AirLand Battle was all the rage in the 1980s, but its legacy, for both the Army and the Air Force, was suspicion and distrust.

By Rebecca Grant

Almost 20 years ago, the Air Force and the Army tried to combine forces in a new concept, AirLand Battle, designed for war in Central Europe. AirLand Battle never met that test but it cast a long shadow over operations from Iraq to Kosovo.

The epicenter of AirLand Battle was the Army Training and Doctrine Command, based at Ft. Monroe, Va. TRADOC was established in 1973 to help guide the Army back from the disaster of Vietnam—to refocus the service on conventional war in Europe and help it make the transition to an all-volunteer force.

TRADOC’s initial doctrine product was called “Active Defense,” codified in the Army Field Manual 100-5 as published in 1976. Active Defense moved Army doctrine out of the swamps of counterinsurgency and back to the task of defending NATO Europe against a quantitatively superior Warsaw Pact. Some criticized the new doctrine as having an overly heavy emphasis on firepower and attrition. However, Active Defense energized education and training and opened up an intellectual debate that set the stage for future developments—most prominently, AirLand Battle.

One of the intellectual breakthroughs came in FM 100-5’s Chapter 8, which presented, in italics, the following statement: “The Army cannot win the land battle without the Air Force.”

Six more years of doctrine development ensued, during which Army officers gained an even sharper appreciation of operational depth and maneuver. This led directly to inclusion of AirLand Battle doctrine in a new version of FM 100-5, published in 1982. The battlefield of the future, it noted, was going to be bigger and more lethal. Forces would have to demonstrate rapid maneuver in order to win the first battle of the next war.

AirLand Battle demonstrated a determined shift toward a doctrine of the offensive. It broke out of the narrow tactical focus of Active Defense by showcasing two distinct operational concepts:

- Deep attacks beyond the forward edge of the battle area to disrupt enemy second echelons.
- Lightning-fast offensive maneuver using mechanized forces supported by tactical airpower and attack helicopters, the purpose of which would be to exploit the initial advantage.

What the Army doctrine writers called “fires” became not only a
means of attrition but also an instrument to freeze the enemy and stun him long enough for maneuver forces to strike deep and destroy enemy forces.

AirLand Battle doctrine emphasized that any future European battlefield would be nonlinear—that is, a place where Soviet forces might attack NATO’s close, rear, and deep areas at once. The philosophy of AirLand Battle was to turn around that problem and throw it back at the Warsaw Pact. Instead of holding off and then rolling back the enemy in a sequence of close engagements on a broad front, forces would synchronize close engagements with deep strikes on enemy second echelons. The key concepts were initiative, depth, agility, and synchronization of forces.

Gen. John A. Wickham Jr., the Army Chief of Staff in the 1980s, explained: “Deep operations are designed to delay, disrupt, and attrit the enemy’s forces and, as a result, shape the battle conditions in which close operations will be conducted; close operations are executed to engage decisively and destroy the enemy; and rear operations are undertaken to protect our freedom of maneuver, operational continuity, and uninterrupted combat service support.”

Thus, deep attack became a critical factor in the land battle. However, to attack deep, the Army corps commander of the 1980s had no choice but to rely on the air component. The Army had longer-range systems on the drawing boards, but in the early days of AirLand Battle, it had no organic capability to see deep and strike deep. The air component facilitated the shift away from attrition and toward maneuver by giving the maneuver commander the ability to see and strike deeper.

In short, maneuver warfare would depend on the air component to enable, augment, and protect land force operations.

**Then Came FOFA**

In 1986, the Army approved another revision of FM 100-5. This new version captured AirLand Battle doctrine at its peak of refinement. Its strong focus on nonlinear operations had been embraced by NATO and became the centerpiece of a new NATO defense strategy labeled Follow-On Forces Attack—FOFA for short. If war came, NATO’s chance for victory with conventional forces would rest on the success of the AirLand Battle concept.

