

AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC SECURITY

Károly TURCSÁNYI*, Ernő HEGEDŰS*

*Miklós Zrínyi National Defence University, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract: The employment of airborne troops for ensuring public security and fighting terrorism can be explained noting two different reasons. The first reason was the need for faster involvement. The second reason was the achievement of tactical surprise for which airborne troops were used in both public security and antiterrorist operations.

Keywords: airborne operation, public security, terrorism, parachute airborne troops.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays a new tendency can be observed in the development of military organizations where counterterrorist units are organized within a country's national army, more specifically on army bases where deep reconnaissance units are also based. This is related to having air assault capabilities – the use of helicopter and parachute airborne operations, which is becoming a requirement for the greater mobility of small but highly professional troops that are now employed in counterterrorist operations. Approximately 80 percent of counterterrorist units have assault capabilities, and nearly 70 percent of these units operate inside military organizations [1]. The question arises whether counterterrorism as a public security measure, or more precisely the overlap between counterterrorist and airborne troops, is a recent development of the last two-three decades or something that existed earlier. To answer this question, we will examine what type of operations were in effect during the Second World War that would have employed airborne troops for or in relations to fighting counterterrorism within the realms of public security. We would regard as such any operation that would have involved the freeing or capturing of incarcerated or protected individuals, the blocking of unconventional forces or the occupation of towns or territories to control

public security. The examination will look at the Soviet, German, British and American airborne troops, respectively as well as their operations. Typically it was either during the diversionary or possibly tactical operations of parachute troops or during operations of special warfare units executing air assault missions that antiterrorist or public security measures also took place.

2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PARACHUTE AIRBORNE TROOPS AND SPECIAL WARFARE UNITS UNTIL 1945

In consideration of the fight against terrorism and organized crime – beside the certain involvement of parachute airborne troops -what is decisive in the matter is the operations of special warfare units employing air assault techniques; therefore we will go into greater detail in this regard. We will demonstrate only a few characteristic aspects of the development of parachute airborne troops.

The organizational development of Soviet airborne troops preceded that of other countries and started in 1930 when parachute battalions, or rather airborne battalions were established. By 1938 their airborne troops had been organized into brigades [2]. The use of airborne troops in the Soviet military as part of

the battle process was adapted both in their military doctrine and in their field service regulations. From 1941 on, the airborne troops were organized at the regional level. The Soviet airborne legion organized in 1941 was made up of three brigades. The operations of the legion were supported by an independent armoured car battalion. The same year the Branch Commandatura of Airborne Forces was established, which ensured the independence of the service. By 1943 glider airplane regiments had been set up. The number of air carriers made it possible to set up an airborne operations division. In August 1944 the idea of setting up an airborne army composed of a three-brigade airborne legion came up; however, it did not become realized in the end. During the war, the Soviet airborne units were committed in military operations, both in tactical and diversional actions.

The component of the Soviet Army that conducted special warfare bore the Russian acronym Spetsnaz (Spetsialnovo naznashenyiya – „special designation”). Certain units of Spetsnaz were characterized by regular parachute jumps in the enemy’s rear areas and by close links with the Military Intelligence and Secret Service. Spetsnaz was established mostly with the purpose of conducting actions of diversion and sabotage, but also to facilitate cooperation between secret agents, do deep reconnaissance scouting and collect information on a wide scale. Spetsnaz’s first operation took place in 1930 during a field exercise when a small parachute unit was dropped to practice future paraoperations beyond enemy lines. In the following period, Spetsnaz and the Soviet Airborne Forces developed alongside each other. Paratroops reached the area target behind enemy lines by parachute jumping and made their way back by filtering through the enemy’s front lines.

During the Second World War, starting in 1942, all frontlines and headquarters were secured by Spetsnaz battalions made up of experts in explosives [3]. These units were known as „construction battalions” or „construction brigades”. Spetsnaz agents were specially trained for deep reconnaissance scouting, the use of explosives, performing

acts of sabotage, terrain and night intelligence, escaping and hiding, and survival in forest, swamp and tundra environments. They located and attacked the enemy’s command posts and supply lifts. They prevented retreating enemy from blowing up bridges and railway junctions or if it was strategically required they themselves blew those up. Their radio operators detected the exact location of enemy headquarters and message centers and blanketed their radio communications. In their operations they greatly relied on indigenous civilian agents and partisans. They were also capable of providing the local resistance (partisan warfare) with support. During the war 37000 agents were parachuted behind enemy lines, which represented a considerable force [4].

