

One problem led to another, and the Apache helicopters never flew a combat mission in Kosovo.

TASK FORCE HAWK

By Benjamin S. Lambeth



An Army AH-64 Apache in Albania. At right, a line of Apaches in Bosnia.

Only days after Operation Allied Force commenced in March 1999, Gen. Wesley K. Clark, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, asked the United States Army to deploy a contingent of its AH-64 Apache attack helicopters to the combat zone to provide a better close-in capability against enemy tanks and armored personnel carriers than that offered by fixed-wing fighters, which remained restricted to operating at medium altitudes as a general rule. Clark initially had hoped to deploy this force to Macedonia, where the roads and airfields were better and the terrain was less challenging. The Macedonian government, however, declined to grant permission because it was already swamped by the flood of Kosovar refugees, so Albania was sought instead as the best available alternative.

Within four hours, NATO approved Clark's request. It took more than a week, however, for the US and Albanian governments to en-

dorse the deployment. That approval finally came on Day 12 of Allied Force. The US Defense Department at first indicated that it would take up to 10 days to deploy the package. In the end, it took 17 days just to field the first battalion of Apaches, which arrived in Albania on April 21.

At first glance, the idea of using Apaches to reinforce NATO's fixed-wing aircraft seemed entirely appropriate, considering that the AH-64 had been acquired by the Army expressly to engage and destroy enemy armor. As Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon put it in announcing the deployment, they would offer NATO "the type of tank-killing capability that the bad weather has denied us. It will give us the capability to get up close and personal to the Milosevic armor units in Kosovo." In a normal weapons load, the Apache mounts up to 16 Hellfire anti-tank missiles, 76 folding-fin anti-personnel rockets, and 1,200 rounds of 30 mm armor-piercing ammunition.



With that armament, it gained deserved distinction by destroying more than 500 Iraqi armored vehicles during Operation Desert Storm. Yet in Desert Storm, the Apaches had deployed as an organic component of two fully fielded US Army corps. In this case, the Army was being asked by SACEUR to cobble together an ad hoc task force designed to operate essentially on its own, without the backstopping support of a fielded US ground combat presence in the theater. The Army is not configured to undertake such ad hoc deployments, and its units do not train for them. Instead, an Apache battalion normally deploys only as a part of a larger Army division or corps, with all of the latter's organically attached elements.

Apaches, and More

Accordingly, the Army was driven by its own standard operating procedures to supplement the two Apache battalions with a heavy additional contingent of ground forces, air de-

fenses, military engineers, and headquarters overhead. As the core of this larger force complement, now designated Task Force Hawk, the Apaches were drawn from the Army's 11th Aviation Brigade stationed at Illesheim, Germany. The deployment package included, however, not only the two battalions of AH-64s but also 26 UH-60L Black Hawk and CH-47D Chinook helicopters from the 12th Aviation Regiment at Wiesbaden, Germany. Additional assets whose deployment was deemed essential for supporting the Apaches included a light infantry company; a Multiple Launch Rocket System platoon with three MLRS vehicles; a high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (humvee) anti-tank company equipped with 38 armed utility vehicles; a military intelligence platoon; a military police platoon; and a combat service support team. The Army further determined a need for its Apaches to be accompanied by a mechanized infantry company equipped with 14 Bradley armored fight-

ing vehicles; an armor company with 15 M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks; a howitzer battery with eight 155 mm artillery pieces; a construction engineer company; a short-range air defense battery with eight more Bradley armored fighting vehicles armed with Stinger infrared surface-to-air missiles; a smoke generator platoon; a brigade headquarters complement; and diverse other elements. In all, to backstop the deployment of 24 attack helicopters to Albania, Task Force Hawk ended up being accompanied by a support train of no fewer than 5,350 Army personnel.

