
Figure It Out:

An Infantry Support Platoon and an Airfield in Afghanistan

CAPTAIN MIKE BASKIN



The purpose of this article is to describe one infantry support platoon's challenges to operating an efficient landing zone/pick-up zone and flight landing strip (FLS) while deployed as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Task Force Bobcat (2nd Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, out of Schofield Barracks, Hawaii) deployed to Ghazni, Afghanistan, in late April 2004. Ghazni, which is about 200 miles south of Bagram, allowed for ground resupply from Bagram via local national line haulers. The local national line haulers could bring all classes of supply to the battalion forward operating base (FOB), or separately to three individual company FOBs located within 10 miles of the battalion FOB. At that time, my infantry support platoon, which normally worked for the battalion S4 to provide the physical manpower to push logistics from the battalion or forward support battalion to the company level, was attached to a rifle company as a mounted maneuver platoon. Aerial flights were used for mail delivery and the transportation of a handful of Soldiers to and from Bagram. In effect, the ground route accessibility of Ghazni and the developed Bagram system of working with national line haulers had rendered us out of our traditional job. My platoon could not have been happier.

In June, TF Bobcat received orders to execute a no-notice move to Uruzgan province and its capital, Tarin Kowt, and work for the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (22nd MEU). It was understood that the MEU would leave in July, and TF Bobcat would replace it. Upon arriving at our new FOB, the task force commander, Lt. Col. Terry Sellers, directed that my platoon move back under the S4 as a battalion asset. My platoon sergeant and I split the platoon into two equal parts, with my platoon sergeant repositioning to push logistics out of Kandahar (roughly a field trains command

TF Bobcat Support Platoon personnel manage three CH-47s and a C-130 on the ground simultaneously at FOB Ripley.

Capt. Ryan Beltrami

post), and my section receiving, distributing/pushing logistics from FOB Ripley (the combat trains command post [CTCP]) to forward units. We put away our anti-tank platoon/company and heavy weapon manuals and began to review FM 3-21.38, *Pathfinder Operations*, and FM 3-450-3/4/5, which covers external load procedures. The battalion immediately executed operations as an additional maneuver battalion under the MEU. At the same time, my platoon worked shoulder to shoulder with the MEU's landing support detachment (LSD), which had similar critical tasks, including sling-loading (external loads) and convoy escort and had also split into equal sections between Kandahar and FOB Ripley. At FOB Ripley, the MEU had reopened a former Soviet dirt FLS and put down large amounts of rock and mobi-mats, dust abatement mats spiked into the earth to reduce brownout when rotary wing assets landed. The LSD configured external loads to resupply units in the field, as well as to receive KC-130 sorties.

In mid-July, the MEU redeployed back to their home station, and TF Bobcat moved under its brigade-level headquarters, Combined Task Force Bronco. The MEU took its direct air support center (DASC), air traffic control section, crash fire rescue team, and LSD. My support platoon, with Soldiers trained as infantrymen, had large shoes to fill.

It is important to note several key points here. The MEU operated with its organic Air Combat Element (ACE) including fixed wing aircraft (AV-8s and KC-130s) and rotary wing assets (AH-1, UH-1, CH-53 and CH-46). The sheer number and availability of the MEU's aircraft allowed an organic capability to

move large amounts of personnel and equipment quickly.

As the MEU departed FOB Ripley, TF Diamondhead, the Army aviation task force based in Kandahar, replaced the MEU's forward arming and refueling point (FARP) with its own. While the MEU had used four refueling points at its FARP on the western side of the FLS, TF Diamondhead chose to position a two fuel point FARP on the eastern side, where the MEU had positioned its CH-46 casevac aircraft. Note the MEU had placed large river rocks, from 6 to 12 inches in diameter, on both sides of the FLS to prevent brownout from FOB Ripley's three-inch top layer of "moon dust" sand. Moving the fuel point to the eastern side of the FLS allowed Soldiers access to rotary wing helicopters if the FLS was also in use. Additionally, USAF personnel and the CTF Bronco air officer immediately flew into FOB Ripley to administer Landing Zone Safety Officer (LZSO) certification for TF Bobcat personnel to advise C-130s arriving at FOB Ripley. It was understood that my platoon and I would be responsible for the FLS and the LZ/PZ area. Finally, to help man the perimeter of FOB Ripley, my platoon was assigned responsibility for one guard tower.