The development of the German airborne troops started off in the second half of the 1930’s – comparatively late – and was mainly influenced by the Soviet and the Italian example. The employment of airborne troops against organized crime, or terrorist-like illegal armed groups already took place in the ‘30’s, at the time when this service first came into existence. It was against communist groups operating around Berlin that in February 1933 Herman Goring, the Prussian Provincial Minister of Interior created a police unit, mostly composed of hunters with parachuting skills, called the Polizeiabteilung Wecke (Wecke Police Division), which was working under the Berlin Police. In April 1935 this division became a subordinate branch of the army where it operated as an airborne unit [5]. In 1936 construction sub-units specializing in the use of explosives were attached to the Airborne Regiment. In 1938 as a complementation to the organization of parachute units the first glider assault squadrons were established. In 1939 the parachute troops were amalgamated into one division and an artillery-company was also sub-ordained. Based on the operational field experiences gained in 1940, the parachute and the airborne divisions got united into one Airborne Division. In 1941 following the air assault operation in the Battle of Crete that met with great losses, there was a steep decline in the employment of airborne troops, as these

solely performed the traditional task of the infantry, and thus their organizational development was halted. In 1943 development was renewed by the General Staff, who ordered the implementation of four parachute divisions as well as a motorized airborne division. By spring 1945 additional six parachute divisions were set up, and finally the German airborne forces were organized into an airborne army consisting of two divisions.

The development of German special warfare units started in 1939. By this time the structural organization, battle process and the development of military technologies made it possible for special warfare units to be airlifted into the enemy rear. During the Second World War there were two parallel special branches of the Secret Service, the Brandenburg Division and the Special Duties Battalion Friedenthal, and they had the same mission, which was to conduct special warfare operations. Both forces wore the enemy's uniform while in the enemy rear and their staff were highly skilled in knowing the enemy's language, terrain and armed forces. Both special forces units were tied to airborne operations and air assault units as well as closely cooperated with the Military Secret Service. In certain cases the Special Forces used glider airplanes or conducted paraoperations to penetrate the enemy rear. In 1939 the first special forces formation of the German Forces, the Brandenburg Division, was structurally part of the German Intelligence Service, the Abwehr, which was under the German High Command, the Oberkommando Wehrmacht (OKW). The division continued its special commando operations until 1943, when the German Army's offensive ground to a halt, and subsequently it was used as a frontline combat unit. By 1944 the Brandenburg Division had completely lost its stature as a commando unit and was reallocated to the Großdeutschland Panzer Korps. While its staff, well-experienced in divisional operations, was transferred to the special commando forces of the SS [6]. In 1943 a second special forces formation, the Special Duties Battalion Friedenthal was set up as part of the RSHA, or the Reichssicherheitshauptamt which was a

military secret service agency placed under the SS. During 1944 due to personnel transferring from the Wehrmacht, the Battalion was expended into six departments. In 1944 as the last developmental stage of the Special Duties Battalion Friedenthal was the creation of a special operations brigade that had two parachute battalions.

The development of British Airborne Force only commenced after the war broke out in 1940, and it was based on the German example [7]. The objective was to establish a parachute battalion. The same year the organization and training of glider corps began. In 1941 the first parachute infantry battalion came into existence. Consequently the military leadership decided to establish two airborne brigades. One brigade was composed of parachute battalions while the other was designated as the glider corps. The year 1942 saw the establishing of an airborne division. The division was made up of three parachute brigades, one glider brigade, one armored glider reconnaissance regiment, one glider ground artillery division, one airborne anti-tank artillery and further subsidiary units. In 1944 the Allied Forces set up an airborne army to be the highest organizational level of their airborne forces.

The establishment of a British special force team with air assault capabilities started in 1941 with the birth of the battalion called Special Air Service, SAS. The same year the first paratroop operation took place targeting the airports of the Axis. Since this operation was not successful, the idea of airdropping commandos was cast aside and the use of light cross-country vehicles was experimented with. In 1942 the unit was extended into a regiment, and the idea of a parachute formation temporarily abandoned as the regiment was equipped with Willis Jeeps and was employed in land operations. Taking advantage of the excellent mobility of cross-country vehicles equipped with both heavy and light machine-guns, they developed a very efficient raiding process that caused great technical losses at enemy airports. In 1943 a second SAS regiment went into operation. Once again these two regiments became designated to conduct paraoperations. When

they resumed their paratrooping operations, they included the use of light jeeps. In January 1944, two additional regiments were set up and these were amalgamated with the earlier regiments as well as with a special intelligence battalion into a special operation brigade. By this time a certain type of warfare that only characterized the SAS had developed: 10-15 parachute commandoes were employed at great depth. These closely collaborated with units of the secret service and of the resistance that were operating in enemy territory. In 1945 there was no more organizational development in the British Special Forces.

