In Gulf War II, the Air Force and Army discovered a new “sweet spot” in combat cooperation.

Hand in Glove

By Rebecca Grant

In recent years, the Air Force and Army periodically have pushed to improve their cooperation in joint warfare. The AirLand Battle doctrine of the 1980s coordinated some service strengths. The so-called “31 Initiatives” of that era helped to shape USAF’s E-8 Joint STARS aircraft. There were other, lesser steps.

Gulf War II, however, took integration to new highs, and now some view it as the distinguishing feature of warfare, US style.

That’s the view of Richard H. Sinnreich, a former director of the Army School of Advanced Military Studies. “If there is a single thing that jumps out at you about Iraq,” he told the Los Angeles Times, “it is that combined arms works like gangbusters.”

Retired Navy Vice Adm. Arthur K. Cebrowski, director of the Pentagon’s Office of Force Transformation, reached much the same conclusion about Operation Iraqi Freedom. “When the lessons learned come out, one of the things we are probably going to see is a new air-land dynamic,” he said recently. “It is as if we will have discovered a new sweet spot in the relationship between land warfare and air warfare.”

Finding that sweet spot was no sure thing. The 1991 Gulf War coalition won a major victory, but cooperation of air and land components fell short in several key areas.

Sparks flew over placement of the fire support coordination line, alleged inflexibility of the air component’s air tasking order, and even the tally of Iraqi tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery pieces destroyed by airpower. Most important was the difficulty the two services had in adapting to an unexpected event: the rapid, organized retreat of Republican Guard divisions one day after the ground war started.

Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander of US Central Command in Gulf War I, relied heavily on airpower throughout, but he began downplaying its impact as soon as victory was in sight. In his famous televised briefing of Feb. 27, 1991, the night before the cease-fire took effect, he said airpower had been effective initially but had been less so in the war’s latter stages.

Schwarzkopf’s statement angered airmen who had executed a high-intensity, 38-day-long air campaign that had shredded Iraq’s ground forces and made possible a 100-hour Army walkover against a devastated enemy. “The truth was, his remarks hurt,” said Gen. Buster C. Glosson, who was the chief air campaign planner, in his recent book War With Iraq.

McPeak’s Words

The game of ego wounding turned into an equal opportunity sport. Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, the Air Force Chief of Staff, made a quiet but bold statement at a March 15, 1991, Pentagon news briefing. “My private conviction,” McPeak declared, “is that this is the first time in history that a field army has been defeated by airpower.” Though McPeak swaddled his words in effusive praise for coalition ground forces, the damage was done.

Gulf War histories such as Certain Victory: The US Army in the Gulf War, written by Army Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scales Jr., documented profound bitterness caused by misunderstanding of the air component’s target selection process. Two corps commanders, Army Lt. Gens. Gary E. Luck and Frederick M. Franks Jr., were unconvinced that airpower was striking hard enough at enemy forces they would face in battle. In his book, Scales wrote, “The number of corps-nominated targets actually flown quickly became the litmus test for air support.”

In fact, wartime analysis showed that a large number of corps-nominated targets were based on outdated intelligence and thus weren’t worth striking. However, corps commanders were not back-briefed on why some targets were hit and others not. This was largely an organizational failure. Because Schwarzkopf had made himself the commander of coalition ground forces, there was no three-star land component commander to work out problems with the three-star air component commander, Lt. Gen. Charles A. Horner.

Desert Destruction

Tank carcasses (here, hulk of an Iraqi T-55) were a common sight. The goal was to move beyond “deconfliction” and harmonize the combat power of air and land forces.
In Gulf War II, the Air Force and Army discovered a new “sweet spot” in combat cooperation.
In short, “jointness” did not reign supreme. Misunderstanding festered into a mistrust that infected professional and public debate. Looking back on that time, USAF’s Gen. Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in a recent interview with Defense News, “We were basically in a deconfliction mode.”

For the rest of the decade, there were few real-world opportunities to test air and land component coordination within conventional operations. Airpower dominated military action in the 1990s. Operation Deliberate Force in Bosnia in 1995 employed airpower first, with US ground forces entering the region much later as peacekeepers. In 1999, Operation Allied Force in the Balkans ran for 78 days with no land component involvement and no ground operations until after the cease-fire in June.

In 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom made its mark with a different air-land dynamic. The fight featured Special Operations Forces backed by persistent, joint airpower. The coterie of SOF units worked undercover to maneuver various sets of Afghan allies to victory against Taliban fighters. However, the role for conventional US ground forces was small. There was no land component commander in theater until mid-November 2001, a month after the start of the war.

Integration of the air and land components was not tested in conventional combat until operations in Afghanistan entered a new phase in early 2002.

**Up From Anaconda**

The forces of Enduring Freedom made the transition to peacekeeping and stabilization missions in early 2002. One of the remaining tasks was to clear concentrations of surviving al Qaeda and Taliban fighters. One such concentration was pinpointed in the Shah-e-Kot Valley of eastern Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border, and on March 2, 2002, Maj. Gen. Franklin L. “Buster” Hagenbeck, coalition force land component commander forward, launched Operation Anaconda.

