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Operation Arrow, Task Force Hawk and Air Power: KLA Ground Offensive and U.S. Army Targeting and Intelligence Point to Synergy of Joint Approach

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The offensive launched by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) along the Albania–Kosovo border in the last week of May provided the NATO air forces with their first, best chance at striking massed Yugoslav army units in the field. Although the KLA failed to achieve all of their objectives, air attacks by NATO warplanes took a heavy toll on the Yugoslav forces, resulting in perhaps the most productive operations since the war began. The losses incurred by the Yugoslav military and paramilitary forces in these operations helped lead directly to the acceptance of the G-8 accords by the Yugoslav government. In effect, the KLA ground forces became a key enabler, unlocking the full potential of air operations, and allowing those air strikes to have a direct effect on the ground.

The Army component of Operation Allied Force, Task Force (TF) Hawk, also had an important role in the increased effectiveness of air power which led to the end of the conflict. Although TF Hawk's AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) did not see active combat, the intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and target acquisition elements of the task force did. The increased battlefield visibility afforded by the Army battlefield systems allowed the air strikes against Yugoslav forces near the Albanian border to be far more effective than they had been previously.

This synergy between air and ground power is a key component in warfighting, one that NATO seems to be slowly rediscovering in the lessons learned from Allied Force.

The Offensive

In the last week of May, KLA forces along the Albanian–Kosovo border launched Operation Arrow, an offensive by more than 4,000 KLA guerrillas. The aim of the operation was to seize control of the highway between the cities of Pec and Prizren and to destroy Yugoslav forces, both Yugoslav Army (VJ) and internal police (MUP), in the border area. If successful, such an operation would effectively wrest control of southwest Kosovo away from Yugoslavia.

After the launch of Operation Arrow, Yugoslav units who had been dispersed in the area began to mass to counter the operations of the KLA. The Yugoslav army's combination of artillery and highly mobile infantry, backed up by tanks and armored vehicles, began to slow and eventually stop the KLA offensive. NATO took advantage of the KLA ground offensive and NATO sorties began to exact a heavy price on identifiable Yugoslav army formations, including destroying over 84 pieces of military equipment on a single day and inflicting more than 5,000 casualties [NATO Daily Briefing].

Operation Arrow was repulsed. The KLA was not able to gain control of the Pec–Prizren highway and suffered heavy losses along the slopes of Mount Patrik. They did, however, capture the villages of Bucane and Ljumbarda near Pec and seized large stretches of the border area northwest of Prizren.

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Task Force Hawk

Task Force Hawk was to be the U.S. Army contribution to the NATO air campaign. Built around a reinforced brigade with two battalions of Apache attack helicopters, a battalion of Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS)-capable multiple launch rocket systems, and a battalion each of mechanized and airborne infantry, the Task Force was meant to be used to go in low and hunt down small groupings of Yugoslav troops and vehicles that could remain hidden from the NATO “fast movers.” However, due to increasing worries about losses, TF Hawk was never authorized to begin combat operations.

Along with the combat elements, however, TF Hawk had some systems that were to prove extremely effective in the air war. These organizations and systems were all meant to conduct intelligence, surveillance and target acquisition functions, including:

- a Deep Operations Planning Cell: This small headquarters is used to plan long-range operations by attack helicopters and missile systems. It allowed TF Hawk to coordinate and process large amounts of data and get targeting intelligence to the NATO joint force air component commander (JFACC).
- TPQ-36 and -37 “Firefinder” radars: These are small, mobile radar sets that can backtrack the trajectory of an artillery or mortar shell back to its launcher and then get that information to friendly forces to conduct counterbattery operations. Despite the early worries that they would set off NATO warning receivers in aircraft, the Firefinders proved extremely effective in locating Yugoslav artillery systems.
- Guardrail, Airborne Reconnaissance Low (ARL) and EH-60 Quickfix: These are airborne reconnaissance systems in use by the Army for collecting electronic and imagery intelligence. That intelligence could then be given to the air planning cell for targeting purposes.

Once TF Hawk was set up on the ground, it was able to bring these and other systems on line. An intelligence “bubble” was created around TF Hawk, and any Yugoslav forces within that bubble were more easily located and identified. Although the rules of engagement precluded the task force from prosecuting any attacks, the targeting information developed was forwarded to the JFACC planning cell and used to great effect in the closing weeks of the air campaign.

Operation Allied Force

The NATO Alliance began its air war over Yugoslavia with the aim of compelling Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic to accept the conditions of the Rambouillet Accords—an end to the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, monitoring by a NATO peacekeeping force, and limited autonomy for the Kosovar Albanians. The NATO political leadership decided that the war would be conducted as an air offensive only. After 70 days, those objectives had yet to be met, and public sentiment was questioning the ability of air power alone to do the job.

The NATO air attacks began as a multiphase bombing campaign, similar to Operations Desert Storm and Desert Fox. Cruise missiles and stealth aircraft went against command and control facilities and elements of the integrated air defense system while conventional aircraft attacked air bases, surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) emplacements, thus establishing air superiority. After that phase, operations turned to the leadership and military infrastructure of Yugoslavia, attacking government buildings, bases, depots and arms factories. These target sets had largely been hit by Day 20 of the campaign and the operation turned to units of the VJ and MUP in the field.

