Combined Arms Maneuver & Aviation Integration: A Joint Multinational Readiness Center Perspective

By MAJ Beau Rollie

Six decisive action training exercises at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Fiscal Year 2015-2016 proved the U.S. Army is re-learning effective air ground operations against near-peer threats. Throughout the learning process, aviation has struggled to establish itself as a fully vested partner on the combined arms team. Aviators experienced challenges at both the aviation task force (AVN TF) and brigade combat team (BCT) echelons. The challenges faced often resulted in aviation losses disproportionate to and exceeding the destruction inflicted upon the enemy. Aviation units are not killing enough enemy for the helicopters we are losing. The exercises in question witnessed 31 total aircraft downed by guided and un-guided weapons (see Figure 1), often without friendly forces achieving a decisive result.

This article will argue that both AVN TF and BCT commands are to blame for deficiencies in their employment of aviation assets. Improvements are required to limit aviation losses and capitalize upon the asymmetric advantages possible through massed usage of rotary-wing aircraft integrated with friendly infantry and armored forces. The primary way to realize the necessary improvements is engagement by aviation key leaders with subordinates in the AVN TF and counterpart key leaders at the BCT and division echelons.

"Combined arms maneuver is the application of the elements of combat power in unified action to defeat enemy ground forces… and to achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages over the enemy to seize and exploit the initiative."[1] There are few elements on the battlefield better equipped to achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages than Army Aviation. Army Aviation is ideal for exposing enemies to overwhelming combat power from unexpected directions as part of the combined arms maneuver team, but tactical mistakes made by air mission commanders, AVN TF commanders, and BCT commanders are inhibiting Aviation's combat multiplication effect.

At the AVN TF echelon, notable mistakes were made in many operations. Inadequate pre-mission planning by attack helicopter crews often failed to identify adequate numbers or quality of firing positions (FP). Poor and inadequate FP selection does not facilitate optimal

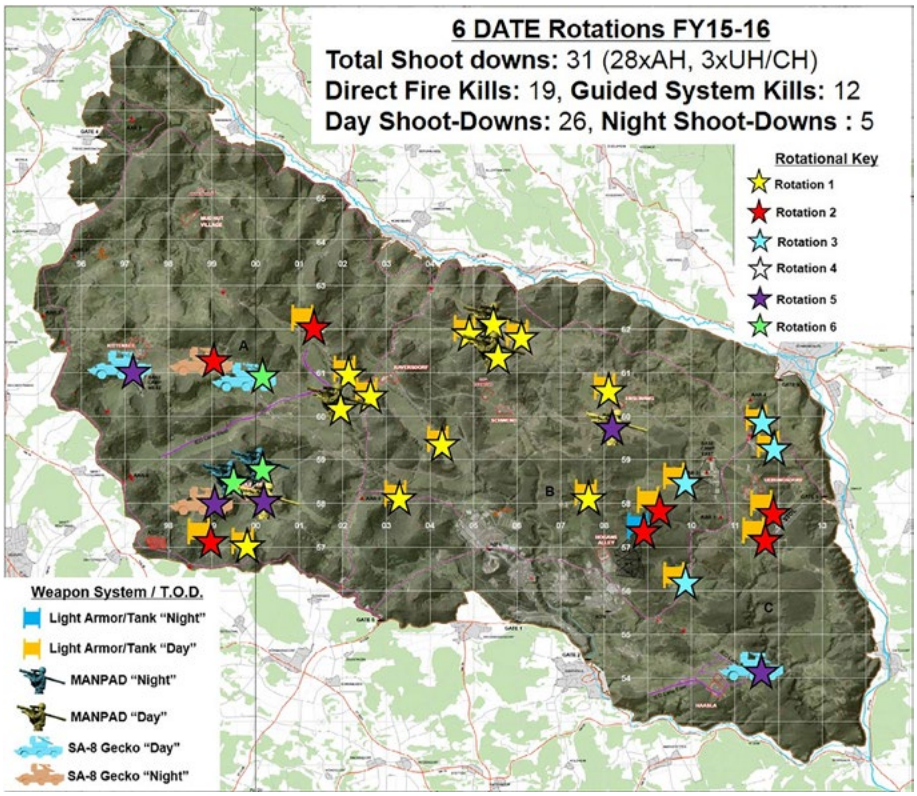

Figure 1.

standoff, target intervisibility, cover, and concealment. Poor position planning translates to attack aircraft being drawn into unanticipated, close quarter fights, thus surrendering inherent range and firepower advantages (resulted in 19 direct fire shoot-downs, see Figure 1). Faced with unsuitable pre-planned FPs, attack helicopter crews maneuvered to hasty FPs, often utilizing un-planned air routes.

