

Experiences as Deputy Commander Air

*Freek Meulman*¹

NL-ARMS, 2009, 297-306

Introduction

In the period January 2007-February 2008 I was sent out to Afghanistan as Deputy Commander Air/Director Air Coordination Element. I worked at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) X Headquarters in Kabul. ISAF is a United Nations (UN) mandated mission led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The objective of the mission is to assist the Afghan government in realising and maintaining stability and security in Afghanistan in order to extend the authority of the Afghan government and to create circumstances conducive to reconstruction, development and good governance.

In this article, I would like to share with the reader my experiences in Afghanistan, especially in the area of the deployment of the air forces. Besides, towards the end of my article I will go into the rebuilding of the Afghan civilian aviation sector. My tour in Afghanistan was a more than fascinating period, during which I was able to familiarise myself with all facets of multinational operations and the many challenges and complexities of Afghanistan.

Headquarters

The ISAF X Headquarters in Kabul was a composite headquarters, consisting of over 2,000 representatives from more than 40 countries, mainly service personnel with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. This implied that much time and effort had to be put into team building and output optimisation, with language sometimes forming a barrier. The sum total of the strongly varying level of experience of the individual players and their mastery of the language meant that the Headquarters did not always function effectively and efficiently. The ambience, however, was good and the will to reach results together was almost tangible everywhere.

Dependent on the contribution to ISAF, the 17 general functions and underlying posts had been distributed over the contributing countries. ISAF X Commander was an

American general, who was assisted by three Deputy Commanders, an American Major General for Security, a British Major General for Stability and a Dutch Major General for Air. A German Major General fulfilled the function of Chief of Staff.

In my function as Deputy Commander Air (DCOM Air)/Director Air Coordination Element (Dir ACE) I had four main tasks. First, I was the ISAF Commander's substitute in his absence. Second, I advised the ISAF Commander in the area of air operations and civilian aviation. Thirdly, I was responsible for controlling ISAF air operations, which incidentally took place in close cooperation and coordination with the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar. Finally, as DCOM Air, I was the functionary in the Headquarters responsible for the reconstruction and development of Afghan civilian aviation.

Apart from my function, the Netherlands also held a number of other posts in ISAF X. In the early days of ISAF X a Major General held the post of Deputy Chief of Staff Security. Later this became the function of Director Afghan National Army Training, Equipping and Standardisation. On top of that, the Netherlands fulfilled the positions of Director of Staff (colonel), Info Operations (colonel), CJ8 (colonel) and a considerable number of staff functions throughout the entire Headquarters. My experience was that the Dutch servicemen and servicewomen, not hindered by any language barrier, proved themselves perfectly capable of working effectively in the ISAF X Headquarters, and as such also enjoyed the respect of others.

In anticipation of ISAF XI, the staff of ISAF X conducted an evaluation of the organisation in mid-2007, which resulted in a change in the main structure. It came down to the following. Under the ISAF Commander (American) came a Deputy Commander (British) and a Chief of Staff (German). Besides, there were three functions of Deputy Chief of staff, viz. Security (American), Stability (Italian) and Air Coordination (Dutch).

Command and control

One of the most complex aspects of the work as DCOM was the Command and Control structure that had been adopted. The American view and the NATO principles with regard to the area of Command and Control diverge. With the Americans the Commander 9th Air Force was simultaneously the Combined Joint Force Air Component Commander (CFACC) within Central Command. This means that he was responsible for the planning, tasking and deployment of the American air forces in the Horn of Africa, Iraq as well as Afghanistan. On top of that, the principle governing the

American doctrinal thinking was ‘unity of command’, which made the CFACC integrally responsible for all air operations and on all levels.

