



THE COMBINED ARMS BATTALION AS AN AIR ASSAULT TASK FORCE

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With proper focus and support, a combined arms battalion (CAB) can become a proficient air assault task force. The 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment (1-15 IN) proved this to be true over the 14 months of continuous combat operations it conducted in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom V as it planned and executed more than 20 air assault missions. Varying from multiple platoon/multiple landing zone (LZ) insertions into several objectives to single platoon daylight raids, these operations effectively disrupted extremist activities across a more than 1,000 square kilometer area of operations (AO).

The results of these operations were tangible — two high value individuals killed or captured, eight caches discovered, 12 enemy killed in action, 69 suspected extremists detained and four extremist safe houses destroyed. Even when the objective area turned out to be a “dry hole,” these air assaults had an important Information Operation (IO) effect by demonstrating the battalion’s capability and resolve to strike at the time and place of its choosing. Most importantly, the vertical approach of the air assault enabled the battalion to achieve this success while avoiding the threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the potential for tripping the

Soldiers from B Company, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment run to a UH-60 helicopter to return to their combat outpost November 25, 2007.

Specialist Ben Hutto

enemy’s early warning systems, and maximizing our technological advantages (night vision devices, AH-64 sight systems, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

With focused training and the right emphasis from senior leadership, a heavy brigade combat team (HBCT) using combined arms battalions as air assault task forces can add a tremendous tool to its arsenal of methods to defeat extremists; a tool that will save lives, strike fear in the heart of the enemy, and is capable of disrupting enemy operations over a larger-than-normal area.

What Made Air Assaults Appealing in the 1-15 IN AO

The 1-15 IN, the “Can Do” Battalion, fought as part of the 3rd HBCT, 3rd Infantry Division (3rd ID) from April 2007 to May 2008. The battalion was task organized with two infantry companies, one armor company and one engineer company — not nearly enough combat power to control many parts of the entire AO. In order to prevent the development of a wholesale extremist sanctuary, the task force looked for ways to disrupt those hardest to reach parts

of the AO. Additionally, an analysis of the enemy's strengths encouraged a greater focus on leveraging technological advantages and the air assault mission.

Analysis of the more than 1,000 square kilometers assigned as the battalion's area of operations revealed that simply driving to the objective and maintaining the element of surprise might not always be possible. The raised canal roads through the irrigated countryside and the canalization through built-up villages greatly increased the potential for enemy early warning. Further, it became apparent that combat forces were the most vulnerable when traveling to the objective due to the IED threat. The majority of the AO was protected by enemy IED security belts that were so dense (sometimes five or more in a row) that they denied coalition ground passage. The enemy used these security belts for both early warning and terrain denial.

After a few attempts to disrupt the enemy via ground, the air assault option became the most appealing in order to seize an objective quickly, gather key intelligence, and extract our forces. Furthermore, by leveraging the use of UAVs, AH-64s and OH-58s with their state-of-the-art night vision, the battalion quickly found itself able to operate freely at night and further develop the intelligence picture within our AO. These systems allowed us to confirm or deny human intelligence (HUMINT) reporting, develop future air assault missions, and maintain the initiative by continuously applying the pressure on the extremists.

Planning for and Building the Air Assault Mind-set

The battalion's first experience conducting an air assault occurred during the home station train-up exercise prior to deploying to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. At that point only a handful of leaders had experience with conducting an air assault in combat. The training exercise was supported by lift assets from the 3rd ID Combat Aviation Brigade, which had numerous pilots with extensive air assault experience but not much as an aviation task force. Therefore, the exercise was approached with fairly meticulous planning and preparation, which closely followed the doctrine of the air assault



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A Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment provides security as fellow Soldiers pass by to search a house for weapons during an air assault mission February 28, 2008.

planning process — initial planning conference (IPC), air movement coordination meeting (AMCM), and air mission brief (AMB). This first air assault attempt was a two serial, two lift, two LZ mission onto a MOUT site at Fort Benning, Georgia. Following the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Gold Book through each step of the air assault was instrumental as both staffs gained the experiential and doctrinal knowledge needed to conduct successful air assaults when we deployed to Iraq.

