

KOSOVO VICTORY.

a Commander's Perspective

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A

t the peak of Operation ALLIED FORCE, I watched the Common Operational Picture and saw aircraft from 14 nations come onto my screen from some 41 bases in Europe. They merged with air-to-air tankers from different nations, took fuel, formed into distinct, well marshalled packages and went to their assigned targets. All returned successfully.

That these multinational packages flew together into a zone of conflict united by the common language of the air and by common NATO procedures is nothing new to the readership of this journal. This has been practised and perfected over the years on Exercise RED FLAG at Nellis AFB in the United States; on the Tactical Leadership Programme at Florennes in Belgium; on Exercise CENTRAL ENTERPRISE in various countries of Central Europe each year; and on the numerous other tactical exercises organised throughout NATO almost daily.

That across the nations we provided each other multinational electronic support, protection, and a carefully woven web of Air Defence is also nothing new. This is the very essence of our success as an alliance in bringing air power to bear and is the legacy of interoperability that NATO's 50-year history and training has left us.

INTRODUCTION

To look upon Operation ALLIED FORCE as an isolated military conflict would be to overlook its most challenging feature. Politically, it was borne out of a determination to prevent a tyrant from redrawing the map of Europe in his bid to create a Greater Serbia. Militarily, it came against the background of half a century of peace and was thrust upon an alliance in the throes of major changes seeking to re-orientate itself to a new strategic environment.

In order to properly focus upon the valuable lessons that NATO's victory in Kosovo can teach us, Operation ALLIED FORCE must first be put into its proper context. In this article I will briefly look at NATO's history, and its past record of combined military operations. I will also address the nature and unique characteristics of Operation ALLIED FORCE, the challenges it presented, and reflect on the circumstances that surrounded the commitment of military forces in the Balkans. Then I will outline some of the lessons learnt in terms of interoperability; both what this will mean for us as an alliance into the future, and how we need to refocus ourselves in order to work together as a fighting force in the years to come.

Drawing lessons learnt from a large-scale Operation, such as ALLIED FORCE, is a dangerous process. Unique circumstances and challenges constrain us towards unique procedures and solutions. We must reflect very carefully before concluding generic lessons from an idiosyncratic Operation. Moreover, whilst students of air power are swift to point out omissions and errors in the planning and execution of the air Operation, we must strive to view the Operation as a whole. The aim was not to destroy armour, kill troops or to demolish infrastructure. The aim of the Operation was to compel Milosovic's forces to leave Kosovo. This was achieved with resounding success chiefly through the precise and careful application of air power. Strategically, this is all that matters.

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THE SHAPING OF TODAY'S NATO

The Washington Agreement

NATO was formed on 4 April 1949 in response to the very real threat and expansionist policies then posed by the Soviet Union. Following the end of WW II, the West had drastically cut its armed forces and pulled them back from their forward locations. The Soviet Union, however, had maintained its forces at wartime levels and locations, had annexed the Baltic States, and proceeded to embrace parts of Eastern Europe and threaten Norway, Greece and Turkey.

Faced with this threat and spurred on by the Soviet blockade of Berlin, the 12 founder countries signed the Washington Treaty, creating the North Atlantic Alliance. Fundamentally a defensive alliance, its unifying creed was summed up in Article V of the Washington Treaty:

"armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all" and that each member nation should restore security by using "...such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force".

The Cold War

The next 40 years were dominated by the Cold War. This period was characterised by a growing lack of trust and dialogue between East and West and a spiralling arms race against the ever-present backdrop of the Iron Curtain. All NATO defences faced east. In this environment of constant tension, NATO grew to 16 members, unshakeably resolved to invest in collective defence in the face of Soviet aggression. Interoperability was the cornerstone of the NATO alliance. It was written into strategy, doctrine and tactics down to squadron level with sharp focus and crystal clear aims. Wartime tactical profiles were practised daily in the air with aircraft of different nations working from exactly the same checklist. We worked together constantly and we did it well.

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Technologies which would
cause us problems are
already at large in the world



New Europe, New Challenge

In 1989 however, the whole face of the North Atlantic area changed. The Berlin Wall collapsed and the Warsaw Pact crumbled soon afterwards as the move towards democratisation and free market economies accelerated in the former Eastern Block. These were momentous times for NATO which had been formed for the purposes of collective defence. The threat from the east was fast disappearing. "An alliance is only as strong as the threat against it" Eisenhower had said. Where was our threat now? How was history's most successful alliance going to withstand this onslaught of peace?

