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*The Airborne Forces of the United States Army: Cornerstone of  
Force Projection*

*Joint Military Operations*

By

Randolph C. White Jr.  
MAJ, USA

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations (JMO).

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of Defense.

Signature: 

5 February 1999

Faculty Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Colonel Mark A. Kelly, U. S. Army  
JMO Instructor

Seminar 10, Instructors: Professor Gerry Dillon  
CAPT John Locks

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## INTRODUCTION

*Where is the prince who can afford so to cover his country with troops for its defense, as that ten thousand men descending from the clouds, might not, in many places, do an infinite deal of mischief before a force can be brought to repel them?*

Benjamin Franklin, 1784

The airborne forces of the United States serve as the cornerstone of this nations force projection ground combat force and provide unique advantages that includes the ability to conduct forcible entry operations anywhere in the world. From Panama to the Persian Gulf, airborne forces have proven themselves ably suited as the nations premier rapid deployment force. The size and numbers of US military units that are forward deployed has decreased drastically since 1991 and this has placed more emphasis than ever before on the ability of this nation to project power over great distances with short notice. The proliferation of state sponsored terrorism and weapons technology serves notice that America's vital interest may be placed in jeopardy with little or no warning.

In this study I will enlighten the future joint planner as to the unique missions and advantages that airborne units provide in the *strategic* and *operational* sense. While reference will be made to historical examples in order to illustrate a particular point, it is not my intent to dwell on airborne history. Additionally, I will address the limitations of airborne forces, before concluding with a discussion focused on the one mission that airborne units are most likely to be called upon to execute in a forcible entry scenario at either the *strategic* or *operational* level of war: The airfield seizure.

## Missions and Advantages

The United States Army Airborne forces are arguably the most diverse and flexible units in the world. Using the parachute assault as *the principle means of insertion*, airborne forces can accomplish a wide range of missions at the *strategic, operational* and tactical levels of war. At both the *strategic* and *operational* level, the use of airborne units afford the commander a flexible deterrent option that may deter, coerce, or compel the enemy to do our bidding. The speed with which airborne units can be employed compresses the operational planning factors of *time, space and force*; all of which enhance the *operational functions of movement and maneuver*.

The simple alerting of airborne forces for deployment can act as a serious flexible deterrent option (FDO) that has both military and political implications for any potential enemy. A enemy commander can ill afford to discount the inherent flexibility airborne forces provide, and may in fact alter or altogether cease with a course of action that is in conflict with US interests. With the means of delivery provided by the United States Air Force (USAF), airborne forces possess *strategic mobility* and can move worldwide to conduct combat and Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) with minimal warning to potential adversaries. Examples of this strategic ability to move and strike or conduct combat operations over considerable distances include *Operation Just Cause*, conducted in December of 1989 to conduct combat operations in Panama and

*Operation Desert Shield*, conducted in August of 1991 to provide the initial ground defense force of Saudi Arabia. At the *Operational* level, airborne forces can be employed anywhere in the theater of war. They have the ability to conduct deep attacks to achieve operational level objectives such as the seizure of airfields, or other key terrain virtually anywhere in the enemy's area of operation. This is tied directly to an operational commanders intent, concept of *operational maneuver*, and specified tasks. Typically, airborne operations conducted at the *operational* level have a specific start and ending point at which time link up with conventional ground forces is to be affected.

*Operation Market Garden*, conducted by American and British airborne units in September of 1944 to secure key bridges over the Rhine River, is an example of the employment of airborne forces at the operational level. Units were deployed directly to the zone of action and simultaneously assaulted three different objectives. Upon arrival to the combat area or zone of action, *tactical* missions include the conduct of raids, deliberate attacks, and reinforcement of friendly forces, and combat operations directed on enemy rear area facilities such as command and control sites. Airborne units can conduct operations in the MOOTW environment to include Peacekeeping operations, Non Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), counter-terrorism, and counterinsurgency missions.

