Viewpoints

Using Air Power in a Small War – A Battlegroup Commander's Reflections on Operations in Afghanistan - Winter 2010/11

By Lieutenant Colonel Colin Weir

Introduction

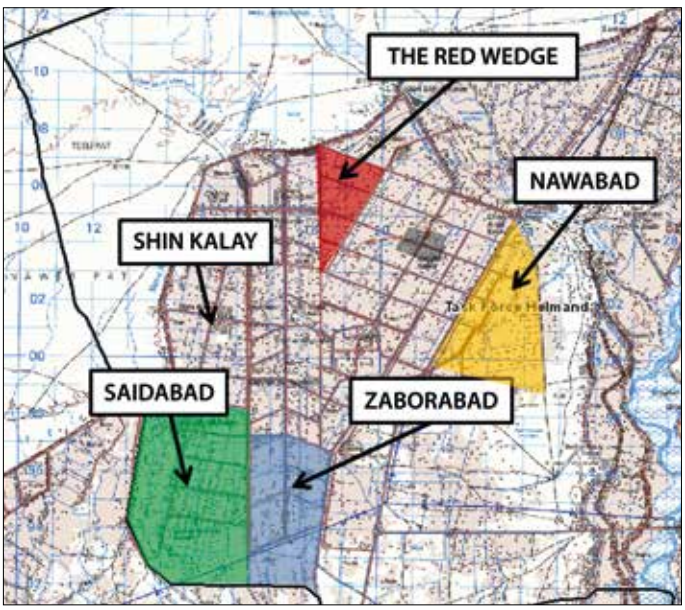
The RAF Centre for Air Power Studies published '*Air Power, Insurgency and the War on Terror*' in 2009 and its introduction articulated:

'the persistence of the longest-lasting misunderstanding between air forces and armies: the latter want the air cover above them to be ubiquitous, precise and lethal. In other words, soldiers ideally want aircraft above them in cab-rank virtually every minute of the day, loitering until they call them down to accurately strike the enemy with whom they are in contact but without any fratricide.'[1]

Three years on from that publication, these much publicized and controversial[2] 'misunderstandings' from the early days of the campaign in Helmand actually appear difficult to find, if they exist at all. At the very least, it is my experience that tactical air and ground commanders have developed a much better appreciation of how the other can best contribute to mission success. However, it may be the case that this understanding is only borne of experience in the field rather than through systematic training and preparation. Why do I say this? I have only developed a view on the relationship between air power and the execution of counter-insurgency on the ground having returned from Afghanistan; I gave it little thought prior to deployment. In training for deployment, my consideration of air power was only in terms of how it would help me *move*, *fight* and *see*. I took no holistic view of its capabilities, and certainly I did not consider how it might dovetail with the complex concepts

inherent in counter-insurgency, which is primarily a ground-centric activity (I believe this latter statement to be one of fact, simply because the insurgency and its counter-insurgency are in a contest for - and amongst - the people, and the people are surface dwellers). If I had taken the time to consider the employment of air power in a more considered way prior to deployment it would, no doubt, have led to my more efficient and effective use of a scarce resource. This article is reflective, in that it considers the role of air power in our small part of a small war. I make no significant recommendations, but merely offer that which I believe we learned in the hope that it may be of some value.

The one thousand men and women of 1st Battalion, The Royal Irish Regiment (1 R IRISH) Battlegroup provided the core of Combined Force Nad-e'Ali (South) through the Winter of 2010/11. Nad-e'Ali had been a significant focus area for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) over the previous 18 months. It had been the heart of Taliban shadow governance structures in Central Helmand, was totemic in that sense and so was not somewhere that the enemy appeared to be inclined to cede to the Government without a fight. Op Moshtarak had established a large ISAF presence there in the Winter of 2009/10, significantly disrupting the insurgency. The following Summer, Op Tor Shezada was credited with establishing an ISAF and Government footprint in Saidabad, one of the last areas of the District not under Government control. Tor Shezada was launched less than six weeks before 1 R IRISH deployed to theatre in September 2010 as part of 16 Air Assault Brigade on Operation HERRICK 13. As we arrived, the enemy were mounting a vicious riposte to ISAF's attempts to clear them from the area. In operational wargaming[3] terms, the enemy were in the reaction phase to ISAF's earlier actions. So the area remained very highly contested. While most of the population centres were relatively secure, the enemy had coalesced in the less densely populated areas, was growing in strength there, and was successfully isolating and attacking into the secured space. Fighting flared throughout the area, but the enemy's centres of mass and influence could be relatively easily defined. Early operations, which we described as 'Find-Feel', orientated us to the battlespace, and identified where the challenges were at their most acute; we codified the geographic problem-set as being the



areas to the west of Zarghun Kalay (known as the Red Wedge), Shin Kalay, Nawabad, Saidabad and Zaborabad.