This training event helped us to dispel one of the myths identified in the Gold Book — that an air assault is just the movement by helicopter of an infantry force. The challenges in coordinating air space, fire support, landing zones, and direct fire control — with forces on the ground and in the air — proved to the battalion's leadership that the planning, preparation, and execution of an air assault mission was a truly challenging task. However, as the benefits of conducting an air assault were high, the battalion staff rapidly adapted itself to planning and preparing for this type of mission, building a true "air assault mind-set" at the most critical level.

Once in Iraq, the battalion staff immediately incorporated the option of conducting an air assault into the battalion-level targeting process. In the analysis of many of the battalion's targets, the staff

made mission-recommendations on specific targets to the battalion commander, including the best method for execution. The battalion S3, S3 Air and the S2 conducted an initial mission analysis to determine a tentative timeline, number of aircraft required, number of lifts required, potential pick-up zones (PZs), LZs, and alternate landing zones (ALZs). This planning session also looked at the actions on the objective and drafted an initial plan that the company commander could refine.

While preparing for the operation, the air planner looked to integrate all available intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to maximize eyes on and around the target area, ensuring security and surveillance for ground forces. He ensured that redundant surveillance measures were available before, during, and after the mission. Maximizing ISR hours before the air assault gave the battalion tactical operations center (TOC) and the ground tactical commander the latest information on the objective area. It also provided a venue for the operations and intelligence brief conducted with the aviators during cold load training. During the operation the attack aviation provided both additional eyes and security while the UAV feed gave the battalion TOC the situational awareness it needed to keep brigade informed on the progress of the

operations. Keeping the UAV monitoring the objective after the air assault allowed the battalion to observe the effects of the recently completed air assault.

Prior to publishing the battalion concept of operation (CONOP), the air planner conducted a detailed map reconnaissance, using UAV “real time” feeds and tasked available attack aviation to gain critical information of the objective area and possible LZs. All of this information was packaged into the CONOP and sent to the supporting aviation units, which began basic planning; the brigade headquarters, which began allocating additional combat multipliers; and the company commander, who would be the ground tactical commander for execution.

The AMCM was conducted approximately 48 hours prior to mission execution. The brigade S3 hosted the meeting which involved the lift and attack aviation assets, the battalion S3 of the unit conducting the air assault, the ground tactical commander, and the brigade aviation element. This meeting gave the participants a chance to ask questions clarifying the CONOP so all elements could continue the planning process. The AMB was conducted approximately 24 hours after the AMCM and briefed by the battalion commander to the brigade commander. All of the same elements were represented; however, each element had an opportunity to refine their portion of the plan. Once AMB was complete, all elements were prepared to execute the mission.

The Challenges

LZ selection — One of the single-most critical portions of air assault planning is the selection of the best landing zone(s) possible. Early on, this selection was made by map (imagery) reconnaissance almost exclusively. However, by trial and error, both 1-15 IN and the supporting aviation battalions found that this was not the best method. By leveraging different ISR platforms, the battalion’s staff was better able to select the right place to land to facilitate a rapid assembly and transition to the ground tactical plan.

Prior to the AMCM, the planner used available assets to continue detailed reconnaissance, and attempted to answer requests for information (RFIs) from the company commander who would be conducting the mission. The LZ plan should include at least one primary and one alternate LZ, and an emergency LZ easily accessible from the objective in case medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) is needed. When selecting these LZs, there were several specific problems that seemed to continually present themselves in Iraq. The majority of suitable LZs were farmers’ fields adjacent to objective houses or villages. These fields proved to be challenging, especially when forces were not prepared for what they encountered. Well-irrigated fields usually consisted of terrain that was hard to maneuver on foot and to land helicopters, while dry fields posed the threat of brown out conditions to aviators and the assault force. Fields intended for farming were almost always surrounded by irrigation canals, some of which were literally impassible for ground troops. Other risks included power lines or small structures near the objective buildings. The 1-15 IN reduced these risks by conducting a detailed map, UAV, and helicopter reconnaissance to preselect the best possible LZ for the objective.

