

Deep Strike MLRS DS to the Light Division Aviation Brigade

by Captain Shannon D. Beebe

A recent deployment of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California, served as the training ground for the Army's new light-heavy task force. For the battalion headquarters employing simulated multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) launchers, this rotation provided a test bed for the initial concept development of a deep strike, sensor-to-shooter architecture for the light division. As the concept is further developed, it could prove a very effective means of employing the high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) to be fielded to the light divisions in the next century.

The results of these initial trials were significant. We discovered MLRS works very effectively in a direct support (DS) role on the light forces' battlefield.

Our goal was to leverage the deep sensing capability of the OH-58D Kiowa Warrior aerial scout helicopter and the deep strike range of MLRS into a DS role during the first phase of the operation: setting the conditions.

The process starts with the synthesis of suspected enemy high-value targets followed by the OH-58D observer confirmation of the targets which, in turn, leads to MLRS fire missions. The aviation-artillery sensor-to-shoot team concept facilitates the maneuver commander's ability to engage the force on his

terms and shape his battlespace for follow-on operations.

Filling a Need

The ability to strike deep, disrupting the enemy's battle rhythms well in advance of the actual engagement, is an advantage MLRS brings to the light forces. Attacking the enemy deep at crucial times can change the battlefield calculus in the friendly force's favor.

With the advent of the light-heavy brigade combat team (BCT) and the future fielding of HIMARS to the light divisions, the question arises: How does the light division commander make the most of this extended-range artillery without taking observer assets from the close fight?

The light force has limited sensor assets. Light divisions have no unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), no organic scout platoons (found only at the battalion level) and no combat observation lasing team (COLT) assets. (The COLTs are brigade-level assets for shaping the brigade's close battlespace.)

The division has one long-range reconnaissance detachment (LRRD). Although highly trained and capable of serving as deep observers, the LRRD teams must remain undetected and move as little as possible to survive. This limits their coverage area.

Applying today's doctrinal employment procedures, commanders must ask hard-hitting questions. Is it worth the risk of infiltrating sensor assets with limited mobility deep in enemy territory, risking them again during exfiltration? Is there another less risky, yet effective way to shape the full depth of battlespace? The answer to the second question is, Yes.

MLRS DS to Aviation

By using the OH-58D to acquire high-value targets—command and control nodes; petroleum, oil and lubricant (POL) dumps; logistics areas and for-



ward arming and refuel points (FARPs)—and linking them to DS MLRS units, the maneuver commander can violently strike the opposing forces with minimal risk to his units.

At first glance, aviators might think the goal is to return to Vietnam-era aerial observation using the OH-58D. This is not true. To give this multipurpose platform the sole mission of observing a target would be a waste of resources. The intent is to task this valuable asset dynamically.

For example, one OH-58D mission is to reconnoiter a route for an Apache strike. If signal intelligence (SIGINT) reports high volumes of communications traffic believed to be a brigade command post and a suspected FARP along the recon route, the OH-58D *could* be tasked to destroy them. But, *should* the OH-58D (or other aerial assets) be tasked to destroy these targets and, perhaps, jeopardize its primary mission? On the other hand, should this intelligence be brushed aside as insignificant for the aviation mission? Neither.

With deep strike artillery DS, the aerial scout only needs to confirm or deny the target, send back a refined grid and continue on with his primary mission. With a real-time accurate grid and the enormous area fire MLRS provides on soft targets, there's no need to "observe" rounds on the target. Static observation under such circumstances wastes time and unnecessarily imperils both man and machine.

The Aviation-Artillery Linkage

The best method to link the aviation sensors to the deep strike artillery as shooters is via a liaison team. With a liaison team organic to the MLRS battalion positioned in the aviation brigade headquarters, missions called in by aerial scouts can be processed immediately and sent to the MLRS battalion.

The liaison team not only brings MLRS expertise to the aviation brigade, but also the ability to process fire missions seamlessly. The lightweight computer unit (LCU) of the liaison team can talk to the LCU of the MLRS battalion, and the fire mission can be processed directly and quickly to the launcher.

As OH-58Ds go 20 to 30 kilometers beyond the forward line of own troops (FLOT), MLRS must be pushed well forward on the battlefield—many times

beyond the FLOT. The advantage is that the faster fire missions are received, the faster they can be executed and the less time the launcher is exposed. But there is a caveat: a security force must protect the launchers while they complete the mission forward.

How it Worked

During Rotation 98-02, the 101st Aviation Brigade requested MLRS in direct support during the setting-the-conditions phase of one battle. The MLRS liaison team moved to the aviation brigade headquarters with associated equipment: single-channel ground and airborne radio system (SINCGARS) and an LCU with initial fire support automated system (IFSAS) software. The equipment was linked directly to the aviation brigade fire support element (FSE). The aerial scouts called in fire missions though the aviation brigade to the MLRS battalion.

We tried the link two ways. In the first attempt, we took fire missions from the OH-58Ds and passed them directly to the MLRS battalion. The OH-58D has SINCGARS—the LCU of the MLRS battalion can communicate with the OH-58D. Although this link worked, we had problems. When a fire mission goes directly from the aerial scout to the MLRS battalion, certain fields in the LCU software must be changed before the fire mission can be sent to the launcher—for example, the call-for-fire has to be changed to translate rounds to volleys. This wastes time. Also, a lack of understanding of the desired effects versus the MLRS capabilities required a few radio transmissions to clarify. This added even more time to fire mission processing.

A better linking method was to send the fire missions from the OH-58D to the aviation brigade via the MLRS liaison team and then on to the battalion. The liaison team transmitted properly formatted fire missions and resolved any technical or tactical issues, allowing the battalion to seamlessly process the mission. We placed the liaison officer (LNO) with the aviation FSE and sent the fire missions through him, eliminating the need for many questions.

The Next Step

Developing the aviation-artillery deep strike option for the light forces will

take some open-mindedness on the part of both the artillery and aviation communities. Some in the artillery community will point out that MLRS, according to our doctrine, cannot be DS and will cite the seven inherent responsibilities of artillery—specifically the lack of observers. This is the only one MLRS cannot fulfill. Aerial scouts dynamically tasked accomplish this.

The aviation community, although more receptive to the idea, still fear the OH-58Ds slowly will become aerial observers and not allowed to use their other capabilities—not the intent of the employment tactic.

To further refine this sensor-shooter architecture, commanders of both communities must develop exercises focusing on this link—both hands-on and simulated—and incorporate the architecture's training and experimentation into existing exercises, including at the combat training centers (CTCs).

During the 101st Division's rotation at the NTC, the aviation-artillery deep strike architecture was a resounding success. Using this architecture, the maneuver commander can shape battlespace on his terms across the depth of the operation. This preserves combat resources for the current operation, but more importantly, for continued rapid violence in future operations.

The benefits of further developing this deep strike concept promise to be enormous.



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