Doctrinally, airborne units provide four primary *advantages* to the commander at both the strategic and operational levels: 1). **Quick response on short notice.** At any

given moment, the Army's 82nd Airborne Division has at the ready a Division Ready Brigade (DRB), that can begin deployment to anywhere in the world 18 hours after notification. This DRB numbers roughly 2500 paratroopers and consists of three airborne infantry battalions augmented with engineer, air defense, signal, anti-armor, towed artillery, reconnaissance elements, intelligence assets, and other Combat Support (CS) and Combat Service Support components. 2). **Strategic and Operational surprise.** The ability to achieve strategic surprise is somewhat degraded given the current state of telecommunications and surveillance technology. Nevertheless, operational (and tactical) surprise can be achieved principally by the speed in which a significant number of paratroopers can be dropped over a given target. During *Operation Just Cause*, 731 Army Rangers parachuted onto their objectives at the Torrijos/Tocumen airports in one pass comprised of seven C141 and four C-130 aircraft.<sup>1</sup> 3). **The ability to bypass all land or sea obstacles.** When considering the employment of an airborne unit, sea obstacles that may present a challenge to our naval or marine forces are an afterthought. Oceans, sea mines, hostile navies, and coral reef are non-factors in the planning of an airborne operation for obvious reasons. Additionally, mountain ranges, or any other major land or manmade obstacles do not impact airborne operations unless they happen to be in the immediate vicinity of the drop zones. 4). **The ability to mass rapidly on critical objectives.**<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more so than any other advantage, the ability to insert massive numbers of combatants directly onto a given objective, such as an airfield,

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<sup>1</sup> Donnelly, Thomas., Roth, Margaret., Baker, Caleb., Operation Just Cause. New York; Lexington Books, 1991, pg. 195

<sup>2</sup> FM 90-26, Airborne Operations. Washington, DC: HQ Department of the Army, December 1990. Pg. 1-4

is the airborne units chief advantage. A parachute assault onto a given objective provides the strategic or operational commander the ability to achieve *mass*, surprise and shock effect via the speed with which a large number of paratroopers can be dropped. This was very effectively demonstrated during *Operation Just Cause* where two Airborne Ranger battalions conducted the seizure of two different Panamanian airfields simultaneously. The Ranger units were then quickly reinforced with an additional brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division which also arrived to the battlefield via parachute.

Many have argued that the United States Marine Corps can provide the nation's quick reaction force, or in the words of the Commandant of the Marine Corps General Charles Krulak, "serve as the nation's worldwide 911 service".<sup>3</sup> While the Marine Corps is capable of quick and decisive response to a variety of contingencies, their response time is, to a large degree, predicated by the geographical location of the Marine element when it receives alert notification to move to a flash point. The increase in the military capabilities of third world nations and the growing lethality of various terrorist organizations creates a significant challenge for our intelligence community when trying to anticipate flash points involving our national interest and requiring a ground combat force. This challenge, coupled with recent failures in our intelligence community (untimely detection of nuclear testing in Pakistan/North Korea; questionable targeting during the recent cruise missile strikes in the Sudan), means that the alert notification to direct forces to a specified zone of action may very well find our Marine forces at a

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<sup>3</sup> General Charles Krulak, USMC, Speech, US Naval War College, December 1998.

positional disadvantage. The gulf of *time and space* may be a to extensive to traverse for the ships on which our Marines (*force*) will be embarked. In this case, the only option for introduction of a lethal and rapidly deployable ground component is an airborne unit. As has been stated, the 82nd Airborne Division maintains a DRB Task Force ready to deploy worldwide within 18 hours of notification and can successfully conduct decisive combat operations immediately upon arrival. The most recent example of this ability to rapidly deploy a credible ground combat force is the deployment of the 82nd Airborne Division's TF 2-82 to Saudi Arabia at the commencement of *Operation Desert Storm* in August of 1990 and the subsequent timely arrival of the remainder of the division. During this time period, USMC units were in fact on sea station at various locations around the world, and though alerted arrived *after* TF 2-82 was on the ground. The obvious conclusion is that given the *time and space factor* of movement to Saudi Arabia, and undoubtedly on the advice of the JCS, the NCA made the decision that the deployment of an airborne unit would most expediently meet the intent of the Commander in Chief. With the inherent in-flight refueling capability of the vast majority of our long range transport aircraft, there is virtually no where on the face of this earth that an airborne element cannot be delivered in a timely manner.

## LIMITATIONS

As with any combat formation, Airborne units are not without limitations.

Planners and commanders at the strategic and operational level must acknowledge the limitations of airborne units and factor these limitations into any equation calling for the potential deployment of an airborne force.

The most obvious limitation revolves around the availability of appropriate numbers of USAF lift aircraft for the *strategic movement* of the airborne force to the *operational area* of conflict. The number and type of aircraft that can be provided for the movement of the airborne force may significantly impact the planning of any airborne operation in terms of the number of paratroopers to be delivered, and in terms of their subsequent sustainment which will be exclusively by air until the maturation of a logistical support structure in the theater of operations. Airborne operations will also require USAF support in terms of counterair operations, close air support (CAS) and air interdiction operations. Without the robust support of the USAF, the airborne unit is a rider without a horse, but with effective and timely USAF support, the employment of paratroopers can be carried out with the maximum probability of success.

