

Operation THURSDAY

A case study of the critical role of assault support aviation during expeditionary advanced base operations

by Capt Nolan Vihlen

Investment in increasingly advanced long-range precision fires represents a paradigm shift in adversary capabilities that threatens American naval primacy. The concept of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) aims to counter peer and near-peer competitors by employing mobile, persistent, and low-signature forces from austere locations within an adversary's weapons engagement zone (WEZ) in support of the naval force.¹ The establishment and sustainment of mobile expeditionary advanced bases (EAB) to host these forces presents numerous challenges to Marine Corps planners. Examining the first operation that utilized an air assault to establish an operational airfield behind enemy lines provides potential insights to the employment of EABO in the absence of established doctrine.² In a global environment that will require the Marine Corps to persist at extreme long-range within an adversary's WEZ, Operation THURSDAY provides a relevant historical example for the pivotal role assault support aviation must play in EABO. The utilization of assault support aviation during the Burma campaign of 1944 demonstrates the viability of establishing mobile operating bases within an adversary's WEZ, assault support aviation's capability to conduct long-range sustainment and evacuation of maneuver forces, and the ability of dispersed, low-signature forces to contribute to the single-battle concept.

On the night of 4 March 1944, 77 Brigade of British MajGen Orde Wingate's Special Force—the Chindits—was staged at their pickup zone in Lalaghat, India. American CG-4A Waco gliders and the C-47s that would tow them to their objective area waited to transport the Chindits to their destination

>Capt Vihlen is a CH-53E Instructor Pilot currently assigned to Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One at MCAS Yuma. He is also a recent graduate of Expeditionary Warfare School.

160 miles behind Japanese lines in occupied Burma.³ It had been almost a year since Wingate's original, ground inserted, long-range penetration into Burma ended as beleaguered troops waded across the Chindwin River and back into India. The inability of the lightly equipped force to logistically sustain themselves or evacuate their wounded in such an austere environment negated much of the initial successes of the bold plan by the eccentric British commander. Wingate, however,

would not be deterred. Convinced that a highly mobile, low-signature force inserted deep behind Japanese lines could completely reshape the war in Burma, Wingate secured a personal guarantee of American air support from the commander of U.S. Army Air Forces, GEN Henry "Hap" Arnold. The 1st Air Commando Group was tailor-made to address the challenges the Chindits faced in 1943 through a unique command relationship that would directly support Wingate's soldiers in an air assault named Operation THURSDAY.

Appointed by GEN Arnold to assemble a task force for operations in Burma, U.S. Army Colonels Cochran and Allison set to work to assemble an air group comprised of troop-carrying gliders, transport and attack aircraft, and even six experimental YR-4 helicopters.⁴ Early in 1944, the Army air group—origi-



5 March 2019 marked the 75th anniversary of Operation THURSDAY at Hurlburt Field, FL. The Air Commandos protected the British "Chindits" by harassing Japanese forces with P-51A Mustangs and B-25H Mitchell gunships. (Photo by Airman 1st Class Joel Miller.)

nally designated the 5318th Provisional Air Unit—arrived in theater and set to work to support the Chindit air assault into Burma. Utilizing gliders, American pilots would transport one brigade of Chindits deep behind Japanese lines to three landing zones where attached engineers of the American 900th Airborne Engineer Aviation Company would rapidly construct EABs capable of supporting C-47 operations. These EABs, designated Broadway, Piccadilly, and Chowringhee, would facilitate the arrival of troops and supplies required to establish a base of operations for the devastating attacks Wingate had planned against the Japanese.⁵ In execution, the Chindits established an EAB in less than a day through which the 1st Air Commando Group transported 539 troops and 29,972 pounds of supplies within the first twenty-four hours.⁶ After all EABs were established, “one hundred glider and almost six hundred Dakota sorties flew in nine thousand troops and eleven hundred animals”⁷ in less than five days. These locations were not permanent, however, and all were abandoned when their purpose was fulfilled.⁸ EABO intends to duplicate the relative advantage that Wingate’s forces gained as they shifted operating bases despite their continued presence inside the WEZ of Japanese artillery and strike aircraft.⁹

The night brigade-sized glider insert did not occur without significant friction. Planning oversights threatened to scuttle the operation before the first soldier landed in Burma. In defiance of Wingate’s order to minimize flights over the objective area prior to launch, last minute aerial reconnaissance showed that the Piccadilly landing zone was fouled by felled trees and untenable for glider operations. After significant effort, Wingate was assured that the clear landing zone at Broadway was not a Japanese trap.¹⁰ Moreover, desperate to avoid the logistical challenges of the previous year, troops loaded their gliders with more supplies than aircrew had accounted for. C-47s simultaneously towing two overloaded gliders had difficulty climbing to the altitude required to transit the intervening terrain and multiple gliders were prematurely re-

leased prior to reaching the objective area. This planning factor remains relevant for aviation planners required to facilitate the sustainment EABs far from logistical hubs.¹¹ Despite these difficulties, thirty-seven gliders landed at Broadway and by the next evening, sixty-three C-47s had landed at the freshly constructed 4,700 foot, fully lit runway.¹² This EAB and the sub-

entire division-sized Chindits. A special command relationship existed between the air-ground task force as Wingate’s troops “had the unique luxury of its own air force.”¹⁵ Our Service’s emphasis on the importance of aviation is demonstrated by the MAGTF’s reliance on the ACE to provide commanders “mobility, flexibility, force protection, and fires.”¹⁶ A cohesive air-ground re-

... thousands of specially trained and equipped Commonwealth troops inserted suddenly within the enemy’s rear area was intended to present a complex dilemma to Japanese commanders.

sequently constructed landing zone at Chowringhee enabled three brigades of Chindits to rapidly move against targets in the vulnerable Japanese rear area.