To be sure, there was a legitimate force-protection rationale behind this accompanying train of equipment and personnel. Unlike the Marines, who deployed 24 F/A-18D fighters to Hungary only a few weeks thereafter and had them flying combat missions within days with nothing even approaching Hawk's overhead and support baggage, Army planners had to be concerned about the inherent risks of deploying a comparable num-

ber of Apaches on terrain that was not that of a NATO ally, that lacked any semblance of a friendly ground force presence, and that could easily have invited a VJ (for Vojska Jugoslavskaya, the Serb army) cross-border attack in the absence of a US ground force sufficient to render that an unacceptable gamble for VJ commanders.

That said, it bears noting that the threat of Serbian forces coming across the Albanian border did not appear to be a matter of great concern to anyone in the Allied Force command hierarchy before the arrival of Task Force Hawk, even though there were US troops already on the ground. The troops, who were not provided with any comparable force protection package, were in Albania as a part of Joint Task Force Shining Hope, the Albanian refugee relief effort.

Baggage Problems

As one might have expected with that much additional equipment and personnel, however, the Apache deployment soon encountered the predictable consequences of the Army's decision to accompany the AH-64s with such a surfeit of arguably unnecessary extra baggage. It was at first estimated that 200 USAF C-17 transport sorties would be needed to airlift the assorted support elements with which the Apaches had been burdened. (The airport at Tirana, Albania, lacked the required taxi-

way and ramp specifications to accommodate the more capacious C-5.) In the end, it took more than 500 C-17 sorties, moving some 22,000 short tons in all, to transfer Hawk in its entirety. Commenting later on the deployment, one Army officer complained that the Army is "still organized to fight in the Fulda Gap." Even the outgoing Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Dennis J. Reimer, admitted in an internal memo to senior Army staff officers once the deployment package had finally been assembled in theater that the manifold problems encountered by Hawk had underscored a "need for more adaptive force packaging methodology."

In all events, 23 Apaches with their attached equipment and personnel arrived in Albania in late April. (The 24th Apache had developed hydraulic trouble en route and remained on the ground in Italy.) No sooner had the Army declared all but one of the aircraft ready for combat on April 26 when, only hours later, one crashed at the Tirana airfield in full view of reporters who had been authorized to televise the flight. Neither crew member was injured, but the accident made for an inauspicious start for the widely touted deployment. Less than two weeks later, on May 5, a second accident occurred, this time killing both crew members during a night training mission some 46 miles north of Tirana. The aircraft was carrying a full load of weapons and extra fuel. A subsequent investiga-

tion concluded that the first accident had been caused by the pilot's having mistakenly landed short of his intended touchdown point. The second was attributed to an apparent failure of the tail rotor, considering that the aircraft had been observed to enter a rapid uncontrolled spiral during the last moments before its impact with the ground.

Rising Costs

As of May 31, the cost of the Task Force Hawk deployment had reached \$254 million, much of that constituting the expense for the hundreds of C-17 sorties that had been needed to haul all the equipment from Germany to Albania, plus the additional costs of building base camps and port services and conducting mission rehearsals. Yet despite SACEUR's intentions to the contrary, the Apaches flew not a single combat mission during the entire remainder of Operation Allied Force. The reason given by then-JCS Chairman Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton was that Serb air defenses in Kosovo, although noticeably degraded by early May, remained effective enough to warrant keeping the Apaches out of action until suppression of enemy air defenses operations had "reduced the risk to the very minimum."

In a final coda to the Army's plagued Task Force Hawk experience, Shelton conceded later in a written response to questions from the Senate Armed Services Committee that "the anticipated benefit of employing the Apaches against dispersed forces in a high-threat environment did not outweigh the risk to our pilots." Shelton added that by the time the Apache deployment had reached the point where it was ready to engage in combat, VJ ground formations were no longer massed but had become dispersed and well hidden. Moreover, he went on to note, the weather had improved, enabling Air Force A-10s and other fixed-wing aircraft to hunt down dispersed and hidden enemy forces while incurring less risk from enemy infrared SAMs, anti-aircraft artillery, and small-arms fire than the Apaches would have faced.