Our arrival that September was a literal baptism of fire. After a comprehensive handover from the preceding Battalion, 1 R IRISH took command on the first Sunday of October, and the following three days saw 36 prolonged engagements (including a determined Taliban attack on the District Centre). By the end of the week we had had 80 significant acts (or SIGACTS, in other words shooting or Improvised Explosive Device (IED) events) and over a short period of time we were to see the highest levels of kinetics in that geographic space on record.

Against this background, and in the early days, it was easy to lose sight of what the operation was all about. In part, of course, it was about clearing the Taliban from what they saw as their strongholds; however if the geographic battlespace was one problem, the psychological battlespace was another entirely different and much more difficult arena in which to fight. Here, the objective was not a piece of real-estate, or the kill or capture of a Taliban commander, rather it was to secure the confidence of the people. My Brigade Commander summarised it succinctly and helpfully:

*'We seek an irreversible momentum by giving the local people the **confidence** to reject the insurgency and place their trust in the Afghan state.'*[4]

This approach with its clarity and simplicity was immensely helpful and it resonated at all levels of my Battlegroup. There were all sorts of different strands of confidence that we had to instil in the people. They had to have confidence not only that we *could* beat the enemy in battle, but also that we had the resolve to actually do it. They had to have confidence that we would pursue the enemy vigorously, but equally that our use of fire was controlled and precise. They had to have confidence that ISAF and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan were in this to win it; we were not leaving next year, as the enemy frequently told the people. Finally, they had to have confidence that, if given the opportunity and a secure enough space, their Government could help them achieve a better existence. The sum of these confidences would lead to a greater one, which was a collective confidence to reject and even stand up to the insurgency, in effect to take part in the defeat of the Taliban. All of our efforts had to focus on the shoring up, the development and the consolidation of the confidence of the people. This overarching requirement was the fundamental start point for how we considered and then employed force, both on the ground and from the air.

Fighting

There were two broad activities in our effort: fighting and talking. The fight on the ground was close, personal and exhausting. It involved small groups of heavily laden soldiers stepping out of checkpoints on a daily basis sure in the knowledge that battle would ensue at some point. It also involved Company and Battlegroup-level operations, surging into the areas previously defined during our 'Find-Feel' operations with the overt aim of crippling the insurgency in

those areas through fighting. The IED threat was a constant, increasing in its intensity through the winter. The battlespace was highly populated; it was a war *amongst*, but more importantly *for* the people.

The aim of the fight was to close with and defeat the enemy. To defeat him required offensive spirit - the will and confidence to attack. Killing was a fundamental part of the effort. This reality needed commanders at all levels to have trust in their subordinates that they would do the right thing. We had to trust: that our soldiers are decent human beings who do not want to kill for killing's sake; that they understand the rules of engagement; that they are technically proficient and can shoot straight; and that they can select the right weapon and will only pull the trigger *or call for fire* as many times as is necessary.

The avoidance of civilian casualties was a concern in all of this, but a zero risk approach to civilian casualties would lead to our defeat. If we withdrew every time we came into contact because we *might* kill a civilian then we would end up withdrawing *every* time because the enemy would make sure civilians were there, and those civilians would also provide a ready-made audience to watch from the grandstand and to see our defeat. This would not sit easily alongside the concept of securing the people's confidence in you and their Government. So we needed to fight him and to win, and to be seen to be winners.