Anaconda was designed to quickly clear the enemy from the valley, but it ran into trouble as the opposition in the wintry, mountainous terrain proved much fiercer than expected. Airpower became the major source of fire support for Hagenbeck’s 1,411 men on the ground and SOF teams working near them.

After a rough start, airpower and some smart tactical decisions by the troops on the ground got the opera-

**Lessons Learned.** US soldiers take part in Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, which sparked an Air Force–Army effort to improve close air support planning, equipment, and control measures.

*US Army photo by Spc. Andres J. Rodriguez*
Mobility also suffered. In a period when all fuel, ammunition, supplies, and personnel came into Afghanistan only by air, the planning countdown left little time for working airlift requirements.

Understanding between the components suffered. For example, the ground component fire support coordinator, Lt. Col. Christopher F. Bentley, criticized air control mechanisms as “inflexible and not well-suited to support a nonlinear, asymmetrical battlefield.”

The technology and tactics were there. Operation Anaconda proved that airpower could on short notice pour munitions into a small area, helping ground forces stand against stiff resistance and accomplish their objectives with minimal casualties.

Yet no matter how well individuals performed, their valor compensated in part for shoddy operational-level planning and the inadequate working relationships between the two components. The Anaconda experience revealed that nearly every area of air and land component coordination needed some work.

Helping to focus on the problem was the looming war with Iraq. If the miscues of Operation Anaconda played out on a larger scale, the war might founder.

Senior service leaders responded. Talks between Air Force and Army three- and four-star generals quickly identified practical improvements for close air support equipment and control measures.

At the operational level, Air Force Maj. Gen. Daniel P. Leaf was sent to Camp Doha, Kuwait, to be the air component liaison to the land component commander. Preparing for war in Iraq demanded that the air and land components leave nothing to chance.

The Problem of Iraq

Despite the success of Operation Desert Storm a decade earlier, many had misgivings about attacking the regime of Saddam Hussein, which they thought would be tougher this time around. In fact, Myers told reporters in early March, Operation Iraqi Freedom would be very different from the first Gulf War.

This time, the US and its coalition partners had to take Baghdad. The strategic problem was different, too. In 1991, Iraq massed regular Army forces in a line along the border with Saudi Arabia. Top-flight Republican Guards forces were behind the front line in a mutually supporting formation that guarded the escape routes north to Basra and on to Baghdad.

As 2003 began, Iraq’s forces were in much different positions; they were stationed throughout Iraq. A new force of Special Republican Guards, consisting of four brigades with about 15,000 soldiers each, had been formed to protect Baghdad itself. The mechanized and infantry divisions of the Republican Guards were divided into two corps. The Northern Corps defended outer Baghdad while the Southern Corps, headquartered at al Hafreia, had to watch out for a possible US invasion from Kuwait.

In the forthcoming battle, defeating Iraq’s Republican Guards was the key. The question was whether the Republican Guards might have a chance to retreat back into Baghdad itself and set the stage for bloody urban combat.

Added to the operational challenges, the global war on terrorism came with its own set of rules. Warriors had to reduce the impact on civilians for any war to be deemed a political as well as a military success. It was a point that was made by none other than the combined force air component commander himself, Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley.

“The sensitivity that the CINC and all of us have as component commanders is to absolutely totally minimize the collateral damage and absolutely totally minimize the effect on the civilian population,” he said during an April 5 news briefing.

Speed was also important. A war that dragged on would jeopardize the fragile political support for the operations in Iraq and increase the risks to those fighting it. Iraqi chemical and biological weapons were deemed a real threat, and no one wanted to give Iraqi forces the time to use them.

Out of these considerations emerged the OIF plan. It hinged on ground forces making a rapid thrust to Baghdad. Still, there would be a gap between the time the ground forces jumped off from Kuwait and when they encountered the Republican Guards outside of Baghdad.

The Game Changes

The key to a swift war would be to pin down and attrit those Republican Guards forces so they could not move back into defensive positions inside Baghdad. Until the ground forces made contact, it was a job for airpower.

The operation began on March 20 (local Baghdad time) with F-117 fighter and Tomahawk cruise missile strikes. Air strikes against Republican Guards targets began right away, too. Ground forces started moving several hours later. After about 24 hours, the 3rd Infantry Division had moved 100 miles into
By March 24, they were at Karbala, 50 miles from Baghdad. Here the game changed. Two armored divisions of Republican Guards stood in the way. The Hammurabi took up a supporting position behind the Medina, just as they had done in the first Gulf War. Then came the sandstorm. From March 24 through March 26, blowing sand and dust plunged the region into a gritty brownout. In this crucial interval, it was up to airpower to seal off any attempted maneuver by Iraq’s best forces.

The Army’s V Corps commander, Lt. Gen. William S. Wallace, made his move—and encountered the unexpected. He stretched the fire support coordination line out to the Republican Guards forces and attacked with Apache helicopters, which suffered combat damage so extensive that the helicopter attack had to be called off. “The attack of the 11th Aviation on the Medina Division did not meet the objectives that I had set for that attack,” Wallace told reporters in early May.

