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**Airborne forces: A capability to overcome challenges during contingency operations in
immature theaters**

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Army.**

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Abstract

Airborne forces: A capability to overcome challenges during contingency operations in immature theaters.

Throughout the last few decades the United States has reduced the number of forward deployed military bases throughout the world. As a result, the U.S. relies on its ability to conduct global power projection in support of national interests. Regions such as West Africa may possess potentially volatile areas which may require U.S. military intervention. In the event of crisis response and limited contingency operations in immature, landlocked theaters such as the West African Sahel Desert Region, challenges may arise in the ability to rapidly deploy forces to “seize the initiative.” When faced with vast spaces of underdeveloped infrastructure in GLOCs and airbases, airborne forces may be able to mitigate time, space, and force factors associated with a swift US military intervention. This paper also discusses how the employment of airborne forces may enhance a JTF commander’s operational reach, operational maneuver, and operational sustainment in austere operating environments. This paper will discuss cases from Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Just Cause in order to illustrate the unique capabilities that airborne forces can provide a JTF commander. Airborne forces have demonstrated the ability to rapidly deploy and seize and establish lodgments for future operations in immature environments. This capability should be considered by future JTF planners in tackling the problem of rapidly inserting military forces in immature operational areas in support of crisis response and limited contingency operations.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has decreased its number of forward deployed bases. As a result, the U.S. depends on the concept of power projection to project the instruments of national power, to include military forces, to far-reaching parts of the world where contingency crises affecting U.S. national interests may emerge. Joint Publication 5-0: *Joint Operation Planning* defines a crisis as “an incident or situation involving a threat to the United States, its territories, citizens, military forces, possessions, or vital interests. It typically develops rapidly and creates a condition of such diplomatic, economic, or military importance that the President or SecDef [Secretary of Defense] considers a commitment of US military forces and resources to achieve national objectives.”¹ “The capability to conduct rapid insertion world-wide is a useful deterrent . . . In case deterrence fails, the ability to get a viable force to a region quickly . . . may be sufficient to secure the political-strategic aim and the operational objective.”² Challenges arise when the ability to rapidly deploy military forces in response to a crisis is impacted by unaccommodating geography. Landlocked countries with vast spaces and immature transportation infrastructure may create challenges affecting the rapid deployment of land forces into an austere theater. A Joint Task Force (JTF) commander may encounter difficulties regarding operational movement, maneuver and sustainment of ground forces if tasked to conduct operations in an underdeveloped, landlocked operational area. West Africa possesses many areas of this austere nature where the potential for conflicts exists. A JTF commander should consider using airborne forces during crisis response and limited contingency operations in immature, landlocked operational areas in West Africa in order to extend the operational reach of land forces by mitigating time, space and force factors and to

enhance operational maneuver and operational sustainment by rapidly establishing bases of operations that will serve as forward lodgments.

West Africa has the potential to be a contentious region that may impact U.S. national interests. The Defense Department's security concerns regarding Africa are linked to the "potential for conflict, transnational threats, and other threats to peace and security."³ West Africa is a particular area of concern because of the ongoing effort to combat terrorism in the West African Sahel Desert regions of countries such as Eastern Mauritania, Mali, and Niger.



Figure 1. West African Sahel Desert Region. (Adapted from <http://africamap.harvard.edu/>)

Other security threats in West Africa include illegal trafficking in humans, drugs, and weapons. According to the Africa Command's (AFRICOM's) 2010 Posture Statement, "weakly governed spaces [in Africa] provide favorable operating environments for violent extremism, piracy, and trafficking of humans, weapons, and drugs, posing direct threats to the U.S. homeland and our interests abroad."⁴ Humanitarian crises involving disease, famine, and poverty are common throughout the region. Displaced civilians resulting from internecine fighting contribute to the U.S.'s as well as Africa's security and stability concerns. Within the last decade, the U.S. has taken more interest in security related issues in West Africa, a region that is providing a significant amount of American energy imports. This region has become increasingly unstable "because of religious and ethnic division,