So what of the place of air power in the fight? From the ground, and for the people, air power is transient. This transience is perhaps the other side of the 'operational flexibility' coin. The people understand air's 'operational flexibility' as much as we do – it is there one minute and gone the next. They cannot rely on it to keep them safe because it will not be there all of the time. We should not underestimate the cultural aspect of this. It is no secret that the Afghans respect strength – but they particularly respect the look-you-in-the-eye type of strength, or the stand-toe-to-toe-in-a-fight type of strength. The force's *capability* is certainly enabled by our dominance of the third dimension, but its *credibility* is built on infantry soldiers being seen to be defeating the enemy in a straight fight. This breeds confidence in the people. They can rely on the ground-based counter-insurgent whose checkpoint is within sight of their compound, whom they have met and whose name they know (and ideally they like as a fellow human being), who is making a sacrifice for them, and most importantly who is physically and verbally countering the insurgent argument.

'This asymmetric strength in our favour that eschews close physical contact is perceived as a weakness in some cultures.'

JDN 2/8 Integrated Air-Land Operations in Contemporary Warfare

There is a perception that civilians are much more frequently killed by ground-based indirect fire or air or aviation strike than they are by direct fire from either the insurgents

or ISAF. That perception is wrong according to UNAMA's[5] figures which record that across Afghanistan in 2011 305 civilians were killed by 'aerial attack' whereas 1398 civilians were killed by IEDs and 'suicide attacks' (UNAMA do not appear to have a separate category for deaths attributable to mortar or artillery fire, and so I assume that those delivery mechanisms are included in the 'aerial attack' category). In truth, however the figures are probably irrelevant because the perception is much more important than the fact. So it is likely that the people whose confidence we are trying build see air power as an unpredictable protector and an unpredictable threat; its mistakes - or the ground commander's mistakes in using it - can be catastrophic.

Talking

The second key activity was talking, or politics – both small 'p' and big 'p' (at the local level). The talking happened throughout the tour. When we were fighting hard the conversation was muted. But by the time we got the better of the enemy about two-thirds of the way into our deployment, the discussions were constant, fractious and difficult; they filled the space created by improved security. Military power, both air and ground, sat in the background and was actively used to shape the context of the conversation, to give some people a louder voice, and to help to negate and marginalise those who spoke with malign intentions.

