Lessons From Libya

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

The critical lesson of Operations Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector, the missions to defend Libyan civilians from Muammar Qaddafi’s government forces, is that there’s simply no substitute for forward deployed forces. Without these forward forces, top military officials said the effort to protect Libyans from massacre would have been impossible.

Qaddafi had pledged a bloodbath in Benghazi, one of the first large cities to be taken over by opposition forces. Loyalist armored vehicles were on their way to Benghazi when the United Nations sanctioned action to prevent them from fulfilling Qaddafi’s open pledge to massacre civilians there. Then, supported by NATO airpower, rebel forces defended Benghazi from the approaching government units and soon turned the tide. Thanks to the top cover of air superiority, opposition forces began to push back Qaddafi’s attackers.

By Aug. 23, the opposition had taken the Libyan capital of Tripoli and seized the compound from which Qaddafi ruled. However, he had slipped away and continued to release messages urging the nation to resist and pledging never to surrender. Then, on Oct. 20, Qaddafi, who had holed up with his remaining loyalists in Sirte, tried to flee the city as opposition forces moved in. He traveled in a convoy of dozens of vehicles, which was spotted and struck by coalition aircraft.

Wounded, Qaddafi tried to hide nearby but was captured by opposition forces. He was alive when first captured, but dead shortly thereafter. Exactly what happened to Qaddafi was unclear at press time.

The pace of NATO’s intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance sorties had remained fairly even throughout the operation, said Lt. Gen. Ralph Jodice II, but the numbers of kinetic missions ebbed and flowed. Jodice acted as combined air component commander for NATO. As Qaddafi’s area of control diminished, so did NATO strikes, and the Oct. 20 convoy attack marked the last strike mission. Unified Protector was shut down Oct. 31.

Jodice said in late October he’d been given no direction to prepare for any kind of post-Qaddafi mission in Libya. NATO headquarters had been “working very closely with the Libyan civil
Woodward said Libya has been a singular success for US airpower. American airforces "met every ... objective we were given," all without a single coalition loss of life, she noted.

No one expected US Africa Command to be "a command that conducted and led" air campaigns, observed Army Gen. Carter F. Ham, head of AFRICOM. When created, it was expected to focus on training and advising and a lot of support-type missions.

Thus, one of the biggest lessons of the conflict “for me and for the headquarters and the staff is: Combatant commands don’t get to choose their missions,” Ham said. There can’t be an assumption that a regional command will only have to work certain kinds of operations, he asserted.

“Geographic combatant commands must be full-spectrum commands. … We must always retain the capability to do the higher-end operations.”

However, despite the fact that commanders “always want … more ISR,” there was probably an insufficient amount of information about Libya and potential targets when the situation erupted, and necessary intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance assets were not available until well into the operation.

Woodward said she received her first orders to get ready for possible military action on Feb. 26, when the United Nations adopted Resolution 1970, demanding an end to the violence in Libya. The 300-person Air Forces Africa staff was tasked to produce a plan, within 36 hours, to implement a no-fly zone over Libya.

“Almost no one in Washington publicly seemed to believe we would actu-
ally execute this operation,” she said, and there was political chagrin that 17th Air Force’s original plan called for a physical takedown of Libya’s air force and air defense systems. A rebuttal plan from Washington called for establishing the no-fly zone “without any kinetic strikes” in Libya, she said. AFRICOM responded that such a plan was “extremely high risk,” she added.

The plan evolved daily until then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates told Congress that implementing a no-fly zone would demand attacks on Libya’s integrated air defense system. The original course of action was “almost immediately validated by AFRICOM and the Joint Staff,” but political approval of the proper resources “simply did not occur in time for operations,” Woodward reported. For a time, only one “initial strike” was approved. As a result, AFRICOM had to borrow forces from US Air Forces in Europe to conduct the operation. In the absence of direct orders from the Secretary of Defense approving assets, such an arrangement is legal, Woodward said.

There was little “intelligence preparation” of the area of conflict, Woodward added. The US Intelligence Community hadn’t viewed Libya as a potential adversary “for years,” she said, “making operational data and intelligence one of our earliest and most critical limiting factors.”

In an interview, Woodward allowed that even if she’d had RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned surveillance aircraft available exclusively to monitor Africa before the “Arab Spring,” she would not have focused them on Libya.

