

# “Planning for the Combat Aviation Brigade in Large Scale Combat Operations: A Guide for Division G35 and G5 Maneuver Officers”

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to provide division staff officers, particularly non-aviators assigned to G35/G5, critical insights on how to effectively plan for and fight Combat Aviation Brigades (CAB) in large-scale combat operations (LSCO). The below observations are underlying causes of some of the challenges facing divisions and CABs as division planners plan for and fight the CAB at corps and division WFXs. A discussion of Army Aviation’s core competencies follows with simple requirements for division G35 and G5 planners to consider or develop as part of their courses of actions or branch plans. Understanding these observations and the core competencies will support a better relationship between division and CAB staffs and generate greater understanding of the capabilities, limitations, and competencies of the CAB in LSCO.

## **General Observations**

**(Observation #1). Generally speaking, division G35 and G5 staff officers are not typically Aviation officers and they naturally lack a detailed understanding of Aviation capabilities.** This is an obvious statement and the authors do not expect non-aviation officers to turn into aviation subject matter experts. This lack of expertise plays a critical role in WFXs when the enemy forces a deviation from the existing plan and there is minimal time to refine, or plan, a hasty operation. This haste can result in a vague task and purpose or incomplete plan for the CAB, which in turn lacks the minimum required information for the CAB to conduct further planning. Without an understanding of the minimum requirements, flawed guidance triggers a cycle of RFIs, wastes valuable time, and leads to unfavorable outcomes for the division and CAB. In these cases, a simple amount of education about Aviation core competencies<sup>1</sup> and information requirements, which are captured in the division TACSOP, can increase shared understanding and reduce needless coordination in aviation mission planning. The authors highly recommend planners review FM 3-04, Army Aviation and other aviation doctrine to further understand aviation operations in LSCO.

**(Observation #2) There is a significant lack of dialogue between division and CAB staffs.** Dialogue between the CAB commander and division senior leaders is effective. However, the authors do not often observe effective staff-to-staff dialogue. Both staffs must prioritize breaking down barriers to communication and build an effective relationship. This starts with the field grade officers, and it extends to the large number of captains and warrant officers on a CAB staff. To further increase dialogue, division

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<sup>1</sup> FM 3-04, Army Aviation; Par 1-5 through 1-36.

planners must integrate the G3 Aviation Cell into all mission planning. Finally, the CAB must send a capable LNO to the division staff, armed with clear guidance, authorities, and limitations from the CAB Commander.

**(Observation #3). Divisions and CABs alike must work continuously to maintain and enforce their planning horizons in the face of a highly adaptive peer adversary.** When maintaining planning horizons, especially in the division deep fight, a constantly-changing battlefield makes this extremely difficult. As these changes reduce available planning time, it increases operational risks for aviation operations. The authors believe that Observations #1 and #2 are critical to and set conditions for success in this observation. While all units struggle with the reality of LSCO, it particularly degrades aviation operations through poor resource allocation, insufficient conditions, and very high-risk operations that are difficult to synchronize in time and space.

### **Aviation Core Competencies and Missions**

The rest of this article will discuss Aviation's core competencies (FM 3-04, Army Aviation), and how division planners can improve planning of Aviation operations in LSCO.

**Accurate and Timely Intelligence Collection (Reconnaissance).** CABs provide significant support to intelligence collection. Unfortunately, division planners are often myopic in their focus and limit themselves to the CAB's Gray Eagles. Although the MQ-1C is a robust and capable platform, the CAB can also support division intelligence collection through the Heavy Attack Reconnaissance Squadron (HARS), equipped with Shadows and AH-64s through reconnaissance operations (zone, area, and route reconnaissance). Furthermore, the CAB can also conduct limited reconnaissance in the division rear area with their own organic UH and CH aircraft.

To maximize CAB support to intelligence collection, planners must better understand the capabilities and limitations of the CAB for reconnaissance operations. CABs can conduct zone, route, and area reconnaissance organically, or as members of a combined arms team. When conducting a reconnaissance in force, it will likely demand the entire HARS or Attack Battalion. Planners must account for this when considering other follow-on or competing operations. Other considerations include suppression of enemy air defenses, priority of fires for the HARS (because it will make enemy contact first), and protection of Aviation FARPs that are operating in adjacent unit areas of operation.

Furthermore, planners must provide the appropriate task to accomplish the division commander's intent. The authors frequently observe inappropriate tasks/purpose for CAB reconnaissance missions. For example, a zone reconnaissance can be terrain- or enemy-oriented, and it is usually a highly-detailed and methodical mission. On the other hand, a reconnaissance in force also answers PIR, but it is enemy-oriented and it is characterized by aggressive maneuver to overwhelm enemy reconnaissance and find the enemy's main body. These two missions are frequently confused with each other, and when missing detailed commander's reconnaissance guidance it leaves the CAB staff unclear on how to proceed.

