

# The Development of Airfield Seizure Operations in the United States Army

R. F. M. Williams

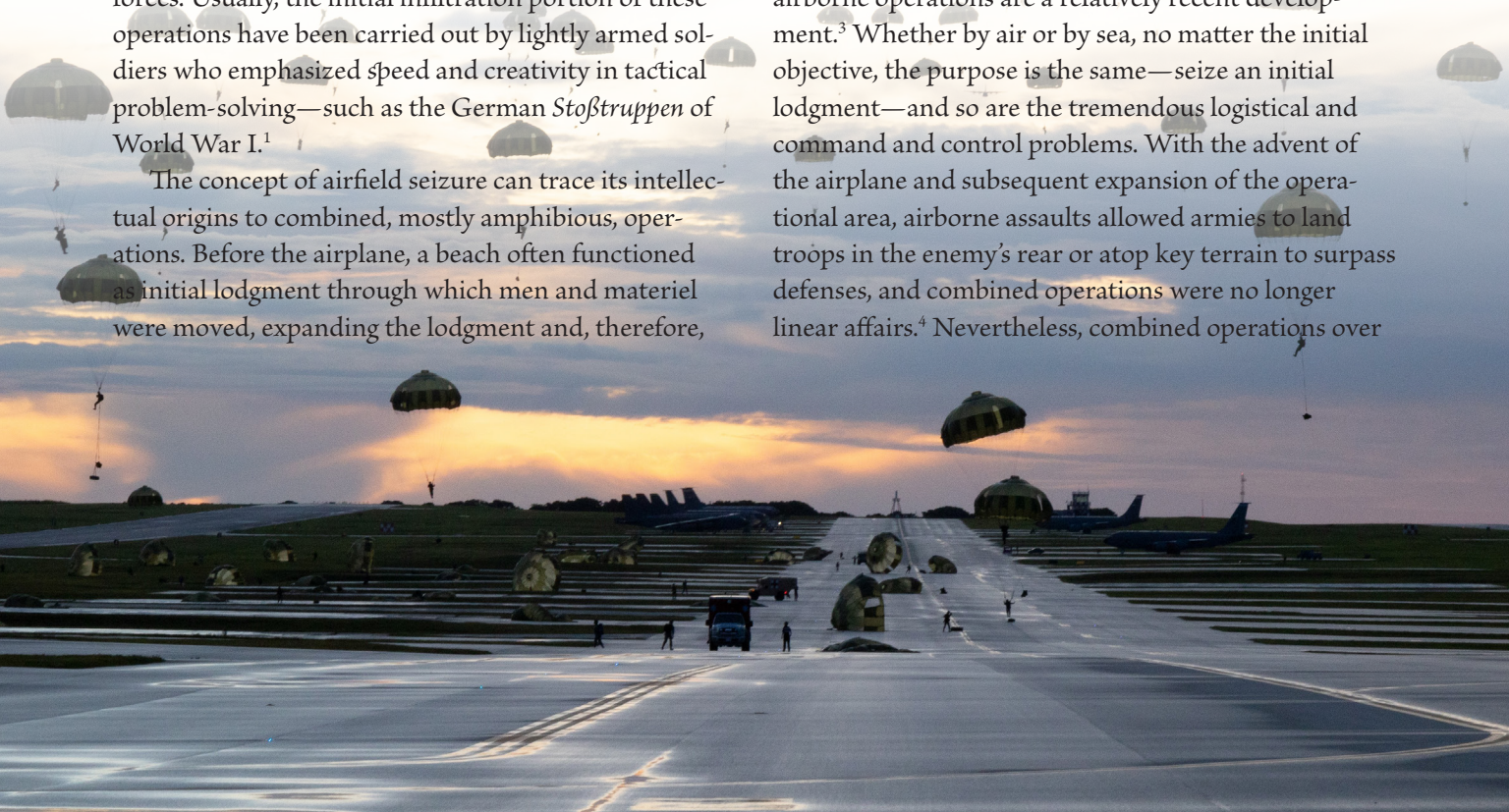
**F**orcible entry operations are the bedrock by which modern airborne forces justify their existence. As such, the ability of parachute-capable units to execute joint forcible entry operations is almost taken for granted.

Forcing a lodgment in a fortified enemy line is a traditional military task referred to as a “combined” or “joint” operation due to meticulous coordination between ground, sea, and later air, transport, and support forces. Usually, the initial infiltration portion of these operations have been carried out by lightly armed soldiers who emphasized speed and creativity in tactical problem-solving—such as the German *Stoßtruppen* of World War I.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of airfield seizure can trace its intellectual origins to combined, mostly amphibious, operations. Before the airplane, a beach often functioned as initial lodgment through which men and materiel were moved, expanding the lodgment and, therefore,

the operational area. The doctrinal manual for joint forcible entry, and by proxy airfield seizure, is Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations*. JP 3-18 envisions a particular and limited role for airborne forces: to seize and hold a lodgment so that larger, heavier, more lethal forces can buttress their efforts to expand combat operations.<sup>2</sup>

