Putting Operation Spiderâ??s Web in Context

Description

On June 1, 2025, the Ukrainian special intelligence services launched Operation Spiderâ??s Web, a remotely triggered drone attack that may have damaged or destroyed over 40 Russian strategic aircraft at four air bases deep inside the Russian Federationâ??s borders. Spiderâ??s Web was undeniably successful: Russiaâ??s capacity to launch cruise missiles into Ukrainian cities and kill civilians has been sharply curtailed. Part of the Russian nuclear triad may have been reduced by more than 30%. And Russia certainly will have to reallocate some precious combat manpower for internal security missions. I and others who support Ukraine in its war against Russia celebrated these attacks.

But nothing about Operation Spiderâ??s Web changes either the nature or character of warfare, however those overused terms might be defined. Nor is this special intelligence operation indicative of any broader change in war that might already have been underway. Drones have been a feature of warfare since World War II and have been in regular use in conflict since the early 1980s. Irregular operations like Spiderâ??s Web have long been a consistent feature of even large-scale conventional war. Moreover, successful deep penetration airfield raids have routinely occurred since they were first mastered by special operations forces in the early 1940s.

So why is there so much inclination to bite on the idea that a novel integration of an old technology with an old tactic indicates a change in the very nature of war itself? I argue in my book *Ground Combat: Puncturing the Myths of Modern War*, that a yawning gap in modern military historical analysis has made it difficult to put emerging events in context. Ahistoricism, a disregard or lack of concern for historical context, makes us more prone to buy into the idea that the very nature of war is in constant, uncontrollable flux.

War is not in constant or high-amplitude flux. Instead, it evolves in form and remains far more steady in function. But this overreaction to Operation Spiderâ??s Webâ??and more broadly to the use of drones and AI in some modern warsâ??provides an excellent opportunity to help put exciting irregular operations like these in historical context.

Airfield Raids in World War II

The lack of high-speed trucks, the density of the frontlines, and the newness of air warfare effectively precluded ground attacks against airfields in World War I. However, there were at least 130 ground

attacks on airfields conducted in World War II resulting in 367 aircraft destroyed. In *Snakes in the Eagleâ??s Nest: A History of Ground Attacks on Air Bases*, Alan Vick recorded a total of 645 ground attacks on airfields worldwide from 1940 through the early 1990s that resulted in 843 aircraft destroyed and 1,207 aircraft damaged. Many such attacks have occurred in the intervening years.

Getting more to the point: many of these attacks were long-range infiltration missions conducted deep in the enemyâ??s rear security zone. Some were launched from submarines, small boats, or by air assault. Vick briefly recounts the British use of deep-penetration ground raids, particularly in North Africa, to illustrate the historical precedent for such operations.

Small teams of commandos would form into raid platoons mounted on about a dozen light trucks, each packed tight with water, fuel, food, explosives, radios, machineguns, and even antiaircraft and antitank guns. As early as 1940, the Long Range Patrols were pushing hundreds of kilometers behind enemy lines to raid Axis airfields, destroying planes and immolating thousands of gallons of precious aviation fuel.

Long-range special operations raiding forces all but lived behind the Axis front lines. Sometimes they conducted raids within a hundred kilometers of the front, but other raids required dangerous round-trip treks of 2,000 or even over 4,000 kilometers. For example, in January 1941, a long-range patrol pushed over 1,100 kilometers forward of friendly lines to attack an Italian airfield and base at Murzuk.

Another deep raid in December of that year simultaneously targeted four Axis airfields. As part of that multi-pronged attack, Captain Bill Fraser and a four-man team sneaked onto the airfield at Agedabia, Libya and destroyed 37 aircraft with explosive charges while suffering no casualties. Perhaps the best-known British raid occurred at Sidi Haneish (an airfield in northwestern Egypt), where British raiders drove their light trucks across the airfield, firing machineguns to destroy or damage well over 40 aircraft. They took only two casualties and escaped.

Airfield Raids after World War II through the 21st Century

Airfield attacks were also a routine occurrence in major wars following World War II. Vick recounts the nearly 500 attacks by Vietnamese forces against U.S. airbases in Vietnam and Thailand. In contrast to World War II, only a handful of thoseâ??20, or about 4% of the totalâ??were ground assaults or clandestine sapper attacks. Vietnamese attackers primarily relied on a mix of mortars, rockets, direct fire, and other weapons to destroy or damage well over 1,000 aircraft.

For example, on October 1, 1964, in a carefully planned small-unit raid, a Vietnamese insurgent team moved six 81-mm mortars into position near the Bien Hoa airfield and launched 83 rounds onto target.

This simple, very-low-cost raid destroyed five B-57 bombers and damaged 15 more, effectively putting a U.S. bomber squadron out of commission. Four American personnel died and 70 were wounded. No attackers were killed or captured.

In the Falklands War, a British Special Air Service unit landed by small boat and helicopter to raid the Argentine airfield at Pebble Island, destroying 11 aircraft with only two soldiers wounded. Throughout the post-2001 Iraq and Afghanistan wars, insurgents routinely attacked airfields by infiltrating close enough to launch indirect fire attacks orâ??less frequentlyâ??infiltrate or assault the airfield perimeters. In probably the best-known of these attacks, Taliban fighters infiltrated and attacked the coalition airfield at Camp Bastion, Afghanistan in 2012. They destroyed six AV-8B fighter-bombers and damaged two more.

A Very (very) Brief History of Drones in War and Changes in Our Perceptions

While the proliferation of small drones is fairly new, drones themselves are old technology. Probably the first electronically guided drone was built before 1910. Suicide drones like the Kettering Bug were successfully tested by the end of World War I. Television guided attack drones were employed many times during World War II: at least 18 U.S. Navy drones hit their targets in the Pacific theater.

