Was it just poor tactics or some deeper problem that caused the failed Apache mission?

Ambush at Najaf

By Richard J. Newman

A US Army AH-64 Apache in Iraq. Critics view the failed March 24 mission as the Apache's "Little Big Horn."

DURING Gulf War II, the Army sent its Apache helicopters to mount a "deep attack" against an Iraqi unit. Small-arms and anti-aircraft fire downed one Apache, and the other helicopters retreated, some damaged so seriously they had to be grounded for weeks. That aborted mission has become the subject of one of the most controversial postwar debates.

There's little dispute about what happened. On March 24, Lt. Gen. William S. Wallace, the Army's V Corps commander, ordered 32 AH-64 Apaches from the 11th Aviation Regiment to mount an attack behind enemy lines against the Iraqi Republican Guard Medina Division. The corridor near Najaf that the Apaches planned to fly through was modestly populated, so commanders decided against the usual suppression fire—mainly artillery—used to silence enemy forces that could threaten the helicopters. That opening gave the Iraqis one of their few battlefield victories of the war.

A fusillade of small-arms and anti-aircraft fire downed one Apache and its two-man crew. The other helicopters in the raid retreated before the mission could be accomplished.

Despite this failed mission, the Army insists the Apache was indispensable during the war, providing critical close air support for ground troops engaged in combat and armed reconnaissance by helping to destroy Iraqi armor and other key equipment lurking on the edges of the battlefield. "Our Apaches did great for us," said Maj. Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, during a briefing after the war. "We were flexible and adaptable in the way that we used them."

"Little Big Horn"?

But critics of the multimillion dollar chopper view the Najaf retreat as the Apache's "Little Big Horn"—proof that it is too vulnerable to survive modern combat. They argue that the Apache is a relic of Cold War planning that failed at its primary mission—deep attack.

"The Army," wrote former Air Force Chief of Staff Merrill A. McPeak after the war, "should restrict the Apache to close air support—or, if it must go deep, hand it over for joint tasking."

Those are precisely the kinds of

US Army photo by Sgt. Igor Paustovski

issues facing defense planners as they attempt to fulfill Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's goal of making the military more nimble and versatile.

Whatever its limitations, few deny that the Apache is a fearsome weapon system. The helicopter can carry 16 fire-and-forget Hellfire missiles, each capable of taking out a tank. The newer and more advanced version—the AH-64D Longbow—can track and process up to 256 different targets at once. It also carries a millimeter-wave radar for improved performance during bad weather and other poor-visibility situations. At combat altitudes of less than a hundred feet, Apaches can often sneak below an enemy's radar coverage, which made them the weapon of choice in the opening phase of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Before any Air Force or Navy aircraft had dropped their bombs, a fleet of Apaches had slipped into Iraq and attacked key nodes of the air defense system—the opening shots of the war.

Army commanders expected the Apaches to play a similar role in Gulf War II.

In January and February 2003, Apaches from the 101st Airborne, the 11th Aviation Regiment, and other units participated in an exercise called Victory Scrimmage at the Army's training range in Grafenwoehr, Germany. The exercise was a dress rehearsal for the war, with units practicing roles they anticipated they would fulfill in Iraq. Some went after artillery, for example, while others attacked mechanized units. Risky operations behind enemy lines were the focal point. "It was typical use of the Apaches," recalled Lt. Col. Steve Smith, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment. "We thought we'd be doing night and deep attacks."

The Mission

Then came the mission against the Medina Division on March 24, four days into the war.

Army officials now believe that the aviation assembly areas the Army established in the Iraqi desert had been under surveillance by enemy observers, who noticed battle preparations on the night of the 24th. After the war, Wallace, the V Corps commander, told reporters that an Iraqi two-star general in Najaf had used a "cellular telephone to speed-dial a number of Iraqi air defenders" and tell them to prepare for a helicopter raid.