The stakes were high. Wickham noted, “The potential of AirLand Battle must be fully realized if we are to combat the Soviets without resorting to the early ‘first use’ of nuclear weapons.”

The emergence of AirLand Battle was made possible in no small measure by the flourishing relationship between TRADOC and USAF’s Tactical Air Command, headquartered at nearby Langley AFB, Va. Years of Army–Air Force exercises had led to improved close air support procedures. Good relations between the Army and Air Force gave AirLand Battle a special prominence, at a time when USAF doctrine was split between TAC’s ground combat focus and the global war planning focus of Strategic Air Command.

Though AirLand Battle was never part of official Air Force doctrine, officials at TAC heartily endorsed its precepts. Gen. Merrill A. McPeak, the now-retired Air Force Chief of Staff, served at TAC during these years. In a statement made in the early 1990s, he remembered the move toward AirLand Battle as a change for the better.

“Recall what the Army’s doctrine was before the AirLand Battle,” McPeak remarked in a 1992 statement. “It was called the ‘Active Defense’—kind of sit in prepared positions and allow the Soviets to punch through the Fulda Gap and across the north German plain.” McPeak went on to say that AirLand Battle changed all that by putting a “heavy emphasis on maneuver” and “the idea of getting inside of the enemy’s decision cycle time—being able to move before he could make a decision and react.”

Air Force leaders saw AirLand Battle as the only game in town. Airmen had no desire to stand back from the synchronization of the combined arms team. AirLand Battle ensured airpower would be part of the ground scheme of maneuver. The prevailing USAF view of the early 1980s was that heavy concentrations of ground forces in Europe made land war the major conventional battle, and airmen believed they had a duty to provide support.

**TAC’s Reason For Being**

Writing in the April 1988 issue of this magazine, Senior Editor James W. Canan observed that TAC headquarters had become a place where “working with the Army is an accepted way of life and where helping the Army wage and win the decisive land battle is ungrudgingly acknowledged as TAC’s reason for being.”

Gen. Robert D. Russ, the TAC commander, crisply summed up the situation in a 1988 memo: “Tactical aviators have two primary jobs—to provide air defense for the North American continent and support the Army in achieving its battlefield objectives.”

The meeting of minds between the Army and TAC had reached a key juncture with the promulgation in May 1984 of what was known as the 31 Initiatives, a memorandum signed by the USAF Chief of Staff, Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, and Army Chief, Wickham. The initiatives covered major topics ranging from point air defense and combat search and rescue to joint target lists and the Joint STARS radar aircraft concept.

Among the more detailed items was Initiative 25, dealing with air liaison officers and forward air controllers. These issues encapsulated and symbolized the major focus on improving the Air Force’s provision of close air support to ground troops.

The two service chiefs saw the memorandum of agreement as but a single step in a dynamic process in which the Army and Air Force would build “optimum airland combat capability” by working together on warfighting issues and acquisition priorities. An Air Force analyst, Richard G. Davis, wrote at that time, “The type of battlefield integration encouraged by the 31 Initiatives should make the services more effective,” but he warned that it would take the “highest levels of service leadership to sustain the momentum.”

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ver. Retired Maj. Gen. Charles D. Link recalled, “AirLand Battle was widely if inaccurately considered the ultimate expression of airpower’s contemporary potential. Basically, for lack of any other alternative, the United States Air Force enthusiastically embraced AirLand Battle. As a result, soldiers were encouraged to expect airpower to serve the land force objectives in the first instance. ... Probably worse than the soldiers’ expectation, airmen developed the same expectation.”

The Decisive Phase

AirLand Battle’s major innovation was to recognize the importance of deep operations—but this was also the area where the Air Force would later split with the Army’s doctrine. Under AirLand Battle, the air component’s deep air interdiction had to be synchronized with the action of ground forces. Moreover, close combat was to be viewed as the decisive phase of battle. Deep operations were to be used to support and assist, but attention would be concentrated on the close battle area, where, in the words of a 1983 Wickham–Gabriel memo defining the terms for the Army–Air Force joint development work, “the imperative of defeating the enemy ground combat formations or at least preventing their penetration into the friendly rear area is predominant.”

