

God Bless Thinking Soldiers:

A Former Battalion Commander's Advice to Future Combat Commanders

COL (RETIRED) FRANK HANCOCK

I was recently browsing the military history section at a book store when I happened to pick up the book *Tactics*. As I leafed through the book, I quickly came to the conclusion that *Tactics* was a civilianized version of the U.S. Army's Field Manual 3-90, published in 2013. I skimmed the book looking for new concepts and examples, since I am still avidly interested in military affairs, and I was pleasantly surprised that the historical example used to exemplify the concept of the offense was the maneuver conducted by the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) from 24-28 February 1991 during Operation Desert Storm. Interestingly, the accompanying example of a defense was the Battle of Kursk, the largest tank battle in history fought between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1943. The 101st Airborne's actions during Operation Desert Storm are very familiar to me as I was the commander of the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment — one of nine air assault infantry battalions in the division while it was deployed in support of the Iraqi operation.

Referred to by former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates as “the tip of the spear” in Afghanistan, the 101st Airborne Division is able to plan, coordinate, and execute brigade-size air assault operations capable of seizing key terrain in support of operational objectives, and is capable of working in austere environments with limited or degraded infrastructure. These particular operations are conducted by highly mobile teams covering extensive distances and engaging enemy forces behind enemy lines. Its unique battlefield mobility and high level of training have kept it in the vanguard of U.S. land combat forces in recent conflicts. More recently, the 101st Airborne has been performing foreign internal defense and counterterrorism operations within Iraq and Afghanistan.¹

During the 101st Airborne Division's 24 February 1991 attack into Iraq, my battalion was the lead infantry element tasked with seizing the terrain necessary to establish Forward Operating Base (FOB) Cobra. FOB Cobra was more than 100 kilometers inside Iraq and approximately 400 square kilometers in size. It was the division's first objective inside Iraq and was considered critical to follow-on operations by both the division and corps commanders. This air assault was to become the largest operation of its kind in history. Although it was accomplished in a seemingly effortless manner and used as “the textbook example” of an offense, it was far from a flawless operation. Moreover, it came surprisingly close to being a very different and potentially costly endeavor for the division.



As I recalled the operation and the events that preceded it, it occurred to me that an article about the “two thinking Soldiers” who — more than anyone — made the operation a success would be worthy of, as the late radio announcer Paul Harvey would say when dissecting a complex subject, “...the rest of the story.”

The Plan

“It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

On 24 February 1991, the 101st was scheduled to start the ground phase of Operation Desert Storm. Soldiers from the division's 1st Brigade would be the first American troops to seize terrain within Iraq. Planners would call it the longest and largest mass heliborne attack in history. If the plan went accordingly, the 1st Brigade would leap over the Iraqi frontlines and establish FOB Cobra more than 100 kilometers behind Iraqi frontlines.²

The establishment of FOB Cobra would be the first phase of the 101st's assault into Iraq. The plan called for FOB Cobra to be transformed into a giant fuel station with aviation fuel being flown into the FOB after it was secured. The plan called for follow-on operations including an air assault by the 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne on 25 February to the Euphrates Valley, another 100 kilometers further into Iraq, and to cut Highway 8 as an escape axis for Iraqi forces trying to get out of Kuwait and back into Iraq.

The helicopters that transported 3rd Brigade to the Euphrates Valley would then fly to FOB Cobra to refuel and return to Saudi Arabia. Apache and Cobra attack helicopters would also use the FOB as a rapid refueling point to extend their reach into Iraq. Without the seizure and establishment of FOB Cobra, the maneuvers planned for by the 101st would not be feasible.

The Intelligence Estimate

“Therein lies the rub!”

— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Most competent commanders will tell you that when conducting a heliborne (air assault) operation the most important aspect of planning is a timely and accurate intelligence estimate. Heliborne operations are inherently dangerous, especially upon landing. The 1st Brigade's assault into FOB Cobra required that the Blackhawk helicopters be optimized to deliver the largest possible amount of combat

resources in the least amount of time; therefore, each helicopter carried 14 Soldiers. Any enemy troops near the landing zone could potentially play havoc with the helicopters during their approach to the landing zone and while they are on the ground.

In the days preceding our historic assault, the intelligence picture for the landing zones assigned to my battalion displayed no confirmed enemy activity. However, there was one intelligence report that had identified an “unoccupied trench line” approximately a kilometer long in the area designated as our Alpha Company’s landing zone. Alpha Company was the lead company of the battalion’s air assault, and the “unoccupied trench line” bisected not only the landing zone but the area where the aviation fuel containers were to be delivered. The consensus of the intelligence (S2) sections of my higher headquarters, XVIII Corps, 101st Airborne Division, and 1st Brigade concurred that the trench line was “unoccupied” and the area around it was a suitable and relatively safe location for the Alpha Company landing zone.

