

Use of Air Power in Counter Insurgency Operations

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"By gaining the people,
the kingdom is gained,
by losing the people,
the kingdom is lost."

—CONFUCIOUS

"A guerrilla war differs from traditional military operations because its key prize is not control of territory, but control of the population. This depends in part on psychological criteria, especially a sense of security. No positive program of counter insurgency can succeed unless the population feels safe from terror or reprisal. Guerrillas rarely seek to hold real estate."

—HENRY KISSINGER

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kissinger made this statement after the war in Vietnam was almost lost. The importance of winning the people cannot be more emphasised in counter insurgency (COIN) operations.

The post World War II period brought out two distinct patterns of warfare. The sharp, short and limited wars, like the Arab-Israeli wars and the long, protracted, limited insurgencies as in Indo China, Malaya, Algeria and the Philippines. The efficacy and credibility of both have been amply proved by their aims and achievements.

During this century, insurgency has assumed a great deal of importance, and has gripped the attention of all military thinkers in the world. Insurgency is an inexpensive method of waging an indirect war without active involvement. It can also be waged by a small group of people to try and topple legal government.

Insurgency and guerrilla warfare go hand in hand. The insurgents always use guerrilla tactics, and the objectives of insurgency and guerrilla warfare can be any of the following :—

- ' (a) To defend the country, as a last resort against an enemy or to assist the regular forces.

(b) To instigate the masses to action so as to overthrow the enemy or existing government.

Insurgencies can either be urban or rural. In India we have examples of both, Naxalite urban insurgency and the rural insurgency of the Nagas and Mizos. Both must be countered differently to succeed. This paper deals with rural counter insurgency. The aim of this paper is to study the "Use of Air Power in Counter Insurgency Operations".

INSURGENCY AND COUNTER INSURGENCY

"Given an established base or sanctuary from which to work, the first aim of any insurgency movement must be to gain momentum by capturing more weapons, ammunition and explosives. Attacks will therefore, be made on isolated police posts and stations, and even on military installations where security is lax. At the same time, these and other attacks, particularly on communications, will be designed to throw the government off balance, to cause panic in the population and dislocate the economy. If these attacks in turn entice the government forces to go blundering around the country side, so much the better".

—ROBERT THOMPSON

Aim of An Insurgency. The strategic aims of the insurgents must be clearly understood by those who wish to counter it. The use of force by itself has not won any COIN operations. As Henry Kissinger once said, "The war in Vietnam was won militarily but lost politically". The political aim of the insurgents is to gain control over the population by starting in the rural areas and destroying the governments prestige and authority. The military aim is to neutralize the armed forces, rendering them powerless to save the country.

COIN operations must, therefore, ensure that the villages are made secure. The people must be won over to support the government forces. Without the people the war would be lost in any case. It is the masses, who in the long run decide the outcome of COIN operations. This fact must be borne in mind, particularly so when air power is used in COIN operations.

BRIEF HISTORY OF AIR POWER IN COUNTER INSURGENCY OPERATIONS

Air power has been used in COIN operations in Malaya, the Philippines, Algeria and Vietnam. Though the circumstances of the insurgencies differ in each country, nevertheless, there are a few valuable lessons to be learnt.

MALAYAN INSURGENCY

In 1948 an emergency was declared in Malaya when the insurgents launched a wave of murders against rubber planters. In 1951 the insurgency reached its peak and did not die off until the end of the decade. It was in 1951 that serious countermeasures were undertaken by the British. The COIN operations were directed by the civilians and the military campaign was subordinated to the political objectives. This was done to primarily gain or regain the confidence of the people. Throughout the operations, no independent role was assigned to the air force, and it was almost always used in close coordination with the ground forces in the following roles :—

- (a) Offensive Air Support.
- (b) Transport Air Support.
- (c) Helicopter Operations.
- (d) Reconnaissance.
- (e) Psychological Warfare Operations.

During offensive air strikes special care was taken to avoid destruction of private property. The rules were so strict that often a raid was aborted if a house lay in the target area. Also all strike operations were cleared by the local police, in order to keep civilian casualties to an absolute minimum.

