



The Use of the Reconnaissance Squadron during Joint Forcible Entry

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Arguably, there is no greater commitment of U.S. military resources than an invasion of a sovereign country. Known as *joint forcible entry*, this type of operation aims to “seize and hold lodgments against armed opposition.”¹ A lodgment may be a beachhead, an airfield, or anything that allows for “the continuous landing of troops and

materiel,” and that provides “maneuver space for subsequent operations.”²

There are several methods for delivering the invasion force—amphibious landing, air assault, ground, or airborne assault—and each can be used in various combinations as the situation requires. Of these options, only airborne assault provides national command



(Photo by Airman 1st Class Jamie Nicley, U.S. Air Force)

Soldiers from the reconnaissance squadron of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team parachute from a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft 18 November 2009 at the Nevada Test and Training Range, Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada.

authority with the ability to deliver a battalion in eighteen hours, or a brigade combat team (BCT) in ninety-six hours, from U.S. soil to anywhere in the world.

The relevance of airborne units was called into question by Dr. Marc R. Devore's 2015 publication *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*. Devore argues that U.S. airborne forces have outlived their relevance, that it is not practical to employ airborne forces against a near-peer competitor, and that the cost of maintaining this capability is not worth the benefits.³

I do not attempt to argue directly against Devore's study but rather to show that airborne units can be relevant if they employ a new way of conducting an airborne assault as part of a forcible entry operation. Devore asserts that an "organization's ability to innovate is contingent upon its willingness to dismantle or otherwise abandon elements of its existing structure and operational procedures," and in that regard, I agree.⁴ To make airborne assault more relevant, we must abandon existing procedures and embrace a new, effective way of employing the airborne brigade's organic reconnaissance squadron during joint forcible entry.

Effectiveness of Airborne Assault

As the land force component of a joint task force conducting forcible entry, the 82nd Airborne Division is the proponent for developing and training procedures for airborne assault. Unfortunately, the way the 82nd plans, rehearses, and trains for airborne assault is outdated. The standard by which the Army's five airborne brigades conduct an airborne assault fails to employ the BCT's organic reconnaissance squadron to its full potential.⁵

For example, at the time this article was written, an operation plan (OPLAN) developed by the 82nd's G-5 (assistant chief of staff, plans) and used as the planning and training template for airborne assault at the brigade level had placed the reconnaissance squadron in a defensive position for most of the operation.⁶ The current "82nd Airborne Division Airfield Seizure Standard Operating Procedure," derived from this OPLAN and other institutional documents, does not even mention the reconnaissance squadron.⁷ Fortunately, these shortcomings are an opportunity not only to update standard operating procedures (SOPs), plans, and training guidelines but also to revisit the challenging problem of

fully integrating the reconnaissance squadron into the joint fight during a forcible entry operation.

According to current practice, the reconnaissance squadron conducts an airborne assault without the majority of its vehicles—that is, during the assault phase of a forcible entry. The squadron relies on those vehicles to arrive later, on “heavy-drop” parachute platforms or on aircraft that land after an airhead is secure. Because the squadron is task-organized with two mounted troops and one dismounted reconnaissance troop, essentially two-thirds of the squadron’s combat power is unavailable during initial combat operations. This practice deprives the ground force commander of a unique asset. By design, the reconnaissance squadron can quickly reconnoiter more area than an infantry battalion, and it can provide more persistent surveillance from a ground perspective than modern unmanned aerial vehicles. Despite these unique capabilities, during forcible entry the reconnaissance squadron typically is tasked with isolating part of the lodgment while the infantry battalions seize and clear it. This is a task for which the reconnaissance squadron is ill suited.

In essence, the reconnaissance squadron is treated as if it were task-organized like an infantry battalion, possessing similar capabilities and limitations.⁸ This has negative consequences for operations because “when reconnaissance units are assigned close-combat missions or become decisively engaged, *reconnaissance ceases*. When reconnaissance ceases, the potential for achieving and capitalizing upon information dominance is lost.”⁹

Improved Organization

Before BCTs realigned to incorporate an additional maneuver battalion, brigade commanders had to limit the use of the reconnaissance squadron because the BCTs lacked adequate capacity and capability to conduct forcible entry while employing the reconnaissance squadron in its intended role. This is no longer the case. With the addition of a third infantry battalion to each BCT as part of the Army 2020 design, commanders can employ the reconnaissance squadron in new ways.¹⁰ The increase in combat power from two to three infantry rifle battalions necessitates a fundamental change in how the reconnaissance squadron is used during forcible entry.