Finally, the most critical and overlooked considerations for aviation reconnaissance operations are updated and relevant priority intelligence requirements (PIRs) and Commander's reconnaissance guidance. FM 3-98 identifies that the commander's reconnaissance priorities should be set early and will include focus, tempo, engagement/disengagement criteria, and displacement criteria. Whether reconnaissance guidance comes from the division, supported BCT, or Division Cavalry Squadron (DIVCAV), the CAB must receive this critical guidance to focus planning and execute reconnaissance. The authors highly recommend including the CAB staff when developing the specifics of reconnaissance guidance.

The authors also routinely see CABs task organized in support of a Division Cavalry (DIVCAV) Squadron. Division planners should sustain this as a general practice to support this vital mission. The following are some considerations for Division planners when developing COAs for aviation operations in support of DIVCAV.

*Task Organization and Command and Support relationships.* The relationships most often used for aviation support to DIVCAV are direct support (DS) or TACON, and range from one Air Cavalry troop (AH-64s / Shadows) to an entire squadron. Rather than discuss which relationship is more appropriate, the authors emphasize the importance of discussing the appropriate command/support relationship between division and CAB planners. This supports a critical dialogue between the two staffs, which, as discussed above, is currently lacking, and ensures the right relationship to accomplish the mission.

*Span of control.* If using a squadron-sized formation as the DIVCAV, span of control becomes a critical consideration for aviation support. Since there is no aviation element assigned to a squadron, planners must discuss how the CAB or HARS (as required) will provide the proper additional command and control support to the DIVCAV. This support can take many forms, including LNOs or a TAC.

Finally, division planners must consider *other competing mission requirements*, and the duration of support to DIVCAV. Depending on the size, scope, duration, and enemy, the majority of the CAB's total AH-64s could be committed to supporting DIVCAV. This limits available crews for other attack or reconnaissance missions and limits the ability to mass in the deep area. There must be a continuous dialogue in concert with the division commander's intent to balance the appropriate priorities in order to ensure the best support to the entire division.

**Provide reaction time and maneuver space.** In addition to supporting intelligence collection and reconnaissance, the CAB also supports security operations. It is critical for planners to understand that CABs can conduct a screen with only organic resources. CABs cannot conduct a guard mission without being task organized as a member of a combined arms team.

As discussed above, coordination across staffs is incumbent prior to issuing orders to ensure the correct task and purpose. Furthermore, when tasking the CAB to conduct security operations, division staffs must provide certain information to the CAB to support further planning and execution. Critical information must include commander's security guidance, accompanying PIRs, the breadth, depth, duration of the screen, and required reaction time for ground forces. These requirements have a significant impact on fighter management and sustainment (movement and synchronization of FARPs), which are often the limiting factors in conducting a guard or screen for the CAB.

**Destroy, Defeat, Disrupt, Delay Enemy Forces.** The CAB provides a lethal ability to mass and destroy enemy forces in LSCO. CABs execute attacks against enemy forces in close friendly contact or out of friendly contact, and they can be either hasty or deliberate in nature.<sup>2</sup> Planners do not task CABs to conduct attacks in contact or out of contact of friendly forces. The appropriate task is simply "attack."

Aviation attacks out of friendly contact are usually in the division deep area, constitute high risk, and require extensive coordination and synchronization to mitigate risk and achieve success. For a more in-depth discussion on this subject, refer to the article "Winning the Deep Fight: Planning, Preparing, and Aviation

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<sup>2</sup> FM 3-04, Army Aviation, par 3-13

Attacks Out of Friendly Contact,” found in the July-August 2021 edition of *Military Review*.<sup>3</sup> In short, division planners must consider or provide the following for aviation attacks out of contact.

*Destruction criteria* is a very clear way to define success or failure for an attack. The authors highly recommend discussing destruction criteria with the CAB, since destruction criteria may be limited by other factors such as friendly combat power or sustainment. As discussed above, this opens a critical dialogue between the staffs, which facilitates planning and avoids needless and time-consuming RFIs. As an example, based on the nature of the target, friendly combat power attrition, and sustainment challenges a CAB may need to execute a re-attack to meet destruction criteria. This triggers a discussion about risk and identifies a possible decision point where the commander assumes risk and conducts the re-attack, reduces destruction criteria, or brings other resources to bear in order to meet destruction criteria without a re-attack. A clear and well thought out destruction criteria, established with input by the CAB staff, is critical for further planning and successful execution.

It is also noteworthy that division planners default to ‘destroy’ when planning aviation attacks, but given the threat, terrain, and other sustainment constraints it might be more appropriate for the CAB to attack to ‘defeat, disrupt, or delay’ enemy forces. Again, a conversation with the CAB staff and G3 Aviation can help inform this discussion for division planners.

*Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB)*. Division planners must take the lead on initial IPB for aviation attacks out of contact. This includes identifying enemy unit composition and disposition, developing an event template, designating named areas of interest, performing terrain analysis, and identifying initial broad engagement areas. This process works best when the G-2 includes the CAB staff and G3 Aviation as much as possible in IPB.

*Gain and Maintain Contact*. To ensure a successful attack, divisions must establish a high degree of target fidelity by gaining and maintaining enemy contact. A well-developed event template and intelligence collection synchronization matrix go a long way to focusing when and where the CAB will mass in the engagement area to destroy enemy units. The authors routinely observe these attacks meet failure or partial success due to poor target fidelity and the mission devolves into a movement to contact for the CAB.

