

Airborne Is Relevant

SGM BRADLEY S. WATTS

World War II brought many advancements to war-fighting, but perhaps none were more innovative than the use of airborne forces. The Army's ability to seize terrain by dropping warriors from the sky is decisive and cunning. Since the inception of airborne warfare, the practice of using parachutes to insert troops has turned the tides of conflicts. The invasion of Normandy during World War II used airborne forces to seize key terrain and cripple German forces, allowing the Allied powers to win the war.¹

As warfare evolves, so do tactics and strategy. Some military strategists believe large-scale airborne operations are irrelevant, risky, and ineffective. The current operational environment is dynamic and dangerous, and this will require military leaders to assume greater risk on the battlefield to seize the initiative and gain terrain.² An instrument of audacity, airborne forces have participated in small-scale conflicts in recent history. The ongoing war in Ukraine demonstrated a failed assault at Hostomel Airport. If this operation had been successful, the airport's seizure may have changed the outcome of the Russian invasion of Kyiv.³ Airborne operations have a place in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). They allow commanders to be bold and audacious and gain an advantage against an adversary. However, they are high risk and may not be suitable or feasible to accomplish a commander's intent.



Paratroopers from the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 11th Airborne Division execute an airborne operation as part of Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center 24-02 at Donnelly Training Area, AK, on 8 February 2024. (Photo illustration by SGT Keon Horton)

Background

Commanders use airborne forces to seize the initiative. A brigade of paratroopers can envelop the ground from the sky in moments, allowing an army to strike deep inside enemy territory to gain key terrain and rapidly build combat power. During LSCO, military forces that possess dynamic assets will be victorious.⁴

Joint forcible entry operations rapidly place combat power in a contested operational environment. The use of airborne forces in these specific operations is proper force utilization. Airborne forces can execute a parachute assault and gain key terrain. A joint force commander can use this capability to expand a lodgment, allowing a joint force to mass combat power.⁵

The U.S. Army has conducted airborne operations in Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq, all with immense success.⁶ As the great power competition between the U.S. and its near-peer adversaries continues, along with wars in Europe and the Middle East, the propensity for a global conflict increases, further emphasizing the need for airborne capabilities within our instruments of national power.

Airborne operations are relevant and have application in LSCO. The argument that the dangers of airborne operations are high risk has existed since their inception and will continue to be present in future conflicts.⁷ Airborne forces jump, fight, and win for strategic purposes.

Jump, Fight, Win

Concentrating forces and building combat power rapidly is desirable for any military commander. Airborne operations possess unique characteristics that allow a commander to seize the initiative and gain momentum through vertical envelopment. LSCO will require forces that can quickly gain and retain terrain without intensive sustainment.

Light and Lethal — Airborne operations require heavy planning and resources to execute, but to their advantage, airborne forces are incredibly light and mobile compared to heavy or mechanized troops. Airborne forces are dropped deep behind enemy lines and resupplied via airdrop. LSCO will need decisive and swift actions on the battlefield, striking far in the realm of operational reach and providing an ability to gain a marked advantage.⁸ Airborne forces typically carry all the required equipment to sustain themselves for initial entry operations. Commanders can maintain the initiative without being overly concerned about a logistically exhausting force. Logistics will have a tremendous impact on the success of campaigns during LSCO, and forces that require little help and can sustain themselves will be valuable. Airborne forces possess this quality.⁹

Seize the Initiative — Concentration and surprise are two characteristics of offensive operations and where airborne operations excel. A brigade of paratroopers can be on the ground through vertical envelopment relatively quickly; this means a combatant commander can strike a blow in the heart of enemy territory.¹⁰ An airborne force executes an assault on an objective, such as an airport, to seize control and expand a lodgment.¹¹ Paratroopers can then capture a piece of key terrain in the darkness of night against an unsuspecting enemy and transition to sustained combat operations in a matter of hours. Using both concentration and surprise in concert is a strategic advantage for a military with a capable force. Airborne operations provide these unique capabilities to commanders.

The LSCO environment will challenge commanders with complexities not seen during the global war on terrorism (GWOT). The operational environment has drastically changed in nature. Modern warfare will evolve and regress as technology merges with large division-sized campaigns. This new paradigm creates a void for swift and decisive actions that need to occur in this operational environment.¹² The great power competition is fostering a resurgence of an ability to rapidly put a significant force on the ground. Airborne operations penetrate an enemy's defense to seize the initiative. The joint forcible entry concentrates forces and sets conditions for future operations through audacity.