The developing of American Airborne Troops started comparatively late. In 1940 the first parachute infantry battalion was established. In 1942 the first experimentation with air assault gliders took place. In 1942 the first parachute construction battalion was set up [8]. With the establishment of this unit the military leadership intended to create a unit whose task was to set up field airports where airborne infantry could land. They established several airborne regiments enforced with construction battalions that operated in the Pacific theatre of war. The division was made up of three parachute brigades, one glider brigade, one armored glider reconnaissance regiment, one glider ground artillery division, one airborne anti-tank artillery and further subsidiary units. In 1943 the setting-up of the first American parachute division that was mainly made up of three parachute infantry regiments, one glider ground regiment, one parachute field infantry regiment, one glider ground artillery regiment one glider anti-tank artillery and one glider construction battalion. The year of 1944 saw the establishment of further airborne divisions. During the August of the same year, three airborne divisions that were operating in the European theatre were organized into an airborne army-corps. The same year two American and a British air division plus a Polish air brigade were united to form the Allied Air Force.

A special forces team with air assault capabilities was only part of the British Army among the Allied Forces during the Second World War. Although in the American Army, airborne division and ranger formations that

copied the British commandoes were set up based on the advice of officers accredited in the British Army, there was no interest for a special force team with air assault capabilities.

3. AIRBORNE OPERATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC SECURITY AND FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

On May 10 1940 during the Offensive against the Netherlands the Brandenburg Division went into action by crossing the Dutch and Belgian borders with the mission of capturing some important leaders [9]. Some of their units reached their destination by parachuting, others were airlifted by STOL, short take off and landing ultralight aircraft, that could land on any terrain. The units didn't reach their original target.

Soviet airborne troops were used in the air assault against Bessarabia [10]. Two airborne brigades were commissioned on June 29, 1940 when the Soviet Army was occupying Bessarabia. Cavalry and armored car formations of the land forces conducted a fast advancement in the directions of two cities of key importance Izmil and Bolgrad. The land offensive began on June 28. The plans that had been prepared for the airborne units in case of resistance was to occupy towns, to prevent the withdrawing Romanian Army's any attempt to detonate military objects, bridges, rail lines, road and industrial infrastructure as well as to secure the area until the arrival the cavalry and mechanized troops. The three airborne brigades were united at the airports 350 km-s away from the target area. The task of transportation was accomplished by 170 TB-3 planes. Out of the three brigades only two ended up employed, the third one was left in reserve. On the day of the operation one airborne unit was dropped off at 12 kilometers away from Bolgrad. It stormed the city and occupied it by evening. Next day one of the battalions of the brigade also occupied the city of Kagul. The next airborne brigade to be sent in was planned to be delivered by regular landing. However, according to their air reconnaissance data, this operation was not possible, so they ended up dropping a brigade of 30 parachutists without heavy weaponry in

the vicinity Izmail. This brigade occupied the city the very same day and secured the crucial roads around the city. There was no clash with the withdrawing Romanian forces during the operation.

German airborne troops were employed as supporting units to aid the operation of two land divisions in the occupation of the Italian headquarters at Monte Rontondo, in the capture of high ranking officers and in the stunting of military management in September 8, 1943. The Germans took measures in the neutralization of Italian forces after the coup that took place in Italian internal politics when Mussolini was removed from power. Two land division were ordered to enter Italy to disarm the Italian Army. The operations of these two divisions weakened the Italian military leadership at the same time, which consequently lead to the weakening of the Italian resistance as well. General Kurt Student was in charge of sending in parachute troops to capture the now unreliable Italian General Staff and to occupy the headquarters at Monte Rotondo. The occupation of this mountain fort would have been impossible using traditional ground troops due to the fact that it had a powerful anti-aircraft defense and a system of mechanical obstacles. The Germans, having done a thorough air and local reconnaissance, started their air assault on September 8th, employing fifty-two JU 52 transport aircraft and a parachute battalion. They attempted to drop the parachutists directly onto the headquarters. In the Italian air defense response, several transport aircraft perished thus the rest of the troops had to land three kilometers from the headquarters. The forces that had managed to land attacked the headquarters, succeeded to break some of the mechanical obstacles and crossed the hand and machine gun fire and shortly occupied the central building where they captured 200 personnel, including 15 officers. The Italians ordered more troops into the region and surrounded the German air troops occupied headquarters. The evacuation of these parachute units could only take place as part of a prisoner exchange [11].