A UAV provided the opportunity to conduct reconnaissance of the objective with little detection by enemy forces. The UAV was

also a beneficial tool because it provided the planner the ability to watch the target area through a Rover feed and shift focus to areas of interest or possible threats to air and ground forces. The only downside to UAV reconnaissance was that some platforms were loud and easily detected from the ground. Sustained coverage in a previously quiet area could lead to enemy personnel becoming suspicious or weary of pending coalition missions. To mitigate this early warning, 1-15 IN was successful in “desensitizing” an area days or weeks prior to an operation by flying UAV and attack aviation around and over the area at arbitrary times. Desensitization can be achieved by having attack aviation conduct low hovers above fields surrounding the target area. These fields should be selected at varying distances from the target area, and desensitization should be conducted at varying times throughout the night. Though UAVs were helpful to initially identify LZs, the pictures they produced were usually not clear enough to determine all threats or hazards in the area. Once the LZs were selected, OH-58s were used to provide extremely detailed digital pictures of an LZ that were clear enough to identify any hazards or danger areas. They were also used to pinpoint infiltration routes on to the target from the LZ.

Learning organization — As with any successful organization, 1-15 IN used after action reviews (AARs) to continually improve its performance and streamline the planning and execution of follow-on missions. Additionally, the battalion leadership continually sought feedback and lessons learned from other units performing air assault missions throughout the Iraq theater of operations.

The first air assault operation conducted by 1-15 IN occurred on June 5, 2007, nearly three months into the deployment. Operation Casablanca was a company air assault designed to kill and or capture extremists setting the conditions for a future battalion mission in a heavily contested area. This mission was a two serial, two lift, two LZ mission conducted with the same company that executed the training mission at Fort Benning. The operation was a success and all of the hard work and training paid off as the battalion was able to truly realize the advantages of conducting air assaults in combat.

With continued experience in conducting air assault missions, the battalion gradually increased the complexity as we gained more confidence. By the eighth air assault, the battalion was able to conduct an assault on two different objectives. Using three CH-47s, the assault force initially landed at one objective and subsequently cleared three suspected al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) safe houses. Once the area was thoroughly searched and the detainees secured, the CH-47s returned, landing at a second objective — yet another suspected AQI safe house. The mission was a success, confirming the location of multiple AQI safe houses.

Early successes in conducting air assaults did not preclude us from learning from other organizations. Every morning, the 1-15 IN battle captain listened to the division commander’s update on the Command Post of the Future (CPOF). Through this process, the battalion’s leadership gained valuable tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) from other units across all lines of operation. A couple of key lessons learned pertaining to air assault operations were the use of the tactical callouts and offset LZs.

During a tactical callout, the ground assault force maneuvered to a position to establish the outer cordon of the target house.

Once this outer cordon was set, the unit would delay entering and clearing the building and use their interpreters to “call out” the occupants (using a bull horn) and give them a chance to identify themselves. This method reduced the threat of suicide attacks and house-born IEDs. Additionally, the employment of call outs reduced collateral damage to structures on or near the objective which influenced the occupants’ willingness to provide useful information.

As a result of other unit’s successes, 1-15 IN began to experiment with the proximity of the landing zones to the objective area. During the initial air assaults, the landing zones selected were as close to the target house as possible. In many cases, potentially targeted individuals were able to escape from the objective before it was effectively cordoned off (these individuals were termed “squirters”). In order to prevent this from happening, 1-15 IN began planning air assaults where the LZ was 1,000 (or more) meters away from the actual objective — an offset LZ. Direct infilts were most effective when the objective was either a fixed target (such as a cache site or a suspected enemy safe house) or an isolated objective where enemy personnel can not easily move from one structure to another. By contrast, using an offset LZ was successful when the objective was part of a built-up village. For example, during Operation Varsity March on October 25, 2007, the ground assault force infiltrated approximately two kilometers from the objective area, where the helicopter

rotors could be heard but not necessarily tip off personnel on the objective. Once the force was inserted, they conducted a tactical movement to the objective, avoiding areas where they could be detected such as houses or built-up canal roads.