Deep battle area operations were to be more flexible and depend on the nature of the enemy’s dispositions and the intent of the commander. Deep battle would be conducted “in accordance with the appropriate commanders’ concepts of operations.” The deep zone was to be split into a “near zone,” where operations would be “capable of immediately affecting the outcome of the ground engagement,” and another zone with fixed and mobile targets farther to the rear which “over time could influence the close battle area but are not a near-term threat to it.”

AirLand Battle satisfied the Army’s need for maneuver warfare doctrine. However, there was no recognition of the potential for a phased campaign where, if the deep battle became the top priority for a joint force commander, land forces might be called upon to support the air component, if ground forces could get to the battle at all.

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Initiative 21 actually hinted at this problem by instructing the Army and Air Force to figure out how to “synchronize Battlefield Air Interdiction (BAI) with maneuver” and to connect the Army battlefield coordination element with the corps and land component commanders via near-real-time data links.

As the Cold War came to an end, AirLand Battle doctrine had not resolved latent Army and Air Force differences over campaign priorities, authority of the joint forces air component commander over corps commanders, and what to do in expediitory operations where the battle plan might not follow a course of synchronized, joint force employment.

The preoccupation with close battle was natural to the soldier. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander of World War II, once wrote, “Every ground commander seeks the battle of annihilation; so far as conditions permit, he tries to duplicate in modern war the classic example of Cannae” (famous battle of 216 B.C. in which invading Carthaginian forces under Hannibal smashed a Roman army within Italy).

AirLand Battle, for all its innovation, was no different. Deep operations would support and assist, but the attention was on the close battle area.

In the 1980s, neither soldiers nor airmen took particular note of these limitations, but the conflicts of the 1990s made them glaringly apparent. The prime case in point was the Gulf War.

From all appearances, the massive, multicorps Gulf War offensive was a textbook example of AirLand Battle in the real world. In fact, Desert Storm used only broad-brush strokes from the operational palette of AirLand Battle. Army Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, commander in chief of US Central Command, did not order up simultaneous close, rear, and deep operations, as would benefit a NATO response to a Warsaw Pact attack in Europe. Rather, he constructed a campaign that began with prolonged deep air operations and which proceeded for quite some time without a ground offensive. The coalition air and ground forces pursued not “synchronization” but “phasing.” Schwarzkopf did not make the air and ground actions simultaneous, but tasked the air component to achieve a desired level of attrition on Iraqi front-line units before the launching of a ground attack. In Schwarzkopf’s phased war plan, only Phase 4, the ground operation, resembled the AirLand Battle doctrine of the 1980s.

The Dilemmas

In the Gulf War, the air and land components ran into dilemmas that showed the downside of depending on AirLand Battle doctrine as the only framework for action. One sore point was target selection; Schwarzkopf wanted first to send airpower against Iraqi second-echelon units and only degrade front-line forces at the last minute, the better to prevent Iraq from reconstituting them. Ground commanders wanted front-line attacks to begin sooner and with more prominence.

Each corps commander wanted to control those air forces in his own sector. The Army had axed its field army headquarters, the traditional locus of air–ground coordination, in the 1973 reforms that
produced TRADOC. Schwarzkopf and his deputy, Lt. Gen. Calvin Waller, deconflicted the corps commanders and the air component when possible, but neither side got much insight into why decisions were made.

These competing perspectives within the command echelon posed a problem right through the last day of the Gulf War, when corps commanders established their fire support coordination lines so far forward that coalition airpower could not interdict fleeing Iraqi units. Many of these forces escaped destruction. Army doctrine still called for synchronizing maneuver, but the air component needed more room to work far out ahead of the lines.

