

Five Years after Operation *Anaconda* Challenges *and* Opportunities

By MICHAEL W. ISHERWOOD

Five years later, the battle of Shahi-Kot Valley in Afghanistan, known as Operation *Anaconda*, still evokes heated emotions among U.S. air and ground warfighters. Nevertheless, reopening this discussion can help us examine the progress made and opportunities ahead to improve air and ground integration. This article reviews advances from Operation *Enduring Freedom* and offers suggestions for further improvements. The view presented is based on personal experience integrating air operations with ground maneuver in Afghanistan during 2005–2006.

Shortfalls

Operation *Anaconda*, the first large-scale Army combat operation in Operation *Enduring Freedom* that included Special Operations and multinational partners, revealed a number of joint planning and execution issues. At the theater or operational level, problems surfaced in three key areas: organization, planning, and execution.

At the organizational level, Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Mountain assumed



U.S. Army (David Marek, Jr)

Soldiers of 101st Airborne Division scan ridge during Operation *Anaconda*

Colonel Michael W. Isherwood, USAF (Ret.), is a Senior Analyst at the Northrop Grumman Analysis Center. In 2005–2006, he deployed as the Deputy Director, Air Component Coordination Element, to Combined Joint Task Force–76 at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.



Soldiers prepare for tactical march through Shahi-Kot Valley during Operation *Anaconda*

55th Signal Company Combat Camera (Keith D. McGrew)

▲ Download as computer wallpaper at ndupress.ndu.edu

the lead for *Anaconda* less than 2 weeks before the scheduled D-Day. The CJTF did not have an Air Support Operations Center (ASOC), which serves as the air component's lead for "planning, coordinating, controlling, and executing" air operations to support ground combat forces.¹ A three-person ASOC cell arrived the day the operational order was published, but it was too late to offer the air component's expertise to the plan.² Thus, organizationally, the joint team lacked a critical command and control node that should have integrated air with ground maneuver.

During execution, fixed-wing aircraft arrived overhead but could not integrate fully with ground forces. Aviators often did not know the position, ordnance, tasking, or capabilities of other on-scene flights. Since the ASOC cell deployed without its communications equipment, it lacked the command and control tools to prioritize, synchronize, and integrate the air operations with ground maneuver and objectives. Tactical leadership and initiative in the air and on the ground exploited as best they could the capabilities of the aviators supporting engaged ground forces. American warfighters knew the joint team has greater promise and potential.

Air and Ground Integration Today

Recent operations in *Enduring Freedom* demonstrate that expectations for better air and ground integration are realistic. At the same time, they indicate areas for further progress. While there was not an operation of *Anaconda*'s scope during 2005 and 2006,

similar battalion-sized operations benefited from better initiatives.

Organization. The presence of a robust ASOC with long-range communications equipment has had a positive impact. While under the operational control of the Combined Forces Air Component Commander (CFACC), the ASOC was embedded on the CJTF staff and provided vital air expertise to influence operations planning. It also guided the air liaison officers assigned to the brigades and enlisted joint terminal air controllers (JTACs) deployed with the battalions.

In addition to the ASOC, an Air Component Coordination Element (ACCE) resided with the CJTF headquarters. The ACCE director represented the CFACC to the CJTF commander. The ACCE director had a small staff of airlift, intelligence, plans, and close air support officers. The ASOC and ACCE staff coordinated the ground component's requirements and offered recommendations. Figure 1 depicts the organizations available at different levels.

Planning. To assist the ground commanders, the ACCE staff augmented the ASOC personnel for planning larger scale operations. In the fall of 2005 and into 2006, ACCE personnel visited brigade and task force staffs in the field to assist in detailed planning sessions. This increased the air component's awareness of ground units' future operations while making additional air expertise available. With three brigades and a dozen battalions in the field, however, there were insufficient Airmen to support all ongoing planning. The enlisted JTACs at battalion

level were experts at requesting air assets and providing terminal control; however, they lacked the knowledge base to exploit all the air and space assets capabilities fully.

That expertise resided with the CFACC and his Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC). The CAOC staff had four divisions: combat plans, operations, intelligence, and mobility. The land forces component's battlefield coordination detachment also provided a conduit of information. Collectively, they planned and executed air and space operations to meet the CJTF/component commander objectives

for the entire U.S. Central Command area of responsibility.