rampant state corruption and severe poverty.”⁵ Throughout the West Africa Sahel Desert, these factors have resulted in a region that is exploited by narco-terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC).⁶ Currently AFRICOM strives to maintain a “Phase Zero” construct with regard to maintaining stability throughout potential crises areas in Africa.⁷ Because of the volatile nature of regions within West Africa, the possibility exists for a contingency crisis to emerge from the failure of stability and deterrence operations, leading to the requirement for military intervention involving “boots on the ground.” According to Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, “The President and SecDef may direct a CCDR [combatant commander] to resolve a crisis quickly, employing immediately available forces and appropriate FDOs (flexible deterrent options) . . . to preclude escalation. When these forces and actions are not sufficient, follow-on strikes and/or the deployment of forces from CONUS or another theater . . . may be necessary.”⁸ If a crisis emerges in West Africa that requires a rapid military response, a JTF commander may need to deploy “boots on the ground” to seize the initiative and set conditions for subsequent operations. Most likely, the JTF commander will face challenges in quickly seizing the initiative and establishing footholds throughout austere and landlocked operational areas in West Africa. During operations throughout this type of environment, airborne forces could provide a viable solution.

Against a modern enemy in a high intensity conflict, the cost-benefit analysis of the employment of airborne forces suggests that it may not be a feasible or acceptable course of action (COA) to a JTF commander; in other words, it may not be worth the risk. However, in the case of West Africa, military operations would most likely be categorized as “crisis

response and limited contingency operations” which fall on the lower end of the range of military operations.⁹

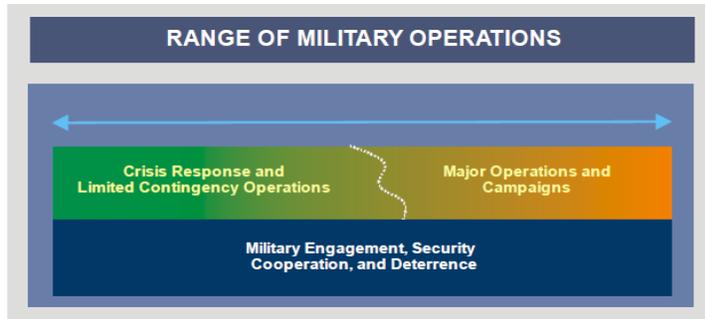


Figure 2. Range of Military Operations. (Reprinted from Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 17 September 2006 Incorporating Change 2 22 March 2010), I-8.

According to Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, crisis response or limited contingency operations are used “to protect US interests and/or prevent surprise attack or further conflict.”¹⁰ They include operations that “ensure the safety of American citizens and US interests while maintaining and improving US ability to operate with multinational partners to deter the hostile ambitions of potential aggressors.”¹¹ In addition, “a crisis may prompt the conduct of FHA [foreign humanitarian assistance], CS [civil support], noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs), peace operations (PO), strikes, raids, or recovery operations.”¹² Once a crisis has been defined and a contingency operation has progressed beyond the “deter” phase, a JTF commander’s next priority is to “seize the initiative.” Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, states that during the “seize initiative” phase, “operations to gain access to theater infrastructure and to expand friendly freedom of action continue while the JFC [Joint Forces Commander] seeks to degrade adversary capabilities with the intent of resolving the crisis at the earliest opportunity.”¹³ Countries within the West African Sahel Desert region such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger present inherent geographic challenges to the “seize the initiative phase” as these landlocked countries consist of vast spaces with immature infrastructure in terms of roads, railways, and airports which

would prevent the rapid deployment of any ground forces. “The attributes that affect the timely availability of forces include . . . the distance to the employment area, the transportation mode, and the infrastructure in the employment area.”¹⁴ It is evident that the potential for austere employment areas in West Africa is great. During lower-intensity contingency operations, the use of airborne forces may be able to mitigate a JTF’s time, space, and force issues while deploying in response to situations requiring U.S. military “boots on the ground” intervention.