While amphibious combined operations have featured in many of history’s great inflection points, airborne operations are a relatively recent development.<sup>3</sup> Whether by air or by sea, no matter the initial objective, the purpose is the same—seize an initial lodgment—and so are the tremendous logistical and command and control problems. With the advent of the airplane and subsequent expansion of the operational area, airborne assaults allowed armies to land troops in the enemy’s rear or atop key terrain to surpass defenses, and combined operations were no longer linear affairs.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, combined operations over



**Previous page:** Army Green Berets with 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), and members of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force parachute onto an airfield targeted as a drop zone 30 July 2021 as part of Exercise Forager 21 at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Anthony Bryant, U.S. Army)

the beach or from the air require massive quantities of logistics and the quick establishment of port facilities to bring in more men and material.<sup>5</sup>

Joint forcible entry by rapid seizure of an airfield to provide a base of operations for follow-on operations has historical precedent in Soviet and German interwar concepts of airborne warfare that took hold in American efforts to create parachute units and doctrine during the Second World War. However, the promise of vertical envelopment was not a panacea.

included foreign military observers.<sup>6</sup> *New York Times* journalist Walter Duranty marveled at the ability of airborne forces to sow havoc. Watching as men jumped from twelve bomber aircraft to seize the airdrome and launch attacks to destroy their opponent's communications capabilities during a training exercise, Duranty remarked how this new element of warfare and "attacks of 500 or 1,000 desperate men armed with grenades and light machine guns might paralyze a whole army."<sup>7</sup> Soon, TB-3 bombers delivered more troops, a T-37 light tank, and artillery. Within two hours, 2,500 troops had parachuted or landed. The 1935 Kiev exercise marked the beginning of modern airborne forces. The French, their parachute-capable forces thereafter.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet parachute assault on an airfield was

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These troops still needed sustainment and reinforcement. Furthermore, despite significant advances in parachute-drop accuracy, the most efficient method to deliver massed combat power is still to land a fixed-wing airplane on an improved airstrip. Whether used to launch close air support, interdiction, or bombing sorties, or to receive men and material, the airfield is a critical piece of infrastructure and thus, key terrain. Recognizing the importance of controlling airfields, early proponents of airborne warfare in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany focused on airfield seizure as a doctrinal task, which shaped American efforts to establish an airborne force.

## The Soviet Experience

During the interwar period, as aircraft capabilities increased, every significant power experimented with parachute techniques. While American officers experimented with dropping small teams, it was the Soviet Union that proved the most innovative and open to observers while leading the way in large-scale airborne operations. In 1935, it dropped two parachute battalions on an airfield before an audience that

itself no accident. Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky had the Red Army experimenting with military parachute units as early as 1929, and by 1931, Tukhachevsky had created an organization designed to seize airfields and landing strips for the landing of follow-on forces.<sup>9</sup> While maintaining its position as an essential element of Soviet deep battle

doctrine, the Soviet army developed self-contained airborne divisions designed for airfield seizure. These units contained at least one motor landing brigade, an aviation brigade, and a parachute detachment to make the initial assault and seizure. After 1933, nearly every major Soviet exercise included an airborne component. During the large exercises between 1934 and 1937, the Soviet leadership concentrated

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on developing answers to unit organization and tactical employment questions. For example, in the September 1936 exercise at Moscow, the Soviets seized an airfield with a five-thousand-man regiment of disparate battalions that had never worked together before. These exercises validated and verified the doctrinal concepts for airborne forces, and airborne capabilities were codified in the *Field Service Regulations: Soviet Army, 1936*.<sup>10</sup>

