



Deliberations leading up to establishment of Army Aviation as a separate branch in 1983 offer an interesting insight into why its creation was considered in the first place and the thinking on both sides of the issue.

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Aviation: A Branch Decision Revisited

In the August 1990 special issue of *ARMY* featuring Army aviation, Maj. Gen. Rudolph Ostovich III concluded his article, "Army aviation remains a most relevant force for the future." Deployment to Operation Desert Shield of the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) and the 82nd Airborne, both heavily dependent on aviation, makes this statement sound prophetic.

The terrain in Operation Desert Shield and the heavy armor of the potential opposing force seem tailor-made for aviation units equipped with the AH-64 and OH-58D; yet there is a similar terrain and opposing force at the National Training Center (NTC), Ft. Irwin, Calif., and rarely has aviation been a relevant force there.

Was the branch decision a mistake? The recently released list of colonels selected for brigadier general contained only one colonel of aviation; the earlier list for major general contained only one aviation brigadier.

Was the branch decision a mistake? Before addressing these two issues, one must first review the circumstances and conditions extant when the decision was made seven years ago to create aviation as a separate branch of the Army.

The Aviation System Program Review (ASPR) conducted in March 1982 dealt with the results of the first Army aviation mission area analysis (AAMAA). The AAMAA identified 134 doctrinal corrective actions. The ASPR considered 27 concept and doctrinal issues, and ten of these were selected

to be presented to the senior leadership of ASPR, chaired by then Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. John W. Vessey Jr. One of the ASPR panels was chaired by Gen. John R. Galvin, then a major general commanding the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized).

To the discomfort of many of his fellow general officers, Gen. Galvin reported to Gen. Vessey that aviation doctrine and the training that should flow from that doctrine was in such disarray that the only sensible solution was to create an aviation branch with a real branch school with all the doctrine, training and materiel development responsibilities attendant to a combat arms branch school.

Following much debate, Gen. Vessey directed Gen. Glenn K. Otis, the TRADOC (Training and Doctrine Command) commander, to "wrestle this branch question to the ground."

In June 1982, Gen. Otis formed the TRADOC Review of Army Aviation (TROAA) group "to assess the current state of Army aviation and provide him recommendations which would enhance the use and management of Army aviation in the future under envisioned concepts of how the Army will fight."

The review group included Lt. Gen. Richard L. West, U.S. Army retired, a former comptroller of the Army; Maj. Gen. Benjamin L. Harrison, U.S. Army retired; Col. E. Frank Estes of the Aviation Center at Ft. Rucker, Ala.; and CWO 4 John P. Valaer,

head of the Warrant Officer College at Ft. Rucker.

The review group was headquartered at Ft. Hood, Tex., and received technical and administrative support from the then-TRADOC Combined Arms Test Activity and the Army Research Institute.

The TROAA group visited 12 installations, interviewed 38 general officers and administered questionnaires to 421 commissioned officers (43 percent were nonaviators) and 182 warrant officers. These were some of the key findings:

- Doctrine and training were deficient. Seven different schools had major aviation doctrinal responsibilities. (Hearing this shocking state of affairs, Gen. Otis asked if the report was going to be classified.) The Aviation Center, for example, was the standardization authority for certifying instructor pilots as being technically and tactically competent, but the Center was not allowed to develop and teach tactical employment of aviation.

- Aviators need to have experience in and a better understanding of combat arms and the combined arms team. This shortcoming was universally recognized, but MILPERCEN (Military Personnel Center) assignment officers were severely constrained from making these professional development-type assignments because of aviator utilization laws imposed by Congress. Some division and corps commanders sought to correct the situation, but the practice was very limited and uneven.

- Schools were inadequately staffed to provide aviation expertise.
- Aviation had become too sophisticated for part-time aviators.
- New aviation officers had a branch identity problem and were greatly concerned about career development. For example, a captain artillery aviator interviewed at Ft. Bragg, N.C., told how he was called by his branch and asked where he wanted to go for his advanced course. He said, "Ft. Sill, of course, I need the branch training." The assignment officer told him not to waste his time there because he would never get an assignment in artillery as a captain or field grade officer, so he may as well go somewhere he would enjoy. Thus did this captain learn the true meaning of a "carrier branch for aviators."