Time-sensitive missions — After gaining experience through several air assaults, 1-15 IN was able to execute several hastily planned air assault missions to take advantage of information on time sensitive targets (TSTs). In order to maximize the exploitation of TST information, serious modifications to the air assault planning sequence were necessary; many were planned and executed in under six hours.

To expedite the planning process, 1-15 IN assembled the entire air assault task force at one location, often landing both lift and attack helicopters at one of the combat outposts. Then, with all pilots and key ground force leaders in one place, intelligence was reviewed, LZs selected, command and control (C2) information exchanged, and contingencies were talked through. Based on previous missions, this team was able to leverage pre-existing execution and conditions checklists.

Over time, these types of missions became battle drills for the companies as well as the battalion staff. The most pertinent tools needed for these types of missions could be established in advance, maximizing time for flexibility when the TST mission was received. Critical to these missions was the conditions check to identify minimum requirements needed to

execute such a mission. Though TST operations are always a race against the clock, units can ensure success by continually rehearsing contingency planning, including basic air assault tasks.

Combined Arms Battalion Air Assault TTPs

Use of the battalion tactical command post (TAC) — On all battalion-level air assault operations (two or more companies) and the larger, more complex, company-level air assaults, it was important to have a battalion TAC element operating on the ground along with maneuver forces. The battalion TAC provides a command and control element that allowed the company commander to “fight lower,” while the TAC “fought higher.” TAC composition was mission dependent, but usually consisted of the following personnel: the battalion commander and battalion command sergeant major (CSM), the battalion S-3 Air, a battalion radio-telephone operator (RTO), the battalion fire support officer, and the battalion physician’s assistant. If seats were available, additional personnel were added to aid the ground mission, to include S-2 analysts, additional medics, and command security personnel.

During the operation the battalion commander and battalion CSM were on the ground to gain full situational understanding of the operation as it developed, and were present to make timely decisions. The S-3 Air’s primary responsibility was to coordinate with aviation elements (both lift and attack) to ensure that they received accurate situation reports from the ground, that attack aviation support was constantly maintained, and that lift aviation was aware of any changes to the timeline or PZ location. The S-3 Air also relayed updates from the company commander to the battalion TOC. The battalion RTO was responsible for maintaining constant communication with the battalion TOC, often using tactical satellite (TACSAT) and high frequency radios. Additionally, the battalion RTO received UAV and close air support updates from the battalion TOC, which could then be passed off to attack aviation for immediate exploitation. The battalion FSO maintained redundant communication with the battalion through the fires net, and controlled all fires requested by the company



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Soldiers from B Company, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment load onto a UH-60 helicopter during an air assault mission February 28.



Captain Simon McKensie

Lieutenant Colonel Jack Marr shows U.S. Marine Corps Major General Mastin Robeson, Major General Rick Lynch and Colonel Wayne Grigsby a DRAGON-V.

commander. The FSO and the S-3 Air deconflicted air in the vicinity of the objective prior to initiating fires.

During battalion-level air assault operations, the maneuver element often received numerous attachments, including Combat Camera, press, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams, K-9 teams, Psychological Operations (PSYOP) teams, and HUMINT collectors. Though these elements were important to the ground tactical plan, the company commander could become overwhelmed by the number of attachments on the objective. The battalion TAC relieved this pressure by consolidating attachments and assuming the responsibility for their accountability. The company could call forward these elements as dictated by the situation, but the TAC provided overwatch of the attachments out of the way of maneuver forces, allowing the company commander to focus on maneuvering the ground forces.

