An Infantry Perspective on Task Force X-Ray

by Maj Christopher C. Conlin

Our attempt at a large helicopterborne operation during the Gulf War has led this author and other ground officers to doubt whether the Corps still has that capability.

"War is the unfolding of miscalculations."
—Barbara Tuchman

As the fifth anniversary of Operation DESERT STORM’s ground war approaches, it is fitting to reexamine the range of lessons learned in that unique conflict. Many of these lessons have been closely examined and debated in our professional literature in the years since the cease-fire. Although some of the underlying doctrinal changes demanded by our Gulf War experience have not yet been fully effected, those issues remain front and center in our institutional consciousness. Unfortunately, other issues of equal or even greater long-term importance have slipped off our radar screens and lie dormant in the back of our minds. The experience of Task Force (TF) X-Ray during the war stands as a vivid example of a relatively obscure event that portends trouble for the future. Like it or not, it was an operation that revealed a major rift in the Marine Corps’ training and operational capabilities, and as such it should be thoroughly dissected.

Like it or not, it was an operation that revealed a major rift in the Marine Corps’ training and operational capabilities, and as such it should be thoroughly dissected.

Background

I deployed to Saudi Arabia on or about 2 September 1990 as the company commander of Company C, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines. “Charlie” was the battalion’s helicopterborne company, so we had spent a great deal of our time working assault support issues with Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 (HMM-165), which was the battalion’s associated helicopter squadron from Marine Aircraft Group 24 (MAG-24). That group also deployed to the Gulf early in Operation DESERT SHIELD.

During DESERT SHIELD, the battalion occupied numerous defensive positions along the coastal main supply route (MSR) and tensely anticipated orders to move north into Kuwait. The 1st and 3d Battalions of the 3d Marines (1/3 and 3/3) did not join the 1st Marine Division’s larger mechanized TFs of Ripper and (later) Papa Bear. Instead, they—along with 1/5 and 1/6—fell under the 3d Marines’ (collectively designated as TF Taro) and trained on a variety of operational skills vice committing to only mechanized operations. We conducted constant “round robin” training that included company-level helicopterborne operations, foot-mobile infiltrations, cross training with Arab coalition forces, and limited mechanized operations. This general training left me confident of my Marines flexibility, but concerned about what our “piece of the pie” would be in an attack north.

Sometime around November, the subject of TF Taro serving as a helicopterborne regiment was briefed by my battalion staff. I was ecstatic since I felt “Charlie” had a leg up in helicopter operations. Our primary challenge was helicopter availability, which in the fall of 1990 was at an all-time low due to the corrosive effect of the sand on aircraft and competing requirements for logistics support. Under these difficult operating conditions, all of MAG-16’s squadrons flew in general support of 1 Marine Expeditionary Force (1 MEF). It became obvious that we would not have the opportunity to “bond” with assault support as we had in Hawaii.

As fall turned to winter, TF Taro’s battalions started to create helicopter load plans to support the projected regimental helicopterborne assault. The results were staggering. Lift requirements were in the neighborhood of 86 aircraft for a significantly reduced battalion in a one-wave lift. These figures, which had seemed so supportable in all our formal schools, were now daunting. As December and January came, 1/3 tried several times to schedule battalion-size lifts with no success. The helicopter availability was not there to support this training, again because of logistics...
commitments and asset conservation. Our air officer was able to set up some small company-size helicopterborne raids, but they consisted of only eight aircraft or less and were never conducted at night due to safety concerns.

Birth of X-Ray

As December came to a close my battalion began to present concept briefs on potential missions in an assault into Kuwait. The first that I remember was a regimental helicopterborne assault into the Al Jaber Airfield. The concept was to assault with two battalions in two waves, with another battalion (2/3) on call, all supporting a single-division breach of Iraqi lines in southern Kuwait. The TF would then clear and hold the airfield until it linked up with a mechanized force driving up from the south. We had deep concerns about antiaircraft artillery near the objective, and lift constraints remained a major issue. We worked this plan until early February, when it was waved off by I MEF after Gen Boomer decided on a two-division breach farther to the west. TF Taro with 2/3 and 3/3 was soon detailed to support this assault, while 1/3 remained focused on helicopterborne operations.