“Thinking Heroes”

“A man who does not think for himself does not think at all.”
— Oscar Wilde

In November 1990 excerpts of the book *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* by LTG (Retired) Hal Moore and Joe Galloway were published in the magazine *US News and Report*. The excerpts told the story of the heliborne assault of elements of the 1st Cavalry Division in the Vietnam War in 1965. Plagued by a faulty intelligence picture, the operation was very near a catastrophe.

This article was heaven sent because after reading the excerpts for myself, I had my battalion staff and company

commanders read the article and made the point that we were not going to make the mistake of launching an operation based on poorly thought out intelligence. I was fortunate to have under my command a battalion staff and commanders that were a serious and “hard” group of Soldiers. They took my words to heart.

As time ticked down to the kickoff of the ground war on 24 February, all commanders and staff members busily refined their plans and wholeheartedly attempted to create as accurate an intelligence picture as possible. Within my battalion, CPT Jose Delgado headed my S2 section. He was a very bright and inquisitive intelligence officer whom (he would later recount) was particularly troubled by the intelligence picture developed by the battalion’s higher headquarters. Specifically, CPT Delgado was concerned about the kilometer-long, reportedly unoccupied trench line in the middle of Alpha Company’s sector. “Why would someone make that much engineer effort without covering it with troops or artillery fire?” he would later ask in explaining his uneasiness.

CPT Delgado and his intelligence analyst, SGT Jesus Gonzalez, subsequently went about gathering as much information about the trench line as they could. Three days before the actual air assault, CPT Delgado and SGT Gonzalez hit pay dirt when they came across a satellite imagery report that indicated movement at grid coordinates that coincided with the trench line. This information clashed with the intelligence picture of corps, division, and brigade which surmised that the area was devoid of enemy activity or presence. On the evening of 22 February, less than 36 hours before the air assault, CPT Delgado, SGT Gonzalez, the battalion executive officer (MAJ Chappel), the battalion S3 (MAJ Dempsey), and the battalion

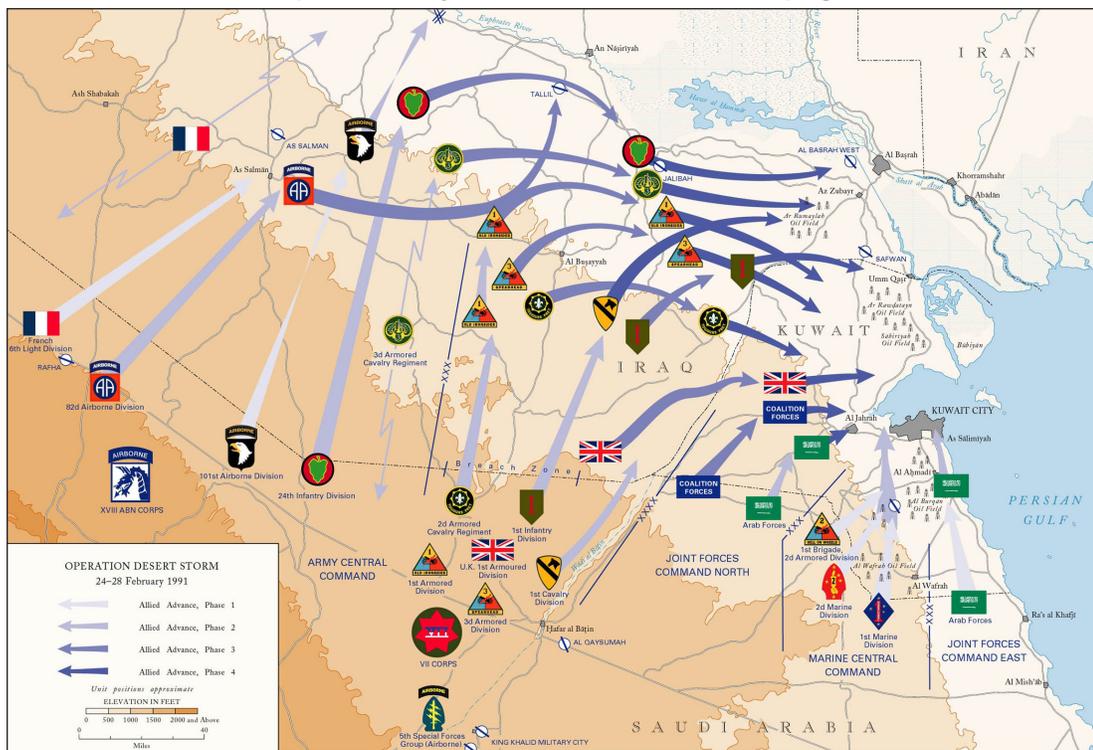
command sergeant major (“Rock” Riley) all briefed me on their analysis and conclusion that the trench line was occupied by Iraqi troops and that, if we followed the current plan, it could potentially become a disaster.

