

# OPERATION NORTHERN DELAY: THE EVOLUTION OF JOINT FORCIBLE ENTRY

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

OPERATION NORTHERN DELAY: THE EVOLUTION OF JOINT FORCIBLE ENTRY, by Major Andrew D. Robinson, 124 pages.

This paper uses Operation Northern Delay, the 173rd Airborne Brigade's airborne assault into northern Iraq in 2003, as a historical case study highlighting the evolution of Joint Forcible Entry (JFE). Army, Air Force, and special operations forces acted jointly on the northern front of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade jumped a thousand paratroopers into Bashur Airfield on the night of 26 March 2003 under the tactical control of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North (Task Force Viking). The 173rd airlanded the rest of its combat power and received the first airland of an M-1 Abrams tank task force (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 63<sup>rd</sup> Armored Regiment) in military history. The joint force conducted unconventional and conventional warfare alongside Kurdish peshmerga to fix Iraqi defensive forces along the Green Line. Northern Delay was the first strategic brigade airdrop using C-17 aircraft in formation, integrating a conventional Army airborne brigade within the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, and integrating an armored battalion into an airborne operation. Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry*, should incorporate lessons learned from the hybrid airdrop/airland, SOF-conventional integration, and airborne-armored integration to improve readiness of the joint entry force.

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## ACRONYMS

AFAR	Airborne Field Artillery Regiment
AFSOC	Air Force Special Operations Command
AR	Armor
ARFOR-T	Army Forces-Turkey
CF	Conventional forces
CFLCC	Combined Forces Land Component Command
CFSOCC	Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CJSOTF-N	Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North
CJSOTF-W	Combined Joint Special Operations Forces-West
CRG	Contingency Response Group
ERO	Engine Running Off/On Load
FARP	Forward Area Refueling/Re-arming Point
FSB	Forward Support Battalion
ID	Infantry Division
IRTF	Immediate Ready Task Force
JFC	Joint Force Commander
JFE	Joint Forcible Entry
JP	Joint Publication
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
LOC	Line of communication
LRSD	Long Range Surveillance Detachment
OA	Operational access

ODA	Operational Detachments-Alpha
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SETAF	Southern European Task Force
SF	Special Forces
SIAP	Saddam International Airport
SOCCENT	Special Operations Command-Central
SOF	Special operations forces
TF	Task Force
US	United States
USAF	United States Air Force
USAREUR	United States Army Europe
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USEUCOM	United States European Command
USMC	United States Marine Corps

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Forcible entry operations are inherently risky and always joint. Forcible entry demands careful planning and thorough preparation; synchronized, violent, and rapid execution; and leader initiative at every level to deal with friction, chance, and opportunity.

— Joint Chiefs of Staff,  
JP 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations*

#### Research Intent/Background

The United States (U.S.) Department of Defense and the academic community regularly review and analyze the military's joint forcible entry (JFE) capabilities. The term forcible entry describes "a military aspect of operational access that may be applied when diplomatic and other means have failed" and "operations to seize and hold lodgments against armed opposition." Strategists define operational access as "the ability to project military force into an OA [operational area] with sufficient freedom of action to accomplish the mission." U.S. military JFE capabilities include "amphibious assault, airborne assault, air assault, ground assault, and any combination thereof." This paper focuses on JFE at the operational level of war. Specifically, this paper analyzes a historical case study of Operation Northern Delay in 2003, an airborne/airland assault in Iraq by the U.S. Army, Air Force (USAF), and special operations forces (SOF).<sup>1</sup>

U.S. Army airborne forces are "the assault force or used in combination with other capabilities for a forcible entry, or they may conduct follow-on operations from a lodgment." Precursor units to the modern U.S. Army, Marine Corps (USMC), USAF, and SOF employed airborne operations as early as World War II. Many Army airborne and

SOF units share an official lineage originating from paratrooper and Office of Strategic Services units in World War II. Modern Army airborne and SOF are both capable of JFE, specifically airborne operations.<sup>2</sup>

The United States employed airborne and special operations units for joint forcible entry in nearly every armed conflict since World War II. Operations Tomahawk in Korea, Junction City in Vietnam, Urgent Fury in Grenada, and Just Cause in Panama are well known examples. Recent airborne operations were demonstrations, or shows of force, falling short of combat. Examples include Operation Golden Pheasant in Honduras, Operation Restore/Uphold Democracy in Haiti (the joint force was in flight and ready to jump and fight when diplomats arrived at a last-minute peace deal), and Operation Rapid Guardian in the Balkans.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas conventional airborne forces leveraged the principle of mass during the previously mentioned operations—rapidly inserting thousands of paratroopers to overwhelm an enemy-held objective—forcible entry operations via SOF are more precise. JFE doctrine states “[SOF] can execute forcible entries using a combination of fixed-wing, rotary-wing, and tiltrotor aircraft employing airland or airdrop procedures” Of note, conventional Army airborne forces can and do employ airland techniques.

To ensure consistent readiness for these types of contingency operations, Army airborne units maintain close training relationships with the USAF. For instance, Army requirements informed the development and testing of USAF cargo aircraft from the C-130 turboprop to the C-141 jet to the modern C-17 jet. Nevertheless, intra-service tension remains between Army airborne, SOF, and armored forces. This is caused by parochialism, bureaucratic stovepipes, separate geographic basing, and short-sighted

doctrine. Participant units in the most recent U.S. operational-level airborne assault worked together to accomplish the mission despite these tensions and illuminated a path toward better joint and combined arms JFE doctrine.

Operation Northern Delay occurred 26-30 March 2003, during the ground invasion phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The JFE operation centered around the 173rd Airborne Brigade conducting a hybrid airdrop/airland operation under the tactical control of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North (CJSOTF-N). The 173rd's mission was a "demonstration of U.S. resolve . . . to prevent the movement of Iraq divisions north of the Green Line and deter autonomous faction operations in Northern Iraq." After the initial jump and airland operation, the 173rd received an armored task force (1st Battalion, 63rd Armored Regiment) to enhance its ground combat power. This follow-on airland operation was called Airborne Dragon. Three aspects of the 173rd's combat deployment showed the evolution of JFE: a hybrid airdrop/airland operation using the USAF's new C-17 cargo jets, the tactical control of a conventional airborne brigade by a Special Forces (SF) Group, and the Army's first integration of an M-1 Abrams tank battalion into an airland operation.

### Research Questions

#### Primary Research Question

How did Operation Northern Delay demonstrate innovation and an evolved concept of integration in Joint Forcible Entry operations?<sup>4</sup>

### Secondary Questions

1. How did Operation Northern Delay demonstrate innovation as a campaign-level Joint Forcible Entry operation?
2. How did Operation Northern Delay demonstrate innovation and an evolved concept of airborne and SOF integration?
3. How did Operation Northern Delay display innovation and an evolved concept of armored and airborne forces integration?
4. How are the lessons of Northern Delay codified in JFE doctrine?

### Assumptions

1. The operational principles and tactical methods used in Operation Northern Delay are suitable and feasible for future use.
2. Airborne assault as a method of forcible entry will remain a valid operational capability. (Three brigades of the 82nd Airborne Division, the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and the 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division continue to train regularly with the USAF for strategic brigade airdrop.)
3. Continuing enemy development of antiaccess/area denial capabilities will limit, but not totally discount, the ability of U.S. forces to physically access future operational areas. Antiaccess/area denial was a problem mitigated in Iraq by Operations Northern and Southern Watch in the decade prior to Operation Iraqi Freedom. It plays only a limited role in the Northern Delay case study.

### Definition of Terms

Air corridor. “A restricted air route of travel specified for use by friendly aircraft and established for the purpose of preventing friendly aircraft from being fired on by friendly forces.”<sup>5</sup>

Airborne assault. “The use of airborne forces to parachute into an objective area to attack and eliminate armed resistance and secure designated objectives” (also called a personnel airdrop).<sup>6</sup>

Airborne operation. “An operation involving the air movement into an objective area of combat forces and their logistic support for execution of a tactical, operational, or strategic mission.”<sup>7</sup>

Airfield seizure. “To employ combat forces to occupy physically and to control a[n airfield].”<sup>8</sup>

Airhead line. “A line denoting the limits of the objective area for an airborne assault.”<sup>9</sup>

Airhead. A type of “lodgment that, when seized and held, ensures the continuous air landing of troops and materiel and provides the maneuver space necessary for projected operations.”<sup>10</sup>

Airland. “Move by air and disembark, or unload, after the aircraft has landed or while an aircraft is hovering.”<sup>11</sup>

Assault phase. “In an airborne operation, a phase beginning with delivery by air of the assault echelon of the force into the objective area and extending through attack of assault objectives and consolidation of the initial airhead.”<sup>12</sup>

Line of communications. “A route, either land, water, and/or air, that connects an operating military force with a base of operations and along which supplies and military forces move.”<sup>13</sup>

Lodgment. “A designated area in a hostile or potentially hostile operational area that, when seized and held, makes the continuous landing of troops and materiel possible and provides maneuver space for subsequent operations.”<sup>14</sup>

Passage of lines. “An operation in which a force moves forward or rearward through another force’s combat positions with the intention of moving into or out of contact with the enemy.”<sup>15</sup>

### Limitations

Research for this study took place from October 2017 to May 2018. Research came from U.S. military joint publications (past and present), commercially available books, library-accessible magazine and journal articles, unit records, and archived interviews. The author has undergraduate and graduate degrees, but this was the first formal graduate thesis attempt. The author served in two airborne units, trained with three, and participated as a company-grade officer on numerous JFE exercises. The author is on assignment to serve in a special operations Ranger battalion. The author has an admitted bias toward the tradition and esprit de corps of paratrooper units, which rests largely on their continued relevance. Additionally, the author is longtime friends with Major Charles Mayville, son of the 173rd Airborne Brigade’s commander for Operation Northern Delay.<sup>16</sup> Finally, this study took place solely in the unclassified realm. If classified materials were available for inclusion, this study would delve deeper into the nature of SOF operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

### Scope

The historical case study follows the five phases of forcible entry planning as described in JP 3-18: “preparation and deployment, assault, stabilization of the lodgment, introduction of follow-on forces, and termination or transition.”<sup>17</sup> The paper assesses the effectiveness of JFE via an airborne assault on the northern front of OIF. The paper determines the evolution of forcible entry as it relates to airborne/airland operations, CF-SOF interoperability, and airborne-armored interoperability. The paper examines the implications for joint forcible entry doctrine.

### Delimitations

This study draws on the author’s personal study of classified SOF airborne and airland assaults in western Iraq during OIF, but they are not central historical case studies.<sup>18</sup> This study briefly describes, but offers minimal analysis, of the decisive coalition ground invasion through southern Iraq toward Baghdad. This study does not discuss airspace control authority or enemy integrated air defense systems as aspects of JFE because they did not apply at the operational level of war in northern Iraq.

### Significance of the Study

To date, scholarship on OIF concentrates on the decisive ground invasion from southern Iraq. The northern front, as an economy of force shaping operation, deserves further study. This study concludes with recommendations for improving JFE doctrine based on lessons from Northern Delay.

The Northern Delay case study demonstrates innovation in the practice of JFE during the last operational use of airborne/airland assault and should result in improved

joint doctrine. Conventional airborne units anchor the U.S. military's Global Response Force, but continue to battle perceptions of irrelevance from pundits like Marc Devore and Douglas Macgregor. SOF continues to operate either by itself or in subordination to conventional commanders. Armored units remain geographically dislocated from rapidly deployable airborne units. The lessons of Operation Northern Delay should result in increased interoperability between Army branches, conventional and special operations forces, and the USAF. The military services represented in the case study came together in the initial days of the invasion, with no time for rehearsal, and accomplished their mission using never-before used tactics and techniques.

### Summary

The entrance of the 173rd onto the northern front was widely publicized on cable news (CNN) and print (Stars and Stripes) media. The events and the environment surrounding the combat jump are less well known. Also, the effect of the airborne/airland operation on the fight in the north and on the evolution of JFE are under-researched. First, the 173rd and the USAF's strategic lift assets provided the joint force commander with flexibility. Next, they also served as an integrator between conventional forces (CF) and SOF. Finally, the 173rd's subordination to CJSOTF-N and the airborne brigade's tactical control of an armored task force were unique in modern military history.

Literature on airborne assault, on airborne forces, and on the northern front in Iraq concentrates on other issues. Multiple authors offer ways forward for SOF, airborne, and mechanized force integration, offering both positive and negatives, but fail to reference Northern Delay. This paper fills the gap on the last use of airborne assault at the operational level and its implications for the joint force and Army combined arms.

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), I-1. On page vii the JP describes the relationship between JFE and the US National Military Strategy (NMS): “To be credible both as a deterrent and as a viable military option for policy enforcement, the Armed Forces of the United States must be capable of deploying and fighting to gain access to geographical areas controlled by forces hostile to US interests. The military environment and the threats it presents are increasingly transregional, multi-domain, and multi-functional (TMM) in nature. Joint forcible entry operations in a TMM setting is a likely crisis or contingency the joint forces will face in the future.” To get further granularity, the offensive task associated with JFE operations is to “seize and hold a lodgment against armed opposition.” On page I-2, the JP states the purpose of JFE can be to “gain and maintain operational access, defeat enemy area denial, seize bases for subsequent operations, introduce follow-on forces, destroy specific enemy capability, evacuate personnel and equipment, military deception, support joint special operations, [or] gain intelligence.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Department of State, Office of the Historian, “Intervention in Haiti, 1994-1995,” accessed 14 May 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/haiti>.

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, “Pamphlet 525-3-1, The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World, 2020-2040,” (Fort Eustis, VA, 2014), on page 22 defines innovation as “the result of critical and creative thinking and the conversion of new ideas into valued outcomes. Innovation drives the development of new tools or methods that permit Army forces to anticipate future demands, stay ahead of determined enemies, and accomplish the mission.”

<sup>5</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, April 2018, accessed 19 May 2018, <http://www.jcs.mil/Doctrine/DOD-Terminology/>.

<sup>6</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), GL-4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, GL-5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, GL-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

<sup>12</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), GL-4.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.

<sup>14</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), GL-5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The author tried to mitigate his admiration for the character, leadership, and military skill of the Mayville family, but it remains an unavoidable bias.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), xi. On pages vii-viii, JP 3-18 sets out fourteen “Principles for Forcible Entry Operational Success”: (1) “Achieve surprise,” (2) “Visualize the OA,” (3) “Control of the air,” (4) “Control of space,” (5) “Joint electromagnetic spectrum management operations,” (6) “Information superiority,” (7) “Sea control,” (8) “Isolate lodgment,” (9) “Gain and maintain access,” (10) “Neutralize enemy forces within the lodgment,” (11) “Identification of enemy infrastructure which may be of value for future use by friendly forces,” (12) “Expand the lodgment,” (13) “Manage the impact of environmental factors,” (14) “Integrate supporting operations.”

<sup>18</sup> 75th Ranger Regiment’s Objectives Roadrunner and Serpent and Task Force 20’s Mission Support Site Grizzly.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The military and the academic community constantly review JFE capabilities, particularly as they relate to the integration of U.S. Army, Air Force, and SOF airborne units. This paper analyzes the evolution of JFE via conventional airborne assault/airland in OIF, with lessons applicable for joint doctrine. This paper centers on a historical case study of Operation Northern Delay, conducted 26 to 30 March 2003. The airborne assault on the first night of Northern Delay is the most recent U.S. strategic brigade airdrop. Scholarship on Northern Delay and its effect on joint doctrine is limited. This paper provides insight on the importance of evolving U.S. airborne capability for future JFE application.

Gaining operational access to denied territory through JFE is critical to the U.S. military. The Army maintains airborne units as an offering to the U.S. military's suite of forcible capabilities. Many historical and scholastic works mention Northern Delay as a campaign-level airborne operation, but literature is lacking as to Northern Delay's relevance for joint doctrine. Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *Joint Forcible Entry*, cites the operation only to emphasize the USAF's "pre-mission coordination" using air mobility liaison officers. The JP notes that the 173rd was a "seizure force" conducting an "airfield opening" but Northern Delay is not highlighted as a historical vignette. Analysis of and extrapolation from the operation's key aspects is left to outside experts.<sup>1</sup>

Authors of books such as *Cobra II* and *All Roads Lead to Baghdad* state that Northern Delay was successful in opening another conventional front to help fix Iraqi

defensive forces. Books on the invasion of Iraq give incomplete analysis, and stop when the 173rd's boots hit the ground. There is little scholarship on lessons learned from interoperability between the 173rd and the SOF that were already in northern Iraq. Also, the historical record is light on analysis of the armored task force's airland operation as part of the conventional effort. A study of Northern Delay's airborne/airland assault operation, conventional-SOF integration, and airborne-armor integration shows where current joint doctrine should incorporate lessons learned.

The following literature review is organized according to three main areas that support answers to the research questions arising from the Northern Delay case study:

1. The Northern Front, CJSOTF-N, and Northern Delay
2. SOF-CF and Airborne-Armor Integration
3. JFE Doctrine

#### The Northern Front, CJSOTF-N, and Northern Delay

Exploration of the 2003 invasion of Iraq starts with the comprehensive books *Cobra II* by Michael Bernard and Bernard Trainor and *On Point* by Gregory Fontenot with E.J. Degen and John Tohn. The definitive accounts of the invasion, these books contain thorough analysis of pre-war planning. They also provide insight into the successful use of SOF to make Saddam believe he was threatened on multiple simultaneous fronts (north, west, and south). Bernard and Trainor make a convincing case for CJSOTF-N's effectiveness in replacing the 4th Infantry Division in the overall campaign plan. They offer little description of the effects of the 173rd's entrance. Fontenot declines to make critical judgements about commanders' decisions on the

northern front in OIF. The book *Plan of Attack* by *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward is a journalistic narrative of post-9/11 White House and the Pentagon's deliberations and actions on Iraq. Woodward offers details from interviews with high-ranking leaders at the geographic combatant commands, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Pentagon, and the White House. Woodward tells the story of pre-invasion CIA intelligence teams in northern Iraq and how they set the stage for an economy of force mission. Woodward makes a case for the decisiveness of the so-called ROCKSTARS intelligence program in preparing the battlefield for CJSOTF-N's success. In addition to these books, several professional journal articles provide even more detail about the northern front.<sup>2</sup>

Patrick Warren and Michael Morrissey's "Turkey and an Army Forward" and Burwell Bell and Thomas Galvin's "In Defense of Service Component Commands" give thorough first-person accounts of the U.S. military's invasion preparation. The two articles' insights into 1st Infantry Division (1ID), United States Army Europe (USAREUR), and U.S. European Command (EUCOM) efforts are germane to this study. They explain the years of work to stand up the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the Immediate Ready Task Force (IRTF), and Army Forces-Turkey (ARFOR-T). The trio of higher European headquarters facilitated the ground lines of communication (LOCs) from the Mediterranean through Turkey and into northern Iraq. General Burwell Bell, USAREUR commander at the time of the invasion, argues for the relevance of the Army service component command inside of a larger unified combatant command. USAREUR successfully deployed the 173rd Airborne Brigade as an economy of force mission after

Turkey denied entry to the 4th ID. Burwell's article highlights the operation as the U.S. Army and Air Force's first combat airland of an M-1 Abrams tank battalion.<sup>3</sup>

Adding analysis to primary accounts from Warren and Bell, multiple long-form research studies are fruitful sources for understanding the enemy's view of the historical U.S. operations in the north. The multi-author *Iraqi Perspectives Project*, published by the now-defunct U.S. Joint Forces Command, is one of the few unclassified reports from the Iraqi perspective. Documents captured in the invasion serve as the basis of the *Project*. Saddam and his leaders displayed extreme paranoia about surviving a military coup. This helps explain the regional power plays and learned incompetence resulting in weak Iraqi resistance during the invasion. The *Perspectives Project* explains why the six Iraqi Army divisions stationed on the northern front gave light resistance to CJSOTF-N, Kurdish Peshmerga militia, and the 173rd. It is the only work to draw directly from interviews with captured Iraqi generals. *Operation Hotel California: The Clandestine War Inside Iraq* by Charles Faddis and Mike Tucker is an account of pre- and post-invasion intelligence activities in Iraq. Faddis is a former CIA agent. He postulates that Turkish refusal to allow a ground invasion through their country was predictable based on reports before the invasion. The CIA's intelligence activities, according to Faddis, were not relayed to the correct decision makers or ignored altogether. Another relevant study is *Shaping the Plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Role of Military Intelligence Assessments* by Gregory Hooker. The author was CENTCOM's lead Iraq intelligence analyst, on the job from 1996 to 2004. His writings give insight into self-admitted interagency failures of leadership and planning for Iraq under U.S.-led coalition control. The integration of CIA agents like Faddis, SOF, and conventional forces in northern Iraq

was an unrehearsed, ad hoc effort. Unlike the other fronts, the failure of the planned mechanized invasion of the north necessitated a close relationship between all three agencies/units.

