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**Conceptual Underpinnings
of the Air Assault Concept:
The Hogaboom, Rogers and Howze Boards**

Mark A. Olinger

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Conceptual Underpinnings of the Air Assault Concept:

The Hogaboom, Rogers and Howze Boards

by Mark A. Olinger

Colonel Mark A. Olinger, U.S. Army, as the Commander, Defense Energy Support Center–Middle East, is responsible for providing comprehensive integrated joint bulk fuel support to United States Central Command within a 27-country area of responsibility. He has served in a number of command and staff positions in the United States, Panama, Republic of Korea, the Middle East, and Germany.

His combat service includes Company Commander in the 528th Support Battalion (Airborne) during Operation Earnest Well/Prime Chance in the Arabian Gulf; Deputy Director of Logistics (J4), U.S. Special Operations Command–South/Joint Special Operations Task Force during Operation Just Cause in Panama; and Support Operations Officer in the 528th Support Battalion (Airborne) during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. During Operation Iraqi Freedom he served as the Commander, 142d Corps Support Battalion, and later as the Assistant Chief of Staff for Logistics (G-4) for the 1st Armored Division.

Colonel Olinger's military education includes the U.S. Army's Infantry Officer Basic Course, the U.S. Army's Quartermaster Officer Advanced Course, the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare Course (non-resident), the Operations Research Systems Analysis Military Applications Course, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and the National War College. His degrees include a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from California State Polytechnic University at Pomona in 1983 and a Master of Science in National Security Strategy from the National Defense University in 2006.

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Inquiries regarding this and future Land Warfare Papers should be directed to: Director, ILW Programs, AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare, e-mail sdaugherty@ausa.org or telephone: (direct dial) 703-907-2627 or (toll free) 1-800-336-4570, ext. 226.

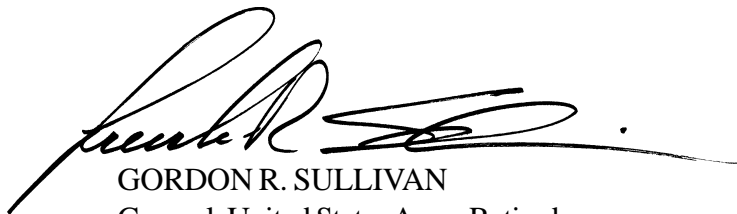
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Foreword

This paper assesses the boards used by the Army and Marine Corps in the development of air assault forces between the Korean War and July 1965. First, it discusses the strategic environment and how the services were influenced by it. Second, it briefly outlines the growth of the air assault concept after the Korean War. Third is a series of discussions on the boards used by the services; an outline of the force structure and an analysis of the boards as potential models of transformation are also presented. Finally, an analysis of the applicable theories and the strategic implications of air assault forces and their long-term efficacy concludes the paper.

The concept was a merger of Soldiers and Marines on the ground with those who flew. Once joined, they rapidly demonstrated that the advantages of increased mobility, maneuverability and firepower inherent in an air assault force offered a combat effectiveness that can be employed across the full spectrum of combat.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gordon R. Sullivan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

GORDON R. SULLIVAN
General, United States Army Retired
President

December 2006

Conceptual Underpinnings of the Air Assault Concept: The Hogaboom, Rogers and Howze Boards

Introduction

America's versatile commissioner to France, Benjamin Franklin, was so enthusiastic about the success of hot air balloons in 1784 that he posed this interesting military question:

[W]here is the prince who can afford so to cover his country with troops for its defence, as that ten thousand men descending from the clouds might not in many places do an infinite deal of mischief, before a force could be brought together to repel them?¹

The answer to Franklin's question would not be fully realized until the U.S. Army and Marine Corps had doctrinally-based air assault forces. Air assault forces are composed primarily of ground and rotary-wing air units organized, equipped and trained for air assault operations.²

An air assault operation is an operation in which air assault forces—using the firepower, mobility and total integration of helicopter assets in their ground or air roles—maneuver on the battlefield under the control of the ground or air maneuver commander to engage and destroy enemy forces.³ The evolution of the air assault concept led to an interwar transformation for both services and potential models for future transformations.

