

THE 'THIRD DIMENSION' THE EVOLUTION OF AIRBORNE FORCES

Man has always sought an advantage in war. As such, the benefit of waging battle from the heavens was always well understood. The ancient Greek warrior Bellerophon, astride his winged horse Pegasus, was but one early example of using the 'third dimension' to gain advantage over an enemy. The benefits of this mode of attack included mobility, psychological dislocation, tactical advantage and surprise. Quite simply, no-one and no-place was ever safe.

The invention of the balloon brought the workings of imagination closer to reality. In 1784, the successful trial in Paris, France, of a hydrogen balloon prompted the famous American, Benjamin Franklin, to pose the rhetorical question, "Where is the Prince, who can afford so to cover his country with troops for its defence, 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?"

These musings were not lost on Napoleon nor his victorious French Army. In March 1794, they established a special formation designated the 'Compagnie d'Aérostiers,' which consisted of four balloons – *l'Entreprenant, Celeste, Hercule and Intrepide* - each with its own permanent crew. In 1803, French planners placed such great faith in their aerial weapon that they contemplated an invasion of England with the assistance of an aerial armada of balloons. They believed that 2,500 of these four-man vehicles, launched prior to a sea invasion, would create chaos if not the complete surrender of England. In the end, the new method of warfare, much like Napoleon's invasion plans, never occurred.

Although the concept of unleashing assault troops from the skies subsequently underwent

a lengthy hiatus, experimentation with balloons and parachutes, and the fascination they engendered, continued. Throughout the 1800s dare-devils, acrobats and circus performers in Europe and North America were lifted up by balloons at outdoor events, such as fairs, and then jumped and floated to the ground by way of crude static line parachutes. Significantly, the military application never disappeared. In the spring of 1889, American balloonist Charles Leroux demonstrated his new parachute harness and technique to a group of senior German officers in Berlin. Leroux jumped from 1000 meters and successfully landed safely in front of the impressed officers. "If one could only steer these things," General Graf von Schlieffen of the Great General Staff commented, "parachutes could provide a new means of exploiting surprise in war, as it would be feasible for a few men to wipe out an enemy headquarters."

Schlieffen's speculation, like that before him, was still premature. However, the military application of parachuting quickly became apparent with the invention of the airplane. In 1912, Captain Albert Berry of the United States Army made the first successful jump from an aircraft in St. Louis. Two years later, William Lewis became the first British parachutist to drop from an airplane. Indeed, during the First World War the parachute, often referred to by its commercial name "Guardian Angel," was used universally by aerial observers to jump to safety when their observation balloons were shot down by fighters. It was only a question of time until the parachute was adopted as emergency equipment for aircraft.

This became the next significant step. It was the use of parachutes by German pilots to escape their stricken aircraft that provided the catalyst for the next great leap forward in airborne history. In the fall of 1918, Colonel William "Billy" Mitchell, the Commander of the United States Army Air Corps in France, after hearing accounts of the use of parachutes by German

pilots, pressed his superiors to get similar equipment for his own aviators. More importantly, it also provided the genesis of an idea that had the potential to revolutionize the concept of warfare on the costly and stagnant European battlefields of the First World War.

On 17 October 1918, Colonel Mitchell proposed that the US Army “assign one of the infantry divisions permanently to the Air Service, preferably the 1st U.S. Infantry Division [Big Red One]; . . . to go over the front in our large airplanes, which would carry ten or fifteen of these soldiers.” His plan emphasized an aerial assault. “We could equip each man with a parachute,” he insisted, “so that when we desired to make a rear attack on the enemy, we could carry these men over the lines and drop them off in parachutes behind the German position.” The innovative plan was accepted. However, Mitchell’s bold scheme was shelved less than a month later when the armistice was announced. Notwithstanding the brilliance of the idea, in reality, the plan was actually premature for its time. Theory and reality do not always coexist. Quite simply, the Allied armies had neither the resources, nor the doctrine, to carry out Mitchell’s bold plan.

The Italians were the next to push the idea of airborne warfare. In 1927, they simultaneously dropped nine men with their equipment and the following year they air-dropped supplies to the stranded crew of the dirigible *Italia* in the North Pole. Shortly thereafter, the Italians established several battalions of parachutists and conducted several mass drops in North Africa in 1929-1930.

The Italian experimentation, however, was quickly dwarfed by a more aggressive and wide sweeping program. It was the Russians who pioneered the modern theory of airborne warfare. Their experimentation and vision advanced the idea to unprecedented heights. The Russian experience in World War I and their subsequent Civil War, left Soviet military commanders with

an understanding of the importance of manoeuver, speed and surprise. Consequently, a belief in aggressive and bold action emerged. They embraced the offensive, mechanization and airborne forces. Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky became key to the development of the avant-garde Soviet military doctrine. "Modern operations," he wrote, "involve the concentration of the forces necessary for an assault and the infliction of continual and uninterrupted strikes by these forces against the opponent throughout an extremely deep area." Airborne forces were viewed as an integral element of this philosophy, namely 'Deep Battle.'

The Soviet concept of Deep Battle envisioned that aviation, airborne, mechanized and motorized formations would be organized to cooperate together, but importantly, to still operate independently of the main force to allow severe penetration of the enemy's operational depth. The Soviet construct was aggressively put into practice. In 1929, a parachute battalion was established. Over the next two years a number of these airborne troops were successfully dropped during large exercises. By the summer of 1933, Soviet doctrine emphasized the requirement for airborne forces to engage in bold manoeuvres to capitalize on the element of surprise and to effect the speedy employment and rapid concentration of force. Significantly, all Soviet field exercises from 1933 onwards included airborne operations.

