

AH-64 arriving at  
Rinas, Kosovo.



1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Cesar Rodriguez)

# The Operational Challenges of Task Force Hawk

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Operation Allied Force was a major NATO success. The Alliance withstood competing national agendas and divisive political pressures while conducting a 78-day campaign that ended violence against Albanian Kosovars. Serb forces withdrew from Kosovo and refugees returned home. Yet the conflict also raised questions. While many of the controversies were debated on the levels of policy and strategy, differences on the operational role of U.S. joint forces also arose. Task Force Hawk was the most visible case. Intended to supplement airpower by using the AH-64 helicopter and multiple launch rocket system (MLRS), its



ANTP-Q-37 radar,  
Task Force Hawk.

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Perimeter at Rinas Airport.



U.S. Air Force (Angela Stafforci)

mission proved to be controversial among senior U.S. military officers. In addition, operations revealed major failures in the integration of ground and air forces.

This article reviews the background leading to the decision to launch Task

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Force Hawk, its deployment, misconceptions regarding its speed of arrival, and the operational difficulties that confronted the joint force.

#### A Rumor of War

Preparations for a campaign against Yugoslavia started in summer 1998. With conditions in the province of Kosovo steadily deteriorating, military planning was conducted within both NATO and U.S.-only channels. Planning was significantly constrained because few Alliance members perceived that they had vital interests at stake in Kosovo. In particular, neither American nor NATO leadership favored using ground forces as part of an integrated joint operation. While fairly elaborate air attack options were developed through the early winter of 1999,

there was no planning for a land component. This shortfall strongly influenced subsequent operations.

Although the initial mission was to take out the Serbian air defense system, air operations included provisions for attacks on ground forces as well as fixed infrastructure targets. Planners realized at the outset that it would be hard to locate and hit Yugoslav ground troops operating inside Kosovo where regular army and police forces were conducting operations against the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Serbian conventional units were employed in company- and battalion-sized battle groups so forces could spread throughout the province and rapidly move to support the police. These tactics and the forested, hilly terrain produced a dispersed and nearly invisible enemy with long experience in small unit, combined arms operations.

While NATO had months to prepare for air operations, the timeline for Task Force Hawk was constrained. Army planners in Europe first learned that General Wesley Clark, USA, Commander in Chief, European Command, was considering using attack helicopters in Kosovo at a planning exercise at

Grafenwohr, Germany, on March 20, 1999, just four days prior to the start of NATO air attacks. Initial guidance to the Germany-based Army V Corps was to plan to deploy a force of 1,700 to Macedonia, where it would prepare for deep attack helicopter operations. The force would eventually grow to 48 AH-64s, although the initial deployment envisioned 24 aircraft plus support ships. A small number of MLRS were included to provide air defense suppression fires. Since the force was originally envisioned to deploy to Macedonia and be positioned near elements of the NATO Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, planners minimized unit size because force protection and logistic support would be available.

Clark's request for Task Force Hawk proved controversial. He was searching for ways to hit Serb fielded forces in Kosovo, believing that their destruction would convince the enemy to end the conflict. He considered the ground forces a center of gravity for Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic. Moreover, he felt the political pressure for results. Initial air attacks had done little to either damage Serb forces or halt ethnic cleansing.

Where Clark saw benefits, JCS found risks. They immediately raised objections. Critics cited such issues as possible Serb attacks against the AH-64s' operating base, low altitude air defenses in Kosovo, and the dispersed nature of ground targets. The whole issue appeared moot when Macedonia refused permission to mount offensive NATO operations from its territory. Army planners in Germany learned the mission would probably be cancelled on the Friday before Easter.

The situation changed over the weekend. Albania agreed to accept ground forces. The President was persuaded at the same time to authorize the mission despite strong JCS objections. On April 3, he decided to deploy Task Force Hawk.

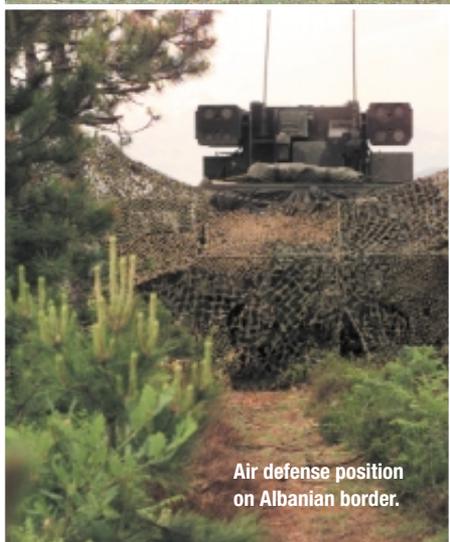
#### On the Fly

The new base profoundly impacted planning and operations. Given the absence of U.S. or NATO units in Albania to provide force protection or other support, the size of the force

AH-64s near Tirana.