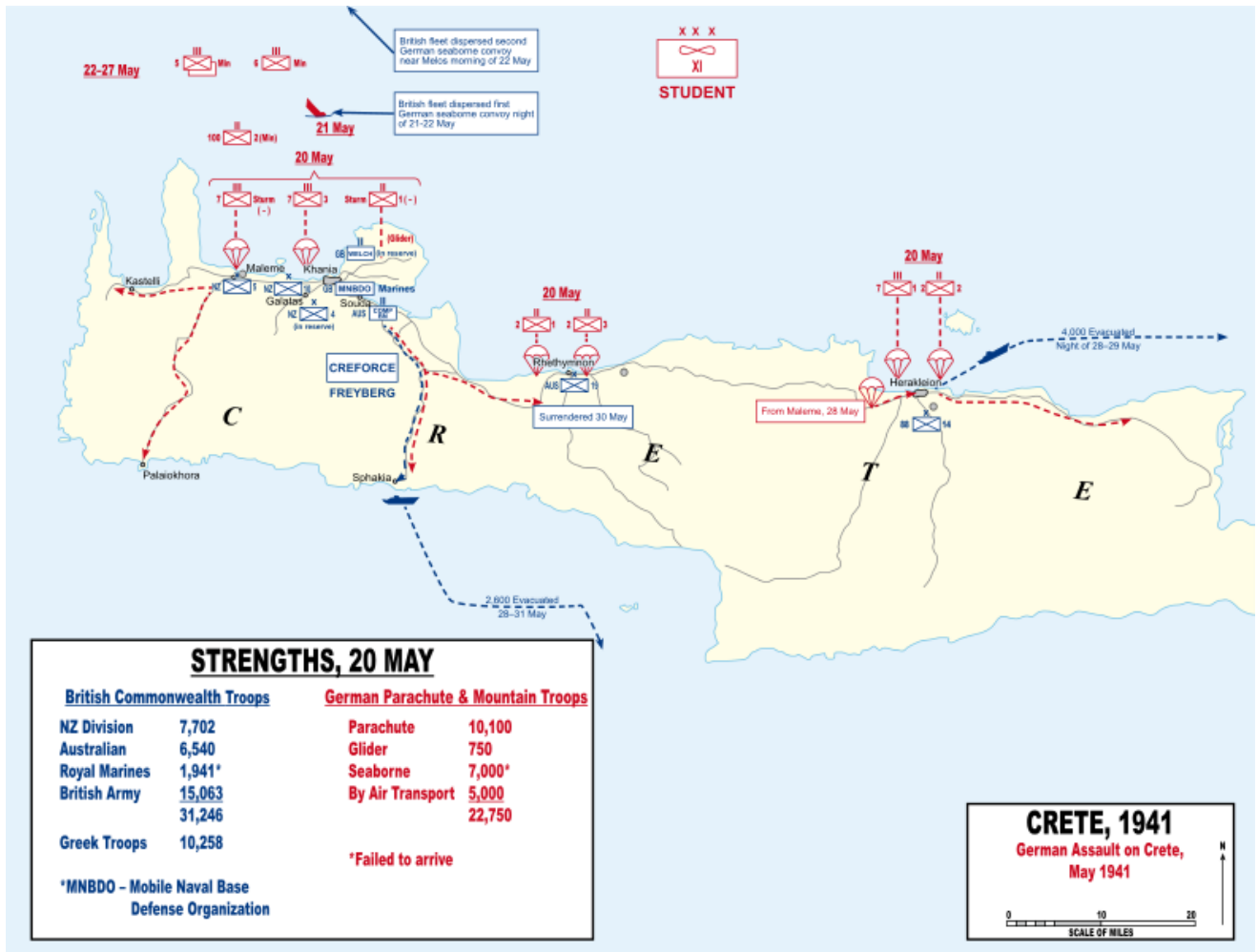
While historian David Glantz contends that little is known about the impacts of Joseph Stalin's famous military purges on the development of airborne forces and their doctrine, their acceptance as an element of deep battle is evident in their continued expansion during the Second World War. In 1940, Marshal Semyon Timoshenko authorized a new table of organization and equipment for Soviet airborne brigades that included parachute, glider, and airland groups, further signifying the inclusion of airfield seizure as a core competency for airborne units. After defeats in August and September 1941, the Soviet High Command redefined the guidelines, and from then on, "airborne units would be used only with specific Stavka approval" to perform their missions, including to "secure and destroy enemy airfields."<sup>11</sup> After further failure at Dnepr in September 1943, in which poor planning resulted in the decimation of the 3rd Guards Airborne Brigade, the Soviets did not conduct any further large-scale airborne operations.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Soviet paratroopers were relegated to ground combat roles as "elite" infantry. However, after World War II, the Soviet Union continued to

develop airborne warfare as a critical component of deep battle. As a result, the Soviet airborne evolved into its own service, combined with their air transports in a separate strategic command to be employed by their supreme commander.<sup>13</sup> Airborne forces' role was to assault targets far behind enemy lines and seize critical objectives—including airfields—to disrupt the opponent's command and control systems.<sup>14</sup> Despite their advancement of the craft before the war, the Soviets did not perform any large-scale airborne operations during the war, as they could not solve the logistics and equipment issues of any unit larger than battalion size.<sup>15</sup>

## The German Experience

Observing the Soviet Union's progress in airborne operations provided the impetus for Germany's *Fallschirmjäger* (paratrooper) development. The first German parachute unit, a battalion within the *Polizei Regiment General Göring* (Police Regiment General Goering), was transferred to the *Luftwaffe* (air force) on 1 October 1935 and soon began soliciting and training volunteers. Shortly after their inception, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring recognized that air and airborne forces should be organized under one command to achieve unity of command. Accordingly, the *Luftwaffe* took command of all airborne forces in July 1938.<sup>16</sup> The Germans believed that their airborne troops should only be supplied for a single day of fighting and that resupply by air was paramount for a successful airborne operation. By 1943, this proved difficult, and German





(Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle\\_of\\_crete.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Battle_of_crete.svg))

## German assault on Crete, May 1941

commanders all but abandoned the concept of vertical envelopment.<sup>17</sup> Like the Soviets, the Germans developed a three-pronged airborne force consisting of parachutists, gliders, and airland troops in which *General der Flieger* (General of the Airmen) Kurt Student, commander of all airborne forces since their transfer to the Luftwaffe, envisioned airborne operations that began with gliders, followed by paratroopers and—if an airfield were secure—the airland troops. Ergo, the most effective way to use the three types of troops to achieve maximum mass on the battlefield was to seize airfields, expand the lodgment, and link up with conventional forces.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, early German operations showcased the desire and tactical efficacy of seizing airfields. Supplying and reinforcing an airhead by airlanded transports is much more efficient than continued parachute drops of supplies or men. As a result, Germany was the first state to use paratroopers in combat when they launched the invasions of Denmark and Norway in April 1940.<sup>19</sup> Critical to the operation was a 9 April company-level assault on two airfields outside Aalborg, Denmark, a jump that occurred in tandem with a two-company mission to seize Oslo’s airport by elements of the 1st Battalion, 1st Fallschirmjäger Regiment, from the 7th Air Division commanded by then Maj. Gen. Student. Following the seizure of the Oslo Fornebu Airport in Norway, the Wehrmacht

