

# Aviation's Cultural Change in the Combined Arms Fight

By CPT James "Beau" Robinson

The combined arms team has developed an interesting and multifaceted dependence on aviation. We are a combat multiplier with capabilities to shoot, move, and communicate more efficiently than anything on the ground. Nevertheless, the ground commander's scheme of maneuver rarely incorporates aviation decisively. Instead, the habits of 15 years of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations continue to be the mainstay of the ground commander's application of Army Aviation. We must achieve culture change in the combined arms community to maximize aviation maneuver capabilities as doctrinally intended and prevent aviation assets from becoming a COIN-like reactionary force in a possible future near peer conflict.

Where does aviation fall in the mix of combined arms maneuver? Air-ground operations under unified land operations (ULO) is the simultaneous or synchronized employment of ground forces with aviation maneuver and fires to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative. Army Aviation, with its inherent speed, mobility, and firepower is the optimal organization capable of doing this within the combined arms

team. Doctrinally, aviation assets may be thought of as Strykers (UH-60 and CH-47) or Abrams M-1s (AH-64) capable of operating in the third dimension. Tracing Army Aviation's legacy back to Vietnam, air mobility embraced and embodied the modern day air-ground operations ideology. An infantryman could all but predict the specific tail number in which he would ride to and from battle. The aircraft in the division served no other purpose but to move troops and necessary equipment to and from the objective area. The infantryman's sole job was to ride into battle via the helicopter assigned to his unit, seize and retain key terrain, and destroy the enemy at the time and place of his choosing. Army Aviation's recent doctrine and structure evolved in many ways since the 1960s. Technology, the modern day operational environment, cost of aviation, and the general size of the U.S. Army have all lead us to the principles and organizational configuration we know today. We will likely never revert to the ideology reflected in the air mobility concept developed during the Vietnam or Cold War era, but Army Aviation's combined arms focus should closely mirror that philosophy.

success enjoyed by the United States and our allies. Army Aviation demonstrated, again, the capability to be responsive, effective, and indispensable in its assigned tasks. A one-page concept of the operation containing grid, frequency, call sign, and timeline replaced detailed mission planning, integration with the ground unit commander, and "rehearse until you get it right" exercises. Aviation and ground unit personnel completed mission coordination with a phone call. Landing zone (LZ) selection consisted of a barrage of e-mail exchanges between the ground force commander, air mission commander, the aviation final mission approval authority, and any number of other parties within the chain of command until all agreed on the selection. Aeromedical evacuation crews remained in their "ready-up" room, caught off guard, as the execution of a large operation occurred without their knowledge. Attack aviation crews arrived on station with ground force scheme of maneuver, grid, frequency, and call sign; they were excited to join the party with limited information because it was easy. Our increase on battlefield technology and the reliance on the "status-quo" replaced the basic mission planning and preparation essentials. These practices significantly reduced time and effort, appeased the aviation customer, and became the easy answer for everyone. With notable exceptions, time after time and mission after mission, this process somehow worked. Why? It worked because we were all professionals seasoned by 15 years of repetition, fighting with superior equipment and technology against an unsophisticated enemy. Will it work in our next conflict? Will it work when our technology is matched by our antagonists?

September 11, 2016 marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Our senior non-commissioned officers, field grade officers, and warrant officers are all products of the GWOT. Since the beginning of the COIN efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Army Aviation has been the cornerstone of the



Current trends show that the ground commander looks at aviation as an enabler — frequently as a 9-1-1 afterthought — rather than as a maneuver force. They rarely integrate aviation assets into the brigade combat team (BCT) scheme of maneuver. In the direct action training environment, the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) Falcon Team rarely observes the same success we have observed in the COIN environment. Army Aviation planners should not forget lessons learned from COIN operations in Iraq and Afghanistan because they will continue to be part of decisive action operations; however, old skills from the Cold War era are going to have to be relearned. On a symmetric battlefield against a near peer enemy, the COIN advantages experienced in the past 15 years all but disappear. Maintaining continuous and accurate situational awareness will be a challenge because of the dynamics of the battlefield. Units will be required to move frequently and the comforts and security of fixed based operations will go away. The air defense threat becomes an ominous reality and the familiar call to troops in contact will necessarily go unheeded as mission priorities require massed fires on a major armored offensive initiated by the enemy. Our technological superiority evaporates and we are left to match the enemies' maneuvers with skill and expertise derived from integrated training with our ground partners.

