
A History of the 101st Airborne Division (AASLT) Aviation Brigade TACP

by

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The sun was not up yet, but it would be soon. Light from the east was strong enough now that the first faint shadows of the day could begin to form across the otherwise featureless plain. In the low saddle between two hills on the only terrain relief for miles, four HMMWVs of the 101st Airborne Division's Aviation Brigade huddled tightly together as a handful of Army and Air Force personnel scrambled to stretch camouflage nets and raise antennas. As the first unmerciful rays of the rising desert sun picked out a few clumps of stunted grass clinging to the hillside, the reason for their haste became apparent. With a loud clatter, AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, packed with Hellfire missiles, 2.75 rockets, and 30mm cannon rounds, thundered by, hugging the ground, their rotor wash kicking up dust devils behind them. OH-58C and OH-58D scout helicopters darted ahead of them looking for the enemy.

"Zulu 36, this is Zulu 25. I've got fifteen T-62s, moving south. Am engaging."

"Zulu 36, this is Zulu 12. Spot report, more than forty BTR-60s and T-55s, moving SSE."

"Zulu 36, this is Zulu 17. We're out of Hellfires and low on 30 mike-mike, returning to FARP. There's millions of them out there, and they're coming fast."

Zulu 36 was getting worried, and consequently so was Romeo 45, the Brigade

commander. Soon the commanding general, who was just now getting the reports that had been forwarded through the division intel nets, would be worried too. Despite almost miraculous efforts and the precision of the weapons systems at their command, there were just too many tanks for the Apache's to kill before they overwhelmed the infantry waiting in defensive positions below. Suddenly, low across the plain came the roar and whine of jet turbines. Light glinted off the curves of canopies, wings dipped and weaved. In moments, numerous flights of A-10s prowled and darted along the enemy formations, firing Mavericks and unleashing bursts of their own on-board 30mm guns, controlled by Zulu 36, the Air Battle Captain.

The Apaches quickly returned to their forward area rearming and refueling points (FARPs) to upload once again and return to the flight. Within short order, teamwork between these companions-in-arms, the Apache helicopters and A-10s, orchestrated by the OH-58s, halted the enemy offensive and put what was left of the enemy tanks to flight.

The preceding is, of course, a notional scenario. Though some might find it overly dramatic, the possibility of it occurring in some form or other increases daily here in eastern Saudi Arabia. Given the immensity of the threat, the partnership between A-10 and Apache has never been more important. A description of how one unit has

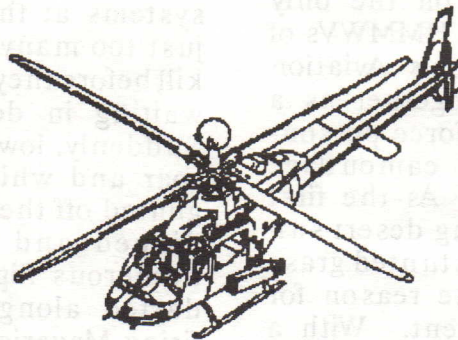
attempted to enhance this partnership and increase the effectiveness of both highly-capable systems follows.

In early August 1990, Detachment 5 of the 507th Tactical Air Control Wing (TAIRCW), Ft Campbell, Kentucky, deployed to Saudi Arabia in support of the 101st Airborne Division (AASLT) participation in operation "Desert Shield." The precipitous Iraqi invasion of Kuwait presented the unique challenge of how to best employ the assets of an air assault division in a very inhospitable climate against an extensive armored threat. Recognizing that light infantry is not the best force to be used within the context of this scenario, new emphasis was placed upon the use of attack helicopter assets. Consequently, Det 5 was tasked to provide the 101st Aviation Brigade with Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) support.

Providing the Aviation Brigade for the first time with their own TACP presented Det 5 with a unique challenge. Traditional manning for the 101st Airborne Division (AASLT) specified TACP support for three infantry brigades and their associated battalions; for an aerial reconnaissance helicopter cavalry squadron; for the division main Tactical Operations Center (TOC); and for the division's Assault Command Post (ACP). Now, with this non-traditional new tasking requirement, Det 5's available manpower was severely stretched in order to respond. Consequently, in light of the resulting manpower shortage, the question had to be asked "do we need to man

the Aviation Brigade at all, or should we rather rely on a more traditional manpower distribution?"

The 101st Abn Div's expanding Desert Shield mission provides the framework for the answer to this question. The mission reveals not only the significant role the 101st Aviation Brigade would play in deterring further Iraqi aggression, but, should deterrence fail, it is obvious that the Aviation Brigade is better equipped to deal with the armor-heavy force than even the most superbly equipped and trained light infantry brigade.



The Saudi Arabian desert can be one of the most brutal, inhospitable, unforgiving expanse of wasteland one could ever imagine anywhere in the world. Wide-open terrain, soft sand, blowing dust, insect infestations and--during the summer months--unrelenting heat make sustained, mobile infantry operations always difficult, and sometimes all but impossible. The use of a dismounted infantry is even more problematic.