In another case, Lt. Gen. Robert L. Wetzel (then major general commanding the Infantry Center) opposed the formation of an aviation branch because he thought it important for some infantry officers to continue to be aviators. Asked what an infantry captain aviator had to do to be a fully qualified infantryman, Gen. Wetzel said: command a rifle company. After some thought, he said that there probably would be adequate opportunity to do that. When asked what a lieutenant colonel aviator must do as an infantryman, he reasoned that there certainly were not going to be enough infantry battalions around to let aviators have a turn at command. He concluded that an aviation branch was probably the best solution for the professional development of aviators.

- The aviation warrant officer system was healthy and working well, but there needed to be some incentive beyond CWO 4.

The two rather emotionally charged issues that emerged from the TROAA group study were:

- Central proponency for aviation doctrine and materiel at Ft. Rucker versus the existing decentralized system.
- The need or lack thereof for a full-fledged aviation branch.

On the issue of central proponency, the review group concluded:

"Aviation has not received adequate emphasis and priority efforts at Forts Benning, Knox and Leavenworth, and it will continue to compete poorly for attention and

resources as these Centers grapple with other new systems of the '80s more vital to their primary missions.

"Aviation systems are inherently expensive to develop. The operation of the systems is complex and sophisticated and usually requires expensive training. Safety of operations is a vital concern. Mistakes are costly in lives and materiel resources. Experienced and skilled aviators are required to provide the necessary intensive management."

The need to consolidate proponency at the Aviation Center turned out to be a "no-brainer" decision.

The branch issue, however, was something else altogether. The review group reported:

"Chiefs of Staff of the Army and senior commanders can proclaim that aviation is a full-fledged combat arm, but the young aviator continues to wonder if the Army is really leveling with him. Does the Army really want him to be a professional, highly competent, and tactically and technically qualified expert in fighting aviation assets in the combined arms team? Or does it want him to give first loyalty to the branch brass on his collar and look to that branch as his career home?"

"Some aviators in our recent past truly loved their ground combat branch and very few would have transferred to an aviation branch. That is not true of the majority of today's [1982] aviators. They want a full career in aviation. The few who do not, in most cases, have already commanded a company-size unit of their branch—an option that is only available to a few and, then, on an exception basis. The overriding point is that today's aviator wants to be a regular member of the combined arms team as an aviator and not as a carrier branch exception to normal branch career patterns."

The aviation warrant officers, who make up 75 percent of TOE (tables of organization and equipment) aviators, stated that they wanted commissioned aviators to come to units, learn their trade and stay to practice it. They said it was their sad experience that the commissioned officer was anxious to quickly move on to an assignment in his branch that "really meant something."

It became clear to the review group that, given the congressional constraints on the assignment and utilization of aviators, establishment of aviation as a separate combat arm branch was the most effective way to provide for centralization of aviation proponency for doctrine, training and materiel development. (Time has proved that congressional oversight of aviator utilization has become even more stringent.)

It was recommended by the group that the Army should:

"Assign commissioned officers accepted for flight training to the aviation branch upon initial entry into the Army. Detail these officers to either infantry or armor for a 12 to 24-month tour for validation of SC 11 or SC 12 military qualification standards (MQS) II with subsequent attendance at the initial entry rotary wing (IERW) course."

Gen. Otis briefed the Army commanders conference in October 1982 on review results and recommendations using the same words as in the report. There was strong opposition led by Gens. Frederick J. Kroesen and Richard E. Cavazos expressing a desire to continue having officers dual qualified in their branch and aviation. The most outspoken opponents from the retired community were Gens. Hamilton H. Howze and Robert M. Shoemaker expressing the same desire. Although there is some question in my mind that it is reasonable to expect an officer to be fully competent in the complexities of modern equipment in any two branches of today's Army, I did strongly favor the initial detail of aviators to either armor or infantry for certification at the MQS II level. Nonetheless, both of these ideas were victims of resource constraints.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Edward C. Meyer pushed the branch decision through on 12 April, 1983. Maj. Gen. Bobby J. Maddox, commanding the Aviation Center, expedited the start of aviation officer basic and advanced courses. The next commander of the Aviation Center, Maj. Gen. Ellis D. Parker, overhauled doctrinal publications and filled voids, and his direction of the COEA (cost and operational effectiveness and analysis) for the LH (light helicopter) and the trailblazing Army aviation modernization plan put aviation at the head of the class of TRADOC combat development activities.