RUNNING THE FLS

TF Bobcat's support platoon adapted quickly to running the FLS. A section of the 528th Engineer Battalion from the Alabama National Guard maintained the dirt runway and graded it whenever C-130 wheels began to produce large ruts. We ensured that the endzones were clearly marked with VS-17 panels in the prescribed manner and that no vehicles, animals, or personnel were on the FLS when aircraft arrived. The S3 and battle captain would ensure I knew a C-130 was arriving the night before based on the air tasking order (ATO). Due to the length and set up of the FLS, an aircraft could land from either direction. After trial and error, we determined that the best place to off-load and on-load C-130s was at the very end of the runway, and mandated that aircraft fly in only one way to facilitate operations while on the ground. Aircraft would land, taxi to the very end, complete a u-turn, offload and then upload equipment and passengers, and then depart. This minimized the amount of time the aircraft stayed on the ground and allowed us to pre-stage a forklift and vehicles. A slight downhill grade of the FLS made it easy to upload pallets from that end as well.

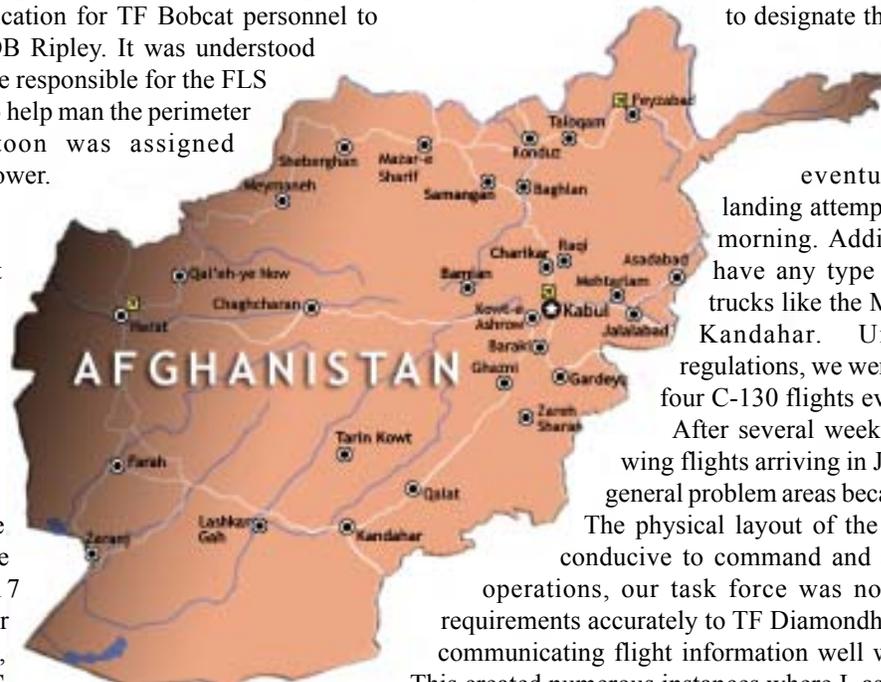
As the platoon leader and OIC, I was responsible for giving the C-130 the advisory of the state of the airfield, wind, how we wanted the aircraft to approach and taxi, and the approval to land at the pilot's discretion. Most of my platoon had attended the LZSO class, and after the first few arrivals, we began to rotate through administering the fixed wing advisory, which proved the point that even a junior Soldier can advise a C-130 with a little practice.

Later, it occurred to me that a C-130 scheduled by the Air Force could arrive at exactly the same time as rotary wing aircraft scheduled by TF Diamondhead. After the first time that happened, and simply asking the CH-47s to go around while the C-130 took off, it became apparent that de-conflicting fixed and rotary wing aircraft was actually quite simple. If the C-130 could land first, we wanted it to land first, as rotary wing aircraft could fly over the C-130 to land at the FARP.