Reporter Linda Robinson's books on the U.S. Army Special Forces are the best popular histories of those units' still-classified operations.<sup>4</sup> Robinson offers an accounting of CJSOTF-N in *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*. CJSOTF-N, based around 10th SF Group, and the 173<sup>rd</sup> are indelibly linked by the northern front in Iraq. Robinson explains the cobbled-together nature of the task force that led the northern invasion. She reports that the SF perspective on the 173<sup>rd</sup> was that they were welcome to help the cause. 10th Group focused on conducting operations using USAF bombing and by, with, and through the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga—with little thought toward conventional forces' long-term role in Iraq. Additional primary sources dealing with 10th Group and pre-invasion SOF activities include Isaac Peltier's *Surrogate Warfare: The Role of US Army Special Forces*. Peltier wrote *Surrogate Warfare* as a monograph for the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies. Peltier uses SF operations in northern Iraq as a case study. He highlights the region's austere conditions and CJSOTF-N's plan to leverage indigenous allied forces as a combat force multiplier. Finally, Leigh Neville's *Special Operations Forces in Iraq* is based on declassified documents and first-person interviews, giving greater detail on the pre-invasion actions of SOF in northern Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

While SOF actions in the north are well accounted for, stories about the 173<sup>rd</sup> are a bit harder to find. Primary accounts best tell the story of the 173<sup>rd</sup> in Iraq. Thomas Collins, the Southern European Task Force (SETAF) public affairs officer, wrote an

article called “173rd Airborne Brigade in Iraq.” William Jacobs, Laura Klein, and Harry Tunnell were all Brigade paratroopers who gave detailed interviews. Tunnell wrote an entire monograph about his experiences as an airborne battalion commander. None of these participants, however, provide new campaign-level insight into JFE, SOF-CF, or airborne-armor integration. Outsiders like Ken Dilanian and Lady Emma Sky give a more robust telling of the brigade’s joint forcible entry operation.<sup>6</sup>

Ken Dilanian in “US Army paratroopers seize airfield in northern Iraq,” gives an embedded reporter's first-hand account. He delves briefly into conventional military leaders' thinking as the invasion kicked off, including the need for greater troop numbers, reports of overrun SF teams, and the threat of ground-to-air fire that endangered U.S. aircraft. One of the best accounts of the 173rd’s mission comes from Lady Emma Sky in *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*. She was the diplomatic counterpart to Colonel William Mayville, commander of the 173rd. She gives personal testimony on the inability of C-17s to sustain hundreds of landings on the runway at Bashur airfield. Colonel Mayville told her that this necessitated the airdrop of a third of his troops. A study from RAND’s Arroyo Center, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq*, gives an Army-sponsored look at the timeline of how the 173rd Airborne Brigade responded to emerging events in Kirkuk. The presence of the 173rd gave senior commanders flexibility in bridging the gap between CJSOTF-N and the 4th Infantry Division’s arrival in late April 2003.<sup>7</sup>

The literature on the northern front is rich but does not address implications of Northern Delay on the evolution of Army-Air Force-SOF JFE. SOF-CF and airborne-armor integration receive even shorter shrift. The integration of the 173rd into CJSOTF-

N and the integration of Task Force (TF) 1-63 Armor into the 173rd were examples of the U.S. Army's combined arms evolution. Remarkably, little scholarship exists on these efforts.

### SOF-CF and Airborne-Armor Integration

Members of Task Force 1-63 Armor provide an insider's perspective in two short articles: Patrick Warren and Keith Barclay's "Operation Airborne Dragon, Northern Iraq," and Brian Maddox's "Checkmate on the Northern Front." In parallel fashion, Scott Riley and D. Jones, members of 10th SF Group, gave Operational Leadership Experience Interviews to the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. They described their efforts on the ground to prepare Bashur airfield for the 173rd's entrance into the war. These are thorough tactical-level pieces. Primary source material from operational-level leaders on the northern front is harder to come by.<sup>8</sup>

Primary source material is best compiled in after action reports by the RAND Corporation. RAND Arroyo's *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Decisive War, Elusive Peace* is a less personality-based and more technically-detailed companion to *Cobra II* and *On Point*. *Decisive War* gives a view of how CJSOTF-N struggled to please multiple masters (Special Operations Command-Central (SOCCENT), the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), and EUCOM) while cobbling together assets. The authors of *Decisive War* posit that participation by the 173rd was mostly unwanted by leaders at SOCCENT, a division-equivalent headquarters. The logistical considerations for resupplying such a sizeable conventional unit were outside their regular duties as a SOF headquarters. The authors suggest that SOCCENT did not have the staff bandwidth to support the integration of the 173rd adequately. Additionally, USAREUR planners

clashed with SOF planners as to the necessity of armored reinforcements for the airborne brigade and any suggestions of splitting the unit up into smaller formations. The study suggests that the Army's battalion and brigade pre-command courses should integrate training on SOF-conventional force employment, in a SOF-as-the-lead model. Similarly, several sources from active duty officers lobby for the integration of armor with airborne units. They do not, however, use TF 1-63's experience as proof.<sup>9</sup>

Army Captain Kyle Wolfley's "The Army's Mobility Solution to the JFE Problem" details vehicle considerations as an augmenting capability. These vehicles are relatively easily loaded, secured, air-landed, and operationalized for additional maneuver capability. Wolfley addresses legitimate points about the staying power of an airborne light infantry force in a high-intensity conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Current literature on SOF, airborne, and armor integration remains unsatisfactory even as JFE continues to be a widely reviewed topic. Merging all four topics into a coherent whole is an unfilled gap. Even the seminal publication JP 3-18 barely mentions Army combined arms integration.

### JFE Doctrine

Joint Publication (JP) 3-18, *JFE Operations*, published in May 2017, is the U.S. military manual for gaining operational access to denied territory. The JP's scope is to "[provide] joint doctrine for planning, executing, and assessing JFE operations." It details the service-specific capabilities required to ensure the military's global relevance as an invading force: naval power projection, Marine amphibious capability, Air Force power projection, Army ground operations, and service interoperability. JP 3-18 codifies the Army-Air Force relationship when it comes to airborne assault, via airdrop or fixed-wing

airland operation. The previous edition, published in November 2012, added SOF interoperability but gave it minimal discussion. The latest version does not expand on the subject. It also does not mention U.S. Army combined arms. Outsiders pick up discussion and criticism of the current state of JFE capabilities. Several prominent military writers like Marc Devore, Kyle Jahner, and Douglas MacGregor are critical of the U.S. Army's airborne forces.<sup>11</sup>

Marc Devore's *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces*, is the Army University Press's inaugural publication. It is a purposely provocative monograph. Devore, a lecturer at the University of St. Andrews in the United Kingdom, studies the birth of the parachute assault in World War II and its evolution in the United States, United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union/Russia. He argues that interorganizational politics were most important to the survival of the capability—not any data on the relevance of airborne operations. Kyle Jahner in “Does the Army need airborne?” questions the practicality, expense, and connection to modern warfare of airborne capability. Airborne units cost 10 percent more than light infantry (but 66 percent less than an armored unit). His argument comes down to how many airborne brigades are needed—a question of capacity, not capability.<sup>12</sup> In “USMC: Underutilized Superfluous Military Capability,” by Douglas MacGregor, the author of *Breaking the Phalanx* questions the modern-day relevance of the Marine Corps and the XVIII Airborne Corps. He posits that commanders canceled airborne assaults for Desert Storm, Afghanistan, and Iraq due to overwhelming integrated air defense and other threats. Finally, *Military Airlift: Options Exist for Meeting Requirements While Acquiring Fewer C-17s* is a Government Accountability Office report showing at least a \$7 billion cost

savings if the Air Force were not required to own C-17s to support the Army's mass tactical airborne force. Alongside the C-5 Galaxy, the C-17 fleet makes up the U.S. Air Force's strategic airlift capability. The jet aircraft respond to global requirements, no matter where they are based. Apologists for the relevance of Army-Air Force airborne operations are mainly pilots or those with paratrooper experience.<sup>13</sup>

Airborne advocates include the air component commander for the 173rd's combat jump, M. Shane Hershman, in "Employment of the C-17 in Airdrop and Airland Operations in Closing the Force," and Crispin Burke in "Yes, the US Army Still Needs Paratroopers." Advocates for the advancement of tactics and operational concepts in airborne assault as a JFE capability include Charles Flynn and Joshua Richardson in "Joint Operational Access and the Global Response Force: Redefining Readiness." Flynn, the former deputy commanding general of the 82nd Airborne Division, explains how the unit trains for the Global Response Force mission. He acknowledges the need for joint training with USAF integrated air defense system defeat capabilities, as well as the need for a more robust in-flight communications system and new vehicular solutions.<sup>14</sup>

Other notable articles on capability advancement include David Johnson and John Gordon's "Reimagining and Modernizing US Airborne Forces for the 21st Century" and a RAND Arroyo Center study, *Enhanced Army Airborne Forces: A New Joint Operational Capability*. Johnson and Gordon discuss new vehicular capabilities as possibly benefiting the airborne force by making it a light armored unit. The latter study lays out the current threats to airborne JFE and gives recommendations for mitigating them. Finally, the Arroyo Center's *Enabling the Global Response Force: Access Strategies for the 82nd Airborne Division* states that, as the centerpiece of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff 's Global Response Force, the 82nd Airborne Division is unique. *Enabling* outlines current airlift, staging base, and geographic access abilities and limitations. This information is much more detailed than current Joint Doctrine, furthermore it shows the multi-echelon efforts and thought that are put into Army-Air Force forcible entry operations.<sup>15</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

This paper is a needed addition to the joint force's knowledge of OIF and its significance for JFE doctrine. The literature covers the plan for northern Iraq very well. However, a shortage of scholarship exists on the integration of the 173rd into the overall campaign plan, the evolution of special operations-conventional interoperability in Northern Delay, and the historic nature of TF 1-63 Armor's combat airland.

There are multiple reasons to study Northern Delay in depth. First, the airborne/airland operation represented a three-fold increase in manpower to CJSOTF-N's efforts in northern Iraq. Next, a Special Forces O-6 tactically controlled a conventional Army O-6—an unusual command relationship. Finally, the 173rd facilitated the first combat airland of an M-1 Abrams tank battalion. These three aspects of the 173rd's mission deserve a place in the growing corpus of OIF scholarship.

Some gaps in knowledge cannot be addressed either in literature review or this paper. First, a lack of primary source evidence of Iraqi government and military leaders' decisions about when and where to fight and to surrender in northern Iraq. Second, primary source evidence of SOF sources and methods of gaining a relative advantage over the enemy before the invasion began. This evidence is either unavailable or

currently classified. Nevertheless, the following case study and analysis fills several current gaps in academic research.

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), IV-12.

<sup>2</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2006); Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004); Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack: The Definitive Account of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Warren and Michael Morrissey, “Turkey and an Army Forward,” *Military Review* (November-December 2003); Burwell B. Bell and Thomas P. Galvin, “In Defense of Service Component Commands,” *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 37 (2005): 96-104.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Woods et al., *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam’s Senior Leadership* (Norfolk, VA: Joint Center for Operational Analysis, 2006); Charles Faddis and Mike Tucker, *Operation Hotel California: The Clandestine War Inside Iraq* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Isaac J. Peltier, “Surrogate Warfare: The Role of US Army Special Forces” (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2005); Leigh Neville, *Special Operations Forces in Iraq* (United Kingdom: Osprey Elite Publishing, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas W Collins, “173rd Airborne Brigade in Iraq,” *Army Magazine* (June 2003): 42-46; William Jacobs, Operational Leadership Experience Interview, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 22 February 2006; Laura Klein, Operational Leadership Experience Interview, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 23 August 2006; Harry D. Tunnell IV, *Red Devils: Tactical Perspectives From Iraq* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Ken Dilanian, “US Army Paratroopers Seize Airfield in Northern Iraq,” 26 March 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/latest-news/article24435169.html>; Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2015); Nora Bensahel et al., *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Arroyo Center, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Warren and Keith Barclay, “Operation Airborne Dragon, Northern Iraq,” *Military Review* (November-December 2003): 11-14; Brian Maddox, “Checkmate on the

Northern Front,” *Armor Magazine* (September-October 2003): 6-10; Scott Riley, Operational Leadership Experience Interview, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS; D. Jones, Operational Leadership Experience Interview, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Perry et al., ed., *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Decisive War, Elusive Peace* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Arroyo Center, 2015); Bensahel et al.

<sup>10</sup> Kyle Wolfley, “The Army’s Mobility Solution to the Joint Forcible Entry Problem,” *Army Press Online Journal*, 19 February 2016, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/Wolfley-mobility.pdf>; Luke O’Brien, “Actually, Paratroopers Are Obsolete Without Armored Vehicles,” *Warisboring.com*, 19 March 2016, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://warisboring.com/actually-paratroopers-are-obsolete-without-armored-vehicles/>.

<sup>11</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), i.

<sup>12</sup> Marc R. Devore, *When Failure Thrives: Institutions and the Evolution of Postwar Airborne Forces* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: The Army Press, June 2015); Kyle Jahner, “Does the Army Need Airborne?” *Army Times*, 29 February 2016, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2016/02/29/does-the-army-need-airborne/>.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas A. Macgregor, “USMC: Underutilized Superfluous Military Capability,” *Time Magazine*, 3 December 2012, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://nation.time.com/2012/12/03/usmc-under-utilized-superfluous-military-capability/>; U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Airlift: Options Exist for Meeting Requirements While Acquiring Fewer C-17s* (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> M. Shane Hershman, “Employment of the C-17 in Airdrop and Airland Operations in Closing the Force” (US Army War College Personal Experience Monograph, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2005); Crispin Burke, “Yes, the US Army Still Needs Paratroopers,” *WarIsBoring.com*, 7 March 2016, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://warisboring.com/yes-the-u-s-army-still-needs-paratroopers/>; Charles Flynn and Joshua Richardson, “Joint Operational Access and the Global Response Force: Redefining Readiness,” *Military Review* (July-August 2013): 38-44.

<sup>15</sup> David Johnson and John Gordon IV, “Reimagining and Modernizing US Airborne Forces for the 21st Century,” *War on the Rocks*, 20 April 2016, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/reimagining-and-modernizing-u-s-airborne-forces-for-the-21st-century/>; Pernin et al., *Enabling the Global Response Force: Access Strategies for the 82nd Airborne Division* (Santa Monica: RAND Arroyo Center, 2016).

## CHAPTER 3

### CASE STUDY

And where is the Prince who can afford so to cover his Country with Troops for its Defense, as that Ten Thousand Men descending from the Clouds, might not in many Places do an infinite deal of Mischief, before a Force could be brought together to repel them?

— Benjamin Franklin,  
Letter to Monsieur Le Dr. Ingenhauss

#### Introduction

Continual debate surrounds airborne assault as an effective method of JFE. Prominent detractors like Marc Devore and Douglas Macgregor remain unconvinced even though it is the *raison d'être* for tens of thousands of Army paratroopers. The United States' last campaign-level use of airborne assault was on 26 March 2003. The parachute drop was part of a joint forcible entry operation called Northern Delay near Irbil, Iraq. The “Sky Soldiers” of the 173rd Airborne and C-17A aircrews of the 62nd Air Wing conducted a strategic brigade airdrop, parachuting a third of the 173rd's combat strength onto Bashur Drop Zone. The paratroopers joined forces with special operators already on the ground. The airborne assault seized a foothold for the rest of the brigade and follow-on forces, including an armored battalion task force. The 173rd's introduction to the northern front in OIF was years in the making and an important step in the evolution of JFE, SOF-CF interoperability, and airborne-armored force integration.<sup>1</sup>

The following chapter is a historical case study of Northern Delay. The chapter explains the political and military context around the airborne operation and presents a factual narrative. It describes how Northern Delay and the airborne assault method of JFE

fit into the broader OIF campaign plan. The case study describes operational-level considerations surrounding Northern Delay and gives insight into the thought processes of commanders and the complex nature of joint operations. The study draws out three concepts not sufficiently codified in joint doctrine. First, a hybrid airborne/airland assault capability is a unique forcible entry option for joint force commanders. Second, the flexibility and responsiveness of a joint airborne formation are highly suitable for integration with SOF. Third, heavy task force interoperability with an airborne unit is a promising endeavor.<sup>2</sup> There remains an opportunity for joint doctrine to incorporate Northern Delay's influence on these three concepts.

## OIF Campaign Design: Multiple Dilemmas



Figure 1. Iraq's Position in the Middle East

Source: Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 2.

The 2003 invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein had multiple fronts. Baghdad, the Iraqi capital and Saddam's power base, was in position to cause significant problems for single ground approach from Kuwait. Iraq owned the means to inundate that approach by releasing hydroelectric dams and flooding the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys.

Also, densely populated cities sat along the 500-mile route from Kuwait City to Baghdad.

Basra, Nasiriya, Samawah, Najaf, and Karbala were prime locations for Iraqi forces to delay invaders. Finally, Kuwait offered limited capacity as a staging base. A modern force required a robust network of sustainment locations for an invasion. OIF was a joint, multi-national endeavor requiring multiple staging locations for the ground axes of advance from the south, west, and north.<sup>3</sup>

United States Central Command (CENTCOM), commanded by General Tommy Franks, led the invading coalition. General Frank's objectives were a direct strike at Baghdad; finding and preventing the deployment of Scud missiles and weapons of mass destruction; stabilizing the populace; and wholly replacing the government of a country the size of California. To these ends, CENTCOM assigned land (CFLCC), air (Combined Forces Air Component Command), special operations (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command—CFSOCC), and other (maritime, intelligence, and logistics) forces to carry out the campaign. The final plan was named 1003V Hybrid.

Franks envisioned Saddam Hussein spreading his forces out. The CENTCOM commander wanted the coalition to penetrate lightly defended ground and air routes. Franks designated CFLCC as the supported component for the ground invasion. Commanded by Lieutenant General David McKiernan, CFLCC shaped the ground invasion to achieve CENTCOM's objectives by presenting Saddam with multiple dilemmas.<sup>4</sup>

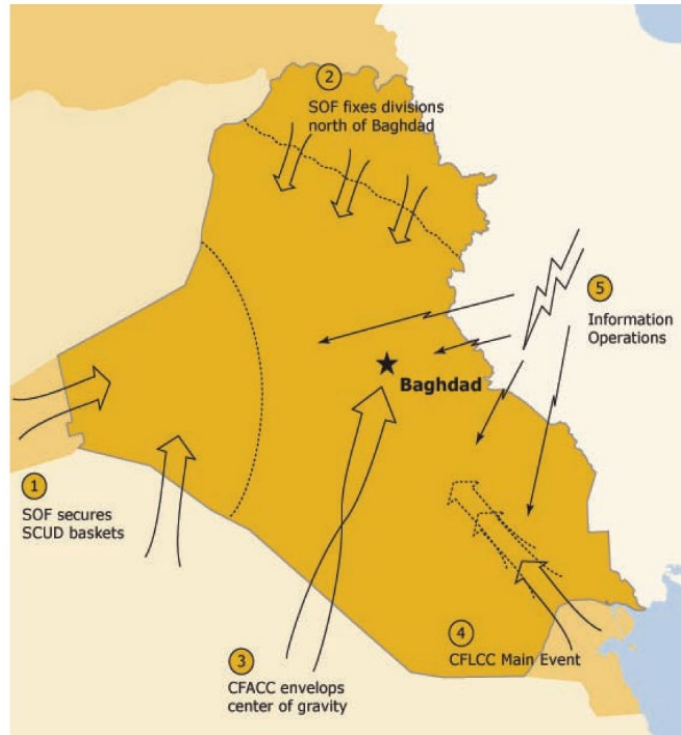


Figure 2. CENTCOM's Five-front Plan

*Source:* U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command History*, 6th ed. (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command, March 2008), 114.