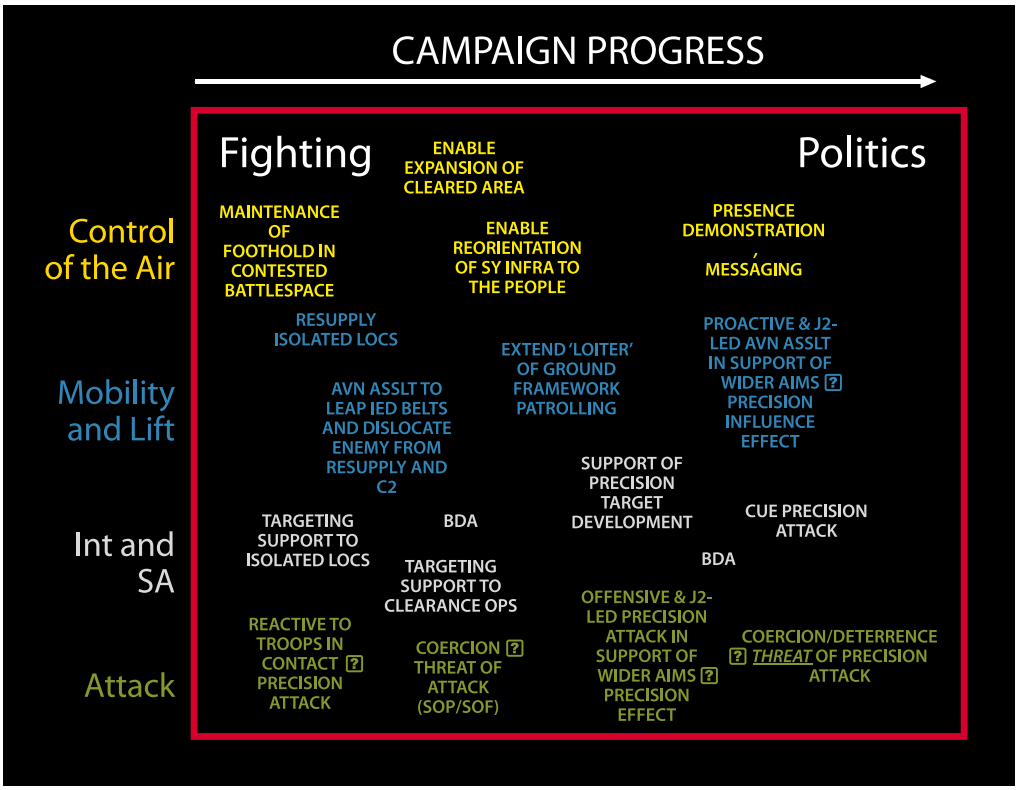
Themes

Looking back, there were probably four themes that ran through our tour. First, the relocation of the security infrastructure to where the people were. Second, the roll out of a persistent Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) matrix, to the extent that by the time we left we had considerable ISTAR dominance. Third, an intense Battlegroup and Brigade targeting effort to destroy the enemy's ability to command and control. Finally and fourth, the establishment of a sustainable local Afghan security solution, which in our case was the Afghan Local Police.

Operation Herrick 13 was a winter tour, traditionally a less kinetic period than the summer months, however at the 3 month point 1 R IRISH had same number of SIGACTS as Operation Herrick 12 which was a summer deployment. As intimated above, this can be put down to the enemy's decision to react to, and to contest, ISAF's 'big manoeuvre'. To a considerable degree, it also has its origin in the much improved ISAF force-density in Nad-e'Ali which was due in large part to the re-balancing of UK forces into Central Helmand following the arrival of large numbers of US Marines into Afghanistan in 2010. Having more soldiers available allowed 1 R IRISH to go further and to manoeuvre in greater numbers than our predecessors could. The spike in fighting was probably an inevitable by-product of the combination of these factors. But things changed over time and SIGACTS dropped to a historically low level, hence my characterisation of the tour as being dominated at first by fighting and at the end by politics.

Considering Air Power in a Small War

Against that context, and the roles of air and space power[6], the employment of air might be considered as follows:



In general terms, the kinetic phase of the effort in Nad-e'Ali - the left hand side of the box-saw air power being used in a generally defensive role. This reflected the fact that the enemy had the initiative; we were using helicopters and aeroplanes to *respond* to his actions. We used airborne ISTAR to look into Named Areas of Interest (NAIs) where we might pick up indicators of his intentions *vis-a-vis* us, his forming up places, his weapons caches and his lines of communications into our area. We used strike in support of Troops in Contact (TiCs) where the enemy had generally initiated that contact. We had to use Support Helicopter (SH) to resupply isolated checkpoints and patrol bases because the Taliban controlled the surrounding battlespace. In all of these instances, we were using air power in *response* to his activity and not on our own terms; air power in this phase primarily delivered force protection and sustainment functions. But of course the very act of force protection, especially accurately delivered precision munitions, also had significant attritional effect on the opposition.

This attritional effect started to allow us to move to the central part of the scale, where air and aviation started to be used much more offensively in pursuit of the confidence of the people.

Airborne reconnaissance, precision target development and strike all combined to enable the critical activity of clearing areas of insurgents and re-orientating the security infrastructure to where the people were, where population densities were highest. In other words this was establishing Patrol Bases and Checkpoints in the right place to achieve better control of the ground and the population. Better control of the ground enabled better control of the air and therefore the reduction of the ground threat to aviation. The consolidation of this ground control then allowed 'red' HLSs to become green which in turn enabled the cleared and held real estate to be expanded.

On the face of it, the infantry in this arrangement hold the greater risk in that they have to close with the enemy and defeat him in order to clear ground out to beyond more than harassing fire range for external Helicopter Landing Sites (and sometimes internal HLSs). Of course it is not as formulaic as this. The build of Checkpoint Ranger over Christmas 2010 in the Saidabad area adopted a different model. The Ranger site was in the heart of Insurgent-controlled space in Saidabad, and its build could only be effected by using Support Helicopter because the road to it (Route Exeter) was structurally fragile and in need of extensive work, it was heavily seeded with IEDs, and it was under constant enemy observation and fire. The SH-enabled establishment of the checkpoint with an integral but, at that stage, not particularly technologically advanced ISTAR capability then allowed the route to be better overwatched, in turn allowing the road improvement work to happen, which in turn allowed heavy defence stores and aggregate to be moved in. Clearly, as we were able to spin around this virtuous cycle, the risk to both my soldiers and the aviation became less, and Ranger's presence transformed the area in question. This was a true ground-manoeuvre link-up operation to a force inserted and sustained by aviation, albeit at reasonably small-scale. Circumstances will dictate which element shoulders most of the risk as we start this sort of operation. In general terms it was the infantry, but with projects like the establishment of Ranger, it was certainly the aviation component.