NATO not only survived the onslaught of peace, it blossomed in the new strategic environment, because of the strength of the political as well as the military alliance. Alliance forces embraced peacekeeping and stabilisation roles in the Balkans and on 12 March this year welcomed Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to expand to 19 members. NATO's political face has also changed significantly, with new Strategic Concepts and numerous Charters and Councils established with nations of the former Warsaw Pact. Indeed, so successful was our alliance over the last 50 years, that it never went to war.

OPERATION ALLIED FORCE

A Unique Operation

However, in March 1999 all that changed. The most successful alliance in history was faced with genocide on its border and with a tyrant who refused to agree to terms at Rambouillet, persisting, even while negotiating with the West, in a policy of ethnic cleansing, murder and brutalising the people of Kosovo.

A plea for
help from an
oppressed
people



For many, the fact that the nations of NATO did indeed reach consensus to take military action against a tyrant and in defence of an oppressed people will yet be the most significant facet of Operation ALLIED FORCE. Amid a plethora of alliance defence cuts, an evasive threat and rapidly changing political-military relationships both within and without our defensive Alliance, NATO had just committed itself to the first out of area, out of region, offensive application of military power in its history. Yet Operation

ALLIED FORCE was scarcely the ideal stage on which to give NATO its wartime debut. The actors, the scenery and the script were all different to those with which we had so successfully rehearsed for so many years.

As a peace enforcement operation, the political constraints for Operation ALLIED FORCE were predictably severe – in terms of the forces we could employ, the weapons we could use and the targets we could attack. Even more so than in the Gulf War, we were under the public eye – live on world television 24 hours a day. There was absolutely no margin for error, the smallest of mistakes would be replayed to us that same evening on the TV by the watchful Press. No collateral and no allied loss of life were the impossible requirements. Our enemy were concealed amongst the very people we were trying to protect, often disguised as civilians or using civilian buildings and vehicles.

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This made the targeting process extremely challenging. Not only did we have to be 100% sure of our targets, but we also had to be prepared to convince the world's press of our rationale.

We also had no ground forces with which to fix our enemy. They had free reign to manoeuvre and hide amongst innocent civilians. Ironically, just when we needed pinpoint accuracy, the weather conspired to deny us use of laser guidance – we had 50% or greater cloud cover over the Area of Operation 72% of the time.

To say the least, Operation ALLIED FORCE was a challenging scenario for NATO's debut. But if we think it will be any easier next time, we are fooling ourselves – this is the future, or at least it is an example of the restrictions that any future task may offer. Politicians will continue to seek the use of air power as a perceived low involvement option – swift and clinical. We as airmen must be prepared to conduct military operations in any environment. The impossible absolutes of no collateral and no allied loss of life will continue to be our political leaders' overriding concerns.

In sum, Op ALLIED FORCE was the first major military operation of a defensive alliance; moreover, it was both offensive and out of area. It required surgical accuracy onto extremely demanding targets with last minute political constraints and the world's press close by our side. Moreover, we were to operate with the omnipresent mandate of no collateral and no allied loss of life.

Victory in Kosovo

In my view, the military success of Operation ALLIED FORCE is unquestionable. After 78 days of air operations, Milosovic capitulated, the 47,000 Serb Militia left Kosovo and a 16,000-strong NATO-led Peacekeeping Force walked into Kosovo unopposed to start rebuilding the lives of the one million displaced Kosovars. Despite the necessarily microscopic detail of our operational and tactical level planning and the substantial targeting difficulties, we successfully flew in excess of 24,000 offensive missions. We did not lose a single allied life during air operations. We integrated more nations than contributed to DESERT STORM, taking off from 3 continents – all through just one Air Operations Centre. Over the course of the air campaign, we flew over 38,000 sorties, 30% of which were strike sorties. Given the constraints, this was undoubtedly a remarkable victory for NATO.



British troops hand out food supplies to Kosovar refugees

A Legacy of Interoperability

There is little doubt that our high standards of interoperability made this victory possible. Over the past 50 years, as airmen, a vast proportion of our daily effort has gone towards being interoperable with our alliance partners' air forces: effort that could have been spent training for less selfless goals, with more tangible, rapidly achievable results. The investment of that effort towards the overarching goal of interoperability, has reaped its reward in terms of an unprecedented success in the unforgiving environment of Kosovo.