In any contingency operation military forces may have to face challenges dealing with time, space, and force considerations. For example, in order to rapidly deploy a contingency response force in support of a crisis in the West African Sahel Desert region, it would require moving that force across a vast, landlocked area that has an immature infrastructure to support operational movement by ground. “A well-established road and railroad network generally facilitates the movement of large forces and therefore decreases the factor of time.”¹⁵ Countries like Mali and Niger are “seriously impaired by regional transit transport systems that are among the least developed in the world.”¹⁶ The transportation infrastructure is deteriorated because underdeveloped countries cannot afford to build and maintain the roads and railways. In the case of Mali, many portions of the country’s railroads consist of poor track conditions and the lines are frequently closed during the rainy seasons.¹⁷ For obvious reasons, the lack of developed ground transportation networks may increase time, a critical factor that may not be in abundant supply during most contingency crisis operations. A JTF’s challenges with regard to meeting the demands of a rapid deployment, in response to a crisis that requires the movement of a force across a large landlocked space consisting of underdeveloped infrastructure, may be solved by employing

the capabilities that airborne forces provide. “The unique capabilities of the airborne . . . make it a prime player in contingency operations. Its highly lethal, no-notice, fast-deploying, forced entry capability has numerous utility in any contingency operations. It has proven itself in numerous contingency operations over the past thirty years in both low-and mid-intensity operations.”¹⁸

Airborne forces may extend a JTF’s operational reach and mitigate time, space, and force issues associated with rapid military force projection in a landlocked country. West African countries like Mali and Niger encompass massive remote regions that may present great difficulties when attempting to rapidly deploy military forces by ground insertion. For example, Mali is a landlocked country that is roughly the size of Texas and California combined, including vast amounts of open desert with a very poor road system. The few roads that do exist are considered poor and hazardous, and most of the major thoroughfares in the northern part of the country “are little more than desert tracks with long isolated stretches.”¹⁹ In this case, a JTF’s operational reach may be restricted by the nature of the geography and the road system. However, a JTF commander could extend his operational reach “through forward positioning of capabilities and resources . . .”²⁰ By rapidly deploying forces and logistics to an austere environment, a JTF commander could mitigate his time, space, and force issues in an effort to rapidly react to a crisis. Airborne forces provide the JTF commander with a quick reaction capability to accomplish this. “The greater the speed and [operational] mobility, the shorter the transit time [will be].”²¹ The following narrative further illustrates this point:

The additional time and space advantages of aerospace projection are in the areas of responsiveness, speed, and surprise. Aerospace power projection is more responsive in that it is easier and faster to load planes with

a tailored contingency force package than to load a ship or train. It is always faster to fly than to drive or sail over large distances, thus air power projection is inherently faster. Finally, it is easier and faster to unload a plane, either by airdrop or airland on the objective, than it is to unload a ship at the nearest coastline, or a train at the nearest secure railhead, and then move to the scene of the conflict. The greatest disadvantage of aerospace power projection is the limited weight that transport aircraft can move, as compared with sealift. This disadvantage is offset to the degree that the Army maximizes the combat power per pound in its air-transportable early entry forces.²²

The employment of airborne forces in northern Iraq during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) demonstrates the concept of using airborne forces to extend operational reach while mitigating time, space, and force factors. During the opening weeks of OIF, the U.S.'s Central Command (CENTCOM) planned to conduct combat operations in Iraq by opening a new front in the northern part of the country. By executing a northern offensive, CENTCOM aimed to expedite the Iraqi regime's defeat, protect oil fields in northern Iraq, and prevent the northern Iraqi Kurdish population from suffering atrocities from the Iraqi Army.²³ Unfortunately, the government of Turkey denied coalition forces access by way of ground movement through their country into Iraq. Faced with the challenge of figuring out how to rapidly deploy ground forces into northern Iraq, CENTCOM turned to the airborne forces of the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade.