This paper assesses the boards used by the Army and Marine Corps in the development of air assault forces between the Korean War and July 1965. First, it discusses the strategic environment and how the services were influenced by it. Second, it briefly outlines the growth of the air assault concept after the Korean War. Third is a series of discussions on the boards used by the services; an outline of the force structure and an analysis of the boards as potential models of transformation are also presented. Finally, an analysis of the applicable theories and the strategic implications of air assault forces and their long-term efficacy concludes the paper.

Strategic Environment

After the Korean War, the United States turned from a crisis-oriented military policy toward concepts and programs designed to outlast the rivalry with the Soviet Union. Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson adopted policies suited for the long haul. With U.S.-Soviet competition accepted as fact in

international relations, American policymakers regarded defense policy as a principal instrument for containing the spread of communism. To check the extension of Soviet influence, the United States sought to reduce the likelihood that the Soviets would threaten or use military force as a tool of international influence. American policy rested upon assumptions about the nature of the military challenge and the appropriate response. Supported by a coalition in Congress, the three Cold War presidents further refined containment, strategic deterrence and a collective defense.⁴ U.S. security policy required a high degree of presidential freedom of action, something all three had.

The Eisenhower administration adopted a national security strategy that emphasized nuclear capability through air power rather than ground combat. Three considerations dictated this change: limited resources, a worldwide commitment to contain communism, and the desire to reduce defense spending. Given the declining number of ground forces, both the Army and Marine Corps fielded fewer divisions; because of the possibility of nuclear war, leaders of both services wanted units that could fight and survive on a nuclear as well as conventional battlefield. President Kennedy ushered in the era of “flexible response” in 1961, deciding that the threat of a general nuclear war had become remote but the possibility of conventional wars had increased. “Flexible response” was tested during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the intervention in the Dominican Republic.

Growth of the Concept

The fundamental difference between the transition to air assault operations in the 1950s and 1960s and the transition to mechanization in the 1930s was that the U.S. Army and Marine Corps were “flying blind” during this period. While many countries were experimenting with mechanization in the interwar period, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps were the only services that would conduct wide-scale examination of the use of helicopters in tactical operations.⁵

In Korea both services had learned that the difficult terrain and the numerical superiority of the enemy combined to provide the communists with an advantage that was not easily balanced by the qualitative superiority of the American ground forces. Helicopters were used for a variety of missions, including reconnaissance, command and control, casualty evacuation, resupply, wire-laying, rescue of downed fighter pilots and limited air assault operations by the Marines. Overall, the helicopter proved to be a valuable tactical weapon in Korea.

After Korea, senior commanders studied the lessons of that war and compared actual campaign operations with hypothetical air assault operations under the same conditions. The Marines’ emphasis would be on large assault helicopters, with centralized control under the air wing. A more mobile, decentralized and integrated structure proved ideal for the Army. As the Army and Marine Corps became increasingly aware of an air assault force’s importance in modern warfare, they became increasingly bold in its tactical usage.

The Hogaboom Board

In the years following the Korean War, the Marine Corps continued to develop their tactics and helicopters for air assault operations. After eight years of the most intense planning, including thousands of field tests run under a variety of nuclear and conventional exercises, a new doctrine of amphibious warfare was published in Landing Force Bulletin-17 in December 1955.⁶ Centered on air assault operations, this doctrine dictated a powerful two-pronged attack, one a surface assault across the beach by a conventional means and the other an air assault operation.

An essential element of the new doctrine was the helicopter. The former operational concept of the amphibious task force working in conjunction with fast carriers and other naval forces remained. Selected conventional troop assault ships were to be replaced by helicopter-troop carriers from which assault elements of the landing force were airlifted and carried ten or more miles inland. To ensure that the development of helicopters did not outstrip the design of amphibious ships to carry them and move a landing force, the Marine Corps had already moved into action. Looking into the future in July 1951, General Clifton B. Cates, Commandant of the Marine Corps, stated in a letter to the Chief of Naval Operations:

Studies and past experience indicate that the most desirable type of assault shipping for such a helicopter-borne force will be ships which can accommodate the necessary embarked troops, the helicopters to land them and the crews to operate and maintain the helicopters.⁷

This resulted in a program beginning with the conversion of light carriers to amphibious assault ships (LPHs), and then the development of designs for LPHs from the keel up.

Landing Force Bulletin-17 envisioned initial penetrations as far as a hundred miles from the task force or fifty miles inland and extending over divisional frontages of as much as fifty miles were considered feasible. The long-term goal was air assault forces with follow-on forces coming in by aircraft.