As the Apache pilots flew toward their attack positions, the Iraqi power grid in the Najaf area went black for a few seconds—likely a signal to Iraqi gunners that the Apaches were approaching. Then the sky filled with lead. The fire was so dense that when the Army tried to mount a search and rescue operation for the two-man crew of the Apache that was shot down, the rescuers couldn't get through. Iraqi forces captured the two pilots.

Two days later, the Army again used Apaches to carry out another nighttime deep attack. But the Army used different tactics this time.

First, it preceded the Apache raid with a four-minute artillery bombardment to make sure Iraqi gunners wouldn't catch the helicopter crews by surprise. As the Apaches approached the city of Karbala, where the Army expected to find Iraqi armor, the lights once again went out, just as they had when the 11th had been ambushed. "That put a little lump in my throat," said Smith, who was flying one of the choppers.

Initially, the Apaches took little fire. However, south of the city, they

found the Iraqi units they were seeking and quickly came under attack from anti-aircraft artillery. The Apaches fired back on the move—rather than using the Army's typical tactic of hovering over the battlefield. That made them harder to hit from the ground but reduced their accuracy. The Army choppers also coordinated the attack with several F/A-18s and other fixed-wing fighters. The fighters guarded the choppers' flanks, enabling the Apaches to get in close and quickly pass the precise locations of the Iraqi military vehicles and anti-aircraft guns to the fighters overhead.

The results of the attack were respectable, if not spectacular: seven Iraqi air defense guns destroyed, along with three artillery systems, five radars, and 25 vehicles or other weapons systems. Not one Apache was shot down. Shortly afterward, the 3rd Infantry Division slashed through the Medina on its way toward Baghdad.

The contrast between those two missions has fueled the debate. Did the Army merely need to tweak its attack aviation tactics as it adapted to the battlefield in Iraq or was a broader revamping of the entire Apache mission required? "One key question," wrote Anthony H. Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "is whether the loss of tactical surprise [on the 24th] was a freak incident or more typical of what can be expected of an alert enemy in the future."

USAF photo by SSgt. Cherie A. Thurlby

After the March 24 retreat, Apaches coordinated attacks with fighters such as these F-16CJs, flying over Iraq. Some say the failed attack was poorly planned. Others say the Apache is inadequate for its deep-attack mission.

Critics like McPeak argue that the Apache simply lacks the stealth and the range to penetrate enemy lines without being detected. Others have speculated, less publicly, that the March 24 raid was simply poorly planned, with a predictable flight path and a breach of operational security. Cordesman pointed out that the "critical mission limitations" placed on Apache units after March 24 "may have occurred because it was already clear that the US could win this particular war without taking major losses."

One thing is certain, though: The Apache mission changed significantly during the course of the war.

Military officials have pointed out that fighting conditions in Iraq weren't well-suited to the Apache's classic, deep-attack mission. For instance, instead of massing in formation—an ideal posture for an Apache raid—Iraqi units dispersed and moved away from the American lines, making themselves less vulnerable to the kind of concentrated firepower that attack helicopters bring to bear. The fine dust of the Iraqi desert also inhibited flight operations, fouling engines and power units and making visibility treacherous. At least one crash was largely caused by such poor environmental conditions.

Still, the March 24 setback clearly alarmed senior commanders and forced rapid changes. "Everybody in this country has a weapon," observed Wallace in a *USA Today* interview, "and if they all shoot them up in the air at the same time at every helicopter that flies over, it becomes a very lethal environment for low-flying aircraft. He later told reporters, "Our attack aviation performed a significant role during the fight, but I must admit it didn't perform the same role that I had envisioned."

US Army photo by Sgt. Igor Paustovski

This AH-64 crashed during landing in Iraq on March 30. The Apaches suffered from mechanical problems and poor visibility caused by the fine dust of the Iraqi desert.