The possible loss of operational surprise also presents a major limitation to the ability of an airborne force to be successful during the conduct of a parachute assault. Witness the near disaster that met the German Airborne forces or *Fallschirmjager* the invasion of Crete (Operation Mercury) in May of 1941. The New Zealand and British

defenders on Crete, having been alerted to the planned German airborne assault, were able to kill large numbers of Germans as the *Fallschirmjager* (German paratroopers) drifted to the ground under their parachutes. The Germans prevailed only by virtue of poor tactical decision making on the part of the New Zealand and British defenders.<sup>4</sup>

Army Field Manual 90-26 (Airborne Operations), outlines the following additional limitations of airborne units:

- "Airborne force are vulnerable to enemy attack while enroute to the Drop Zone (DZ).

Although the USAF can conduct limited airdrops without air superiority, operations at the strategic and operational level require neutralization or suppression of enemy counterair operations and air defense assets. This may require Suppression of Enemy Air Defense (SEAD), radar jamming, and fighter aircraft in addition to CAS sorties.

- After the initial airdrop the sustained combat power of airborne forces depends on resupply by air. Any interruption in the flow of resupply aircraft can cause a potential weakening of the airborne force. Enemy air defense fires on resupply aircraft and long range artillery and mortar fires on the DZ can hamper the delivery, collection, or distribution of critical supplies.

- Once on the ground, the airborne force has limited tactical mobility. That mobility depends on the number and type of vehicles and helicopters that can be brought into the objective area.

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<sup>4</sup> Department of the Army Pamphlet 20-232, Airborne Operations: A German Appraisal. HQ Department of the Army, October 1951. Pg. 18.

- The airborne force has limited Field Artillery (FA) and Air Defense Artillery (ADA) support until additional assets can be introduced into the objective area. These may arrive by subsequent parachute drops, or by airland if a secured airfield is available.
- Evacuation of casualties from the airhead is difficult. Until evacuation means are available, the brigade (or larger sized unit) must be prepared to provide medical care through the attachment of divisional or additional medical elements.”<sup>5</sup>

Weather can also impact adversely on any airborne operation. During *Operation Market Garden*, the British 1st Airborne Division was virtually annihilated in part due to the affects of weather over the departure airfields in England. Follow on reinforcements were delayed for days and the sustainment of those forces on the ground became impossible. American airborne forces also felt the affects of weather, with minimal impact during *Operation Just Cause*. The original plan had envisioned a follow on parachute assault by a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division 45 minutes after the Ranger battalions conducted their airborne assault. Unfortunately, an ice storm that hit the departure airfield in North Carolina caused the 20 aircraft carrying the 82nd troopers to depart and arrive in a haphazard fashion. Instead of the 2176 troopers arriving in one formation of aircraft, they began arriving in varying numbers of aircraft at 0211 and completed their insertion a little more than two hours later at 0430.<sup>6</sup> Long range meteorological forecasting techniques must be utilized in order to provide strategic and operational planners the option of selecting alternate departure airfields.

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<sup>5</sup> FM 90-26, pg. 1-6

<sup>6</sup> Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, pg. 202

## CRITICAL TASK : THE AIRFIELD SEIZURE

“...No one does a better job of airfield seizure and takedowns than the 82nd Airborne Division”.<sup>7</sup> “An airfield seizure is executed to clear and control a designated airstrip. The purpose can be to allow follow-on airland forces to conduct transload operations or to establish a lodgment in order to continue combat operations from that location. Airfields can be seized and occupied by friendly forces for a definite or indefinite period of time.”<sup>8</sup>

It is no large revelation that two principal points of entry into any country are that country's airfield and port facilities. The United States utilized both during the buildup and subsequent sustainment of the force that ensured the success of both *Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm* during the Persian Gulf War. The United States Marine Corps (USMC), supported by the United States Navy (USN) has been and continues to stand as the force of choice for forced entry operations into port facilities. The recent emphasis on operations conducted in the littorals will enable the USMC to continue to sharpen its' doctrine in regards to forcible entry of port facilities from the horizontal perspective.

The United States Army provides the forces configured and equipped to provide the rapid and decisive vertical forced entry seizure of strategic or operational airfields

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<sup>7</sup> General Dennis Reimer (USA), Speech, US Naval War College, January 1999.

