



# Fighting the CAB in Combined Arms Maneuver

By COL Robert T. Ault

The last 14 years showcased Army Aviation's ability to apply its fundamental principles of flexibility, speed, security, and precision to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the Army refocuses to deter and defeat a peer or near-peer competitor, it's important to think through what fighting the combat aviation brigade (CAB) will look like.

## Decisive Action Construct

The Army conducts decisive action as an independent maneuver force or as part of an integrated joint or combined force during unified land operations. The Army is decisive as it conducts globally integrated operations via offense, defense, stability, and defense support to civil authorities. Due to the nature of the operating environment, Army forces may find themselves conducting these missions simultaneously in multiple locations.

The Army's core competencies include shaping the security environment, setting the theater - establishing lodgments and preparing a theater for follow-on phases of conflict (seize the initiative, dominate), projecting national power, combined arms maneuver (CAM), wide area security (WAS), cyber operations, and special operations. Recent operations conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate examples of WAS whereas operations such as Desert Storm and the Iraq Invasion of 2003 demonstrate examples of CAM. While the majority of combat operations over the last 14 years have certainly been dangerous, the

intensity of those actions was generally at the company or platoon level and below.

Recent WAS operations against the Taliban or Al Qaeda are markedly different than expected CAM operations against peer or near-peer forces. Emerging hybrid threats pose a more symmetrical threat and will field capable formations with significant offensive capability and integrated air defense systems in conjunction with enabling capabilities such as cyber and, most importantly, the logistics capable of sustaining operations. Due to the nature of future conflict, the CAB must be able to conduct missions across the entire range of military operations. However, fighting the CAB as a maneuver element in CAM is a task that must be trained from the company upward to enable success.

Army operations may range from having a linear and contiguous operational environment, with a discernable front and back, to having a non-linear and noncontiguous operational environment which has no discernable boundaries between what is considered the deep, close, and support areas. It is significant that today the operational environment demands the ability to conduct offensive, defensive, and stability operations simultaneously. Combat aviation brigades will find themselves conducting these operations across their formations multiple times as they maneuver as part of a division or higher organization.

The nature of future missions and the anticipated operational variables dictate the tactics to be used in either CAM or WAS. For recent operations, Army



Aviation has conducted team maneuver with battalion-level mission command. This is evidenced in the majority of missions that required a team of AH-64s to respond to troops in contact or that of two or three CH-47s air assaulting a battalion of infantry. Specifically in relation to counter insurgency, the nature of WAS demands the small precise use of force, applied through several levels of leadership. Leaders must apply this force with centralized intent and dispersed execution through disciplined initiative, which are central aspects of mission command. In this manner, combined arms maneuver is significantly different, but the underlying principles of mission command still apply.

The level of integration and capability associated with a near-peer threat in CAM demands that companies and battalions maneuver within the parameters of higher mission command echelons. This necessity can be seen in the warfighter training events set in the decisive action training environment. When facing a near-peer competitor, division, corps, and joint task force commanders may conduct maneuvers at a unit level in order to either gain the initiative or a position of advantage. The threat demands tactics that balance protecting friendly forces while maximizing the probability of gaining that advantage. It is significant that CAM demands the ability to maneuver and fight collectively at all levels. This need to conduct unit maneuver changes how commanders must think about readiness and synchronizing and integrating all members of a joint or combined arms team.

### **What Does Readiness Look Like in Combined Arms Maneuver?**

Readiness represents the ability of a unit to fight and execute its war time missions under the national military strategy. These missions contain tasks known as mission essential tasks which make up a unit's mission essential task list (METL). As the Army moves to standardize and objectively assess the unit METL from brigade down to company level, readiness will begin to be expressed in terms of repetitions and results.

A standardized METL and objective assessments of readiness will force unit commanders, at all levels, to measure themselves against the ability to conduct battalion level maneuver with brigade mission command. This is significantly



different than subjectively assigning readiness objectives. Setting T1 (85% or greater of a unit's METL assessed as fully trained during the last 180 days) against this unit collective level capability standard will add much needed rigor not only in training but in assessing what level of capability or readiness units are able to attain.