Revised Tactics

Instead of conducting raids, Apaches ended up spending most of their time executing other missions from the Army aviation playbook: armed reconnaissance and close support of

ground troops. Armed reconnaissance missions often resembled deep attacks, since many took place behind enemy lines. Some covered distances of nearly 100 miles. But there were important differences. Many of the reconnaissance flights were during daylight. They were often packaged with other air assets, such as USAF's E-8 Joint STARS radar, E-3 AWACS command and control aircraft, and F-16s with High speed Anti-Radiation Missiles, and Navy EA-6B electronic jamming aircraft. The Apaches would gather intelligence on how Iraqi forces were arrayed and scout for targets—but husband their own ordnance. If they came across hot targets, they'd call for strikes from Army artillery or from fixed-wing fighters overhead. Only when the Apaches were running low on fuel and were near the end of their time on station would they fire their own missiles, if targets were handy.

US Army photo by Sgt. Igor Paustovski

As part of its revised tactics, the Army shifted the Apaches to new missions: armed reconnaissance, close air support, and urban warfare. They proved highly effective in supporting ground forces in the urban setting.

There was more shooting during close air support missions, when ground troops from the 101st and the 3rd Infantry Division were battling Iraqi units. As those troops punched through areas such as the Ramadi Gap, al Hillah, and Karbala, Apaches often hovered "over the shoulder" of ground units, guarding their flanks, protecting supply lines, and conducting standoff attacks of enemy troops up to five miles ahead. At al Hillah, for instance, an Apache company from the 101st "fought very, very hard," according to Petraeus, and was a key factor in the defeat of a Republican Guard battalion. Eight helicopters took fire.

In a half-dozen such battles during the first two weeks of April, attack aviation units from the 101st destroyed more than 200 Iraqi air defense guns, 100 artillery pieces, nearly 35 radars, and hundreds of other weapons. The Apaches found some of the equipment abandoned, beneath trees or in the open desert, but, at other times, Iraqi defenders put up a fight. Overall, the 101st Apaches and Kiowa Warrior scout helicopters fired more than 40,000 rounds of ammunition, along with nearly 1,000 2.75-inch rockets and Hellfire missiles.

To the Apaches fell another new mission, filling the security vacuum created as the lead Army battalions briskly bypassed cities such as an Najaf and Karbala. When the 101st moved into some of those areas to begin peace enforcement operations, Apache helicopters turned out to be invaluable: Hovering over buildings gave them an ideal perch for intelligence gathering and taking direct action. They were far more effective than artillery when US ground forces needed offensive fire. When Iraqi irregulars belonging to the Fedayeen Saddam militia fired on a US brigade commander's convoy in Najaf, for instance, an Apache aircrew had the mobility—and the lethality—to track the attackers and destroy their vehicles. By the time US forces reached the Iraqi capital, Apache crews found themselves in an unprecedented role, essentially flying air combat patrols for troops engaged in urban combat. "I never thought I'd be flying an Apache over the rooftops of southern Baghdad," recalled Smith. "But there I was."

Was that a new role for the Apache? Or an anomaly? The question may not be answered until the next war, but Apache pilots know they never could have flown over Iraqi cities if fixed-wing fighters and other weapons hadn't neutralized Iraqi air defenses and friendly ground troops hadn't secured the territory beneath them. There's also an important degree of symbiosis between the Apaches and their enablers. Attack helicopters helped identify and destroy many air defense weapons, and they served as aerial protectors for the very troops whose presence on the ground made it safer to fly.

That may argue in favor of new procedures for Apache units and for greater integration with other aircraft. The kinds of "pop-up" tactics and earth-hugging flight profiles that are effective at the Army's National Training Center—where tactical surprise is often assumed and where few civilians roam the terrain—may turn out to be inappropriate for combat on many of the world's potential battlefields, where concerns about collateral damage trump standard operating procedures. Greater coordination with fixed-wing aircraft—as was apparently the case during the battle of Karbala—may enhance the survivability and effectiveness of the Apache.

Cordesman suggested that long-range helicopter raids might be more successful if the helicopters attack armor while overhead fighters suppress air defense weapons.

If the Apache is indeed more effective in the next war, then the March 24 retreat at Najaf might turn out to have been one of the most productive defeats in modern warfare. ■

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