*Division planners must synchronize and integrate joint enablers to meet the right conditions and ensure success*. Division planners must understand required conditions for aviation attacks and request joint enablers well in advance to resource this mission accordingly. Division planners should clearly list these anticipated conditions by warfighting function in their TACSOP. A well-developed conditions checklist serves as a final go/no-go, but also quickly guides the staff to critical requirements for success.

*Aerial Delivered Minefields (Volcano)*. Although not often considered, the CAB can also disrupt or delay enemy forces using aerial delivered minefields (Volcano), via the UH-60. The CAB supports the offense or defense by emplacing disrupt, fix, turn, or block minefields, based on a specific time duration. The authors routinely observe this capability go unused, even as the CAB’s UH-60s sit idle for extensive periods at warfighter exercises.

To execute, division planners must provide the intent of the obstacle (disrupt, fix, turn, block), location, required dimensions, observers (if required), suppression of enemy air defenses, and careful timing and synchronization of the mission based on the limited duration of the mines. Finally, planners must account for the time required to reconfigure UH-60s for Volcano operations.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/JA-21/Sevigny-Deep-Fight.pdf>

**Air Assault Ground Maneuver Forces.** This discussion of air assaults will focus on a few critical factors that will help Division planners and the CAB better plan for and execute air assaults in LSCO.

Division planners must clearly identify, in writing, the Air Assault Task Force Commander (AATFC). If this is a BCT Commander, the BCT staff forms the Air Assault Task Force staff, but division planners must remain engaged in the planning process. The combined arms nature of an air assault almost guarantees that this mission will involve multiple brigades in the division, as well as the synchronization of joint enablers to ensure success and mitigate risk. Much of these capabilities are beyond the scope of the CAB and the BCT staff, meaning division must lead and synchronize this operation. This includes taking the lead in developing critical fighting documents, such as the execution checklist (EXCHECK), and shared conditions checklists. The CAB and BCT play critical roles in both documents, but responsibility for it falls beyond the scope of both units. Finally, the division must take the lead in meeting the right conditions to mitigate risk and lead the air assault task force rehearsal. If division planners do not take the lead in these areas, the authors routinely observe an air assault that does not meet required conditions and desynchronizes the greater division scheme of maneuver.

**Air Movement of passengers, equipment, and supplies.** Although not a movement and maneuver responsibility for the division staff, the CAB also helps sustain the division, as outlined in the aviation core competency “air movement of passengers, equipment, and supplies.” This is especially critical to prevent culmination, as the division transitions between offense and defense.

To maximize use of this capability, division planners must develop a system to receive, process, prioritize, execute, and track a high volume of air movement and resupply requests. The air mission request (AMR) is a common TTP and it can be extremely effective, if widely understood throughout the division. All stakeholders and users must clearly understand their duties and responsibilities within this system, and planners must capture it in the TACSOP. The CAB and G3 Aviation play a critical role in helping to develop this system.

Furthermore, Division planners can use support relationships from the CAB to the division Sustainment Brigade (DSB) in order to streamline mission processing. A direct support relationship from the CAB to the sustainment brigade can be particularly effective. If coupled with a CAB LNO to the DSB this further enhances coordination. Finally, the Division G3 Aviation or CAB should consider providing an LNO or a representative in the division rear area command post (RACP) to further assist with processing rotary wing air movements in the division rear area.

**Evacuate wounded – CASEVAC.** The CAB provides aerial MEDEVAC capability to the division through its air ambulance company, and CASEVAC through its UH and CH helicopters. In LSCO, high casualties could likely exceed aerial MEDEVAC capacity. Therefore, division planners must anticipate the use of CASEVAC to supplement MEDEVAC. Despite this reality and capability, the authors rarely see the CAB’s CASEVAC capability considered in the division patient evacuation plan. It is also exceptionally rare that division planners task CABs to perform dedicated CASEVAC operations, which often contributes to a higher “died of wounds” rate and culmination on the battlefield. FM 3-04 outlines dedicated, designated, and opportune CASEVAC. Dedicated CASEVAC helicopters are reserved exclusively for CASEVAC for a finite period to support high casualties, and do not perform any other mission. To optimize the CAB in this role, division planners coordinate with the CAB to conduct dedicated CASEVAC during finite periods when casualty estimates will likely increase or overwhelm MEDEVAC capacity. A discussion with the CAB staff will determine the feasibility of the CAB providing dedicated CASEVAC for a finite time, and provide support for this critical mission.

## **Conclusion**

Through the Army aviation core competencies, CABs play a critical role in supporting divisions in large-scale combat operations across all warfighting functions. To maximize the CABs' effectiveness, division and CAB staffs must work together to educate division planners and staff about aviation capabilities and limitations. This will naturally improve the dialogue and build a better relationship between the staffs, which will further develop shared information requirements that streamline planning in LSCO. By understanding the Aviation core competencies, and understanding these requirements, division planners will continuously improve and increase the speed of planning, which in turn will achieve more favorable outcomes in LSCO.

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