LTG McKiernan had several ground insertion methods to complement CENTCOM's extensive air and information operations phases of the war. The CFLCC commander had options for overland invasion by armored and mechanized forces, SOF partisan link up and deception operations, conventional helicopter air assault, and conventional and SOF airborne/airland assault. GEN Franks and LTG McKiernan agreed that the Hussein regime's center of gravity was Baghdad. No matter the shape of the invasion, all the coalition's efforts supported getting to the capital city as early as possible. The resulting plan called for a main effort of Army and Marine mechanized

forces using linear, conventional, and deliberate methods. SOF and airborne units, by political and geographic necessity, used more dynamic methods to support the mechanized assault. The coalition ultimately used a combination of conventional and SOF techniques to mass its forces at deliberate times and locations to gain relative advantage against Saddam's defenses.<sup>5</sup>

### The Invasion

Coalition forces built up in Kuwait in 2002 and early 2003 while diplomatic appeals for Saddam to abdicate went unheeded. Between 19 and 21 March 2003 the ground, air, and direct action SOF invasion phases started near simultaneously. CFLCC ground forces took a straightforward route, eschewing the “left hook” assault of Operation Desert Storm. Most importantly, the U.S. Army’s V Corps and the I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) invaded along parallel lines running northwest to Baghdad. With I Marine Expeditionary Force positioned to V Corps’ immediate north, the two formations raced each other out of Kuwait. The 101st Airborne Division and the 82nd Airborne waited impatiently in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to be called into the fight. CFSOCC supported the sprint to Baghdad by opening northern and western fronts.<sup>6</sup>

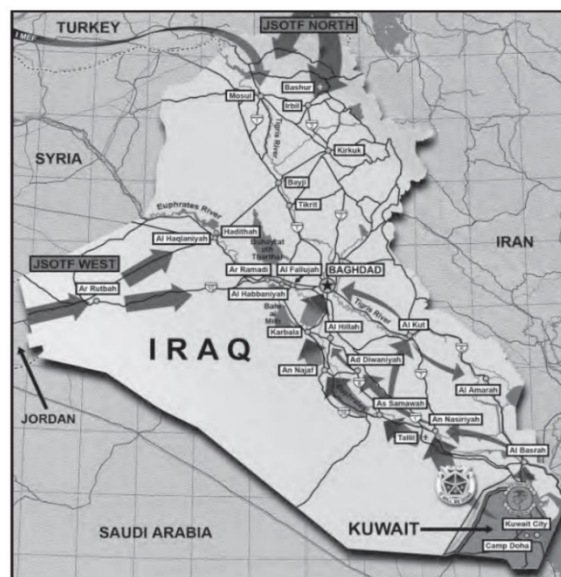
The success of SOF in toppling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 cast CFSOCC in a new light, especially to General Franks. Then-Brigadier General Gary Harrell commanded CFSOCC and formed it around his SOCCENT staff. CFSOCC planned support operations for the northern and western fronts as early as December 2002 for CENTCOM's *Internal Look* joint exercise. Conventional ground invasion from anywhere except Kuwait proved politically infeasible in early 2003. Therefore, CFSOCC’s role changed to a supported command for the western and northern fronts.

These fronts in turn supported CFLCC's ground assault from the south. SOF took on the responsibility to deceive Saddam as to the direction of the offensive and to fix his defensive forces in place.<sup>7</sup>

On the northern front, a ground invasion originally centered around the 4th Infantry Division (ID) (Mechanized) changed into a hybrid effort under CJSOTF-N, dubbed "Task Force Viking." Viking was based around Colonel Charles Cleveland's 10th SF Group. The special operations task force conducted a complex insertion of multiple units into Kurdistan, the autonomous region separating Ba'ath party-controlled Iraq from Turkey. Special Forces teams conducted an unconventional warfare offensive, partnering with Kurdish Peshmerga and receiving overwhelming support from coalition airpower. Task Force Viking also received substantial support from EUCOM and its Army service component command, USAREUR.

Europe-based ground combat forces and robust logistics supported SOF in fixing Iraqi defensive forces on the northern front. Multiple inter-service and support units including ARFOR-T, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and Task Force 1-63 Armor were important contributors to the CJSOTF-N effort. Almost all coalition forces arrived in northern Iraq via military aircraft. The USAF and 173rd's joint forcible entry operation to seize Bashur airfield marked the beginning of the conventional phase in the north. Fighting north of Baghdad was relatively segregated from the intense ground combat that mechanized divisions saw in the south. The northern front had problems of intertribal conflict and powerful actors vying to fill the vacuum left by deserting Ba'ath leadership. Task Force Viking fought a relatively isolated effort in the north. By contrast, SOF in western Iraq operated directly in support of the main ground invasion.

On the western front, joint special operations Task Force 20 operated out of Saudi Arabia. Major General Dell Dailey commanded TF 20 from an airbase at Ar'ar. Dailey's unit partnered with Combined Joint Special Operation Task Force-West (CJSOTF-W) to conduct daring economy-of-force "marauding" and deception operations. CJSOTF-W was based around the U.S. Army's 5th SF Group and commanded by Colonel John Mulholland. It contained a joint special operations aviation detachment and substantial Australian and United Kingdom special operations ground and aviation components. Colonel Mulholland operated out of Forward Operating Base 51 in Jordan. TF 20 and CJSOTF-W worked to find Scud missile launchers, cut off regime escape routes, and "generally create the impression in Baghdad that a sizable invasion force was moving on the capital from the west." SOF operations on the western front deserve their own case study but remain largely classified. SOF commanders in the west used every means of force insertion at their disposal and were key supporters of the 3rd ID's victorious Thunder Run in Baghdad.<sup>8</sup>



### Figure 3. Conventional and SOF Avenues of Approach, OIF

*Source:* Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 30.

#### Early Regime Collapse, Joint Forcible Entry, and Airborne Assault

“Early regime collapse” and the ensuing chaos were a top planning consideration for CENTCOM and CFLCC, and an “obsession” for the national command authority. A ground invasion could trigger internal regime disintegration, meaning catastrophic success with armored units still fighting north to secure Baghdad. An early regime collapse scenario called for stabilization of the capital via joint forcible entry. CENTCOM planned for the contingency by tapping the Army’s stable of trained and ready airborne units.<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. Army maintains several paratrooper units capable of a no-notice deep strike into enemy-held territory. In 2003, the 82nd Airborne Division, the 75th Ranger Regiment, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade were the largest airborne-capable formations. Paratrooper units habitually train with the USAF to conduct mass tactical parachute jumps. Strategic brigade airdrop inserts thousands of fully-armed infantrymen within seconds. Airborne units train to fight immediately to secure a lodgment, usually at an airfield, for follow-on forces. Special operators are deployed worldwide to shape the environment for future conflict and are often on the ground to meet the paratroopers when they land. The bulk of follow-on forces are the Army's elements of decisive landpower: medium (Stryker fighting vehicle), mechanized (Bradley fighting vehicle) and armored (Abrams tank) units. Airborne forces are trained to operate in the range of military operations as a link between preparatory SOF and decisive heavy forces.

Notwithstanding the deliberate mystique built up around individual paratrooper bravery, commanders often prefer to conduct airland operations. An organized force running off an aircraft ramp can be a more efficient method of securing the objective. Airland operations negate the risk of malfunctioning parachutes, high winds, treacherous landings, and missed insertion points. Airdrop is necessary when the runway is untenable or the enemy threatens aircraft on the ground. Commanders in OIF weighed the benefits and drawbacks of both techniques throughout the initial invasion.

A large airborne force acted as the CFLCC reserve through the first week of ground operations. The SOF-CF team centered around the 75th Ranger Regiment (a subordinate unit of TF 20) and the 82nd Airborne Division. Paratroopers and operators prepared to jump into Saddam International Airport (SIAP), seize critical infrastructure, and enable airland of follow-on units to secure the capital city. The joint airborne force trained extensively before deployment, thoroughly rehearsing the SIAP seizure scenario at least twice in the southern United States. Airborne forces enabled CFLCC's branch plans in case the ground invasion met with catastrophic success.<sup>10</sup>

Saddam's regime did not collapse early. V Corps and I Marine Expeditionary Force rapidly advanced toward Baghdad, with 3<sup>rd</sup> ID in the lead. As Ba'ath party leaders fled Baghdad into the western Iraqi desert, the CLFCC C/J5 proposed diverting the 82nd Airborne to parachute in and cut off their escape routes. LTG McKiernan deemed the jump into western Iraq too risky, and officially canceled the airborne seizure of SIAP on 23 March. The CFLCC commander released the 82nd to his main effort, V Corps, on 26 March to "deal with the threat against their rear area." In less than thirty-six hours, the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment de-rigged its equipment and conducted a combined

ground assault convoy and airland operation, closing at Talil Air Base and As Samawah, Iraq. McKiernan highlighted the 82nd Airborne's flexibility in post-war analysis. He stated that releasing the reserve to support the rapid ground assault by 3<sup>rd</sup> ID was "the most important" decision of the war. As 82nd paratroopers moved into direct ground combat, other forces pivoted from the SIAP seizure scenario to other operations.<sup>11</sup>

TF 20 began precision helicopter raids in western Iraq, supported by the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. Special Operations Aviation Regiment's attack helicopter raids on over seventy Iraqi army and air defense outposts ensured air corridors for TF 20 operations. The TF partnered with CJSOTF-W to establish a series of temporary operating bases and support sites in the west. TF 20 also conducted tailored airland/airborne assaults, supported by Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC).

In the first week of the war, a special operations squadron flew on C-17s directly from the southern U.S. to a landing strip in western Iraq. As their assault vehicles drove off the ramp at the strip, dubbed Mission Support Site Grizzly, the operators marked the first C-17A combat airland of a mechanized force. TF 20 units were accompanied into western Iraq by special operations light infantry from the 75th Ranger Regiment.<sup>12</sup>

Rangers made the first combat jump of OIF on the night of 24 March. Charlie Company, 3rd Ranger Battalion parachuted onto Objective Roadrunner, a landing strip near Al Qaim on the Syrian border. The Rangers' mission was to facilitate TF 20's "preempt[ion of] the firing of chemical-armed Scud missiles." TF 20 found no missiles, but Fox News reported on the jump the following morning as part of the information operations and deception efforts. A Ranger airland operation subsequently took place at

Objective Coyote in western Iraq. Charlie Company, 1st Ranger Battalion, and an 82nd Airborne weapons company (motorized anti-tank) landed in C-17s at the already-secure desert landing strip. 75th Ranger Regimental headquarters leveraged these successful raids and seized more opportunities to get Rangers into the fight in western Iraq.<sup>13</sup>

On 28 March, it was Alpha Company, 3rd Ranger Battalion's turn. Along with a Regimental command element, several Air Force special tactics airmen, and engineers from 27th Engineers, Alpha Company launched from its base in Saudi Arabia. The airborne force flew into Iraq on three C-17s operated by Special Operations Low Level II aircrews. The aircraft entered western Iraqi airspace, dodged ground-to-air fire, leveled out over H-1 Airbase (Objective Serpent), and dropped the Rangers from approximately 500 feet above ground level. The Rangers seized H-1 and used it as a staging base to secure nearby Scud-launching and suspected weapons of mass destruction sites.

The Air Force ultimately dropped almost 100 tons of equipment via heavy-rig platforms onto H-1. It continued to bring in airlands in support of SOF missions in western Iraq, setting up large bladders for a Forward Area Refueling Point (FARP). The FARP facilitated sustained operations for fixed-wing, rotary-wing, and armored vehicles units out of H-1. 3rd Battalion went on to capture Haditha Dam (Objective Lynx), ostensibly to prevent the flooding of the Karbala Gap. With the Rangers fully integrated onto the western front, TF 20 stepped up use of C-17s to insert tailored force packages.<sup>14</sup>

On 2 April, TF 20 conducted the first combat airland of M-1 Abrams tanks from 3rd ID. With 48 hours' notice and facilitated by Special Operations Low Level II aircrews, the V Corps main effort took the time to load and fly "Team Tank" via C-17 from Talil Air Base. Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 70th Armored Regiment provided

ten tanks and crews for the force package. Team Tank conducted advanced feint operations west of Baghdad in support of its Division's rapid assault on the capital city. TF 20 and Team Tank presaged the 173rd's integration of TF 1-63 Armor (AR) onto the northern front by only a few days.<sup>15</sup>

SOF and airborne unit efforts in western Iraq made creative use of their assets. They were a contributing factor to Saddam's unwillingness to mass all his forces along the southern invasion routes. Flexibility and ingenuity in the use of joint forcible entry by TF 20, the 82nd Airborne, CJSOTF-W, the Rangers, and AFSOC helped mitigate the risk to thousands of Soldiers and Marines of 3<sup>rd</sup> ID, V Corps, and I MEF fighting their way through Saddam's defenses north to Baghdad.

While the efforts in western Iraq intended to give the impression of a ground invasion, coalition operations in northern Iraq were meant to be an actual ground invasion. In the *Iraqi Perspective Project*, Kevin Woods writes:

[T]he largest contributing factor to the complete defeat of Iraq's military forces was the continued interference by Saddam. Just as soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division were about to push through the Karbala Gap, Saddam decided that all of that fighting was a mere feint, with the real threat coming from American forces moving from Jordan.<sup>16</sup>

Northern Iraq was different. Kurdistan housed a restive population, neighboring Turkey had designs on its lucrative oilfields, and it faced at least two Iraqi Army corps on the Green Line. CFLCC originally desired an entire Army mechanized division to secure the north. When that proved politically infeasible, TF Viking and the 173rd Airborne stepped in.

### The Situation in Northern Iraq

Geographic and political dynamics in northern Iraq, known as the Kurdish Autonomous Region or “Kurdistan,” differed significantly from the south and the west. Kurds, who represent nearly one-fifth of Iraq's total population, are mainly Muslim and identify as an Iranic people, not Arabs. Competing factions in northern Iraq in 2003 included the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), led by Massoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), directed by Jalal Talabani. The Hussein regime and Iran routinely leveraged the KDP, PUK, and other groups as proxy militia forces. The KDP occupied northwest Kurdistan, and the PUK held the southwest. Over 40,000 Kurdish militia, or Peshmerga (“those who face death”), swore allegiance to the KDP and over 20,000 to the PUK. The Communist Kurdistan Party and the Turkmen (a wholly different ethnic clan) also occupied parts of Kurdistan. These groups each had territorial claims and were historically opposed to the Sunni Arab power base in Iraq under Saddam.

Major cities in Kurdistan contained a mixture of ethnicities and religious groups, very few of whom enjoyed favor with the ruling Ba'ath party. Dahuk, Irbil (controlled by the KDP) and Sulaymaniyah (controlled by the PUK) were the major population centers in Kurdistan. Irbil was the largest city. With approximately one million inhabitants, it was the nominal capital. An internal border known as the Green Line ran in a jagged line, northwest to southeast, separating Kurdistan from the rest of the country. The region played host to a series of military and political efforts during the previous decade that foreshadowed OIF planning.<sup>17</sup>

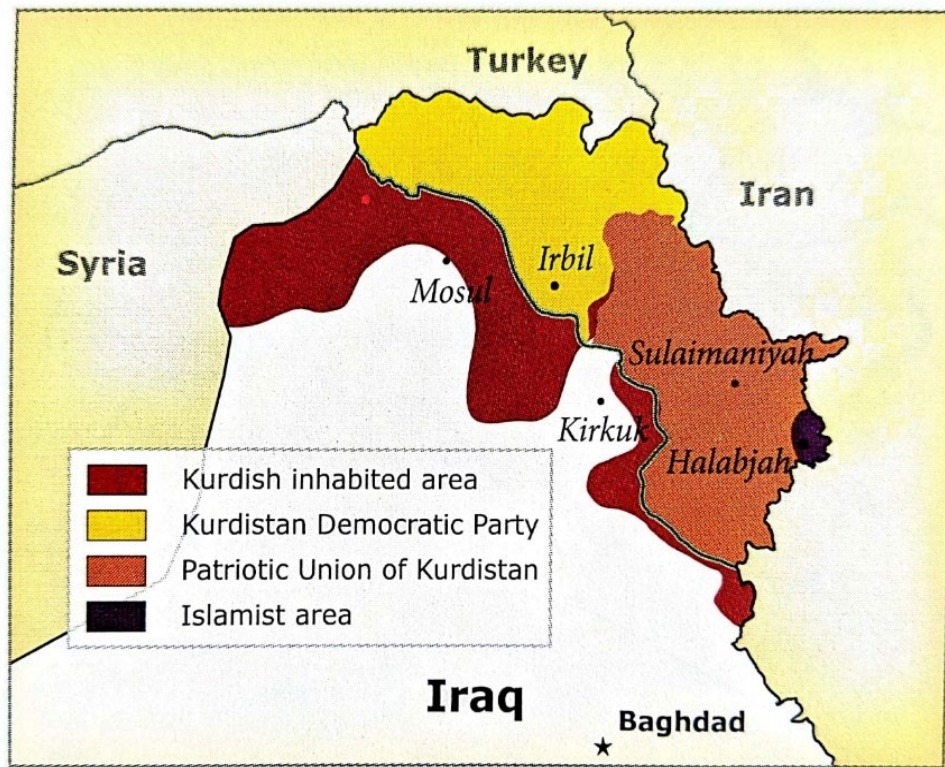


Figure 4. The Green Line and Kurdistan

Source: Charles H. Briscoe, *All Roads Lead to Baghdad: Army Special Operations Forces in Iraq* (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command History Office, 2007), Figure 1.7.

During Desert Storm the United States leveraged widespread anti-Saddam Hussein sentiment amongst the Kurds. Saddam's cousin "Chemical" Ali had gassed the Kurds at the town of Halabja as recently as 1987. After Desert Storm a U.S.-led coalition conducted a humanitarian relief effort called Operation Provide Comfort. Senior members of 10th Group recalled the Special Forces' heavy involvement in the assistance effort. Provide Comfort maintained a ground presence in Kurdistan until the end of 1996, but successive U.S. administrations allowed Saddam to remain in power over the rest of Iraq.

The United States chose not to provide military support for post-Desert Storm Kurd and Shi'a uprisings. The rebellions inflicted severe losses on Iraqi Army but Saddam's Republican Guard eventually put down the insurgents in late summer 1996. The Republican Guard killed over ten thousand Kurds near Irbil and over a hundred thousand Shi'ites in southern Iraq. CENTCOM observed the fighting and remained cognizant of the possibility of a pre-emptive attack by Saddam to consolidate his power over Kurdistan. The Kurds, constantly fighting for an independent state, were generally unwelcome in all the countries they partially occupied: Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria.<sup>18</sup>

To contain the Kurdish threat, Turkey had up to 40,000 troops stationed along its southern border. Turkish SOF routinely operated inside Iraqi territory. Adding to the complexity, the northeast border with Iran saw intertribal proxy fighting. For example, Saddam used the Mujahedin-e Khalq, a female-dominated exiled Iranian group to work against their home country. Iran leveraged the Badr Corps, fighters from the oppressed Iraqi Shi'a majority, against Saddam. Sunni terrorist organization Ansar al-Islam (to which Abu Musab al-Zarqawi once belonged) was hostile to all established powers in Kurdistan. Like al-Qaeda, Ansar al-Islam desired a Muslim caliphate under Sharia law. The boiling pot of ethnic tension and its potential for co-option by outside powers led Saddam to station two army corps on the Green Line. Post-war analysis revealed the regime was convinced of a Coalition attack from the west, an Iranian exploitation from the east, and a Kurdish uprising in the north.<sup>19</sup>

Saddam's commander for the northern front was his deputy prime minister, Izzat Ibrahim Al-Duri. Al-Duri led six regular army divisions and two Republican Guard divisions, the Adnan and Nebuchadnezzar. Stationed along the Green line, Al-Duri's

forces made up almost 40 percent of the Iraqi army. Saddam had multiple reasons to covet power over the north. These included consolidating oilfield control, securing the border, and currying favor with neighbors by putting down the Kurds. The coalition's considerations included the bordering countries' interests, the allure of the Kirkuk oilfields, the dream of Kurdish independence, and Saddam's defensive forces on the Green Line.<sup>20</sup>

#### The Plan for the Northern Front: From Pilgrim to Viking

Since the mid-1990s the U.S. concept plan for an invasion through Turkey was aptly named "Pilgrim." The plan originated with strategic planners at Third Army, which formed the basis of the CFLCC staff. Pilgrim underwent several iterations before CFSOCC settled on the use of 10th SF Group. 10th Group chose a different group of sojourners for its moniker: the Vikings. In the final invasion plan, Task Force Viking replaced tens of thousands of planned-for mechanized troops.<sup>21</sup>

CFLCC stood up in November 2001 and codified an official northern component of 1003V Hybrid in August of 2002. For several months, the northern invasion plan called for a United Kingdom corps headquarters to command coalition forces out of Turkey. General Franks and his staff originally believed the northern front called for 35,000 to 60,000 troops. The massive influx of coalition fighting units would spread Iraqi defenses thin, tamp down long-simmering ethnic tensions, and secure Kirkuk oilfields. In mid-December, the plan coalesced around the U.S. Army 4th ID, commanded by Major General Raymond Odierno. 4th ID planned to take control the 173rd Airborne Brigade and other USAREUR units in northern Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

In support of the conventional invasion plan, USAREUR directed the formation of ARFOR-T based around 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized). ARFOR-T consisted of over 2,000 personnel drawn from two Germany-based maneuver battalions, the 21st Theater Support Command, and other support units including the 69th Air Defense Brigade. ARFOR-T secured LOCs for 4th ID's route from the Mediterranean, through Turkey, and into northern Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

4th ID owned the U.S. Army's latest in upgraded vehicles and communications gear and as such would not be able to rely on prepositioned equipment in Kuwait. ARFOR-T prepared to facilitate rail and roadways for nearly 15,000 vehicles and over 30,000 soldiers passing through Turkey's Iskenderun sea port. 4th ID planned to travel 700 kilometers from the Mediterranean to the Turkey-Iraq border gate at Habur. The division planned to drive south, securing Kurdistan and northern Iraq all the way to Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit.<sup>24</sup>

4th ID received official orders to deploy in early January 2003. The division embarked its vehicles and equipment on dozens of U.S.-flagged cargo ships. The plan called for floating the force in the Mediterranean, while U.S. and Turkish diplomats negotiated terms of entry. The northern invasion rested on the benevolence of the conflicted Turkish government.