Able to deploy within 96 hours as part of the European Command's (EUCOM's) Strategic Ready Force, the 173rd Airborne Brigade was tasked to deploy forces into northern Iraq.²⁴ The airborne forces were essentially the "key" to unlocking the door of CENTCOM's northern front in Iraq. On March 26, 2003 the paratroopers of the airborne brigade, along with organic and attached logistics enablers, conducted an airborne assault and seized and secured Bashur Airfield in northern Iraq.²⁵ Bashur Airfield then became a functioning

lodgment and base of operations from which armored ground forces arrived in the Iraqi northern operational area and subsequently carried out combat operations. The rapid insertion of ground forces into a landlocked operational area such as northern Iraq during the spring of 2003 demonstrated the benefits of utilizing an airborne capability to extend operational reach. The 173rd Airborne Brigade mitigated the operational factors of time, space, and force by rapidly deploying into a landlocked operational area in which the surrounding areas were diplomatically denied. The events that occurred in northern Iraq during the early days of OIF may be similar with regard to future scenarios involving the employment of airborne forces. In situations where factors such as unaccommodating geography, lack of developed ground transportation networks, or even diplomatically denied access to ground lines of communication (GLOCs) preventing the rapid deployment of military land forces, the use of airborne forces may be very practical.

In addition to extending operational reach and mitigating the factors of time, space, and force regarding the ability to project combat power into a landlocked operational area, the airborne forces of the 173rd Airborne Brigade also enhanced CENTCOM's operational maneuver by seizing a base of operations at Bashur Airfield. Studying the various components of operational design, it is apparent that various physical lines of operations will be included in the design. These physical lines of operations will be tied to a base of operations when developing the operational design construct. A base of operations provides the node from which various physical lines of operations can project.²⁶ Figure 3 below depicts a sample physical line of operation.

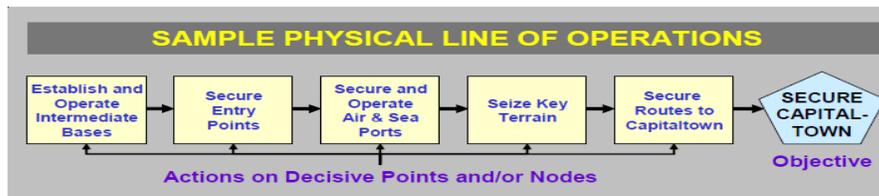


Figure 3. Sample Physical Line of Operations. (Reprinted from Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 26 December 2006), IV-20.

Securing a base of operations is necessary in order to enhance a JTF commander’s operational maneuver since operational maneuver will begin at a base of operation and then proceed along a physical line of operation through decisive points, ultimately ending at an objective. In terms of physical lines of operations, shorter is better. “The operational commander can harmonize the factors of space by selecting objectives that lie short distances from his bases of operations; shortening his lines of operations by operating from a central position. . .”²⁷ If a JTF commander is tasked with conducting contingency operations in a country such as the Mali, West Africa or any of its landlocked neighbors, the requirement for rapidly establishing forward bases of operations may become necessary to shorten the physical lines of operations during a contingency crisis. Airborne forces have the capability to rapidly seize and secure forward bases of operations. Airfields within a landlocked country can serve as a base of operations once seized and secured by friendly forces. However, on the modern battlefield, more and more of the potential U.S. adversaries have access to surface to air missiles (SAMs) and air defense capabilities that could be used to oppose the employment of airborne forces. Against a modernized enemy with integrated air defense capabilities and enhanced surveillance and radar technologies, airborne operations may be extremely vulnerable. In the case of contingency operations in underdeveloped

countries where high-intensity conflict is not anticipated, an assumption for this argument is that an airfield will either be lightly defended or unsecured by potentially hostile forces.

“Despite the existence of first-rate opinion to the contrary, I feel reasonably sure that sizeable fixed-wing airborne operations against unsecured territory will remain feasible if an airhead is established as a forward base. . . .”²⁸ Once an airfield is seized and secured, a JTF commander has the ability to flow in follow-on forces including sustainment units. In the aforementioned case study involving the 173rd Airborne Brigade in northern Iraq, paratroopers seized and secured a lodgment which allowed an armored task force (Task-Force 1-63) to fly directly into Bashur Airfield in order to conduct combat operations.²⁹ The airfield was the “key” to unlocking the door of CENTCOM’s northern offensive. “[It] is obvious that in each country there are some points of *exceptional* importance . . . where it is easy to stockpile supplies, whence one can conveniently move in several directions; in short, whose possession satisfies a number of needs and offers a number of advantages.”³⁰ Bashur Airfield, which became a base of operations, was an example of a “point of *exceptional* importance.”