A joint staff typically conducts forcible entry in five phases: preparation and deployment, assault, stabilization of the lodgment, introduction of follow-on forces, and termination or transition.¹¹ According to Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations*, surveillance operations and reconnaissance operations, along with other supporting operations, “are key to setting the conditions for forcible entry operational success,” and “these enablers should be integrated into the operation at every stage from initial planning to transition.”¹² A key consideration for preparation and deployment planning is not whether to employ these assets but rather how to best employ the reconnaissance squadron within the limitations of its capabilities while accepting appropriate levels of risk.

Risk Management

In any combat operation, a commander must identify and assess hazards, develop controls and make risk decisions, implement controls, and supervise and evaluate. Seizing a lodgment presents numerous hazards, not least of which is the expectation of armed resistance. Even during the invasions of Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, which Devore describes as being against “ill-equipped and poorly-organized opponents,” airborne assault forces faced 23 mm anti-aircraft guns (known as ZSU-23-2) and .50-caliber machine guns—weapons capable of posing a significant threat to aircraft and personnel on the ground.¹³ The lesson learned was that even when conducting a forced entry against a nonpeer force, commanders should avoid “enemy defenses to the greatest extent possible.”¹⁴ According to JP 3-18,

Major General Alexander A. Vandergrift, United States Marine Corps, clearly articulated that view [to avoid enemy defenses] in his 1943 assessment of operations in the Solomon Islands. He noted that a comparison of the several landings leads to the inescapable conclusion that landings should not be attempted in the face of organized resistance if, by any combination of march or maneuver, it is possible to land unopposed within striking distance of the objective.¹⁵

The reconnaissance squadron provides real-time intelligence on enemy composition, disposition, and

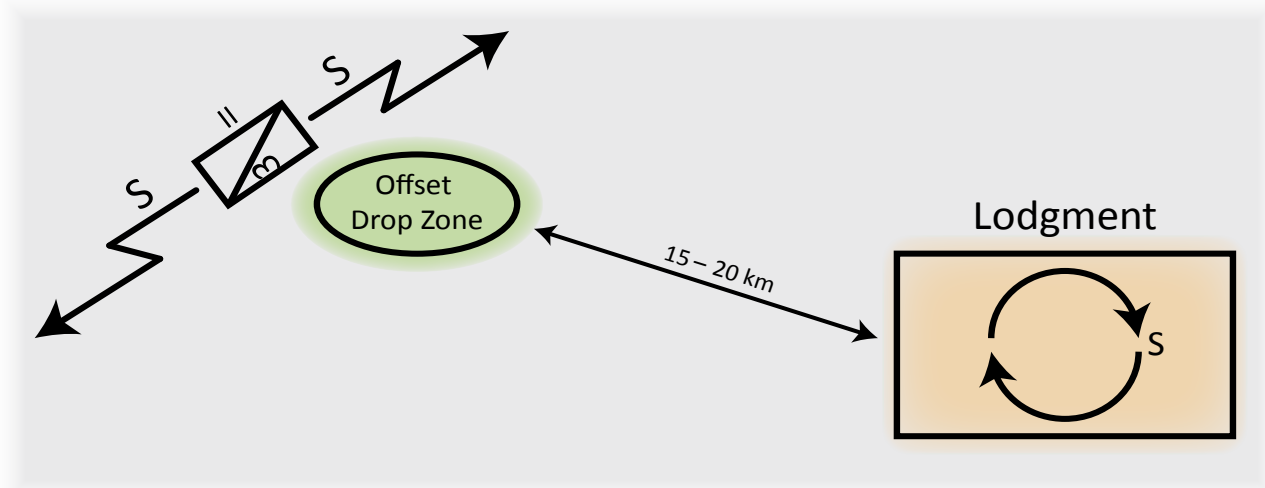


Figure. Joint Forcible Entry by Airborne Assault, with the Reconnaissance Squadron Inserted on an Offset Drop Zone to Create a Screen Line

strength. In this way, it improves the commander's ability to avoid concentrations of enemy forces.

While infantry battalions are organized, equipped, and trained for the close-in fight necessary to control a lodgment and prepare it for follow-on forces, the reconnaissance squadron is designed to operate within and behind enemy lines without becoming decisively engaged. During the assault phase, the infantry battalions will be, by necessity, focused on terrain. Conversely, a reconnaissance squadron will not be concerned with controlling terrain but rather with providing timely and accurate reporting for the joint force commander. To achieve this, while the main assault force masses on the lodgment, the reconnaissance squadron can insert on an offset drop zone simultaneously but outside the lodgment itself.