Reducing the hit footprint remained the battalion’s biggest challenge in the weeks preceding the ground assault. We made great progress toward this objective in mid-February, when 1/3 received M151 Jeeps with heavy machinegun and TOW mounts to replace our helicopter-unfriendly HMMWVs. The battalion also requested open back Toyota trucks to augment the M151s. (These arrived on G-minus-2). This swap seemed easy on paper. In reality, our drivers had to switch on the run from their powerful, sure-footed HMMWVs with automatic transmissions to the under-powered, top-heavy M151s and Toyotas with standard transmissions.

On 13 February I received a battalion brief that we were now designated TF X-Ray, the division reserve. Al Jaber was out as an objective and we turned our attention to the area below the Al Burqan Oil Field. We moved to our assembly area north of Al Kanjar and received our mission brief.

TF X-Ray would conduct a daylight battalion (minus) helicopterborne assault into a landing zone (LZ) in the vicinity of Al Burqan in order to protect the division’s right flank during the breach of the second obstacle belt and follow-on attack at Al Jaber Airfield. We would execute on order, but it would be timed so that we seized our objectives 4 hours prior to TF Papa Bear completing its breach of the second obstacle belt. An additional mission requirement was for one artillery battalion to be in position between the two belts to support the insert into TF X-Ray’s LZ.

Reality Sets In

The initial concept of operations developed by the battalion involved using three company battle positions to occupy a series of low hills located between the intended breach sites and the base of the Al Burqan Oil Field. Two combined antia-
constraint was the lack of a full rehearsal due to heavy tasking of assault support aircraft prior to G-day.

The battalion staff conducted a brief with the division staff on G-minus-2. When the commanding officer and staff returned to the assembly area, they informed the company commanders that we now had a new force mix. No rifle companies would go in the assault. Instead, TF X-Ray would consist of three CAATs with a large headquarters section containing the battalion combat operations center (COC) and the 81mm mortar platoon (minus). Including attachments, the grand total for X-Ray now came to 134 passengers and 40 vehicles. Division’s concerns about our lack of helicopter support and the ability of the TF to move out of enemy artillery range precipitated these changes.

It was after this brief that the battalion commander, LtCol Michael V. Maloney, asked me to accompany TF X-Ray as the assistant operations officer. As a graduate of the Tactical Air Control Party Course, the Weapons and Tactics Instructors Course, and two years experience as the forward air controller at the Infantry Officer Course, I possessed some unique training in helicopter-borne operations. Since our plan called for the rifle companies to link up eventually with TF X-Ray, and since I had a strong company executive officer, I accepted. In fact, though, all but one of 1/3’s companies fell back to TF Taro during the assault and were split up into several security missions. Charlie broke into three platoons and guarded the batteries of 1/12. Two of my platoons linked up with me at the Kuwait airport on 27 February; the third did not join us until later back at Manifa Bay.

Making It Work

Our assault support arrived on 23 February, and it was a sight to behold. It seemed that every helicopter in the Marine Corps was landing around the perimeter of our assembly area, but it was really just over 50. I remember the preponderance of them being CH-53s, but we had at least one of every type flown in the Fleet Marine Force. Escorts consisted of AH-1Ws and AH-1Js, but we also had some UH-1Ns with guns mounted and one configured as a command and control (C&C) bird with an ASC-126 communications suite. The C&C bird also had a mobile unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) monitor in it, but we were in the end unable to get a UAV dedicated to our mission. Happily from our perspective, the air mission commander was LtCol Marvin D. Hall, commander of HMM-165.