The concept of utilizing airborne forces to seize bases of operations can also be seen during other U.S. contingency operations such as Operation JUST CAUSE (OJC) in Panama (1989). During OJC, the U.S.’s strategic objective was to remove the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega from power. Military planners began the planning process for OJC by identifying the enemy centers of gravity which were determined to be Noriega and his Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF).³¹ A center of gravity “can be defined as a source of massed strength-physical or moral-or a source of leverage whose serious degradation, dislocation, neutralization, or destruction would have the most decisive impact on the

enemy's or one's own ability to accomplish a given political/military objective."³² The PDF was the operational center of gravity. The destruction of the PDF "would remove the institution that controlled Panamanian political life."³³ By destroying the PDF, U.S. forces would be one step closer to accomplishing the greater strategic objective, the removal of Manuel Noriega's regime from power. During the planning of OJC, lines of operations were developed to strike at the PDF. However, in order to conduct various lines of operations such as attacking critical vulnerabilities of the PDF, U.S. Joint Task Force- South (JTF-South) planners realized the need to quickly establish suitable bases of operations within Panama from which to project combat power. At the onset of OJC, the U.S. possessed only one suitable base of operations, Howard Air Force Base. However, JTF-South planners identified the requirement for additional bases in Panama. According to military theorist Milan Vego, "In many cases the physical space separating the attacker's base of operations and the assigned objectives could be either too wide or too deep in the initial phase of a campaign or major operation. Hence, one of the tasks of the operational planners is to divide the enemy's controlled space into smaller segments that require the least time to control with the forces available."³⁴ Planners recognized that additional airfields within Panama were essential to providing suitable bases of operations which would allow the introduction of sufficient combat power in the operational area as well as the sustainment of future combat operations.³⁵ "The seizure of T/T [Tocumen/Torrijos Airfield] was essential to Operation Just Cause. The scope of the operation required to achieve the "Coup de Main" effect exceeded the support capacity of Howard AFB. The large number of various aircraft, refueling requirements, and arriving CONUS [Continental United States] forces, made the seizure of T/T an operational imperative."³⁶ The rapid seizure of airfields was a decisive

point that would allow U.S. forces to establish bases of operations and subsequently project physical lines of operations aimed at destroying the PDF. Both the requirement for bases of operations and the speed to establish them were key factors in the operation. “The planners wanted to deliver a large number of additional forces [in Panama] as fast as they could.”³⁷ Airborne forces were selected over air-land forces and Marine expeditionary units because speed was a priority.³⁸ LTG Thomas Kelly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) operations director during OJC, made it clear that airborne forces were his preferred choice. He stated, “The fact is, we could get an airborne division on the ground in ten minutes or we could get an airlanded brigade in a day and a half. If you’re going to do that you have to work fast. We realized that we had to take down the PDF.”³⁹

The U.S. employed airborne forces of the 75th Ranger Regiment and the 82nd Airborne Division to rapidly seize and secure Tocumen/Torrijos and Rio Hato airfields to serve as forward bases of operations.⁴⁰ Once secured these airfields allowed for the reception of follow on forces that went on to conduct combat operations against the PDF. The seizure of bases of operations by airborne forces enhanced the operational maneuver of U.S. military forces along physical lines of operations.

Airborne forces were also used to seize a base of operations in the landlocked region of Southern Afghanistan during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF). In October 2001, airborne forces from 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment conducted an airborne assault “onto a desert landing strip southwest of Kandahar, code-named Objective RHINO.”⁴¹ “Having secured the landing zone, they assisted follow-on helicopter forces of [Special Operations Forces] SOF soldiers that had additional raids to conduct in the area.”⁴² One month later, in November 2001 the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) conducted the

longest amphibious air assault in history with rotary wing assets in order to build up the base of operations on the desert landing strip, later called Camp Rhino.⁴³ This event demonstrated how rotary wing assets can supplement the efforts of airborne forces in establishing bases of operations in landlocked theaters. Employing airborne forces and air assault assets to accomplish this critical task in order to enhance a JTF commander's operational maneuver can also be applied during operations in an immature theater such as West Africa.