To assist with command and control, TF 1-15 IN built the Deployable Radio Air Ground Operational Network Vehicle (DRAGON-V). This was a Gator vehicle that was modified to assist in command and control. The DRAGON-V has a mounted One-Station Remote Viewer Terminal (OSRVT) to assist with watching the UAV feeds, a blue force tracker (BFT) to monitor the unit's locations as well as a contingency for communications, two Advanced Systems Improvement Program (ASIP) radios as the primary method of communications, a TACSAT radio for long distance communications, and a generator. The DRAGON-V negated the C2 disadvantages of being "on the ground," by bringing all of the amenities of a battalion TOC and all the technological advantages our Army could provide.

Leveraging hidden talent — Most combined arms battalions have Soldiers with an array of hidden talents due to experiences from previous assignments. The elimination of the 11M military occupational specialty has led to infantrymen — at all ranks — to serve across our Army, gaining valuable experiences and bringing

it to other units. It is imperative that the leadership of the battalion seek out their air assault-specific hidden talent and discuss previous deployment experiences. Fortunately, 1-15 IN had two company commanders and the battalion commander who had served in the 82nd Airborne Division and another company commander who had served in one of the Ranger battalions. Additionally, several of the platoon sergeants, quite a few squad leaders, and even some of the riflemen had served previous tours in Iraq and Afghanistan with the 101st Airborne Division, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the 10th Mountain Division, as well as the Ranger Regiment. This meant that key individuals throughout the formation had conducted numerous air assaults and knew how these types of operations enabled combat forces to extend their tactical reach.

Isolating the objective — One of the main issues that a staff must account for when planning an air assault is isolation of the objective. Through experience, 1-15 IN developed several TTPs that were proven effective in managing "squirt control."

On almost every one of the battalion's air assault missions, 1-15 IN observed the enemy TTP of "squirtling" off of the objective, often into wooded areas or nearby residential areas. Usually, the enemy was smart enough not to carry weapons, thereby complicating the unit's ability to engage them immediately. By the time ground forces had landed and were prepared to assault the objective, the enemy personnel usually had enough time to evade, and ISR assets had trouble tracking these personnel when they were moving under the concealment of trees or houses. Even when ISR was able to follow the squirts, it was often difficult to maneuver an element over land to intercept them.

Isolation fires were proven to be an effective means of restricting enemy freedom of maneuver. Isolation fires were most effective when ground forces would infil onto a direct LZ that provided them the ability to quickly assault the objective, and when employed at H-0:05 or H-0:06. These isolation fires confused and overwhelmed personnel on the objective as the first sounds of rotor blades could be detected. By the time personnel on the objective regained their senses, the assault force had already been able to occupy assault positions and were prepared to initiate the raid. The only downside to this TTP was the proximity of lift assets to the objective as well as the isolation fires being conducted. This risk was mitigated by conducting rehearsals, prior coordination utilizing phase lines, and good cross talk to ensure solid airspace deconfliction.

The 1-15 IN was also successful in controlling squirts by having a chalk or two dedicated to hastily infil into LZs in the areas that squirts had moved to. This technique was hard to plan for because of all the contingencies involved, but the most effective technique was to have the UH-60s return following the final lift onto the objective and loiter in a pre-established air checkpoint. Attack aviation was essential throughout this insertion to identify the location of squirts and identify LZs for lift elements to use. Once UH-60s were clear, attack aviation also provided isolation fires to deny the enemy's ability to flee from ground forces.

PZ control operations — Pick-up zone control and manifesting

is an essential process in the conduct of an air assault operation. The battalion S-1, along with a small detail, was tasked with controlling and facilitating this process. An early lesson learned was integration of the PZ control element into the rehearsal process.

The manifest process begins days prior to the mission as the unit prepared an initial manifest based off of the type and number of aircraft, the number of LZs, and the placement of key personnel to allow efficient command and control on the ground. On the day of the rehearsal, the 1-15 IN S-1 confirmed the complete manifest and participated in the rehearsal. The S-1 ensured that Soldiers' information was properly annotated on the manifest. Once the battalion S-1 confirmed that all Soldiers were on the manifest, a copy of the manifest was given to all chalk leaders for the mission.

