The Evolution of Special Operations Joint Fires

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Aaron Allmon)

By ERIC BRAGANCA

A familiar complaint about Special Operations Forces (SOF) is that they are not integrated with conventional forces. Moreover, they are suspected of regarding themselves as strategic assets. However, SOF leaders recognize that they support other forces—land, sea, air, and space—just as those forces support special operations and one another. This reality has led to the improvement of special operations joint fires in Iraq, which is largely based on experiences in Afghanistan.

Special Operations Forces made great progress in integrating joint fires by borrowing ideas from three distinct battlespaces during Iraqi Freedom. The use of joint fires and air coordination elements assured these successes and should provide a model for the future.

Prior to Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Special Operations Forces understood the need to integrate joint fires. Doctrine indicates that SOF headquarters should include joint fires expertise in mission planning and execution. But even after 9/11, those headquarters were reluctant to seek the support of outside joint fires in order to keep operations small and light, and they did not fully understand what was missing. Initially, they resisted this assistance on the tactical and operational levels, deploying teams without either terminal attack controllers or qualified operational planners and executers on their staffs.

However, based on a battlefield assessment, Special Operations Forces realized their errors and

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Patrolling in west Baghdad.

U.S. Air Force (Jeremy T. Lock)

took corrective action. With the air component, they organized a small but effective team to integrate operations. This cooperation became the model for Iraqi Freedom. But that operation was much more complicated because SOF assets operated in three environments, each with unique integration issues. These varied supported and supporting relationships required unique solutions to joint integration, and each serves as a model for future joint fires integration.

The next challenge is institutionalizing success. The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were fought with the same land, sea, air, and special operations components. While other theaters have witnessed this success, they require details on SOF advances to adapt their lessons for the future. Special Operations Forces also play an important role in the global war on terrorism that transcends conventional boundaries and that will require increased personnel, some of whom should reinforce joint fires. One aspect of this capability is the link between special operations and conventional forces. U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the Air Force should institutionalize the relationships among their subordinate commands to better respond to the next crisis.

Planning and Coordinating

For years joint doctrine did not list the duties or responsibilities for the fire support element of a joint special operations task force (JSOTF). Special Operations Forces eventually integrated joint fires in the theater air-ground system through Joint Publication 3-09, *Joint Fire Support*. The Army has an extensive approach to linking organic fires (artillery, missiles, and helicopters) with Air Force close air support and interdiction using tactical air control parties attached to units down to battalion level. The Marine Corps has a similar arrangement connecting its air and ground fires. The Navy links strike aviation and missiles with the other services. Each path goes through a joint air operations center to ensure that campaigns are synchronized. Special Operations Forces only are connected to each other, reinforcing a perception that they are fighting their own war. Between 1998 and 2001, this started to change.

Prior to the war in Afghanistan, some headquarters realized the shortfall in operational fires expertise through joint exercises and began to address it. However, the effort proved insufficient. Joint Publication 3-05.1, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Joint Special Operations Task Force Operations*, was being revised as the conflict in Afghanistan began and included details on the fire support element, including coordinating boundaries, representing special operations to agencies such as the joint targeting and coordination board, and preventing fratricide. This volume also recommended a fire support annex to the task force operation order and standard operating procedures. However, none of these were in place when operations began in Afghanistan, thus lessons were learned through experience.

Task Force Dagger, the initial joint special operations task force for Afghanistan, was built around a Special Forces group headquarters and faced problems using joint fires on the tactical and operational levels. Teams deployed without terminal attack controllers—Air Force troops trained and were certified to control close air support. Unsuccessful close air support in the first few days of combat indicated the need for expertise, which led the task force commander to deploy trained ground controllers. They had an immediate positive effect on the campaign.

Within days the Special Forces team had qualified terminal attack controllers. This posed problems when air-savvy ground controllers sent air support requests to the task force. No one in the headquarters could handle integration—incorporating joint fires in campaign planning, collating or submitting subordinate fires requests, and deconflicting operations. Though there was a special operations liaison element at air component level, the task force almost exclusively relied on liaison for deconfliction and integration. This resulted in limited success but was not the complete answer because the liaison cell was located with the air component in Saudi Arabia, leaving the task force with no resident expertise to incorporate fires in the campaign.

30th Space Communications Squadron (Richard Freeland)

B–52 refueling, Iraqi Freedom.

Fortunately, the air component commander deployed a small element of the same type used to support conventional Army maneuver. Like controllers on the battlefield, this dramatic initiative enhanced coordination and integration with the air component. Teams on the ground experienced this improvement when close air support became readily available. This Air Force element, known as the joint air component element, provided what Special Operations Forces lacked—the ability to plan and coordinate joint air fires.

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Iraqi Freedom

As operations continued in Afghanistan, U.S. Central Command focused on planning for Iraq. Its land, air, and special operations components—Third Army, Ninth Air Force, and Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT)—created a joint fires architecture. SOF units fought in the north, west, and south. They stopped the enemy in the north, which had fortified the unofficial boundary with the Kurds, from reinforcing Baghdad. To the west they assisted the air component to prevent the launch of SCUDs and other theater ballistic missiles. And they supported the land component in the south to take Baghdad and eliminate elite forces such as the Republican Guard. Because these three fronts required unique approaches to joint fires integration, Third Army, Ninth Air Force, and SOCCENT developed tailored packages for each one.

In the north, where the SOF commander was supported, the air component deployed a joint air component element to JSOTF (subordinate to SOCCENT), which developed its own joint fires element. While these organizations worked together closely, they had separate identities because the joint air component element was directed exclusively on air operations as the joint fires element focused on lethal and non-lethal effects. In the west, where Special Operations Forces supported the air component in the counter-SCUD mission, joint air component and fires elements were fused into a homogeneous body. This worked because operations in the west focused on one mission and there was no need to distinguish between them. In the south, it used a different structure to integrate with the land component.