To meet the requirements of Landing Force Bulletin-17 and to prepare for the future, the organization and structure of all Fleet Marine Force units—three divisions, three air wings and combat support/service support elements (referred to as force troops)—were reviewed from June to December 1956 by the Fleet Marine Force Organization and Composition Board, chaired by then Major General Robert E. Hogaboom, USMC (and known as the Hogaboom Board). The Commandant of the Marine Corps directed the board to:

conduct a thorough and comprehensive study of the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) and make recommendations . . . for optimum organization, composition, and equipping of the FMF in order to best perform its mission.⁸

Assigned to the board were one general officer and 13 colonels. This group was a mixture of naval aviators and ground officers of all specialties. Any specialty not included on the board was to be furnished by interviews with numerous recognized experts and other selected for their combat experience.⁹ Many of the board members firmly believed that the role of the Marine Corps should not duplicate that of the Army or vice versa and that the Marine division should be capable of an all-helicopter assault.

Recommended changes by the board to the Marine division would enhance the force-in-readiness missions, enable all helicopter assaults and be completely air transportable. Reduced in personnel from 21,000 to just fewer than 19,000, the division was stripped of heavy equipment and weapons; by the integration of new weapons and force structure changes, it actually increased in combat power.¹⁰ Major changes included increased command and staff personnel, administrative and supply personnel transferred from regimental level to division, the weapons company replaced by a fourth rifle company in each infantry battalion, the tank battalion transferred to force troops, the 155mm howitzer eliminated from the division artillery regiment and replaced by the 105mm howitzer, and the reconnaissance company increased to battalion strength.

Most controversial of these changes was the removal of tanks from the division. A number of officers held that the role of the tank in the assault (providing close fire support and defense against enemy tanks) should not be sacrificed to air transportability. Proponents of the change argued that air-to-surface missiles and armed helicopters would provide the necessary close fire support and that the 106mm recoilless rifle was effective protection against enemy armor. Extended, dispersed, and mobile warfare combined with an increase in intelligence demands prompted the expansion of the division reconnaissance from company to battalion strength. To exploit movement by helicopter and support the infantry during the assault, the 105mm howitzer became the standard for the artillery regiment. Finally, when the tactical situation demanded tanks, deep reconnaissance or heavy artillery, they could be supplied from force troops. The ability of these units to integrate rapidly and smoothly into the division task organization meant the division had increased capabilities on call without the logistic responsibility.

Reorganization of the marine air wing was not as drastic as that of the division. In strength the wing remained at between 8,000 to 10,000 personnel, with slightly fewer than 400 operational aircraft that formed six operational groups: fighter, attack, all-weather, fixed-wing transport, medium helicopter and light helicopter.¹¹ Besides their conventional missions of preassault bombardment, air protection and close air support of the landing force, the fighter and attack elements now had to be concerned with the tactics required to protect an air assault force.

At the time of the Hogaboom Board, the Marine Corps were flying three types of helicopters: reconnaissance, utility and heavy lift. Included in each air wing were two light helicopter transport squadrons, one composite reconnaissance squadron and one medium

helicopter squadron with a total of 87 helicopters. The air wing had the capability to move in one lift about 876 troops with full equipment and a 100-mile operating radius. The challenge of supporting both fixed- and rotary-wing operations from the ground was partially resolved by the development of a bulk-fuel handling system that was helicopter transportable and offered a supply of 300,000-gallon capacity to the landing force.¹²

The recommendations of this board were approved by the commandant, General Randolph McC. Pate, who ordered phased implementation to begin in early 1957, with the reorganization to be completed in 1958. Minor changes would be made, but fitting the FMF into the physical delimitations set by the air assault concept increased its readiness. Air assault techniques continued to be improved, and by the end of 1961 the FMF possessed the capability to execute multiple battalion level air assault operations from the LPHs, a powerful tool for any war or emergency that may involve the country.

The Army Aircraft Requirements Review Board

On 15 January 1960 Army Chief of Staff General Lyman L. Lemnitzer selected Lieutenant General Gordon B. Rogers, the deputy commanding general of the Continental Army Command, to chair the Army Aircraft Requirements Review Board (or Rogers Board); the purpose of the board was to consider the Army Aircraft Development Plan and to review the industry proposals. The Army general staff and elements of the Continental Army Command supported the Rogers Board.