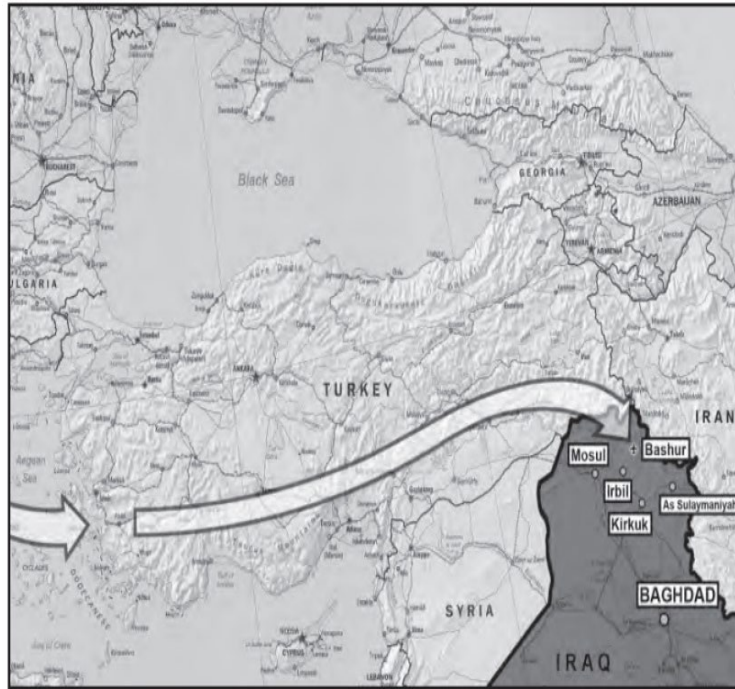


Figure 5. 4th ID's Planned Route

*Source:* Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 79.

Turkey was a key NATO member and was the logical geographic base from which to stage a ground invasion. Turkey willingly offered its air bases for coalition operations during Desert Storm. U.S. aircraft launched out of the air base at Incirlik to patrol Iraqi airspace throughout the 1990s. After 9/11, Turkey contributed troops to Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The secular Islamic country, however, had massive internal political divisions. The Turks welcomed the fall of Saddam, but feared economic destabilization from another Iraq war and a Kurd uprising. The Turkish military, under the guise of protecting ethnic Turkmen, frequently ventured into northern Iraq. U.S. negotiations with Turkey froze over the Turks' desire to secure their interests

and the coalition's determination that Iraq become a model democracy free of outside influence.<sup>25</sup>

Negotiations with Turkey failed. On 2 March the Turkish parliament voted down a U.S. payment of over \$20 billion and blocked coalition ground combat forces. Prime Minister Abdullah Gull subsequently ended the diplomatic negotiation process. The decision negated an agreement to allow tens of thousands of Turkish soldiers to secure the border and Iraqi oilfields. The 4th ID was out of the equation for the near term. ARFOR-T's efforts looked to be for naught.<sup>26</sup>

Direct ground LOCs for conventional combat troops from Europe to northern Iraq were unusable. CFSOCC, and by turn TF Viking, took on supported command responsibility for the northern front. TF Viking was temporarily based out of Constanta, Romania. Colonel Charles Cleveland commanded three SF battalion headquarters (his own 2nd and 3rd Battalions and 3rd Battalion, 3rd SF Group). The battalions brought a total of over four dozen twelve-man teams known as Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs). A contingent of infantry soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment joined the SF Group. Finally, a joint special operations aviation detachment from AFSOC's 352nd Special Operations Group supplied inter-theater lift. TF Viking's mission was to join forces with and fight alongside anti-Saddam Kurdish forces.<sup>27</sup>

At a 4 March pre-invasion conference in Qatar, USAREUR gave CFSOCC operational control of the 173rd and TF 1-63 AR. USAREUR also agreed to take on responsibility for sustaining the northern front. CFSOCC subsequently chopped responsibility for the 173rd to TF Viking. Brigadier General Harrell's decision marked

the first time since the Vietnam war that an SF group gained control of a conventional Army infantry brigade.<sup>28</sup>

#### Northern Delay: Main Cast and Characters

The full-size 173rd Airborne Brigade reached initial operating capability on 14 March 2003, twelve days before Northern Delay. The brigade was based on a battalion-sized task force that more than doubled in size over the previous thirty months. EUCOM envisioned the 173rd, based at Caserma Ederle, Vicenza, Italy, as a key part of its Strategic Ready Force. The new brigade was part of a USAREUR initiative called “efficient-basing South.” The 173rd trained to deploy within ninety-six hours of notification, partnering with USAF theater lift assets at nearby Aviano Air Base. The effort was Europe-internal, not part of an Army growth initiative.<sup>29</sup>

Colonel William Mayville commanded the 173rd. His brigade contained two maneuver battalions: the 1st of the 508th Infantry (Red Devils) and the newly reactivated 2nd of the 503rd Infantry (The Rock). Lieutenant Colonel Harry Tunnell commanded the Red Devils and Lieutenant Colonel Dominic Caraccilo commanded The Rock. Support paratroopers came from the Brigade Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Delta Battery (six 105mm howitzers) of the 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment (AFAR), 10th SF Group liaison personnel, and the 173rd Combat Support Company. The latter included engineers, air defense, and the 74th Infantry (Long Range Surveillance Detachment—LRSD). A dozen Pathfinder-qualified paratroopers from the LRSD, the 173rd brigade adjutant, and an air force tactical controller would be the first Sky Soldiers into Iraq. They infiltrated alongside SF personnel to survey the drop zone approximately twenty-four hours prior to Northern Delay.

Augmentees included medics and surgeons of the airborne-capable 250th Medical Detachment out of Fort Lewis, Washington. The 201st Forward Support Battalion (FSB) (Provisional) grew out of the 173rd's 501st Forward Support Company for Northern Delay. 1st ID provided twenty-one specially selected officers, including a battalion command element. The sustainers brought expertise in coordination with the 1st ID, ARFOR-T, USAREUR, EUCOM and knowledge about the follow-on heavy force package. Finally, the USAF's 86th Contingency Response Group (CRG) would eventually bring 200 personnel into Bashur. Formed in 1999 by U.S. Air Forces Europe, it maintained a rapid-deployment capability out of its home station in Ramstein, Germany. The 86th maintained interoperability by training its combat controller technicians as parachutists. The interoperability between the 501st and 86th was an Army-Air Force relationship that grew out of the airborne mission. The two organizations operated as liaisons to each other's service components. The 86th's commander, Colonel Steven Weart, jumped into Iraq alongside the Sky Soldiers.<sup>30</sup>

The 10th Mountain Division provided augmentation to Delta/319th AFAR with dozens of personnel from 2nd Battalion, 15th Field Artillery Regiment. The artillerymen rushed to deploy their equipment from Fort Drum, New York to Italy in time to participate in the airland portion of Northern Delay. They brought a Q-36 Firefinder radar and a combat observation lasing team, assets missing from the 173rd's organic inventory.<sup>31</sup>

USAREUR and 1st ID assigned the IRTF to the 173rd. USAREUR designed the IRTF in the aftermath of Balkan operations in the 1990s. The new millennium called for close integration of rapid response, early-entry light and heavy forces. (In the continental

U.S. the Army's Transformation process called on Stryker units to bridge the heavy-light force gap). USAREUR pulled the IRTF on a rotational basis from the 1st Armored Division and the 1st Infantry Division.

The 1st Battalion, 63rd Armored Regiment, a 1<sup>st</sup> ID unit based out of Germany, would follow the 173rd into Bashur Airfield. TF 1-63 AR offered a Heavy Ready Company (based around five M1 Abrams tanks and five M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles), a Medium Ready Company (based around ten M113 armored personnel carriers), a 120mm mortar platoon (four M1064 mortar carriers), and a scout platoon with seven High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles. Task Force 1-63 AR's combat support and service support enablers deployed as well, by way of a tailored USAREUR "force enhancement module" prepositioned in Germany. Combat service support included one M88 recovery vehicle, a military police detachment, and sustainment elements.<sup>32</sup>

TF 1-63 AR was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Riddle. Since November 2002 the battalion had trained for, equipped, prepared, and loaded its combat vehicles for shackling on C-17s for 96-hour notice fly-away missions. The tank and Bradley crewmen practiced on-loading, shackling, and off-loading with their Air Force loadmaster counterparts. Training and preparation were facilitated by dedicated warehouse space at the Ramstein Deployment Processing Center, accompanied by civilian contract support.<sup>33</sup> Joint training and preparation with the USAF was vital for the entire force going to war with the 173rd.

The 62nd Airlift Wing out of McChord Air Force Base, Washington provided the 173rd's C-17 airlift force. Aircrews from McChord and Charleston Air Force Base, South

Carolina flew the jet aircraft. Colonel Robert Allardice commanded the 62nd and was Air Mission Commander and a pilot-in-command for Northern Delay. Dice's relationship with Colonel Mayville was paramount. The two men jointly weighed the operational risk to aircraft and paratroopers. Northern Delay was the first combat jump for the 173rd since Operation Junction City on 22 February 1967 in Vietnam. It was the Army and Air Force's first strategic brigade airdrop joint forcible entry operation since Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989.

The 173rd's airborne status and CFSOCC's control of the brigade were key levers for diplomats negotiating its entrance into the war. Coalition liaison officers deemed the 173rd as SOF for diplomatic basing negotiations. The SOF designation bought flexibility for planners because Southern European countries were hesitant to allow conventional troops. No one could convince Turkey that the 4th ID was SOF. Mechanized units share a different tradition than airborne and special operations units. The 173rd's airborne status was well known in the region.

Establishing a foothold for conventional force flow into northern Iraq was vital. Saddam's defenses along the Green Line appeared to be stout, prepared to either defend in place or deploy south to reinforce. Coalition planners strove to shape Saddam's decision-making to favor the former.<sup>34</sup>

## The Iraqi Defense of the North



Figure 6. The Iraqi Defensive Plan around the Green Line

Source: Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 153.

Lieutenant General Hamdani, Commander of the II Republican Guard Corps, gave a post-war explanation of the Iraqi defense plan:

If the Americans came from the north, they would face I and V Regular Army Corps. Republican Guard divisions supported each of these Corps (the Adnan Division stood behind V Corps, and the Nebuchadnezzar Division stood behind the I Corps). Upon an attack, the Adnan Division and the remnants of the V Corps

would conduct a fighting withdrawal back to and across the Euphrates River, while the Nebuchadnezzar Division and remnants of the I Regular Army Corps would fall back behind the Tigris River. They would defend along strong defensive lines between Bayji to Al-Hadithah with a fallback line from Samarra to Al-Fallujah.<sup>35</sup>

The remainder of the Iraqi army numbered eleven regular divisions in the south to combat Shi'a insurgents and to guard the Iranian border, and four Republican Guard Divisions centralized around Baghdad. On paper, Saddam's infantry divisions had 14,000 soldiers and about 100 tanks. His armored divisions supposedly had 12,000 soldiers and about 250 tanks. Actual end strength throughout the Iraqi Army was much less. To mitigate the weakness of the Army, the regime created multiple layers of defensive forces. It coordinated *Saddam Fedayeen* and other loyalist militia to enforce Saddam's policies, to quell popular rebellion, and to stifle coup attempts from the armed forces. Saddam, his sons, and a few high-level ministers held all the power over Iraqi forces. The dictator highly discouraged lower-level decision-making and initiative, even from his generals.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 7. Iraq's Defensive Posture

Source: Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 100.

The Iraqi defensive plan ostensibly changed after an 18 December commanders' meeting called by Saddam's son Qusay. Qusay was responsible to his father for employment of the Republican Guard. The new plan called for concentric defensive rings around Baghdad. In the face of invasion, Qusay expected defensive forces at each of four rings to fall back successively until engaging in a final defense of the capital. The concentric ring plan, however, never took shape. Iraqi defensive posture changed relatively little between December 2002 and March 2003.

One exception was the Adnan Republican Guard Division' move south, from Mosul to Tikrit. Al-Duri moved the division in February after the Turkish parliament's first vote to disallow U.S. ground combat troops. Tikrit, still over one hundred miles north of Baghdad proper, was the terminal objective of 4th ID. The impotence of Qusay's concentric ring plan and the Adnan Division's relatively inconsequential move showed Saddam's overwhelming fear of internal and regional threats. His paranoia belied clear warning of a U.S.-led coalition invasion from Kuwait. Saddam believed propping up the byzantine network of military units and intelligence agents in the north was more important to the future of his regime.<sup>37</sup>

Kirkuk, locus of control for northern oilfields, was case in point. Laying just south of the Green Line, the city was rife with Saddam's secret organizations. Shadowy paramilitary units in the city included the Fedayeen, a "permanent force tasked with a number of state security missions" and the al-Quds, a "part-time territorial defense." The Fedayeen was a response to the post-Desert Storm Kurdish uprising, what Saddam called the "Page of Treason and Treachery." The Al-Quds was a Ba'ath party enforcement scheme. Fedayeen and Al-Quds partnered with local militias and the Governate to secure Saddam's hold on the city against rebellious Kurds. The two organizations participated in terrorism, including suicide bombings, against agitators and Western-influenced opposition. Minimal interaction occurred between Iraqi military units and their secret militia counterparts. Such initiative was too creative for Saddam. He preferred pliable and ignorant subordinates.<sup>38</sup>

While Saddam was busy making sure his multi-layered defense forces did not talk to each other, the coalition did the exact opposite. Intelligence agents shaped the pre-

invasion operational environment and CJSOTF-N came together as a hybrid organization. 10th SF Group, the 173rd, TF 1-63 AR, and the USAF worked towards a model of service interoperability. Their goal: make the northern invasion task force greater than the sum of its parts.

Invasion of the North: Task Force Viking,  
Northern Delay, and Airborne Dragon

Americans are asking you to make the world a better place by jumping into the unknown for the benefit of others. Our cause is just, and victory is certain.<sup>39</sup>

Phase I: Preparation and Deployment

Forcible entry operations are conducted by organizations whose force structures permit rapid deployment into the objective area. Joint forces may deploy directly to the OA or to staging areas to prepare for subsequent operations.<sup>40</sup>

The coalition invasion plan for northern Iraq was multi-phase and multi-domain. It included a preparatory intelligence and deception operations phase, followed by partnering phase with like-minded indigenous forces. The final phase saw coalition ground troops entering to link up with SOF and trusted indigenous forces.

As the invasion plan came together in late 2002, CENTCOM passed faked plans through intelligence agents and SOF special reconnaissance operators. The plans ended up with paid northern Iraqi agents, who disseminated them throughout the Iraqi intelligence system. Additionally, the CFLCC commander engaged in deception operations by discussing carefully scripted plans on unsecure telephone lines. The false information outlined coalition parachute insertions north of Baghdad. CENTCOM hoped to keep Saddam's attention on maintaining and reinforcing his northern forces. CENTCOM intelligence agents postulated that if Saddam took the deception seriously, he could preemptively strike to consolidate power in Kurdistan. Just as in the south, the

coalition had even more reason to seize a foothold before deception operations caused catastrophic success.<sup>41</sup>

In early 2003, CIA and Green Beret special reconnaissance personnel were already in northern Iraq and working to gain Peshmerga support. When Turkey denied entry to the 4th ID, the USAF worked to gain diplomatic clearances for air corridors over Iraq's neighbors. Pre-positioned intelligence and reconnaissance teams facilitated over 200 heavily modified Land Rovers and Toyota light pickups through Turkish customs to mitigate the loss of conventional ground presence. 10th Group ODAs began infiltrating northern Iraq in force on 20 March 2003.

The air route for 10th Group's main body infiltration was circuitous at best. It was nicknamed "Ugly Baby" by Colonel Cleveland's staff. On 23 March, an MC-130H Combat Talon flight through Jordan triggered heavy ground-to-air machine gun fire when it reached Iraqi airspace. The special operations turboprop airplane made an emergency landing in Turkey. Battle damage to the aircraft included "15 good-size holes" in the windshield, engine nacelle, and fuselage. To avoid international embarrassment, Turkey subsequently opened its airspace for combat overflight.

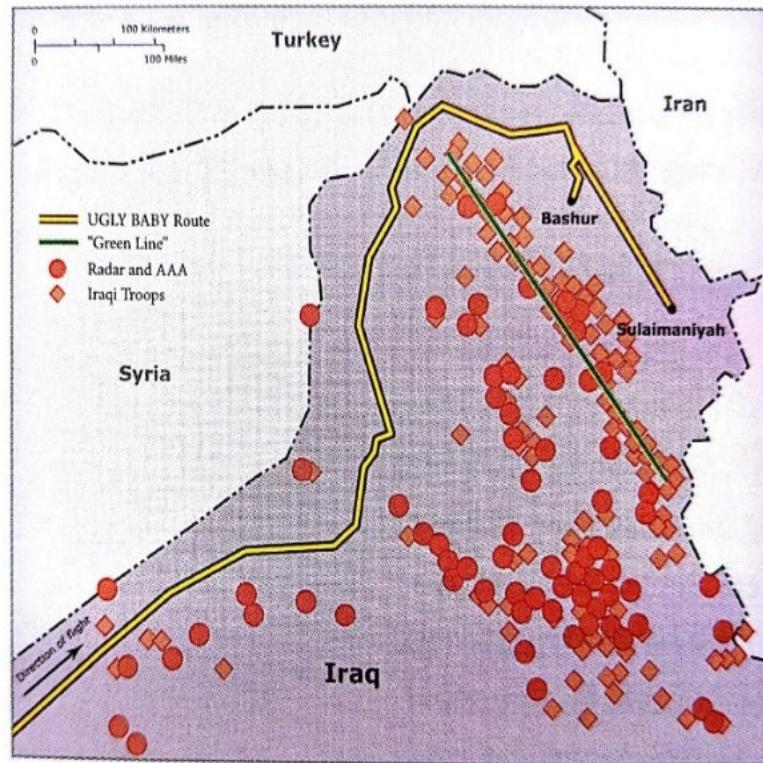


Figure 8. Operation Ugly Baby

Source: Charles H. Briscoe, *All Roads Lead to Baghdad: Army Special Operations Forces in Iraq* (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command History Office, 2007), Figure 5.5.