While air assaults were not conducted by the Marine Corps until the introduction of rotary-wing vertical envelopment during the Korean War, World War II glider-borne air assaults provide relevant lessons as the Marine Corps begins to codify EABO procedures. Developed by Germany prior to World War II, an air assault at the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael enabled over 400 German troops in 41 DFS 230 gliders to conduct a *coup de main*, which overwhelmed startled defenders and set the conditions for an armored blitzkrieg that would devastate Western Europe. Allied planners quickly understood the utility of gliders to conduct internal transportation of supplies and equipment to areas inaccessible to powered aircraft. Moreover, it allowed commanders to mass combat power while maintaining unit integrity that proved challenging in paratroop operations.¹³ This technology convinced GEN Arnold that air power could demonstrate the ability of assault support aviation “to support sizable units for an extended period behind enemy lines.”¹⁴ Assault support aviation not only inserted three brigades of combat troops deep within the Japanese rear area, but it was also the sole source of sustainment for the

relationship was critical to the success of Wingate’s maneuver forces during Operation THURSDAY, and it will be fundamental to the conduct of EABO.

The operating bases and associated airfields rapidly constructed during Operation THURSDAY, while remote and austere, lacked the fundamental maritime character that defines EABs in EABO.¹⁷ It is critical, however, to understand the contributions of this operation to the strategic level of war against the Empire of Japan. Allied leaders were presented numerous challenges as they sought to defeat Japanese forces that not only occupied Burma but actively threatened India with invasion. The primary goal of the Chindits was to inflict considerable damage to enemy lines of communication in support of adjacent commanders. The inevitable confusion caused by thousands of specially trained and equipped Commonwealth troops inserted suddenly within the enemy’s rear area was intended to present a complex dilemma to Japanese commanders. A continued Japanese presence in Burma would prove increasingly untenable when cut off from reinforcements required to face Allied Chinese troops under the command of American LTG Joseph Stilwell while simultaneously wedged between additional Chinese forces to their east and LTG William Slim’s Fourteenth Army to their west.¹⁸ Assault support aviation’s contribution



Veterans of Operation THURSDAY, LtCol Richard Cole USAF(Ret), Senior Master Sgt William Cartwright USAF(Ret), middle, and former U.S. Army Air Force Staff Sgt Patt Meara, right, attended the 75th anniversary commemoration with members of 1st Special Operations Wing and Air Force Special Operations Command. (Photo by Airman 1st Class Joel Miller.)

to the single-battle concept through the construction of low-signature, mobile EABs played no small part in setting the favorable conditions throughout the China Burma India Theater. The dramatic actions of the Chindits and American Air Commandos had “profound and consequent effects on other areas and events,” specifically enabling the strategic conditions that allowed the unopposed amphibious landing to seize Rangoon, Burma, during Operation DRACULA the following year. It is critical that planners are not burdened with an overly prescriptive interpretation of EABO. If actions conducted at EABs disproportionately engage an adversary and “enable fleet forces to mitigate risk in a contested environment or seize opportunities elsewhere”¹⁹ it has successfully conducted EABO regardless of its proximity to maritime terrain.

The current global threat environment presents significant challenges to the Marine Corps as it transitions between the counterinsurgency operations of the last two decades and burgeoning great power competition.²⁰ Significant ambiguity exists regarding the execution of EABO, but it is evident that it will require intensive aviation operations at “long ranges and high endurance.”²¹

The far eastern corner of the British Raj posed logistical and maneuver challenges that will be mirrored by Marines during EABO. While the character of the modern battlefield is markedly different from that of Burma in 1944, the mobility and flexibility that assault support aviation provides to ground forces is as relevant now as it was on the humid spring evening that the 1st Air Commando Group made history. The actions that occurred during Operation THURSDAY demonstrate the viability of assault support aviation in the establishment of EABs deep within an adversary’s WEZ, aviation’s contribution to long-range sustainment of distributed forces, and the tangible impact of dispersed, low-signature forces to the single-battle concept. It is imperative that Marine leaders understand the ability of aviation to support the MAGTF despite the uncertainties that inevitably accompany any conflict that lies just over the horizon.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

2. Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1943–1945*, (New York, NY: Copper Square Press, 1956).
3. Randy Bergeron, Herbert Mason, and James Renfrow, *Operation Thursday: Birth of the Air Commandos*, (Montgomery, AL: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1994).
4. R.D. Wagner, *1st Air Commando Group: Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, (Montgomery, AL: Air Command and Staff College, 1986).
5. *Operation THURSDAY*.
6. *Ibid*.
7. *Defeat Into Victory*.
8. Henry Arnold, “The Aerial Invasion of Burma,” *National Geographic*, (Washington, DC: August 1944).
9. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, (Washington, DC: February 2021).
10. *Defeat Into Victory*.
11. *Operation THURSDAY*.
12. *1st Air Commando Group*.
13. Stephen Ambrose, *Pegasus Bridge*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Inc, 1985).
14. Dwight Zimmerman, “The 1st Air Commando Group Rise to the Challenge,” *The Year in Special Operations*, (Tampa, FL: Faircount Media Group, 2004).
15. *Defeat Into Victory*.
16. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-20, Aviation Operations*, (Washington, DC: 2018).
17. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.
18. *Defeat Into Victory*.
19. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.
20. *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*.
21. *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