By 1 February 1960, 45 companies had submitted a total of 119 design concepts as their solutions to the problems posed by the Army Study Requirements. These concepts were evaluated in two phases: a 1–15 February technical evaluation under the direction of the Chief of Transportation and a 16–28 February operational evaluation under the direction of the Office of the Chief of Research and Development. After the evaluation period, the Rogers Board met at Fort Monroe, Virginia, from 29 February to 6 March to review the Army Aircraft Development Plan, discuss roles and missions of Army aviation, project Army funding, assess combat surveillance requirements and detail procurement plans.¹³

The Rogers Board made recommendations regarding three types of aircraft: observation, surveillance and transport. Two other recommendations were made: first, that a policy be established to replace each model of aircraft at least every ten years or sooner if warranted by operational requirements or technological advances, and second, that the Department of the Army and Continental Army Command prepare an in-depth study to determine whether the concept of air assault units was practical and if an experimental unit should be activated to test its feasibility. In mid-March 1960 the Army Chief of Staff approved the Rogers Board recommendations with implementation for planning purposes and assigned various staff agencies primary responsibility to carry out these recommendations. Regarding air assault units, he charged the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations with the responsibility for preparing recommendations in this area.

The Army, the Howze Board and the 11th Air Assault Division

Dissatisfied with the Army's aviation program, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in late 1961 directed the Army to prepare a study specifying its aviation requirements. Disappointed with the completed report, McNamara directed the Secretary of the Army in an April 1962 memo to reexamine the Army posture and, in effect, ordered the implementation of the air assault concept. In the memo the secretary led with the comment:

I have not been satisfied with the Army program submissions for tactical mobility. . . . I shall be disappointed, if the . . . reexamination merely produces more of the same, rather than a plan for implementing fresh and perhaps unorthodox concepts which will give us a significant increase in mobility.¹⁴

Within a week of the secretary's memo, Lieutenant General Hamilton Howze was appointed president of the Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board (or Howze Board). The Howze Board consisted of 13 general officers and five colonels.¹⁵ To support the various types of experiments the Army provided the Howze Board an infantry battle group from the 82d Airborne Division and 150 Army aircraft. Four different scenarios were used to evaluate air assault operations against the Warsaw Pact, Chinese communists, an insurgency and other threats emerging from Latin America or Africa. With these scenarios, the Howze Board foresaw that offensive operations would be the dominant type of operation performed. A major operational premise was that brigade task force-size units of the division would operate roughly 100 kilometers forward of the division support base with battalions operating up to a distance of 25 to 35 kilometers from the brigade support base, with the capability to strike a number of widely dispersed targets. The number of aircraft available to the division would allow for the airlifting of one-third of the brigade task forces at a time.¹⁶ After 90 days the board concluded in its final report that:

The doctrine to support the concepts enunciated by the Report is not difficult to formulate, although a wide departure from present tactical doctrine must be developed for airmobile units and the larger forces incorporating them.¹⁷

With this conclusion, the Howze Board established the fundamental precepts of air assault doctrine and the force structure to support it. Specifically, the board recommended that five of sixteen divisions be replaced by air assault divisions, with three air cavalry combat brigades and five air transport brigades being added to the force structure. The air assault division was similar in structure to other divisions, with 15,029 men and 459 aircraft. With 316 helicopters, 144 of them attack helicopters, the air cavalry combat brigade was a completely air-fighting unit. Each air transport brigade would contain 12 medium helicopters, 90 fixed-wing transports and a support command.¹⁸ Howze saw the advantage of air assault forces as mobility, utility in delay operations, ability to ambush, and direct firepower capability. Rather than accept the board's recommendations wholesale, which would have amounted to a radical overhaul of the Army's force structure, the Army leadership ordered more extensive tests to begin in 1963.

In February 1963 at Fort Benning, Georgia, the 11th Air Assault Division was activated along with the 10th Air Transport Brigade, which was not organic to the division but was added as a support unit.¹⁹ Under the command of Brigadier General Harry W. O. Kinnard, the 11th Air Assault Division practiced and experimented with the helicopter as an instrument of war throughout the remainder of 1963 and into 1964. Focusing on air assault, Soldiers could think about ground combat in new ways based on the capabilities and limitations of helicopters. By September 1964, Army leaders believed that the division had reached the stage where it could be evaluated under field conditions.