Within NATO DCOM Air acted as CFACC of the ISAF air forces, with DCOM Air being responsible for drafting the Air Estimate (what do we need to successfully carry out the assigned tasks) and for the ISAF part of the Joint Air Operations Plan. Moreover, DCOM Air, on behalf of COMISAF, was responsible for the monthly direction of the air operations, which took the form of an Air Operations Directive. Besides, the ISAF Headquarters provided a daily prioritised input for the Air Task Order (ATO), in which all requests for air support approved by the Headquarters were passed on to the CAOC.

This construction was a cumbersome one, and the reasons for it lay in the fact that the American CFACC found it hard to conform to the tasks, responsibilities and authorities of ISAF’s DCOM Air. One of the reasons for this, as explained above, was that with the Americans the Commander CFACC also held integral responsibility for Afghanistan within Central Command, and he was used to operating on the basis of this principle. A result of this was that initially he hardly made use of the direction and guidance from the ISAF Headquarters. On top of that, as CFACC, he demanded integral responsibility for issuing the Air Operations Plan, all this primarily from the perspective that the Americans provided the bulk of the air forces.

On the basis of the experiences of Operation Medusa in the province of Kandahar in fall of 2006 and the fact that as of October 2006 ISAF became integrally responsible for the mission in Afghanistan, it was decided to launch a quality initiative for the direction of operations. For the air force component at the ISAF Headquarters in Kabul this entailed a considerable extension of the material and personnel capacities in the Combined Joint Operations Center (CJOC). At the same time, the Americans made available a national Air Operations Control Center (AOCC) for the CJOC, while simultaneously minimising that capacity on Bagram Airfield.

In cooperation with the AOCC, the Regional Air Operations Control Centers took care of the daily input for the Air Task Order for the CAOC in Qatar. Among its other tasks were also the monitoring and, if necessary, the adjusting of the daily Air Task Order. The latter happened in the form of a so-called dynamic retasking. Besides, during the execution of the air operations the AOCC maintained contact with the Regional Air Operations Centers, Air Liaison Officers and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs). Moreover, there was constant coordination with the CAOC in Qatar, which bore the actual responsibility for the execution of the air operations.

In order to facilitate the conduct of air operations from the CAOC in Qatar, a double-hatted construction was decided upon for the Deputy Combined Joint Force Air Component Commander (DCFACC), who was present on a daily basis in the CAOC as a representative of the American CFACC. Not only was the DCFACC responsible for the execution of ISAF air operations, but also for those in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of their CENTCOM area of responsibility. DCFACC was the functionary who considered all requests for the deployment of air forces in order to come to an optimal assignment of available resources. Frequently, national American resources were assigned to ISAF for the execution of tasks (tankers, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and air and ground operations). Only in this manner did it become possible to support all requests with the right priorities.

Within the air force organisation at the ISAF Headquarters the Deputy Director Operations was responsible, on behalf of the DCOM Air, for the monitoring of the execution of the ISAF air operations. However, he was also directly accountable to the DCFACC for the execution of the mission. All in all, this was not a very easy construction, but first and foremost one that required workable solutions.

Those solutions were found in working agreements between DCOM Air and DCFACC, clear and transparent arrangements that allowed both to take their responsibilities and to give substance to their roles. There were also agreements on the role and position of the Deputy Director ACE, in order to avoid him exclusively operating as an exponent of the CAOC. Those agreements led to an effective organisation of the planning and tasking process for the deployment of air forces. It ensured an adequate procedure for the necessary air support and, in the end, that is what it is all about.

The air force component at HQ ISAF further consisted of a Deputy Director of Plans and Projects with his own organisation for operational planning (integrated in the J5, J3/5 and J3 organisation). This ensured the necessary air-ground integration, in any case at HQ level. Finally, 'projects' was involved in complex issues, such as the take-over by NATO of the American-led Kandahar Airfield, the NATO infrastructural rehabilitation on Kabul International Airport, but also matters such as air basing, air space management, et cetera, et cetera.