The battalion issued a “zippo” brief in mass to the pilots as well as to the whole maneuver force. All parties also received the air brief. We developed some quick “go/no-go” criteria:

- The mission must launch prior to 1645 to avoid a night insert.
- We must have 60 minutes notice to execute in order to “hack” in all fire support agencies and arrange with division for priority in close air support and artillery during the insert.
- All aircraft must be loaded and staged by H-hour on G-day.
- If the primary LZ is untenable, X-Ray will try to insert on the friendly side of the second breach.

TF X-Ray submitted all the above conditions to division and began final preparations.

Some of the first problems that we encountered revealed themselves during the loading of the aircraft. Our drivers, some with less than 24 hours experience in their new jeeps and trucks, were now trying to maneuver them into cramped helicopter interiors. Estimations of aircraft loads were creative at best, because we were uncertain of things such as the weight of a modified Toyota truck with a M105 trailer.

As usual, the Marines carried the day by displaying limitless ingenuity. Aircraft crew chiefs and gun team leaders worked around, over, and through every obstacle. Machinegun and TOW mounts were partially disassembled, clamshell doors modified, and aircraft interiors reconfigured to fit the ground force to our helicopters. Still, it was the overwhelming consensus that we were tempting fate without a full blown rehearsal.
By late evening on G-minus-1, we had loaded everything and issued an execution checklist. Since this operation involved a variety of squadrons, LtCol Hall worked out a set of instant standing operating procedures to cover contingencies like a hot LZ, medevacs during insert, and emergency extract procedures. In accordance with our go/no-go criteria, we did not plan or discuss night contingencies.

**Snap!**

G-day morning (24 February) began with all the TF X-Ray key players huddled around the battalion’s COC listening to the progress of the 1st Marine Division. Our plan called for the reception of a series of brevity codes from division headquarters with “Huddle” (60 minutes to launch) and ending with “Snap” (begin helicopterborne assault).

By 1000 it seemed that the ground attack was progressing well and our launch would go as planned. The Marines waited patiently for their respective aircraft, conducting final checks and focusing on the mission at hand. TF Papa Bear had already passed through the first breach and was waiting for artillery support before continuing the attack through the second obstacle belt. This had some significance for X-Ray since one of our launch criteria was the presence of an artillery battalion to support our insert. Ripper called in that it was receiving enemy artillery fire, but was also going to start the second breach.

The attack continued at a fast pace. By 1200 TF Papa Bear was at the second obstacle belt, still without artillery, but nevertheless beginning its second breach. At that time we received: “60 to Huddle.” Concerned that someone had confused brevity codes, the battalion called for confirmation. The response on the command net was: “Huddle in 1800 to 1800.”

At about 1400, TF X-Ray received “Huddle.” The Marines buckled in, flight crews went to MOPP 4 and started preflight checks, and we waited.

The waiting went on until 1600 when we received a call asking: “Can Snap go at 1730?” We responded: “Negative, 1645 is our no-go time or we will be conducting a night insert.” The division response was that we had to do the mission at 1730 regardless. TF Papa Bear had already completed its second breach and was now moving into our insert LZ. They needed TF X-Ray to relieve them so that the assault on Al Jaber could begin on time.

We started to discuss the realities of a night insert. A 1730 launch would make L-hour 1800, right after sunset. From the ground perspective we had little information about the objective area, so our ability to seize control of it quickly and set up long-range kill zones at night would be severely impaired, but certainly not impossible. The added concealment, however, would also afford us more opportunity to move about without a large enemy audience.

The air perspective was less optimistic. More than 50 helicopters flying at low level into a dark, oil smoke-covered battlefield and attempting to insert us into a sand-covered LZ was a sobering thought. In addition, not all of the flight crews were current on their night vision goggle qualification because of the lack of night flying in Southwest Asia. The airborne helicopter coordinator, Maj Raymond E. “Rake” Schwartz of HMM-165, started discussing options with the flight leaders, but the responses he received did not inspire confidence.

LtCol Hall contacted the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing on the helicopter request net asking if it was in agreement with launching X-Ray as a night insert. About 10 minutes later he received back a garbled response that indicated the mission was a go, although later there was some question as to whether we received the correct response over the busy net.

