the additional training is to push students mentally and physically. Between the physical training, layouts, and the “break and formation procedures,” all students receive an education in discipline. Like the newest private, a colonel or sergeant major in the course is treated by the instructor as a roster number. Students hold rank only within the class. Though the periods of instruction and format of air assault school has changed, the program is designed to push all Soldiers attending the course in some way. The composition of the Army may change, but the unforgiving and brutal nature of combat does not. All military training must consider this lesson, particularly after operations in Afghanistan have ceased.

Advantages of Air Assault Operations

A properly executed air assault gives commanders advantages in three warfighting functions: sustainment, fires, and maneuver. Air assault operations allow commanders to apply these capabilities in a cohesive and precise manner. By integrating ground and air assets, combat power can be emplaced directly on an enemy’s center of gravity. Further, ground commanders can rapidly shift Soldiers, equipment, and supplies to the portion of the battlefield that requires reinforcement or to exploit success.

Airborne operations have a particular shock value on the enemy, but paratroopers cannot sustain themselves in continuous combat operations without further support. Once on the ground, the light Infantry Soldier only has the equipment, food, and water that can be carried in his rucksack. Although low-cost, low-altitude (LCLA) drops provide a means of resupply for airborne units, they can be costly in the event of miss-drops. Furthermore, rotary wing aircraft can also conduct LCLA drops in support of the air assault Soldier. Using rotary wing aircraft to sling-load supplies and equipment absolves the problem of recovery and the potential of a damaged load. Sling-loading equipment also allows air assault

operations to get High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), artillery pieces, engineering assets, and other equipment quickly into the fight. For example, a cavalry troop can air assault in CH-47 Chinooks with their fully loaded HMMWVs sling-loaded below. However, air assault-qualified Soldiers are needed to rig, inspect, and plan in order for these sling-load operations to occur.⁷ Unlike other light Infantry formations, air assault units are not as restricted by resources because they have a more reliable means of combat support.

Establishment of a forward arming and refueling point (FARP) has been a proven method of resupply that also extends the range of air assault operations. Though often cumbersome in planning, they provide air assault units a consolidated point in which to receive supplies and fuel. Further, there is oversight on resupply operations where officers and senior NCOs can manage the distribution of supplies. A FARP can also serve as a staging point for extended air assault operations beyond a helicopter's normal range. A notable example is Forward Operating Base (FOB) Cobra, part of Operation Desert Rendezvous during the First Gulf War. The 101st Airborne Division's 1st Brigade "Bastogne" air assaulted onto an Iraqi base more than 93 miles behind hostile lines. Once forcibly taken, equipment and supplies were then sling-loaded to the occupied Iraqi post, which was renamed FOB Cobra, in preparation for follow-on operations. The next day, the 3rd Brigade "Rakkasans" used FOB Cobra to resupply their aircraft and conduct an air assault another 62 miles to the Euphrates River. This movement placed Soldiers more than 152 miles behind enemy lines, cutting off elements of the retreating Iraqi army.⁸

Overwhelming firepower and surprise are both hallmarks of the American way of war. The artillery raid has been in use for hundreds of years. First implemented by Napoleon, this method has been used to exploit and expand upon the lethality of the artillery. The air assault artillery raid normally utilizes UH-60 Blackhawks or CH-47 Chinooks to sling-load a M119A2 105mm howitzer or a M777 155mm howitzer platoon to a location that best supports the maneuver element.⁹ This small group quickly fires its mission and can reposition itself to another area of support. An artillery raid is self-sustaining for up to 48 hours, during which time it can provide continuous support of advancing Infantry formations. Admittedly, airborne operations can also drop artillery far behind enemy lines, but once staged they cannot be quickly moved. Often the guns are sling-loaded off the area of operations. With organic, flexible indirect fire assets, air assault commanders are able to maintain indirect fire support during a high-tempo combined arms fight.

