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AIR ASSAULT 101

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Publisher: Shrapnel Games
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AIR ASSAULT 101

Air Assault Task Force can be unforgiving to the beginning player (or the advanced player, for that matter). We have striven to make AATF the most realistic simulation of air assault combat ever created. As such, the things that will get you killed in combat will probably get you killed in AATF, too.

Don't feel bad. U.S. Army officers train their whole life to fight wars and still get their butts kicked by the OPFOR at places like the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Fighting wars is hard stuff.

What we are going to try to do now is give you a brief, nitty-gritty, how-to on one of the most complex, difficult operations a US Army infantry battalion does: the air assault. Before we start, there are a few general concepts that you have to keep in mind when fighting in AATF. Don't worry, we are not about to bore you to tears with an essay on the principles of war. Whole books and manuals have been written on these, and they can do a lot better job than we can. But two principles must be mastered if you are going to fight and win in AATF.

SYNCHRONIZATION

In warfighting, this word is best defined as "Getting all the pieces working together at the same time". If you have played any of the scenarios yet, you see the enemy do this. Your infantry platoon is wandering through the woods, from the LZ to the objective. You hit a minefield. Suddenly, his infantry teams "light you up" with direct fire. Artillery or mortars begin falling on your head. Damn! Restart!

You have to learn to do the same thing to him. It's harder to do when you are in the offense. Artillery missions take a few minutes to begin impacting. Fixed-wing aircraft take as long as fifteen minutes to reach the target area. Your attack and carry helicopters travel at different speeds. Your infantry moves very slow once it is on the ground. And you have to get eyes (recon, UAV, air) deep enough so that you can observe for your indirect fire systems.

If you can master this, you will (almost) always win.

MASS

This is only subtly different from synchronization, and some will argue that it is the same thing. The real difference between the two is focus. Synchronization is useless if you are doing everything at once, but you are doing it all over the map. You have to focus your assets at the decisive point on the battlefield.

This is best illustrated by a bad example. You are beginning your air assault and your attack aviation detects something on one LZ. You go to investigate. You begin prepping the objective with artillery. Your carry helicopters move to another LZ, finding it "hot" (occupied by enemy, and their not too happy). You start moving your close air support, but it will take 15 minutes for it to arrive on the battlefield. You finally get your infantry on the ground and they run into an obstacle and start taking fire from an enemy machine gun. &\$%^@# Time to hit Restart!

In this article, we are going to talk about how to apply these two concepts to an air assault. For this discussion we are going to use the scenario, JRTC 01: Airfield Seizure (Tutorial), from Air Assault Task Force. This scenario is included in the demo, which is available here.

Air Assault Task Force is available from Shrapnel Games. To check out the website, go here. There is also a ProSIM Company Air Assault Task Force page here.

The only way to really get this stuff down, though, is practice. With time you will get an intuitive feel for how long things take to happen and when certain events have to be initiated and where. We have also included FM 90-4: Air Assault Operations on the game CD. This is the definitive work on this subject, and the source for the following discussion.

What is an air assault? According to the FM 90-4: Air Assault Operations...

Air assault operations are those in which assault forces (combat, combat support, and combat service support), using firepower, mobility, and total integration of helicopter assets, maneuver on the battlefield under the control of the ground or air maneuver commander to engage and destroy enemy forces or to seize and hold key terrain.

OK. That didn't help much. Perhaps it is better to break it down into its essential components. To be an air assault, an operation must...

- Be offensive (as opposed to defensive)
Integrate helicopters and ground combat forces
Destroy the enemy and/or seize terrain

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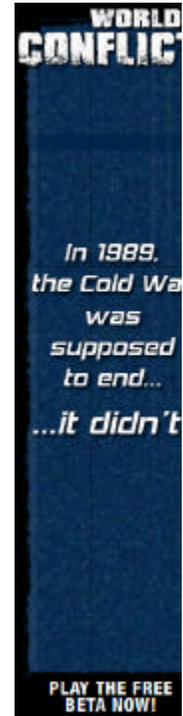
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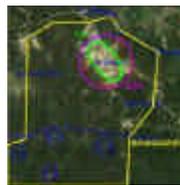


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In the scenario, this looks as follows:



The FM 90-4: Air Assault Operations advises that you should plan an air assault in reverse order, with five phases.

