Building upon McRavenâ??s Foundation: Operational and Strategic Principles of Special Air Operations

Description

Editorâ??s note: This article is part of Project Air Power, which explores and advocates for the totality of air, aviation, and space power in the irregular, hybrid, and gray-zone environments. We invite you to contribute to the discussion, explore the difficult questions, and help influence the future of air and space power. Please contact us at https://irregularwarfare.org/tag/air-power/ if you would like to propose an article, podcast, or event.

In 1995, the future commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, William McRaven, published what has become a seminal work for understanding special operations: *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory & Practice*. Using a series of case studies to demonstrate key principles, McRaven offered a theory of special operations that has served as essential guidelines for a generation. In essence, his theory states that â??Special operations forces gain relative superiority over superior forces when they have a simple plan, carefully concealed, realistically rehearsed, and executed with surprise, speed, and purpose.â?•

Building on the groundwork laid by McRaven, this article aims to delve deeper into the strategic and operational layers that complement McRavenâ??s foundational principles. These additional principles serve to enhance the effectiveness of special air operations and ensure that they not only succeed tactically but also align with overarching military and political objectives. Through an exploration of these principles, readers will gain a more nuanced understanding of the approach required for the successful orchestration of special air operations.

The necessity for clear and comprehensive principles that guide special air operations is paramount. Principles that transcend traditional tactics ensure that operations are not only effective in immediate terms, but are also aligned with broader strategic objectives by creating a unified framework that enables decision-makers at all levels to act with a clear understanding of their role within the larger strategic context. As we look to the future of special air operations, the development of a set of principles that embraces the larger strategic context is not just beneficial; it is essential. Such principles provide the clarity and direction needed to operate effectively in todayâ??s global security environment and ensure that actions at every level contribute to a cohesive and strategically sound operation.

When discussing principles of special air operations, evaluating the applicability of McRavenâ??s theory of special operations is essential. While McRavenâ??s theory has been influential in shaping principles for direct action missions primarily from a ground operations perspective, the theory requires expansion and adaptation to fully address the unique challenges and dynamics of modern special air operations.

The increasing reliance on technologies such as unmanned aerial vehicles, advanced aircraft, and sophisticated communication systems in modern air operations is a critical aspect that McRavenâ??s principles, in their original form, did not comprehensively address. These technologies simply did not exist to their current extent when McRaven wrote his theory. Technologies integral to surveillance, intelligence gathering, precision strikes, and long-range missions in contemporary conflicts necessitate their inclusion in principles of contemporary special air operations.

Additionally, special air operations face distinct operational hurdles, such as conducting aerial refueling and managing long-range insertion and extraction in high-threat environments. These operations are further complicated by the need to navigate environments equipped with both advanced, high-tech devices and basic massed equipment. These operational and technological challenges require specific strategies and tactics that are distinct from ground operations. Moreover, these challenges have historically acted as catalysts for innovation and the development of unconventional solutions by airmen. For instance, the challenge of breaching the Ruhr Valley dams during Operation Chastise led to the invention of Wallisâ??s bouncing bombs. Yet, it was the ingenuity of the airmen who perfected the skipping technique and devised the lighting system necessary for maintaining the bombers at the precise height for bomb release. Similarly, the technical dilemma of launching medium bombers from an aircraft carrier for the Doolittle Raid necessitated mechanical modifications to the B-25s. However, it was the human creativity and determination that figured out the logistics of safely executing such a daring launch. These instances exemplify how, when faced with operational and technical hurdles, the human element plays a pivotal role in overcoming obstacles and achieving operational success in special air operations.

The current landscape of military operations often necessitates involving various branches of the government and military. Principles focusing on the coordination between (non) governmental agencies and air, ground, naval, space, and cyber forces are crucial for the success of modern multi-domain operations.

Furthermore, the legal and political considerations in special air operations, especially when operating in sovereign territories without explicit consent, require careful navigation. McRavenâ??s theory, while effective in a tactical sense, does not sufficiently cover these aspects for special air operations. Modern

conflicts often involve a mix of conventional, unconventional, overt, covert, and clandestine tactics by states and also illegal and malicious actions by non-state actors. Particularly in a special air operations context it is essential to address the complexities of modern battlefields. Lastly, the psychological impact and the role of information operations in modern warfare is critical. While McRavenâ??s principles intentionally limited their focus to the tactical execution of direct-action missions, from the strategic and operational levels special operations also require an increasing focus on the psychological and informational dimensions of warfare.

Operational and strategic principles of special air operations

While McRavenâ??s theory of special operations lays a significant foundational framework, its adaptation and expansion are imperative to fully address the operational and strategic level challenges in modern special air operations. Warfare demands a comprehensive approach that encompasses not only tactical execution but also advanced technology integration, inter-service coordination, legal and political considerations, and psychological and information warfare strategies. This necessitates a forward-thinking and multifaceted approach integrated into strategic planning. To ensure strategic and operational coherence, it is beneficial to design principles of special air operations that can be used across the full spectrum of warfare, from the tactical to the strategic level.

The figure below presents a layered approach to the newly designed principles of special air operations, building upon the foundational principles laid out by McRaven and extending them to address the complexities of special air operations at the operational and strategic level.

image
Figure 1: Principles of special air operations. Source: Author.

At the base, we have McRavenâ??s principles of special operations that provide fundamental tactical principles: simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose. Building upon this, the operational level introduces the principles of flexibility, coordination, and intelligence, which are essential for executing complex missions with precision and skill. At the top of the pyramid, we find the strategic principles of adaptability, innovation, and integration, signifying the highest-order principles necessary for dynamic and successful special air operations in a rapidly changing environment.