The rapid establishment of forward bases of operations will not only enhance a JTF commander's operational maneuver, but may also enhance his operational sustainment. "Sustainment is the provision of logistics and personnel services necessary to maintain and prolong operations until mission accomplishment. The focus of sustainment in joint operations is to provide the JFC [Joint Forces Commander] with the means to enable freedom of action and endurance and extend operational reach."⁴⁴ During contingency operations in landlocked regions of the West African Sahel Desert, airfields may be the only choice for initial forward operating bases. Air Force senior leaders have "acknowledged the importance of airbases to projecting airpower anywhere on the globe. Recent crises have compelled the United States to project airpower into places where bases did not exist under the control of friendly forces, thereby elevating the emphasis on seizing and opening airbases."⁴⁵ The problem that air planners face when dealing with most regions throughout Africa is one of locating "suitable" airbases. Many airfields throughout underdeveloped countries on the African continent are plagued with "poor runways and ground infrastructures."⁴⁶ An airfield plagued with poor runway conditions and underdeveloped or unmaintained infrastructure presents hazards to air operations. It could also be a single point of failure when trying to rapidly establish a forward lodgment in an immature theater that relies on air bridges for

sustainment. Utilizing airborne forces to seize an airfield that cannot support operational sustainment would seem like a wasted effort. Unless the airfield is capable of supporting the landings of United States Air Force (USAF) aircraft loaded with follow-on forces and sustainment packages, “once on the ground the airborne forces would have to survive isolation, and would have to be sustained completely by air [airdropped supplies] until relieved by ground forces . . .”⁴⁷ Airborne forces are generally not resourced for prolonged operations and would quickly expend their supplies if left on their own. The rapid establishment of a lodgment that enhances operational sustainment will be critical to a JTF. As in the case of OJC in Panama, the seizure of airfields enhanced operational sustainment by providing “hubs for medical evacuation and resupply of forces.”⁴⁸ Additional forces and supplies that arrive by air into a base of operations may also increase a JTF’s combat power.

Generally, the conditions of airbases throughout Africa are poor. However, airborne forces with niche capabilities trained to expand lodgments may alleviate the problem of degraded airfields in underdeveloped countries. During OEF in Afghanistan, the USAF recognized the requirement for specialized airborne capabilities that would be used to enhance airfield operations on a seized airfield. Since Afghanistan is a landlocked country, airbases were critical to operational sustainment. “In November 2001, as coalition ground troops seized the airfield at Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, they realized [that] the [previous coalition] bombing campaign had rendered the runway and the airfield operations facilities unusable because of craters and unexploded ordnance and other explosive devices.”⁴⁹ Although the Mazar-e-Sharif Airfield had been seized by coalition forces, the airbase would not have been able to enhance operational sustainment unless the runway and facilities had been repaired. The USAF recognized the challenge of getting heavy equipment and supplies

to fix the airfield since “no reliable secure land route was established.”⁵⁰ During the early days of OEF this event “awakened the Air Force to the challenge of opening airbases in remote locations and drove the creation of airborne engineer units in the Air Force.”⁵¹ The USAF maintains units trained in airborne operations that can provide specialized capabilities such as expeditionary airfield assessment, repair, maintenance, and upgrade. In addition, these units also specialize in initial air base opening and command and control of USAF assets. Rapid response units such as the USAF’s contingency response groups (CRGs) and RED HORSE (Rapid Engineer Deployable, Heavy Operational Repair Squadron, Engineer) add to the unique airborne capabilities that are required to support air operations on an austere airbase. These air operations may be critical to a JTF commander’s operational sustainment in any landlocked area. During OIF, the airborne operation that was executed in northern Iraq involved elements of the USAF 86th CRG who parachuted into Bashur Airfield, Iraq in order to rapidly “set up all facets of air operations . . .”⁵² Bashur Airfield was a bare base with no infrastructure or electricity but the airmen from the 86th CRG were able to transform it into a functioning airbase and lodgment for coalition forces.⁵³ The lodgment established at Bashur Airfield logistically supported US forces because it served as a hub for the provision of supplies and additional forces. US Army capabilities seized the airfield while USAF assets transformed the airfield into a base of operations that enhanced operational sustainment.