During a campaign's major combat operations (Phase III), the CAOC developed a master air attack plan and air tasking order that assigned target sets to flights in order to support CJTF/component commander objectives. During recent *Enduring Freedom*

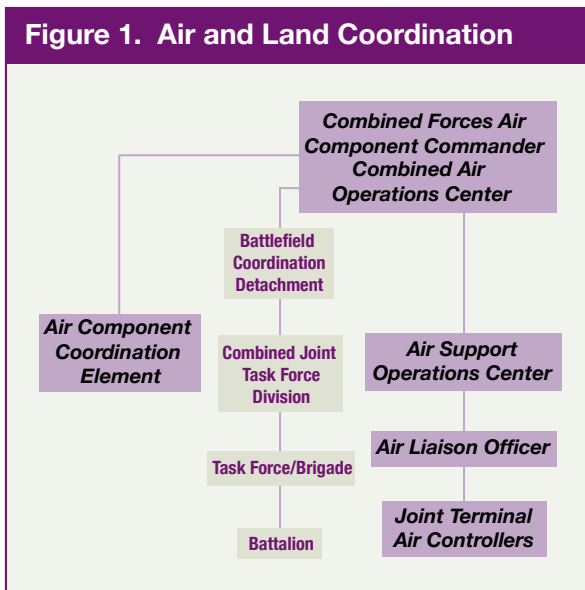
the joint team lacked a critical command and control node that should have integrated air with ground maneuver



Soldiers of 10th Mountain Division take security position in Shahi-Kot mountain range

counterinsurgency and stability operations (Phase IV), however, the CAOC concentrated on filling air requests from the ground units with close air support and occasional airlift missions. It continued to set priorities and assess the effectiveness of an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) collection strategy to meet theater and tactical requirements. Overall, the CAOC planning role reflected the Airmen's "centralized planning and decentralized execution" approach.

In contrast, the land forces mission analysis and course of action development reflected a "mission command" approach, where subordinate leaders exercise disciplined initiative within the commander's intent.³ The battlespace was dynamic and changing, which required a flexible approach as orders were developed. As a result, major efforts often started at the company or battalion level. One company may have faced a hostile operating area while another had a supportive local population. On at least one occasion, village leaders wanted coalition forces to remove belligerent anti-Afghan elements, but lacked the will or capability. Thus, an operation started



with emphasis on lethal force, but transitioned to engagement and reconstruction tasks in its later phases as coalition forces sought to assist local populations. In counterinsurgency and stability operations, company commanders understood their unique battlespace and tailored plans accordingly.

In the above example and others, the company commander forwarded the plan to battalion and then brigade level. At each level, the higher commander revised it—adding forces, maneuver, or priorities—and then forwarded it to the CJTF commander. The ACCE director saw the plan at the same time as the CJTF commander. Given the fluid situation, the plan was often executed within 12 to 48 hours after the CJTF/component commander approved it.

Understanding the air and land component planning process is important for two reasons. First, it highlights that the two components have opposite planning processes. In essence, the air component's process is top-down, while the land component's is bottom-up. Second, despite the differences, air and ground planning has improved over the past 5 years. The above description documents the Airman's commitment to supporting the Soldier and Marine.

Execution. As a result of better planning, air operations improved. The air component contributed a significant quantity and quality of aircraft to major operations. Figure 2 highlights many of the assets that supported battalion-sized efforts. For a multiphase combat and humanitarian operation, B-52s might strike preplanned targets (such as cave complexes) just prior to H-Hour while A-10s escort the heli-borne insertion of ground forces. ISR assets, such as U-2s, RC-135s, or Predators, would have been on scene to build commanders' situational awareness prior to and during the initial execution. If Special Operations Forces units participated, a P-3 might have been present, adding its ISR sensors and command and control links. Electronic attack aircraft provided their capabilities to the ground commander's mission. At some point during a week-long operation, a C-130 air-dropped additional supplies and humanitarian aid. The number of air assets simultaneously over the objective area varied; however, almost all were present at the start of the operation.

In addition, the air component deployed a Control and Reporting Center, which provided a common air picture and vital

communications links among the ASOC, CAOC, and airborne aircraft. Aircraft, such as A-10s, were also equipped with improved long-range radios that enabled in-flight retasking. The air component had better means to execute the ground components' priorities. Thus, positive steps have been implemented between air and ground components in the 5 years since Operation *Anaconda*.

ground—fighters, bombers, airlift, ISR, and special mission aircraft. Listing aircraft on the air tasking order is a good start, but it does not ensure a well-orchestrated effort.

The key to improved air integration resides within the air component and its planning staff. In its top-down planning (centralized planning and decentralized execution), the CAOC has extensive expertise integrating air and space forces. The CAOC has used this

in counterinsurgency and stability operations, company commanders understood their unique battlespace and tailored plans accordingly

Looking Forward

As positive as these steps are, more can be done. The joint team brings tremendous potential and skill to the fight. Harnessing that talent requires actions within the components and between them. Progress is possible in five key areas.