By the time NATO warplanes began operations against Yugoslav units in Kosovo and nearby Serbia, those units had already established passive defense measures. The KLA was largely defeated inside Kosovo. This allowed the Yugoslav units to disperse into small, spread-out formations and hide among the civilian populace and infrastructure. The Yugoslavs did not have to move, and they kept electronic emissions, to include air defense radar, to a minimum to reduce chances of detection. The result was that NATO air

operations were of limited effectiveness against deployed Yugoslav army and police forces, and could not stop or even slow the ethnic cleansing.

With Allied Force's inability to achieve the political objectives or stop the ethnic cleansing, NATO turned back to strategic bombing concepts by bringing the war to Serbia's civilian populace in order to break their will to fight. As a result, from around Day 45 up to the last week of the campaign, we saw NATO strikes target power grids, water supplies, oil and gas infrastructure, bridges and economic production components of the civilian sector of Yugoslavia. Unfortunately for NATO, this strategy led to increased civilian casualties—bombing “blunders” against targets that should have been off-limits (not least of which was the Chinese Embassy), and decreasing public support at home.

The Maneuver–Firepower Combination

With the fortuitous Operation Arrow, the rejuvenated KLA was able to force the Yugoslav army and national police to mass and move in Kosovo. The Yugoslav forces had to ignore their passive aerial defense measures to meet the ground threat, and opened themselves up to effective NATO bombing. The ground-based intelligence and targeting systems of Task Force Hawk were able to locate Yugoslav forces with greater ease and precision than the airborne systems being used. These underscored the synergy of air and ground operations.

In warfare there are two ways to defeat the enemy on the battlefield. One way uses firepower from a standoff distance to attrit the enemy forces until they capitulate; this strategy takes time and relies on destruction of the enemy. The other way involves moving one's forces, or maneuver, in order to place the enemy at a disadvantage that will lead to his destruction through either standoff firepower or close combat. Maneuver may also threaten something else, such as a supply line or a critical political objective.

Conceptually, firepower and maneuver elicit a contradictory response from the enemy. Threatened with firepower, the enemy response is to disperse into smaller units, hide and remain static. To counter maneuver, the enemy must mass together and countermaneuver in order to try to place the opposing force in a disadvantaged position. However, massing to oppose maneuvering ground forces (in this case, the KLA) leaves one open to firepower (air attack) assault. Dispersing to avoid that firepower opens one up to defeat by enemy maneuver forces.

When Operation Arrow was launched, the Yugoslav forces could not stay dispersed. To do so would have meant the KLA could mass at selected points and defeat them in detail, piece by piece. This massing allowed NATO air power the first clear shot at the VJ and MUP in months and resulted in the destruction of 84 tanks, artillery pieces and armored fighting vehicles. In effect, ground maneuver “unlocked” the full capabilities of aerial firepower.

The subsequent peace negotiations, which led to the end of the air campaign and the NATO peacekeeping mission, were influenced by Operation Arrow, Task Force Hawk and the renewed effectiveness of the air campaign. First of all, they represented the first time that Yugoslav units were heavily damaged by the air attack. Since the present Yugoslav government is dependent on the army and paramilitary for its political support, survival of the regime rests with the survival of the army. Secondly, despite the victories of the VJ/MUP forces in fighting the KLA, the KLA was able to launch Operation Arrow with more than 4,000 fighters. Much like the Tet Offensive was crushed by American forces on the battlefield but showed that the North Vietnamese forces were still effective, Arrow had shown that the KLA remained an effective player and had the potential to become stronger.

The Lesson

The lesson of all of this is that well-balanced joint forces are needed to prosecute a war. One element alone cannot do the job. In Kosovo we have seen the failure of aerial firepower unsupported by maneuver. Conversely, maneuver unsupported by firepower would mean a costly conflict with casualties.

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When NATO announced that the war would be conducted through air operations (read “firepower”) only, it gave the Yugoslav forces the perfect defense. Freed from the need to counter a maneuver force on the ground, the VJ and MUP forces dispersed in a classic anti-firepower strategy and survived. By telegraphing strategy, making its “means” clear, NATO effectively ceded the ethnic cleansing initiative to Yugoslavia. ***It took a hastily thrown together ground force of KLA fighters to remind us of the synergy between (aerial) firepower and (ground) maneuver. And, it took TF Hawk’s capabilities to refine the ground battlespace targets.***

The Yugoslav acceptance of the G-8 accords can be seen as a direct result of the KLA–TF Hawk–Air power operation. Now that the war has ended, we can reflect back on the conduct of operations and begin to draw lessons for the future. The synergy that was created among the KLA offensive, Army intelligence and targeting, and NATO air power is one lesson that should be examined.

The KLA supplied a largely ineffective maneuver ground force, but it led to NATO’s most effective bombing to date. If the maneuver force had been a modern, high-tech NATO ground force, fully coordinated and tied in with the aerial fires, the result would have been a spectacular victory. In sum, the war took longer than it should, and was less effective than it could have been, because NATO had not employed half of the tools in the tool box.