Route EXETER looking west.
Ground clearance still 2km from the ongoing CP RANGER Build
Saidabad 14 Jan 11

During the third stage of our campaign – the right side of the box - we were militarily dominant, and the opposition was no longer contesting us in a straight fight with anything like the intensity of the period up to mid-January 2011. By that stage, he was mixing sporadic attacks, with coercion - in the form of intimidation and assassination - whilst also contesting us in the political space through malign actors. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it was in this area

where air power had the greatest positive effect in driving the campaign forward. In particular, this leads into a discussion of deterrence and influence, and strike and aviation assault.

The Limitations of Deterrence, the Utility of Strike

The enemy *knows* how powerful and capable we are, so we have to work very hard to surprise him. We also need to understand the limits of deterrence from the air, because he certainly understands those limitations. Air power can avert the enemy's kinetic attacks when they are in the final stages of commission, but in the sort of circumstances we faced in Nad-e'Ali, it could not easily prevent intimidation. Intimidation was not generally carried out by armed men who could legitimately be engaged by air assets, rather it was effected by mobile phone, or by one or two unarmed insurgents issuing a threat in the local bazaar or clinic. When we did engage him in a fight, because he understands our Rules of Engagement and how we apply those rules differently in different types of terrain (human and topographical), even the effect of 'shows of presence' and 'shows of force' could be be limited. This is simply because he has a healthy and justified scepticism that we will engage with air-delivered weapons. The stories of the opposition sneering at demonstrations of our capability are not apocryphal. The Taliban laughed after a low show of force from an F/A 18 in Saidabad, and they were prone to shepherding women and children into an area where they expected adjusted mortar fire to land. Terrain as highly populated and as complex as the Nad-e'Ali green zone (even in winter when cover is less and visibility is better) is not conducive to the use of high yield ordnance or strafing, without exposing the mission to significant risk. And by that I mean killing civilians. That is not to say that we did not use fixed-wing strafing. We did, but in almost 1000 engagements we dropped no bombs, although we did use the range of lower-yield precision munitions from Hellfire through to GMLRS, and through necessity, generally due to the non-availability of a precision asset, we employed numerous artillery and mortar fire-missions.

We also need to be cognisant of the negative information effect of using air-delivered ordnance in somewhere like Nad-e'Ali, where a relatively secure area could be less than 500 metres from an insurgent stronghold. The negative-influence effect of large-yield ordnance being dropped in the contested space is potentially significant, and can set the confidence-cursor back to the left of the scale. In other words the detonation of the munition can have a much wider effect than its blast radius. Commanders who are confronted with immediate kinetic challenges the response to which might legally and proportionally be a high yield munition need to consider the wider context before dropping that bomb or ordering that fire mission. This is simply because of the likelihood of a negative effect on the confidence of the people in the wider populated battlespace. In other words that tactical commander is thinking about, and where possible conforming to, his one-up and two-up commanders' intent of shoring up confidence.

Air and aviation deterrence is effective if it can dissuade him from conducting attacks, it can prevent him from pulling the trigger or laying the IED, however he does not *need* to be

conducting violent activity to be achieving an effect. We massed significant force in Saidabad to give the people confidence to open their bazaar[7], and they did so in early December 2010. However, that massed force (which included much UK and US air power) could not stop the enemy from tipping the balance in his favour once again and the bazaar closed some three weeks after its reopening after a surge of intimidation. When the bazaar closed for the second time, it was not because of the enemy's overt power. It was because the people did not yet have the confidence to say 'no' to him. And at that stage having every allied aircraft in central Asia overhead would have made no difference. *His* asymmetric advantage trumped *our* asymmetric advantage. The fact was that the people were still frightened of what he could do to them despite there being ground troops in the area, and helicopters and aeroplanes in the sky.