Previous page: Soviet parachute assault, 1929. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)





German paratroopers land in Crete, May 1941. (Photo courtesy of Arthur Conry, Wikipedia)

air landed two infantry battalions and an engineer company from the 324th Infantry Regiment. A fourth company also assaulted Sola Airfield outside of Stavanger before receiving two battalions from the 193rd Infantry Regiment.<sup>20</sup> In one operation, the Germans seized four Scandinavian airfields and the city of Oslo, a testament to their realization that air bases represented critical terrain in an era of three-dimensional combined arms maneuver.

Success with airfield seizure further emboldened German commanders to use airborne forces. They next moved airborne forces to seize airfields near The Hague until Dutch forces counterattacked and destroyed 170 transport aircraft.<sup>21</sup> Despite the setback in the Low Countries, German Fallschirmjäger efforts pressed forward, culminating in Operation *Mercury* (Mercury)—the ill-fated aerial invasion of Crete on 20 May 1941 (see figure, on page 4). On Crete, the Germans attempted to seize the island by air alone but suffered an initial casualty rate of 44 percent. The Fallschirmjäger dropped

parachutists and gliders on airfields at Maleme, Heraklion, Canea, and Retimo.

Fighting through exceptionally high casualties, the Germans continued to resupply themselves by air and captured the island by 31 May.<sup>22</sup> Hailed by British and American airborne theorists as a revolution in tactics, the high casualties prompted the end of major German airborne operations for the duration of the war.<sup>23</sup> However, in subsequent campaigns, German parachute units were used as the Wehrmacht's corps d'élite—an ideal mobile reserve of “elite” volunteer light infantry.

## The American World War II Experience

Borrowing directly from German doctrine for parachute operations, then Maj. James M. Gavin's 1942 Field Manual (FM) 31-30, *Tactics and Techniques of Airborne Troops*, asserts that parachute troops are to spearhead a vertical envelopment to serve as an advance guard for

airlanding more troops. Thus, paratroopers were tasked to capture and secure landing areas, like their Soviet and German counterparts, ahead of the glider or airlanded reinforcements.<sup>24</sup> Airfield seizure was the most likely mission for airborne troops, and the initial manual devoted an entire section to that task.<sup>25</sup> The original divisional structure consisted of two glider regiments and one parachute regiment. Reinforcing by glider (and airland) was by design; no airborne division went into combat in that configuration, however, and a reverse organization was codified into modified table of organization and equipment changes by late 1944.<sup>26</sup> Despite conducting only small-scale airfield seizure operations during the war, the concept and capability remained, and several smaller operations attempted airfield seizures, starting with Operation Torch on 8 November 1942.

The jump into North Africa required Lt Col. Edson D. Raff's 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry, to land between two airfields and secure them for Allied aircraft. The airborne force failed to achieve its mission, arriving at the airfields on D+1 with only 60 percent strength to find them already secured by American tanks of the 1st Armored Division.<sup>27</sup> This was due to scattered airplanes landing all over French North Africa including Morocco, while Maj. William P. Yarborough led a small force of those he could gather on foot to their objective. A second jump on 15 November saw 350 of Raff's paratroopers jump onto the French-held airfield at Youks-les-Bains, link up with the French Third Zouaves, and secure the field before the Nazis arrived.<sup>28</sup> The next major airborne operation, Husky, in July 1943, tasked the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment to secure the Ponte Olivo Airfield in Sicily alongside the seaborne 1st Infantry Division as part of its operational

objectives. In the end, the beach-landed forces constituted most of the elements that seized the airfield.<sup>29</sup> However, the operation on Sicily went awry thanks to widespread drops caused by poorly pilot training and high winds. Nevertheless, the operation inspired War Department Training Circular (TC) 113, *Employment and Training of Airborne and Troop Carrier Forces*, on 9 October 1943.<sup>30</sup> This new training manual codified the relationship between transport and trooper while

stressing the importance of joint training before every operation. This manual, in turn, begat a wholesale test of large-scale airborne forces in the winter 1943 Knollwood Maneuver during which Maj. Gen. Joseph Swing's 11th Airborne Division captured Knollwood Airport in North Carolina and was resupplied by air or air landing alone for the first four days.<sup>31</sup> The training exercise and Swing's report validated TC 113—especially the importance of pilot training and aerial resupply. The Swing report also convinced Army Ground Forces commander Gen. Lesley J. McNair of the efficacy of the airborne divisional concept.<sup>32</sup>

