

Using Combined Arms Operations to Win the Counter Insurgency Fight: Aviation's Role in
Combined Arms Operations

SGM William Herrmann

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Schiffman

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Abstract

As combined arms operations increase in counter insurgency operations Aviation will play a large role in determining capabilities. Army Aviation has been involved in counter insurgency warfare since the Vietnam War with great success. The use of Army Aviation allows commanders to move large numbers of troops and supplies to where they are needed most. From the battle fields of Vietnam and Cambodia to today's battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, Army Aviation has been crucial in the combined arms fight.

Aviations Role in Combined Arms Operations

As combined arms operations increase in counter insurgency operations Aviation will play a large role in determining capabilities. Since its inception, Aviation has played a key part in counter insurgency operations and as new TTPs are developed and refined aviations role will continue to increase and become vital to these operations. Aviation is important because it gives the combatant commander speed, flexibility, and firepower that can be brought to bear at a moments notice. Aviation has a role in command and control, logistics, reconnaissance, maneuver, and firepower (Bergerson, 1980).

With the displacement of small teams of Soldiers into the population to operate within the population they are being moved away from their traditional support structure. Because of this commanders need the ability to provide logistics, firepower, and other types of support in a rapid manner. During the American Indian War, Cavalry units would have to wait days or even weeks to be resupplied. In some instances, they would even have to break contact and move to a resupply point due to running out of ammunition or not having enough firepower.

Today ammunition and supplies can be flown by Army helicopters into the battle area rather quickly. According to Frederic Bergerson, GEN Maxwell Taylor learned to appreciate the saving of an important battle flank through the use of helicopters for resupply. If the commander decides that more firepower is needed artillery pieces can be flown in to assist in his efforts. If this is not enough, armed helicopters can be brought into the fight to deal devastating blows to the enemy and provide valuable intelligence on enemy movements. If unit supply routes are compromised or if it is deemed to dangerous to travel by ground vital supplies such as food, gas, and ammunition can be airlifted to a unit within hours instead of days and weeks.

The U.S. Army began to use Aviation in the counter insurgency fight during the Vietnam War. Special Operations Forces would operate from small outposts far from any type of military base. These small units would have to be supported from larger Army bases in the rear. One disadvantage to this was that the helicopters were always in the rear area and never moved forward where the troops were. This meant that if reinforcements or ammunition were needed there would be significant delays due to the request time and method. However, this was still much quicker than trying to send a ground convoy and in many places there were no roads so aviation was the only method of delivering the necessary materials.

In 1969, the Army used helicopters for operations in Cambodia. These operations were responsible for finding and destroying large enemy caches, enemy living quarters, medical facilities and other vital NVA equipment. The speed in which these operations took place and the prior aerial reconnaissance by Army aircraft resulted in these operations being a huge success and was responsible for weakening the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong. Commanders were able to seize the initiative from the enemy and take the fight to them in their hiding places thanks to Army Aviation.

During the 1980s and 1990s a new counter insurgency war developed, the “War on Drugs.” The Army found itself in several Andean Ridge countries supporting friendly governments in their efforts to eradicate drugs and the cartels that produced them. This support included helicopters, fixed wing aircraft, and the personnel to operate them. UH-60 aircraft were used to transport police and members of the armed forces in raids on suspected drug cartels. They were also used in a reconnaissance role to locate the cartel’s crops from the air. Once the crops were found, troops could be flown in to destroy the crop and engage members of the cartel guarding the crop.

As the cartels became more sophisticated so did the aircraft that was used to battle them. Fixed wing aircraft were developed and deployed that could provide imagery to forces on the ground while operations were ongoing or the imagery could be brought back to a ground station to be exploited. Communications aircraft were also deployed to provide command and control as well as signal intelligence.

In today's operations, aviation units are located near their ground counterparts. During the planning phase of operations aviation LNOs are utilized to explain the specific capabilities of aircraft and how they can best be used to support the troops on the ground. Many of today's Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) have Brigade Aviation Elements (BAEs) which consists of aviation personnel that bring their expertise to the BCT to ensure the commander employs all available assets. These personnel are the commander's direct link to the Aviation unit and employing the aircraft he needs to conduct his mission.

By having the Aviation personnel with the BCT mission, request times are cut from hours to minutes. Aviation assets can be placed under the operational control of the BCT commander for specific missions cutting their response times even further. Aviation units across the Army have been reorganized to better support their ground counterparts. Aviation Brigades now consist of an attack battalion, medium lift battalion, and general support battalion. Now the commander has all the assets he needs to support the BCT commander.

In Afghanistan the Aviation units are broken down even more to support the ground commander. Attack battalions are broken down into company teams and strategically placed within areas of operation that support quick response times to support ground troops in the fight. Lift units are based from central locations and have specific resupply missions based on unit logistical requirements. This ability to create specialized aviation packages is critical to the success of combined arms operations.

Army Aviation has been involved in counter insurgency warfare since the Vietnam War with great success. The use of Army Aviation allows commanders to move large numbers of troops and supplies to where they are needed most. From the battle fields of Vietnam and Cambodia to today's battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, Army Aviation has been crucial in the combined arms fight. Without aviation assets, today's battlefield would look drastically different and the use of combined arms would not be severely limited.

References

Bergerson, F.A. *The Army Gets an Air Force: Tactics of an Insurgent Bureaucracy*. The John Hopkins Press.