So, another lesson was that there may be a need for the capability to obtain wide-scale, comprehensive ISR coverage of an area with little notice. AFRICOM received a draft of UN Security Council Resolution 1973—which included a mandate to “protect civilians”—on March 16, one day before it passed.

Though commanders requested assets such as E-3 AWACS and E-8 JSTARS aircraft right from the start of planning, these were not approved until after strike operations were under way. The situation in Benghazi was becoming urgent, however, meaning there was no time to lose.

**SCAR Missions**

“At the very beginning,” Woodward said, “I thought we may have been given the mission too late” to keep Qaddafi’s forces from entering Benghazi.

If they had, “I thought it was going to be next to impossible, in that urban environment, to do what we needed to do to prevent him from killing civilians.”

The political approval process was so slow B-2 bombers making initial stealthy strikes on Libyan airfields took off from Whiteman AFB, Mo., without being issued an execute order, Woodward reported. It was finally signed six hours into the mission—when the bombers were already halfway to the target.

Operating bases were designated on the periphery of the Mediterranean Sea, and made full use of USAF agile combat support forces to accommodate thousands of personnel and hundreds of coalition aircraft converging on those locations.

The distances involved were daunting, Woodward said. Fighter sorties out of bases in Europe averaged eight hours and required five air refuelings “to generate just one hour on station,” she noted.

Thirty-four tankers from myriad active, Guard, and Reserve units were cobbled together in what was dubbed the “Calico Wing” to support the operation, Woodward said. Over the next 13 days, they offloaded more than 17 million pounds of fuel.

Since the initial strikes didn’t have JSTARS or AWACS intelligence, tracking, and targeting support, Woodward said this put an enormous burden on the aircrews. She had orders to minimize civilian casualties, avoid losing any aircrew, and to do nothing to suggest Qaddafi himself was targeted.

“We’re telling them to go down, look at the environment and then make a decision based on what they estimate...
the collateral damage to be, and then make a decision on whether to release weapons or hold them. ... Not a simple thing to do,” explained Woodward. Such decisions are usually made with the heavy collaboration of air battle managers with direct visibility into the unfolding combat.

She described the fighter missions as SCAR: strike coordination and reconnaissance. In addition to the tasks she described, the fighters performed a kind of forward air control-air battle manager function, sequencing and deconflicting multiple attacking flights into and out of target areas. They also provided targeting information to other aircraft.

The principal USAF combat aircraft were F-15Es based in Lakenheath, Britain, and F-16CJs based in Spangdahlem, Germany. The F-15Es conducted most of the interdiction and strike missions, while the F-16CJs were charged chiefly with suppressing Libyan air defenses, performing strikes as conditions warranted.

It was also difficult not having dedicated combat search and rescue forces close at hand for the start of operations, Woodward reported. A heart-stopper of an event occurred when an F-15E crashed early in the operation, due to a mechanical problem, leaving its two-man crew stranded deep in contested territory.

The potential crisis of an airman being captured and used as a human shield or for propaganda purposes was a nightmare for all coalition participants. Fortunately the pilot and combat systems officer were recovered relatively quickly.

“I will never forget looking across the AOC [air operations center]” at coalition representatives, Woodward said. “They were cheering just like everyone else ... when we had the message that both crew members were safe.”

The other air force representatives gained a sense of “unbelievable security” from the rescue, knowing if any of their own aircrews had to bail out, they would be rescued swiftly, Woodward asserted.

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As per agreement with its allies, the US, which had led the initial strikes, handed off the kinetic missions to other NATO forces, led by Britain and France, although nearly all coalition members carried out some strikes.

The US continued to participate as a key enabler, however, providing ISR assets as well as ongoing aerial refueling support. Jodice moved his operational headquarters from Izmir, Turkey, to Sigonella, Italy, because it was necessary to be at the NATO air operations center near the action.

Steps and Checks

“Because of the dynamic environment,” requiring face-to-face discussions with NATO leaders and representatives of coalition partners, “it was critical that we were all together,” Jodice said in an October interview.

When NATO allies began to run low on munitions, the US stepped in to replenish weapon stocks. This last contribution irked Gates, who, in a parting speech as US Defense Secretary to NATO ministers, chided them for having insufficient inventory of weapons—a symptom, he said, of NATO countries’ failing to spend enough on their military forces.