In the Pacific, the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment executed a seizure of the Nadzab Emergency Landing Strip that assisted in the broader operation against the port of Lae, New Guinea, on 5 September 1943. The three battalions of the 503rd met little resistance and secured the airfield. Within thirty-six hours, the landing strip received the 7th Australian Division by air. This operation had a dual impact: it showcased a tactical airfield seizure and reinvigorated enthusiasm for regiment-size operations after the issues on Sicily. In its next jump, the 503rd seized an airfield at Noemfoor on the northwest coast of New Guinea on 3 and 4 July 1944. Again, however,



U.S. paratroopers of the 1st Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, land 3 July 1944 to establish a stronghold on the Japanese-built Kamiri Airfield on Noemfoor Island, New Guinea. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

the paratroopers encountered no enemy resistance. On 23 June 1945, a reinforced battalion from the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment secured Camalaniugan Airfield on Luzon, Philippines, in the final parachute operation of the war before receiving seven gliders as reinforcement. The paratroopers seized Appari and linked up with the 37th Infantry Division by the end of June.<sup>33</sup>

Various canceled plans foresaw grandiose ideas for airfield seizures. Operation Giant II proposed seizing five airfields outside of Rome, defending them with Italian forces, and awaiting reinforcement or linkup. The plan was scratched when U.S. leaders realized how much they would have to rely on the Italians for logistical and tactical support, of which there was no guarantee.<sup>34</sup> Gen. George C. Marshall later recommended that Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower commit airborne forces to seize airfields between the Normandy beachheads and Paris, an idea subsequently scrapped because of the objectives' distance from friendly support from the beaches.<sup>35</sup> While the 1941 *Field Service Regulations* made no mention of airborne forces, the expanded 1944 version included a significant section and listed the capture of enemy airfields as one of the nine possible missions for airborne forces, emphasizing the requirement to seize and maintain an airhead while recognizing that airlanded troops require, at least, hastily built airstrips to land.<sup>36</sup>

## The Postwar Period

Prevailing postwar wisdom in the United States held that rapid movement through the air would be enough to deter any enemy from challenging American interests. In January 1946, the commander of Army Ground Forces, Gen. J. Lawton Collins, returned the 82nd Airborne Division to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to be reorganized and repurposed as a strategic striking force tasked with readiness for worldwide crises.<sup>37</sup> The post-World War II General Board conducted numerous studies into the efficacy of various elements of the war's prosecution in the European theater. One critical finding held that airborne divisions would be required to seize and establish airheads in any future war.<sup>38</sup> Gavin further asserted the primacy of airfield seizure when he wrote, "The rapid construction of landing strips suitable for air landed troops must have number one priority in future operations."<sup>39</sup> The rapid movement of reinforcement by air was considered the only way to get enough combat power on the ground quickly

enough to affect any future war. Therefore, a force prepared to seize airheads was considered a necessity.<sup>40</sup> A new FM 71-30, *Employment of Airborne Forces*, arrived in 1947 to replace Gavin's 1942 doctrine. This new manual reflected lessons learned in World War II and formally incorporated concepts from TC 113 into Army doctrine.<sup>41</sup>

In 1948, the Berlin airlift displayed the value of air-landed resupply during contingency operations when no other recourse was possible. A defining moment for the new U.S. Air Force, the operation's zenith had an aircraft landing in Berlin every sixty-two seconds.<sup>42</sup> By delivering upward of eight thousand tons of cargo per day, the operation showcased the Air Force's ability to sustain a city with its transport fleet. It was, therefore, easy to draw the connection between the ability to feed 2.5 million people and the ability to deploy and support a ground force by air alone.<sup>43</sup> Gen. Jacob Devers and many Army leaders looked at the Berlin airlift as a critical turning point toward creating fully air-transportable divisions.<sup>44</sup>

A critical hallmark of airborne operations within the 1949 *Field Service Regulations* was to seize an airhead to initiate further operations—the first listed mission for airborne operations.<sup>45</sup> This manual simplified airborne doctrinal tasks from nine to six.<sup>46</sup> In a May 1949 article in *Military Review*, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Omar Bradley envisioned a three-stage future war. After first employing nuclear weapons, American forces would seize forward bases for a further counter-attack, a mission well-suited to airborne forces.<sup>47</sup>

In 1950, Lt. Col. Melvin Zais, an airborne battalion commander in World War II, wrote to Maj. Gen. William Miley emphasizing the primacy of airfield seizure and echoing the postwar general boards that recommended maintaining airborne divisions for forcible entry situations and emphasized transporting infantry divisions by air as a vital mission in future warfare.<sup>48</sup> The board found that there is no acceptable alternative to the airborne division because landing an infantry division in slow-moving transport aircraft required a secure airfield, necessitating trained parachute forces to seize one. However, seizing, reinforcing, and expanding the perimeter of an airfield required massive amounts of airlifted supplies, something the fledgling U.S. Air Force was not yet ready to provide.<sup>49</sup>

Exercise Swarmer, conducted in April and May 1950 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, utilized the lessons of the