Beyond these problems created by the Army's decision to bring along so much additional overhead, there was a breakdown in joint doc-

USAF photo by SrA. Michelle Leonard



The estimate was for 200 sorties. In fact, C-17s flew more than 500 to haul 23 Task Force Hawk Apaches and their support elements from Germany to Albania.

trine for the combat use of the helicopters that was disturbingly evocative of the earlier competition for ownership and control of coalition air assets that had continually poisoned the relationship between the Joint Force Air Component Commander and the Army's corps commanders during Desert Storm. The issue stemmed in this case from the fact that the Army has traditionally regarded its attack helicopters not as part of a larger airpower equation with a theaterwide focus but rather as an organic maneuver element fielded to help support the ground maneuver needs of a division or corps. Apache crews typically rely on their own ground units to select and designate their targets. Yet in the case of Allied Force, with no Army ground combat presence in-theater to speak of, they would either have had to self-designate their targets or else rely on Air Force forward air controllers flying at higher altitudes to designate for them. The idea of using Apaches as a strike asset in this manner independently of US ground forces was simply not recognized by prevailing Army doctrine. On the contrary, as prescribed in Army Field Manual 1-112, *Attack Helicopter Operations*, an AH-64 battalion "never fights alone. ... Attacks may be conducted out of physical contact with other friendly forces," but they must be "synchronized with their scheme of maneuver." FM 1-112 expressly characterizes deep attack missions of the sort envisaged by Clark as "high-risk, high-payoff operations that must be exercised with the utmost care."

Emerging Rift

In light of this, the Army's V Corps commander, Lt. Gen. John W. Hendrix, was willing to have the Apaches included in the European Command Air Tasking Order, but he demurred on having them incorporated as well in the separate NATO ATO, notwithstanding the insistence of the NATO air commander, Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short, that such inclusion would be essential in any situation in which the attack helicopters were ever committed to actual combat. Apart from that, however, Short never sought operational control of the Apaches or attempted to task them. He also offered to provide Task



An Army mechanic works on an Apache. The Army support tail for Task Force Hawk included 5,350 personnel.

Force Hawk as much operational support (including EA-6B Prowler jamming support) as possible and even went so far as to propose to subordinate himself and his Combined Air Operations Center as a supporting (as opposed to supported) combat element to Hendrix, who as V Corps commander was also the ultimate commander of Hawk.

An agreement was finally reached that nominally included the Apaches with all other ATO missions, yet which left to Hendrix's discretion much essential detail on mission timing and tactics. A window was provided in the ATO such that the Apaches would be time-deconflicted from friendly bombs falling from above and also assured of some fixed-wing air support. However, the agreement reached in the end was so vague that it allowed each service to claim it maintained tactical control over the Apaches in the event they were ever committed to combat. For their part, Army officers insisted that fire support for the AH-64s would come *only* from MLRS and Army Tactical Missile Systems positioned on the Albanian side of the border. That doctrinal stance was enough all by itself to ensure that the Apaches would never see combat, considering that the massive MLRS and ATACMS fires envisaged for any AH-64 operations would have rained literally multiple thousands of cluster bomb unit submunitions all over Kosovo in an indiscriminate attempt

to suppress enemy AAA and infrared SAMs, a tactic that was out of the question from the very start, given NATO's determination to avoid any significant incidence of noncombatant casualties. In contrast, Air Force planners maintained that excluding the Apaches from CAOC control would increase their level of risk by depriving them of support from such key battlespace awareness assets as Joint STARS, Rivet Joint, Compass Call, and the EA-6B. As a USAF officer attached to Hendrix's deep operations coordination cell wrote in an e-mail obtained by *Inside the Pentagon*, "They do not know, nor do they want to know, the detailed integration required to get the Prowler to jam the priority threats, provide acquisition jamming on the correct azimuth, etc. The benefits of integrating with platforms like Compass Call, Rivet Joint, and others are off their radar scope."

In his memoirs, Clark later scored the press article that reported this material. He criticized its author for "personally attacking Jay Hendrix and claiming, among other accusations, that he would not allow the Apache sorties to appear on Short's Air Tasking Order." Clark made no attempt to refute that accusation, however, but merely dismissed it as the complaint of a "disgruntled Air Force officer."