In the thick jungles offensive air strikes were largely ineffective due to these restrictions. In isolated pockets the insurgents were, however, harassed, and kept on the move, thus lowering their morale.

The air force concentrated mainly on aerial reconnaissance (recce), transport support and psychological warfare operations. In these roles air power was found to be valuable and even indispensable.

The situation in Malaya was, however, different from that in Vietnam. No bordering country supported the insurgents. As the insurgents were mainly of Chinese origin, they could not blend with the local population, to escape the government forces.

ALGERIAN INSURGENCY

With a flat terrain without foliage air power was more extensively used in Algeria than in Malaya.

The French Air Force used a total of 1,000 aircraft including helicopters to support the ground forces from the very start, flying almost 1,000 sorties a month. Air power was used in offensive strikes, recce, in transport support, liaison and casualty evacuation operations.

Air power combined with the ground troops reduced the ranks of the insurgents, and gave the government forces decided advantage. However, this military victory was never translated into a political one. Indiscriminate and rampant bombing of suspected guerrilla strongholds and villages led to a large number of women and children being killed. This left a scar on the people, information thus dried up, as the people sympathised with the insurgents.

AIR WAR IN VIETNAM

"We fought a military war, our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition, our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. In the process, we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrillas war, the guerrilla wins if he does not lose, the conventional army loses if it does not win."

—HENRY KISSINGER

The conflict in Vietnam started as a small scale guerrilla war and gradually escalated to a point where the guerrillas operated in strength leading to a limited conventional war. The air war in Vietnam was one sided as there were severe political constraints on the use of air power. Almost 4,000 to 5,000 aircraft were employed in COIN operations during the peak years by the United States and its Allies. Air power was used in the following roles :—

- (a) Offensive Strike Operations.
- (b) Interdiction.
- (c) Air Transport Operations.
- (d) Reconnaissance.
- (e) Helicopter Operations.
- (f) Psychological Warfare.
- (g) Miscellaneous operations including flare dropping, defoliation and crop destruction.

The air war lasted almost a decade and saw a wide variety of aircraft and munitions being used. In 1968-1969 the average daily sorties flown by fighter bombers and helicopters in South Vietnam was approximately 700 and 2,800 respectively, and the monthly average by the B-52 bombers were 310 sorties. The total weight of bombs dropped on South Vietnam by the middle of 1971 was 3.9 million tons and the US aircraft losses till then were 429 fixed wing aircraft and 1876 helicopters.

The civilian casualties caused till Apr 71 were almost 1,050,000 which included 3,25,000 deaths. A total of 6,000,000 South Vietnamese became refugees, which is one third the total population.

During World War II and the Korean War the total tonnage of bombs dropped was 2,000,000 and 1,000,000 tons respectively. In Vietnam a country the size of Britain 6,300,000 tons of bombs were dropped till 1971 and by the end of 1972 the bombs were still falling on Indo China at the rate of 55,000 tons per month.

Though air power was dominant during the Vietnam war, it could not win the war, but it prevented it from being lost. The large number of civilians killed by bombing, eventually led to the defeat of the government forces. The military victory could not be translated into a political one.

USE OF AIR POWER IN COUNTER INSURGENCY OPERATIONS

In the initial stages the insurgents rely on hit and run tactics, operating from well protected bases in jungles, mountains and swamps. The insurgents are not well defined as such not vulnerable to air attacks. Therefore, the use of air power is limited during this stage. Once the insurgents have consolidated their ranks and offer battle to the government forces, air power plays a dominant role in COIN operations. Without air power COIN operations may prove unsuccessful. However, indiscriminate and ruthless use of air power does more harm than good.

ROLE OF AIR POWER

The role of air power will be discussed under the following :-

- (a) Air Transport Operations.
- (b) Reconnaissance.
- (c) Offensive Air Strike (Fixed Wing).
- (d) Helicopter Operations.
- (e) Defoliation and Crop destruction.
- (f) Psychological Warfare.

AIR TRANSPORT OPERATIONS

The lack of suitable surface communications in under developed areas causes a lot of difficulties and delays for the ground forces to reinforce a threatened area. To keep the existing lines of communications open, a large force is tied down.