Two years later an entire battalion was dropped in the Ukraine. Improvements increased exponentially. That same year, during an exercise in Kiev, the Soviets inserted two battalions by parachute to seize an airstrip. They then air-landed 2,300 reinforcements, including sixteen artillery pieces. The next year, they stunned the world when a regiment, totaling in excess of a 1,000 men, was dropped in front of an array of foreign military attachés.

By 1936, Tukhachevsky had conceptually refined the concept of Deep Battle. The 1936

Red Army Field Regulations asserted that “Major units of parachute forces provide an effective means of disrupting the enemy’s command, control and logistics. In conjunction with frontal attack, parachute units may play a decisive part in achieving complete destruction of the enemy on a given thrust line.” But the Soviet developments were quickly lost as a result of Stalin’s purges of his senior military commanders in 1937. As a result, the Soviet airborne program quickly disappeared.

The momentum gained in the evolution of airborne forces, however, was not entirely lost. Experimentation in Germany was already underway. In February 1933, Hermann Göring, the Prussian Minister of the Interior, ordered the formation of a special police parachute unit for internal security operations. They parachuted into suspected communist hideouts with stunning success. In April 1935, the organization was renamed the “General Göring” Regiment, designated a military unit and in October of the same year absorbed into the Luftwaffe. That autumn, the Luftwaffe Chief of Staff, General Walther Wever, successfully persuaded now Air Marshall Göring that the newly formed Regiment should be trained as parachutists. This led to the establishment of the first German parachute battalion and provided the impetus for the creation of a parachute school in Stendal, a year later.

In the autumn of 1937, the first operational parachute company made its debut as a commando type unit during the Wehrmacht manoeuvres in Mecklenburg and they successfully destroyed railway installations and communications in the ‘enemy’ rear area. In June 1938, Göring appointed Major-General Kurt Student as the overall commander of the German airborne forces, designated the 7th Air Division, which included all existing airborne (air-landing) and parachute units, as well as the requisite air transport force. Its first mass drop was conducted on

7 October 1938.

Student, clearly understood the value of his Fallschirmjäger. "Airborne forces," he insisted, "made third dimensional warfare possible in land operations. An adversary could never be sure of a stable front because paratroops could simply jump in and attack it from the rear where and when they decided." He believed that airborne troops could "pounce down and take over before the foe knows what is going on." Student insisted that "the element of surprise and shock action of paratroopers dropping in what was considered a safe area instilled panic in the defender prior to the first shot being fired."

Despite widespread knowledge of the ongoing airborne experimentation, parallel developments in the other major powers were virtually nonexistent. The French had limited their foray into airborne warfare with the establishment, in 1938, of only two airborne companies totaling approximately 300 men. These were subsequently disbanded at the start of World War II and used as normal infantry.

The Americans and the British demonstrated even less interest. Both decided on a conservative approach of study and research - but no concrete action. There existed initially an attitude that the employment of air infantry meant "suicide" missions. Although commanders slowly began to realize the importance of airborne troops, the final acceptance came in the spring of 1940, when German Fallschirmjäger shattered any remaining lethargy that existed in the West by seizing vital terrain in Norway and the Low Countries. Skeptics and non-believers were finally convinced. The German aerial onslaught became the catalyst for action.

And action was quickly taken. The Americans established their test platoon on 26 June 1940. Its inaugural jump was made 16 August, and a month later General George Marshall

ordered the activation at the earliest practical date of the 1st Parachute Battalion. The British, relative latecomers, reacted even quicker than the Americans. By 6 June 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill directed that Britain also develop an airborne capability. Several weeks later he sent a memorandum to the Chiefs of Staff urging them to establish a corps "of parachute troops on a scale of equal to five thousand." But, conservatism, as well as a degree of concern for more pressing matters, such as the defence of the island itself prompted vehement resistance from his military commanders who felt that the utility of airborne troops did not warrant the investment of scarce resources, particularly some of its best soldiers. As such, progress was slow.

However, the successful German airborne invasion of Crete in May 1941, proved to be the final push the Allies needed. Both the Americans and British now committed themselves to building large airborne formations. Ironically, the Germans moved in exactly the opposite direction. The 58 percent casualty rate inflicted in Crete, with one in four Fallschirmjäger actually being killed, prompted Hitler to conclude that the airborne weapon had lost its edge. He believed that the crucial element of surprise so necessary for parachute operations was lost and therefore, directed that no large scale airborne operations would henceforth be undertaken.

But the German decision was inconsequential. The Allies, with their enormous industrial might now propelled the airborne concept to an unsurpassed level. Universally, paratroopers were perceived by the public, government and military establishment to embody offensive spirit and modern warfare. The paratrooper himself was seen as the epitome of the modern fighting man. It seemed that no nation could ignore this advancement in warfare as airborne forces became a defining element of a modern army.

These revelations were not mere doctrinal platitudes. They quickly proved to be fundamental to the Allied way of war. By July 1943, 7,300 paratroopers and glider troops were used as part of Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. Less than a year later, on 5-6 June 1944, 17,000 airborne troops with a dedicated 1,086 aircraft participated in D-Day and were the first troops to puncture *Festung Europa*. And then, on 24 March 1945, the Allies used 21,680 airborne soldiers with approximately 3,000 dedicated aircraft to pierce the Reich itself. And so, the initial German assaults of 1940, encompassing relatively small groups of Fallschirmjäger and nominal numbers of aircraft, triggered a dramatic evolution in warfare. Airborne forces became an integral element of modern armies in the post war period. They provided nations, particularly super powers, with strategic mobility and a rapid power projection capability. In the case of the United States, airborne forces, or more precisely their operational deployment in a crisis, became the embodiment of the national will.