<sup>8</sup> FM 90-26, pg. 7-10

*anywhere in the world.* Currently, these forces consist of the 75th Ranger Regiment and the 82nd Airborne Division, either of which *could* be called upon to seize an airfield via parachute assault. Given our current policy of quick and decisive force projection, as well as the relative instability of the world since the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, any contingency operations will require a robust and defensible base into which combat power can rapidly be introduced. If port facilities are unavailable or otherwise impractical (i.e. mined or heavily defended), control of an airfield will provide the conduit through which combat power can be introduced and sustained from. The forcible seizure of an airfield in close proximity to the objective and enemy forces will, in all likelihood, provide US forces with significant positional advantage that can then be exploited. In this instance, the airfield becomes the *decisive point* as defined in FM 100-5, Operations.<sup>9</sup>

Some may argue that forcible seizure of an airfield by parachute assault is a risky venture in the best of conditions. The worldwide proliferation of integrated air defense networks and early warning radar, coupled with the inherent advantages (in the eyes of many) of a well unified defending force supports this argument to some extent. This argument however, is neither revolutionary or unique. It is not as if the United States military takes potential enemies lightly or condescendingly. Indeed, in the words of Archidamus II, King of Sparta: "The practical measures that we take are always based on the assumption that our enemies are not unintelligent".<sup>10</sup> We must assume that any

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<sup>9</sup> FM 100-5, Operations. Washington, DC: HQ Department of the Army, June 1993. Pg. 6-5

<sup>10</sup> Tsouras, Peter G. Warriors' Words: A Dictionary of Military Quotations. New York; Cassell, Arms, and Armour., 1992. Pg. 157.

potential adversary will defend his airfield in the same studied, robust manner as we would defend our own. That is to say the airfield defenses will be well situated so as to perpetuate the maximum combat power and destruction on any attacker. These assumptions, as well as the obvious vulnerabilities during the conduct of the vertical assault by parachute can provide the defending enemy with a decided advantage. As in any offensive operation, the airfield seizure element must overcome and defeat those advantages possessed by the defender.

How can these potential enemy advantages be overcome? The four elements of *combat power: Protection, Maneuver, Leadership, and Firepower*, as defined in Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations, provide the keys to successful airfield seizure operations. As has been previously stated, the critical element in the conduct of the airfield seizure is *surprise*. Within the *strategic* context, proper OPSEC procedures at homestation will enhance the potential exploitation of surprise, by limiting the media's ability to compromise a pending airfield seizure with the reckless reporting that has become their standard. In an *operational* context, surprise can be achieved in several ways. The conduct of the airfield seizure under nighttime conditions maximizes the benefit of surprise, shock effect, and the paratroopers night fighting capability. Additionally, nighttime assault enhances the *force protection* element of combat power as it relates to the airborne assault element. Finally, the placement of the airborne assault force that may provide for positional advantage in relation to the enemy, or more

specifically, effective *operational maneuver* of the airborne assault force is critical and may mean the difference between success and failure.

The timing or *operational sequencing* of the parachute assault is also critical to the success of the airfield seizure. Planning factors must include the time of flight from departure airfields to the target area, integration of any supporting *operational fires*, as well as any overflight considerations involving other nations. This is accomplished via the joint efforts of Army and USAF planners. The *operational sequencing* or timing of follow-on airland elements and/or resupply aircraft is also critical to the exploitation of the initial seizure of any airfield.

“The configuration and condition of the airfield, including taxiways and parking determines the maximum-on-ground (MOG) capacity for aircraft at one time. This, combined with offload/transload time estimates, impacts directly on scheduling follow-on airflow into the airfield. Surface composition and condition and predicted weather conditions must allow the airfield to accept the required number of sorties without deteriorating the surface below the minimum acceptable safety standards.... The airfield location must facilitate follow on operations. If transload operations must occur, the follow on target must be within the range of the aircraft to be used. If not, then forward area rearm/refuel assets must be available and positioned to support the follow on operation... The airfield must be defensible initially with assault forces against any immediate threat and with planned follow-on forces against larger, coordinated

counterattacks.”<sup>11</sup> The obvious key to the initial defense of the airfield is the configuration of the Division Ready Brigade (DRB) from the 82nd Airborne Division or that of the 75th Ranger (Airborne) element that would typically be used to conduct the initial seizure, as well as the supporting fires that can be provided by the USAF. In the case of the 82nd Airborne Division, the *task organization* would remain the same regardless of which DRB was given the measure of seizing a particular airfield. However, given its size (approx 14,000), the 82nd Airborne Division has greater flexibility in tailoring a force package for any unusual or anticipated challenges in the target area (i.e., significant armored or air threat).