Posing even greater difficulties is the nature of the Iraqi threat. As any military strategist will attest, the threat determines the tactics--no threat, no need for tactics. As the threat increases, the need for prudent tactics becomes more and more apparent. In Desert Shield, enemy armor is the primary threat. Therefore, the use of an extensive anti-armor asset would be the most logical. Despite the fact that the infantry does possess some anti-armor capacity, by itself it just doesn't have the depth of force necessary, nor the mobility

required, to decisively defeat a massive armored adversary. What is needed is a highly mobile anti-armor force--exactly what attack helicopters are all about.

Given the huge numbers of armored vehicles that can, however, be potentially fielded by the other side, even the AH-64 Apaches and AH-1 Cobras of the Aviation Brigade can't do it by themselves. Accordingly, providing the 101st Aviation Brigade with a TACP to augment attack helicopter operations with CAS, coordinated through a dedicated Aviation Brigade TACP, not only makes great sense, but is clearly an intelligence use of manpower and equipment.

Therefore, once the decision to support the Aviation Brigade was resolved, two questions remained to be answered:

1. Where was Det 5 going to get the additional manpower and equipment.
2. How was this new TACP supposed to function within it's new brigade? Obviously, the answer to the latter question depends upon the answer to the former--just what would the Aviation Brigade TACP have to operate with?

To solve the problem of manpower and equipment, it was decided that the TACP already assigned to the Aviation Brigade's cavalry squadron would be moved up to support the Aviation Brigade. To round out the Aviation Brigade TACP, a second Air Liaison Officer (ALO) was moved over from one of the infantry brigades. It was decided not to man the individual aviation attack battalions for three reasons. First, there was just not enough available manpower and equipment. Second, with proficient Air Battle Captains (ABCs), it would be unnecessary, since with brigade ALO guidance the ABC can perform almost all of the functions associated with a battalion level TACP. And third, in some

instances various attack battalions would be "chopped" to support infantry units which have their own ALO's.

With the Aviation Brigade functioning as an independent maneuver brigade, the question of how the Aviation Brigade TACP would function in supporting not only the brigade itself, but also its several attack battalions, initially presented quite a challenge. Attempting to find an equitable solution to this dilemma, the Aviation Brigade went through basically three evolutionary stages in its operating concept.

First, it was envisioned that the Aviation Brigade ALO would remain at brigade level to orchestrate CAS requests from the brigade, and the Fighter Liaison Officer (FLO), would "float" from one attack battalion to another, wherever the emphasis of the battle was providing the same service, but on a battalion level. This concept was found to be unworkable for a myriad of reasons involving manpower and equipment limitations, logistics, and the stresses involved in playing "musical chairs" between the various units.

The next evolutionary step involved keeping the Aviation Brigade TACP in one piece, to operate together at brigade level. CAS support would be provided to the attack battalions by the ABCs who essentially served as battalion level FACs. When an attack battalion generated a CAS request, this request would be forwarded to the brigade ALO via a radio link. The ABC would provide the ALO with target area coordinates, suggested IP, ABC callsign and frequency, and any other pertinent information. In-turn, the ALO would forward this request to either the ASOC, or ABCCC for action. The tasked fighters would check with the brigade ALO, who would then send them to the appropriate IP with direction to contact a specific ABC for the target area brief. This plan sounded simple, workable, and effective.

It was also slightly deficient. Due to problems encountered while operating and monitoring several radio frequencies severely limited the ALO's ability to do his job. In addition, this procedure did not allow for the brigade S-3 (operations officer) to actively monitor the ebb and flow of the battle. Obviously, this was unacceptable.

The final evolutionary step was uncomplicated, remarkably effective, and provided for efficient integration of the S-3, the ABC's, the ALO, and the CAS fighters. The solution required having the ABC relay his request for CAS through the brigade command radio net that is monitored by the S-3. The S-3 would then pass this request to the ALO for action. The air request would direct the tasked CAS fighters to contact the ABC, not the ALO.

This new procedure improved the S-3's ability to monitor his portion of the war, and streamlined radio communications between the fighters and the ABC. It also put great emphasis upon proper training and proficiency on the part of

the ABC. Without a properly trained ABC, this plan would also fail. Recognizing that having proficient, well trained ABC's is crucial, extensive JAAT training was conducted, and is ongoing.

At all times the staff function of the airborne ALO, as well as the rest of the airborne S-3 staff, is monitored and tracked by a ground TOC that displaces forward, ready to assume the battle at anytime. This is where the FLO becomes particularly important. Without the FLO, the ability to provide the Aviation Brigade with back-up manning in case something happens to the airborne command and control helicopter is non-existent. As a further benefit, having a FLO allows the Aviation Brigade TACP to conduct 24 hr operations.

This plan has been exercised several times, and it works. The ABC's and fighters work well together, and have encountered no real problems. In the final analysis, the Aviation Brigade TACP is ready and able to ensure victory wherever it may be employed.