Secondly, poor air route planning was responsible for many of the 31 shoot-downs. Lack of experience at deliberate air route planning and lack-luster ground maneuver integration forced the use of hastily selected or poorly planned air routes. Consequences included pilots who consistently flew through ground mobility corridors that should have been recognizable as high speed avenues of approach on BCT products such as a modified combined obstacles overlay. About half of the recorded shoot-downs occurred in enemy observed or guarded mobility corridors. These losses are especially distressing because we are not planning or applying other members of the combined arms team to mitigate risk to aircraft.

The third problem, a lack of integrated planning concerning unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) for manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) and suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) missions contributes to poor aircraft survivability rates. A simple air-route reconnaissance by UAS with dedicated SEAD missions prior to landing zone (LZ) insertions are ways to mitigate tactical risk to aircraft. By failing to identify, suppress, and/or destroy enemy air defense artillery and direct fire threats near air routes, LZs, and FPs, the risk to aircraft was significantly increased. By failing to conduct detailed planning regarding air routes and FPs, we aviators are shooting ourselves in the proverbial foot by hindering our own effectiveness. We are, however, not the only ones failing to address tactical risks to aircraft. Our higher echelons bear responsibility as well.

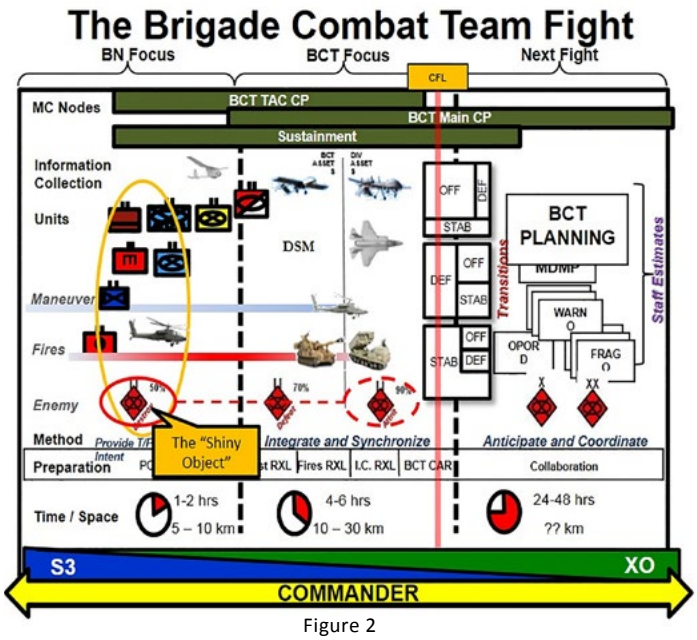

Figure 2

At the BCT and division levels, aviation assets are often planned and used in a reactionary way to address "shiny objects" (see Figure 2) including troops-in-contact. Attack and lift aircraft are often left in reserve as quick reaction forces to react to enemy actions, thereby relegating the most maneuverable assets the U.S. Army possesses to a reactionary role. Attack helicopter employment is usually planned in a fashion similar to close air support or fire missions and is not integrated into ground schemes as a maneuver asset. The BCT planners rarely maximize aerial maneuver capability of Army Aviation assault assets. Instead, planning air assault insertions is typically conducted at the company or smaller sized echelons which rarely produce decisive results. Lastly, aviation employment that is not integrated into the ground maneuver plan results in poor aircrew situational awareness regarding friendly positions and enemy maneuver leading to increased fratricide risk and greater incidence of aircraft shoot-downs.

The best way to overcome these common aviation employment problems is through Army Aviation leader engagement at the AVN TF, BCT, and division levels. The AVN TF commander needs to enforce better deliberate planning of air routes and FPs and include MUM-T and SEAD mission integration to increase aircraft survivability. The AVN TF and combat aviation brigade commanders must advocate aviation maneuver integration at the BCT and division levels with a focus on massing aircraft for decisive operations. Leader advocacy should also focus on facilitating the paradigm shift regarding Army perception of helicopters as enablers instead of maneuver elements. If the ground commander planned to use attack, utility, and cargo helicopters in a fashion similar to tanks and armored personnel carriers respectively, maneuver integration would increase. Aviation operations are inherently offensive[2] and if aviation leaders plan for and advocate helicopter usage to make the enemy react to us, we will limit aviation losses and achieve decisive results.

1 United States Department of the Army, *Operations*, Army Doctrine Publication 3-0 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, September 13, 2016),
2 United States Department of the Army, *Aviation Tactical Employment*, Army Techniques Publication 3-04.1 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, April 2016), xiii

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Acronym Reference

AVN TF - aviation task force	**LZ** - landing zone
BCT - brigade combat team	**MUM-T** - manned-unmanned teaming
FP - firing position	**SEAD** - suppression of enemy air defense
JMRC - Joint Multinational Readiness Center	**UAS** - unmanned aircraft system