For 50 years we have trained together against a readily identified threat with a marked emphasis on operating together as an alliance – at times sacrificing individual efficiency for alliance commonality and combined interoperability

The ability to refuel each others' aircraft, on the ground as well as in the air; the capacity to cross-service other nations' aircraft; the discipline to use standardised words with precise meanings – that is, the use of NATO common brevity codes; the familiarity to employ the same tactical and operational procedures for combined operations – whether or not it best suits our individual nation's needs, in the interests of commonality; the will to share our individual nation's strengths for the greater efficiency of the combined operation, and pooling resources to achieve true synergy: these are the pieces of the interoperability jigsaw in which we have so heavily invested time and money throughout the Alliance's history.

There is no shortage of tactical examples of interoperability in Operation ALLIED FORCE all the way down to formation level but the sum of it all is the victory that NATO forces gained. For 50 years we have trained together against a readily identified threat with a marked emphasis on operating together as an alliance – at times sacrificing individual efficiency for alliance commonality and combined interoperability. This undoubtedly served us well in Operation ALLIED FORCE – even if the operation was significantly different from our pre-scripted threat, our commitment to common training brought us through.

Future Operations

Although Op ALLIED FORCE gave NATO Air Forces the opportunity to excel, there remain plenty of hurdles on the road to perfect interoperability. Interoperability in this age does not mean everyone operating the same piece of equipment (that is standardisation), indeed NATO's diversity of hardware has long been viewed as a significant strength. And interoperability is also not just confined to enabling our differing hardware to operate together on the same battlefield. It is more than that – it is achieving synergy through common operating procedures, common training and common commitment to the same goals.

The ability to fight alongside our NATO allies is not a luxury, it is a political and military necessity. In future conflicts we will need to stand together inseparably as an alliance for political solidarity and military expediency as well as for economic burden sharing. Without interoperability we are not an effective alliance – we are no more than a collection of like-minded nations, not a cohesive military force. As an alliance we are only militarily as strong as our weakest link. There has never been a greater need for working together on the battlefield now and into the future.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM OPERATION ALLIED FORCE

Necessary Capabilities from Modern Technologies

COMSEC

The ability to communicate effectively in the air is essential. During Operation ALLIED FORCE we were forced off frequency hopping and secure air-to-air communication channels and onto open nets because the lack of capability of some of our own players in this area. This denied us effective COMSEC and gave away critical targeting and tactical information to Serb forces. Fortunately, the Serbian military lacked the capability to rapidly capitalise on this information – our next opponent is unlikely to be so generous. Future operations need to be able to be run on a baseline of secure, or at a minimum, jam-resistant radio nets if we are to maintain credible COMSEC and tactical effectiveness.

IFF

Similarly in such complex, multinational airborne operations, the ability to rapidly differentiate between friend and foe is crucial to the success of the whole Command and Control process. The absence of IFF Mode 4 capabilities on many NATO aircraft vastly increased the workload of such high value assets as AWACS when trying to sort a picture of some 660 airborne radar returns. A robust hi-fidelity friend or foe system must be a minimum requirement for future operations if we are to continue to be militarily effective in the air as an alliance.

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Radar Warning Receivers

Another interoperability issue is the vast disparity across the alliance in capabilities of airborne radar warning receivers. Even against an opponent that could not be described as "hi-tech", many airborne players were unable to reliably ascertain which SAM system was illuminating them, or even whether or not that system was hostile. Patently, this complicates the airborne communications and the task of operational planners who must then endeavour to support less capable aircraft with more capable systems in order to continue to employ all assets safely. A reliable and flexible threat warning system, matched to the threats of our adversary, must be viewed as essential equipment for all future NATO air operations.

Airborne Laser Designation

Precious few NATO Nations possessed the ability to laser designate weapons from the air. Given the requirement for absolute precision and no collateral damage, airborne laser designation was a critical requirement for Operation ALLIED FORCE. Through careful planning co-operative designation could be co-ordinated. However, this meant lengthy and detailed preparation, a loss of target compression and involved the marking aircraft loitering for many minutes in the target area, thereby placing the aircraft and its crew in great danger. In an operation that saw over 700 Serbian SAMs launched at allied aircraft, this was a high price indeed to pay for mutually supporting operations. Future operations will undoubtedly have the similar requirements for precision and lack of collateral damage – in the future we need to ensure that we each have the ability to *independently* participate in such precision warfare, where precision guided munitions (whatever their characteristics) are the weapons of choice.

These four tactical examples are typical of many more from Operation ALLIED FORCE and serve to illustrate that arming ourselves with the right equipment to fight together and interoperate does not necessarily mean massive defence spending. These are not new technologies. These capabilities have been available and affordable for many years.