The insurgents rely mainly on surprise for success. They can select targets at random, attack and withdraw before the opposite side can react. Air Transport provides mobility and flexibility for the ground forces. It is thus possible to deploy troops rapidly in the threatened areas and achieve surprise.

Air transport operations can be carried out by para dropping or landing troops and material, using VTOL/STOL aircraft, and to maintain contact with isolated parts. Quick evacuation of sick and wounded government forces, civilians and insurgents could be carried out. Thus raising the morale of own troops and winning the support of the masses and insurgents.

Paradropping. These operations will largely depend on the terrain and area in which they are carried out.

When a guerrilla camp has been located or an outpost attacked, the para force, which is on alert, gets airborne immediately. The DZ selection, so as to give the insurgents minimum warning. A second para unit is dropped along the likely retreat route, as soon as possible.

High winds would cause casualties and dispersion of the force, delaying regrouping. Use of flares, flags, whistles and smoke candles would help in quick regrouping. Today special parachutes permit drops from low altitudes, however, in case of main chute failure, casualties would be higher, as there is no time to operate the auxiliary chute. The aircraft in this case is exposed to ground fire, however, the paratrooper is exposed to ground fire for a shorter duration and dispersion is reduced.

The para force should remain in the area till the guerrillas have been annihilated or have escaped. Therefore, arrangements for resupplies should be made in advance. The force should as far as possible be retrieved by air using helicopters or VTOL/STOL aircraft. Return by surface communications over long distances would reduce the force's effectiveness and employability. Ambush enroute would also cause heavy casualties.

Terrain. Paradrops in paddy fields and generally flat ground is easy, while drops in jungles can be hazardous. At times paradropping may be the only way to reach a guerrilla camp and maintaining surprise. For drops in thick jungles, the paratrooper is equipped with a special shock absorbing bag which is positioned under the feet as soon as the chute opens. The initial impact is taken by the bag. As soon as the chute is firmly hung in the trees, the bag is lowered to the ground. A canvas strap, which is firmly attached to the paratrooper is passed through the chute harness. When the chute is released the paratrooper slowly descends to the ground.

Air Landing of Troops and Material. Para operations may not always be feasible. In which case it would be essential to land troops

and material close to the threatened area of hideout. Preparing landing strips over soft ground and jungles is extremely difficult. In jungles, however, strips could be prepared by the use of explosives or cutting down the trees. The use of VTOL/STOL aircraft could reduce the length required. Landing strips could be prepared in advance if possible depending on the area of operations. On receiving information about the guerrillas, the troops could be air lifted to the nearest landing ground.

Air transportation of troops and material provides mobility, flexibility and surprise, which is so essential in COIN operations.

Air Cushion Landing System. One of the major problems in operating transport aircraft, is the preparation of landing strips. This problem can be overcome by using Air Cushion Landing System (ACLS). The ACLS works on the same principle as the Air Cushioned Vehicles (ACVs). The aircraft fitted with ACLS would be able to operate over water, land, marshy areas, swamps, ice, snow and over undulating terrain. This means that the preparation of the landing strip becomes easy. This system can be used on any type of aircraft including helicopters. The aircraft would thus be able to operate over a wider variety of terrain without the requirement of firm ground.

AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE

Intelligence in COIN operations is obtained by observing the movements of guerrilla bands, interrogation of prisoners, captured documents and informants. Some of this information is outdated and unreliable.

Aerial recce is today one of the most important methods of gathering intelligence. The aircraft can traverse a large area in a short time, thus providing valuable information regarding enemy movements and hide-outs. Aerial recce keeps the guerrilla on the move, thus reducing his effectiveness and morale.

Aerial recce can be carried out visually or by photo, radar, infra red and low light television (LLTV).

Visual Recce. Using fixed wing slow speed aircraft and helicopters provides upto date accurate information and permits the ground forces/strike aircraft to react fast. Night vision equipment enables visual recce to be carried out by night effectively. Visual recce should be carried out by pilots allotted more or less permanent areas of operation. Thus any departure from the ordinary would be easily noticed.