Berlin airlift to validate the concept of airfield seizure and airlanded reinforcement and supply. Despite the success at dropping and supplying troops by air, the exercise revealed a dearth of Air Force transport planes.<sup>50</sup> In 1951, J. Lawton Collins, impressed with the possibilities of pure aerial operations, wrote that the Army had only begun to see the fruits of air transportability, and “given transports in sufficient quantity our divisions could assume greater strategic importance for distant areas threatened in the world or in far-flung operations of a global war ... our airborne divisions could go over enemy lines to strike vital targets which otherwise could only be taken at great loss in men and equipment.”<sup>51</sup>

## The Cold War

Between World War II and Vietnam, airborne leaders such as Matthew B. Ridgway, Maxwell D. Taylor, and James M. Gavin rose to control the Army and impart their views. Many officers, including one-time Armored Force commander Gen. Jacob Devers, envisioned a force sustainable entirely by air resupply.<sup>52</sup> The 1954 edition of FM 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations*, echoed that sentiment, reiterating the strategic threat that airborne forces in reserve constitute and the effect they might have on potential enemies.<sup>53</sup> When the United States engineered a coup in Guatemala, the 82nd Airborne Division had a parachute battalion on standby to seize an airfield and evacuate American citizens.<sup>54</sup> The Army continued to ponder the aerial delivery of combat power and its insertion through forcible entry airfield seizure operations, as reflected in doctrine into the 1960s.<sup>55</sup> The Army designated the 82nd Airborne Division as the Western Hemisphere Reaction Force in 1953 and the XVIII Airborne Corps as the Strategic Army Corps in 1958, and it created a new joint headquarters, U.S. Strike Command, in 1962.<sup>56</sup>

Actions during this era included no parachute airfield seizures but did include quick reaction force deployments of airborne forces into permissive or semipermissive airfields. While the XVIII Airborne Corps and the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions prepared to seize four airfields on Cuba as the Cuban Missile Crisis increased the probability of a military confrontation in late 1962, the joint seaborne/airborne invasion never happened as cooler heads prevailed.<sup>57</sup> In 1965, the 82nd Airborne Division executed a Caribbean response

mission for Operation Power Pack in the Dominican Republic. In that operation, the division deployed initial elements to Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico in April as a show of force intended to deescalate the situation without committing U.S. troops to the island. Then, if required, the division would prepare for a combat jump onto airfields outside of Santo Domingo. Instead, as tensions escalated, the paratroopers were diverted and airlanded at San Isidro Air Base to reinforce marines on the ground.<sup>58</sup> Operation Power Pack validated the ready-brigade concept, showing that the U.S. military could move “rapidly and forcefully to defend its interests.”<sup>59</sup> As American presence in the Republic of Vietnam increased, the 173rd Airborne Brigade deployed from Okinawa to secure Bien Hoa Air Base—twelve miles northeast of Saigon—on 5 May 1965, the first U.S. Army ground combat unit committed to the conflict.<sup>60</sup>

Following the Vietnam War, doctrine continued to emphasize airfields—even the infamous 1976 edition of FM 100-5, *Operations*, that placed a premium on mechanized warfare.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the United States increased its quick response force capabilities. In 1974, on the orders of Army Chief of Staff Gen. Creighton Abrams, the first two modern Ranger battalions were formed.<sup>62</sup> The reactivated 1st and 2nd Ranger Battalions were created as elite, light, highly proficient infantry battalions.<sup>63</sup> After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran hostage crisis (and subsequent bungling of Operation Eagle Claw), the Carter administration pushed forward on a new rapid deployment force joint headquarters that would assemble forces needed for the situation at hand. The rapid deployment force was designed to fight any number of “half wars,” small wars, or contingency operations in the Middle East, North Africa, or Korea, while the Department of Defense maintained enough resources to fight the Soviets in Europe.<sup>64</sup> Since its inception, the 75th Ranger Regiment has maintained a special operations role, prepared to conduct no-notice forcible entry operations, deep penetration raids, and support to other special operations units.<sup>65</sup>

Refining concepts like rapid response forces earmarked for opening airheads to support contingency operations worldwide continued into Ronald Reagan’s presidency. In his 1981 *New York Times* article that elaborated on new ideas in the defense strategy of the Reagan administration, incoming CIA director Stansfield