One situation did occur when rotary wing assets were grounded in Kandahar due to dust storms, and a C-130 arrived to evacuate an injured local national just as limited visibility crept in. The flight landing strip was not rated for limited visibility flights, and we were not equipped with landing lights or infrared beacons. We attempted to use lightstick bundles and eventually vehicle lights to designate the landing strip. After returning again later that evening and making pass after pass, the C-130 eventually called off the landing attempt and landed the next morning. Additionally, we did not have any type of crash fire rescue trucks like the MEU or the airfield at Kandahar. Under Air Force regulations, we were therefore limited to four C-130 flights every 14 days.

After several weeks of rotary and fixed wing flights arriving in July and August, three general problem areas became quickly apparent. The physical layout of the LZ/PZ area was not conducive to command and control and efficient operations, our task force was not forecasting its air requirements accurately to TF Diamondhead, and we were not communicating flight information well within our task force. This created numerous instances where I, as the OIC of the flight line area, was asking aircraft to take significant passengers and equipment that had not been scheduled or approved by the air unit.

The physical layout of the LZ/PZ area created significant difficulties for my platoon and I. First, TF Bobcat immediately became customers of two TF Diamondhead "ring flights." These missions, often involving three aircraft, left from Kandahar and dropped off and picked up cargo and passengers at several different scheduled stops before returning to Kandahar. With these aircraft arriving at FOB Ripley, I would attempt to orchestrate "aircraft ballet" to allow equipment and passengers to be downloaded, aircraft to refuel, and passengers and equipment to be uploaded. Due to the significant amount of equipment arriving at FOB Ripley, the area immediately next to the refueling hoses would become littered with downloaded equipment. This would also hamper our ability to upload pallets of equipment destined for our forward company FOBs, as our attached forklift could not access the rear of the CH-47s because of downloaded equipment. If I directed a third aircraft to land on the western side of the FLS on a landing pad, I would soon have Soldiers scattering in every direction,



making it difficult for the S1 to track who had, in fact, arrived at FOB Ripley. Departing Soldiers had to be directed to specific aircraft in accordance with the submitted requirements that the ring flight was planned upon. The significant size of the FARP and the western side of the FLS was compounded by having only six Soldiers, who also had to complete the hookups of any external (fuel blivets, cargo nets, vehicles) loads as well. All of these factors would combine to create controlled chaos when aircraft arrived.

After several weeks of frustration, culminating with three CH-47s remaining on the ground for over an hour, I knew we had to improve. We needed to control the aircraft in a standard manner, control arriving Soldiers, download arriving equipment, allow the aircraft to refuel, upload departing equipment and Soldiers, and do it all much more quickly. With suggestions from a variety of officers and NCOs at FOB Ripley, I created a presentation to change the layout of the airfield for the S4, and with his approval, took it to the battalion executive officer (XO). With the battalion XO's approval in hand, we made significant modifications to the flight line. First, we created a tent staging area with chairs for Soldiers departing. This waiting area corralled Soldiers and prevented them from wandering all over the LZ/PZ and FARP area. We placed barbed wire on the eastern side of the FARP with a narrow lane snaking out to the western side of the FARP (bordering the flightline). This prevented Soldiers from stepping on the FARP's hoses and from running up to or in between aircraft. The wire allowed us to control Soldiers, but we still had problems managing equipment.

Our main problem with equipment centered on forcing our forklift to upload pallets on aircraft on the western side of the FLS. First, after conferring with TF Diamondhead crews, we began to maximize use of external 5k and 10k cargo nets. As our task force was using ring flights to supplement ground resupply of small company FOBs, we would put most Class I (food and water) in nets instead of pallets. Pallets worked well for aircraft in Kandahar. With the engines off, crew chiefs and forklift operators could clearly communicate with each other. Loading pallets onto aircraft with their engines on and rotor blades turning at FOB Ripley took significant time because of slow communication due mainly to engine noise. External nets reduced our number of pallets but did not eliminate them altogether. We still encountered instances where the forklift would travel across the FLS to upload pallets on the western side (to aircraft that had repositioned away from the FARP). In short, we needed to keep the forklift, the pallets, and the aircraft in a small area so that we did not waste time uploading the aircraft.