Ugly Baby's close call was a boon for the rest of the force. The Turks' decision provided a safe and straightforward air corridor for Europe-based SOF infiltration and the 173rd's airborne assault. Lieutenant Colonel M. Shane Hershman, lead pilot for Northern Delay, determined in early March that "[e]ntering Iraq from the south by Saudi Arabia or Jordan would require a three-hour flight over Iraq to the drop zone and a three-hour flight from the drop zone. The red team determined that we had a high risk of losing more than[sic] one C-17A to enemy fire by taking this route."<sup>42</sup>

TF Viking sought like-minded partner forces in Kurdistan to set the stage for the influx of the airborne brigade and follow-on heavy forces. The SF convinced the Peshmerga to integrate with them for the coming ground fight. The SF teams' mission was to fix Iraqi army units stationed along the Green Line in place. The task force was also in place to prevent Iraq's neighbors from filling the power vacuum after the Saddam's collapse.<sup>43</sup>

Looking forward to the introduction of conventional forces, TF Viking reconnoitered various airfields in northern Iraq to find a suitable drop zone. A fully loaded C-17A cargo jet needs about 1,200 meters of runway to take off and land safely. The task force selected Bashur Airfield as an initial lodgment because of its runway length and composition. The runway at Bashur was just over 2,000 meters long and could handle fully-loaded cargo jet take-offs and landings. The airfield was thirty-five miles northeast of Irbil, well north of the Green Line. Army planners referred to the insertion point, encompassing the runway and the farm fields around it and framed to the northeast by Safeen Mountain of the Zagros Range, as Bashur Drop Zone.<sup>44</sup>

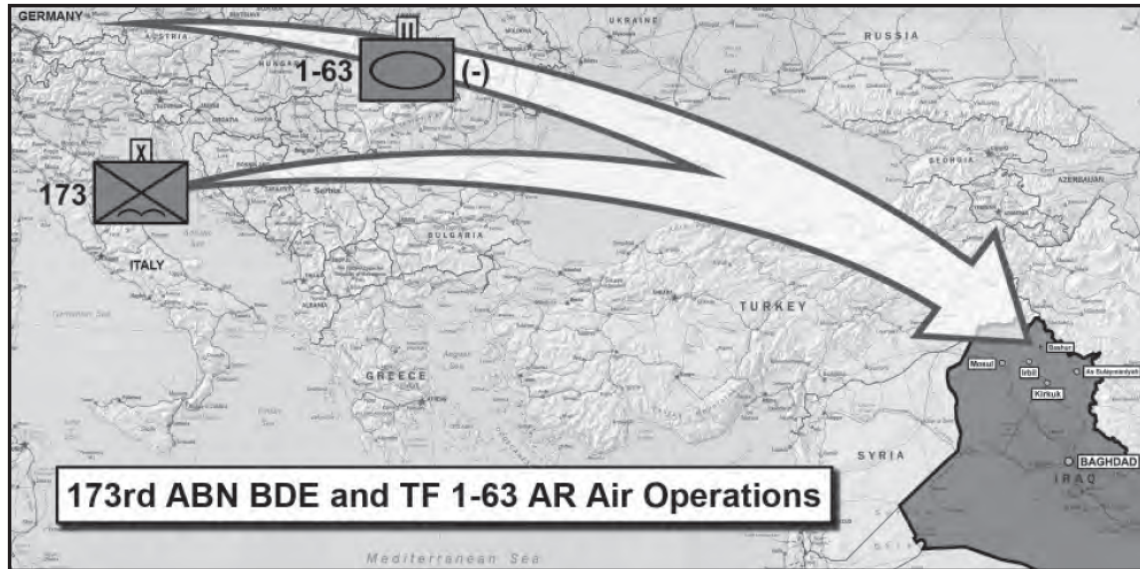


Figure 9. The Infiltration Route for the 173rd and TF 1-63 AR

Source: Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn. *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 224.

News reports by the *AP*, *The Guardian*, and Turkish television pegged Bashur as the location of construction and force build-up as early as 28 January 2003. A 1 March *Washington Post* article mentioned Bashur Airfield and Bakrajo, near Sulaymaniyah on the Iran border, as likely logistics nodes for the upcoming invasion. Media military experts were openly skeptical that Bashur was anything more than a helicopter refueling point. One commentator doubted if it could “withstand repeated landings by fully laden U.S. C-5 and C-17 military transports.” Planners inside the coalition had the same thoughts.<sup>45</sup>

Joint air-ground planning for Northern Delay began in earnest in Al Udeid, Qatar on 9 March. As a testament to the decade-long no-fly zone facilitated by Operations Northern and Southern Watch, Saddam chose not to defend Iraq through air-to-air

interdiction. Iraqi forces shot down a few MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial vehicles, but no coalition aircraft ever confronted an Iraqi combat aircraft while in flight. The negligible Iraqi Air Force was in reserve for use after the Americans gave up and went home. Although extensively mitigated, the ground-to-air threat over Iraq was real. Iraq attacked U.S. and coalition airplanes at least 500 times in 2002. Aircrews remained constantly vigilant and trained on evasive tactics over enemy territory.<sup>46</sup>

The 62nd Wing planned for ground-to-air threats in Iraqi airspace including “small arms fire and MANPADS [man-portable air defense systems].” Lieutenant Colonel Hershman described planning for a new type of operation for the USAF.

Due to the threat, we discussed a new procedure that the crews had not been trained on before. The procedure was a high speed descent of 3,500 to 4,500 feet per minute (FPM) at 230 knots from above 23,000 feet with the slats extended to an initial point (IP) of five miles from the drop zone (DZ). Normally the descent for an airdrop is 1,000 Feet per Minute (FPM) to an IP of 10 miles from the DZ. During the descent, the jumpers would be standing, since the level off at drop altitude and deceleration to drop airspeed would occur at five miles or approximately three minutes from the DZ. The C-17A pilots would be flying on NVGs and in formation. This is not a procedure we had trained to and incurs some risks to both passengers and aircraft.<sup>47</sup>

Joint planners estimated that insertion of the 173rd's troops and equipment required sixty sorties (landings and takeoffs). Establishing the Europe-to-northern Iraq air bridge required hundreds more sorties. Even though CENTCOM operationally controlled coalition forces on the northern front, EUCOM remained administratively in control and provided virtually all classes of supply. Fuel for vehicles and generators was most important. The petroleum needs of 1-63 AR were up to ten thousand gallons per day, and the tank-based task force “needed at least 22,000 gallons of fuel on hand to conduct sustained combat operations.” Planners knew that repeated stress from fully-loaded cargo

jets landing with much-needed supplies would eventually disintegrate the blacktop runway.<sup>48</sup>

Air Force planners estimated that Bashur could handle 200 landings and takeoffs before needing substantial repair. The weak point of the runway was a culvert running crosswise half a kilometer from the end of the pavement. Additionally, runway parking space allowed for only four aircraft on the ground. As of 19 March, Northern Delay was still up for discussion as an airland, airborne, or hybrid JFE operation. Counterintuitively, an airland-only operation was quicker and required fewer aircraft than an airdrop-only operation. The airdrop operation, however, would require fewer total aircraft landings on Bashur's runway. Hershman writes:

By flying a two-ship formation, we could land, offload, and depart every 15 minutes. Since the MOG [maximum on ground] was four, we would operate only at nighttime and we would fly 15 airplanes a day. In two hours, we would be completely offloaded and the airfield would be available for other operations. With a total airland operation the number of sorties could be reduced by four airplanes. The reduction of airplanes was the way cargo is loaded for an airland operation versus an airdrop operation.<sup>49</sup>

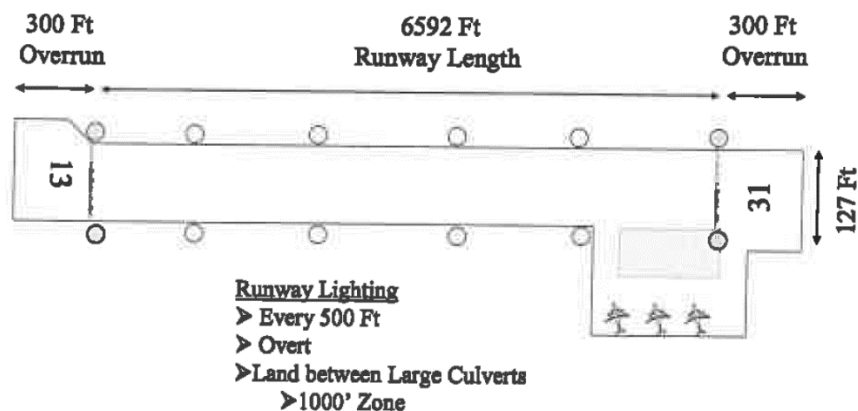


Figure 10. Diagram of Bashur Airfield

*Source:* M. Shane Hershman, "The Planning and Execution of the Airdrop and Airland of the 173rd Airborne Brigade over Northern Iraq on 26-30 March 2003" (U.S. Army War College Personal Experience Monograph, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2005), 24.

Regardless of how the 173rd inserted its troops, the northern front required robust sustainment. With ground forces entering through Turkey out of the question, the node created by the 173rd was the single point of entry for all conventional combat power.

Colonel Mayville weighed the risk. He crafted the mission statement of the 173rd as

When directed, the 173rd provides a demonstration of U.S. resolve in support of CJSTOF-N operations in order to prevent the movement of Iraq divisions north of the Green Line and deter autonomous faction operations in Northern Iraq. Begin plans to secure key oil nodes vicinity Kirkuk oil fields in support of CFC objectives.<sup>50</sup>

The joint force would endanger the runway with repeated landings, or it would endanger paratroopers by dropping them individually into enemy territory at night. Colonel Mayville exercised the inherent flexibility of his paratroopers. He decided on a hybrid option to reduce stress on the runway while conserving airfield ramp space.<sup>51</sup>

On 22 March Mayville ordered a third of his force to parachute in to Bashur. The jump reduced impact on the unproven runway by fifteen sorties—an eight percent stress reduction. He planned for his two infantry battalions to secure the airfield before the first C-17A touched down, ensuring the aircraft's safety in case it broke down. Finally, Mayville intended the jump to demonstrate the coalition's resolve to the Iraqi defense forces. The USAF and the Sky Soldiers would publicly arrive in Iraq by parachute and by jet aircraft, ready to fight Saddam anywhere and by any means.<sup>52</sup>

Colonel Mayville was the highest ranked jumper on the paratrooper manifest. He was followed by elements of his maneuver, support, and combat service support units. Different units were decisive at different phases of the operation. Initially, the infantry battalions provided security and mitigated direct-fire threats to the airfield. Then, as the follow-on forces neared influx, the logistics units took precedence. The USAF air control

party jumping alongside the Sky Soldiers required additional support in repairing, protecting, and improving the airfield runway. The infantry battalions carried only enough supplies to sustain a three-day fight. After seventy-two hours the infantry needed ammunition, food, water, spare parts, medical care, and petroleum resupply. The paratroopers also needed sufficient follow-on firepower to fight the mechanized and entrenched Iraqi force on the Green Line.<sup>53</sup>

On Wednesday, 26 March, six days after 10th Group's infiltration, seventeen C-17s parked at Aviano Air Base. The cargo jets were an unusual sight at the air base, which was home to the 31st Fighter Wing and its Mission Support Group. The enormous logistical needs of the cargo jet fleet and the airborne brigade strained Aviano's capabilities. The first five days of Northern Delay nearly quintupled the aerial port's average monthly throughput of 500 tons.

Aircrews topped off the airplanes' tanks with 120,000 pounds of fuel and the jets taxied to a nose-to-tail queue, hundreds of yards long. Cargo specialists stuffed the first five aircraft with a total of twenty parachute-rigged heavy platforms containing vehicles, ammunition, and combat supplies. In the afternoon, Colonel Mayville and 1,004 combat-loaded Sky Soldiers shuffled out the next ten aircraft. The sixteenth and seventeenth aircraft were spares in case of breakdown. The joint force prepared for a military first: combat personnel airdrop via C-17 in formation. When the pilots of the 62nd arrived in Italy in mid-March they were informed "[t]here were only three soldiers in the 173rd that had ever jumped from a C-17A before."<sup>54</sup>

Outside factors almost cancelled the 26 March airborne assault. The joint force received final diplomatic clearances for overflight of Turkey only eight hours prior to

take off. Weather at takeoff still did not meet the standards for a personnel airdrop. An enormous sandstorm had moved west to east across Iraq during the previous 48 hours. The storm was so severe that the ground invasion in the south experienced a “pause in operations.” On the morning of 26 March, the Pathfinders called with an update via tactical satellite radio to the 173rd’s higher headquarters, the Southern European Task Force (SETAF—division equivalent). The terrain and weather appeared suitable for airborne operations. Colonel Allardice confirmed with his USAF combat weathermen that Bashur would experience clear skies at time-on-target.<sup>55</sup>

The jump was a go. The first C-17s took off at 4:00 p.m. local time, taxiing down the main runway lined on both sides with U.S. military personnel and families cheering and waving American flags. The airborne force flew a relatively short four-and-a-half hour, low-level route. The air corridor was straightforward: over the Balkans and Turkey and into Iraqi airspace. The joint force’s escort package included fighter aircraft from the USS Truman and USS Roosevelt, a B-52 long-range bomber for dynamic suppression of enemy air defenses, and an AC-130. Only one in-flight refueling operation, via KC-130, was necessary and it did not take place until the return flight to Aviano.<sup>56</sup>

#### Phase II: Assault

Surprise is not a necessary condition for operational success (particularly when the force has overwhelming superiority), but it can significantly reduce operational risk.<sup>57</sup>

At 6:00 p.m. local time winds were negligible, clouds were non-existent, and the Pathfinders confirmed the initial drop time for 8:00 p.m. Hershman’s heavy-drop C-17 led the formation in descending from a cruising altitude of 30,000 feet to an airdrop altitude of 1,000 feet above ground level. The C-17s used combat evasive maneuvers to

avoid ground fire and subjected the paratroopers to bouts of negative gravitational forces. The heavy-drop C-17s were first over Bashur, releasing all twenty platforms of vehicles, equipment, and supplies. Three minutes later came the personnel drop aircraft, “flown in five-two ship elements.”<sup>58</sup>

Colonel Allardice reported hearing the young Sky Soldiers stomping and war whooping as the airplanes leveled out for final approach. At 8:10 p.m., the airborne force parachuted onto Bashur Drop Zone. Officially, the drop aircraft had fifty-eight seconds of green light over the drop zone. Approximately one hundred paratroopers planned to exit per aircraft: fifty out of the left paratroop door, fifty out of the right. Each overburdened Sky Soldier—rucksack hanging between his legs, weapon strapped to his side, main parachute carried on his back, reserve strapped to his chest—had just over one second to shuffle toward the door. With 135-knot wind whipping his face he handed his static line to the jumpmaster, turned into the door, and jumped out as far and as high as possible.<sup>59</sup>

The C-17s released paratroopers at a wider-than-expected interval. Integration of the global positioning system with nighttime visual estimations from the pilots, drop zone support, and jumpmasters is an art, not a science. Lieutenant Colonel Hershman states:

There were a few problems on the ground though. The block letters [positioned by the Pathfinders] were in the wrong location. They were positioned at a location from the planning in early March, but were not where they were briefed the day prior. A few planes dropped soldiers on the location of the block letters and some off the aircraft mission computer. A few airplanes had SKE [station keeping equipment] problems, and one aircraft had an exceptional restart (mission computer shuts down) at drop time. The crew conducted a manual drop.<sup>60</sup>

The fleet of aircraft disgorged 969 paratroopers jumped out over a span of ten kilometers before the pilots turned off the green light. The remaining thirty came in via

airland the next day. The widespread drop and adverse soil conditions complicated the 173rd's usual assembly time.

Bashur lay in the middle of “flat, open fields” and experienced rain and snow in the previous days. The night of the 26th the airfield was a mud pit. Many Sky Soldiers could not perform a parachute landing fall, a weight-distributing sideways roll upon contact with the ground. The paratroopers were instead immediately stuck in waist-deep mud. Throughout the night the brigade doggedly moved to assemble at pre-planned locations and gather up its far-flung personnel. By 10:00 pm the infantry companies occupied blocking positions around the airfield. By 11:00 am on 27 March all paratroopers were assembled under their parent headquarters. Nineteen Sky Soldiers were injured on the jump, including four aeromedical evacuees. The evacuees were treated and packaged by Army surgeon Lieutenant Colonel Harry Stinger, a veteran of the 75th Ranger Regiment. Stinger and eight members of his 250th Forward Surgical Team had parachuted in alongside the Sky Soldiers.<sup>61</sup>

Notwithstanding the Air Force's evasive maneuvers and the hard landing injuries, Bashur Drop Zone was a permissive environment. The Sky Soldiers encountered no enemy presence on 26 March. The jump nevertheless proceeded according to joint Army and Air Force standards. The USAF performed well during its first C-17 strategic brigade airdrop. Over twenty turboprop C-130s would have been needed for the same mission. The complete insertion on 26 March took only twenty-five minutes. Drop aircraft stayed long enough to ensure their loads were clear and away, and paratroopers landed ready to fight. Hershman, commander of the 62nd Wing's 7th Airlift Squadron, and his aircrew would go on to receive the USAF and National Aeronautic Association's prestigious

Mackay Trophy for their courageous performance in leading the unprecedented mission. Once on the ground, the 173rd turned to protecting the steady inflow of C-17 cargo aircraft.<sup>62</sup>

Securing an active airfield is a different challenge than securing an empty one. Cargo jets on the ground are a high-payoff target. To “minimize turn times” the subsequent airland cargo jets used Engine Running Off/On Load (ERO) procedures, a critical capability the C-17A brings to the USAF strategic lift inventory. To protect the aircraft, the 173rd was responsible for expanding the airhead line with its complement of paratroopers, vehicles, weapons, and target acquisition systems.<sup>63</sup>

### Phase III: Stabilization of the Lodgment

Stabilization involves securing the lodgment to protect the force and ensure the continuous landing of personnel and equipment, organizing the lodgment to support the increased flow of forces and logistic resource requirements, and expanding the lodgment as required to support the joint force in preparing for and executing follow-on operations.<sup>64</sup>

Until the 173rd could organize itself, SF and Peshmerga “secured key terrain off the drop zone.” The 173rd’s main effort, 1st of the 508th, eventually took over security for the southeast side of Bashur. The Red Devils also oversaw preparation of the main runway for airland operations. The supporting effort, 2nd of the 503rd, secured the northeast side of the airfield. The first C-17 touched down the following day and started the build-up of the rest of the 173rd’s combat power. Mayville’s engineers received their Light Airfield Repair Package and partnered with the 86th CRG to ensure the runway remained continuously usable.<sup>65</sup>

The airdrop set the conditions to bring in over a thousand remaining Sky Soldiers and their equipment. Bashur Airfield became a critical node for the air LOC from Iraq to

Europe. The 173rd and the 86th CRG operated in austere conditions. The airfield had no running water, sewage, electricity, hard-stand buildings, or control tower. The Kurds avoided a conspicuous construction effort in the lead up to the jump, but Coalition efforts to make Bashur a logistics node were not a secret. CFLCC wanted the whole world to know that the conventional front in the north was open.<sup>66</sup>

On 27 March Iraqi Army checkpoints on routes around Kirkuk began melting away, and covert Peshmerga started infiltrating the city. On 28 March 3rd Battalion, 10th SF Group and Peshmerga conducted Operation Viking Hammer near the Iranian border. The official U.S. Special Operations Command history states:

ODAs from FOB [Forward Operating Base] 103 and 6,500 Peshmerga attacked Ansar al Islam(AI)—an al Qaeda (AQ) affiliate—in a fortified enclave that housed 700 heavily armed terrorists near Iran. Within 30 hours, the combined force crushed the terrorist pocket. Through a subsequent series of coordinated attacks along the Green Line, the line demarcating the KAZ, SOF and Peshmerga troops advanced against Iraqi military forces, occupying abandoned positions. The effective integration of air and ground forces destroyed the enemy's will to fight and opened the avenues of approach to the two most significant northern cities, Kirkuk and Mosul.

Also on 28 March, TF Viking seized the city of Tuz Khurmatu.<sup>67</sup>

#### Phase IV: Introduction of Follow-on Forces

Follow-on forces provide the JFC with increased flexibility to conduct operations as required by operational conditions; once the lodgment has been established with aerial ports of debarkation and seaports of debarkation, a joint security area may be identified and developed to facilitate and provide security for subsequent support operations.<sup>68</sup>

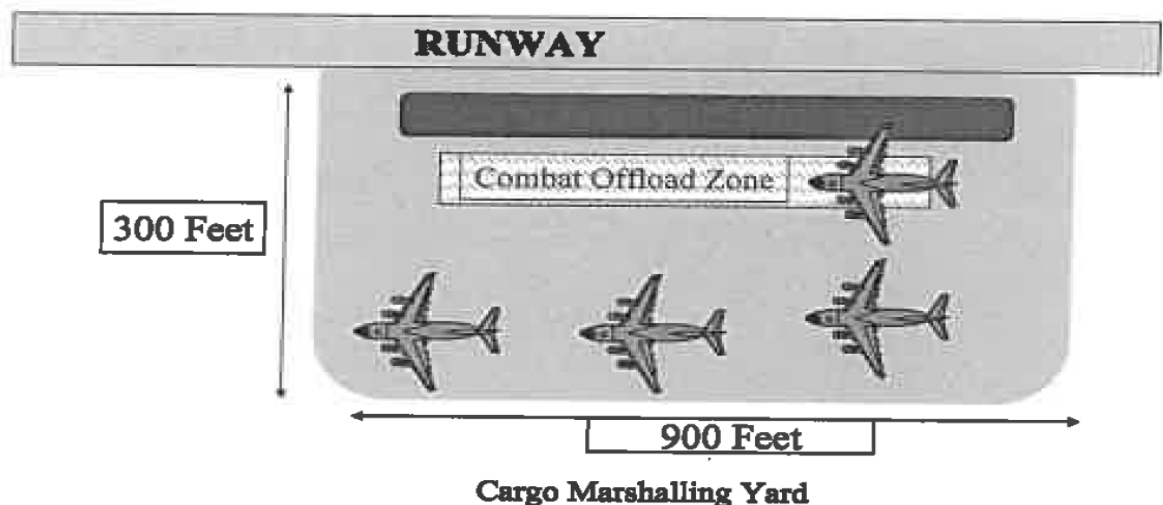


Figure 11. The Ramp Area at Bashur Airfield

*Source:* M. Shane Hershman, “The Planning and Execution of the Airdrop and Airland of the 173rd Airborne Brigade over Northern Iraq on 26-30 March 2003” (U.S. Army War College Personal Experience Monograph, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2005), 23.