This course of action, depicted graphically in the figure, would require two coordinated airborne assaults. Forcible entry “may include linkup and exploitation by ground maneuver from a separate location,” an option that provides the ground force commander with several benefits.¹⁶ By inserting the reconnaissance squadron onto a separate drop zone, the joint force commander enables the squadron to develop the situation beyond the lodgment so the joint force can achieve significant effects on enemy forces.

Because a reconnaissance squadron can operate independently from the actions on the lodgment, the enemy may feel compelled to shift part of its

“attention and effort away from actual assault objectives.”¹⁷ The enemy then would be forced to choose between massing combat power against the actual lodgment and confronting the possibility of an additional lodgment being created by the squadron's assault onto an offset drop zone—terrain the squadron would never intend to hold. The result would be that the enemy could not “mass decisive force to deny joint force assaults.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, as the enemy attempted to fix and finish the reconnaissance squadron—a challenging task given its design—the squadron would continue to provide timely information on enemy maneuvers without becoming decisively engaged.

Information Dominance

It is during the assault phase that information dominance is most critical to a commander's decision-making process. As the joint force is most vulnerable during this phase, “effective indications and warnings, targeting support, and collection management of ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] assets to track enemy reaction to the assault and force protection are paramount concerns.”¹⁹ While these concerns represent considerable risks during the most critical phase of the operation, they can also be mitigated through employment of the reconnaissance squadron in a manner consistent with Army and joint doctrine. When properly

employed, the “squadron’s reconnaissance operations yield an extraordinarily high payoff in the areas of threat location, disposition, and composition, early warning, protection, and battle damage assessment.”²⁰ Reconnaissance operations have the direct effect of allowing commanders to accept or initiate combat at the time and place of their choosing, thus maintaining the BCT’s freedom of maneuver and initiative during the critical early phases of the airborne assault.²¹

During the assault phase, the main assault force—comprising three infantry battalions, engineers, a fires battalion, and a mission command node—can approach a target lodgment while the reconnaissance squadron approaches a secondary drop zone. Though the assault force must mass firepower on the lodgment, the reconnaissance squadron is not limited to a single piece of terrain. Instead, it can use its superior maneuverability to find and report on the enemy while avoiding direct engagement. Any area capable of receiving multiple heavy drops and up to five hundred paratroopers can suffice for the secondary drop zone. Such an area can be secured

and marked by the special operations forces that precede a forcible entry operation. When the main assault force lands on the lodgment, its fight begins; the force works to clear an airhead and prevent the enemy from impeding air landings.

Meanwhile, the reconnaissance squadron is not concerned with holding terrain but rather with finding and, as necessary, fixing enemy forces that seek to influence friendly actions on the intended lodgment. Upon landing, the two mounted troops move to their vehicles, inserted by heavy drop moments before paratroopers exit their aircraft, and they quickly begin to disperse. They expand the security zone around the target lodgment, establish screen lines, provide terminal guidance for air power, assess battle damage, and make adjustments for artillery. The mounted troops, working in concert with aerial ISR, provide real-time reporting on enemy locations, composition, and disposition, as well as early warning of enemy reactions to friendly forces.

Simultaneously, the dismounted troop moves to targets designated as secondary objectives for the primary assault force. The dismounted troop observes and reports on these objectives and remains available for retasking by the commander to observe named or targeted areas of interest. The individual reconnaissance teams of the dismounted troop provide imagery and full-motion video from a ground perspective to the joint force commander and staff. This enables them to prioritize targets and facilitate a target handover with battalion scouts as the infantry battalions expand the lodgment and turn their focus toward their secondary objectives. After the battalion scouts link up with the dismounted reconnaissance



(Photo by Spc. L'Erin Wynn, 49th Public Affairs Detachment)

Paratroopers with 1st Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, establish security 26 October 2015 during a rehearsal for a live-fire exercise in preparation for Combined Joint Operations Access Exercise 16-01 on Fort Bragg, North Carolina.



(Photo by Baz Ratner, Reuters)

Soldiers from 4th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, fire a mortar during a firefight with Taliban forces 18 April 2012 in Zhary District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan.

teams, the scouts lead the infantry battalions to their secondary objectives while the dismounted troop pushes further out into the security zone.