Approximately one hour prior to the lift off time of the aircraft, the battalion S-1, along with a small detail assumed PZ control responsibilities and would mark the locations where each lift and chalk would conduct their final manifest. During night air assault operations, a chem light marking system was typically used. As the Soldiers for the air assault arrived and lined up in their chinks, the S-1 and the PZ control detail verified the final manifest to ensure that all Soldiers were present and in their correct chinks. The chalk leaders then met with the battalion S-1 to once again verify that there were no discrepancies within the manifest. Upon the arrival of the aircraft, the PZ control detail would then guide each chalk to its aircraft, counting them on as they loaded (this step doesn't have to be done at the aircraft door; it can be done from a distance). Once all Soldiers had boarded the aircraft, the detail reported to the battalion S-1 the total number of personnel on each aircraft. The 1-15 IN S-1 would then report the number of personnel that loaded the aircraft and the time of their departure, to the TOC.

Once the mission was complete and the aircraft returned to the combat outpost, the PZ control detail led the Soldiers off of the aircraft and passed them through a choke point. The battalion S-1 posted himself at this choke point and personally placed hands on each Soldier as they left the LZ to ensure proper accountability for all the returning Soldiers. The battalion S-1 would

also receive an "up" from each chalk leader for accountability of personnel and equipment. The 1-15 IN S-1 would then report 100-percent accountability of all personnel and equipment to the TOC.

Working with attachments — There are more and more "enablers" that commanders have to use to mitigate enemy TTPs, such as military working dogs, human collection teams, tactical PSYOPS teams (TPTs), and EOD teams. These assets must be used in a synchronized step-by-step fashion. It is necessary for not only commanders but also the lower level elements such as squads, to rehearse the plan (with these assets) to synchronize the actions on the object as well as get all elements familiar with having extra attachments on the battlefield. When organized and rehearsed, the assault force — with these additional assets — combined for a lethal and risk-mitigated operation.

The Importance of rehearsals — Rehearsals were essential for all 1-15 IN operations; however, for a unit that was not experienced in air assault operations, they were absolutely critical. Every aspect of the operation was rehearsed: from static load or cold load training to infiltration and actions on the objective. Soldiers getting off an aircraft at night are similar to those getting out of the back of a Bradley fighting vehicle in that it will take time to get oriented on the ground. Detailed rehearsals and identifying landmarks to look for once on the ground will help to alleviate this period of orientation.

Rehearsing the exfiltration was equally important. This may be one of the most complex actions since the air assault force must consolidate and reorganize on the objective and ensure accountability of all men, weapons, and equipment while moving into PZ posture. When rehearsed each Soldier knew exactly where he was supposed to go when the "prep for exfil" command was given. The 1-15 IN ensured that the ground element was not exposed in PZ posture (waiting for AC) for more than five minutes.

As a general rule, 1-15 IN companies rehearsed every operation at a minimum of three times (not including platoon and squad rehearsals) during the planning cycle. We rehearsed to the point that it was painfully tedious. The one constant AAR comment from all leaders in the company was that as painful and tedious that the

rehearsals were, they paid off and were glad they were executed, "things went smoothly because of rehearsals."

Conclusion

As the Army draws down in Iraq, building the air assault capability becomes more important because it allows a battalion to have an effect over a larger area. TF 1-15, a combined arms battalion, whose usual method of transportation is by Bradleys and tanks, conducted 23 air assault operations. The "Can Do" Battalion refined its TTPs every mission and treated each operation as the battalion's focus. Conducting air assault missions gave the battalion the ability to disrupt the enemy in areas that were not accessible by ground. More than 300 Soldiers in TF 1-15 IN participated in at least one air assault mission. Among these 300 Soldiers were tankers, artillerymen, and intelligence analysts. As these Soldiers join new units and prepare to deploy, they bring with them knowledge of yet another method of defeating the enemy.

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