PARADIGM SHIFT:

TURNING AN ATTACK TEAM INTO A SCOUT TEAM

By CPT John Commerford

The effectiveness and practical necessity of aerial scouts executing their mission in an aircraft designed for the aerial scout mission is not in dispute. What is in dispute is how to make attack pilots, trained in and flying an aircraft designed for the attack mission, into aerial scouts. In these times of fiscal constraints and restructuring, the Army must develop a thorough and complete plan of action to use the AH-64 system (pilot and aircraft) in the reconnaissance role. Aircraft in the reconnaissance and security mission set increase the speed, tactical mobility, and depth of ground cavalry reconnaissance squadrons. The aviation community owes the ground force commander a continuation in the synergistic relationship between the ground unit and aero scout. The Army, when transitioning to the AH-64 as the primary manned scout aircraft, must maintain and nurture the aero scout mindset, create habitual training relationships to establish tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP), and leverage technology where possible to enhance ground and aerial scout capabilities.

An aircraft and its role begins with the pilot flying that aircraft. The Army can take the scout out of an aircraft, but must not take the scout mentality away from the scout. There are fundamental differences in the "gun" and "scout" pilot mentalities. When blending the scout culture into an attack aircraft, the Army must preserve the aero scout's mindset. The Army's plan to transition OH-58D pilots into the AH-64 is a good starting point to preserve the scout culture. However, much more must be done to ensure the ground/air recon integration culture, as a combat multiplier, is not lost. The Army should encourage former OH-58D instructor pilots and unit trainers to transfer their skills into the AH-64. These instructors will form an initial base at the unit level to develop skilled scout teams within the current pool of attack crews. Beyond the unit level, the U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence (USAACE) should replicate the academics and flight syllabus that had been used to create the superior knowledge and skill set of the aerial scout in the AH-64 program of instruction. It is essential that the scout resume developed from this course continues to serve the Army. Failing to do so, will invariably and dangerously burden the ground reconnaissance elements, with providing the commander with information he has heretofore expected and received from aerial scouts. The USAACE should seek to hire instructors with reconnaissance experience to develop a new crop of AH-64 pilots capable of performing both in the attack and scout roles.

Maintaining and nurturing the aero scout culture must include the integration of ground forces. Aero scouts historically have a very close relationship to ground scouts. The aero scouts work to increase the reach and scope of the ground reconnaissance forces. Careful air-ground operations (AGO) planning, rehearsals, and training lead to the most beneficial intelligence for the ground force commander. Heavy attack reconnaissance squadrons (H-ARSs) must train AGO and all of its mission sets. It is vital that the H-ARS complements the ground force and increases the tactical reach of the commander. Training with ground forces habitually in a progressive manner allows for the practice necessary for "attack" pilots to understand that integrated air and ground reconnaissance is more effective than pure air or pure ground reconnaissance.

The Army must have a renewed urgency for training, not garrison type training, but real tactical training in the field. If forces are only as good as their training, then habitual training relationships must begin to take shape amongst the units of the Army. This is especially necessary for the new H-ARSs since they are new and relatively untested in combat. The H-ARS troops must practice in order to determine what TTP works best to complement the ground unit reconnaissance forces. Then, the H-ARS must pass this knowledge to the USAACE for dissemination to other squadrons. When testing TTP, training should include the unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) of the H-ARS. The manned and unmanned

team (MUM-T) will likely form an integral part of the new reconnaissance role of the AH-64, but without first extensively testing the abilities of this technological match, the realization of both the potential strengths and weaknesses of the MUM-T may come too late in combat.

View from a UAS camera.

Operationally, the Army should experiment with the deployment of AH-64s in training. The Air Mobility Command can quickly and easily move an entire air cavalry troop of OH-58s, with the troop ready to perform soon after the C-17 lands; however, it is far more complicated and takes far more time to move and make operational the same compliment of AH-64s. The Army must investigate and develop new maintenance requirement solutions for the AH-64 in order to decrease the deployment time of AH-64s into a contingency theater of operations.

Training currently exists to leverage the technology of the AH-64 and UAS team. Investigations in Afghanistan identified problems such as insufficient ranges for unmanned aircraft and constrained situational understanding. As an example, the limited aperture of UAS cameras can only provide a "soda straw" view of the operational environment. The closed cockpit of the AH-64 also limits visual situational awareness. With this in mind, tasks such as assessing cross-country mobility on routes demand the development of different TTP to use in conjunction with ground reconnaissance. At the risk of honing in on singular targets, technology helps the scout extend visual range with the AH-64, but without proper scanning techniques, trained crews could "miss the forest for the trees." The development of new TTP is vital to ensure, as aircraft crews take control of the UAS to extend ranges, the flight of the manned aircraft does not fall to the wayside. As the Army continues to proliferate the UAS, the commander must fully integrate UAS crews in AGO. Unmanned aircraft system operators must understand what information the ground commander requires from UAS reconnaissance and the UAS operators must be able to explain to the commander the capabilities of their aircraft. The sensors and hardware of the AH-64 and UAS are superior to those of the OH-58, but if not thoroughly developed and integrated, the AH-64 or UAS "bells and whistles" will not improve AGO for reconnaissance.


View from an AH-64 during reconnaissance

Challenged with significant cuts in its Fiscal Year 2014 and beyond procurement and operations budgets, Army Aviation chose to start down the path of its second Aviation Restructure Initiative (ARI) in just 21 years.[1] The Army Chief of Staff approved and implemented the first ARI in 1993.[2] A casualty of this second ARI is the OH-58 system – the OH-58 aerial scout and his aircraft. Nevertheless, Army Aviation retains the critical requirement to provide aerial reconnaissance. For the foreseeable future, the AH-64, teamed with UAS aircraft, must satisfy this requirement. This may not be a perfect solution, but this solution allows the opportunity for the scout community to grow provided the Army maintains and nourishes the scout culture, establishes new TTP through renewed training initiatives, and leverages the available technologies of the AH-64 and UAS aircraft to benefit the reconnaissance and security mission set. Challenges are inevitable in the Army, but how these challenges get resolved and the attitudes behind these resolutions shape future conflicts. The scout pilots of the present and the past owe it to Army Aviation and the ground forces to steer the course of the MUM-T to success in the role of reconnaissance and security.

[1] Creekmore, Joseph P. COL. Personal interview. 27 January 2015.
[2] Ibid.

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Acronym Reference

AGO - air-ground operations
ARI - Aviation Restructure Initiative
H-ARS - heavy attack reconnaissance squadron
MUM-T - manned-unmanned team
TTP - tactics, techniques, and procedures
UAS - unmanned aircraft system
USAACE - U.S. Army Aviation Center of Excellence