Joint Forcible Entry is a Key

The hallmark capabilities of airborne forces are penetration and envelopment. Commanders can exercise audacity by assuming risk and using airborne operations to devastate enemy forces. Access to contested areas will pose a challenge to commanders in LSCO, and joint forcible entry may be a solution to this access problem. Campaigns require audacious and bold operations to gain an advantage against the enemy and envelop a contested area in the operational environment.¹³ In future conflicts with peer threats, the U.S. must consider using airborne operations to gain access and expand a lodgment to enable future operations.

Gaining Access — In a world of complex and dynamic threats, the capability to surpass an enemy defense and vertically envelope terrain through joint forcible entry is advantageous to nations that possess airborne forces. In the paradigm of peer threats, gaining dominance in as many domains as possible will be imperative to execute offensive operations.¹⁴

A joint forcible entry employing an airborne assault is the pinnacle of audacity. A sizable airborne force envelops a location (ideally one with an airfield), seizes this point of entry, and then defends it to allow for a lodgment. This type of operation can turn the tide of a campaign in a drastically short period. This ability is a strategic key to gaining access. Once access is gained, the lodgment is expanded.

Expanding Lodgment — The joint forcible entry aims to expand the lodgment, building combat power to maintain the tempo and pressure an enemy. An airborne operation opens lines of communication by strategically inserting forces far beyond the forward line of own troops to gain the ability to increase lethality across the land domain. After the airborne force seizes and controls an objective, follow-on forces arrive. Their presence allows the joint force to safely expand control of an area of operation. The capability to achieve this through airborne assault versus an extensive ground campaign is less resource intensive. Once forces gain a foothold beyond enemy lines, they can conduct campaigns beyond their natural operational reach.¹⁵

Risk, Reward, Relevant — Joint forcible entry through airborne assault is a relevant strategic concept in LSCO. In future conflicts, the ability to seize key terrain and expand a lodgment will be a highly desired capability.¹⁶ The U.S. strategy of dropping paratroopers deep behind enemy lines is as relevant today as it was during World War II. Winning in the cyber and air domains can mitigate risks by advancing air defense technology. For commanders, risk mitigation is a factor; the reward and pay off are worth the risk when viewed in the scale of success. These types of operations will be valuable in multidomain conflicts.

Airborne operations will be strategic in future conflicts. U.S. forces can execute a joint forcible entry, expand a lodgment, and set conditions for sustained unified land operations.¹⁷ Looking at recent examples of airborne operations, they will have a place in future conflicts.

Recent Airborne Operations

Airborne operations have occurred in every U.S. conflict since World War II. The lessons learned from Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, and GWOT provide a template for how commanders can execute airborne operations to succeed in LSCO. Airborne operations during World War II consisted of divisions of paratroopers (thousands of Soldiers) jumping to secure key terrain. Airborne operations during the Korean War were also large scale, using brigade-sized units to execute airborne operations.¹⁸ In the Vietnam War, the military inserted battalions of paratroopers and squad-sized elements behind enemy lines during smaller airborne operations. On 25 October 1983, the 1st and 2nd Ranger Battalions conducted a parachute assault on Point Salines on the island of Grenada. Approximately 600 Rangers seized an airfield in the first American military use of troops since the Vietnam War. On 20 December 1989, the 82nd Airborne Division and the 75th Ranger Regiment executed parachute assaults in Panama to overthrow dictator Manuel Noriega's regime and restore civil order during Operation Just Cause.¹⁹ These operations have one common trend: Each seized vital terrain.



Paratroopers of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team, 2nd and 4th Ranger Companies, and the Indian Army Parachute Field Ambulance unit jump into combat at Munsan-Ni, Korea, on 23 March 1951. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)

The 9/11 attacks changed the world. The United States conducted its first strike in Afghanistan with a parachute assault on 19 October 2001. More than 300 Rangers jumped into the darkness of night to secure a field landing strip to enable future operations. Rangers again accomplished a similar mission in March 2003, this time in Iraq. On 26 March 2003, the 173rd Airborne Brigade jumped into Northern Iraq during Operation Northern Delay. The envelopment prevented an enemy division from making its way to Baghdad.²⁰ These operations contributed to the strategic purpose of a larger goal.