Although airborne forces may seem like the preferred choice during crises response or limited contingency operations in landlocked immature theaters, they are not the panacea. There are some disadvantages associated with employing such a capability. Airborne operations are inherently risky, and before a JTF commander commits to employing an

airborne force at the operational level “he must be convinced of three things: 1) that the force can fly to the target successfully; 2) that it can jump in and survive at a reasonable cost in men and material; and 3) that it can accomplish a sufficiently important mission to warrant the effort expended.”⁵⁴ Surface to air missiles in the hands of a willing enemy will always pose a threat to airborne forces. Even during limited contingency operations, this threat must be considered. “The proliferation of shoulder-fired heat seeking missiles may make reinforcement and resupply operations prohibitively costly.”⁵⁵ In this case, operational sustainment would suffer. During the Soviet-Afghanistan War during the 1980’s, the Afghan Mujahedeen proved that the shoulder-fired Stinger missile employed by small teams of insurgents had devastating effects against Soviet aircraft. This same threat could apply to an airborne force while en route to its objective. Against a mechanized enemy threat, an airborne force may lack substantial firepower and protection to survive on its own. In desert environments (as opposed to mountainous terrain) such as the West African Sahel regions, airborne forces are at a disadvantage compared to mechanized or even heavy-weapon, wheeled enemy threats. Unless reinforced by friendly ground units, airborne forces facing such threats are nothing more than “speed bumps,” a reference made to the 82nd Airborne Division paratroopers that stood between Iraqi tanks and the defense of Saudi Arabia during Operation DESERT SHIELD. Furthermore, in order to deliver an airborne force to an operational area, JTF planners must address the availability of transport aircraft. Commanders would have to consider the feasibility of utilizing strategic airlift assets that are occupied by other ongoing operations throughout the world that may have higher priorities. “Airborne missions would therefore compete for airlift assets against other missions (such) as strategic deployment of forces, inter and intra-theater transportation of reinforcements,

replacements, and resupply, aeromedical evacuation and special operations.”⁵⁶ However, in immature, landlocked theaters, there may be no better option other than the employment of airborne forces, especially if speed is a governing factor.

Overall, airborne forces have demonstrated the ability to rapidly deploy into austere and landlocked areas in order to establish bases of operations that enhance a JTF commander’s operational maneuver and operational sustainment. There may be future scenarios that warrant utilizing such a capability in the event of crises response and limited contingency operations throughout the landlocked regions of West Africa. Airborne forces may extend the operational reach of land forces in such regions by mitigating time, space and force when exercising the capability of rapid deployment by air. Operational reach may also be enhanced when a JTF commander has the ability to operate forces located in the vicinity of forward bases of operations. Forward bases of operations within landlocked countries could shorten a JTF commander’s physical lines of operations during contingency operations thereby also improving operational maneuver. The forward positioning of additional combat power and logistics within these forward bases of operations will benefit operational sustainment.

The West Africa Sahel Desert Region which encompasses countries like Mali and Niger may be hotspots for potential conflict. It has been established that these landlocked countries lack adequate infrastructure to support the rapid deployment of land forces by ground. Airborne forces should be considered by CCDR and JTF planning staffs as a viable solution to rapidly deploying military forces in response to a crisis or limited contingency operation in West Africa in the event that military intervention is required. USAFRICOM should include concept plans that employ utilizing joint airborne forces during the

development of future contingency plans. The ability to conduct rapid deployment and insertion of forces into landlocked countries in order to seize and build up bases of operations is an advantage that the U.S. military must always maintain. Airborne forces across the military services are uniquely qualified to conduct such operations. They just might be the key to unlocking the door of future landlocked austere theaters.

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