> 'The closure of the Saidabad bazaar highlights two things: first, we cannot protect the population everywhere; and second, despite being soundly beaten on the battlefield the enemy can still generate an asymmetric advantage. The deployment of many hundreds of soldiers in Saidabad over the past three months (including ANA) has created a significantly improved security environment but a handful of insurgents with a mobile phone can still generate a *perception* of insecurity and intimidation.'
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> CO 1 R IRISH ASSESSREP 31 Dec 10

Where deterrence does work is when it is based on previous 'form' and on the enemy's perceptions of our capabilities and his concomitant fear that those capabilities will be directed at him in particular. Being a mid-level Taliban commander in our area was a reasonably short- term career choice. The likelihood of death or capture was exceptionally high, and the precision use of airborne capabilities for target acquisition and development, and then for strike was a key component of this. Our ability to detect and identify fleeting, low-signature, and specific targets improved hugely during the course of the operation. Occasionally we found and then lost targets, but we became reasonably sanguine about this because we knew that we would probably get him the next day, or the day after that. He knew it too, and as a result, the Taliban's mid-level leadership started to command Nad-e'Ali remotely, without the means to do this effectively. I sat in a shura with one of the local elders discussing the establishment of the Afghan Local Police programme when his mobile phone rang; the display showed the call was a Pakistani number. He answered it and put it onto speaker. I then heard a torrent of abuse from the Taliban commander of the southern part of Nad-e'Ali threatening the elder should he subscribe to the ALP.[8] The enemy benefit from face-to-face command as much as we do, in other words, personal leadership. There is nothing more valuable than being able to look your subordinates in the eye and to feel their fatigue and their fear and for them to see that you are with them, sharing the danger and the stresses, and for both of you to be energised by the sense of shared endeavour. The threat - and indeed likelihood - of precision strike and death from the air, or being cornered and captured or killed by ground troops, meant that the Taliban commanders struggled to have the same sort of command

relationship with their people that we had with our soldiers. Soldiers need to be led from the front regardless of whether they are US or British Infantrymen or Taliban fighters.

The conduct of precision strike was clearly dependent on having the ability to find and track fleeting targets. At the start of our tour we had considerable capability, and by the time of our departure some seven months later, we had something approaching ISTAR dominance of Nad-e'Ali. In both circumstances – a *relative* paucity and a *relative* abundance of capability – those assets still needed to be targeted. The standard mechanism of a Decision Support Overlay with identified Named Areas of Interest into which we looked was the key piece of staff work at the Battlegroup Headquarters level. However the complexity of the environment, and the number of J2 start points demanded a relatively sophisticated target prioritisation mechanism to allocate the ISTAR resource to those NAIs (HUMINT/SIGINT/IMINT). As time went on, we knew more and because we knew more there were more places, people and things that we wanted to look at. In the trade off, we stared to look less at 'pattern of life' development and more at specific J2 start points such as IED hotspots, key compounds of interest, enemy firing points and so on. The airborne ISTAR platforms, including UAVs, gave us the flexibility to look beyond the standing decks of the ground-based ISTAR, the mast and aerostat-mounted cameras and sensors. In many ways this ground-based capability provided an ISTAR shield, helping us protect what we held, whilst the airborne capability was much more offensive, allowing us to develop targets for future clearance or strike. Therefore, in addition to the well-understood horizontal layering of ISTAR capability, there was also this vertical layering of ISTAR by *effect*; the inner layer primarily enabled the 'hold' and 'build' functions, the outer layer primarily enabled the 'shape' and 'clear' functions. This outer layer was mostly provided by the air component.

Most fundamentally, ISTAR was a force multiplier. My rough calculations of the force available to me and my Afghan partners suggests that we were never at the recommended minimum ratio of twenty-five counter-insurgents per one-thousand of the population. However, in addition to telling us where we needed to go, ISTAR could also tell us where we *did not* need to go, at least not today, and so this, combined with a high tempo of ground and air manoeuvre mitigated the doctrinal numbers deficit.