Synchronized Reconnaissance

During the assault phase and subsequent phases, the squadron commander synchronizes the squadron's maneuver forces with ISR assets external to the BCT, providing priorities and ensuring that the joint force commander's priority intelligence requirements are answered by phase, collaborating with the brigade intelligence officer to analyze enemy activity, and adjusting reconnaissance assets accordingly. Sustainment is facilitated through the squadron's mission command node. The squadron may need to remain self-sustaining for at least forty-eight to seventy-two hours, or until the assault force secures the lodgment and brings in resupply by aircraft. Once sustainment is secured on the airhead, resupply can reach the reconnaissance squadron through low-cost, low-altitude (LCLA) aerial resupply.²²

The joint force commander will assume risk by employing the reconnaissance squadron in this fashion. The two mounted troops and the dismounted troop

will, possibly, operate outside the range of indirect fire support from the airfield or naval gunships. While the mounted troops establish screen lines and expand the security zone, and the dismounted reconnaissance teams maneuver over land toward their objectives, they may all encounter superior enemy forces. While this is a reasonable cause for concern, it is also a risk that can be mitigated through planning, preparation, and execution. Accepting that the squadron is primarily a find force and possibly a fix force, but not a finish force, the joint force commander can rely on the squadron's organic 120 mm mortars to support maneuver troops in contact effectively enough to allow them to break contact and avoid becoming decisively engaged. What the squadron lacks in direct firepower it mitigates with superior maneuverability, communications, and battlefield awareness.

The Human Element

These concepts are not new. As with most audacious plans, it is not merely the understanding of a concept but rather its application that can mean the difference between success and failure. Commanders achieve success by exploiting the enemy's vulnerabilities and seizing the

initiative, enabled by timely and accurate reporting from the reconnaissance squadron.

There is no doubt that technology will continue to be a force multiplier during conflicts of the future. That said, central to any military action is the service member on the ground. In an era of U.S. electronic warfare and all-source intelligence dominance, it is easy to overlook the value of the human element within the reconnaissance squadron when considering SOPs

or operation plans. However, what satellite imagery, full-motion aerial video, or ground sensors can never replicate is the ability of the soldiers on the ground to process what they see and hear, while applying intuition, experience, and initiative. To use this human element, how we plan, train, and execute forcible entry does not require a radical overhaul of our airborne capability, but rather a radical new approach to a complex challenge. ■

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Notes

1. Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 27 November 2012), viii.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Marc R. Devore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: The Army Press, June 2015).

4. *Ibid.*, 1.

5. Field Manual (FM) 3-96 *Brigade Combat Team* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, October 2015), 1-3 and fig. 11. During a joint forcible entry by airborne assault, an airborne infantry brigade combat team can employ three infantry battalions, a reconnaissance squadron, a field artillery battalion, and a support battalion.

6. Operation Plan (OPLAN) Giant in its various versions (used in 2015, all now obsolete) outlined the tactical plan for an airborne brigade combat team conducting forcible entry onto a denied airfield. This OPLAN was the template for how each airborne brigade in the 82nd planned and trained for forcible entry as part of the "global response force" requirement. It divided tasks into *secure, clear, isolate, fires, and support*. In every iteration, the plan relegated the reconnaissance squadron to providing part of the isolation force during the initial assault, even though the squadron is neither manned nor equipped to repel a deliberate attack. Additionally, under OPLAN Giant, the priority during the initial hours of the assault was to deliver paratroopers to the battlefield. Consequently, the scout vehicles that provided the squadron firepower and maneuverability were manifested on aircraft designated to land hours after the initial assault.

7. 82nd Airborne Division, "82nd Airborne Division Airfield Seizure Standard Operating Procedure," 2015 version, draws from OPLAN Giant III, among other sources. The SOP provides a specific task and purpose for every maneuver and support asset within a brigade, except for the reconnaissance squadron. The only reconnaissance assets the SOP refers to are the long-range surveillance units organic to the corps.

8. FM 3-20.96, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 12 March 2010), 1-3, login required, "The placement of dedicated reconnaissance units in the modular force takes into account their inherent direct combat vulnerabilities or capabilities and demands employment in accordance with those defined capabilities. This understanding also requires abstaining from employing them in missions and roles for which they were not created or resourced."

9. *Ibid.*

10. Michelle Tan, "The Huge BCT Overhaul," *Army Times*, 2 July 2013, accessed 22 October 2015, <http://www.armytimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130702/NEWS/307020002/The-huge-BCT-overhaul>.

11. JP 3-18, xi.

12. *Ibid.*, I-5.

13. Marc R. Devore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: The Army Press, June 2015), 61. The ZSU-23-2 is a Russian twin-barreled autocannon designed in the 1950s for defense against air assault. Devore cites Mark Adkin, *Urgent Fury: The Battle For Grenada* (Lexington: Lexington, 1989), 131-39, regarding enemy guns used in 1983 in Grenada. U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, retired, in an interview with author, Arlington, Virginia, 27 December 2015, stated that enemy forces used the ZSU in 1989 in Panama.

14. JP 3-18, I-9.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, I-8.

17. *Ibid.*, IV-17.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, IV-15.

20. FM 3-20.96 *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Squadron*, 1-3.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 15.