After Allied Force ended, USAF Maj. Gen. John R. Dallager, the assistant chief of staff for operations

and logistics at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, touched the heart of the overriding interests and equities at stake here when he stated, during a briefing at a NATO Reaction Force Air Staff conference on JFACC issues: “Clearly the JFACC’s authority must not infringe upon operational C² [Command and Control] relationships within and between national or service commands and other functional commands. But to ensure deconfliction of simultaneous missions and to minimize the risk of fratricide, all air operations within the [joint operating arena] must be closely coordinated by the JFACC through the ATO ... process. This last point may be difficult to swallow for land and maritime commanders, but if air history teaches us anything, it is that air, the truly joint activity, needs to be coordinated centrally if we are to make efficient use of scarce resources and if we are to avoid blue-on-blue.”

The Headquarters View

Interestingly, the Army leadership in the Pentagon seemed far more disposed than Hendrix, at least in principle, to assign operational control of the Apaches to the CAOC. According to *Inside the Army*, the incoming Army vice chief of staff, Lt. Gen. John M. Keane, frankly commented at an Army aviation symposium in May 1999 that “it boggles my mind, but we still have senior leaders, people who wear stars, ...

who don’t recognize that if you are going to fly Apaches at a distance and range, it’s got to be on the Air Tasking Order.” Keane added that the Apaches had to be under the operational control of the JFACC in the Army’s “self-interest” because that arrangement offered a more effective way of employing them in this particular instance: “The JFACC should determine what the Apache targets are as a result of the entire responsibility he has in conducting that air campaign.” He further noted that the JFACC had the comparative advantage of being able to retask combat assets based on real-time intelligence, something the Army could take advantage of as well if it could get itself out of “this business of being myopic about ground operations.” In closing, he acknowledged that in the Army, “we’ve got this nagging fear that somehow, if we turn over our organization to somebody in another uniform, that that organization is going to suffer as a result of that. And I just fundamentally disagree with that.”

In yet further testimony to the ill-fated character of the Army’s Task Force Hawk experience, it was acknowledged in an internal Army memorandum after Allied Force ended that the aircrews that had been sent with the Apaches had been both undertrained and under-equipped for their intended mission. In the memo—obtained by Legi-Slate News Service—to the in-

coming Chief of Staff, Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, Brig. Gen. Richard A. Cody, the Army’s director of operations, resources, and mobilization, warned that because of those shortcomings, “we are placing them and their unit at risk when we have to ramp up for a real-world crisis.” Cody, who earlier had planned and executed the Army’s highly successful Apache operations during the 1991 Gulf War, noted that more than 65 percent of the assigned aviators in Task Force Hawk had less than 500 hours of flight experience in the Apache and that none were qualified to fly missions requiring night vision goggles. He further noted that the radios in the deployed Apaches had insufficient range for conducting deep operations and that the crews were, in the absence of night vision goggles, dependent solely on their Forward-Looking Infrared sensors. Given the rugged terrain, unpredictable weather, and poorly marked power lines that crisscrossed Kosovo, relying on FLIR alone, he suggested, “was not a good option.” Moreover, he added, in order for the Apaches to have flown the required distances and crossed the high mountains of Kosovo, Hellfire missiles would have had to be removed from one of their two wing mounts to free up a station for auxiliary fuel tanks. As for the man-portable air defense system threat, Cody remarked that “the current suite of ASE [Aircraft Survivability Equipment] is not reliable enough and sometimes ineffective.”

The Task Force Hawk experience underscored how little the US Army, by its own leadership’s candid admission, had done since Desert Storm to increase its capacity to get to an emergent theater of operations rapidly and with sufficient forces to offer a credible combat presence. Shortly after the Gulf War, the Army’s leadership for a time entertained the thought of reorganizing the service so it might become more agile by abandoning its structure of 10 combat divisions and opting instead for 25 “mobile combat groups” of around 5,000 troops each. Ultimately, however, the Army backed away from that proposed reform, doing itself out of any ability to deploy a strong armored force rapidly and retaining the unpalatable alternatives of either airlifting several thousand lightly armed in-

US Army photo by Spc. Christopher R. Salazar



US forces catalogue SA-7B surface-to-air missiles found in a Serbian storage facility. JCS Chairman Shelton said the Apaches faced greater risk from Serb air defenses than fixed-wing aircraft.

fantrymen to a threatened theater within days or shipping a contingent of 70-ton M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks over the course of several months.