- The ground tactical plan
- The landing plan
- The air movement plan
- The loading plan
- The staging plan

The ground tactical plan is, at its heart, an attack. We have also included the FM 3-90: Tactics on the CD. This manual says:

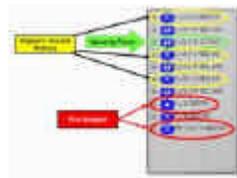
An attack is an offensive operation that destroys or defeats enemy forces, seizes and secures terrain, or both.

According to this manual, the control measures for an attack include...

- Boundaries. Lines you can't go outside.
- A line of departure (LD). This is the "start line" for your attack. In an air assault, this will be your LZ.
- An objective (OBJ). This is the ground you want to seize or secure. In an air assault, it might be the LZ as well.

An attack force, according to this manual should be organized with the following subordinate forces.

- Security forces. This force secures the ground around the line of departure (LD). In an air assault, this means the security force secures your LZ.
- Main body
  - Support force. This force places suppressive fires on the objective.
  - Breach force. This force breaches any obstacles on the objective.
  - Assault force. This force moves through the breach and kills the enemy on the other side.
  - Fire support. This is all of the artillery, attack aviation, and close air support that will suppress the enemy, provide smoke, and kill enemy in support of the attack.
- Reserve. This is the force that will
- Sustainment forces



According to the S-2 (intel officer), there are no obstacles on the objective (there are no obstacles drawn on the enemy SITTEMP, the S-2's best guess as to what the enemy will do). We will take the S-2's word for it, so we won't need a breach force. There are three enemy positions, and we have three platoons. We have only one and a half hours to take the LZ EASTWOOD, so we will have to take all of the enemy positions at once. So we will have each platoon take one enemy position, providing its own support and assault force. So our task organization will look like this.

We are going to accept risk by not having a reserve force, because a) we don't have a lot of forces to do this attack and b) we have no vehicles, so we don't really have the ability to rapidly move a reserve force to react to a threat. In another situation, M966 TOW HMMWVs would be an ideal choice for a reserve.

Additionally, once we have air assaulted the entire battalion into the LZ, we will not need a security force. For this reason, we will begin using the attack helicopter platoon (1 / D / 2-17 CAV) as a fire support asset.

Our actual ground plan will be in three phases.

- In Phase I, we will move 1 / D / 2-17 CAV to LZ EASTWOOD. We will use them to a) identify forces on the LZ for artillery fire, b) attack enemy on the LZ to secure it for the air assault, and c) confirm the S-2s SITTEMP by identifying enemy positions. This phase ends when all of the enemy on the airfield (in the open) are destroyed. An LZ must be clear of enemy before you land vulnerable troop carrier helos, or they will be destroyed.
- In Phase II, we will air assault the three platoons and the mortars onto the LZ. The attack helicopter platoon will become fire

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support for the landing. This phase is the "air movement plan" and the "landing plan." We will move the carry helos off of the LZ as soon as their cargo is unloaded. We will probably have to make a second trip with one of the platoons to get the whole company on the LZ (see "The loading plan," below). This phase ends with the whole infantry company on the LZ and the aircraft safely back at the PZs.

- Finally, in Phase III, with the air movement complete, the three platoons will attack to seize the three enemy battle positions. This phase, Phase III, is the "ground tactical plan." This phase ends with the enemy BPs (battle positions) destroyed.