C-17A sorties flew different approach and departure routes to and from Bashur each night to avoid the persistent threat of ground-to-air fire. The planes brought Delta/319th AFAR’s howitzers on 28 March and the 173rd began stockpiling fuel and parts to support the heavy vehicles of TF 1-63 AR. On the night of 28 March, fuel ran low. An extra C-17A sortie, with Extended Range Tanks and 60,000 pounds of petroleum, re-filled the 201st FSB’s FARP, growing it to a capacity of 80,000 gallons. The 21st Theater Support Command expedited supply and parts “by air within 24 hours of the requests” using C-17s, C-130s, and contracted ground convoys. C-130s landing at Bashur also conducted EROs “in case a plane had to make a fast getaway” and to avoid problems associated engine shut-down.<sup>69</sup> Both air and ground LOCs proved necessary after Turkey allowed ground supply convoys via the Habur border gate, a 225-mile round trip. Captain Jamie Krump, a member of the 201st, wrote:

Delivery of fuel by C-17s and C-130s proved to be impractical. Because of the limited size of the airfield at Bashur and the threat to the aircraft, the planes would not spend more than 45 minutes on the ground, which was not long enough to offload large quantities of fuel. All flights occurred at night, and unloading fuel from an airplane requires even more time during darkness. The only workable solution for obtaining fuel was to establish a ground LOC. Because the FSB was cut off from all forces in the south, it was necessary to create a northern ground LOC. Finally, the Army Forces (Turkey) negotiated an agreement with the Turks to let fuel tankers cross their border into northern Iraq.<sup>70</sup>

Sky Soldiers deployed off the airfield on 29 March 2003, partnered with Peshmerga. Operations included route and area reconnaissance and convoy escort of “food, water, and fuel by contract carrier” from the 21st Theater Support Command. The 173rd’s artillery assets also participated in suppressing Iraqi Green Line defenses, conducting two “two-gun raids near enemy lines with 60 confirmed kills and two bunker complexes destroyed in support of U.S. Special Forces operations.” By the night of 31 March, twelve apportioned C-17’s flew sixty-two sorties to enable full assembly of the 173rd. The total infiltration effort brought in “2,175 [personnel], 3060 short tons of cargo, [and] 408 vehicles.”<sup>71</sup>

#### Phase V: Transition

A successful forcible entry operation is completed in one of two ways: attainment of the campaign objectives (termination) or completion of the operational objectives wherein a lodgment is established for follow-on combat operations (transition).<sup>72</sup>

The U.S. Special Operations Command official history states, “The [173rd’s] actions subsequently freed ODAs to prosecute objectives with the Peshmerga.” Colonel Mayville directed 1st of the 508th to take over “independent combat operations in the vicinity of Irbil.” The Red Devils partnered with SF and “conducted a reconnaissance in force which culminated in offensive operations against Iraqi conventional military

forces” including one artillery raid and one combined arms raid. The operations placed U.S. conventional forces in blocking positions south of the Green Line. The Red Devils’ first valorous award, a Bronze Star Medal, went to a fire support noncommissioned officer (NCO). While manning a forward position the NCO “expertly control[ed] the task force’s indirect fires, and . . . adjust[ed] heavy machinegun and grenade machinegun fires onto enemy forces with a handheld laser designator.”<sup>73</sup>

Task Force Viking and Peshmerga forces conducted at least four combined offensive operations against Iraqi divisions between 30 March and 2 April. Irbil fell on 1 April. On 6 April, only one day before the arrival of Task Force 1-63 AR, TF Viking conducted a daytime defense from elevated positions on Debecka Ridge against a battalion-sized enemy armored unit. Also on 6 April, Combined Forces Air Component Command declared air supremacy over all of Iraq. Saddam’s forces’ will to fight was sapping quicker than the coalition could flow forces into the country.

On 7 April, USAREUR’s IRTF began deployment to Bashur. The mission of the IRTF, as stated in its early March deployment warning order, was: “to address a contingency to accomplish the purpose of the CFLCC CENTCOM mission to provide a credible force in northern Iraq. To this end, a force capable of providing an offensive mounted tactical assault capability is necessary.” The presence of the Dragons was not a secret. CNN imbed Steve Nettleton included 1-63 AR in open-source news stories as early as 27 March. CENTCOM used the armored task force to show Iraqi defense forces and the entire region that the absence of the 4th ID would not deter the coalition from building combat power.<sup>74</sup>

Woodland camouflage pattern for operations in the Balkans remained on TF 1-63 AR's vehicles as a testament to its late-notice reaction. The tank battalion loaded and flew thirty C-17 sorties over the course of three days out of the Ramstein Deployment Processing Center. The C-17s landing at Bashur with M-1 Abrams tanks weighed as much as 300,000 pounds. Ultimately, the armored task force required 180 C-17 and C-130 sorties to sustain its operations during April and May.<sup>75</sup>

Pressure from Kurdish Peshmerga, their SF counterparts, and coalition airstrikes convinced Saddam's forces to abandon Kirkuk on 10 April. On this day, Iraqi forces woke up to news reports of the regime's fall. Television images showed 3rd ID soldiers and Iraqi civilians pulling down statues of Saddam in central Baghdad. The 173rd headquarters, both infantry battalions, and the newly-arrived TF 1-63 AR began movement that day. The brigade's mission was to control Kirkuk and its oilfields, approximately 100 miles south of Bashur Drop Zone. The first task was to seize the Kirkuk airfield to use as a base of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Tunnell states:

the Iraqis had abandoned their positions, or had been driven out by Kurdish paramilitary forces—the reports varied. In any case, the enemy positions were empty and the battalion continued its mounted movement to Kirkuk where Iraqi forces were, with a great deal of alacrity, deserting their positions in the city and surrounding areas.<sup>76</sup>

The enemy abandoned their posts, appearing to melt into the populace. Within 24 hours the task force seized the undefended Kirkuk airport and began patrols to secure the city and its lucrative oilfields.<sup>77</sup>

The 173rd went on to establish coalition presence throughout Kirkuk to fill the power vacuum. Acting on intelligence from multiple sources, the two infantry battalions raided Fedayeen and other militia hideouts. Requests from the local leaders spurred the

brigade to establish programs to repair infrastructure, train police, and prime the shocked economy.<sup>78</sup>

On 11 April, a devastating series of airstrikes on the city's surrounding Iraqi divisions allowed Peshmerga and 2nd Battalion, 10th SF Group to liberate Mosul.<sup>79</sup>



Figure 12. CJSOTF-N Operations Against Iraqi Defenses

Source: Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and John Tohn. *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 252.

By 14 April, with Saddam's forces deserting en masse, the brigade owned the city and was regularly patrolling. Direct-fire engagements proved few and far between for the rest of the month. The northern "oilfields had been secured with minimal destruction or

sabotage.” The possible destruction of the oilfields was particularly worrisome for coalition planners because the retreating Iraqi Army did so during Desert Storm. Evidence shows Saddam’s regime was prepared to do the same, to its fields both north and south, in 2003. Fortunately, the plan never reached fruition.<sup>80</sup>

Concerning Red Devil operations in Kirkuk, Lieutenant Colonel Tunnell wrote:

The brigade focused on stability operations once it reached Kirkuk to restore, and then maintain civil order. Iraqi forces departed in disarray, leaving a vacuum. The void they left was in danger of being filled by lawlessness and other counterproductive behavior. There were a variety of competing entities looking to take advantage of the political and law enforcement void to include political parties, armed groups, and criminal gangs. Furthermore, a significant risk of looting and a general breakdown in services needed to sustain a minimum standard of living existed. Even though there were instances of violence, civil disobedience, looting (primarily of military, political, or government infrastructure abandoned by the old regime), and other problems, for a city of nearly one million people, the issues were remarkably kept well-in-check by the brigade's efforts.<sup>81</sup>

On 14 April, cracks appeared on the main runway at Bashur airfield. Colonel Mayville’s original assumption was proved correct, if imprecise. The airfield lasted much longer than expected, but nearly 450 cargo aircraft landings and takeoffs took their toll. The cracks appeared after the runway took on approximately 13 million pounds of vehicles, fuel, equipment, and supplies. The 86th CRG shortened the blacktop surface to 1,400 meters—still viable for C-17 airland—and began work repairing the fouled portion.<sup>82</sup>

### Afterword

4th Infantry Division invaded in early April 2003. The division drove north from Kuwait, arriving in northern Iraq a month after the initial invasion. Major General Odierno based his headquarters in Tikrit and relieved TF Viking. 4th ID took operational

control of the 173rd from CFSOCC and assumed responsibility for central-northern Iraq from Baqubah to Kirkuk. The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) took control of Mosul and the rest of Kurdistan for the subsequent twelve months of stability operations. Coalition plans to house tens of thousands of Iraqi Army POWs were unneeded because, as an official put it: “[t]hey simply laid down their arms and went home.” President George W. Bush declared an end to major combat operations on 1 May 2003 from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln. Planners turned to confront the problems of a growing insurgency throughout the war-torn country. The 173rd fought in Iraq, based out of Kirkuk, for almost a year. It was relieved in place in February 2004 by the 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division.<sup>83</sup>

### Summary

General Franks’ plan to attack the Saddam Hussein regime on multiple fronts necessitated Operation Northern Delay. Due to diplomatic failures, the only way insert conventional combat power on the northern front was the 173rd Airborne Brigade’s hybrid airdrop/airland joint forcible entry operation. Northern Delay represented several significant events in military history: the first C-17 strategic brigade airdrop, subordination of a U.S. Army airborne infantry brigade to a Special Forces Group, and the first airland of an M-1 Abrams tank battalion task force. The operation set the stage for a conventional fight against 40 percent of Saddam’s forces along the Green Line that never occurred. Nonetheless, lessons learned from the 173rd’s experience in northern Iraq should inform current JFE doctrine. The following chapters analyze and draw conclusions from these lessons.

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<sup>1</sup> “Strategic” in the sense that U.S. Air Force strategic airlift was used, and the operation crossed the boundary between United States European Command and United States Central Command (the Turkey-Iraq border) during wartime.

<sup>2</sup> Another method of delivering combat power to an airfield via aircraft is “combat offload.” Lieutenant Colonel Hershman describes it in “The Planning and Execution of the Airdrop and Airland of the 173rd Airborne Brigade over Northern Iraq on 26-30 March 2003” 10-11: “A combat offload is an airdrop from a plane on the ground without a parachute. In the C-17A, there are two sets of rails, the airdrop rails, which run down the center of the aircraft and the logistic rails, which are side by side running the length of the aircraft. During a combat offload, the pallet locks are removed from the pallet and it rolls out of the aircraft as power is added to the aircraft. The minimum length required is 1000 feet, but at Bashur we only had 900 feet to do the combat offload. A CONEX could not be downloaded, since the forklift had broken but the CONEX was combat offloaded on the ramp at Bashur. The disadvantages of a combat offload is a lot of thrust produced by the engines, and there cannot be anything light behind the aircraft or it stands a good chance of being blown over.”

<sup>3</sup> Gordon and Trainor, *Kindle*, location 912. The exception being the British overland invasion in 1941. Other “fronts” for OIF included aerial (USAF) and information operations.

<sup>4</sup> Hooker, 28; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 46-47.

<sup>5</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 54-55; Gordon and Trainor, *Kindle* location 1603 and 9656 of 11432; Gordon and Trainor report that, post 27 March, LTG McKiernan viewed the Republican Guard and the Fedayeen as the enemy centers of gravity, *Kindle* location 5992 of 11432.

<sup>6</sup> The United Kingdom’s 1st Armoured Division also took part, aligned with the I MEF. The UK focused on seizing the southern city of Basra.

<sup>7</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 54; Collins, 43; Gordon and Trainor, *Kindle* location 8639. CFSOCC also oversaw a southern Iraq effort consisting of SF, Naval Special Warfare Task Group-CENTCOM (NSWTG-CENT, based around US Navy SEALs), and Polish SOF task force. It was responsible for operations to secure petroleum assets around the Al-Faw Peninsula, the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon and Trainor, 373 and 377.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>10</sup> Now Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). Gordon and Trainor, 374.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Benson, Operational Leadership Experience Interview, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 7; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 210-213.

<sup>12</sup> Neville, 11; Gordon and Trainor, 379.

<sup>13</sup> Mir Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors: A History of the US Army Rangers* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 246; Barton Gellman, “Covert Unit Hunted for Iraqi Arms,” *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/12/AR2006061200926.html>; Joseph Kapaczewski and Charles W. Sasser, *Back in the Fight: The Explosive Memoir of a Special Operator Who Never Gave Up* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>14</sup> Richard E. Williamson, Jr., “C-17 Special Operations Low Level II (SOL II) Supporting the Combatant Commander” (Research Project, United States Air Force Institute of Technology, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH, June 2004), 42; Gordon and Trainor, 373. 3rd Ranger Battalion’s tactical actions at Haditha dam were no doubt valorous. The mission, however, had dubious military purpose at the operational level. Post-war analysis showed that Saddam never intended to damage the dam while coalition operations to almost inadvertently breached it.

<sup>15</sup> The classified nature of Task Force 20 and Team Tank contributed to the widely-accepted, but erroneous, claim that tanks from 1st Battalion, 63rd Armored Regiment were the first to airland in combat. Five days later, on 7 April, tanks and infantry fighting vehicles from TF 1-63, US Army Europe’s Immediate Ready Task Force, landed via C-17 at Bashur Airfield in northern Iraq. Williamson, 42; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 253.

<sup>16</sup> Woods et al., x.

<sup>17</sup> The PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) an insurgent group in southern Turkey, northern Iraq and Syria, was not active during the timeframe of OIF I.

<sup>18</sup> Todd S. Purdum, *A Time of Our Choosing: America’s War in Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2003), Chapter 12; Hooker, 23, 49, and 59; Woods et al., 4.

<sup>19</sup> Purdum, Chapter 12; Karl Vick, “Airstrip Work Evidence of US Presence in Northern Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, 1 March 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20030301/news/303019983>; Todd S. Brown, *Battleground Iraq: Journal of a Company Commander* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 25, 31; Neville, 12; Perry et al., xxiv.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon and Trainor, Kindle location 87 of 11432; Hooker, 61-62.

<sup>21</sup> Benson, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 41. Gordon and Trainor, Kindle location 1579 of 11432; Tunnell, ix; Walter J. Boyne, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: What Went Right, What Went Wrong, and Why* (New York: Forge, 2003), 41. The Army used the traditional abbreviation 173d. For purposes of readability, this paper uses 173rd. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Bell and Galvin, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 41; Warren and Morrissey, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Perry et al., 119; Boyne, 41; Benson, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Guy Chazan, “As U.S.-Turkish Relationships Fray, Historic Base is on the Sidelines,” *The Wall Street Journal*, updated 2 April, 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB104923506280542400>; Benson, 1-5; Warren and Barclay, 12; Boyne, 41; Gordon and Trainor, Kindle location 2238 of 11432. Later in the summer of 2003, Sky Soldiers conducted a raid and arrested 11 Turkish soldiers. The Turks were released after a direct conversation between US Vice President Dick Cheney and Turkish President Recep Erdogan. When the US forces “raided Turkish offices in Sulaimaniya” the Turkish soldiers had with them “15kg of explosives, sniper rifles, grenades and maps of Kirkuk, with circles drawn around positions near the governor's building.”

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command History*, 6th ed. (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: United States Special Operations Command, March 2008), 121; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 402 and 225.

<sup>28</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-5; Perry et al., 108-109, 381-382; Warren and Barclay, 12; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 224. Under tactical control of TF Viking, the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed to northern Iraq on 12 and 13 April 2003. The Marines flew via helicopter from Navy ships in the Mediterranean and via KC-130 from the island of Crete. The Marines landed at Bashur and moved to secure Mosul until relieve by the 101st Airborne Division. Also, a tiny contingent of Marine officers operated in northern Iraq during the invasion. Led by II Marine Expeditionary Force Commander Major General H.P. Osman, the group infiltrated by way of Turkey on 23 March, escorted by 10th Group Green Berets. Known as the Military Coordination and Liaison Command (MCLC), the Marines linked up with intelligence agents and Kurdish leaders to begin preparations for post-conflict mediation with the varied ethnic and political groups in northern Iraq. The MCLC reported to CENTCOM, not CFSOCC or CFLCC. CENTCOM announced the MCLC's presence to the public on 24 March, “a largely symbolic holding action against [the] possibility” that the Turks would enter the north. Marine history gives MG Osman credit for convincing the PUK's leadership to stand down a virtual takeover of government offices in Sulaymaniyah during the post-invasion power vacuum. Regardless of its effectiveness, the MCLC is an example of the “directed telescope” that high-level commanders, in this case, Generals Franks and John Abizaid (CENTCOM deputy commander), often place in their area of operations. They keep a finger on things in a way that is outside the chain of command.

<sup>29</sup> Collins, 44; Bell and Galvin, 99; Warren and Barclay, 13; *173rd Airborne Brigade: Sky Soldiers*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Turner Publishing Company, 2006), 89.

<sup>30</sup> Jamie L. Krump, “Sustaining Northern Iraq,” *Army Logistician* (November-December 2003): 5-8; Kevin Dougherty, “Air Force Mission Is Outgrowing Bashur,” *Stars and Stripes*, 16 April 2003; Louis Arana-Barradas, “Airlift Takes Toll on Bashur Airfield,” *US Air Force Print News*, 15 April 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/139456/airlift-takes-toll-on-bashur-airfield/>.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffrey T O’Neal, Aaron P. Heberlein, and Jonathan H. Bork, “2-15 FAR Beyond Combat: Flexibility and Bold Innovation for Multiple Missions in Iraq,” *Field Artillery* (January-February 2004): 13-15.

<sup>32</sup> Bell and Galvin, 98; Warren and Barclay, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Warren and Barclay, 11-13. TF 1-63’s force structure for Operation Airborne Dragon was: Medium Ready Company (two M113 platoons of Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment), Heavy Ready Company (one Bradley Fighting Vehicle platoon from B/2-2 and one Abrams tank platoon of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 63rd Armored Regiment), Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1-63 AR (tactical command and control force enhancement module, one scout platoon, one military police detachment of 3/554 MP, one mortar platoon with one section for each of the ready companies, combat service support force enhancement module)

<sup>34</sup> The history of US Army airborne and special operations forces is inextricable. Fort Bragg, North Carolina is known as “Home of the Airborne and Special Operations Forces.” The two communities share lineage as displayed at the Airborne and Special Operations Museum in nearby Fayetteville. Airborne and special operations troops share the uniform traditions of shined jump boots, colorful background trimmings behind their parachutist badges, and red and green berets.

<sup>35</sup> Woods, 77.

<sup>36</sup> Hooker, 52; Boyne, 43; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 153.

<sup>37</sup> Boyne, 42; Woods, 80-83; Hooker, 62-63, 71.

<sup>38</sup> Woods, 48-49, 51, 53, 101.

<sup>39</sup> Purdum, Chapter 12.

<sup>40</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), xi.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon and Trainor, Kindle locations 2174 and 2217 of 11432.

<sup>42</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 8.

<sup>43</sup> Perry et al., 110; Neville, 8; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 90-91, 225-226; Warren and Barclay, 12; Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-8; Purdum, Chapter 12.

<sup>44</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 6; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 223; Borzou Daragahi, “Air Base Reopens in Kurdish Northern Iraq,” Associated Press, 28 January 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://www.ourmidland.com/news/article/Air-Base-Reopens-in-Kurdish-Northern-Iraq-7053465.php>; U.S. Air Force, “C-17 Globemaster III,” US Air Force Fact Sheet, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/104523/c-17-globemaster-iii/>; “Permanent Orders 145-19: Bronze Star Combat Parachutist Badge and Arrow Head Device”; 173rd Airborne Brigade, “For participation in a parachute assault landing into enemy controlled territory,” 24 May 2004, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.173rdairborne.com/manifest-iraq.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Daragahi; Gary Younge, “US ‘Sets Up Base’ in Kurdish Region,” *The Guardian*, 29 January 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jan/30/iraq.garyyounge>; Vick.