Poorly Prepared

On his second day in office as the Army's new Chief of Staff, Shinseki acknowledged that the Army had been poorly prepared to move its Apaches and support overhead to Albania. Part of the problem, he noted fairly, was that the only available deployment site that made any operational sense had poor rail connections, a shallow port, and a limited airfield capacity that could not accommodate the Air Force's C-5 heavy airlifter. However, he admitted that the Army all the same was overdue to develop and act on a plan to make its heavy forces more mobile and its lighter forces more lethal. In what presaged a major shift in Army force development policy for the years ahead, he declared: "Our heavy forces are too heavy and our light forces lack staying power. Heavy forces must be more strategically deployable and more agile with a smaller logistical footprint, and light forces must be more lethal, survivable, and tactically mobile. Achieving this paradigm will require innovative thinking about structure, modernization efforts, and spending."

One positive role played by Task Force Hawk once the counteroffensive by the paramilitary Kosovo Liberation Army began registering effects in late May was the service provided by the former's counterbattery radars in helping NATO fixed-wing pilots pinpoint and deliver munitions against enemy artillery positions. Its TPQ-36 and TPQ-37 firefinder radars were positioned atop the hills adjacent to Tirana to spot Serb artillery fire and backtrack the airborne shells to their point of origin. Army EH-60 helicopters and RC-12 Guardrail electronic intelligence aircraft were further able to establish the location of VJ com-



USAF photo by TSgt. Cesar Rodriguez

They didn't fly in combat, but Apache intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets aided allied fixed-wing targeting toward the end of Allied Force.

mand posts whenever the latter transmitted. Although Hawk's Apaches and other combat assets never saw action, its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets exerted a significant influence on the air effort at one of its most crucial moments. The KLA's counteroffensive had forced the VJ to mass their forces and maneuver, to communicate by radio, and to fire artillery and mortars to protect themselves. In response, the sensors of Task Force Hawk, operating in conjunction with the Army's Hunter unmanned aerial vehicles, spotted VJ targets and passed that information on to those in the command loop who could bring air-delivered ordnance to bear in a timely manner. "The result," wrote Theodore G. Stroup Jr., a retired Army three-star general, "was that NATO airpower was finally able to target precisely and hit the Serb army in the field. The Kosovars acted as the anvil and TF Hawk as the eyes and ears of the blacksmith so that the hammer of airpower could be effective." Echoing this conclusion, then-US Air Forces in Europe commander, Gen. John P. Jumper, confirmed that

the counterbattery radars of Task Force Hawk had played "a very big part" in allied targeting during the final stages of Allied Force.

Another bright spot in the otherwise troubled Hawk experience was the USAF air mobility system's outstanding performance in opening up the Rinas Air Base in Albania and flowing forces and relief supplies into it. The combined efforts of USAFE's Air Mobility Operations Command Center, the Allied Force Air Mobility Division, USAFE's 86th Contingency Response Group at Ramstein AB, Germany, and multiple supporting Air Mobility Command entities resulted in a standout success amid the generally dismal story of Hawk's immobility and the Army's persistent go-it-alone approach when it came to command relations and putting the Apaches into the ATO. Simply put, the C-17 made the Task Force Hawk movement possible. No other aircraft could have done the job, yet another testimonial to the direct-delivery concept that shaped the aircraft's design and got it through one of the most hard-fought acquisition battles in USAF's history. Thanks to the ultimate success of the C-17 acquisition, Hawk got in and many thousand Albanian refugees survived, two signal accomplishments of what the commander of the US Army Europe, Gen. Montgomery C. Meigs, later called one of the most successful airlift operations in history. ■

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