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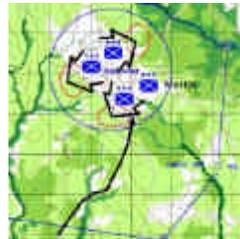
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The picture below shows this graphically. The black arrow shows the route for the air movement (see "The air movement plan," below). Both the attack helicopter platoon and the actual air assault force will follow this route (this is always a good idea so that the attack platoon clears the route for the more vulnerable troop carrier helos) in Phase I and II respectively. The "axes of advance" (the big arrows from the infantry platoons to the enemy battle positions) shows the three simultaneous attacks that will take place in Phase III.

The landing plan becomes simple, now (that's why we plan in reverse). The figure shows where we want our platoons to start Phase III, so this is where we need to deposit them in our air assault. This is where our helicopter platoons will have to land and disgorge their cargo.



The air movement plan bears a little examination. Again, the black line shows the air route we will use for the movement, both of the attack helos (Phase I) and the carry helos (Phase II). Why did we choose this route? If you look at this terrain in the game, you will see that this line follows a road. Roads are clear of trees, with high trees on either side. If we follow the road at a low enough altitude, the high trees on either side will provide cover and concealment, making it possible for us to reach the LZ undetected.

In game terms, the way we do this is to put all of the helicopter platoons in a None formation, plan a route for one of the platoons along this path, copy the path, and then use Paste In Line to paste the path, exactly, to each of the other platoons. This will cause the helos to follow, "ducks in a row" along the same path to the objective. A few cautions using this method:

- Make sure you give the Stop order to all of the carry helo platoons after pasting the path. We don't want them to start moving until the attack helos have cleared the path.
- Make sure you change the formation for all of the platoons as they hit the LZ. You want the attack helos spread out and scanning their sectors to do their job (Wedge is a good formation). You want the carry helos spread out when they land, so they are less vulnerable to mortar fire (Column is a great formation for this).

(See Chapter Two: How To... of the AATF User's Manual for more information on planning paths and giving formations to platoons and companies.)

The loading plan may or may not be done for you. In a scenario or two in *Air Assault Task Force*, the aircraft are already loaded. But, for most of the scenarios, you will have to load the aircraft yourself.

When loading the aircraft (see Chapter Two: How To... to see the game mechanics of doing this), you should ask yourself, what do I want to arrive first? Second? Third, etc.? This is how you should load your aircraft. You probably don't have enough aircraft to insert everything in one lift. This is the case in JRTC 01.

Based on our plan, we are moving all of the infantry platoons, including the mortar platoon, onto the LZ. We have not even assigned a task to the company headquarters, so it is not that important. We want the mortars on the LZ as soon as possible, so that they can provide fire support for the attack, but we probably do not want them their first (they are lightly armed and vulnerable). However, you want every aircraft full, on every lift. (Never send an empty helo to the LZ; you are exposing it to fire for no reason, which makes aviators very angry.) So, we will go with the following plan.

- First Lift
  - 1 / A / 4-101 AVN carries 1 / A / 1-502 IN
  - 2 / A / 4-101 AVN carries MTR / A / 1-502 IN and HQ / A / 1-502 IN
  - 3 / A / 4-101 AVN carries 3 / A / 1-502 IN
- Second Lift
  - 1 / A / 4-101 AVN carries 2 / A / 1-502 IN

Note that we are carrying HQ / A / 1-502 IN with the mortar platoon on the first lift, even though we have not really included it in the plan. From a realism perspective, the company commander would travel with the perponderance of his force, which is going on the first lift. From a practical perspective, this is a few more rifles for the fight, and 2 / A / 4-101 AVN will not be filled up simply with the mortar platoon. It can carry the extra unit.

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The staging plan is done for you, before you start the scenario. Your forces are already arrayed when the scenario begins. So, we won't talk a lot about this.

Execution. We obviously do not do execution in reverse order. Since staging is done for us, before the scenario begins, we begin with the loading plan. We load our first lift, just as described above. We also plan the paths, using the method described in the air movement plan, planning the route for the attack aviation and then using Copy and Paste In Line to give the same path to the carry helos (remembering to give the Stop order to our carry helos until we have cleared the LZ). With the aircraft loaded, and the movement planned, we hit Start on the Time Toolbar and begin Phase I.