At 1700 we gathered all the key players and briefed them on the situation. As best we could tell, Papa Bear was in LZ X-Ray and could handle our initial terminal guidance. The TF would conduct a night insert, link up with Papa Bear in zone, and conduct a night relief in place. The danger of going into the center of Papa Bear, at night, in a still unstable situation, were apparent to all of us.

LtCol Hall modified the flight plan for night in record time. No one left the brief with a happy face. But we had a mission, and we were going to do everything we could to make it work. TF X-Ray launched at about 1730.

**The Plans of Mice and Men**

As we lifted off from our assembly area, I sat in the C&C bird operating the ASC-126 with Maj Schwartz and LtCol Maloney. Our radios came alive with reports of our first problem. A CH-46 rolled on takeoff, and the aircraft immediately behind it were maneuvering out of the way. Fortunately there were no casualties. Still our force was already diminished, and we hadn’t even entered Kuwait.

The formation stabilized and we called division to report crossing the border and continuing our schedule to L-hour. The sun was dropping fast behind us, and the sky alternated between pink and black as we flew through the low-hanging smoke. Below we could see the division trains scrambling across open desert. Maj Schwartz had his hands full as the formation fought to maintain distance in the constantly changing visibility.

I was monitoring the division command net and could hear TFs Ripper, Papa Bear, and Grizzly calling in their positions as they attempted to consolidate for the night. I established contact
with Papa Bear and received “Landing ‘T’ Vet” over the net.

At about L-minus-10, I overheard one of the TFs report incoming artillery. Out the open door of my helicopter I saw a series of flashes to our northwest. I passed the information on to Maj Schwartz as he was getting a call from our Cobra escorts that they saw impacts in the vicinity of the oil fires, just north of LZ X-Ray. Over the division net we heard that Papa Bear was engaging some enemy to the north of its positions.

The Cobras called back that they were over the zone, and it looked hot. The Cobras were turning outboard for another pass as my helicopter overflew the second breach. The LZ below us was invisible because of the glare from the hundreds of flaming oil wells to the north. I could see intermittent incoming and outgoing fires on the ground, though none seemed directed at us.

As we looked down, reports started coming in from the aircraft that the formation was jumbled, with the Cobras intermixed with the transports. Reports of incoming ground fire were also received. It was obvious that the formation had become a furball over the zone. Maj Schwartz tried to sort it out quickly, but it was not going to happen. He asked LtCol Maloney to abort the insert, and this was promptly done. I called Papa Bear with the news and suddenly became a very nervous passenger.

Withdrawal

Withdrawals are seldom planned in detail and never look pretty. The X-Ray mission validated this corollary in my mind. I cannot do justice to this portion of the operation; I am not a pilot and spent most of the flight back watching rotor blades and cockpit lights rush at us from outside the open helicopter doors. From my perspective, the aircrews did an incredible job returning to Saudi Arabia without loss of life.

Most of the TF landed at LZ Lonesome Dove, although a few aircraft used the LZ at Kibrit after they became separated. They returned to Lonesome Dove later the next day. We spent the remainder of the night of the 24th locating and accounting for all our Marines.

Incredibly, all the aircraft made it back to Saudi Arabia. Our only casualties were the CH-46 that rolled on takeoff and a CH-53 that crashed its landing gear while landing at Lonesome Dove. The Marines on board the two damaged helicopters were pretty banged up, but none were critically injured. Their vehicles and weapons did not fare as well.

Try, Try Again

We received a call at 0400 on the 25th to launch LZ X-Ray again at first light, but that simply was not an option. We needed time to reconfigure our task force. Our aircraft availability was also in question, as other needs for close-in fire support and assault support were starting to draw our armada of helicopters away.

We ran a mission brief at 0700. Our new plan called for inserting the TF into LZ X-Ray in two waves with 30 helos. Our alternate LZ would be just south of the second breach point. The TF was ready to launch by 1100, but we received orders to delay because TF Papa Bear was fighting off an enemy counterattack. After waiting until 1200 we launched TF X-Ray for the second time.