55<sup>th</sup> Signal Company (Christina Ann Home)



Air defense position on Albanian border.

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the total number personnel to 5,100. A major portion of the V Corps staff was deployed to Albania to control operations. Lieutenant General John Hendrix, USA, was named to head Task Force Hawk.

Expanding the size of the force was not the only factor affecting deployment. The small airstrip at Rinas, inbound humanitarian flights, and limited means of offloading restricted arrivals to twenty C-17s per day.

Transports carrying personnel and equipment departed from Ramstein air base on April 8. Helicopters began departing six days later. All arrived in Pisa, Italy, by April 18. They were held there several days. The situation at Rinas was chaotic. There was limited ramp room for cargo aircraft and torrential rains had turned the surrounding area into a lake of mud. Humanitarian relief helicopters landing in open fields had sunk up to their bellies. The attack ships would have to wait while concrete landing pads were constructed.

The first 11 AH-64s and 20 support helicopters arrived April 21. The remaining 24 ships came five days later. Hendrix declared an initial operational capability on April 26. On May 7, Task Force Hawk was declared to be fully ready for deep operations

and placed under the operational control of Joint Task Force Noble Anvil, commanded by Admiral James Ellis.

These dates did not compare unfavorably with the expectations of U.S. and NATO commanders. Task Force Hawk met its goals despite the public perception that it was slow to deploy. The National Security Council set mission capability for April 23–24. On April 23, 11 mission-ready AH-64s were at Rinas and several mission readiness exercises had been conducted. In fact, the deployment had gone well from the viewpoint of the Army and Air Force despite one training accident and another mishap attributed to equipment failure.

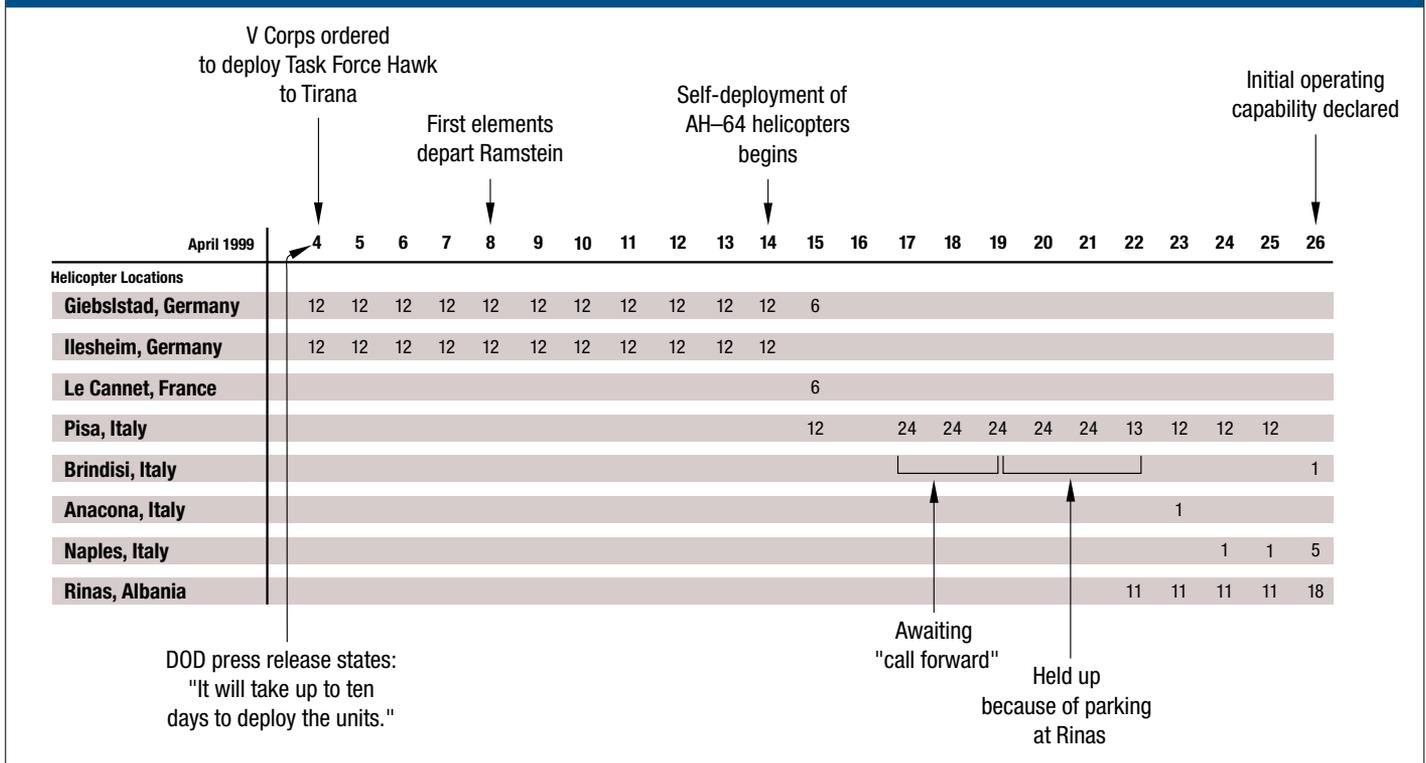
An April 4 DOD press statement contributed to the feeling that the deployment was slow. Kenneth Bacon, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, told a reporter, “You’re probably talking, when you consider the transportation challenges, about a week or so, maybe seven to ten days. . . .” A formal press release the same day stated that it would “take up to ten days to deploy the units,”<sup>1</sup> implying closure on April 14, well before the Clark or National Security Council targets. This established a false expectation in the media and among the public.