This time, however, the air and land components were ready to deal with the unexpected. A-10s flew cover to suppress ground fires on subsequent missions. Joint STARS radar aircraft and other sensor platforms tracked two separate columns of the Republican Guard on the move. Heavy air attacks knocked them out. As Moseley said, “The strikes on those formations have been devastating and have been decisive in breaking them up.”

Air attacks on the Republican Guards put the campaign in a good position. Wallace identified the culminating point as a series of five coordinated attacks by the 3rd Infantry Division and the 101st Airborne and 82nd Airborne Divisions, all starting early in the morning on March 30.

Wallace explained: “As we completed those attacks, defeated the enemy in and around al Hillah—which is the first time, by the way, that we had confirmed contact with the Republican Guard—we began to receive reports from our [unmanned aerial vehicles] and aerial observers and from our intelligence folks that the Iraqi Army was repositioning. And it was about 3, maybe 4 in the afternoon on a beautiful sunlit day, low wind, no restrictions to flight, and at that point the US Air Force had a heyday against those repositioning Iraqi forces.”

**Airpower Made the Difference**

The Republican Guard units never got the chance to mount coordinated resistance; the Guard divisions had suffered grievous losses. A few counterattacks did occur, but the power of the Republican Guard to be spoilers in the battle of Baghdad melted away under the impact of coalition strikes.

Mastery of the air enabled other operations to proceed smoothly. In a stunning display, the 101st and 82nd Airborne separately conducted air assaults that secured key airfields, allowing close air support aircraft to move closer to the scene of action. The 3rd Infantry’s audacious entry into Baghdad provided a healthy dose of shock and awe. Moseley applauded the “incredibly brave US Army and US Marine Corps troops who have been able to capitalize on the effect that we’ve had on the Republican Guard and the fielded forces and have been able to exploit that success.”

Four factors strengthened the co-

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**Watch on Iraq. USAF flew advanced ISR aircraft (such as this RQ-1B Predator) around the clock, a step that gave ground commanders an unprecedented view of the battlespace.**
operation between the air and land components.

One was the vastly improved intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance capabilities now available to the combined air operations center and Army command posts. Platforms such as the Joint STARS, U-2, and Global Hawk UAV put together a superior real-time picture of the battle by exploiting various types of sensor information. Over Baghdad, USAF operated four Predator UAVs at a time. The combination made possible strike coordination and reconnaissance—in other words, using sensor platforms in near real time to identify and verify targets, then check on damage assessments. Commanders could therefore “see” the effects on the Republican Guard units. Combined with better communications, the net effect was also to give a better integrated view of joint operations.

Commented Adm. Edmund P. Giambastiani Jr., commander of US Joint Forces Command: “We had probably more situational awareness on where our own forces were than we’ve ever had on any battlefield before.”

Second, as foreshadowed in Operation Allied Force and in Enduring Freedom, coalition airpower attained a new level of precision and persistence. Only nine percent of the munitions employed in Operation Desert Storm were precision munitions. The early total for precision in Iraqi Freedom was 68 percent. With all fighters and bombers capable of precision attack, and with most able to plug into an enhanced ISR network, the value of each sortie rose exponentially.

Third, OIF planners would have air supremacy from the outset. It did not take 38 days to set conditions for land attack this time. Daring land component actions—from the use of just a few divisions to the stretching out of supply lines—rested in a framework of air dominance carved out months before the operation began. Between June 2002 and March 2003, coalition aircraft “actually flew about 4,000 sorties against the integrated air defense system in Iraq and against surface-to-air missiles and their command and control,” according to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John P. Jumper. “By the time we got to March, we think that they were pretty much out of business,” he added.

From Day 1

Day 1 air dominance helped make it possible to move up the timetable for the ground attack and seize the oil fields on short notice. Airpower was also the backup to SOF teams working in Iraq months before OIF started. During the main phase of the campaign, persistent airpower was on tap to seek out and destroy Iraqi forces or deliver close air support when requested. As a result, the coalition could afford to risk rapid forward movement of ground forces, bypassing cities and leaving long supply lines relatively open. Airpower could quickly defend the flanks.

Finally, there was a real desire to move beyond what Myers called the “deconfliction” mind-set of the past to create greater harmony between the air and land components—and cash it in for devastating combat effectiveness.

Credit in part the deliberate, incremental effort to cultivate better joint relationships—to find the “sweet spot” of operational success. Joint tours and joint education are now a way of life and a requirement for promotion for top officers across the services. Today’s colonels and generals are more likely than ever to have a personal, practical experience base of joint operations that becomes part of instinct as commanders.

The climate at the top is propitious. The annual Army–Air Force Warfighter Talks among four-star generals began anew in the mid-1990s to try to find common ground on programs and to close some of the gaps in perspective.

It is too soon to say whether OIF success will lead to permanent bonds between air and land operations. Moseley has gone out of his way to spread credit around and describe success in joint terms. Land component kudos have not been as frequent or as lavish. The institutional tensions caused by transformation efforts could also sour the relationship yet again.

Thus, further integration may not be easy, but future operations will have the success of OIF as a solid foundation. In the words of Moseley: “I’ve had five joint assignments, and this is the best joint cooperation that I have seen.”

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