After the war, soldiers and airmen argued over how to operate in the deep battle arena, an issue in which AirLand Battle concepts and terminology were of little help.

The Army asserted an independent right to strike deep targets. Army officers claimed a capability to do so. For example, an Army study noted that preliminary use of the Army Tactical Missile System missile suggested it would be more effective than USAF fighter—attack aircraft in this role, in that it needed “no elaborate penetration aids” and didn’t risk the lives of pilots.

Those Army officers who wrote post-Gulf War doctrine were not kind to the combat achievements of airpower. A new FM 100-5, published in 1993, endorsed joint operations but continued to insist on synchronized air and land operations.

Spokesmen for ground power embraced the notion that the Army’s 100 hours of combat in the period of Feb. 24–28, 1991, was the sum and substance of the war. “The recent air campaign against Iraqi forces gained not a single one of the US or UN objectives in the Persian Gulf War,” said Gen. Frederick J. Kroesen, USA (Ret.), a senior fellow of the Association of the US Army’s Institute of Land Warfare and former commander in chief of US Army Europe in a letter published in the Washington Post in November 1994. “Four days of land battle—aided immeasurably by the air campaign—achieved every goal and victory.”

Sour Comments

An AUSA commemorative brochure produced to mark the 10-year anniversary of the Gulf War spoke of the dominance of land combat and how it had brought about the “wholesale destruction” of Iraqi forces. It complained about airmen who allegedly were arguing that their precision munitions could “win wars the ‘clean’ way, i.e., through strategic targeting.”

In addition to expressing a deep reverence for things difficult and dirty, Army spokesmen and apologists over the 1990s argued hard against the very notion that there was such a thing as an air campaign. They steadfastly referred to the Gulf War air assault as “an operation” and enjoyed great success in getting joint doctrine writers to see things their way.

Such imaginative recastings of Desert Storm’s phased campaign showed the price of continuing to rely on the doctrinal language of AirLand Battle. The deep battle was now warfare’s new center of gravity, especially in expeditionary operations.

Now, the question of who would control the deep battle caused bitter divisions. The first skirmish came in deliberations of the Commission on Roles and Missions, which met in the period 1994–95. The real battle, though, came a bit later, and at its center was the so-called “halt phase” of war.

The problem was that AirLand Battle doctrine of the 1980s had offered only a rough outline of how to handle a deep battle. Schwarzkopf’s general use of airpower in Desert Storm and the specific success of airpower at the Battle of Khafji showed that the air component commander could take charge of the deep battle and interdict enemy ground forces to great effect. This marked a departure from AirLand Battle because there was no simultaneous deep and close battle. Schwarzkopf actually pulled back forces at Khafji to give coalition airpower more room to work.

On top of this, air attacks were effective against a maneuvering enemy, in daylight and, for the first time, at night. Radar tracks produced by E-8 Joint STARS systems showed how aircraft had attacked lead vehicles in an enemy column, causing that column to halt in confusion.

Desert Storm, moreover, marked only a single data point in development of airpower effectiveness. Progress continued apace after the war. Both the Air Force and Navy quintupled their precision capabilities in the five years after Desert Storm.

Thus, the link between the Air Force and AirLand Battle doctrine was subjected to constant—and constantly increasing—strains and stresses. In the mid-1990s came the final, definitive break. The last straw was the new concept of a halt phase.

Air Before Ground?

In January 1996, Lt. Gen. Ralph E. Eberhart was the Air Force’s deputy chief of staff for plans and operations, and he had just put the finishing touches on a new airpower briefing for Gen. Ronald Fogleman, the Chief of Staff. The Eberhart briefing wasn’t a strategy for winning a war with airpower alone, but it did make the case for a novel concept: that a joint force commander could profitably use his air component to attack deep battle targets or at the start of an expeditionary operation before ground forces were in place.