This area of precision strike links ISTAR, influence, strike and deterrence reasonably tidily. Through the winter, the local insurgency saw its commanders killed or captured with what must have been a depressing regularity. Those who did decide to continue to kill and intimidate within Nad-e'Ali did so at their own peril. A properly targeted, and well-timed strike to kill or capture could have a seismic effect at the tactical level. That effect could reverberate through people's everyday lives, through local politics and through local security, and all for the good. There was a direct path from the air-power enabled kinetic strike, or a ground manoeuvre raid (invariably supported by air assets) on specific insurgent commanders and groupings, through to the establishment of the Afghan Local Police through to the improved security situation that led to President Karzai's announcement on 27th November 2011 that

Nad-e'Ali would be accelerated in its handover to an Afghan security lead. But it was not just air-enabled strike that led to this outcome, as air assault also had a fundamental role to play.

Air Assault

1 R IRISH used air assault throughout the various stages of the operation, generally at sub-unit level. It had tremendous utility. It allowed the Battlegroup to go where we wanted, to avoid IED seeded routes, and to put large numbers of soldiers on the ground quickly. It demoralised the enemy. 1 R IRISH subscribed to the shape-clear-hold-build model, and Air Assault was particularly effective during the 'shape' and 'clear'. The 'shape' phase was when we wanted to do most of our fighting, it was the period in which we attempted to decisively engage the enemy. We did this by attempting to appear weak, or low in numbers, whilst concealing force, which only unmasked when the enemy presented himself. The model saw the enemy being tactically, kinetically and therefore demonstrably defeated by the start of the 'clear'. The 'clear' was then the establishment of a fixed security presence in the previously contested battlespace. Air assault was fundamental to both the shape and the clear. Not only did it help us to bring the enemy to battle on our terms and to negate some of his advantages, it also shaped perceptions in the minds of the locals. It was a demonstration of power.

'Air Assault has tremendous utility in irregular warfare and dispersed operations, enabling local massing of combat power at high tempo.'

Joint Doctrine Note 2/08
Integrated Air-Land Operations in Contemporary Warfare
August 2008

'Air Assault has proven its worth in that I am able to jab at the enemy where I choose, knowing that we can return for the decisive blow when the relevant target set is sufficiently developed.'

CO 1 R IRISH ASSESSREP 15 Oct 10

Air Assault is not a straightforward activity in a COIN operation, and the challenges of shaping and understanding the battlespace for aviation assault in an IED-rich environment are significant: the pre-assault ISTAR soak draws limited resource from primarily looking at the human terrain elsewhere to primarily looking at the landing sites where IEDs *might* be; the viability of the ground CONPLAN for post-assault non-availability of helicopters for CASEVAC and the replenishment of combat supplies can be the ground commander's most difficult challenge; and the possibility of a late notice cancellation of the operation due to a higher priority emerging elsewhere is a constant threat.

When it did come together though, it was tremendously effective. 1 R IRISH conducted one large-scale Battlegroup-level air assault operation – Operation TOR ZHEMAY VI[9] - in February

2010. This was towards the latter end of our tour, and into Zaborabad, an area where we believed that we had already caused significant attrition to the enemy through the daily grind of patrol engagements, Company-level advance to contacts and the occasional J2-led air or ground manoeuvre strike. The Battlegroup had had soldiers killed and severely wounded fighting in Zaborabad. As a result of all of the effort to that point, confidence in that area was moving our way. However, we needed to do more to convince the people that we were prepared to invest in their future. Neither we, nor the Afghan police or army had a permanent presence in the area, so while we knew that we had caused damage to the enemy, when we launched we did not know how much.

The scheme of manoeuvre saw, in effect, a Battlegroup cordon and search operation with three companies of ground troops and armour providing a horseshoe 'seal' around the contested area to its west, north and east. On D-Day, the air assault element flew from Camp Bastion in a wide arc over the Helmand River sweeping around to the east and then south of Lashkar Gah, finally dropping low over the Red Desert and northern Marjah in order to attack Zaborabad from the south, the unexpected direction. Landing on three landing sites, the fifteen support helicopters inserted three companies, plus Battlegroup Tactical Headquarters in one wave of both UK and US aviation supported by Apache, Cobra, fixed wing assets and Remotely Piloted Air Systems. There then followed a two day advance to contact operation with very limited enemy resistance but with a considerable haul of enemy warlike materiel and a number of detentions of Taliban suspects. The effects of this operation were twofold. Firstly, there was the materiel and personnel attrition of the enemy without fighting. Secondly, and much more importantly, the assault was a catalyst for a shift in the confidence of the people. When we extracted from the area 72 hours after the land-on, the immediate request from the local District Community Council members was for our immediate return. Because of the nature and inherent flexibility of air power, we were able to respond by flexing pre-planned aviation insertions from other parts of the battlespace back into Zaborabad, and to maintain positive momentum in what by this stage was the last remaining area of ungoverned space in Nad-e'Ali (South). Shortly after this operation, we established our first detachment of Afghan Local Police in the area and 45 Commando successfully expanded the cleared area when they took over from us around a month after the operation.