By the 1980s, both the Israelis and South Africans were routinely using large and small drones in combat in places like Lebanon and Angola. Mini-quadcopter drones with cameras were developed in the late 1980s. American military and intelligence services routinely used drones starting in the early 1990s. And by the 2010s, drones were in wide use by most regular and irregular forces on the planet.

Why, then, is there a collective sense that drones are suddenly and radically altering warfare? I argue in *Ground Combat* that several converging factors are at play. Primarily, long-running drone operations emerged from the shadows. Military forces that had tried to classify and hide drone flights for decades lost control of the narrative as flight trackers, mobile phones, and online videos uncovered once secretive operations.

In parallel, all militaries increasingly recognized the information warfare value of drones and competed to promulgate their own videos. And the sheer volume of publicly available drone videos multiplied as small, commercial drones went into mass production. These trends contributed to a collective and broadly mistaken sense that drones were a sudden phenomenon â??changing everythingâ?• about war.

Back to Operation Spiderâ??s Web: A novel technical means in broader context

Also contrary to popular perception, Spiderâ??s Web was certainly not the first surprise close-proximity drone attack on a military airfield. We do not have a full accounting of all incidents from every battlefield in the world, but I was able to find references to about 20 historical attacks with a basic internet search.

For example, Iraqi insurgents have been launching small drones at airfields with some frequency for years (and continue to do so). Syrian rebels launched attack drones at the Russian airbase at Khmeimim several times in 2018. Rebels in Myanmar routinely attack junta airbases with small drones. A mid-2024 article describes junta efforts to improve their airfield counter-drone defenses with help from the Indian Air Force in the face of repeated small-drone attacks.

In this historical context, Ukraineâ??s recent airfield attacks take on different meaning. They clearly were ingenious in context. But this was a narrow, carefully planned operation conducted by a country that can ill-afford to risk its elite troops on long-range airfield raids. It combined over 100-year-old drone technology with over 80-year-old deep airfield raid tactics and likely equally proven clandestine logistics techniques.

Based on the videos and results of the operation, the Ukrainians traded risk for effect. In other words, greater effect might have been achieved with a human raid. Russiaâ??s airfields appear to have been poorly secured; one could easily imagine a Special Air Serviceâ??like special operations ground raid taking out far more aircraft than the remote-controlled drones actually destroyed or damaged.

In the Ukrainian raid and in other modern operations, technology was used in place of humans at the point of attack. As a result, human adaptability and resilience were removed from the operational equation. At one site, Russian civilians may have been able to knock some drones out of action by throwing rocks at them. As previous attacks in Iraq, Yemen, and elsewhere show, airfields can be successfully protected against drones with layered counter-drone systems. We should not perceive a temporary or isolated security failure as a revolution in warfare.

Implications for Understanding Modern Irregular and Conventional Warfare

Foremost, it is imperative that we improve our collective historical understanding of modern warfare to reduce our vulnerability to hyperbole, technophilia, and technophobia. Anyone armed with this collective knowledge of the history of drones, of deep-penetration airfield attacks, and of the many small-drone attacks on military airbases in the past decade certainly would be less inclined to see Operation Spiderâ??s Web as revolutionary. This dynamic applies to all of warfare: understand history in width, depth, and context to better understand the present and to better forecast the near future.

Given the proclivity of senior military leaders and politicians to bite on revolutionary-technology hyperbole, it is also imperative to routinely point out the inherent tradeoffs between risk acceptance and risk avoidance, between commonsense use and overreliance on technology, and between exciting tactical effects and enduring strategic success. It is good to applaud the Ukrainians as they adapt and sometimes dramatically succeed in this war. But we should not extrapolate our entire understanding of warfare from their narrow contextual experience.

Given that I am writing this article for the Irregular Warfare Initiative, I also argue we must continue to work together to break down the artificial and often illogical conceptual barriers between irregular and conventional warfare. There probably has not been a recorded conventional war that did not include some type of so-called irregular operation leveraging clandestine intelligence, sabotage, resistance forces, or raids. Deep airfield raids and all types of novel technical adaptations are regular â??irregularâ?• components of conventional warfare.

And while I join others in arguing that the line between irregular and conventional war is artificial, we must also refrain from immediately attaching greater meaning to special operations exploits. As exciting and novel as combat or special operations might look from time to time, war goes on in places like Ukraine. Soldiers fight in trenches, assault across open ground, fire artillery at one another, and kill each other with rifles, grenades, and even knives. They also use evolved 100-year-old drone technology. Two things can be true at once without one devaluing or erasing the other. Operation Spiderâ??s Web does not indicate a change in the way wars are fought. It does highlight the importance of human adaptability in war. We must periodically remind ourselves that all Western militaries describe war as a fundamentally human endeavor. In that context, technology is a useful tool only when applied by humans. I recommend focusing here on more immediate and practical lessons. Foremost: Given the broader historical context of deep-penetration raids and indirect-fire attacks on vulnerable airfields, Ukraineâ??s operations certainly recommend a careful review of standing Western airfield security measures.

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[Left] Image Description and Credit: Lieutenant Colonel David Stirling, officer commanding the Special Air Service in the Middle East, speaks with Patrol Commander Lieutenant McDonald. Lieutenant Colonel Stirling led the raid on the Sidi Haneish Airfield. Date: 18 January 1943. Image courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.

[Right] Image generated by AI using OpenAIâ??s DALLÂ·E, June 2025.

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