Airland Battle Doctrine

By Mark R. Schwartz

Need for Something New

In the late 1970s the US Army and Air Force developed a new doctrine for conventional war that was centered on the idea of being able to rapidly defeat massed Soviet ground formations. Among other things, it shifted away from past reliance on tactical nuclear weaponry and instead emphasized a new way of fighting conventionally. Both services moved to the same concepts for different reasons, together creating what became known as “AirLand Battle Doctrine.” It would be applied in an adapted form during the First Gulf War in 1991.
Throughout the Cold War, Soviet nuclear weapons threatened Western Europe. Soviet doctrine called for “deep operations,” using densely massed armies and air forces. American military planners doubted the ability of then current NATO doctrine to stop such an offensive without the employment of tactical nuclear weapons. That was something that would devastate Europe, regardless of who “won,” any such future war. Of course, the Soviet system was infallible. Its tactics were not useful, its units formed up in predictable echelons, and its technology was inferior. Further, the Warsaw Pact command and control (C2) system was overly centralized. Plans were made at the upper level, with higher headquarters retaining control of all aspects of operational execution down to the tactical level. At the same time, Soviet doctrine called for units to seize the initiative and conduct complex, mobile operations. Thus, those centrally controlled tactics would likely fail if an opponent could disrupt their execution. For example, Soviet doctrine called for second and third echelon forces to move through and exploit breaks throughs made by the first echelon. Those two echelons weren’t flexible reserves; rather, they were rigidly slatted to_when and where_to move as part of a larger overall plan. Hence, were the initial phase of the offensive to be disrupted, US strategists expected the rest of the operation would also fall apart. The dilemma, then, was in having forces prepared to fight large-scale mobile battles, actions that went well beyond simply holding a line. Until the 1970s, the US Army doctrine for conventional war was called “Active Defense.” It stressed firepower over maneuver, and its central idea was to attract attacking forces to the point they halted their advance. Then reserves would be committed to push them back. The doctrine was unimaginative, but it seemed to be the best alternative in the face of Soviet and Warsaw Pact numerical superiority. The US experience in the Vietnam War indicated tactical actions were unable to gain a decision, at least in a politically acceptable timeframe and with politically acceptable losses. Rather than fighting outnumbered and winning, the new concept that emerged was aimed at controlling the larger “battle space” in order to reduce the strength and effectiveness of enemy forces prior to the moment of initial contact before raising ground forces. That called for interdicting the adversary’s flow of men, materiel and supplies with assets at long-range artillery, and airpower. By immediately taking the fight deep into the enemy’s rear area, NATO could channel the attacker’s movement, open gaps among their formations, and block follow-on echelons from joining the battle. All that would then result in the disruption of their momentum and combat effectiveness. Operations “must be in turn, overwhelm and culminating battle” in which NATO could maneuver to decisively counterattack whatever had by then been identified as the enemy center of gravity, thereby gaining the final decision. Extended Battlefield AirLand Battle had four doctrinal tenets: initiative, depth, agility and synchronization. To execute those tenets, the corps was to become the primary C2 headquarters, both utilizing divisions in operational-level engagements and also conducting the deeper C2, the latter by synchronizing organic artillery assets with airpower. The goal was to attack enemy formations massing for combat up to 100 miles away. The overall battle space was partitioned into the Forward Line of Own Troops or FLOT, the Deep Battle Area (which might extent to 120 or more miles beyond the FLOT), and the even more distant Strategic Battle Area, in which operations were reserved for airpower. MANOEUVRE was conducted within an “area of interest.” Maneuver brigades at the FLOT generally attacked the battle area depth of nine to 13 miles, while the divisions did so out to 43 miles. In comparison, Soviet doctrine placed follow-on maneuver formations in reserve at 18 to 30 miles from the FLOT. Thus the US would actually be fighting far deeper than would be the “deep operations” of the Soviets. Commanders were to fight within their areas of interest as determined not only by higher headquarters, but also by their own appreciation of the enemy’s actual and anticipated actions. That area of interest concept was another new dimension of AirLand Battle: they were to overlap between adjacent maneuver forces so that the area could be coordinated to concentrate attacks against the same enemy force. That called for interdicting the battlefield became increasingly non-linear, and the importance assigned to an enemy that had by then been identified as the enemy center of gravity, thereby gaining the final decision. Jointness The new army doctrine was aligned with close air support (CAS) concepts introduced by the corps headquarters to apply to its evolving concept of deep battle. The air force had always resisted the use of AFS and strikes to support airborne forces to the “mere status of flying artillery,” preferring instead to operate against strategic and other targets beyond the battlefield. Nonetheless, a working partnership with the army came into play in forming the new doctrine. Before submitting requests for that kind of help, ground unit commanders had to check if organic artillery could do the job. If so, the mission went to those assets. Air support requests eventually made it to the theater-level C2 center to be matched with available aircraft. Resisted the reduction of airborne CAS and AFS to focus on delivering weapons against tactical targets. JSG also investigated methods to interdict Warsaw Pact echelon formations: each headquarters would have USAF tactical air control parties (TACP) to identify targets to be engaged by fixed-wing aircraft. The USAF Tactical Air Command (TAC), alongside the army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), formed the Air-Land Forces Applications Agency (ALFA) and the Joint Studies Group (JSG) in 1977. ALFA tested the new A-10 CAS aircraft and attack helicopters, producing joint tactics for air delivered weapons against tactical targets. JSG also investigated methods to interdict Warsaw Pact echelon formations: each headquarters would have USAF tactical air control parties (TACP) to identify targets to be engaged by fixed-wing aircraft. The US experience in the Vietnam War demonstrated the power of anti-tank guided missiles, suggesting massed enemy armor could be stopped. To bridge the doctrinal gap, the army formed its Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in 1973 under Gen. William Dwyer. TRADOC developed doctrine for the army, becoming the intellectual engine for all such developments. TRADOC’s new look at land warfare determined armed warfare was feasible in Europe while conflicts elsewhere would involve mostly light infantry. Dwyer created NATO weaponry could possibly prevail in initial European battles, but formations would have to be concentrated. TRADOC evolved “Active Defense” as a first—but transitory—doctrinal effort. The next TRADOC commander, Gen. Don Starry, expanded thinking in his 1981 Battlefield Development Plan. That advocated attacks against enemy second echelon forces. Better force management techniques were also developed, as did viewing the “extended battlefield” as a dimension of time as well as distance. Under Starry, TRADOC made Air and Battle ready for war. TRADOC: The US Army’s Intellectual Side