The scenario we most often observe at the JMRC is aviation not integrated decisively into the BCT's fight. The opposing force conducts a decisive and overwhelming attack on the BCT and an immediate 9-1-1 request for attack helicopter support comes in. Usually, one of two results play out. Either the attack crews rush in to save the day, fly into a chaotic firefight, and are killed by enemy air defense systems or small arms fire before they are able to identify friend or foe. In the other scenario, the crews

bound towards the last known troop location, use tactical patience to develop the situation, and arrive face-to-face with the enemy after the BCT has been rendered combat ineffective. Aviation and ground mission planners rarely conduct analysis and detailed planning to identify attack helicopter battle positions to thwart an enemy's most likely or most deadly course of action. Seldom do BCTs utilize CH-47 or UH-60s for preplanned resupply or air assault of the reserve. Aviation leaders must train not only their own units but they must train the ground unit leadership on the proper integration and synchronization of Army Aviation well before the fight begins. How do we achieve this culture change in the combined arms community?

Two key elements will change the way aviation fights in future conflicts with our combined arms partners - building trust and establishing a tenacious liaison. Despite the fact that weather and maintenance are elements beyond our control, if we are not where we are supposed to be, when we are supposed to be there, and with the tools we are supposed to show up with, our credibility is indelibly damaged. Weather and maintenance often hinder aviation operations and despite that both are generally beyond our control, when we are unable to deliver our assets as rehearsed, it creates a significant trust deficit. It is essential that every individual within the aviation community do their part to educate their combined arms contacts about limitations associated with these two elements. When the possibility that these factors may affect an operation, aviation leaders must stand up to ensure that the ground commander has made alternative or contingency plans.



Establishing a continuous line of communication with the ground unit is critical. This is accomplished with the aviation unit sacrificing a knowledgeable, articulate, and aggressive liaison officer capable of selling (but not over selling) the unit's capabilities. The liaison officer is an essential link that can make or break the unit's reputation and determine the success or failure of the ground commander's operation.

Army Aviation has worked hard to demonstrate commitment to the Soldiers on the ground in the COIN fight in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are now in transition as the threat defines a significantly more dangerous environment and it is our responsibility to ensure the ground unit leadership and planners understand that the rules have changed. Whether the ground commander knows it or not, and as hard as it will be for us NOT to respond, 9-1-1 calls for troops in contact may no longer be the aviation unit's priority. This change will require Army Aviation to educate the ground unit commander and conduct more detailed planning and coordination with the ground forces we support if we are to survive to ensure the ground unit's success. It will also require a renewed education of aviation tactical skills not practiced since the Cold War training exercises, a knowledge of the ground unit maneuver capabilities, and it will require graduate level knowledge of aircraft survivability systems.



CPT James "Beau" Robinson currently serves as the Attack Aviation Observer, Controller/Trainer, Joint Multinational Readiness Center, Hohenfels, Germany. CPT Robinson previously served as Commander, B/3-159<sup>th</sup> Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, Illesheim, Germany and Assistant S-3, 1-2<sup>nd</sup> Attack Reconnaissance Battalion, Fort Carson, Colorado. He deployed in support of Operation Spartan Shield and then forward deployed to Baghdad, Iraq in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. He also deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. CPT Robinson has nine years of service and is qualified in the AH-64D Longbow Apache and LUH-72A Lakota.

### Acronym Reference

**BCT** - brigade combat team  
**COIN** - counterinsurgency  
**GWOT** - Global War on Terror

**JMRC** - Joint Multinational Readiness Center  
**LZ** - landing zone  
**ULO** - unified land operations