To rescue Mussolini the Germans employed the Friedenthal Special Division

and a traditional parachute unit in September 10, 1943. The Nazi Department of Security (RSHA) and Otto Skorzeny conducted a lengthy investigation and reconnaissance and succeeded in narrowing down the location of Mussolini, who was held on the 2900 meter high mountain of Gran Sasso in a hotel. The operation was conducted by a parachute battalion that was joined by the Friedenthal Special Division of the SS lead by Skorzeny. There happened to be an open airfield outside the hotel where a glider was able to land. This is where the battalion and the special division landed using twelve Gotha DFS 230 gliders on September 12. Part of the forces started the occupation of the building while the rest was ordered to secure the ski lift leading up to the hotel. Mussolini was freed in a few minutes and boarded one of the STOL airplanes. These airplanes are characterized by super lightweight and special wing design that allows them to take off on a very short run.

In Europe it was from October 1943 that SAS commando paratroopers were employed by the British. *On the 2nd of October* in the region of Ancona and Pescara SAS commandoes containing 61 men each were sent in to rescue prisoners of war. The commando was in operation until the 6th of October in the enemy rear and managed to rescue 50 allied prisoners of war. During July and August of 1944 in Normandy further SAS commandoes went into action in order to support the advance of Allied forces and to hinder the movements of the withdrawing German Army. *On the 25th of July*, southeast of Paris in the Ramouillier region, a seven-crew paratroop was dropped beyond the German lines in order to eliminate General Rommel. *On the 31st of July* yet another SAS unit of 23 men was dropped in the region of La Mans. This unit succeeded in disturbing the enemy's movement and also rescued 150 prisoners of war [12].

On the 22nd and 23rd of February, 1944, at the settlement of Los Banos in the region of Laguna De Bay southeast of Manila, the Americans executed a special operation to eliminate a prisoner of war camp. The operation was conducted by a parachute battalion, a glider battalion as well as a deep

reconnaissance unit. First the American Army collected data on the camp using their intelligence staff and then dropped a deep reconnaissance parachute unit near the camp. The scouts made contact with the resistance, working in the region and collected further data about the camp. After a day of gathering information the deep reconnaissance unit secured the zone where the main forces were to land and prepared for the attack. Preceding the landing of the parachute battalion in charge of liberating the camp, the deep reconnaissance unit used granites to create an intense smokescreen over the camp; then, joined the resistance in liquidating the area. The landing paratroops launched an attack on the camp, wiped out the 248-member Japanese staff and liberated the prisoners. The liberation of the 2147-interned individuals only took twenty minutes. Neither the attackers nor the prisoners suffered any losses. The evacuation of the liberated prisoners and airborne troops was conducted by using amphibious vehicles. A glider airborne regiment conducted yet another air assault after the liberation of the camp in order to hold up the Japanese reinforcement moving toward the camp. Using special warfare technique, sub-units selected from the staff of the airborne troops conducted the successful intern liberation action.

Airborne troops were used to purge Yugoslav partisan groups at Drvar on the 25th of May, 1944 and to assist two mountaineer divisions in their pincher attack. The mission was accomplished by the SS Fallschirmjager 500 parachute battalion [5]. Tito's partisans were conducting their guerilla operations in the mountains. The German leadership wanted to eliminate Tito's headquarters. His headquarters were situated on a plateau near Drvar in a deep cave so it was protected both by natural and man-made obstacles. 1200 armed partisans were in charge of protection. It was against them that the airborne battalion was sent in with the mission of tying up these forces so that the main troops, two mountain hunter battalion, could surround the area and advance to the partisan headquarters. The crew of the parachute battalion was dropped at the target zone on the 25th of May, 1944. Since the necessary

number of air transport carriers were not provided, the air troops could only be delivered in two shifts with five hours between them. The first wave of air assault took the town of Drvar. The second wave brought in further 300 staff on glider airplanes. The ground troops that were to surround the area were considerably behind schedule in approaching the target zone near Tito's headquarters, already secured by the paratroops. The two mountain hunter battalions only arrived the next morning and by this time the paratroopers got worn down, only 800 of the initial 1600 men remaining alive. Although Tito managed to flee the premises, the air assault did tie up the partisans' forces that suffered great losses in the end.

On the 12th of October 1944 British Paratroops landed on an airfield outside Athens having given the mission of stopping two irregular enemy Greek forces from clashing with each other. Due to the switch in alliance of the Romanian Army, the German forces occupying Greece decided to withdraw quickly in fear of the lifeline of their forces being cut.