Resources

In order to carry out the various air force tasks, a range of resources had been made available. This involved not only fixed-wing, but also helicopters and unmanned aerial

vehicles (UAVs), the latter being used in ISR as well as combat (support) roles. The resources were divided on a task/effect basis. Thus, for air-ground operations the British Harrier GR 7/9s, French Mirages 2000, F15 and Rafales, Dutch F-16s, American F-15s and A-10s were available. For armed helicopters the British, Americans and Dutch used the Apache AH-64-D and the Italians the A-129. Other 'in-theatre' transport helicopters were the CH-53 (German), the Lynx (British), the Chinook-CH-47 (British, Italian, American and Dutch), and the Cougar (Spanish, French and Dutch). Finally, the Americans as well as the Turks flew the UH-Blackhawk and the Americans the HH-60G for medevac.

For transport purposes ISAF had the disposal of the so-called Intra Theatre Air Transport (ITAS), in actual fact national resources that were offered to ISAF by the countries on the basis of a specified number of contract hours, in particular, the Transall C-160 (German and French) and the C-130 (British, Canadian, Dutch American, and Italian). Finally, ISAF could resort to ISR resources, such as Predators MQ1, Luna and Sperwer UAVs.

Apart from ISAF 'dedicated' resources, in particular the Americans, and to a lesser extent the British, had considerable numbers of aircraft, which were mainly stationed in the Middle East (amongst others, B-1Bs, tankers and ISR). On top of that, American aircraft carriers, with, F-18s, amongst others, were available on a regular basis. These resources were deployed by CAOC on a day-to-day basis to support ISAF or own coalition operations, as the case might be - Close Air Support, ISR, refuelling and air transport taskings. Also, resources in space were made available to ISAF, such as communication, weather and navigation support.

The main airports used by ISAF were Kandahar, in the south, Herat, in the west, Masar-e-Shariff, Termez and Dusjanbe in the north, and Kabul and Bagram in the east of Afghanistan.

Observations

What, then are the most important observations and lessons learned to be derived from the period 2007-2008? In the first place it can be concluded that the deployment of the air forces was effective, with some 14,000 sorties flown in 2007 and almost 2,500 requests by 'troops in contact' for air support, most of which were granted, with an average reaction time of 15 minutes. For an adequate support the Joint Terminal Attack Controllers played a crucial role (identification, coordination and deconfliction).

Incidentally, the air-ground support was not always kinetic, in other words, not on every occasion weapons were used. The range of deployment options also included the so-called show of presence, show of force and the strafing of ground targets.

Medical evacuation, too, with helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, proved to be of great value for the various units. Almost 900 medevac missions were flown in a combat support mode, and they were not only flown to give succour to ISAF troops. The Afghan National Security Forces and the civilian population benefited from the help and the golden hour principle was truly practised: the guarantee that a casualty would be picked up within the hour to be taken to a hospital (role 2 or 3).

Freight and personnel were transported large-scale with ISAF Intra Theatre Air Transport (ITAS), and this involved thousands of flying hours, and more than 80,000 persons/troops and tons of freight. Apart from ITAS, many missions were flown for logistic support. Especially the many 'platoon bases, company outposts and forward operating bases' in Afghanistan received logistic support from the air. What was remarkable, was the increase in 2007 of the use of Containerised Delivery Systems - pallets with logistic supplies, sometimes satellite-guided, which were air dropped accurately. Thus, in an environment with a difficult landscape and infrastructure as Afghanistan the deployment of air forces was indispensable.

The second observation relates to what may be termed the atypical air campaign in Afghanistan. Traditional air campaigns begin with the battle for air superiority, followed by an offensive counter-air campaign, an interdiction and strategic campaign, et cetera. In Afghanistan, however, four sub-campaigns were staged simultaneously: air transport, close air support, ISR and space. The first two were mainly carried out by and with ISAF resources, while the latter mainly by American resources, made available to ISAF on a temporary basis. Where in former times the emphasis had lain on air-air operations, ISAF mainly focussed on air-ground operations and air transport.