At this same time, TF Diamondhead chose to add a third refueling point. With that third point open, I could land all three aircraft at the same time at the FARP. The FARP could then serve as the small space we needed to use the forklift and upload pallets efficiently. However, the large river rocks put down by the MEU caused significant bouncing of the forklift to the point that pallets would be torn in half on the forklifts prongs. With help from the TF engineers, we created specific pathways from the western side of the FARP to each

refueling hose. To reduce brownout, we covered these pathways in Envirotac II, a dust abatement sealant also known as "rhino snot" left over from the MEU. Because downloaded pallets and equipment caused a logjam at the rear of the aircraft, we extended the pathways in the aircraft direction of approach. These pathways allowed an aircraft to land 20 feet short of the fuel hose, download equipment, and then drive forward to the fuel point, refuel, and then upload equipment and Soldiers. Pilots also noted that landing at our company FOBs was extremely dangerous to brownout conditions. We pulled up some of the mobi-mats at FOB Ripley and flew them to the company FOBs to reduce the brownout conditions. Combined with rock bought on the local economy, the FOB landing zones (LZs) became much safer for the aircrews.

Without sufficient planning and dissemination of information on air operations throughout the task force, as well as miscommunication with TF Diamondhead, the airfield became the final ground truth to, in effect, "two units passing in the night." Several points warrant attention here. During our mission readiness exercise on Oahu, TF Diamondhead had placed an aviation LNO with our battalion staff to assist in planning. Due to significant requirements while in country, TF Diamondhead did not attach an aviation liaison officer (LNO) to our

A CH-47 lands as part of a ring flight at a company FOB in Afghanistan. Getting personnel and equipment off and on the aircraft quickly remained a challenge throughout the deployment.