Aerial Photography. Similarly, aerial photography can be extremely useful in providing upto date information of suspected areas. New tracks and clearings in jungles would be easily noticeable in aerial photos.

Visual and photo recce would also be essential in pre-strike and post strike intelligence.

Though the type of target may be known by radar and infra red recce, it is difficult to identify as friendly or hostile. Such recce would have to be linked with other sources of intelligence.

Low Light Television (LLTV) uses sensitive TV cameras to view the ground in fading light. The ground image is projected on the screen for the pilot to examine, thus providing an accurate picture of the ground. This, however, is not possible on dark nights or when visibility is reduced due to low clouds.

Armed Recce. In COIN operations armed recce, in which a target is located and attacked, has more disadvantages than advantages. The pilot spotting movement of supplies and men has no way of confirming if they are insurgents. This can lead to attacks on innocent civilians and cause harm to the COIN operations. This form of recce so effective in conventional wars with a well defined frontline is useless in COIN operations.

OFFENSIVE AIR STRIKES

In COIN operations, there are a number of restrictions on offensive strike sorties. The fact that the guerrillas operate in and close to the local population, with no well defined front lines, imposes a moral and political restraint on these operations. One fact must be borne in mind that these strikes are carried out on own territory and indiscriminate or ruthless use of air power, could cause damage and high casualties amongst the civilian population, thus tilting the scale in favour of the guerrillas.

"If you kill a few civilians from the villages or the aborigine tribes, particularly if they are children, you do more harm than all the good you may do by killing a few insurgents. You have made those people, villagers and tribes, enemies for good. Quick air strikes, also indiscriminate bombing becomes very unpopular towards the end"

—THE AIR WAR IN INDO CHINA

In COIN operations, the insurgents is an elusive target. He operates in small bands and is difficult to identify. The terrain makes location and identification of targets difficult. Therefore, offensive

strikes must be well planned based on accurate intelligence, to avoid casualties to civilians.

Offensive strikes could be preplanned or immediate. Both, if used discriminately backed by accurate intelligence, can be efficacious. Strike aircraft were used in Algeria and to a greater extent in Vietnam. However, the damage caused to the guerrillas was insufficient to make them surrender. Lack of intelligence caused more damage to innocent bystanders.

Lets examine a typical case in Algeria and Vietnam of a village known to harbour guerrillas and sympathisers. Leaflets were dropped or 'voice' aircraft used, ordering the villagers to evacuate the village by a prescribed time, after which it will be bombed. Perhaps only a few can leave the village for fear of the guerrillas reprisals. The bombing commences at the prescribed time and the village is razed to the ground. The result—two guerrillas killed for the loss of 50 villagers including women and children. These strikes were routine. General Johnson US Army Chief of Staff in 1969 summed this up when he said, "We have not enough information, we act with ruthlessness, like a steamroller, bombing extensive areas and not selected targets based on detailed intelligence."

On the other hand when close air support was used in Malaya, it was based on accurate and upto date intelligence.

Method. When a guerrilla camp or hideout has been located, the area must be fixed accurately by the ground forces. Thereafter, attacks could be carried out in one pass so as to give no warning to the insurgents. Similarly, an electronic homing device could be planted as close to the camps as possible, an aerial fix taken and then attacked. The guerrillas are thus caught unawares and have little chance to escape. The ground forces must move in only after the attacks are on the way so as to give no warning to the insurgents.

Also, during encounters with insurgents, close air support could be carried out, under the control of the airborne FAC, to ensure the safety of own troops and civilians. At times the ground forces may have surrounded the insurgents, but are unable to close in due to the terrain, offensive strikes would be extremely effective in killing the guerrillas or forcing them out into the waiting troops.

HELICOPTER OPERATIONS

The versatility of the helicopter renders it extremely efficacious in COIN operations, in terrains, which does not favour elaborate road communications or landing strips for fixed wing aircraft. They can

operate in hilly terrains or jungles so long as a small clearing is available.

During the Vietnam war no other aircraft has been as exploited as the helicopter. It has, similarly been used in Algeria and Malaya. In Vietnam, however, the helicopter operated with total air superiority. The achievements quoted by the US army have been exaggerated quite a bit. A study by an impartial study group has this to say :—

“By the end of 1971 the total US aircraft losses were 429 fixed wing aircraft and 1876 helicopters.”