In 2030, the battlefield will witness a higher prevalence of technological advancements, making the operational environment more contested than ever before. Commanders will need to choose bold and decisive courses of action to achieve strategic purposes. These courses of action will include airborne operations consisting of multiple brigades vertically enveloping key terrain to seize and exploit the initiative. A mass airborne operation has not occurred since World War II because there has not been a need for one. However, U.S. forces continue to prepare to execute them. Swift Response is a multinational joint military exercise in Europe that enhances readiness and builds airborne interoperability. Both the 82nd Airborne Division and 173rd Airborne Brigade have executed simultaneous airborne operations in Europe to demonstrate the effectiveness and lethality of these forces.²¹ The joint force of 2030 will require airborne forces to execute large package force delivery missions to enable deep penetration of enemy lines. Commanders and senior leaders must weigh the risks of airborne operations against the potential strategic, operational, and tactical rewards.

Airborne Risk Versus Reward

Commanders should factor risk management into every decision, as they assume risk at every echelon when committing their forces to action. Airborne operations are inherently high risk. The risk of losing

combat power and lives may not be worth the reward; some modern military strategists consider airborne operations irrelevant.²² LSCO will require large formations fighting in division-sized elements.²³

During World War II, thousands of paratroopers descended from the sky. The airborne mission injured or killed approximately 2,000 paratroopers in Normandy. The loss of thousands of Soldiers in airborne operations would not be as acceptable in a conflict today.²⁴ Leaders are responsible for preserving the force and ensuring success. A significant threat to airborne operations is the threat of enemy air defense.

Air defense technology and surface-to-air missile (SAM) threats will be prevalent in LSCO. Man-portable air defense systems pose threats to aircraft and jeopardize airborne operations. A well-aimed and placed enemy missile could destroy an aircraft loaded with paratroopers. Commanders planning airborne assaults must suppress enemy air defense.²⁵ The challenge of eliminating the threat of SAMs is daunting. The risk is exceptionally high, and the loss could be even more detrimental.²⁶ Technology can suppress or defeat these threats; however, the risk may not be worth the reward. To mitigate risk, we must dominate the multidomain battlefield. This means our forces must find and neutralize enemy air defense capabilities long before they identify a coming airborne attack. Leaders must also consider early warning and sensor technology.

Enemy forces can detect aircraft using radar and satellite technology. The ability to detect an airborne assault force gives the enemy valuable time to mobilize and prepare a counterattack. If commanders employ preparatory strikes to overcome detection capabilities, the enemy can still prepare themselves for an attack if they receive an early warning. This poses a threat to the attacking airborne force.²⁷ Despite the risk and dangers, the characteristics and boldness of airborne operations can prove their worth in LSCO.

Airborne operations have a clear and defined role in LSCO for deep penetration. During LSCO, casualties of both friendly and enemy forces will be increased. Risk is an element of any combat operation; the responsibility of risk management is on the commander. As commanders weigh risk, they must closely examine and understand the objective. They should not allow fear or hesitancy to force decisions on how to fight and win and use sound judgment and wisdom in planning operations. Airborne operations will always have unique associated risks, but comprehensive planning and execution can mitigate and, in some cases, eliminate these risks. Seizing key terrain offers a reward that far exceeds the risk of an airborne operation.²⁸

Conclusion

A joint forcible entry is audacious and can demoralize an enemy force. Airborne forces are more lethal, agile, and flexible than ground-based formations. LSCO will force leaders to assume risk and take bold, decisive action to defeat the enemy. Airborne forces possess unique and critical abilities to shape the battlefield. To penetrate an enemy, the attacker must strike beyond the horizon.

Airborne forces meet this need well. A light, lethal, agile force that can strike from the sky and seize key terrain provides an indispensable asset for commanders to utilize to achieve strategic goals. Airborne forces do not require the extensive and robust maintenance support of mechanized or vehicular-based forces. In recent years, parachute assaults have proven successful in the U.S. invasions of Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These successes display a track record of excellence as the U.S. prepares to face threats of equal or greater size and capability.