Integrating the Air Component. As late as summer 2005, aircraft arriving to support ground units did not know who else was participating, when those aircraft were on station, what their operating altitude was, or other details that would allow the flight leads to optimize their contributions. As figure 2 indicates, a significant number of aircraft supported the warfighter on the

planning expertise for large-scale air operations, such as interdiction package missions. In interdiction operations, the CAOC publishes the air tasking order with a "package identification number" so all participants and aircrew can sort and identify with whom they are flying. The CAOC also designates a mission commander, who coordinates with other units to develop the detailed planning, integration, and execution.

Admittedly, there *are* differences between interdiction missions and close air support/counterinsurgency missions. For interdiction, the strike package ranges over a wide area—sometimes hundreds of miles. The duration of the package is finite, often 60 to 90

Figure 2. Air Execution



minutes from ingress through egress. In contrast, air support for counterinsurgency operations will last for days, and the area is sharply restricted, often to 10 miles in diameter. Differences in time and space, however, do not mitigate the necessity for detailed planning.

As it does for other missions, the CAOC should use the “mission commander” and “package identifiers” to allow air units to do the detailed planning. It will require an innovative approach to traditional mission commanders as they will not be airborne continuously—but that does not remove the need for one person to be in charge. The mission commander could be the air liaison officer or the aircraft that is on station the most. While those details should be adjusted to each mission, the fundamental requirement for a clear authority will remain as urgent as it is for an interdiction mission.

Adjusting the Plan. A second shortfall within the air component occurred during mission execution when plans changed. The ASOC and improved long-distance radios on aircraft such as the A-10 allowed the CAOC to adjust fighters to a new priority, such as responding to an ambush on coalition forces. Once engaged by an improvised explosive device or mortar, ground forces moved to find, fix, and engage those hostile elements. When available, close air support aircraft did assist under JTAC guidance. In this scenario, however, ISR aircraft could play a decisive role. In addition, electronic attack aircraft could have provided a measure of protection for the ground force. Redirecting lethal fire-

power, however, is only refocusing a part of air component capability.

The air component has demonstrated its competency at finding fleeting targets. Time-sensitive targeting—based on find, fix, target, track, engage, and assess principles—has become a cornerstone of the CAOC’s current operation division as it hunts mobile targets, such as Scuds, armor, air defense radars, and artillery. Bringing these tools to assist ground forces under attack should be a priority; however, this requires integrating those assets in real time with other aircraft and with the ground unit’s maneuver and firepower. Adjusting processes to support counterinsurgency operations will ensure that the full

electronic attack aircraft could have provided a measure of protection for the ground force

weight of the air component is brought to bear. One of the CAOC’s challenges will be to develop a means to translate accurate, timely, and highly classified information on the battlespace where secure communications do not exist. Developing procedures will allow vital information to save lives and advance the ground commander’s objectives.

Common Planning Picture. As improved information flow throughout the air component will aid air operations, the same will result from increased information-sharing among the components. The

counterinsurgency and stability operations battlespace has many joint players. Successful operations require information. For example, close air support aircraft with targeting pods can track the Predator’s laser spot to find a target only if each pilot knows the other’s location and coordinate laser codes. A C-130 aircrew needs the location and time for an airdrop from the company they are supporting. But if an AC-130 will relay drop clearance to a C-130 and provide visual and firepower mutual support, it should have access to the same information at the same time. An RC-135 can support an Army company moving in convoy only if the crew knows the time, location, and direction of travel.

All these activities require detailed integration with the ground forces fire and maneuver, so the air action is synchronized. This description may sound familiar; it captures the essence of the definition of *close air support* in Joint Publication 3-09.3, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support*.⁴ That definition, however, characterizes close air support for its support to ground forces. In the counterinsurgency battlespace, all fixed-wing effects must be carefully integrated.

Synchronizing lethal and nonlethal effects requires an expanded planning process to include land, maritime, air, and Special Operations components. A Web-based or similar information technology tool should be developed to facilitate these actions. A common planning picture or tool would



Air Force C-130 lands near Army AH-64 Apache helicopters at Afghan landing zone

U.S. Air Force (Aaron D. Almon II)

allow the distributed joint forces to share information and integrate operations. Given the dynamic environment in Afghanistan and the distance between units, a time-intensive, face-to-face planning method is impractical. A technology-based approach would allow subordinate units (battalions, squadrons, and ships) to see and share information on a future operation. The supported commander would own the process but allow the supporting elements to contribute. Higher echelons could view the information to anticipate requirements but would wait for the lower echelons to revise, approve, and then forward the plan. A set battle rhythm would instill discipline in the planning process. The endstate is the development of tools and applications that permit a common planning picture across component seams. A common planning tool could also become the basis to adjust operations during execution.