The Conversation and the Attack

“It is no use saying, ‘We are doing our best.’ You have got to succeed in doing what is necessary.”
— Winston Churchill

I was confronted by the fact that my entire staff believed that one of our landing zones had an entrenched position in it, and that I now had to make the case to the brigade commander at the eleventh

Map — Summary of the Offensive Ground Campaign



hour to change the location of that landing zone. It was now less than 36 hours before the air assault began, and moving the landing zone would create a significant ripple in the air movement table for the operation. More importantly, my staff was adamant that the intelligence picture of the brigade, division, and corps was inaccurate despite the fact that their information was ostensibly better sourced and their staff more senior. This was not going to be an easy conversation.

I raced to the brigade headquarters with MAJ Dempsey and CPT Delgado to attempt to convince the brigade commander that our lead landing zone needed to be moved. The conversation did not go well. The brigade commander was not convinced that our intelligence assessment of the situation was superior or more accurate and stated that he had been assured that the landing zone was not occupied. More troubling, he emphasized that my Alpha Company WOULD land on the predetermined coordinates. Extremely disappointed by this decision, I struggled for the remainder of the evening on ways to ameliorate this decision to protect the success of the mission and the lives of my troops.

The next morning (24 hours before the air assault), the brigade commander relayed the message that he had changed his mind and that the landing zone could be moved two kilometers south of the trench line. It would be impossible to convey the amount of relief felt by my staff and me. Although I was never privy to the reasons why the landing zone was moved, it proved to be enormously providential for my battalion.

The air assault proceeded the next morning on 24 February. A sandstorm had delayed the assault so the lead elements landed around 0820 hours instead of 0520. The Apache attack helicopters that provided fire support for the landing were taken under fire by forces inside the trench line which (after the adjustment) was now two kilometers north of our Alpha Company landing zone. One Apache helicopter was shot down in the ensuing engagement. After approximately two hours of Apache and Cobra attack helicopter support, Air Force F-16 and A-10 attacks, and a 105mm artillery battery pounding the Iraqis occupying the trench line, the enemy forces surrendered. A battalion of the Iraqi's 45th Infantry Division — 344 Iraqi soldiers — emerged from the trench line after what could have potentially been a long and protracted struggle to seize the terrain they occupied. Subsequent debriefings indicated that their mission was to ambush what they were briefed would be a French armor column moving up a highway behind the trench line. The Iraqi troops had camouflaged themselves by digging into the reverse slope of a hill where no tactical aerial reconnaissance had detected their activity.

Epilogue and Lessons Learned

All's Well That Ends Well

— William Shakespeare play

After the initial contact and subsequent surrender of the 344 Iraqi soldiers, Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters started to bring in supplies of aviation fuel for the next leg of the 101st Airborne's plan. On 25 February, 3rd Brigade flew to the Euphrates Valley and the returning helicopters refueled

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as planned at FOB Cobra. The 1-327th IN was awarded the Valorous Unit Award, suffered no casualties, and was even memorialized in a painting done for the graduating Command and General Staff class at Fort Leavenworth in 2001.

There isn't a day that goes by that I fail to think about what would have happened if CPT Delgado and SGT Gonzalez had not thought for themselves, made their own analysis, and had the moral courage to speak up in the face of adversity. My best estimate is that the helicopters carrying Alpha Company into that landing zone would have had a very, very hard morning. The Iraqis within the trench line would have had the initial advantage of being in a fortified position and in a good location to defeat or severely hamper the initial landing of troops near the trench line.

In light of the aforementioned story, I think it is wise that current and future commanders heed a few lessons learned from this operation. First, always have the moral courage and confidence to think for yourself and make your own analysis. While higher headquarters provides information, only YOU can make your own analysis. Second, listen to your subordinates... they also have good ideas and frequently have access to information that you may not be aware of or considered in your deliberations. I listened to my staff and my brigade commander (after sleeping on it) ultimately listened to me. Lastly, do not be afraid to make waves. If you have something to say — say it and have the conviction to stick to your argument.

Notes

¹ "Gates Praises 101st Airborne as 'Tip of the Spear,'" Defencenews-online.com, 8 December 2010, accessed from <http://www.defencenews-online.com/land/gates-praises-101st-airborne-as-tip-of-the-spear>"; SSG Joel Salgado, "101st Airborne Division Conducts Brigade Air Assault," Army.mil, 9 April 2014, accessed from https://www.army.mil/article/123707/101st_airborne_division_conducts_brigade_air_assault; Russ and Susan Bryant, *Screaming Eagles: 101st Airborne Division* (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing Company, 2007).

² Daniel P. Bolger, *Death Ground: Today's American Infantry in Battle* (NY: Presidio Press, 1999).

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Jose Delgado also contributed to this article. He served as the battalion S2 (intelligence officer) of the 1-327 IN during Operation Desert Storm. He is currently serving as the director of the Current and Emerging Threats Center for the Department of Homeland Security.