Thirdly, there was the military use of air space. Because of the difficult geographical and topographical situation (high mountains, such as the Hindu Kush) most of the air space was not controlled by air traffic control. Positive control only took place around the airfields and Control and Reporting Centers. In all other areas procedural measures were in place, which means that in most of Afghanistan the principle was 'see and avoid'. In particular during concentrated operations, with much military traffic in a relatively small space and simultaneous indirect fire from the ground crossing through the air space, coordination and deconfliction were of great importance. In so-called high-density air space control zones the principle of 'vertical spacing' of resources was applied

and within those air columns, in their turn, deconfliction. Also the deconfliction with existing air routes was important, and sometimes civilian air routes had to be temporarily closed for military operations. A continued stationing of radar stations and the use of Airborne Early Warning Control and Surveillance was, and is, paramount for a safe use of the air space over Afghanistan.

The fourth observation concerns the air-ground synchronisation and integration. An important aspect in this is the doctrinal approach of land and air force units. Land-bound units decentralised this planning and execution, while air force personnel embraced the adage 'centralised planning, decentralised execution'. The latter applied to the daily ATO process, which involved the matching of scarce resources with a multitude of requests, but it did not apply to the timely planning and fine-tuning of operations, which in 2007 were still two separate processes.

The idea had also taken hold that at any time there were enough air forces available to lend support in any situation. Certainly during the summer and fall of 2007 this assumption was not always justified. In spite of the fact that 'Troops in Contact' (TIC) were almost always supported from the air, it meant that the requested and planned deployment of air forces in support of ground commanders was regularly non-existent. Nevertheless, in the area of air-ground synchronisation and integration much progress was made in 2007, to such an extent even that by the end of the year it had become standard use for timely combined-joint planning meetings to be held in preparation of upcoming operations. Even so, further optimisation of synchronised and integrated combined-joint thinking in the area of planning, fine-tuning and execution of operations remained of vital importance.

The fifth aspect to play a major role was the caveats: regulations for the deployment of own troops, which were specified nationally to NATO and which the commanders had to take into account. Virtually every country had its own caveats and restrictions, sometimes limited, sometimes far-reaching. The caveats were mainly of a geographical (deployment was limited to certain areas) and operational nature. An example of the latter was the restriction of some countries that certain airfields must not be used at night. The caveats were a point of concern for the commander, but at the same time a political reality. Nevertheless, limiting the effect of the caveats as far as possible and bringing down their numbers to a minimum, remained an issue that demanded constant attention.

Sixth, there was the subject of 'collateral damage', which ISAF did all it could to prevent. Precise 'Rules of Engagement', a stringent 'Collateral Damage Estimate' process,

the requirement of positive identification and correct information on the local population's ways of life and the right choice of weapons emphatically determined the use of resources. Regrettably, in spite of all precautions, it can never be fully possible to prevent any civilians from getting killed. What must be remarked here, is that in some cases the opposing forces deliberately position civilians in those dangerous circumstances in order to so discredit the foreign troops in Afghanistan and to be able to conduct strategic information campaigns. Another challenge is the paradox of the timeliness and accuracy of information. In more than one instance 'Opposing Militant Forces' (OMF) claimed large numbers of civilian casualties, with the national Afghan and international media almost always reacting immediately and ready to find fault with. A careful appreciation of the situation on the side of ISAF usually cost more time, which, by definition meant that the time needed for careful scrutiny caused a strategic backlog in countering the often incorrect information coming from the opponent, who did not discriminate between a deployment of ISAF resources and that of the Coalition/Operation Enduring Freedom.

Lessons

In spite of the positive role the air forces have played in the Afghan theatre of operations, it is also possible to draw a number of lessons in the area of air-ground synchronisation and integrations and air space management.

