



*Soldiers from Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 25th Aviation Regiment, conduct a cold refuel of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter during Lightning Forge in February 2016 on the Hawaiian Islands. (Photo by Cpl. James Halstead)*

## Supporting an Aviation Task Force Attached to a Brigade Combat Team

■ By Capt. William S. Cunningham and 1st Lt. Jacob H. Lillehaug

In February 2016, the 2nd Battalion (Assault), 25th Aviation Regiment (2-25 AVN), 25th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB), 25th Infantry Division, participated in Lightning Forge, a home-station decisive action training exercise that took place throughout the Hawaiian Islands. The exercise was designed to provide a brigade combat team (BCT) with combat training center-like training with a focus on jungle operations.

During the training, 2-25 AVN was attached to the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 25th Infantry Division. The unit learned that the modified table of organization and equipment of an aviation forward support company (FSC), combined with a different approach to sustainment oper-

ations, presented unforeseen challenges that required non-doctrinal solutions.

This article highlights some of the lessons learned from integrating into a BCT and supporting an aviation task force attached to a maneuver BCT. It also provides best practices to overcome these challenges.

As an assault battalion, 2-25 AVN is designed to have 30 UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters and execute air assault and air movement operations. During Lightning Forge, the aviation task force was comprised of 10 UH-60 Blackhawks, plus three HH-60s for aeromedical evacuation, and two UH-60Ls for aerial mission command. The task force also included four CH-47 Chinooks and four AH-64D Apaches.

Additionally, the 2-25 AVN usual-

ly receives sustainment support from its aviation support battalion (ASB). However, during Lightning Forge, it received sustainment support from the BCT's brigade support battalion (BSB) that they were attached to.

### Challenges of Aviation FSCs

Much like FSCs for BCTs, aviation FSCs are tailored to support their maneuver battalions. But, unlike BCT FSCs, the aviation FSC belongs to its maneuver battalion. It has no command relationship with the ASB. This not only offers a more tailorable package but also presents challenges for the aviation FSC supporting an aviation task force in a decisive action scenario.

Neither the aviation task force nor the aviation FSC is designed to maneuver

extensively on the battlefield. The aviation FSC is not designed to support an aviation task force. It is only designed to support its assigned aviation battalion. Logistics operations in an aviation unit are significantly different from logistics in a BCT and can be a challenge to fully integrating into a BCT task force.

**Mobility.** The first challenge, mobility, is rooted in the modified table of organization and design of the CAB. CABs are designed to fight together from a fixed position as was common in Iraq and Afghanistan. While fighting from built-up airfields in a counterinsurgency environment, mobility was not necessary. However, as training priorities shifted to decisive action and we experienced BCT task force decisive action operations, the CAB design has limitations.

During the planning for Lightning Forge, Echo Company, 2-25 AVN, an FSC supporting the aviation task force, identified the mobility it required to support the aviation task force and that it had a severe mobility asset shortfall. As a result, the unit requested load handling systems with trailers and flat racks and the Soldiers to operate them. This provided the mobility assets required to move a three-day supply of food and drinking water, ammunition, repair parts, and the complex mission command systems of the aviation task force.

**Personnel.** The second challenge was the lack of ammunition specialists required to handle the rockets and missiles for the AH-64D Apaches. While the FSC normally operates ammunition holding areas for small arms, the handling and rearming of the Apaches' weapons required the addition of two ammunition specialists from the ASB.

**Integration.** The final logistics challenge was the integration of the aviation task force into the sustainment structure of a BCT. Field Manual (FM) 3-96, Brigade Combat Team, says that the BCT should echelon sustainment support by creating a brigade support area with a field trains command post while pushing the combat trains command post forward with the maneuver battalion. This allows the maneuver

battalion the maximum support while still maintaining a high degree of mobility on the battlefield. However, aviation FSCs provide a distinctly different set of capabilities to aviation battalions that invalidate field and combat trains command posts.

### **CAB versus BCT Logistics**

Aviation logistics doctrine is very different from BCT logistics doctrine. FM 3-96 describes the use of echeloned support as the method of supporting an organization arrayed within an area of operations. To support the maneuver battalions, supplies are pushed from a sustainment brigade to the brigade support battalion, reconfigured, and then sent to the FSCs for distribution to the maneuver company. FM 3-04.111, Aviation Brigades, describes the throughput of supplies to the ASB and FSC and the need for pulsed logistics. Pulsed logistics is defined as support that does not come in a continuous stream but arrives in distinct packages. Pulsed logistics allows supplies to flow during tactical pauses and provides minimum disruption to the aviation FSC and the aviation battalion.

**FARPs.** The aviation FSC's greatest asset to the aviation battalion is its ability to operate forward arming and refueling points. These field-expedient points gives the FSC the ability to quickly refuel helicopters, rearm Apaches, and provide 24-hour support to the aviation battalion.

Aviation support naturally pulses with the operational tempo and crew rest requirements. Pulsed logistics allows the aviation FSC to receive supplies after major flight periods and during operations when supplies are low and the capacity exists to receive resupply. Normal expenditures during Lightning Forge ranged from 6,000 to 12,000 gallons of fuel per day in the aviation task force. This requirement quickly overwhelmed the infantry BCT's BSB, so the next supporting element, the 25th Sustainment Brigade, delivered fuel directly to the aviation FSC.

**Proper support.** Problematic to the integration of aviation logistics into BCT logistics is the lack of echeloned support.

Unlike ground maneuver battalions, aviation battalions maintain battalion integrity in the battlespace. All of the aviation FSC's supported maneuver companies are co-located with the task force headquarters and the FSC. The FSC can then leverage unit supply. Maintaining a liaison with the BSB was extremely important during the exercise. Originally, the FSC executive officer and the S-4 noncommissioned officer-in-charge acted as liaisons with the BSB. This worked well but could be improved upon.

Having a representative from the S-1 would be helpful, especially given the requirement to coordinate replacements and report battle losses. Also, having a representative from the S-3 section would provide better visibility of aviation operations in the BSB. Much of the logistics support in the exercise was done by air. Because the operation took place on an archipelago, aviation was heavily relied on to move troops and supplies. The aviation liaisons to the BSB received a lot of requests for information about aviation operations.

Lightning Forge presented many learning opportunities for sustainers at the tactical and operational level. The BCT and CAB developed a mutual understanding of sustainment operations and became generally familiar with each other's sustainment doctrine. The key to success was direct communication and a shared understanding of their different mission sets and support requirements.

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