Integration in the land battle presented unique challenges. First, the two units subordinate to Third Army were organized differently for fires. 1st Marine Expeditionary Force and V Corps had distinct processes for deep operations where Special Operations Forces would be supporting them. Rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, SOCCENT and its subordinate commands organized a flexible system of command and control as well as liaison elements to ensure SOF capabilities supported both Third Army and its subordinate commands.

SOCCENT and Third Army exchanged liaison officers, ensuring conduits for information. By mutual agreement, SOF elements were sent to V Corps and 1st Marine Expeditionary Force. These special operations command and control elements (SOCCEs) took tactical control of teams operating with ground forces to ensure that SOF operations were fully integrated. The element at V Corps also recognized the need for presence at subordinate divisions to keep commanders, who were directly supported, informed by deploying liaison elements. This integration was effective as SOF assets supported Third Army in front of and behind a nonlinear operation. With this scheme, Special Operations Forces reconnoitered lines of communication in advance of 3d Infantry Division en route to Baghdad and supported 1st Marine Expeditionary Force with AC–130 gunships in rear areas, eliminating the *fedayeen* fighters,

Special Operations Forces solved integration challenges through innovation. The methods diverged but were tailor-made for battlespaces with disparate missions. Though for many Iraq was a unified effort, it was not for SOF units. They nominated over 5,200 targets while fighting on three fronts. They captured the northern oil fields, which contain one-third of Iraqi reserves, helped prevent theater ballistic missile launches, and took the southern oil distribution point in preparation for conventional forces. Such success was largely the result of agile thinking by architects of joint fires from Third Army, Ninth Air Force, and SOCCENT.

U.S. Air Force (Jeremy T. Lock)

Combat controller, Afghanistan.

The Future

SOCCENT learned painful but beneficial lessons in Afghanistan and Iraq. The challenge is institutionalizing them. By improving joint fires expertise in SOF headquarters, formalizing the link with the Air Force, and updating doctrine, those lessons will endure. They should be folded into training so that successive generations of warriors understand joint fires.

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No theater special operations commands have standing joint fires elements to better prepare them to make this leap in ability. Theater headquarters are small and lightly staffed with little fires expertise. Moreover, that is true of the SOF headquarters that formed many of the recent JSOTFs. By organizing standing special operations joint fires elements in each theater, there will be resident expertise during deliberate planning as well as exercise development. This asset will ensure that each theater special operations command establishes and maintains links to sister components and rehearses processes during operational battlestaff and field training exercises. Standing joint fires elements need not be as large as those deployed in Iraq with up to 21 personnel in one command. With expertise in four areas (Army fire support, Navy and Air Force close air support/interdiction, and Marine Corps artillery), each SOF command could develop standard operating procedures, incorporate joint fires into deliberate operational and concept plans, and include these concepts in routine exercises.

SOCOM is preparing to absorb a large number of new positions to fight the global war on terrorism. Moving some assets to theater special operations commands as joint fires elements will achieve both tasks since improved joint fires integration will significantly help combat terrorism. And the Marine Corps is working with SOCOM to integrate some of its forces, which provides an opportunity to lend their joint fires expertise to SOF headquarters. With a three-legged joint fires effort, Special Operations Forces can ensure the long-term survival of the process which brought success in Iraq without the lengthy learning process which preceded it.

The other half of this success story was the Air Force tactical air control party—particularly joint air component elements. For years, Special

Loading 155mm howitzer.

U.S. Marine Corps (Matthew J. Decker)

Operations Forces have been augmented by Air Force enlisted terminal attack controllers, including some who have been permanently attached as Special Forces trainers. But direct support relationship by these elements to JSOTF headquarters was new. SOCOM and the Air Force should formalize this arrangement for tactical and operational training purposes as well as contingencies. Linking specific headquarters with tactical air control, perhaps geographically, would create a standing relationship with common tactics, techniques, and procedures before contingencies erupt. Without a formal agreement, recent successes will fade and need to be revived with the same risks experienced by U.S. Central Command.

Lessons learned must also be incorporated into doctrine as proven methods for integration. Joint special operations doctrine is being revised with joint fire support scheduled to be included. These are the first areas in which these new methods should be addressed. Related joint doctrine must eventually be revised as service doctrine is modified in this collaborative effort.

Progress should be institutionalized by extending joint fires expertise to SOF headquarters, formalizing the links between U.S. Special Operations Command and the Air Force and updating joint doctrine for the next conflict.

Special Operations Forces made dramatic progress in joint integration by the end of combat operations in Iraq. No longer seen as fighting their own war, they were fully integrated with other forces as both supported and supporting assets during the campaign. A major part of this success was joint fires, which began before the Afghanistan conflict and culminated in Iraq.

SOCCENT learned valuable lessons in Afghanistan and, through a collaborative effort with other components, established a network of joint fires, air coordination, and command and control elements on multiple levels. Special Operations Forces applied different joint fires solutions on three fronts in Iraq, tailored to specific circumstances. They were supported in the north with joint fires linked to air component elements employing traditional Army side-by-side integration. They supported the air component in the west, merging joint fires with joint air component elements. Their complex support to the land component in the south required a more detailed infrastructure of command and control elements and liaison, ensuring the appropriate expertise.

Special Operations Forces learned valuable lessons in both Afghanistan and Iraq that must be institutionalized. Capabilities cannot be developed after a crisis occurs. **JFQ**