Douglas Skinner, a noted military analyst, described doctrine as “a level of abstraction and generality higher than strategy. Doctrine is a guide to thought on how to employ strategy and tactics. Commanders formulate their strategy, employ tactics, then appeal to doctrine for how to combine these elements effectively in battle.”
CAS vs. AI vs. BAI

Like the US, NATO saw the corps as the spearhead of deep operations. It developed a new fixed-wing OAS mission, Battlefield Air Interdiction (BAI), to attack enemy follow-on echelons. The US in turn accepted BAI as part of its doctrine in 1979. But, the US Air Force said it should be a weapon of the theater-level air component commander (ALCC) rather than any ground force corps. BAI thus became the focal point for army vs. air force AirLand Battle debate. BAI supported close battle and required detailed integration with small-unit maneuver and fire plans, and safety measures were needed to protect ground troops from friendly fire. CAS could attack no deeper than the fire support coordination line (FSCL), a control measure giving the ground force commander authority over air strikes to the range of his organic artillery (usually out to 12 miles beyond the FLOT). The commander’s TACP proposed likely CAS missions inside the FSCL, and he approved or denied those proposals. BAI remained a secure way to operate above the FSCL, but the question remained as to how enemy second echelon forces moving toward friendly troops already engaged against first echelon units could be struck. By mid-1981 air and army staffs had endorsed an agreement that set up OAS appointment and allocation procedures, and directed that corps commanders would select BAI targets. Theater-level C2 allocated sorties to OAS missions with army-level advice on their distribution to corps and divisions.

To integrate CAS with his unit’s scheme of maneuver and fire, each commander required timely information on the location of enemy and friendly formations. That level of situational awareness remained hard to achieve for brigade and division commanders in fluid situations. Generally only the corps possessed information adequate to decide if a CAS request was better served by organic artillery fire or needed higher-level commitment. According to the 1981 inter-service agreement, BAI would engage enemy concentrations of sufficient size and importance to have a potentially decisive effect on the overall land battle. BAI would therefore target only battalions or larger formations, especially those spearheading an attack and the units following them to exploit penetrations. In 1981 the US Air high command declared that agreement to constitute official doctrine.

Further Debate

The 1982 edition of FM 100-5 officially premiered AirLand Battle and defined BAI as that primary means of fighting the deep battle at extended ranges. BAI isolates enemy forces by preventing their reinforce- ment and resupply and by restricting their maneuver. It also destroys, delays, or disrupts follow-on enemy units before they can enter the close battle. The army intended to synchronize ground operations with larger theater and campaign objectives, dictating that air-to-ground operations be a part of the larger campaign objectives rather than be subordinate to the needs of individual battles within it. The army decided for all that theorizing would finally come in 1991.

War in the Gulf

In response to the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait and Operation Desert Storm, the US committed sizable land and air forces to fight in the 1990-1991 operation codenamed Desert Storm, a.k.a. the Gulf War. That fighting exposed doctrinal rifts that still divided soldiers and airmen. While the ground force commander laments the effective absence of BAI, the airman applied CAS across the deep battle space nominally given to BAI, irrespective of FSCL placement. CAS thus became a focal point for air force and army commanders in the theater air commander level, minus the 24 to 72 hour planning and execution cycle at division-level. It thereby effectively legislated BAI operations out of the division’s reach. The Gulf War illustrated the problems that were expected from a European conflict evaporated with the realities of the war in the Persian Gulf. CAS remained available for the close battle, but the absence of

Col. John Boyd & theOODA Loop

In the 1976 briefing, Patterns of Conflict, Col. John Boyd—a USAF fighter pilot and doctrinal theorist—proposed a new set of tactics with no set front line, utilizing hit-and-run attacks against Soviet maneuver groups. He advocated a “deep battle” that would be fought in the Soviet rear area as well as via agile maneuver along the front. His objective was to derail the Warsaw Pact command system. Boyd asked the following questions.

Why to reduce your own friction and uncertainty? Why not magnify the adversary’s friction and uncertainty?

Why to exhaust the adversary by increasing his efforts? Why not paralyze him by denying opportunities to expand effort?

Why to strike at one center of gravity where mass is concentrated? Why not strike at many smaller centers of gravity that sustain the larger system?

He suggested traditional strategists err by viewing conflict from the top down. He emphasized adaptability by pushing decisions to lower levels as the battle tempo increased. He advocated a coherent command and control (C2) structure by synchronizing all of its elements faster, thereby controlling every facet of the decision-making process of: Observe, Orient, Decide and Act. The idea was to operate inside the adversary's OODA time-cycle by controlling every part of his actions.

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