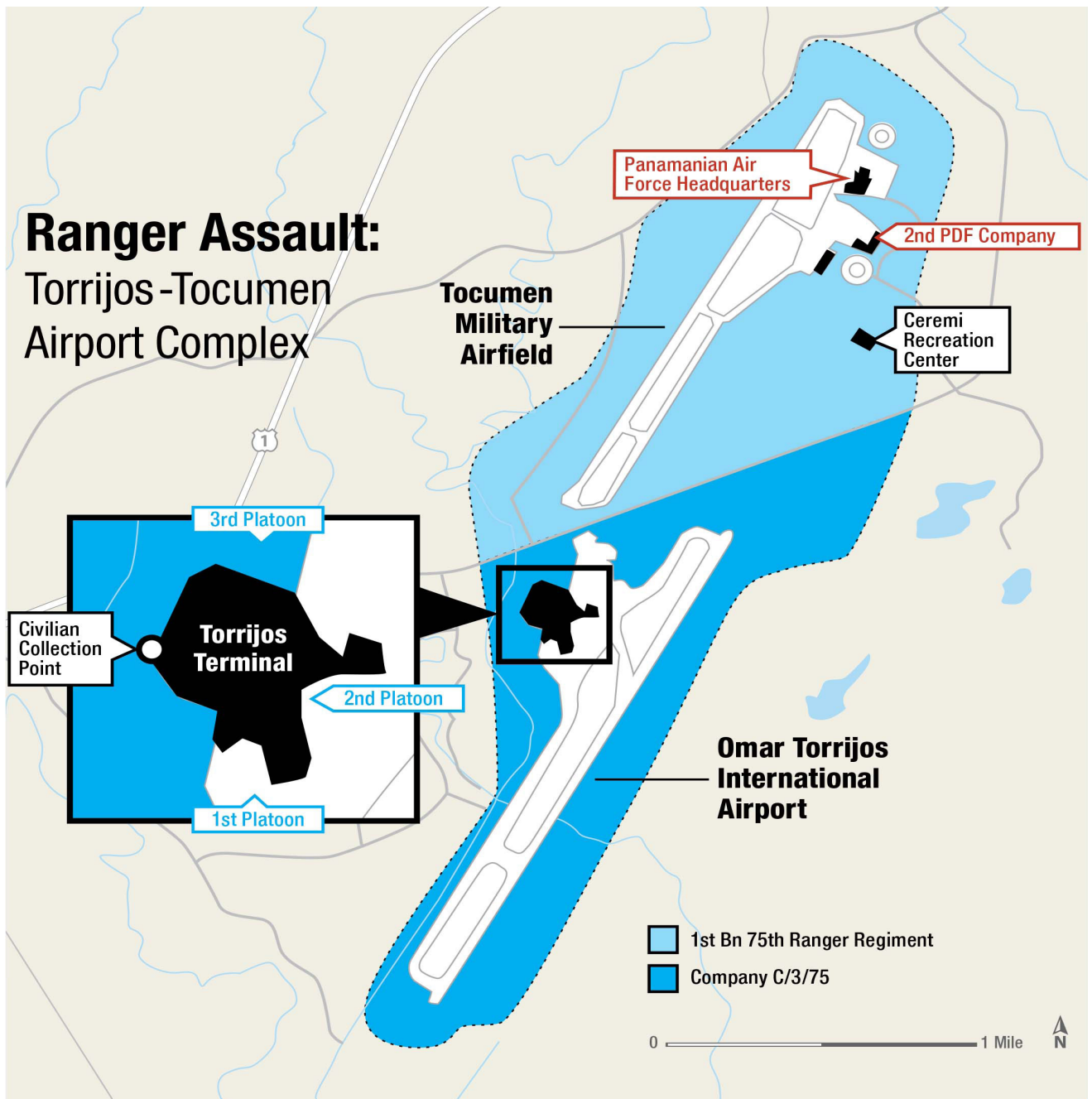
Operation Urgent Fury, 1983. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Turner extolled the virtues of rapid response forces as crucial to combat threats in the Persian Gulf. Gambling that decisive rapid movement of American forces to seize bases would deter Soviet interference in the region, Turner cited the inability of the United States to quickly move sufficient forces into Korea in 1950 as proof for the need to maintain robust quick response force capability. While also arguing for overseas bases, Turner notes that “our military preparations must be more flexible than fixed bases” to handle threats in the region.<sup>66</sup>

Operation Urgent Fury was a textbook case of joint forcible entry by airfield seizure. Worried that Cuban communists were influencing the new Grenadian government by constructing an airfield as a Communist base in the southern Caribbean, Reagan ordered an invasion.<sup>67</sup> On 25 October 1983 at 5:30 a.m., several hundred Rangers descended upon Point Salines airfield. The Rangers cleared the airstrip of obstacles and captured 250 Cuban defenders, securing the airfield in two hours. By 9:00 a.m., they had rescued American students at the medical campus adjacent to the airfield before learning of two hundred more Americans at a separate campus.<sup>68</sup> Following the Rangers’ initial action, paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division arrived

by airland—not parachute—by 2:00 p.m. on the 25th, and by the 27th, the 2nd and 3rd Brigades of the 82nd were on the ground neutralizing enemy resistance. By the end of the operation, 581 American students from the Saint George’s University School of Medicine and one hundred more foreign nationals were evacuated.<sup>69</sup> The Rangers’ success in Grenada begat a third Ranger battalion and a regimental headquarters, both activated at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1984.