Figure 3 indicates a number of key issues that require resolution to better integrate air with ground force maneuver. While the list is not all-inclusive, it does highlight the types of information needed by other joint forces to integrate air assets better.

Combined Planning and Execution. As one recognizes the need to expand informa-

tion within the joint team, he realizes that select information exchange should include coalition partners and host nation forces. Nonmilitary agencies also contribute to the CJTF endstate. For example, Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan included U.S. interagency personnel—the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Justice, State, and Transportation—plus the Afghan central government.⁵ Allied and host nations will have equivalent organizations present to some degree. In addition, joint warfighters will find international agencies such as the United Nations, Doctors Without Borders, and Save the Children operating within their battlespace.⁶ As a result, the joint team should have awareness of their activities, if not an ability to plan and integrate with their efforts.

The suggestion to include nongovernmental organizations may raise concerns. Providing a means to share information is not the same as sharing *all* information. Nonetheless, the nongovernmental organizations are dedicated to the same endstate and are present. To ignore them risks both mission failure and fratricide with noncombatants.

Practice. Finally, the joint force must

practice these collaborative planning approaches in order to refine what information is needed and when. Practice will also train officers and commanders to understand the other components' planning processes and information. Components have not only unique planning techniques and procedures but also distinct cultures in operation development. Joint exercises such as Joint Expeditionary Force Experiment, Multinational Experiment, and Joint Red Flag provide

the opportunities for joint warfighters to gain experience. These events can be the conduit to establish requirements for industry to develop command and control planning tools.

Operation *Anaconda* and the battle of Shahi-Kot Valley continue to cast a shadow over air and land operations. Five years after the battle, however, organizational changes have allowed the air and land components to conduct better planning and execution. The deployed Air Support Operations Center, Air Component Coordination Element, and Control and Reporting Center allow the air component to interact better at all levels and provide means to adjust to changing situations. The future will be brighter when mechanisms are developed and incorporated that allow for a seamless common planning picture across all the components and their associated units. These processes must reconcile the realities that the air component planning is top-down while the land forces planning will be bottom-up. It is not useful to identify one as better. Instead, the joint warfighter must seek to exploit the attributes of both. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Department of the Air Force, Air Force Doctrine Document 2-1, *Air Warfare*, January 22, 2000, 58, available at <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/service_pubs/afd2_1.pdf>.

² Headquarters of the U.S. Air Force, *Operation Anaconda: An Air Power Perspective*, February 7, 2005, 5-7, 40, 53, available at <www.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-060726-037.pdf>.

³ Department of the Army, Field Manual 5-0, *Army Planning and Orders Production*, January 2005, 1-5, available at <www.nd.edu/~army/fm5_0.pdf>.

⁴ Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-09.3, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Close Air Support*, September 2, 2005, I-1, available at <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp3_09_3ch1.pdf>.

⁵ Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, Fact Sheet, "Provincial Reconstruction Teams," January 31, 2006, available at <www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/60085.htm>.

⁶ Save the Children, *Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Military-Humanitarian Relations in Afghanistan* (London: Save the Children, 2004), 5, available at <www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Save_the_Children_UK_-_PRTs_and_Humanitarian-Military_Relations_in_Afghanistan_2004_09.pdf>.

Figure 3. Joint Planning and Execution Issues

Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Support

What are the commander's critical information requirements?
What assets are best to collect against those?
If a Predator is used, when and where will it be on station?
If a U-2, JSTARS, or P-3 is used, when and where will it be on station?
How will those assets pass real time information to airborne aircraft or ground units?

Special Operations Force Support

Will the P-3 be present for a command control role?
When and where will the P-3 be on station?
How would the P-3 or AC-130 get information to other airborne aircraft or ground units?
When and where will the AC-130 orbit be?

Airlift

If C-130s are providing aerial resupply, where is the drop zone?
What is their final axis?
Who will provide clearance? If another aircraft is needed for clearance, who will pass it on what frequency?

Helicopter Support

When and where will the heli-borne assault be?
Will they need visual and firepower support?
Who will have the final firepower execution authority?

Electronic Attack

Are electronic attack aircraft needed?
If so, where and when will they be on station?
How does the ground commander make adjustments to the electronic attack plan?

Medical Evacuation

If medical evacuation is needed, where will it come from?
Will medical evacuation need escort? If so, on what frequency?