— The Air War in Indo China

The details of aircraft losses is attached as Appendix A.

The helicopter still plays an important role in COIN operations, the use, however, would depend on the resources of the country. Helicopters can be used for various roles in COIN operations.

Mobility. The troops carrying helicopter provides mobility and flexibility to the ground forces in underdeveloped areas. The troops can be kept in readiness, with helicopters standing by. Whenever, the insurgents have been spotted or an outpost attacked, this force could be quickly deployed to encircle the insurgents and cut off their retreat. Once surrounded, the ground forces could carry out mopping up operations. The helicopter can operate from unprepared clearings and is more advantageous than the STOL aircraft, though the flying time is more. The combination of VTOL aircraft and helicopters is ideal.

Reconnaissance. The slow speed and hovering capability of the helicopter make it an ideal platform for recce. Visual recce can be best done in helicopters. The pilots operating in specified areas could spot any changes easily. Similarly, photo recce, and electronic recce can be carried out—similar to fixed wing aircraft. Use of LLTV and night vision equipment would make it effective during the night also.

Casualty Evacuation. The helicopters ability to evacuate own casualties from inaccessible areas gives a tremendous boost to the morale of every soldier on patrol. This ensures quick medical treatment of the sick and wounded. Similarly, when civilians are evacuated from far flung areas, they regain confidence in the government. Leaflets with the following would help to win the borderline insurgent : “Leave the sick and wounded behind, we guarantee their safety and medical treatment.” This would have a devastating effect on the insurgents and would go a long way in winning the war politically.

Similarly, search and rescue of downed pilots would save valuable pilots and uninjured pilots would be available for flying immediately.

Airborne FAC. The helicopter could be most effectively used for the airborne FAC to direct the firepower of strike aircraft. Slow speed fixed wing aircraft could also be used. The FAC could also act as a command post and airborne relay station, to augment the communications during major operations. Target marking rockets and coloured smoke could be used to mark the target and indicate position of own troops.

Armed Helicopter. The utility of the armed helicopter in COIN operations is undisputed. However, it has various limitations like the fixed wing strike aircraft. Operations in an hostile environment would cause a high rate of attrition. The US army in its eagerness to retain control of the helicopters have given exaggerated achievements, while playing low on the losses. The attrition rates in Vietnam are given as Appendix A.

It can be argued that the helicopter flew a larger number of sorties. This is not entirely true. Only a part of the total sorties were utilised in the strike role, the rest being used for recce, communications, casualty evacuation etc.

At no stage is it implied that the helicopter is useless, far from it. However, it does not replace the fighter ground attack aircraft, but is complementary to it. The helicopter, if used haphazardly, the losses in pilots and aircraft would be prohibitive. Besides, it would jeopardize the government cause, if used ruthlessly, similar, to the fixed wing aircraft.

Helicopter Gunships. The armed helicopter could be used in the defensive and offensive role. Aircraft mounted with sideways and or forward firing guns are referred to as gun ships. The 7.62 mm miniguns and the 2.75 inch rockets have proved to be very effective due to the accuracy of the weapons. The fragmentation warhead and the Flechette round, which is a finned metal dart, designed to air burst provides very good penetration in thick jungles.

The gunships can be used independently or in conjunction with other ground/air operations. Once a hideout has been located and identified, they could be used to attack and or hold the insurgents till the ground forces surround the hideouts. Road convoys and troop movements could be provided cover from ambushes. The gunships can also provide suppressing fire power during para operations, casualty evacuation, rescue operations and when troops and supplies are landed in guerrilla infested areas.

Due to high explosives and large dispersion of the weapons, use of gunships in close proximity of own forces or civilians would be restricted. Fire control by FAC would, therefore, be essential.