Air Assault II, the last and most important test, began on 12 October and continued until 14 November. It involved 35,000 Soldiers in a leased maneuver area of 4.5 million acres stretching from Fayetteville, North Carolina, to Columbia, South Carolina.²⁰ Although emphasizing the offensive, the tasks included defensive actions and withdrawals. The 11th Air Assault Division successfully demonstrated that its units could seek out an enemy over the large two-state area (despite extremely unfavorable weather conditions in the form of a hurricane), find the enemy and then rapidly synchronize and mass combat power to destroy the threat. In scenario after scenario, the 82d Airborne Division opposed the air assault division. By the end of the test period the airborne division was in disarray and the exercise's outcome was obvious.

Lieutenant General C. W. G. Rich, the exercise director, observed that air assault operations could be realized only in a division. In December, he sent his overwhelmingly positive recommendation to Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson. By March 1965 the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell dissenting, had favorably endorsed the exercise's findings.²¹ In June 1965, McNamara authorized the organization of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile); the reorganized unit had an authorized strength of 15,787 men, 428 helicopters and 1,600 vehicles. Activated in July 1965, it was made up of resources from the 11th Air Assault and 2d Infantry Divisions.²²

A Model for Transformation?

These boards must be viewed in their proper time frame, for they were not necessarily geared to the prospect of an increased involvement in Vietnam but rather to future Army and Marine force structure requirements worldwide. Board members felt certain that increased air assault capability for units would be useful in future major contingencies.

Since the Hogaboom Board new weapons have been introduced, personnel and budgetary guidance changed, and there have been changes to the national security strategy, combined with missions on the NATO northern flank and combat operations in Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq. The board implemented all of its guidance to the best of its ability. It codified and reorganized the FMF to accommodate numerous concepts and lessons that emerged from World War II and Korea. More important, it radically changed the way the Marine Corps approached its roles and functions.

It is apparent that the scope of the 1960 Rogers Board review was limited. Obviously it did not constitute a major advance in tactical mobility for the Army. In comparison with the advances made during the 1950s, the board's objectives, if obtained, would have represented a substantial gain in mobility through the use of aviation; it did provide essential aviation guidance for development, procurement and personnel planning. The Howze Board and tests of the 11th Air Assault Division have obscured the importance of the Rogers Board.

The Howze Board laid the foundation for the Army to exploit air assault operations and suggested the means to finish the job. Air assault operations advanced, although some of the revolutionary recommendations were not adopted. The subsequent test program using the 11th Air Assault Division was exemplary. The Howze Board produced a lasting change that is still manifested within the current U.S. Army force structure.

Numerous boards have met since the Hogaboom and Howze Boards; these boards caused remarkable changes in the Army and Marine Corps. As the two services incorporate advances in technology into the force structure, these boards serve as time-tested models for putting proposed transformations into practice. Their mandates, leadership, innovative approaches, streamlined processes and focused recommendations are worthy of emulation.

Final Analysis

The growth of the air assault concept in the 1950s and 1960s evolved into the world's most advanced air assault forces, which have proved successful in combat from Vietnam to Afghanistan and Iraq. In slightly more than fifty years, each of the two services transformed from a horse- and foot-mobile force to one that could execute air assault operations over extended distances. There were those who saw air assault operations as the absolute instrument of war, much like Italian airpower theorist General Giulio Douhet. Others, like Billy Mitchell and Hap Arnold, were more visionary; they saw it as the means of victory, to be brought to the area of decisive combat.²³ Still others saw it as the culmination of B. H. Liddell Hart's indirect approach and strategic dislocation. The air assault concept as it developed was a military philosophy of thinking in terms of the next war instead of the last.

Air assault forces have been successful as a result of the lessons learned from the 1st Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade and the III Marine Amphibious Force. As the final approval for an air assault division was being made, the 173d Airborne Brigade in Vietnam air-assaulted deep into War Zone D using the techniques, tactics, and procedures developed during Air Assault II. In November 1965, during its initial operations in the Ia Drang Valley, the 1st Cavalry Division answered the challenge of a powerful North Vietnamese division. The actions of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, were one of a series of major engagements fought by air assault units in Vietnam; it was the hard lessons learned from this battalion that set the standard for others to follow.

