

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Air Assault into Iraq

LIEUTENANT COLONEL FRANK R. HANCOCK

At 0725 hours on 24 February 1991, the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division launched a massive helicopter assault as it struck 90 miles inside Iraq with more than 2,000 soldiers. The brigade's mission was to establish a forward operating base (FOB Cobra), which would support the division's attack on the following day to sever Highway 8 in the Euphrates River Valley.

The air assault consisted of four infantry battalions (the 1st, 2d, and 3d Battalions, 327th Infantry, and the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry); one field artillery battalion; two attack helicopter battalions; a cavalry squadron; and several lift battalions. Upon landing, the lead infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, was surprised to find an Iraqi infantry battalion (340 soldiers) entrenched in a battle position within its sector of the FOB.

Over the next three hours, the battalion employed attack helicopters, artillery, close air support (F-16s and A-10s) and infantry weapon systems to force the Iraqi battalion to surrender.

In executing our portion of the division's assault into FOB Cobra, we had our fair share of luck. We also came away with some lessons we had learned, or relearned, about air assault. Our experience may be helpful to future battalion commanders, S-3s, and company

commanders who will plan and execute the air assaults of the future.

Analyze your intelligence reports. In preparing for the air assault into Iraq, the battalion received a blizzard of different intelligence products. Intelligence summaries from the 101st and the XVIII Airborne Corps, aerial photography, and video tapes of our landing zones (taken by Apache helicopters) were all available to us. Because of the volume of information, it was a challenge to sift through all the reports to ensure that the critical intelligence for the air assault was incorporated into our planning.

For example, in studying one of the summaries, the battalion S-2 plotted an "unoccupied" trench line adjacent to our lead company's landing zone. Since we knew there was an Iraqi logistics site (15 to 30 men) three kilometers north of this trench line, the S-2 recommended that we move the landing zone (LZ). Because of his analysis, we moved the LZ two kilometers farther south to keep from landing 500 meters from the dug-in Iraqi battalion. At battalion level, the staff and the commander must analyze their intelligence reports. No one is in a better position to understand the relevance of a particular piece of intelligence.

Don't underestimate the capabilities of the enemy. When a battalion is

preparing for an air assault, its leaders need to think carefully about the enemy's capabilities. In this air assault, we had to consider whether chemical weapons would be used, the possibility of counterattacks by enemy armor, and whether enemy artillery could reach our LZs.

In these particular cases, our analysis was correct: The Iraqis did not have the delivery systems in our sector to release chemical weapons; their armor was destroyed by the combination of air power and the 6th French Division to our west; and their artillery was not within range of our LZs. On the negative side, however, we were surprised by their air defense capability (four S-60 guns surrounded the Iraqi positions); they did have much more firepower than expected (10 mortars, more than 300 rocket propelled grenade rounds, and several types of larger antitank weapons); and they had very good night vision capabilities. Because of the vulnerability of air assaults, planners must not underestimate the capabilities of future foes who will probably have weapons comparable to our own in effectiveness and lethality.

Artillery—Don't leave home without it. When an infantry unit exits its helicopters, it needs artillery *in range* to support it. While attack helicopters and close air support can supplement



artillery fire, the all-weather, reliable, and time-independent artillery becomes the infantryman's weapon of choice.

In planning an air assault, the infantry commander should ensure that artillery will be available to him when he lands. Although attack helicopters and close air strikes were used against the Iraqi battalion, artillery was the *prime* weapon in forcing their surrender.

If you can't talk, you can't command. When the battalion landed in Iraq, it was necessary for me to talk to 11 different stations—Company A, Company B, Company C, Company D, scout platoon, mortar platoon, brigade tactical command post (TAC), the battalion alternate TAC, attack helicopter battalion, artillery battery, and close air support aircraft. These stations were spread out over 15 kilometers and moving, some of them under fire. To synchronize these elements, prevent fratricide, and at the same time strike at the enemy, we had to have good communications.

Some of the steps we took to provide reliable and redundant communications were:

- Place the S-3 and an alternate TAC with the lead company.
- Place the battalion TAC in the center company so it could talk to the lead and rear companies.
- Bring the Air Force liaison officer's vehicle and the battalion commander's vehicle into the LZ (by CH-47) for the increased range and power of their radios.

- Ensure that the attack helicopter battalions knew the frequencies and call signs of the committed force.

These steps helped give us good communications throughout the air assault. The battalion commander is the *maestro* for his part of the battle: He has to orchestrate the attack helicopters, the CAS, the artillery, and the infantry units, and if he can't talk to these elements, he can't effectively use them.

If the objective has enemy on it, land somewhere else. The argument about whether or not to land on an objective goes back to World War II airborne doctrine. Some people believe you can land on a small defending force and overcome it with sheer violence and mass. Considering, however, the lethality of automatic weapons, hand-held surface-to-air missiles and the vulnerability of helicopters, I believe it is much wiser to land off an objective that is occupied by even a small force. Although attack helicopters, CAS, and artillery can suppress an enemy position, you can never be sure that all opposition has been eliminated until you actually reach the objective. Landing off the objective allows you to get organized and synchronize your firepower before attacking. Landing on an occupied objective may prematurely put soldiers in jeopardy.

Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. In preparing for our air assault, we had plenty of time to rehearse the mission, and we did this from squad to division level. In the battalion, we had three full-

blown rehearsals (everyone in the battalion), and in the last one had the key leaders (battalion and company commanders) assessed as casualties. Rehearsals will verify plans, work out the bugs, and synchronize the attack.

Train your subordinates, and then trust them to do the right thing. Finally, and most important, an air assault can be depicted as a centralized concept executed in a decentralized manner. Our battalion's portion of the air assault had more than 600 soldiers and 10 vehicles, lifted in by 22 Black Hawk and seven Chinook helicopters in two separate lifts. The air assault covered more than 90 miles, lasted more than two hours, and spread the battalion over 15 kilometers.

To pull off this type of attack, leaders must train their subordinates to think for themselves and make decisions on their own. Commanders who retain too much control, or who fail to train their subordinates to think and act on their own, will have a tough time executing an air assault of this magnitude.

The successful execution of this air assault was a result of a careful intelligence assessment, a detailed understanding of the enemy's capabilities, responsive artillery support, well-planned command and control, and thoroughly trained subordinates. While airmobile operations may have unique characteristics, the principles that contributed to the success of this mission were the same ones that commanders have relied upon in past wars. Leaders who apply them in future conflicts will be able to move quickly, accomplish the mission, and redeploy with minimal losses among the soldiers and equipment entrusted to their care.

Lieutenant Colonel Frank R. Hancock commanded the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, during its air assault into Iraq. He is a graduate of the British Army Staff College and the Army War College and is presently assigned to the Strategy and Policy Branch of U.S. Pacific Command. He is a 1972 graduate of the United States Military Academy.