The assault went much easier on the 25th, but of course we already had a pretty fair rehearsal the previous night! A new twist was that we lost our C&C bird and Maj Schwartz had toFragment V-281 “Sticks” into service as our command platform. It worked, but I would not recommend it. We were able to see our LZ this time, but found it to be full of Iraqi POWs and burning tanks. Maj Schwartz quickly executed our alternate LZ plan, and we landed next to the 1st Combat Engineer Battalion command post southeast of the second breach. By 1500 on the 25th, TF X-Ray linked up with TF Papa Bear and began a relief in place with 1st Tanks. On the 26th, Company A flew in to reinforce TF X-Ray, and on the following day we displaced to Kuwait International Airport and rejoined TF Taro.

Lessons Learned

- Training. We teach large helicopterborne operations in all of our formal military schools, but we do not practice them in our schools or in the Fleet Marine Force. Operations such as the one at Vietnam’s Dewey Canyon have turned from a capability to a haunting memory. We need to train for this complex mission seriously or give up the misperception that we can effectively execute it.
- Night Operations. TF X-Ray recognized early that a night insert was not a capability we possessed. Though the Marine Corps had joined the media hype promoting our night capabilities, the
realities were that the helicopter squadrons were severely limited in conducting night training. We need to commit to training for full operational capability in limited visibility or be willing to fight under the limitations of little or no assault support at night.

- **Command and Control.** Command and control were not deficiencies in TF X-Ray. The staff from 1/3 and supporting staff members from HMM-165 had a long history of working together. HMM-165 was our associated squadron in 1st Marine Brigade and during deployments to Okinawa. As a result, we shared standardized procedures and a base of experience. Decisions, such as the abort call on G-day evening, were rapid and timely as a result of our strong working relationship and accumulated trust. I recognize, however, that this may not be the case with other units around the Corps.

- **Hot Zones.** Although the area surrounding the LZ on G-day evening was active with outgoing fires from TF Papa Bear, it is questionable how much, if any, incoming fire was present. To my knowledge no aircraft received hits. However, the perception that fires were directed upward added to the confused situation over LZ X-Ray. We do not practice landing into LZs at night with friendly forces firing, but we should. It is difficult to judge the direction and distance of tracers at first glance, or to use night vision goggles near blazing fires and explosions. Popular training, no. Critical, yes.

- **Rehearsals, Rehearsals, Rehearsals.** We should have conducted a full rehearsal of this operation. Fuel concerns and the late arrival of all the TF members were the main reasons we did not rehearse. As a result, we were not able to work out the details of our communications, load, landing, and contingency plans. Particularly in view of our change to a night mission, the lack of a rehearsal of any type added significantly to our problems in execution.

**Epilogue**

I have always been proud of the Marine Corps’ inherent capability to innovate and perform under pressure. I feel that we have developed that capability by becoming generalists in military operations, switching readily from helicopterborne to mechanized to foot-mobile operations as the time and circumstances dictate. Our devotion to diverse training results in unsurpassed flexibility and resilience in the Fleet Marine Force.

A reality of the Corps is that we have not organized and do not employ our assets in a way that facilitates maintaining a capability for large helicopterborne operations. A Marine infantry battalion may have a designated helicopterborne company but rarely has an opportunity to engage in larger undertakings. What would it take to change that? What are we willing to give up in order to cultivate such a capability? One thing is certain, however. Our doctrine and its formal schools training must reflect actual capabilities and not capabilities that were present for a short period of time in another generation’s war. Deluding ourselves by conducting pacetime exercises that feature helicopterborne battalions without fully committing our training to that efficacy is reckless. The experience of the TF X-Ray mission proves that point. I guess Clint Eastwood’s character in Magnum Force said it best when he wryly noted, “A man’s got to know his limitations.”

USMC

---

> Maj Conlin was a rifle company commander during the Gulf War and is currently serving as Marine Corps Security Forces liaison officer to the CNO.