### **Army Aviation as the Supporting Formation versus the Supported Formation**

Fighting in the decisive action construct demands aviation formations that understand both timing and simultaneity in combat operations. When applying combat power through the WAS core competency, Army Aviation units will conduct enabling operations as a supporting formation to other units such as an infantry company. In these cases, aviation may appear to operate as a fires-like platform, conducting precise and discriminately lethal operations against an enemy attempting to blend into the civilian population. For example, an attack weapons team operating on the fires net controlled by a joint terminal attack controller engages a target as part of a "troops in contact" battle drill. Army Aviation units are most likely to conduct

these type of supporting operations as part of WAS while performing the role of a maneuver force during CAM; however, CAM may demand a higher level of risk versus reward analysis by the division or corps commander and his staff.

The results of this analysis cause three key characteristics to change the role of aviation units to supported formations as the level of enemy capability drives the commander to fight in the deep, close, and support areas of the operating environment during CAM. The first characteristic is the presence of follow-on enemy forces not in contact with friendly troops, but outside the main battle area. The critical nature of shaping operations against the force not yet in contact sets the conditions for subsequent or simultaneous operations. Second, the levels of risk associated with both shaping operations and the commitment of formations against high risk, high payoff targets (such as brigade level air assaults or division attacks) demand that leaders understand both the risks and rewards. This is also true in terms of what assets, like division fires or the CAB, are missioned against versus what they are not. In other words, an attack reconnaissance battalion that is direct support to a brigade combat team in the close fight will be unavailable to decisively support the division fight in the deep area. This determination of risk to mission versus risk to force must be done at the senior levels of the division or corps leadership.



Lastly, the required level of synchronization essential to conduct CAM is absent from the WAS fight. For example, suppression of an integrated air defense system in order to conduct shaping operations against forces not yet in contact is usually accomplished above the brigade level in order to deconflict and synchronize indirect fires and aviation maneuver. Additionally, the regeneration of combat power after such a mission, cannot be accomplished without a significant synchronized logistics effort by the higher headquarters.

### Implications for Training

Clearly, to fight as an integrated member of a combined arms team, units must train at a collective level beyond what is traditionally thought of as readiness for counter-insurgency operations. Objective readiness criteria will help leaders accurately assess and articulate their unit's ability to execute mission essential tasks. While individual training will always remain the bedrock for building readiness, fighting a near-peer competitor means units must be able to effectively maneuver at echelons above



Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-94.2 Deep Operations addresses these characteristics and reintroduces the importance of the deep area and the fundamental responsibility of division and corps to shape conditions for subordinate units in the close area. With the shift in focus from WAS to CAM, it is imperative that our doctrine provides a foundation to respond to emerging near-peer threats.

the team level. Combat aviation brigades must be agile and flexible in order to execute mission command for multiple units maneuvering in CAM and WAS simultaneously. Leaders must not be content merely with individual or team readiness. Instead, platoon, company, and battalion commanders must fight to train their units and mission command their subordinates.

In order to facilitate this paradigm shift, Army Aviation, as described in Field Manual 3-04, must help leaders at all levels to assess the ability of their subordinate leaders to execute decentralized operations under stressful and demanding conditions. Training Circular 3-04.11, Commander's Aviation Training and Standardization Program will mandate that battalion, company commanders and platoon leaders be pilots in command. These leaders will be evaluated by their higher commander for their ability to plan, prepare, execute, and assess those tasks associated with conducting unit METL tasks.

### Conclusion

The Army must not fall victim to recent combat deployment experiences and take the wrong lessons about decisive action. While the experience of small unit tactics is indeed invaluable and applicable against a hybrid enemy, we must redefine our understanding and application of CAM. Combined arms maneuver demands battalion level maneuver with brigade-level mission command. Synchronized, high risk operations against a near-peer opposing force will demand aviation leaders and formations that can thrive in the uncertainty and complexity of the operational environment and in and out of the CAM and WAS imperatives simultaneously. Deliberate collective training and leader development are critical to the ability to deter and defeat the threats in the next conflict.



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### Acronym Reference

**ATP** - Army techniques publication  
**CAB** - combat aviation brigade  
**CAM** - combined arms maneuver

**METL** - mission essential task list  
**WAS** - wide area security