In the end the concept was a merger of Soldiers and Marines on the ground with those who flew. Once joined, they rapidly demonstrated that the advantages of increased mobility, maneuverability and firepower inherent in an air assault force offered a combat effectiveness that can be employed across the full spectrum of combat. Attacking throughout the battlespace creates an operational shock that stuns an enemy commander, rendering him unable to make sound decisions or to command and control his forces.

Today the flexibility an air assault force provides a combatant commander is invaluable. It masses highly maneuverable combat power in the most critical area of the battlefield at the most crucial time. Continual improvements in doctrine, training and equipment combined with a relentless commitment to excellence have secured global supremacy for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps in air assault operations.

Endnotes

- ¹ Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Franklin quotes, *Thinkexist.com*, available online at http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/and_where_is_the_prince_who_can_afford_to_so/343562.htm.
- ² U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 11. Early on, some attempted to make a sharp conceptual distinction between the terms “airmobile” and “air assault.” For example, then Brigadier General John M. Wright, Assistant Division Commander, 1st Cavalry Division, and later Commanding General, 101st Airborne Division, put it this way: “By definition, airmobility means moving men and equipment by air and nothing more than that, whereas air assault integrated the aircraft into the fighting elements of the division.” Over time this useful distinction was lost and the terms became virtually interchangeable.
- ³ *Ibid.* On 20 September 1951, the first combat air assault operation occurred when 224 Marines were landed in dense fog on Hill 884 during Operation Summit.
- ⁴ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. 531.
- ⁵ Thomas C. Graves, “Transforming the Force: The 11th Air Assault Division (Test) from 1963–1965” (Monograph, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1999), p. 3.
- ⁶ Robert B. Asprey, “The Fleet Marine Force in the Early 1950s” in *Assault from the Sea: Essays on the History of Amphibious Warfare*, ed. Merrill L. Bartlett (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 354.
- ⁷ U.S. Marine Corps, *History of Marine Corps Aviation: 1950’s – Technological Development*, available online at <http://www.acepilots.com/usmc/hist16.html>.
- ⁸ William K. Jones, “The Hogaboom Board,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 2000, p. 51.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Asprey, “The Fleet Marine Force in the Early 1950s,” p. 354.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.
- ¹² U.S. Department of the Navy, *Report of the Fleet Marine Force Organization and Composition Board* (Washington D.C.: 1957), pp. III-8–III-11; and Asprey, “The Fleet Marine Force in the Early 1950s,” pp. 358–359.

- ¹³ John J. Tolson, *Airmobility 1961–1971* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. 8–9.
- ¹⁴ Robert A. Why, “The Evolution of Fire Support Doctrine Was Driven by Airmobile Doctrine and New Weapon Systems During the Vietnam War” (Master’s Thesis., U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), pp. 7–8.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8; Robert A. Doughty, “The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76” (*Leavenworth Papers*, March 2001), p. 54; and Hamilton H. Howze, “The Howze Board, Part II,” *ARMY*, March 1974, p. 21. Howze called the secretary’s memo the “best directive ever written” and would take full advantage of the strong mandate presented him.
- ¹⁶ Graves, “Transforming the Force,” pp. 7–8.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Christopher C. S. Cheng, *Air Mobility: The Development of a Doctrine* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), pp. 179–180.
- ¹⁹ John M. Carland, “How We Got There: Air Assault Warfare and the Emergence of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), 1950–1965,” *The Land Warfare Papers*, no. 42 (Arlington, Va.: Association of the United States Army, 2003), p. 12. Brigadier General Kinnard wanted his Soldiers to be aggressive, mentally flexible, risk takers and to have a certain mentality that was adaptable to air assault operations.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* This was the same general area used for the Knollwood Maneuver of December 1943, which tested and confirmed the concept of division size airborne operations, ending the official controversy on that subject.
- ²¹ Tolson, *Airmobility 1961–1971*, pp. 56–57; and Carland, “How We Got There,” p. 13.
- ²² Why, “The Evolution of Fire Support Doctrine,” p. 37.
- ²³ James M. Gavin, “Cavalry, and I Don’t Mean Horses,” *Armor*, May–June 1954, p. 21.

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- . "The Howze Board, Part II." *ARMY*, March 1974: 18–24.
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