Reevaluating the Marine Corps' Airborne Requirement

Why do we have it if we don't use it?

by LtCol John Miles, Maj Bradford Carr & Capt Patrick Francescon

The Marine Corps requirement to maintain an airborne capability is the law, literally. The official mission of the Marine Corps as established in the National Security Act of 1947, and amended in 1952, requires that Marines stand prepared to meet mission requirements, including "providing forces for airborne operations," in coordination with the other Services, according to the doctrine established by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as developing, in coordination with the other Services, "the doctrine, procedures, and equipment for airborne operations." That being said, there are plenty of those in and out of the Marine Corps who would argue that airborne operations are an unnecessary and antiquated requirement that should be dispensed with, primarily due to the high cost in money and manpower that maintaining an airborne capability requires.

The last time the Marine Corps conducted a "combat jump" was in Iraq in 2004 when a six-man reconnaissance (recon) pathfinder team jumped via high altitude, high opening (HAHO) into western Iraq. Prior to that, the most recent Marine combat jumps were in Vietnam, 35 years ago. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that we, as an organization, don't seem to be getting much of a return on our investment in airborne operations.

The green light is on. *(Photo courtesy of authors.)*

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In the long war, especially in Afghanistan, we propose that there is a viable mission for Marine Corps airborne operations, specifically as they apply to recon units. One of the mission essential tasks for recon units is to conduct a static line low-level (SLLL) parachute insertion. While it could be argued that the potential mission set would be more suitable for HAHO or

We need to be able to get recon teams close to the objective. *(Photo courtesy of authors.)*

high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) operations, the fact remains that inserting specially trained Marines from the sky, silently, at night, without the noticeable signature of rotary-wing or ground vehicle movement, could be extremely useful for commanders.

One of the most difficult conundrums of the war in Afghanistan is how to get close enough to the enemy to observe what he's doing without being seen or heard ourselves. The obvious answer for this is by using unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) with full motion video. These assets have a tremendous amount of loiter time and can fly around unobserved, showing us what the enemy is doing, at no risk to personnel. The problems are that there are not nearly enough to go around, and they are subject to the limitations that all aircraft are to one degree or another, specifically weather, mechanical issues, and having to go off station eventually to refuel.

A recon team in a hide site, overlooking the objective, and given enough time to camouflage the site can observe and establish a pattern of life for several days. This frees up UAS assets for other missions. The question is how to get a recon team near enough to the objective without being compromised. The only two options currently being used are vehicle and helicopter insertions. Ground vehicle insert, over bad/nonexistent roads, is relatively slow and dangerous due to the constant threat of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—not to mention easily compromised. A convoy of mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles is hard to hide. Rotary-wing insert is fast, agile, and avoids the threat of IEDs but is certainly not stealthy. You're not going to get anywhere near your objective without being detected. That means a long-distance offset insertion from the objective, with a long walk to it. The team is vulnerable during the patrol to the objective, and the longer they have to move the higher their chances of compromise. This movement will usually be undertaken at night, and if the team needs to develop a hide site for observation prior to daybreak, they will struggle to find time to do so. What is the obvious answer? Using parachute operations to insert the team, unheard and unseen, in the dark of night.

The advantages of airborne insertion for recon teams are many. Force Recon Company, II MEF, has demonstrated a high-glide capability that allows over 40 kilometers of travel from jump point to landing. This aerial offset would guarantee a silent insertion and dramatically reduce the risk of compromise. This capability is dependent on HAHO and high-glide certification prior to deployment. Even without those established capabilities, recon teams could jump in from a high enough altitude that the aircraft would not be heard, and if it was, the rural population of Afghanistan is becoming desensitized to hearing high-flying aircraft overhead due the frequent use of container delivery system drops of supplies. For the same reason, if the recon team was seen parachuting in, it wouldn't necessarily result in a compromised mission. Afghanis are getting used to seeing supplies descending to the ground via parachute.

Once the team was on the ground in an advantageous position and in a well-concealed hide site, they could be there for several days, all the while supplying the commander with video, voice, and data information, before they would need to be resupplied or extracted. This would allow them to establish a pattern of life on whatever objective they were observing. Depending on the mission tasking, they may then be told to utilize precision fires or direct aviation munitions on to the target for battlespace shaping.

One of the chief complaints against using airborne operations is the support required to provide an air quick

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reaction force (QRF) to extract a compromised team that had jumped in. This argument assumes the jump capability was utilized to overcome limiting terrain. However, a jump does not necessarily mean a deep insertion in slow or no-go terrain. Since the primary intent is to overcome enemy detection, utilizing a jump to insert a team within vehicle QRF range prevents a unit from having to dedicate air assets to the QRF mission and keeps the QRF requirement to the size and organization normally associated with an infantry mission.

Another reason that airborne operations are not used more frequently is that many commanders are no longer familiar with them. Prior to the long war combat deployment cycles, MEU and higher commanders without an airborne background were introduced to the capabilities of parachute operations through various training evolutions during predeployment workups. This is no longer the case. This current lack of familiarity can only be overcome by commanders including SLLL, HAHO, and HALO parachute operations into current training events, such as Ehanced MOJAVE VIPER or at the Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport. Seeing is believing. If these methods of insertion are demonstrated during predeployment training, commanders will experience the "aha moment" and will be more willing to consider their employment once deployed.

The ability to provide a commander with eyes on a target is priceless, especially with the limitations on intelligence, surveillance, and recon assets and the time required to move these assets around the battlefield. Why should commanders further limit themselves by discounting a capability they already have at their disposal? With the cost limited and the potential for gain in intelligence collection clear, the airborne mission is a useful tool in a commander's tool belt so long as we choose to maintain it as an option.