As soon as we arrive at the LZ, we begin spotting the enemy. We have confirmed the S-2s SITTEMP (situation template), at least concerning the location of the enemy on the southwest BP. We have also spotted an enemy vehicle (a technical) on the airfield. We are going to have to destroy it before we begin the air movement plan. We use the Suppress action with the attack aviation platoon and use the Fire Mission action to plan fire missions for our artillery battery on the enemy positions.



As we destroy the enemy technical, we move forward to the edge of the LZ and spot a second technical. Between hellfires from our AH-64D Apaches and artillery fire, we are able to destroy it as well. A quick sweep of the LZ identifies the other two BPs, exactly where the S-2 predicted they would be, and confirms that there are no more enemy on the airfield. We are ready to begin Phase II and the air movement and landing plan.

Canceling the Stop order for all of the carry helo platoons, we begin the movement of our first lift to the LZ. The platoons begin their movement to the LZ. As they move forward, the role of the attack aviation shifts to suppression, suppressing the southwest BP in order to allow the carry helo platoons to pass. As the platoons arrive at the LZ, we "fine tune" their positions to match the landing plan. When they arrive at the correct position, we use the Dismount order to unload them.



Soon, we have two infantry platoons on the objective, the mortar platoon, and the company headquarters. We begin their movement to their respective battle positions. We send all three helicopter platoons back to the safety of the PZs. One will return with 2nd platoon. The others will standby until the LZ is completely secure.

During this entire phase, we continue to use the attack aviation, the artillery, and the mortars to suppress the enemy BPs, so that they do not influence the landing plan. This phase ends when the entire company is in LZ EASTWOOD, and the carry helo platoons are all back at the PZs.

Phase III has begun in earnest. There are a lot of ways we can proceed. We can use the Assault mission to order each platoon to attack its BP and let the AI run the details. Or, if we prefer, we can manage it our self. To manage it our self, we will need to split the platoons by detaching some teams to be the assault force, while we leave the remaining teams in the platoon, as the support force (you want the support force to be part of the platoon because a platoon can suppress a larger area than four or five detached teams). The support force should probably have all of the MG teams and possibly a few fire teams (MG teams have the M240B and fire teams have the M249 SAW, both of which are good suppressive weapons). The support force in each attack is given the Suppress action and targeted on the enemy BP. The assault force, four detached teams, are give paths that take them through the objective. Mortar, artillery, and attack aviation fires are used on each BP to support each attack (perhaps one for each).

Or, if you prefer, you can simply storm the BP with your whole infantry platoon. It won't win any awards for finesse, and casualties will be high, but if you are running low on time, you may have no choice.

I've killed everything on the objective, but the scenario won't end?!? First, make sure you have killed all of the enemy. Sometimes the enemy will flee to subsequent fighting positions under pressure. You might have to chase them down. Your attack aviation can rapidly sweep and find these "dead-enders."

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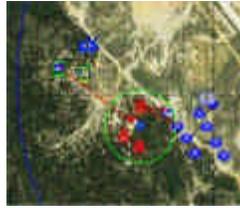
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If your casualties were high during the air assault, you might not have enough combat power on the objective to meet the victory conditions. Try moving your carry helos onto the objective. If that doesn't do it, you might pick up your artillery and move them onto the objective as well (though you will probably run out of time before you can complete this operation. But, if you diligently followed the guidelines in this article, you will probably have no problem meeting the victory conditions with your infantry company alone.

That's it. That is the "thumbail" of what an air assault is all about. Every scenario is different. Some have more or less assets for you to use. Some have different terrain or enemy. Some require you to move from LZs to subsequent objectives. But the planning methodology and the concepts are the same for every air assault. Only the specific METT-TC ( Mission , Enemy, Troops, Terrain, Time, Civillians) conditions change with each scenario. The art of battle command is applying the doctrinal template we have described here to each new situation.

Just remember, mass and synchronization is always key.

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