Principles Explained

Adaptability

Adaptability is the strategic ability of command structures to respond quickly to changing circumstances. It requires mental agility within command structures for decisive action. This includes the ability to alter strategies and operations based on new intelligence or unexpected challenges supported by agile command and control and logistics systems. From a special air warfare perspective, it is about special operations command structures preparing for various scenarios, ensuring operations can swiftly adjust to diverse and unpredicted threats, maintaining operational tempo and achieving strategic objectives in rapidly evolving environments.

Innovation

The strategic principle of innovation is critical for maintaining a strategic advantage, going beyond high-tech adoption to include creative strategies and the unconventional and unexpected use of both advanced and basic technologies. An example of this approach is Operation Thunderbolt, the Israelisâ?? hostage rescue from Uganda in 1976. There, innovative planning and execution underscored the importance of strategic innovation and operational flexibility.

Innovative airmen across all levels advocate for a culture of experimentation, blending high-tech precision with low-tech reliability to enhance operational flexibility, much like the Israeli Defense Forces utilized a mix of intelligence, surprise, and audacity to rescue hostages from Entebbe Airport in Uganda. This operation showcased not only the effective use of military craft and commando tactics but also the strategic deployment of deception and psychological warfare, with the use of a disguised vehicle to mimic Ugandan dictator Idi Aminâ??s convoy. Innovation is not simply implementing new technology. It requires rethinking operational concepts, fostering a mindset that embraces risk-taking, and learning from outcomes to ensure operations across all domains are effective against complex warfare challenges. Operation Thunderbolt stands as a testament to the effectiveness of embracing such innovative approaches, highlighting how blending diverse technological and tactical solutions can achieve decisive outcomes in the face of daunting challenges.

Integration

Integration involves a combination of air power with overall military strategy, ensuring air and space operations enhance other forcesâ?? capabilities. It also includes seamlessly incorporating air strategies into national security and diplomatic objectives. Effective integration results in a unified force capable of efficient action across the full range of competition-to-conflict scenarios, crucial for coordinated efforts in the multi-dimensional landscape of modern warfare.

Flexibility

When highlighting the importance of flexibility in special air warfare, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the impact of the human factor within these operations. Embracing the SOF truth that â??Humans are more important than hardwareâ?• we highlight the essence of what truly propels special air operations beyond conventional warfare. History is filled with examples of this truth, such as Eben Emael, Doolittleâ??s Raid, Operation Chastise, Operation Kingpin, and Operation Thursday, where the ingenuity and adaptability of airmen turned the tide. These examples serve as a testament to the ability of human creativity and unconventional thinking to leverage existing and, at times outdated, technologies in unexpected ways, thereby catching adversaries off guard. This distinct blend of flexibility and innovation, driven by the human spirit, underscores the argument that the strategic advantage in air warfare does not rest on the shoulders of technology but rather on the capability of individuals to think beyond the confines of conventional strategies and tools. The integration of such a human-centric approach into the discourse on air warfare not only enriches our understanding of its dynamic nature but also highlights the invaluable role of human resourcefulness in shaping the outcome of critical operations.

Coordination

Operation Neptune Spear exemplifies the essence of effective coordination in special air operations, showcasing how unified efforts across military branches, government agencies, and international partners are pivotal. The principle of coordination, founded on clear command, control and communication lines, shared objectives, and collaborative planning, was crucial in navigating the logistical, intelligence, and command challenges of the operation. The seamless integration of air operations, from stealth insertion to real-time intelligence, underscores the importance of such coordination in managing the complexities of operations involving state and non-state actors. This operation aligned efforts with broader goals, demonstrating that effective coordination is key to the success of joint operations and multi-domain engagements, achieving strategic political, social, and ideological objectives.

Intelligence

Intelligence emphasizes the operational use of information for planning and executing missions involving robust processes for intelligence gathering, analysis, and dissemination. Itâ??s about understanding the operational environment, identifying threats, and exploiting opportunities to integrate various intelligence sources for a comprehensive mission area overview. Effective intelligence is crucial for enhancing mission success rates, reducing risks, and navigating the complexities of warfare to ensure decisions are well-informed and operations can effectively counter diverse tactics and goals of adversaries.

Now what?

Embracing these additional principles is crucial for harnessing technological advancements, ensuring swift adaptability, and gathering comprehensive intelligence â?? all of which are indispensable for the sustained success of special air warfare. It is imperative that airmen and leaders involved in future special air operations thoroughly integrate these strategic and operational principles, fostering a strong and adaptable approach to special operations that is ready to meet current and future challenges. This ongoing commitment to evolving strategically and operationally is key to staying effective and relevant in a complex global security environment.

As we venture deeper into the 21st century, the success of special air operations will hinge on the militaryâ??s ability to synthesize these principles into a coherent and agile framework. This framework must not only anticipate change, adapt to the unforeseen, and innovate amidst constraints but also prioritize the development, training, and empowerment of its special airmen above the sole acquisition of advanced technology. The ability to coordinate across spectrums, understand and navigate the fog of war and make critical decisions in complex environments underscores the irreplaceable value of skilled, adaptable, and resilient individuals. The future of special air operations is not a distant horizon but an immediate challenge, and readiness to meet this challenge begins with embracing principles that emphasize the importance of human talent and ingenuity. By acknowledging that the effectiveness of special air operations is primarily driven by the capabilities and decision-making of its people, the military ensures that its operations are as versatile and resilient as the individuals it relies upon and the operations it aims to guide.

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U.S. Air Force Special Tactics operators, assigned to the 352d Special Operations Wing, prepare to conduct a simulated medevac mission on March 2, 2020, near Constanta, Romania, using the 352

SOWâ??s CV-22B Osprey. (Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Pena via DVIDS)

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