<sup>46</sup> Hooker, 24; Woods, 40; Richard D. Hooker and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning From The Long War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, September 2015), 44.

<sup>47</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 3-5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>51</sup> Bell and Galvin, 98; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 230; Krump, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 6; Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), ix-x, I-3, I-7, 11-4; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 227-228.

<sup>53</sup> Krump, 5; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 228; Collins, 44; CNN, “1,000 US Paratroopers Secure Iraqi Airfield,” 27 March 2016, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/26/sprj.iq.airfield.taken/index.html>. “In addition, the brigade is outfitted with an organic long-range surveillance company, a combat support company with engineer assets (including two light airfield repair packages and a sapper platoon), air defense, combat support, and the 501st Forward Support Company.”

<sup>54</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 8, 12-13; Matt J. Martin and Charles W. Sasser, *Predator: The Remote-Control Air War over Iraq and Afghanistan* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2010), 7; Collins, 43, 46; “Permanent Orders 145-19”; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 227; Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), x; Scott Elliott, “C-17 Crews Describe Paratroop Drop,” *US Air Force Print News*, 28 March 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/139674/c-17-crews-describe-paratroop-drop/>; Sandra Jontz, “Pilots Tell of Harrowing Drop of 173rd,”

*Stars and Stripes*, European Edition, 29 March 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://anysoldier.com/brian/Iraq/DropOf173rd/>; Collins, 46; USCENTAF, “Operation Iraqi Freedom – By The Numbers” (Report, United States Air Forces Central Command, 30 April 2003), 15.

<sup>55</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-6; Purdum, Chapter 12; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 79, 150; Collins, 43.

<sup>56</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 9,13,15,16; Jontz; Collins, 46; Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-3.

<sup>57</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-3.

<sup>58</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” iii, 13; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 226-227.

<sup>59</sup> Jontz.

<sup>60</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 16.

<sup>61</sup> “Permanent Orders 145-19”; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 227-229; CNN; Martin and Sasser, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 1-2. Hershman flew the C-17 from its initial acquisition by the USAF in 1993 as one of the first twelve C-17-qualified USAF pilots. The 7th Airlift Squadron was the USAF’s first to qualify all its C-17 pilots using night vision goggles (NVGs). Since 1912, the Mackay Trophy has recognized the Air Force’s single most meritorious flight of the year. It is bestowed by the National Aeronautic Association and the United States Air Force and resides at the Smithsonian museum. Past recipients include General Henry “Hap” Arnold (twice), Eddie Rickenbacker, James Doolittle, and Chuck Yeager. Hershman also received the Distinguished Flying Cross for leading the “largest nighttime single-pass airdrop since D-Day” and switching seamlessly from auto-drop to manual drop mode in the final seconds before initiating the drop sequence. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 227.

<sup>63</sup> Hershman, “The Planning and Execution.”

<sup>64</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), xii.

<sup>65</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-5; Tunnell, 15; Blair Ross, “A Transformed Force in Legacy Clothing,” *Infantry Magazine* (Winter 2003): 8.

<sup>66</sup> Collins, 43; Hershman, “The Planning and Execution,” 11; Dougherty.

<sup>67</sup> U.S. Special Operations Command, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), xii.

<sup>69</sup> Arrana-Barradas, “Bashur or Bust”

<sup>70</sup> Krump, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-6; Warren and Barclay, 14; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 229-230; O’Neal, et al. 13-15; Collins, 46; Hershman, “Employment of the C-17,” 7; Krump, 6; Warren and Barclay, 14; Ross, 9. Collins, 44; Hershman, “The Planning and Execution” 11.

<sup>72</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), xii.

<sup>73</sup> Tunnell, 7, 15-17.

<sup>74</sup> Warren and Morrissey, 8; Brown, 55; Arana-Barradas, “Airlift Takes Toll on Bashur Airfield”; CNN; Warren and Barclay, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Bell and Galvin, 98-99; Krump, 6; Collins, 46; Ross, 10. As the Immediate Ready Force (IRF), TF 1-63 AR contained a battalion scout platoon consisting of seven M1025/M1026 High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) with a mixture of mounted M2 .50 caliber machine guns and MK-19 40mm automatic grenade launchers. Seven of these “Humvee” gun trucks arrived in Iraq. The scout platoon took part in the 173rd's brigade assault the southern Kirkuk suburb of Al Huwajah on 19 May 2003. The town was a Ba'ath-party stronghold and the suspected location of Saddam's commander of all northern forces, Izzat Ibrahim Al-Duri. Insurgents ambushed the scout platoon as it conducted a security halt, sustaining one casualty (SPC Billy Barnes) but successfully repelling the vehicular and dismounted attackers and talking the rest of the TF 1-63 onto their location to mop up. Valorous awards for the 1-63 Scouts included 3 ARCOMs and 5 BSMs.

<sup>76</sup> USCENTAF, 15; U.S. Special Operations Command, 124; Krump, 8; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 230; Tunnell, 19.

<sup>77</sup> David Zucchino, “Army Stage-Managed Fall of Hussein Statue,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 2004, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/jul/03/nation/na-statue3>.

<sup>78</sup> *The 173rd Airborne Brigade: Sky Soldiers*, 118.

<sup>79</sup> Purdum, Chapter 12; Neville, 12, 17; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, 250-252.

<sup>80</sup> Ross, 10; Brown, 27; Robert F. Dorr, “Gulf War 20th: Coast Guard Aviators Battled Saddam Hussein’s Oil Spill,” *Defense Media Network*, 13 February 2011, accessed 14 May 2018, <https://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/gulf-war-20th-coast-guard-aviators-battled-saddam-husseins-oil-spill/>; Woods, 98-99.

<sup>81</sup> Tunnell, 19-20.

<sup>82</sup> Keith Reed, “End of the Line,” US Air Force Photos, 14 April 2003, accessed 14 May 2018, <http://www.af.mil/News/Photos/igphoto/2000031887/>; Arana-Barradas, “Airlift Takes Toll on Bashur Airfield.”

<sup>83</sup> Tunnell, x; Bensahel et al., 83 and 87; Gordon and Trainor, Kindle location 8680.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The following chapter analyzes Northern Delay in terms of the evolution of JFE and the integration of airborne, armored, and SOF. The chapter also identifies gaps in current JFE doctrine. In sum, the option to conduct Operation Northern Delay gave flexibility to CFLCC and CFSOCC. The USAF and 173rd Airborne Brigade's operation to seize Bashur Airfield boosted TF Viking's combat power in the face of two full Iraqi Army Corps. Northern Delay also demonstrated to the world that the coalition would enter the fight in Iraq by any means necessary.

The chapter presents, explains, analyzes, and interprets evidence from the case study in support of the four overall research questions: first, the operational significance of Northern Delay; second, lessons learned from integration of the 173rd Airborne brigade into TF Viking; third, lessons learned from the integration of TF 1-63 AR into the 173rd; and fourth, the implications for U.S. military JFE doctrine. The chapter results in the following four findings: innovation at the campaign level, special operations and conventional force integration, airborne and armored force integration, and implications for joint doctrine.

#### Finding One: Innovation at the Campaign Level

As an assault force, airborne forces parachute into the objective area to attack and eliminate armed resistance and secure designated objectives. Airborne forces may also be employed from a lodgment in additional joint combat operations. Airborne forces offer the JFC an immediate forcible entry option since they can be launched directly from the continental United States (CONUS) without the delays

associated with acquiring intermediate staging bases (ISBs) or re-positioning of sea-based forces.<sup>1</sup>

The 173rd's entry into the war mitigated four dangers to the overall CFLCC ground invasion. The following subsections analyze each in turn. First, the coalition's inability to insert and sustain heavy forces on the northern front. Second, the threat to the invasion of a robust Iraqi Army defense of the Green Line. Third, the threat of an Iraqi Army strike into Kurdistan or early regime collapse resulting in a power vacuum. Fourth, possible delays in the 4th Infantry Division and 101st Airborne Division's entrance into the war.

#### Insertion and Sustainment of Heavy Forces on the Northern Front

Under the heading "Command and Control, Force Employment" JP 3-18 states "[t]he JFC should determine the forcible entry capability or combination of capabilities needed to accomplish the mission." The 173rd's parachute capability was a relevant capability available to CFLCC and CFSOCC. It allowed commanders to hedge the viability of Bashur as a coalition foothold. Colonel Mayville's decision to parachute a third of his force relieved the airstrip of fifteen C-17 sorties and the corresponding stress on the runway surface. Also, every airland and engine shutdown at Bashur heightened the probability of aircraft breakdown. The USAF used innovative approach and departure techniques for airdrop and airland during Northern Delay due to it being the first use of C-17s for strategic brigade insertion. Airdropping almost a thousand troops and their equipment decreased the risk to the mission. The decision also helped manage the operation's logistical bottleneck: the runway.<sup>2</sup>

The airfield's value to the joint force rose significantly when the first C-17 touched down. The integrity of the Bashur runway became critical to the continuing build-up of combat power. It was a single point of failure, as it could crumble under the weight of repeated aircraft loads. The closure of the runway bottleneck would have stranded multiple aircraft on an open airfield in daylight in a combat zone. The airborne force took on nineteen hard-landing injuries (and likely some jostled and smashed equipment) in trade for the relative assurance that the runway remained viable.

The jump also lifted the burden of security on Bashur's logistic occupants. During the build-up of combat power in March and early April, the planes only landed at night and remained on the ground for only forty-five minutes each. The quick turnaround is a testament to the risk assessed by the USAF and mitigated by the security provided by the 173rd. The 173rd stood guard against any enemy targeting of the airplanes as they brought in troops and materiel.

#### Mitigation of the Iraqi Army defense of the Green Line

The mass desertion of Iraqi forces stationed along the Green Line was not a pre-war assumption. Gregory Hooker, longtime lead CENTCOM analyst, states

[we] overestimated potential Iraqi responses. The regime's capacity to defend Iraq far exceeded its actions before and during OIF. Intelligence assessments were modeled not only on the regime's gross capabilities but also on its demonstrated willingness and ability to act in the past. Yet, the regime seemed to operate far below its capacity.<sup>3</sup>

He goes on: “[i]n late February 2003, several weeks prior to the invasion, the Republican Guard's Adnan Mechanized Division was moved from Mosul, in the north, south to the Tikrit area (still north of Baghdad).” The move south came after the Turkish “no” vote. Hooker believes that the Adnan Division's movement was not a “strategic shift” and that

the “overall design of Iraq’s defense did not change.” The unit moved to a flexible position intended to facilitate either the defense of Baghdad or a return to the Green Line. Also, as late as mid-March 2003, an Iraqi Regular Army mechanized division, an infantry division, and the Nebuchadnezzar Republican Guard division defended Kirkuk and its airbase. CENTCOM assessment of pre-war Iraqi defenses presumed they would put up a tough fight.<sup>4</sup>

For full-scale combat operations such as these, JFE operations normally signal the beginning phase of the armed conflict. Northern Delay was different. Pre-invasion estimates showed TF Viking requiring a conventional force to confront the Iraqi defenses along the Green Line and in the cities of Kirkuk, Mosul, and Tikrit. The 173rd’s airdrop/airland operation was the only method to insert conventional troops while the SOF unconventional warfare effort progressed. Had the regular Iraqi Army and Republican Guard divisions chosen to stand and fight, the conventional mass and firepower of the 173rd and TF 1-63 AR would have been necessary. The paratroopers and the tankers would have been the vanguard for an even larger influx of combat forces via the LOC from Europe to Bashur. Fortunately, TF Viking’s partnership with the Peshmerga and leveraging of air power proved adequate before conventional troops were needed to press the fight. The 1<sup>st</sup> AD and the 1<sup>st</sup> ID stood ready in Europe to join the fight in the north if needed, but were not called upon until almost a year into “post-major combat operations” phase of the war. The 173rd and TF 1-63 AR assumed responsibility for stability operations instead, taking the lead after the 1 May 2003 announcement of the end of major combat operations.

## Mitigation of the power vacuum in northern Iraq

Pre-war, CENTCOM's intelligence analysis determined that pre-emptive strike into Kurdistan was highly probable. Saddam never attacked, though. This was despite his murderous history in the region and a relatively strong position along the Green Line. He had gone on the offensive before without retaliation from his neighbors or the West. Hooker postulates that Saddam wished to keep good faith with Turkey. Turkish parliament gave him a glimmer of confidence in its vote to disallow U.S. ground forces. Saddam looked for evidence to support his default position: that the coalition would give up and go home and his forces would need to conduct steady-state operations. Saddam took the wrong lesson away from Desert Storm. He determined that the United States was weak because it had not continued to Baghdad. Saddam feared an internal coup, Kurdish separatism, and regional threats from his neighbors more than he feared the United States. A dictator's stubborn ignorance of the motivations of his enemies, though, is no reliable basis for pre-war contingency planning. The coalition rightly planned to confront a mechanized, dug-in defense force.<sup>5</sup>

In hindsight, Saddam would have been well-served to strike early and consolidate power in the north. His regime could have lasted longer if only because of the ensuing chaos. Also, there was a real possibility that Kurdish factions would squabble over power in the north. TF Viking not only defeated Saddam's conventional forces in the north but also kept the Peshmerga focused on regime change and not intertribal warfare and power grabs. The SF pointed to the presence of the 173rd and TF 1-63 AR as a promise to the Kurds that the north would not become a vacuum. Army public relations ensured that CNN.com posted its first story about Northern Delay at 5:27 a.m. on 27 March. Lady

Emma Sky, Colonel Mayville's diplomatic counterpart for his subsequent year in Kirkuk, states "[KDP leader] Masoud Barzani came to meet Colonel Mayville on the airfield, greeting him as a liberator. The Kurds had realized that this time the Americans were serious about removing Saddam."<sup>6</sup>

The nighttime demonstration of joint forcible entry by the 173rd was a logistical necessity and was a military deception and public relations operation for two reasons. First, a C-17-capable airfield, secured and ready to receive heavy forces, was key to coalition plans. Second, the jump demonstrated that northern Iraq would be controlled by the coalition until a new government was in place. The overnight entrance of the 173rd showed that the coalition was committed to maintaining the integrity of Iraq in the face of territorial designs by all regional players. The subsequent airland of TF 1-63 showed that the coalition would, at will, insert heavy armor into the fight.

#### Mitigation of the 4th Infantry and 101st Airborne Divisions' late entrance

The air bridge from Kurdistan to Europe was essential to sustain conventional operations on the northern front. Northern Delay bolstered TF Viking's fighting capacity and established a logistics node to flow heavy forces into northern Iraq. The 4th Infantry and 101st Airborne Divisions could have been delayed weeks or months in getting to Tikrit and Mosul. Northern Delay and Airborne Dragon leveraged the USAF's strategic lift assets to strengthen the SOF effort in the north with an airborne brigade and an armored battalion task force. Bashur Airfield proved a viable airhead into which the joint force could have inserted a mechanized brigade or division to make up for the 4th or 101st.

Northern Delay set the stage for Operation Airborne Dragon, the first combat airland of an M-1 tank-based battalion task force. Airborne Dragon showed the evolution of JFE operations. It was the culmination of years of preparation. The USAF began practicing C-17 insertion of tanks into austere environments only eight years prior. Along with Team Tank's insertion to support TF 20 in western Iraq, Airborne Dragon was the logical next step in the evolution of USAF-Army joint forcible entry.<sup>7</sup>

#### Finding Two: Special Operations and Conventional Force Integration

In some cases, SOF will support the entry of conventional forces (CF), but CF may be used to seize a lodgment for support of special operations missions. The forcible entry operation may include linkup and exploitation by ground maneuver from a separate location. Sustainment considerations may drive the requirement for a combination of capabilities and linkup requirements.<sup>8</sup>

CFSOCC, TF Viking, and the 173rd demonstrated evolution in the integration of SOF and conventional forces. The Army's official history, *On Point*, states that "conventional units to the operational control of SOF units" was a "watershed" moment. Conventional commanders are used to controlling small SOF elements at the operational level. The traditional order was reversed for Northern Delay. Joint doctrine says little about SOF in command of an entire JFE operation, particularly a complex conventional airdrop/airland operation. The overall success of Northern Delay belies the fact that the units involved did not rehearse the invasion together. Flexibility in the use of insertion methods and the ability to operate in austere environments were two traits that bound the airborne, USAF, and SOF units together on the northern front.<sup>9</sup>

The Army airborne community's relationship with the Air Force and with SOF is that of integrator. The 173rd's heightened readiness status (it was globally deployable in

ninety-six hours) provided flexibility for CFLCC and CFSOCC as they moved rapidly between invasion plans for northern Iraq. The brigade first planned to occupy an intermediate staging base alongside SOF and 4th ID and invade through Turkey. When diplomacy failed and the plan changed, the 173rd was well situated to pivot to direct insertion via strategic airlift. Its airborne designation helped to convince neighboring countries of its “SOF” status in negotiations for overflight rights. The plan moved from a United Kingdom corps-led land invasion, to a U.S. Army mechanized division operation, to a hybrid of SOF, Peshmerga, coalition air power, and the 173rd. In the campaign’s final task organization, the 173rd played the role of integrator between SOF and follow-on conventional forces, connecting TF Viking with the logistical capabilities of USAREUR and ARFOR-T.

To support TF Viking’s efforts, Colonel Mayville had a direct line (through SETAF) to USAREUR and the logistical connective tissue within ARFOR-T. The idea of a large-scale conventional ground invasion in the north was very much in play during the war’s first days. In the face of stiffer Iraqi resistance, TF Viking relied on the 173rd’s logistical relationships with the 86th CRG, 501st FSB, and the IRTF to ensure follow-on forces were inserted and supported correctly. Neither CFSOCC nor CJSOTF-N had the same type of relationship with those conventional units to request additional ammunition, supplies, or to incorporate their follow-on forces. Likewise, there was no coordinating general officer headquarters in northern Iraq.

The Turkish decision to disallow the 4th ID left the northern front without a direct general officer commanding presence. EUCOM withheld the division-equivalent SETAF for tasking as Joint Task Force Liberia in July 2003. Brigadier General Harrell of

CFSOCC was dual-hatted as SOCCENT commander. He was busy overseeing efforts in western and southern Iraq and in Afghanistan. EUCOM and CFSOCC trusted the two colonels, Cleveland and Mayville, to work things out themselves. The lack of rank separation between supporting and supported commanders was not unusual in the SOF community (the 75th Ranger Regimental commander supported his special mission unit counterpart, also a colonel, in TF 20), but was unusual for conventional forces. Had a general officer been assigned to the northern front, he might have found himself juggling different visions from 173rd and 10th SF Group for the northern front. The peer relationship between Mayville and Cleveland forced the two professionals to merge their logistic, intelligence, and maneuver warfighting functions.

Colonel Mayville was an infantryman with significant time served in the special operations community. Then-second lieutenant Mayville was assigned to 1st Ranger Battalion right out of the Officer Basic Course, having completed the Ranger course as a West Point cadet. A direct assignment was highly unusual for an officer with no prior enlisted Ranger service. Mayville's subsequent special operations experience included a tour as the 75th Ranger Regiment executive officer and as chief of plans and training for Joint Special Operations Command. Colonel Cleveland was relatively senior to Mayville. He was older, had more "time in grade," and four more years in service than Mayville. Nonetheless, the 173rd and 10th Group demonstrated professionalism throughout the ranks in managing the command relationship.

Before the combat jump, Mayville integrated his 74th LRSD into TF Viking. This was in accordance with joint doctrine, which states, "[w]hen conducting forcible entry operations into an area where SOF are already employed, it is imperative that both

conventional and special operations are synchronized, coordinated, and deconflicted throughout the operation.” The Pathfinders linked up with 10th Group in Constanta, Romania, infiltrated in AFSOC MC-130s alongside ODAs during Operation Ugly Baby, and conducted their drop zone survey alongside the Green Berets and Peshmerga. Operation Northern Delay was, in effect, a nighttime passage of lines between SF, Peshmerga, and U.S. airborne forces. Airfield security for a conventional mass tactical jump is not a normal SF task. True to their philosophy of “by, with, and through,” the ODAs accomplished this with the Peshmerga in support of the 173rd’s jump. The lack of any recorded instance of friendly fire is a testament to the successful signals, markings and communications work of the SF and Kurds.<sup>10</sup>

When fully closed on Bashur, the presence of the 173rd allowed 10th Group to focus on its core competency: managing relationships between indigenous warlords and taking the fight to the enemy alongside the Peshmerga. The Kurdish factions were a powder keg, made combustible by Turkish and Iranian designs on the power vacuum in the North. There is no record of pushback on Mayville’s part toward the task organization. It was clear by the time the 173rd hit the ground that 10th Group and its ODAs, already embedded with the Peshmerga, were better suited to lead the initial offensive. Mayville focused on massing his combat power and on preparing to take and manage the city of Kirkuk and its oilfields. The subsequent successful year-long deployment of the 173rd in the region is testament to that focus and preparation.