Conclusion

I believe that the 2009 view of the Army's requirements of the air component as simply to be deliverers of lethal and precision force, permanently on station and always on call, is no longer a widely held one; it is now much less of a 'persistent misunderstanding'. The utility of air power in COIN, and its limitations, are increasingly well appreciated by COIN practitioners on the ground ('Learn and Adapt', after all, is one of the principles of COIN). This is reflected, to a degree, in the latest UK Tactical Doctrine for COIN:

'...the air power contribution to counterinsurgency operations goes far beyond the delivery of Close Air Support and helicopter lift.'[10]

I would go further, in that I am clear that air power provided our asymmetric advantage in this particular counterinsurgency effort. Strike, ISTAR and Air Mobility all played a vital role in allowing us to build on the efforts of the Battlegroups that had gone before us. Without the enabling effect delivered by air power, the infantry would have had to conduct a much less subtle and precise campaign with considerably reduced tempo - expending more ammunition, taking more casualties, doing more infrastructure damage and probably killing significant numbers of the wrong people. It is also true though, that the experience of 1 R IRISH in Nad-e'Ali through Winter 2010/2011 regarding the employment of air capability was one of trial and error. In time we understood the breadth of employability of air power, the threats inherent in using it (or not using it), and the secondary and tertiary effects of its deployment (both good and bad). But this was learning on the job. Therefore, in the multidimensional battlespace of a COIN small war, and where the human terrain is the vital ground, there may be 'academic space' for more analysis of the relationship between the employment of air power and securing the confidence of the people.

Notes

[1] Air Power, Insurgency and the"War on Terror", Ed Joel Hayward, RAF Centre for Air Power Studies 2009.

[2] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1529620/Major-attacks-useless-RAF-in-leaked-e-mails.html

[3] Headquarters at all levels will 'wargame' each operation prior to its execution to identify areas of weakness in the overall plan and to identify those contingencies that need to be prepared for. The sequence of the wargame sees the force with the initiative taking the first 'action', this will be followed by the enemy's 'reaction', and this in turn will be followed by the 'counteraction' of the force which originally had the initiative. In this particular instance, ISAF successfully executed Op MOSHTARAK during Op HERRICK 11 and Op TOR SHEZADA on Op HERRICK 12; this was the 'action'. The enemy's violent response during Op HERRICK 13 felt like their 'reaction'. It fell to 1 R IRISH, as the in-place force during HERRICK 13 to deliver the 'counteraction'.

[4] Task Force Helmand Operation Order 005-10: Op OQAB ZHEMAY (WINTER EAGLE) 18 November 2010.

[5] United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, Annual Report, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, dated February 2012 http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/Documents/UNAMA%20POC%202011%20Report_Final_Feb%202012.pdf accessed 3 October 2012.

[6] British Air and Space Power Doctrine AP3000 Fourth Edition.

[7] The Taliban had forced the bazaar to close at the beginning of Op Tor Shezada in August 2010 and it had remained closed ever since.

[8] The elder was Assadullah Karimi, an ethnic Hazara teacher and the headmaster of a school that had been destroyed by the Taliban (and which was later rebuilt during Op HERRICKs 14 and 15). He fled Nad-e'Ali for Lashkar Gah after killing a Taliban member in Saidabad but later returned to lead the Afghan Local Police in his village. He was killed by the Taliban in late 2011.

[9] TOR ZHEMAY VI was the largest Air Assault operation of Op HERRICK 13, and the largest in the

history of The Royal Irish Regiment since its predecessors, 1st Battalion, The Royal Ulster Rifles, crossed the Rhine during Op VARISTY in 1945.

[10] Army Field Manual Volume 1 Part 10, Countering Insurgency.