The Germans had withdrawn from Athens by October 4th and a few days later from the whole of the country. As a consequence a crisis developed in the inner politics of Greece as anglophile and left-wing forces disagreed. As irregular left-wing forces were in majority, there was a danger for Athens to be occupied by these. The British Leadership sent a division by sea to stabilize the political crisis. Due to the length of the sea route the landing could only take place on the 13th or 14th, so the British had to look for a faster solution to prevent the occupation of Athens and the stabilization of the region. On the 12th a parachute battalion was dropped on Megara airfield near the city. The jump took place under extremely windy conditions that caused the scattering and injury of a great number of the crew. Following the landing the battalion secured the airfield where military vehicles were airlifted by glider airplanes to increase mobility. On the same vehicles the battalion entered the capital, where it acted as a forerunner for the soon to be landing naval

division and thus greatly contributed to the stabilization process.

In August 1954 the Soviet Union began its offensive against Japan in Manchuria where three airborne brigades were employed in order to aid ground units, to provide civilian security, to capture important personnel and to disarm Japanese formations [13]. The Manchurian Offensive started on the 9th of August, when the Soviet Army crossed the border with ease and made rapid advance toward the heart of the country. The Japanese leadership's number one aim was to hold on to major cities and industrial regions, so most of their forces concentrated in the cities of *Harbin, Kirin, Changchun, Shenyang and Port Arthur*. The offensive to occupy these urban centres began on the 12 of August. The Japanese Forces put up a lot of resistance at Harbin and Kirin, so to aid the occupational effort of the Soviet armor-heavy forward-detachment airborne forces, one brigade and other smaller air units were sent in [14]. After two days of intense fighting, the Japanese surrendered *Harbin and Kirin*. During the Japanese armistice in Manchuria the airborne troops that were employed as an occupational and civilian security force contributed greatly to the prompt closure of the fights. *In the city of Mukden*, two Soviet parachute battalions managed to disarm fifty thousand Japanese soldiers [2]. During the occupation of Changchun, the parachute battalion dropped at the city's airport captured General Yamada and his staff. The effective stunning of the Japanese military and political system exacerbated the collapse of their power. During the Manchurian Offensive airborne operations took place even more frequently than mentioned here.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The employment of airborne troops for ensuring public security and fighting terrorism can be explained noting two different reasons.

The first reason was the *need for faster involvement*. The ability to act fast was the reason why the use of airborne troops became more widespread in these two areas. In both, the Soviet airborne operations over Manchuria

and Bessarabia and the British airborne maneuver near Athens, the goal was to have a quick military presence to ensure public security in cities being occupied by using airborne troops. Paratroops that share the characteristics of light infantry managed to avoid the use of heavy weaponry in fulfilling these missions that served public security rather than being conventional military maneuvers. The delivery of military forces in the fastest way possible was and has been the employment of airborne troops.

The second reason was the *achievement of tactical surprise* for which airborne troops were used in both public security and antiterrorist operations. In missions like the rescue of Mussolini, surprise played a great role, and their success can be attributed to the use of lightweight gliders. Between the enemy's becoming aware of the gliders and the attack launched at the building there must have been only a minute interval that excluded the possibility of any kind of counter-attack.. In the German air assault operations to eliminate the partisans in the Yugoslav mountains, surprise was also key. The paratroopers were dropped directly over the basis of the partisans, which created a surprise effect and completely stunned the mobility of these partisan forces that normally had a great advantage of maneuverability on mountainous terrain.

What characterizes the above mentioned airborne operations is the fact that most of the time the units conducting them were either special forces working under an intelligence agency such as the SAS, or the Brandenburg or Friedenthal divisions or cooperating with an intelligence agency like the American forces in Manila or the German forces rescuing Mussolini. The role of Intelligence is also key in the fight against terrorism today [15]. This leads to the conclusion that special units skilled in air assault are the most likely to be useful in the fight against terrorism. Having considered all, it is noteworthy to draw attention to the experiences of the Second World War, where not only that the British Forces achieved great success in conducting airborne operations by setting up special army forces and within that creating the airborne

skilled SAS, but also they happened to form a military concept that plays significant importance in nowadays fight against terrorism, and which concept is regarded as something to copy by several nations today.

Finally we can state that the use of paratroops or special forces with air assault capabilities dropped on target areas for public security and anti-terrorist tasks in the Second World War can be attributed to the need for fast involvement and the achievement of tactical surprise. Already in that era, it became clear that in the operations of this type, the close cooperation with the Intelligence was paramount.

It can be concluded that special forces with air assault capabilities achieved major importance in solving the tasks of public security and anti-terrorism based on their experiences in the Second World War.

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