Airborne forces will mass combat power quickly; their speed and lethality will shock an opposing force. During LSCO, tempo will be critical to decisively forcing the enemy to be ineffective and unable to gain momentum. Airborne forces keep an enemy on guard and off-balance through audacity. They face unique challenges and vulnerabilities, particularly SAM and technical threats. However, airborne formations can counter these threats by maintaining a competitive technical edge and continually innovating. We need to prepare for LSCO, and the ability to envelop an operational area from the sky will be crucial for success. Risk is prevalent in all military operations, but it cannot stifle audacity. Airborne has been, is, and will always be relevant.



As a part of Swift Response 24, Soldiers in the 173rd Airborne Brigade conduct an airborne operation onto Krivolak Drop Zone in North Macedonia on 8 May 2024. (Photo by Elena Baladelli)

Notes

¹ Kyle Jahner, “Key Moments in Army Airborne History,” *Army Times*, 29 February 2016, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2016/02/29/key-moments-in-army-airborne-history/>.

² Field Manual (FM) 3-99, *Airborne and Air Assault Operations*, March 2015, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm3_99.pdf.

³ Liam Collins, Michael Kofman, and John Spencer, “The Battle of Hostomel Airport: A Key Moment in Russia’s Defeat in Kyiv,” *War on the Rocks*, 10 August 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/08/the-battle-of-hostomel-airport-a-key-moment-in-russias-defeat-in-kyiv/>.

⁴ FM 3-99.

⁵ Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations*, 11 May 2017, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_18ch1.pdf.

⁶ James King, “Yes, Mass Airborne Operations Are a Thing of the Past,” Modern War Institute, 12 October 2016, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/yes-mass-airborne-operations-thing-past/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ FM 3-99.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, July 2019, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34828-ADP_3-90-000-WEB-1.pdf.

¹¹ JP 3-18.

¹² Operations Group, National Training Center (NTC), *Preparing for Large-Scale Combat Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2023), <https://api.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/2023/01/31/73b50bab/21-6-preparing-for-lsco-public.pdf>.

¹³ R.F.M. Williams, “The Development of Airfield Seizure Operations in the United States Army,” *Military Review*, November 2021, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2021-OLE/Williams/>.

¹⁴ JP 3-18.

¹⁵ ADP 3-90.

¹⁶ Williams, "The Development of Airfield Seizure Operations."

¹⁷ ADP 3-90.

¹⁸ Tom Clancy, *Airborne: A Guided Tour of an Airborne Task Force* (NY: Berkley, 1997).

¹⁹ Jahner, "Key Moments in Army Airborne History."

²⁰ Eric Milzarski, "These Are the Only Combat Jumps Our Troops Have Made Since 9/11," *We Are The Mighty*, 20 October 2020, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-trending/post-911-combat-airborne-jumps/>.

²¹ "U.S. Army Europe and Africa Begins Exercise Swift Response," U.S. Army Europe and Africa, 2 May 2022, <https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/ArticleViewPressRelease/Article/3016048/us-army-europe-and-africa-begins-exercise-swift-response/>.

²² King, "Yes, Mass Airborne Operations Are a Thing of the Past."

²³ Operations Group, NTC, *Preparing for Large-Scale Combat Operations*.

²⁴ Clancy, *Airborne: A Guided Tour*.

²⁵ King, "Yes, Mass Airborne Operations Are a Thing of the Past."

²⁶ FM 3-99.

²⁷ King, "Yes, Mass Airborne Operations Are a Thing of the Past."

²⁸ ADP 3-90.

SGM Bradley S. Watts is currently a student in the Sergeants Major Academy, Class 74, at Fort Bliss, TX. He previously served as an operations NCO, Current Operations G-33, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Pentagon. His other assignments include serving as a squad leader and weapons squad leader in 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, at Fort Campbell, KY; Ranger instructor in the 4th Ranger Training Battalion at Fort Moore, GA; platoon sergeant and scout platoon sergeant in 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, at Fort Liberty, NC; and first sergeant in 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Fort Liberty. He is a graduate of Ranger, Basic Airborne, Jumpmaster, and Pathfinder Courses. He earned an associate's degree in small group leadership and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership from Purdue University. MSG Watts has deployed with no notice as part of the 82nd Airborne Division's Immediate Response Force on three occasions (Iraq, the National Capital Region, and Afghanistan for Operation Allies Refuge). He is a second-generation master-rated parachutist.