Back to the issue raised earlier: *Was the branch decision a mistake?* Some have alleged that the branch was created just to give aviators command positions for promotion enhancement. This specious argument will not stand even the most casual examination. It was certainly not an issue for the TROAA study group. Aviation companies, battalions and groups existed for more than 20 years before the branch decision. Aviation brigades in divisions are another issue. The division aviation brigade evolved from testing the Howze Board-created Air Cavalry Combat Brigade in the 1st Cavalry Division (TRICAP) in 1971-73. The TRADOC commander, Gen. William E. DePuy, stated that the Army should have

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An AH-64A Apache attack helicopter prepares for takeoff at a base in Saudi Arabia.

U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Gil High

an aviation brigade in every division, which resulted in Division 86. This plan, the division restructuring study and other studies of the time, worked on by bright young colonels like John W. Foss, all called for an aviation brigade in divisions. (I'm not implying Gen. Foss favored the notion. I don't know his personal feelings. We have all worked on things we didn't necessarily agree with.) Notwithstanding, the divisions have aviation brigades, but they and their operating battalions are understructured. The shortfall has been recognized by the last two aviation system program reviews but is only now being corrected in the AH-64 battalions. Others need fixing, too.

As for aviation being a relevant force, the AH-64 and OH-58D units can fight 24 hours a day and in bad weather. The catch is, *each aircraft and crew* can only fight for about 1.5 to 2 hours at any one time. They have to be ready at the decisive point and at the critical time. That is what synchronization of battle is all about. This takes exacting, coordinated planning for scouts, attack and log birds, FARP (forward area refuel points), maintenance and the like. We don't do this very well at the NTC and other places, and you can't be relevant if you are not there. The problem lies in two camps.

The first camp is the ground brigade, division and corps commanders who must plan for, train for and demand this combined arms effort. The ultimate responsibility for mission accomplishment is with the ground commander. No one has ever been more effective at developing aviation potential at all levels of command than Gen. Crosbie E. Saint. As a division commander,

he was way ahead of his time.

There are several commanders out there who do an excellent job of maximizing aviation assets. Gens. Maxwell R. Thurman and Carl W. Stiner and Maj. Gens. Carmen J. Cavezza and James H. Johnson Jr. did an outstanding job in Operation Just Cause with superb use of aviation. Aviation was such a relevant force in Just Cause that it is painful to imagine the operation without it. It is in the heavy brigades and divisions in situations like those encountered at the NTC where the use of aviation is so frequently unenlightened and ineffective. *Are we really training the way we plan to fight?*

The second camp is occupied by the aviator and the aviation commander. Aviation units may be employed on separate missions. I know that the aviation brigade is considered a maneuver brigade. In excess of 95 percent of the time, aviation units will be employed in support of ground maneuver brigades. The responsibility is from supporting to supported. I know there are no authorized liaison officers in division aviation brigades and attack battalions. (Can you imagine an artillery battalion trying to support without liaison officers?) Nonetheless, the responsibility still rests with the aviation commander.

To make it work, all must recognize that the officer attracted to aviation is not susceptible to the "tyranny of the terrain." The aviator must learn the intricacies of ground fire and maneuver, and he and all ground maneuver commanders must forever keep uppermost in their minds that Army aviation is in the Land part of AirLand doctrine.

A senior field commander who has seen many rotations at the NTC recently told me, "The aviator must be more at ease talking with battalion and brigade S3s than he is talking with air traffic controllers." The flip side for armor and infantry officers is equally true. *Are we really training the way we plan to fight?*

The last issue is poor promotion selection rate in the general officer grades.

Was the branch decision a mistake? Our Army is blessed with a plethora of outstanding people. For every brigadier general vacancy, there are at least 50 fully qualified colonels, 15 of them superbly qualified. Selection for promotion is not a branch issue, nor is it a source of commission issue. The number of U.S. Military Academy graduates selected for brigadier general has steadily declined for the last 20 years, reaching 24 percent in 1989. This year, it more than doubled to 50 percent. Neither aviators nor ROTC and Officer Candidate School graduates should seriously be concerned about the results of one promotion board.

The Aviation Branch was established because that was the best way to provide tactical and technical expertise necessary for the coherent, intense management required for the development and employment of costly, highly complex and enormously capable aviation systems. This expertise is also required in the general officer ranks.

Was the branch decision a mistake? Let's do some policing and ask the same question in another seven years, and let's all hope that we don't get the opportunity to prove the worth of aviation in blood in the sands of Saudi Arabia.