In support of the northern front, the 173rd’s immediate availability to act as route security for ground convoys from Turkey and to respond to a power vacuum in Kirkuk were net benefits. The sustained presence of the 173rd required a robust supply line to

Europe, but also alleviated 10th Group of responsibility for LOC security. SF ODAs train to manage the delicate sensibilities of militia commanders. Their optimal use is not airfield security, convoy security, and local area security patrolling. These missions are the realm of light and motorized infantry platoons, precisely the force that the 173rd brought. The 173rd lifted 10th Group's long-term logistical burden by opening the air line of communication, taking over airfield security, and assigning maneuver platoons to escort convoys from Turkey. The convoys supplied non-tactical vehicles for the ODAs and re-stocked the FARP for sustained aircraft and vehicle operations.

10th Group ODAs and Peshmerga, enjoying overhead support from the USAF, were the primary coalition forces engaged in direct ground combat along the Green Line and around Kirkuk. Their courage and competence is covered extensively in Linda Robinson's *Masters of Chaos* and *One Hundred Victories*. The 173rd was a follow-on force and integrator to ensure sustained landpower success. This is borne out by commanders' decision to allow 10th SF Group to re-deploy and to keep the 173rd in the theater for a year-long deployment under the 4th ID. Alongside conventional units across Iraq, the 173rd took responsibility to stabilize Kirkuk, secure its oilfields, and to train local police, revive the economy, and settle disputes amongst the populace.<sup>11</sup>

### Finding Three: Airborne and Armored Force Integration

Establishing the . . . immediate ready forces may have been perceived as cosmetic, but not after they were drilled routinely in emergency readiness exercises that deployed them from Germany and Italy to the Balkans, Hungary, Morocco, Poland, and Tunisia. Visible demonstration of capability to respond rapidly to crises throughout the AOR is an important instrument of strategic influence.<sup>12</sup>

Integration of the IRTF with the 173rd signaled an evolution in the relationship between airborne and armored forces. The process began with the near-simultaneous ramping up of the 173rd and IRTF in the late 1990s. In the wake of the Army's Kosovo mission, and after nearly a decade of post-Cold War drawdown in Europe, USAREUR sought to fill capability gaps. The command determined that heavy or medium forces were necessary for Europe/Middle Eastern contingencies and its mechanized divisions lacked rapid deployment capability.

The Army's airborne infantry and armor communities are notoriously at odds, a rivalry harkening back to the historical divide between foot soldier and cavalryman. The operational difference is marked by the airborne community's emphasis on the individual paratrooper's initiative versus the armored community's focus on vehicle and crew readiness. The airborne community has an expeditionary attitude while tankers take a deliberate approach with emphasis on logistical expertise. Both approaches are lethal to the enemy in the right circumstances.

Integration ebbs and flows between the two Army combat arms branches. The 82nd Airborne Division at one time contained a battalion of the 73rd Armored Regiment equipped with parachute-capable M551 Sheridan light tanks. The capability to fight paratroopers and armored vehicles next to each other on the drop zone died along with the Sheridan in the mid-1990s. At the time of Northern Delay, the Army was transforming into sequestered light, airborne, Stryker, and heavy brigade combat team locations.

Rapid armored force deployment required a training relationship with the USAF modeled after that of the airborne community. USAREUR set the conditions for the

success of Operation Airborne Dragon by establishing the IRTF training rotation and dedicating warehouse space and building relationships with Air Force aircrews at the Ramstein Deployment Processing Center.

In the case of Airborne Dragon, TF 1-63 AR worked closely with its Air Force and Army airborne counterparts. The tank battalion accomplished a feat for which it was not designed: combat airland via cargo jet aircraft. Within seventy-two hours of the battalion commander's vehicle pulling off the C-17 ramp at Bashur, the armored force helped secure the major Iraqi city of Kirkuk. Had the armored task force arrived earlier, it could have supported TF Viking in the battle at Debecka Ridge. As it was, the sequence of events of the deployment did not allow for significant integration of the armored vehicles into SF operations.

TF Viking did not subordinate 1-63 AR to its headquarters. Instead, the 173rd tactically controlled the tank task force. The authors of *Decisive War, Elusive Peace* argue that CFSOCC planners resented the 173rd's presence, specifically the IRTF. This attitude was logical, as the logistically-light paradigm of SOF is at odds with the substantial sustainment needs of a conventional force. However, higher level commanders' vision for success in the north looked further out in time and space. In modern war, the principle of mass is best leveraged with the sheer numbers inside a conventional force. Massing on the enemy requires robust logistic and armored vehicle capabilities. TF Viking rightly the two conventional forces together.

The character of the fight on the northern front looked, pre-war, like it would turn into a clash of mechanized forces. Had the two Iraqi corps on the Green Line chosen to stand and fight, or to attack into Kurdistan, TF Viking would have needed a substantial

cache of petroleum, ammunition, and other supplies. It would have needed to sustain the heavy coalition force presaged by the IRTF. This force would have been airlifted from Europe into Bashur, or driven north from Kuwait. As it happened, the Iraqi defenses melted away in the face of coalition airpower. This was a relatively surprising outcome.

The exact reasons for the Turkish parliament's vote against allowing the ground invasion are unknown. However, Turkish fears of a post-invasion power vacuum in Kurdistan were not substantiated. The Vikings, the Herd, the Dragons, and the Peshmerga filled the vacuum with distinction until the 4th Infantry and 101st Airborne Divisions arrived.

#### Finding Four: Implications for Joint Doctrine

Joint forcible entry doctrine is purposely vague to allow flexibility for the services to apply their individual techniques and methods. The lessons of Northern Delay, as the last use of strategic brigade airdrop in combat, are nonetheless applicable joint doctrine. Suggested augmentation to doctrine includes: an additional combat vignette, additional language on special operations-conventional force integration, and additional language on forcible entry capabilities and airborne and air assault operations.

#### Combat Vignettes

JP 3-18 states “[a]lthough forcible entry is conducted with the expectation and due preparation for armed opposition, prudent commanders have always sought to conduct such operations in a manner that avoids enemy defenses to the greatest extent possible.” To illustrate, the JP uses the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit's November 2001 amphibious assault on Camp Rhino in southern Afghanistan. The Marines moved over

the course of forty-eight hours from ships in the Indian Ocean over 400 miles via helicopter, hitting several FARPS in Pakistan. Similarly, the 173rd flew over 1,800 miles from Italy to Iraq via C-17, over countries that would not allow ground troops, in less than five hours to parachute into combat. Airfields in both circumstances were already secured by SOF. The 173<sup>rd</sup>, like the 15<sup>th</sup> MEU, accomplished a complex, high-risk JFE operation. The latter used Navy and Marine Corps assets, the former used Army and USAF assets.<sup>13</sup>

### Special Operations-Conventional Force Integration

Under “Command Relationships for Forcible Entry Operations” the joint publication states:

The airborne task force commander will normally organize the parachute assault force, airlift force, and follow-on airland forces in such a way as to best accomplish the mission based on the concept of operations. . . . Forcible entry operations employing a combination of airborne, air assault, SOF, and AFs (to include MNFs with these capabilities) may be under the command of the JFC or a Service or functional component commander and must be closely coordinated.<sup>14</sup>

This description could be improved by including a hybrid airdrop/airland operation and a SOF-commanded conventional brigade airdrop.

Additionally, JP 3-18’s discussion of Phase I of JFE includes the following:

“Insertion of SOF: Special operations can be vital to shaping or deterrence actions throughout the period preceding the forcible entry. SOF regional expertise and support to JIPOE are often vital in planning and execution.” This paragraph would be helped by adding the possibility of a SOF-led unconventional warfare effort supported by a JFE operation. This effort would be for purposes of military deception, show of force, or conventional troop build-up.<sup>15</sup>

Next, a section on “Supporting Operations” starts with:

Special Operations Forces. Special operations are an integral part of forcible entry operations and these actions and operations are integrated to achieve military objectives. . . . In the execution stages of a forcible entry operation, SOF can seize objectives, interdict targets (especially those that can severely disrupt the assault to open entry points), and conduct other operations to support the main force.<sup>16</sup>

This section could also include the possibility for a conventional force JFE as a supporting operation for SOF.

Finally, the JP states that “reinforcing entry forces must follow the initial entry forces into the AO due to offloading security requirements that must be met prior to their introduction.” Northern Delay and TF 20’s operations in western Iraq show that the line between initial entry and reinforcing forces is blurry at best. Joint doctrine would be better served by taking a wider view of the capability for light, medium, and heavy forces to be part of the initial entry force.<sup>17</sup>

#### Forcible Entry Capabilities and Airborne and Air Assault Operations

Where JP 3-18 states:

Airborne forces may be used as the assault force or used in combination with other capabilities for a forcible entry, or they may conduct follow-on operations from a lodgment . . . Special operations forces (SOF) can execute forcible entries using a combination of fixed-wing, rotary-wing, and tiltrotor aircraft employing airland or airdrop procedures.<sup>18</sup>

and

Airborne forces may be used as the assault force or used in combination with other capabilities for a forcible entry, or they may conduct follow-on operations from a lodgment. As an assault force, airborne forces parachute into the objective area to attack and eliminate armed resistance and secure designated objectives.<sup>19</sup>

it should also add that all types of conventional forces, properly trained to integrate with USAF lift assets, may be used as the assault force. It should add that airland operations are a conventional entry capability, similar to SOF.

Finally, the JP flatly states “Even when multiple LZs are employed, it takes longer to mass forces in the airhead during airland operations than during parachute operations.” As evidenced by the widely scattered drop during Northern Delay, this is not always true. Better verbiage would include the phrase “it may take longer” and the subsequent sentence: “Time to mass forces depends on drop zone width and breadth, weather conditions, and enemy threat, among other factors.”<sup>20</sup>

### Summary

The Northern Delay case study demonstrates the evolution of JFE and the integration of airborne and armored forces and SOF. Evidence from the case study also highlights gaps in current JFE doctrine. The preceding analysis presented findings that argued for: the campaign significance of Northern Delay; lessons learned from integration of the 173rd Airborne brigade into TF Viking; lessons learned from the integration of TF 1-63 AR into the 173rd; and the implications for U.S. military JFE doctrine. The following chapter offers recommendations for improvements to joint doctrine and a way forward for future JFE research.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., viii, ix.

<sup>3</sup> Hooker, xiii. Hooker also states on pages 76-77: Another surprising outcome was the collapse of the Iraqi defense around Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, and the abandonment of the city by regime troops on April 10, 2003. The estimate had concluded that Iraqi units' will to fight could be weakened, but not eliminated, by the combined

effects of coalition airpower, special operations forces, and opposition attacks. Although the Iraqi flight from Kirkuk may have begun as an organized withdrawal, the amount of abandoned equipment suggested a breakdown of military order and force desertion. The experience at Kirkuk raises interesting questions. The intelligence forecast that airpower and oppositionist attacks would not, by themselves, collapse Iraq's military was part of the rationale for attacking Iraq with a large conventional force. The major debate in constructing the plan for OIF had revolved around the size of the force and the potential contribution that airpower, special operations, and oppositionists could make to defeating the regime.... The experience at Kirkuk might suggest that a smaller coalition force with a different composition could have succeeded in toppling the Iraqi military. This conclusion is highly debatable, however. The advance of a large, decisive conventional force in the south probably contributed to the Iraqi perception that defeat was imminent, making the abandonment of Kirkuk much more likely. News of Baghdad's fall the day before regime forces fled Kirkuk must have had a similar effect.

<sup>4</sup> Hooker, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>6</sup> CNN; Sky, 76.

<sup>7</sup> The USAF official history of the C-17 states:” during the May 1995 readiness review, a Charleston crew delivered an Abrams M1A1 tank to an unimproved desert surface runway at Bicycle Lake Army Airfield. . . . With its engines running, Army and Air Force personnel quickly unloaded the tank, and the C-17 lifted off again 30 minutes later . . . Brigadier General J. B. Burns, 24th Infantry Division Commander, quipped, “We could use 100 more of those babies.” U.S. Air Force, 173.

<sup>8</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-9.

<sup>9</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, xxvi.

<sup>10</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), II-5.

<sup>11</sup> The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) took on responsibility for the northern quadrant of Iraq, north of the old Green Line.

<sup>12</sup> Bell and Galvin, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-18 (2017), I-12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ix-x.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., IV-3

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., IV-4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., I-10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., A-5.

<sup>21</sup> Bell and Galvin, 98.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

Overall, JFE capabilities allow the commander to determine the domains in which he wants to enter the fight. Airborne and airland assault are forcible entry capabilities offered by the joint Army-Air Force-SOF team. Like the Navy and Marine Corps' amphibious assault capability, airborne and airland assault provide flexibility for the joint force commander. U.S. Army airborne forces like the 173rd Airborne Brigade train for rapid deployment and to integrate into combined and joint formations to conduct JFE.

The following chapter presents evidence-based conclusions about the 173rd's Operation Northern Delay in March 2003. The chapter also presents recommendations for JFE doctrine. In sum, the 173rd Airborne Brigade's hybrid airdrop/airland operation to enter OIF was an evolution in JFE. Northern Delay was innovative in the use of airdrop/airland operations at the campaign level, in the integration of SOF and conventional forces, and in the integration of airborne and armored forces. Lessons learned from Northern Delay, the U.S. military's last strategic brigade airdrop, deserve incorporation into joint doctrine.

Conclusions from the analysis of the Operation Northern Delay JFE case study include:

1. At the campaign level, Army airborne and SOF are a viable alternative when vehicular forces are denied operational access
2. Army airborne forces are an integrator between the conventional force, the USAF, and SOF, particularly in austere operational environments

3. Army airborne and armored forces can combine to integrate with the USAF and with SOF in the conduct of JFE, as early as initial entry (versus only during follow-on operations)

Recommendations for joint forcible entry doctrine include:

1. Use of Operation Northern Delay as a vignette in Joint Publication 3-18, highlighting its campaign level effects, SOF-CF integration, and airborne-armored force integration
2. Add conventional hybrid airdrop/airland operations as a specific JFE capability
3. Highlight conventional airborne/airland assault as a military deception operation in support of a SOF unconventional warfare effort
4. Ensure conventional airborne and armored airdrop/airland operations are suggested as supporting operations for SOF, mirroring the current language suggesting SOF as a supporting operation for conventional JFE
5. Add language explaining the opportunities and risks associated with inserting vehicular (tank, fighting vehicle, Stryker, etc.) units during the initial entry phase vice only as follow-on forces
6. Clarify the opportunities and risks associated with airdrop versus airland assault operations, including the variations in entry force assembly times due to weather, geography, permissive versus non-permissive operational environment, and airfield runway integrity

## Summary of Analysis

### Innovation at the Campaign Level

Operation Northern Delay allowed CFSOCC to augment Task Force Viking with an initial entry conventional brigade, closely followed by an armored task force. TF Viking's unconventional warfare effort in northern Iraq proved adequate to defeat the Iraqi defenses along the Green Line but was by no means a guaranteed victory. The entrance of the 173rd Airborne Brigade and TF 1-63 AR demonstrated coalition resolve to the entire region, helped fix the Iraqi defenses in place before they melted away, and presaged the ability to insert a larger conventional force. The 173rd conducted an unrehearsed airdrop/airland operation with the USAF's new C-17 fleet. Northern Delay facilitated seizure of Bashur Airfield as a critical joint logistics node in northern Iraq during the first week of the invasion. If the Iraqi forces along the Green Line had attacked into Kurdistan, a larger coalition mechanized force, up to division size, would have been a welcome addition on the northern front. Bashur Airfield would have been the aerial point of debarkation for such a force, with the 173<sup>rd</sup> and 1-63 AR as its vanguard.

### Special Operations and Conventional Forces Integration

Task Force Viking and the 173rd demonstrated integrated SOF and CF in planning, preparation, and execution of Northern Delay and follow-on operations. The 173rd shifted from a plan to support 4th ID's conventional invasion to a plan to support 10th Special Forces' unconventional warfare effort. The subordination of an infantry O-6 to a SF O-6 was unusual but necessary given the nature of economy-of-force effort in the north. The 173rd successfully integrated its LRSD, maneuver platoons, and artillery

assets to ensure success of the airdrop/airland operation and the follow-on fight for northern Iraq.

### Airborne and Armored Forces Integration

The 173rd Airborne Brigade and TF 1-63 AR, the USAREUR IRTF, demonstrated innovation in the integration of armored forces into an airland JFE operation. The integration of the IRTF into a rapid deployment operation began years prior after the U.S. Army's review of operations in Kosovo. Prioritized resources from the Army service component command and joint training between the Air Force and the IRTF were key to the success of Operation Airborne Dragon. Had the IRTF trained closely with the 173rd prior to deployment it might have arrived in northern Iraq even earlier to participate in TF Viking's combat operations.

### Significance of Conclusions

There currently exists no standing format for the integration of campaign-level command headquarters of airborne and SOF units in the context of Joint Forcible Entry. 18th Airborne Corps and the 82nd Airborne Division conduct JFE training exercises either unilaterally or with attached SOF units at the Operational Detachment-Alpha - level. Separate airborne brigades (4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division and the 173rd Airborne Brigade) do not have geographically co-located SOF units. Integration in training is ad hoc or as part of annual joint exercises such as Talisman Saber in the Pacific or Atlantic Resolve in Europe. Army Forces Command and Special Operations Command should consider the benefits of regular training exercises to integrate airborne and SOF unit headquarters at the campaign level.

There also exists no standing format for the integration of armor with airborne forces at the campaign level. Stryker units participate in 75th Ranger Regiment and 18th Airborne Corps JFE training exercises, but at the company-level and below. Heavy and Stryker brigade combat teams are not co-located on posts with airborne brigade combat teams to maximize training interoperability. Only two of the Army's three active duty brigade-sized training centers can accommodate a hybrid heavy-light force. Of those two, only one is in the continental United States (the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California). Army Forces Command and Special Operations Command should consider the benefits of regular training exercises to integrate armored and airborne unit headquarters at the campaign level.

Finally, the U.S. currently faces two possible theaters of large-scale conflict: the Korean peninsula and NATO's eastern border. In a time of conflict, force flow to the point of entry will present a logistical challenge. Initial forces may require forcible entry in some form of hybrid task organization. Smooth integration of pre-positioned SOF with initial entry conventional forces will be necessary. All the geographic component commands, the Air Force, and the Army should consider the benefits of regular training exercises to integrate SOF, airborne, armor, and necessary logistical flow into an austere environment at the campaign level.

### Unanswered Questions

The following is a list of unanswered questions deriving from the Northern Delay case study that deserve further inquiry at the dissertation level:

1. Why did the Iraqi forces along the Green Line not put up more of a fight?

2. Why did more Iraqi units not leave the north and help with the defense of Baghdad?
3. Why was there not a greater effort to defend against U.S. JFE in the north when the airfields were being publicly reconnoitered?
4. Why did the Turks refuse to let the 4th ID invade, knowing that the U.S. would pay \$20 billion and give the Turks a greater say in the future of Kurdistan?
5. What were the classified considerations of commanders during SOF JFE operations in western Iraq in the early days of the invasion?
6. What would have been the nature of the fight in northern Iraq if the U.S. had not conducted Operations Southern and Northern Watch to decimate the Iraqi air force during the 1990s?

### Final Thoughts

U.S. military JFE evolved during the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Lessons from the experience of the joint force should be analyzed and codified. Special operations, airborne, and armored forces partnered with the Air Force's newest fleet of aircraft to conduct daring, untested operations in hostile territory. Access to open source information directed that this case study center on Operation Northern Delay and the 173rd Airborne Brigade. When SOF materials from OIF are declassified they will make for fruitful additional case studies. The XVIII Airborne Corps (the DOD proponent for airborne operations) and USASOC should jointly take the lead in analyzing and codifying lessons learned.

Joint doctrine should account for Northern Delay's example of hybrid and combined operations: airdrop-airland, SOF-CF, and airborne-armored. As our enemies

increase their ability to deny access to future operational areas we should continue to refine and improve our joint and combined arms forcible entry capabilities. Our future joint force commanders will require options to present the enemy with multiple dilemmas, just as the invasion force demonstrated in Iraq in 2003.

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