In his monograph entitled: Airfield Seizure: The modern “Key to the Country”, MAJ. Gordon C. Bonham (now COL., and former commander of 2d Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division) used the theory for generating *combat power* put forth by BG Huba Wass de Czege. COL Bonham writes that “Wass de Czege challenged the concept that combat power...is derived solely from force ratios and numbers crunching. Although the number of troops and artillery pieces are important, Wass de Czege argues that combat power is also a function of intangible attributes. Surprise and shock effect, and the leaders ability to bring potential strength and resources...to bear against the enemy are the real keys to the generation of combat power.”<sup>12</sup> Wass de Czege identifies the same four components of combat power that we use today. “*Maneuver* is the dynamic element and is defined as the movement of

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<sup>11</sup> FM 90-26, pg. 7-10

<sup>12</sup> Bonham, Gordon C. Airfield Seizure: The Modern Key to the Country. School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, December, 1990. Pg. 7.

forces in relation to the enemy to secure a positional advantage. *Firepower* provides the destructive force essential to defeating the enemy's ability and will to fight...firepower facilitates *maneuver* and provides *protection* for the force by destroying or suppressing the enemies combat power. *Protection* is the shielding of the fighting potential of the force so that it can be applied at the decisive time and place. *Leadership* is the most essential element of combat power. The leader is responsible for synchronizing the other three elements to maximize their effects against the enemy. The leaders application of maneuver, firepower, and protection against the enemy at the decisive point converts combat potential to combat power".<sup>13</sup>

The Waas de Czege model, and indeed the current US model for combat power, serves as the template of successful airfield seizures as executed by US Airborne forces. "Unable to rely solely on superior numbers, the airborne assault force must develop overwhelming combat power through the synchronization of *maneuver*, *firepower*, and *protection*. Incorporating the intangible elements of speed, surprise, and shock effect, the *leader* must generate sufficient combat power, relative to the enemy, to seize and secure the airfield. Once accomplished, the assault force must quickly transition to the...defense to gain the advantage of time to allow follow on forces the ability to rapidly reinforce the airhead".<sup>14</sup>

The conduct of the airfield seizure is listed on the Mission Essential Task List (METL) for both the 82nd Airborne Division and the 75th Ranger (Airborne) regiment.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pg. 9.

In laymen terms the METL for US Army units lists the critical wartime tasks (usually 9-12) that a given unit must be able to execute in order to be successful in combat.

The implications of the emphasis is clear: United States Airborne units must be able to forcibly enter and seize enemy airfields the world over. Airborne units possess this unique ability and clearly provide the JTF commander, the JCS and the NCA with options that *no other force* in our nations inventory can provide. At the *Operational* level, the Joint Task Force (JTF) Commander will have the benefit of employing a highly trained and capable force that can enhance *operational maneuver* and gain *positional advantage* over an enemy force virtually anywhere in the world. The mere presence of an airborne force compels the enemy to consider its' striking ability and allows the JTF commander to incorporate the possible use of an airborne element as part of his operational deception plan if warranted.

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to analyze and inform the future operational planner as to the unique position that airborne units hold as the cornerstone of the nations power projection ground combat force. The many capabilities and advantages offered by an airborne unit make it uniquely capable of *strategically or operationally* deploying anywhere in the world on short notice to conduct parachute assault and immediate combat operations in support of the nation's critical interest. For the *operational*

commander airborne units enhance the ability to manage the factors of *space, time, and force*. Additionally, the mere availability of airborne units provide the *operational* commander with a flexible deterrent option that may deter, coerce, or compel the enemy to act in a way favorable to US interests. Finally, airborne units provide unmatched flexibility in terms of maneuver and movement at both the *strategic and operational* level.

A rapidly deployable, lethal force capable of conducting forced entry operations that will have a decisive impact at the *Strategic, Operational, and indeed Tactical* levels of war will necessarily remain the centerpiece of our ability to project force wherever required. As former Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney has said; "It is the ability to project firepower and manpower that will guarantee the security of our worldwide interests...the remote inland location of the many areas of vital national interest and the requirement for speedy strategic deployability can only be accomplished by aerial delivery".<sup>15</sup> The airborne unit stands alone for its *singular ability* to carry out speedy strategic deployment and attain success upon arrival, and it will continue to stand as the nations cornerstone of force projection.

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<sup>15</sup> Cheney, Congressman Richard B. "Strategic Underpinnings of a Future Force". Military Review. October 1986. Pg. 10-11.

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