For the commander of a light Infantry force, the ability to move Soldiers and equipment quickly can be the difference in success or failure. Commanders from company to division level are able to deliver cohesive combat power on a specific target. Armored and motorized units can also achieve this aim. However, these units cannot achieve the same level of surprise and initiative as an air assault operation. Air assault units rapidly move and redeploy Soldiers and equipment to affect the changing, fluid modern battlefield. The ability to conduct operations with both the Fast Rope Insertion/Extraction System (FRIES) and Special Patrol Insertion/Extraction System (SPIES) significantly increases the versatility of an air assault mission. Aircraft are not necessarily hampered by finding areas to land in order to infiltrate or exfiltrate Soldiers. Rather, they can place Infantry forces right on target independent of the surrounding terrain. Also, rotary wing aircraft allow units to move casualties off the battlefield quickly. Moving wounded to a higher level of care increases the likelihood of survival while concurrently freeing the ground unit from caring for the casualty for an extended time. Due to their flexibility and utility, air assaults quickly seize, retain, and exploit the initiative. They also allow air assault units to shift between offensive, defensive, and stability operations.¹⁰ Air assault operations are not the only way to conduct unified land operations, but rather air assault units give commanders the ability to enact this doctrine fully with a light Infantry force.

Conclusion

An air assault division gives the nation a forcible entry capability that is unique to rotary wing aircraft. Air assault school programs are expanding across the Army because commanders need the capabilities that air assault operations provide in addition to a more disciplined, physically fit Soldier. The benefit for the Army is an increased light, combined-arms capability that has advantages in sustainment, fires, and maneuver. As threats change to America, our Army must mold and train a force that can respond accordingly. Air assault school offers the entire Army one more tool to train our Soldiers and organizations to succeed in combat.

Notes

¹ This quote is attributed to General Helmuth von Moltke, the Elder prior to Germany's 1870 invasion of France.

² The Airmobile Badge was authorized for local wear by MG Sidney Berry on 1 February 1974 which was the graduation date for the first airmobile class. A copy of this order is displayed at the Sabalauski Air Assault School.

³ In addition to the school at forts Campbell, Drum (N.Y.), and Benning (Ga.), there are new Air Assault Schools at Fort Bragg (N.C.), Fort Hood (Texas), Fort Bliss (Texas), and at Schofield Barracks (Hawaii, reopened). There has been further discussion about possibly building schools at Fort Lewis, Wash., and at Fort Stewart, Ga.

⁴ The question of standards in military schools has continuously been an emotional debate. The issue of changing standards is a topic for another article. The concept that stricter standards create a better result is undisputable fact but one that must be balanced with the unique mission of each school. The fact that air assault school maintains one standard as outlined by the U.S. Army Infantry School reflects the only consideration within a larger dialogue that I consider for my article: Standards are always non-negotiable.

⁵ The quote is taken from MG James McConville, commanding general, 101st Airborne Division (AASLT) from August 2011 to June 2014.

⁶ Physical requirements for the air assault course can be found in the periods of instruction (POI) approved by the commanding general, 101st Airborne Division (AASLT). This POI is also approved by the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning.

⁷ Sling-loads must be rigged and certified by a Soldier who is E4 or above and an Air Assault, Sling-Load Inspector Certification Course, or Pathfinder graduate.

⁸ LTC John Broadrick, "Air Assault Logistics During Desert Storm: A Personal Experience Monograph," (U.S. Army War College), 1993. The initial air assault utilized 370 aircraft that flew 1046 sorties. The second air assault to the Euphrates used 60 CH-47s and 125 UH-60 sorties to move the entire brigade. For the purpose of moving one Infantry brigade at a time, the 101st Airborne Division currently maintains two combat aviation brigades.

⁹ 101st Airborne Division Gold Book, Chapter 6, Section I.

¹⁰ ADP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, October 2011, 1.

1LT Jonathan E. Reisher currently serves as executive officer of the current Sabalauski Air Assault School, Fort Campbell, Ky. He is a 2011 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and has one deployment to Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)'s 3rd Brigade Combat Team "Rakkasans" where he served as an Infantry platoon leader.