### Preparing for War

Once in theater, the plan was for attack helicopters to strike conventional and police units operating in central and western Kosovo. The targets were to be developed by various means, including joint reconnaissance systems, Army counterfire radars that were observing artillery and mortar firing against KLA in western Kosovo, and Army unmanned aerial vehicles from Macedonia.

All the missions were planned as night attacks by groups of four to six AH-64s, supported by fixed-wing aircraft strikes and helicopters on standby for rescue in case a ship was shot down. Extensive deception missions and suppressive fires against air defense sites were prepared. Lethal suppressive fires were to come from MLRS and artillery units flown to Albania.

## Task Force Hawk: Helicopter Self-Deployment



For planning and control, V Corps Deep Operations Coordination Center deployed to Albania, developed targets for attack helicopter strikes, and passed those to the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Vicenza, Italy. Task

### The Chains that Bind

As with the deployment, Task Force Hawk faced a variety of obstacles once in Kosovo. Overshadowing operational challenges was enduring senior level disagreement over the risks versus

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Force Hawk maintained close contact in Vicenza with the Battlefield Coordination Element (BCE), a small Army detachment whose role was to negotiate the details of proposed helicopter missions. As plans developed, the detachment communicated them to CAOC to deconflict airspace, negotiate fixed-wing support, and work out timing. Task Force Hawk submitted mission proposals daily. While the force prepared for strike operations, it also developed targets that were passed to CAOC for possible fixed-wing strikes.

benefits of employing the force. Combined with Belgrade's capitulation in early June, these factors resulted in Task Force Hawk never being employed in direct combat.

Authorization to employ the force directly never came for several reasons. The target set in western Kosovo consisted of platoon-size forces, dispersed and usually hidden under trees and in villages. Attack helicopters penetrating at low altitude would have been exposed to small arms fire, anti-aircraft guns, and shoulder-fired missiles. Given the extreme U.S. and NATO unwillingness to suffer casualties, the risks were determined to be too great relative to the payoff.

Allied fighters were achieving at least some effect on enemy forces from safer medium altitude attacks, although post-conflict analysis shows that ground forces suffered less damage than was thought at the time.

Exacerbating the challenge of low altitude operations by the helicopters was the fact that the aircraft would have been limited to several mountain passes leading from Albania into Kosovo; they could not fly over the mountains carrying weapons loads. Therefore, the enemy could concentrate its defenses on those ingress and egress routes.

The rules of engagement were so restrictive that extensive lethal suppressive fires were not viable. There was great concern for the huge number of refugees. NATO pilots were required to actually see their targets before releasing ordnance to confirm that there were no civilians in the target area. The rules of engagement tightened every time civilian casualties occurred. In the

case of night attack by helicopters, extensive lethal suppressive fires would have been required since low altitude air defense weapons did not need emitting radars to conduct engagements and were therefore hard to locate.

Washington's support for operations also seems to have eroded as a result of two crashes involving AH-64s in Albania during training. Both crew members were killed in the second accident.

Meanwhile, Task Force Hawk continued to target enemy positions. Since it did not have permission to engage the enemy, these locations were nominated for attack by other air assets. However, due to the lack of preexisting joint procedures to share data on emerging targets and quickly respond, most targets were struck hours later or not at all. Restrictive rules of engagement also limited the effectiveness of sensor-to-shooter linkages. The requirement for eyes on target to minimize collateral damage frequently negated the utility of rapid targeting data such as that provided by the task force's counterfire radars.

Despite the fact that the AH-64s were not employed in Kosovo, Task Force Hawk contributed to the success of Allied Force. The leadership in Belgrade probably viewed it and the NATO ground forces in Macedonia as the nucleus of an eventual ground attack into Kosovo.<sup>2</sup> The presence of the force also likely reassured Albania that the Alliance was committed to its defense during a time of extreme crisis when tens of thousands of refugees were flooding in from Kosovo. In addition, the task force's target location and reconnaissance systems, though not used to best effect, also assisted in locating enemy forces.