Realistic and Dedicated Training

Air-to-air Refuelling

Air-to-air refuelling is, and will remain, a vital skill in our mobile, flexible and rapidly deployable air forces. It is a critical force multiplier and underpins and enhances the inherent characteristics of air power – speed, reach and flexibility. Although the air-to-air refuelling aspects of Operation ALLIED FORCE could rightly be held up as a tour de force for interoperability, there were nevertheless some shortcomings. Many forces were unable to refuel from tankers which their planning guides said they had the capability to use, or had a theoretical capability to use. This was chiefly because the aircrews were not fully trained in some aspects of the discipline. It was an unwelcome distraction that some nations had to request air-to-air refuelling training during Operation ALLIED FORCE. Patently, in such a complex and geographically constrained operation, training was impossible. Busy though we are on the frontline, we need to constantly strive to maximise our opportunities to cross train and interoperate so that we are ready to use our skills when necessary.



The air-to-air refuelling aspects of the Operation could rightly be held up as a tour de force

Airborne Command and Control

Operation ALLIED FORCE starkly illustrated the long-recognised difference between surveillance, and command and control from airborne platforms. Originally conceived as an Airborne Early Warning platform to extend the detection range and relay the presence of terrain masking low flying threats, the role of the E 3 has come a long way since its inception. However, in today's and indeed tomorrow's conflicts it must be prepared to operate autonomously as an airborne co-ordinator and controller of very large packages. Hardware fixes are already in the pipeline to provide a greater capability for command and control, but this is not a solution in itself. Once again, we need to train as we mean to fight – together, in realistic environments, maximising the benefits of TLP and RED FLAG and, where necessary, changing CONOPS, SOPs and tactics to reflect future tasks.

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Air Alone

A warning to those ardent advocates of "Air Alone" and who might be tempted to gloat at the other Services after the air-heavy victory in Kosovo. Initial analyses are now beginning to show that the allied bombing campaign did not achieve results as rapidly as we might have previously expected, and that our immediate battlefield damage assessment was on the optimistic side. This should come as no surprise to us. Historically, this is invariably the case. Without an allied ground presence within Kosovo we had no means of containing or constricting the fielded Serbian ground forces, giving them free reign to disperse and conceal themselves, often amongst innocent civilians. This denied our air platforms a concentrated target set and made targeting a complex and risky process, often requiring last-minute political approval. NATO forces significantly tightened up the process of targeting of fielded forces as the campaign progressed, employing such methods as real-time targeting. In the end, however, our strategic targeting proved sufficient to compel Milosovic to capitulate on NATO's terms.

The simultaneous employment of land, sea and air forces enables parallel targeting at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. There is little doubt, therefore, that an air campaign works best when parallel effects are planned and executed to ensure true joint synergy.

As the most successful alliance in history, we have profited from, as well as been victims of, our own success. For 50 years we have trained and operated together in multinational packages all the way down to unit level against the fixed threat from the East. This has left us with an impressive legacy of interoperability – united by the common language of the air and unified by so many years of flying together using the same doctrine, tactics and procedures.

And yet, paradoxically, our success in keeping the peace during the Cold War has meant that we are now faced with a dispersed and uncertain threat, economic pressure to reduce Defence spending and political pressure to downsize our military strength. This in turn has served to remove the impetus for interoperability.

Although we come fresh from a momentous victory in Kosovo, and we can be rightfully proud of 90% of Operation ALLIED FORCE, it is the 10% that we can improve that we need to focus upon in the forthcoming years. Any future NATO operation will undoubtedly once again require speed, power, flexibility and clinical precision. Politicians now believe that air power not only offers all of these qualities in abundance, but offers them with them the all-important ingredient of interoperability, and therefore burden-sharing, down to unit level. But the tactical environment in which we will be called upon to operate in the future will be a political tightrope rather than a military battlefield. It will likely incorporate complex political constraints, transparency to the world's press, a challenging target set, a requirement for no collateral damage, no loss of allied life and a political burden to be shouldered by as many nations as possible.

The ability to operate together on tomorrow's highly demanding battlefield is central to the military survival of NATO. Interoperability remains the very essence of our alliance. Without interoperability we are a toothless tiger.

We have already proved our ability to interoperate on today's battlefield in Operation ALLIED FORCE. In order to continue to interoperate successfully we need to fully commit ourselves daily to NATO – in our equipment procurement programmes and in our daily training.

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