Capt. Mike Baskin



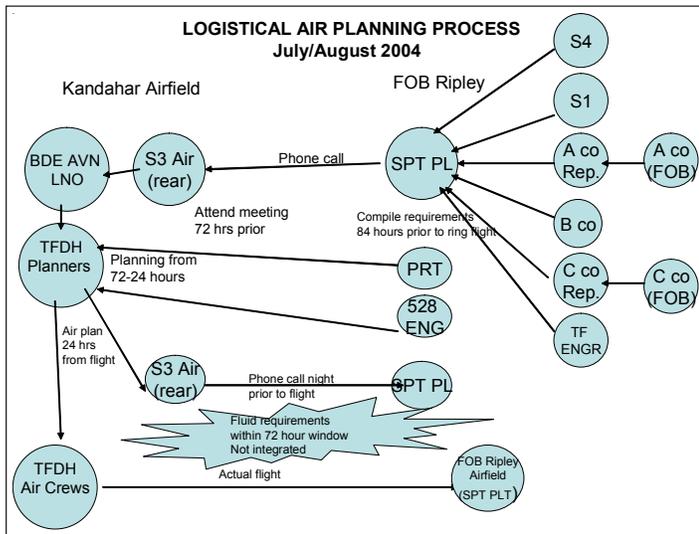


Figure 1

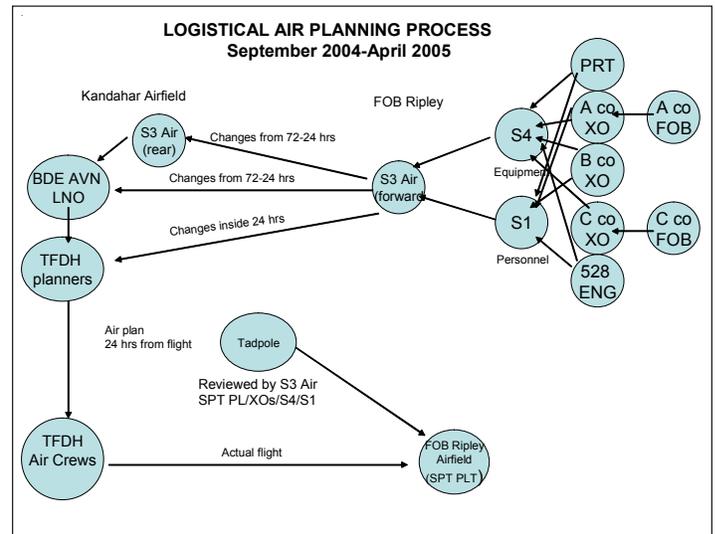


Figure 2

battalion when the MEU departed. Additionally, our battalion had primarily used ground resupply while in Ghazni, and then had become somewhat “spoiled” by the daily flights between FOB Ripley and Kandahar under the MEU.

For ring flight planning, TF Diamondhead held an air planning brief 72 hours prior to a ring flight. Our S3 air officer (rear), located in Kandahar, was designated the task force point of contact (POC) for all logistical air, and would personally attend these meetings and submit TF Bobcat’s requests for space. The S3 air (forward), located at FOB Ripley, was responsible for air assault aircraft mission planning and other A/S3 planning duties. In July and August, as the flightline OIC, I would receive all requests at the evening Battle Update Brief (BUB) the night prior to the 72-hour window and relay them to the S3 air (rear) in Kandahar via phone. The S3 air (rear) would attend the meeting in Kandahar and then would relay the flight information to me 24 hours before the flight. However, in that 72-hour window, the task force air requirements often changed significantly, including numbers of arriving and departing Soldiers, and CL I, III and IX requirements. There were enough links in the planning chain to occasionally lose information between our S3 air (rear), the brigade aviation LNO, and TF Diamondhead’s planners. As only one ring flight serviced our new company FOBs, and the ring flights flew on an irregular pattern that could be generalized as weekly, the next scheduled flight could be 10 days from when the company initially submitted its request from the near-term flight.

Additionally, I did not have detailed information for rigging external loads. For example, if two fuel blivets were scheduled to go to a company FOB, did they need to be rigged as two blivets on one apex or on two apexes for different aircraft? I will admit that I did not ask the right questions of the S3 Air. In those first few weeks, I asked for time of arrival, number of aircraft, and “what are they bringing in and what are they taking out?” I would receive answers to those questions — for our task force. However, co-located units, such as the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and 528th Engineer Battalion, submitted their own separate air requests to TF Diamondhead. At the time of two fuel points, this

caused confusion when aircraft arrived, as my attempt to template “aircraft ballet” would involve incorrect information, and I had to direct aircraft to less desirable positions on the vast airfield.

In short, our problems included poor forecasting and planning by both the staff and companies, inadequate organizational structure of our flight planning process (who talked to who, when they talked, and how they talked), and my lack of knowledge, as the airfield OIC, of what else and where else the aircraft were tasked to carry and go.

The battalion commander, S3, and XO decided to reorganize the air planning structure. For all units located on FOB Ripley, the S4 would process all logistical requests, and the S1 controlled personnel movement scheduling out of FOB Ripley for all units located there. Each would turn their requirements into the S3 air (forward). The S3 air (rear) would compile all requirements to leave KAF and send them to the S3 air (forward). The S3 air (forward) would review all requirements and submit them to the S3 air (rear) via SIPR the night before the 72 hour air planning meeting, and the S3 air (rear) would sit on the TF Diamondhead planning meeting. After that, the S3 air (forward) was responsible for communicating any last minute changes to the aviation brigade LNO and, inside 24 hours, straight to TF Diamondhead itself. Last minute changes were inevitable due to the nature of operations at the two company FOBs. The S3 air (forward) was the dominant S3 air and the S3 air (rear) focused more on his battle captain duties. This moved our task force’s main situational awareness on air operations from Kandahar to FOB Ripley. In a separate yet related move, LTC Sellers mandated that both outlying companies locate their company XO at FOB Ripley. Previously, each company was required to keep merely a representative at FOB Ripley, often a junior NCO, who attended air planning and other staff meetings. With a company XO at FOB Ripley, the S3 air (forward), as well as the rest of the battalion staff, had a much more effective understanding of each company’s requirements (Figures 1 and 2).