Operation Just Cause, the American operation to capture Panamanian narco-dictator Manuel Noriega, was another case study for joint forcible entry by parachute assault. On 20 December 1989, elements from the 75th Ranger Regiment and the 82nd Airborne Division parachuted into two drop zones at Rio Hato Airfield and Torrijos-Tocumen Airport. Ranger task forces seized Torrijos-Tocumen to allow the 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, to follow on by parachute reinforcement, and portions of the 7th Infantry Division, flying from Fort Ord, California, to airland. Seizure of that airfield allowed the 82nd paratroopers to arrive unscathed and denied its use to the Panamanian Air Force. In addition, the airfield seizure at Rio Hato blocked Noriega’s ability to flee via aircraft from that location.<sup>70</sup>



(Map courtesy of Veritas, Journal of U.S. Army Special Operations History, <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16040coll7/id/36/rec/1>)

## Ranger Assault on Torrijos-Tocumen Airport Complex, 1989

Initial plans called for a gradual build-up of U.S. combat power at existing bases in the Panama Canal Zone. However, as tensions escalated and Panama Defense Forces threatened and intimidated U.S. civilians and service members, President George H. W. Bush ordered the assault, relying on airborne and Ranger units' rapid response capability to execute the mission.<sup>71</sup> Tasked with arresting Noriega on drug trafficking charges and

restoring the government of Guillermo Endara, the operation was successful—major combat operations lasted only five days, Noriega surrendered on 3 January, and by 12 January, the operation was complete.<sup>72</sup>

### The Post-Cold War Environment

The need for a quick response force to seize airfields as lodgments for follow-on operations did not cease as

the Cold War ended. The 1990 edition of FM 90-26, *Airborne Operations*, noted the parachute capabilities fielded during Just Cause as essential to that operation's success and asserted that airborne forces operate at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.<sup>73</sup> As the Cold War came to an end, American leaders shifted military forces from overseas bases to the continental United States. With fewer forces available abroad, maintaining a forcible entry capability became a renewed concern.<sup>74</sup>

Likewise, the Army began to focus on *early* entry forces designed to follow an initial forcible entry assault, fight, and buy time for heavier forces.<sup>75</sup>

While no joint forcible entry operations occurred during the post-Cold War unipolar moment of the 1990s, the threat of such an operation played a role in

Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's capitulation to former President Jimmy Carter's peace delegation.<sup>76</sup> The knowledge that combat-equipped paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division were on their way in 113 Air Force aircraft helped Aristide arrive at his decision. Following the al-Qaida attack on 11 September 2001, the United States used parachute and heliborne forces to seize footholds in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, small 75th Ranger Regiment operations at Objective Rhino near Kandahar, Afghanistan, and later at Objectives Roadrunner and Serpent in the deserts of western Iraq. Each of these operations provided American planners with critical airfields to support operations in both countries.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

Following their zenith during the Second World War, the United States maintained a large active-duty airborne force in proportion to the rest of the Army—ostensibly to perform forcible entry operations with no prior notice or

early warning. The current force structure of five airborne brigades and three Ranger battalions allows the United States to project power from multiple strategic locations that collectively cover the entire globe. However, because of airborne units' relative size and cost, the question remains whether the current U.S. airborne force structure is appropriate in today's multi-domain environment.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, airfield seizures remain a mission-essential task for American airborne units. The March 2015

edition of FM 3-99, *Airborne and Air Assault Operations*, asserts that forcible entry operations to seize a lodgment within a hostile or potentially hostile area will be paramount in future operations.<sup>79</sup>

Outside of quick response force missions like the January 2020 rapid deployment of elements from the 82nd Airborne

Division to Iraq, in the last thirty years, American combat parachute operations have almost exclusively focused on airfield seizure.<sup>80</sup> In Grenada, Panama, and to a lesser degree in Iraq and Afghanistan, parachute-delivered forces have seized key airfields to allow follow-on elements to arrive. However, since World War II, the use of parachute forces has been in increasingly permissible environments against, as Marc DeVore terms, "ill-equipped and poorly-organized opponents."<sup>81</sup> The 2003 operation into Northern Iraq was conducted *behind friendly lines*, as U.S. and Kurdish forces had already secured the airfield.<sup>82</sup>

Future airborne joint forcible entry operations will likely continue to be used against lesser opponents instead of near-peer U.S. adversaries like China or Russia. Opponent air defense assets provide ample antiaccess/area-denial capabilities, especially against slow moving transport aircraft, that make these operations unlikely. Counterarguments often center on the intangible qualities and cultural tenets engendered through airborne training such as self-reliance



MC-130 dropping Rangers during the assault on Objective Rhino, 2001. (Screenshot taken from video courtesy of the U.S. Military)



or the idea that paratroopers have already faced the fear of death. Furthermore, the United States lacks the transport capability to effectively launch more than one brigade at a time. As DeVore further notes, the current U.S. airborne force structure of five brigade combat teams does not justify the cost, and ultimately, time is spent focusing on airborne operations to the detriment of other training for more likely missions.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, honing a rapid response, air-transportable capability is not restricted to parachute units.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that the requirement for the United States to maintain a force capable of conducting joint forcible entry operations will remain.

As long as potential adversaries and other nefarious actors conduct their activities far from borders and shorelines, the requirement to seize an airfield to land aircraft and expand the lodgment for follow-on operations will persist.<sup>84</sup> As the recent airfield-based non-combatant evacuation operation from Kabul shows, maintaining an Army unit inherently familiar with airfield operations is a critical capability.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the ability to launch a battalion or more of nimble, ready, infantry (like the Ranger Regiment) from within the United States within hours and place them behind enemy lines is a quick, flexible, expeditionary capability necessary in the modern operating environment. ■

## Notes

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