Thus, it appears that a more result-oriented approach - also known as effects-based approach - with regard to planning and execution must be adopted. Units should not specifically ask for an F-15 or F-16, but clearly state what effect they are seeking. The experts, in this case air force personnel, can then make an assessment of what the best resource is to achieve the desired effect. Furthermore, there is room for improvement with regard to planning. Especially in periods when the operational pace goes up, a better planning is of the essence in order to be able to anticipate with regard to the desired resources and numbers.

Air transport was used effectively, but not always effectively enough. A better planning system, improved coordination and a reduction of caveats can lead to a greater efficiency in the air transport.

Finally, lessons can be learned with regard to the right deployment options of air forces. Air deployment is still too often viewed as 'flying artillery'. Air forces, however, can be deployed in a much wider range of operations. Thus, they can create a broad

spectrum of kinetic and non-kinetic effects. A good understanding of those possibilities gives a ground commander more options for requesting the right support and to further optimise his own effort.

Reconstruction and development of the Afghan civilian aviation

To end, a brief reflection of the reconstruction and development of the Afghan civilian aviation is in order here. Airfields in an environment such as Afghanistan were and are of strategic importance. They form the gateways into the country and they provide civilians and government officials in Afghanistan with the means to cover large distances in relatively short periods of time and to make the peripheral areas accessible.

In the Afghan Compact it had been laid down clearly what should be aimed for. It came down to the building up of Kabul International Airport (KAIA) and Herat as international, ICAO –compliant airfields. Furthermore, Kandahar, Masar-e-sharif and Jalabad were to be built up as regional airfields and nine other airfields were to be developed as domestic capacities (amongst which was Tarin Kowt). Apart from these 14 airfields Afghanistan had some 40 locations that could qualify more or less as airfields and that also required further development.

From the Regional Airports Task Force, established for the purpose, in which DCOM Air together with the deputy Minister of Transport and Aviation acted as chair, much attention was given to the rehabilitation of the international and regional airfields in Afghanistan. Great progress was made here, not only with respect to infrastructure, but also airport functions, such as training of specialists (meteorology, fire fighting, air traffic control, et cetera). Much time was also invested in improving management and control on the ministerial and airport level. In this way Afghans are enabled to define, initiate and realise their own material needs better.

With the opening of the rehabilitated airport terminal at KAIA and with the planned completion of a new terminal, as well as the many infrastructural facilities, a further opening up of KAIA seemed logical. The limiting factor, however, was the safety aspect. Only with the establishment of a credible airport security in 2008 do further steps in the direction of the development of the airport seem feasible. All the same, the Afghans have shown that during the Hadj season (pilgrimage to Mecca) they have made great progress with regard to the planning, effort and handling of great numbers of passengers. In 2007 the three large airfields, Kabul, Kandahar and Herat, were better equipped for their tasks than ever before. This is a hopeful development, indeed.

Conclusion

As an individual soldier sent out and as DCOM Air/Dir ACE at the Kabul Headquarters, 2007 was a fascinating year for me. ISAF was intensely involved in supporting the Afghan government and the development of the country. The many thousands of servicemen, the international community and the Afghans themselves have worked hard to create better circumstances. It has been a slow, but continuing progress.

In 2007 the air forces played an important role in the execution of the ISAF mission. Without the availability and deployment of a large range of resources the mission would have been seriously curtailed in a large number of situations. Besides, in many instances the air forces made for the asymmetric advantage for our troops against the OMF at exactly the right time. Without the strong involvement and effort of the many thousands of men and women, along with the support from their home front, the execution of this ISAF mission would not have been possible. A word of thanks and, in particular, respect is in order here.

I look back with great pleasure on my tour in Afghanistan. The involvement of the various players within ISAF, the Afghan government, the international community, and many others, and the results achieved have strengthened my conviction that Afghanistan will make further steps ahead. In that sense this tough mission was more than worthwhile.

Notes

1. Lieutenant General F. (Freek) H. Meulman is Deputy Chief of Defence of the Netherlands Armed Forces.