Gunships and Hovercrafts. The hovercraft (ACV) has proved to be very effective, capable of operating over swamps, marsh, tall elephant grass and uneven ground. Due to the operations just above the ground the visibility is restricted. The helicopter and the ACV used as a hunter killer group would be very effective against insurgents. The ACV is a noisy vehicle and its approach can be heard by the insurgents. The helicopter, after detecting the insurgents can hover out of small arm range. Its noise would then drown the ACV approach which is being guided by the helicopter, thus taking the insurgents by surprise. Similarly, troops can be retrieved without the insurgents knowing. Due to no contact with the grounds, no vibrations are caused by the ACV.

DEFOLIATION AND CROP DESTRUCTION

In COIN operations aircraft can be used for defoliation and crop destruction. This would deny the insurgent the cover provided by the thick jungle foliage and food. Aerial spraying could be done over a large area. These operations, however, are not recommended as the destruction caused to forest and crop is more or less permanent causing extensive damage to valuable forest, animals and crop, as seen after the Vietnam war. Instead of winning the support of the people, such destruction is more likely to turn them against the government.

The damage caused in Vietnam was about 35 percent of the hard wood forest was destroyed and one half of the mangrove forests in the Delta region. The total crop destroyed was enough to feed 600,000 people for one year.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

Aerial psychological warfare, in COIN operations is as important as the operations mentioned earlier. It is essential that the people be explained the reasons of the war against the insurgents.

The use of aircraft with loud speakers for propaganda and counter-propaganda could be carried out very effectively. Aircraft can cover large areas and be used in remote places, including guerrilla strongholds. This would lower the morale of the insurgents and also assure the people that the government has not deserted them. Similarly, leaflets, special ration cards, surrender passes, could be dropped in large numbers over a wide area to induce the insurgents to defect and sally with the government forces.

Leaflets announcing rewards for information regarding the insurgents, or the rehabilitation of surrendered insurgents could be dropped in suspected and known insurgent camps. This should have a devastating effect in the ranks of the insurgents.

Propaganda by captured/surrendered insurgents, especially well known ones, announcing the good treatment given by the government, could be done by using taped voice or dropping leaflets with the signatures. This would have a profound effect on the morale of the insurgents and would cause mistrust in their ranks.

CONCLUSION

Counter insurgency operations are primarily conducted by the government forces and ground forces and air power used to support these forces. Since 1950, air power has demonstrated the important contribution it makes in COIN operations, especially in jungle, hilly, marshy and swampy terrain. The intelligent use of air power has resulted in a more economical campaign and considerably reduces the manpower which would be much more and way out of proportion to the insurgents.

Air power would provide the government forces with a higher degree of initiative and surprise which otherwise is denied to them. The correct use of air power provides the commander an opportunity to meet the insurgents at times and places least suitable to the insurgents.

Air power can be utilised for air transport support, offensive strikes, recce, strikes by helicopter gunships, airborne FAC, search and rescue. It can be used in the hunter killer role in conjunction with ACVs and for psychological warfare operations. However, air power must function in support of the ground forces. The clearance of offensive strikes must be by the government forces to keep the civilian casualties to the minimum.

The indiscriminate and ruthless use of air power, especially in the offensive strike role would cause damage to civilian property and life. The killing of women and children would do more harm than good to the government forces.

Air power is a dominant factor in COIN operations. It provides the commander rapid mobility, quick deployment of forces and gives a hard punch to the insurgents, if used carefully. No ground commander can hope to succeed in counter-insurgency operations without the support of air power.

Appendix 'A'
(Refers to para 54 and 61.)

US AIRCRAFT LOSSES—SOUTH VIETNAM

Type of Aircraft	1961-1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	Feb 1971	Total
Fixed Wing	81	69	73	107	68	29	2	429
Helicopters	106	123	260	495	452	393	42	1878

Note : Losses due to hostile action.

US AIRCRAFT LOSSES—INDOCHINA ALL CAUSES

Type of Aircraft	1961-1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	Feb 1971	Total
Fixed Wing	462	634	728	657	466	256	45	3248
Helicopters	275	321	664	1008	1048	832	104	4252

US DEATHS DUE TO AIRCRAFT LOSSES—HOSTILE ACTION

Type of Aircraft	1961-1967	1968	1969	1970	Total
Fixed Wing	538	250	165	87	1040
Helicopters	640	631	638	610	2519

—“The Air Power in Indo China”