The task force staff and companies began to plan and forecast with more maturity. We moved from a mind-set of what does that company need for the next week to how are we going to keep that

company going for the next two months? When planning fuel requirements, the S4 scheduled when he could arrange for ground resupply from Kandahar and when he would have to use fuel blivets. As each company needed large amounts of CL IX for their HMMWV fleets, we forecasted additional space for spare parts. While a company did not need additional parts 96 hours out, sure enough it would need them the day of the flight. Likewise, the S1 posted a movement sign up roster for all units located at FOB Ripley. This included the PRT and 528th Engineers and allowed for temporary visitors — first sergeants visiting attached Soldiers, finance Soldiers administering casual pay, and engineer leaders reviewing the development of our FOB — to sign up for a flight. He also began to forecast several additional Soldiers to each leg of the flight, as someone always popped up needing transportation on flight day.

The final piece that synchronized all of this for my platoon and me at the FARP was the ability to print out, use, and understand a tadpole. Whenever aircraft arrived and I explained the personnel and equipment requirements I had to move, the lead pilot would sometimes reply, “It’s not on the tadpole.” Initially, I did not know what a tadpole was. I did know that the aircrews were using a detailed cargo plan,

and I did not have it in my hands. TF Diamondhead was putting a detailed plan of what each aircraft would pick up and drop off, what it called a tadpole, on the SIPR net the night prior to a flight. Anyone with access to a SIPR terminal could access the tadpole, and our unit’s administration and logistics operations center (ALOC) did have a SIPR terminal. I realized that I had been missing crucial information because I was receiving a phone call or even SIPR message of what the air crews were expecting to carry. However, the aircrews would rely on the tadpole, and the tadpole was ground truth for what the aircrews expected to drop off and pick up at each location. The tadpole allowed my platoon to preposition external loads on the western side of the FLS in accordance with the air plan. It also allowed other leaders within the task force such as the S4 and S1 to access the plan and request adjustments to the S3 air (forward). As the flightline OIC, I could identify friction points in the air plan as well, such as a CH-47 carrying too many pallets that would prevent the crew chief from opening the floor hatch to watch an external load hook-up. The combination of mature forecasting, a stronger organizational structure to air planning, and access to the aviation unit’s tadpole significantly reduced communication problems when aircraft arrived on flight

day. While never perfect, the days of “two units passing in the night” at the airfield had been overcome. TF Bobcat continued to require large amounts of aircraft, especially during the winter. However, the support platoon and the entire task force had matured and adopted a much more effective means of accomplishing its mission with the air unit. Midway through the deployment, 1st Lt. Ryan Beltramini became the support platoon leader and airfield OIC. He continued to refine the air process and concentrated the platoon’s actions on unloading and loading the aircraft to ensure the aircrews stayed on schedule.

SIGNIFICANT CONCLUSIONS

In hindsight, the frustration encountered in those first few months was in some ways inevitable. TF Bobcat was doing something it had never attempted before — operating from two company FOBs and one battalion FOB that had not existed before its arrival. There were bound to be significant growing pains along the way.

Support platoons were often noted to work the longest hours in a battalion and yet usually spent an inversely small amount of time spent actually training while in garrison. The Soldiers in TF Bobcat’s support platoon became extremely adept at working with both fixed and rotary wing aircraft crews and external load operations while deployed. At first used in a mounted maneuver platoon role, the support platoon reverted to its standard split-based configuration when the task force moved to a new area of operations.

Recent changes to the TO&E for infantry battalions include the elimination of organic support platoons. Those skills and tasks now reside in the forward support company (FSC) attached to the infantry battalion. Ideally, units that integrate their FSC to near-organic ground truth will be able to duplicate the flexibility and agility a support platoon previously provided.



Capt. Mike Baskin

Task Force Bobcat Support Platoon Soldiers prepare pallets of humanitarian supplies for air insertion into a valley in Uruzgan Province.

Captain Mike Baskin served as a rifle platoon leader, support platoon leader, and company/troop executive officer with the 2nd Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii from May 2003 to December 2005. He currently serves with the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas.