Eberhart reasoned that the air component, equipped with a sufficiently large stockpile of precision munitions, could reach a level of effectiveness permitting the joint force commander to achieve many of his objectives directly, without having to engage the enemy on the ground. The briefing drew on historical examples such as the Allied interdiction of German Panzer divisions moving to the Normandy beaches and was reinforced with modeling from the Air Force Studies and Analyses Agency.

“The need for mass on the battlefield has now changed,” Fogleman declared in a speech in April 1996. “We don’t need to occupy an enemy’s country to defeat his strategy. We can reduce his combat capabilities and in many instances defeat his armed forces from the air.”

Link, Eberhart’s deputy at the time, embraced the airpower briefing, extended it, and effectively made it his own.

Link subsequently drew fire for promoting this halt phase concept as a pivotal contribution to joint warfighting strategy. He insisted that
halt was not a win-the-war-alone approach, but critics were not mollified.

Whatever halt actually was, it certainly didn’t look much like AirLand Battle.

In the halt phase, air forces would be deployed to theater first to interdict and halt advancing enemy columns, disrupting their offensive. The joint air halt aimed to stop enemy forces before they got too far into friendly territory, thereby creating the conditions for a political settlement or buying enough time to get heavy ground forces into action and push the enemy out. In effect, the halt phase concept was a version of Schwarzkopf’s strategy, amplified by new and powerful precision weapons.

To Army officers, the halt phase was a disturbing and alien concept. Army doctrine defined the term “halt” to mean a complete cessation of the enemy’s movement, whereas the airman’s concept implied disruption and relative advantage. The halt phase changed the timing of counterland operations by putting joint airpower in first to interdict and control enemy forces by disrupting their scheme of maneuver.

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Seeking Credit

In the aftermath of Kosovo, AirLand Battle’s precepts increased the interservice tension as the land power partisans sought a share of credit for a successful “joint” campaign and at the same time attempted to downplay airpower’s role. The Pentagon, in its official report on the war, caved into political pressure. DOD stated, “We successfully integrated air, land, and sea operations throughout the conflict,” a statement as bizarre as it was bland.

No longer could Army and Air Force officers use a common language to talk about the lessons of the conflict. The formalized AirLand Battle terms of maneuver, fires, and synchronization did more harm than good. The phraseology just couldn’t describe the military operations of Allied Force.

Many Army spokesmen who wrote about Allied Force credited the putative threat of a US land offensive from Albania and the activities of the Kosovo Liberation Army’s guerrilla forces with “making the air campaign effective.” Maj. Gen. Robert H. Scales Jr., reflecting on the war from his post at the Army War College, came to the conclusion that the US needed “strategic pre-emption,” defined as the “use of airpower to delay the enemy long enough for early arriving ground forces to position themselves between the enemy and his initial operational objectives.”

The view was summarized by retired Army Lt. Gen. Theodore G. Stroup Jr. in an August 1999 article in Army magazine: “The lesson of Operation Allied Force is not that airpower alone can win a war but that it takes the simultaneous application of complementary capabilities—in this case, both land and airpower.”

In fact, the task of contending with Serbian ground forces in Kosovo only pointed up the wisdom of the Army doctrine writers who produced FM 100-5 in 1976. In that document, the Army stated that both the Army and Air Force could deliver firepower, destroy a tank, collect intelligence, conduct reconnaissance, and so forth, but it emphasized “neither the Army nor the Air Force can fulfill any one of those functions completely by itself.” Indeed, all evidence is that NATO airmen desperately needed the Army’s ground intelligence preparation of the battlefield and benefited greatly from it once it was made available. The initial difficulties in tracking fielded forces were a reminder of why soldiers and airmen needed to combine their strengths.

The Allied Force air commander, USAF Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short, and the overall theater commander, Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark, had a number of well publicized disagreements over the targeting of fielded forces, illustrating the divergence between air and land officers over campaign priorities. The Clark–Short feud was AirLand Battle’s tombstone.

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