**For the Future**

Operation Allied Force provides many lessons for joint operations. It was an operation with strictly limited objectives and significant political constraints. Tomorrow's joint operations will present similar challenges. It is thus possible that, due to political realities, future operations will be *air-only*—despite the fact that air-land



UH-60s supporting civil engineering project.

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MLRS mission rehearsal at Kcirre, Albania.

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synergies are preferable to single dimension operations. A better joint approach is needed to respond to similar contingencies.

While NATO won the conflict using airpower alone and with no combat fatalities, joint planning and execution were lacking and better joint procedures would have helped. No land component commander was ever designated. That precluded ground force planning in the event that a land offensive was ever required. It also added to the difficulties of establishing clean lines of command for the joint task force commander. Additionally, land component intelligence with its expertise in enemy land force tactics could have facilitated strike operations.

Similarly, joint procedures for target coordination were slow to evolve. There was a general lack of familiarity among the components as to how to integrate and deconflict target requests. The BCE located at CAOC did not normally work with corps-level headquarters, and Air Force and Navy personnel there were unfamiliar with Army procedures. The joint targeting coordination

process needs to be worked out in advance and well understood.

Better methods to integrate Army attack helicopters with an air operation are also needed. Allied Force revealed a general lack of understanding about how to employ attack helicopters in conjunction with what was primarily an air offensive, resulting in a lost opportunity to expand the means of attack. Planners should consider how Army attack helicopters and missiles can be employed in the initial phase of a joint campaign before ground forces arrive.

Campaign plans should also be as multidimensional as possible. Execution will be compromised when there are no air-land synergies on the operational level. Neither the United States



Redeploying M-1 tank.

1<sup>st</sup> Combat Camera Squadron (Chris Steffen)

nor NATO was willing to consider a ground attack into Kosovo. The practical effect was that the enemy could tailor countermeasures and tactics to minimize the effects of air attack alone. KLA

### the Army should expand ground force options to improve joint synergies

was such an inadequate ground force that police and conventional forces could operate in a very dispersed manner and still defeat it despite Allied command of the air. With no credible threat of a ground offensive, there was no need to be concerned with creating defenses and massing units. Post-conflict analysis indicates that the minimal damage inflicted on the forces inside Kosovo was largely due to their ability to disperse in the face of a single-dimensional threat.

The Army should expand ground force options to help improve joint synergies. Essentially two types of ground units were available for operations in Kosovo, light forces and heavy mechanized units. However, given the

limited firepower, ground mobility, and protection of light units, casualty-averse decisionmakers would probably have been loath to employ them even had there been a willingness to conduct a ground operation. On the other hand, the heavy Army forces with their M-1 tanks and M-2 infantry fighting vehicles would have been severely constrained by the terrain. Indeed, Army engineers in Albania who surveyed routes heavy units could have taken from Albanian ports to the Kosovo border concluded that weeks of extensive engineering would have been needed to shore up bridges, repair roads, and make other infrastructure improvements. The Army's current plans to introduce medium units into its force structure, as represented by the interim brigade combat teams and the later Objective Force, are appropriate given the Allied Force experience.

Allied Force demonstrated the strategic deficiencies of not taking a joint air-land approach to military operations. The political impediments were real enough, but so were the

consequences of adopting a lesser strategy. Key combat synergies derived from joint air-ground operations and the compelling force they can exert on enemies were not realized. Allied Force was a combined air campaign that never had the benefit of a truly joint command. Establishing such a command would have helped the overall effort. Ground intelligence analysts would have brought their special expertise to the identification of targets in Kosovo, possibly improving the effectiveness of the air campaign against Serb forces. Above all, a fully joint headquarters would have been better able to integrate Task Force Hawk, not to mention more ambitious ground operations. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Defense Link, DOD news briefing, April 4, 1999, and "U.S. Attack Helicopters and Multiple Launch Rocket Systems to Deploy in Support of Operation Allied Force," DOD press release no. 145-99, April 4, 1999; DOD news briefing, April 4, 1999, Kenneth H. Bacon, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Clark states that Task Force Hawk "conveyed a powerful image of a ground threat and would have been its lead component." See Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), p. 425. Some argue that the threat of a ground invasion was one of several contributors to Milosovic's willingness to settle with NATO, citing Yugoslav precautionary measures such as strengthening defensive positions along possible invasion routes and positioning 80,000 mines along the Kosovo border with Albania. See Steve Hosmer, *Why Milosovic Decided to Settle When He Did*, MR1351-AF (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), pp. 109-14.