Jodice, however, said, “We had all the assets that we needed; that included munitions. I never once had to cancel or postpone a sortie because I didn’t have the right munitions that I needed.” Jodice did acknowledge that he was not involved in facilitating ad hoc arms transfers under the Foreign Military Sales program.

“We used precision munitions 100 percent of the time,” Jodice noted, adding, “I don’t know that that can be said about any other operation.”

He also described an excruciating sequence of steps and checks applied to all strike missions to prevent civilian casualties and collateral damage. Targets were first identified using the large ISR platforms, such as Rivet Joint and JSTARS. Then the rules of engagement were applied; strikes were called off if there could be unintended damage. If the pilots on the scene confirmed the target, it could be struck, but only with weapons offering “the lowest yield” of explosive effect, Jodice said.

“When we [needed] to strike something, it was done with the utmost precision,” he said.

French Air Force Gen. Stephane Abrial said NATO’s European air forces “could not have performed to the same level of effectiveness without heavy contribution from the US.” Abrial said at the Air Force Association’s September conference that European nations must build capabilities not dependent on the involvement of the US. The United States could have refrained from an out-of-area operation such as Libya, thus hamstringing any Europe-only effort.

One sore spot in the prosecution of the Libyan campaign was the lack of full-motion video—at least, early on. MQ-1 Predators were not approved for Libya until after Odyssey Dawn had ended and Unified Protector began. However, JSTARS and AWACS aircraft eventually entered the fight, and “their job was to orient shooters, pair shooters with targets, solve battlespace problems, speed accurate decision-making,” Woodward reported.

The integration of more and more participants—both new types and new nations—represented an ongoing challenge, Woodward said. While each brought unique and welcome assets, they also brought idiosyncratic rules about what they would and would not do. Germany, for example, refused to participate in any direct attacks. On the other hand, Jodice said, Jordan, Qatar, Sweden, and the United Arab Emirates,
besides contributing aircraft and crews, added a valuable “cultural” element to the operation.

The Structure Works

One of the easiest aspects of the operation was that the coalition accepted US leadership without debate, Woodward reported.

“Each partner understood the need for unity of command [and] ... the need for a single joint force air component commander,” she said. “And each partner deferred to the United States Air Force to fill this role because each partner knew that only the United States Air Force had the capacity to command and control this fight.”

Odyssey Dawn was the first air campaign ever run by a woman. Woodward said although that fact generated some media interest, it was operationally a non-issue.

Asked if there was any foreign opposition to taking direction from a woman, Woodward said there was none. “That just never even came up,” she said. “We never gave it a second thought.”

Despite this operational success, however, USAF’s global assets were stretched thin by the action to protect Libyan civilians and establish a no-fly zone over the country. The operation highlighted shortages of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance equipment and combat search and rescue assets.

Service leaders predict that a future Libya-type operation—a no-warning battle that erupts even as the US is engaged in another conflict—will be impossible to repeat if the Air Force becomes much smaller than it is today.

Odyssey Dawn “came about in pretty short order and unfolded quite quickly,” Ham told defense reporters in September.

“One of the reasons that I think the US was able to respond very quickly was the presence, almost exclusively in European Command, of air and maritime forces that were flexible and able to respond pretty quickly,” he said. Having long trained with NATO air forces and those of other countries that joined the coalition, the US was able to seamlessly respond to United Nations mandates and execute the mission.

Had the US “not taken the lead, with great support” from key US allies, “I’m absolutely convinced,” Ham said, that “many, many people in Benghazi who are alive today ... would not be.”

Another lesson from Libya, which Ham posed as more of a question for the future, is how to ensure in future conflicts the same interoperability and coordination as was seen in Odyssey Dawn and Unified Protector.

“We’re pretty practiced at doing big military operations with our NATO allies,” Ham said. “We brought in some non-NATO participants, but we have a NATO framework for that.” What needs to be figured out, he said, is “how do you bring together a multinational coalition without the standing agreements and interoperability practices that NATO has?”

Jodice said he believes OUP proved that the Alliance structure works.

“One of the valuable lessons learned there is that the Alliance is able to act quickly when the need arises,” he offered.