



THE EMPLOYMENT OF AIRMOBILE FORCES IN MOUNTAIN OPERATIONS

Maj. Claudiu Valer NISTORESCU, PhD Candidate*

Special capabilities as airmobile, air assault and airborne forces could make the difference on today's complex battlefield. Their ability to swiftly deploy and strike enemy vulnerabilities transforms them in a versatile weapon. Mountain operations request special attention, both in planning and execution phases in order to prevail. By integrating airmobile capabilities to mountain unites, a strong opportunity to seize initiative is gained.

Keywords: mountain operations; airmobile capabilities; mountainous environment.

The requirements of today's battlefield are a real challenge for states' security, due to a fast-paced and ever-changing international security environment. The security environment's dimensions and the inherent implications derived from them have always generated a huge pressure on the modern armies' leaders. Military operations in sensitive areas such as the streets of Baghdad, mountains of south-eastern Afghanistan, desert areas of Syria, or South America's jungles, have emphasized complex problems related with the command and control and also the execution of multinationals joint operations. Moreover, cultural challenges and/or the asymmetrical actions of an enemy that has increasingly found the source of its power in unconventional and hybrid methods were revealed.

Regarding Romania's classic threats to national security, such as international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or organized crime, they are completed by new ones such as cyber threats, but also the lack of access to basic education and the medical system, hunger and poverty, migration phenomenon, etc. In addition, the Russian Federation's hostile actions and attitude, in the immediate vicinity of our country, generate possible sources of conflict and regional instability, as well as the perpetuation of already existing differences in the region¹.

Thus, the necessity to build and project new military capabilities including shaping allied forces structures may be more pressing than ever

before. These forces should be equipped with high-performance and interoperable military systems and weapons. Mobility and flexibility, adequate response capacity and, last but not least, sustainability and resilience should be also mandatory requirements². Even if the risk of a major conflict, no matter if it is conventional or hybrid remains low, we cannot completely exclude it.

Taking in consideration the proposed subject for our analysis, I think it should be necessary first to highlight the main objectives and research directions, but also the methods used in order to obtain relevant results. The analysis' results conclusions and recommendations will be stressed in the end.

The study starts and is based on the following hypothesis: "successful military operations in national mountainous environment, depend and are influenced by the building and employment of airmobile forces in support of mountain brigades". By using deductive reasoning, I have tried in the next lines, to argue the relevance of building airmobile forces in direct support of mountain brigades. The emphasis is placed on their essential role in seizing success and initiative in military operations. By studying national and NATO documents related with the mountain operations' planning and execution, as well as performing an analysis of the airmobile forces' characteristics led to conclusions that validate the initial hypothesis.

With the purpose to direct the efforts and to pursue the objectives in an efficient way, the following questions may be useful. Also, I wish to emphasize the fact that those questions practically establish the research directions of the present approach:

* "Carol I" National Defence University
e-mail: nistorescu_claudiu@yahoo.com



- What are the current security environment's requirements and references that determine the development of Romanian mountain forces?

- What are the mountain operations' particularities?

- What are the considerations that require the building and development of airmobile capabilities in support of mountain brigades?

- What are the mandatory actions and measures to be taken for an initial integration of the airmobile forces with the supported mountain unit?

In this context, and also related with the topic under scrutiny, it seems natural to consider the necessity of maintaining and developing specialized forces for mountain operations. Considering the geographical configuration of Romania, corroborated with a short analysis of the main sources of risk to the country's security and also taking into account the lessons learned from national military confrontations, we can consider Carpathian mountain range a strategic line of defence. In other words, by reconsidering the possibility to conduct military *large-scale combat operations*³, on the national territory, Romania's mountainous area will offer a strong defence line to stop a potential enemy offensive. Subsequently, the necessary conditions to conduct a counteroffensive in order to liberate the occupied territory are established. The control of the Romania's mountain area gives the opportunity to deny the enemy's access in the mountain passes, that are the only land penetration routes to the center of the country. Therefore, we should stress again the necessity of continuous development of national mountain forces. I strongly believe it is a priority, given the current security paradigm that influences the policies of states in the region.

The development and adaptation of these special capabilities' with respect to the new requirements generated by the modern conflicts' physiognomy is an inherent feature to the modernization process of the Romanian Army's land forces. This fact implies and requires both solving weapon systems and military equipment issues and adapting combat tactics and procedures, including their forms of maneuver. The Force's mobility and its ability to project surgical effects, in order to gain an advantage against the enemy are the real challenges when we are speaking about building the necessary capabilities to conduct mountain

operations. Following this idea, the objective of this analysis is to highlight the purpose and reasoning to build airmobile forces in support of mountains troops and consequently, to emphasize their role in shaping operations which allow seizing and maintaining the initiative on the battlefield.

Airmobile operations' description refers to those actions that project a force package by air, including necessary weapons and equipment to engage enemy in land environment⁴. These actions are usually conducted for a limited period of time, having a precise objective. An airmobile operation is practically a vertical maneuver, it involves the integrated use of helicopters and ground forces trained to conduct those type of actions.

Airmobile forces are those forces with the capability to execute the operations described above. They usually belong to light forces and exploit the helicopters' firepower and mobility, by conducting aerial maneuvers to engage and destroy enemy forces or to secure and maintain key terrain. Usually, the platforms for air transportation are integrated into the supported unit's organic (the US military are using the term of "army aviation" for helicopter units subordinated to ground forces). If this is not possible, aviation units are received temporary in support in order to give the opportunity to build an airmobile force. This kind of force is designated to execute shaping operations, but with a major impact to the enemy's cohesion and coherence of its actions. If well conducted, airmobile forces have the chance to affect enemy's morale and willingness to fight. Airmobile forces, using surprise are penetrating deep into enemy territory, usually striking its reserves, command points, or occupying key terrain and controlling them until the junction with the main forces is set up. The main features of these forces become their advantages in combat operations. Thus it could be helpful to mention them: flexibility and surprise, operational mobility, speed, shock inducing and the use over long distances, ability to open theatres of operations, independence, economy of forces, *esprit de corp*⁵.

The airmobile forces' efficiency in operations for solving specific crises, establishing a bridgehead, opening a new theater of operations or creating the conditions to develop future actions, leads me to the idea that the full integration of aviation units and mountain units is worth to be considered, in order to



build a robust and flexible force. Thus, I will try in the following lines to argue this idea. Also I would try to highlight the specificity of military mountain operations, which in my opinion, recommends the foundation of the airmobile capability in support of mountains brigades.

The rugged and compartmentalized nature of the mountainous terrain turns these particular areas into real obstacles for mechanized forces. Their movement is limited to the use of a poor communications network, which is usually found along valleys, passes and mountain passes. The operations' success, whether offensive or defensive actions are taken, depends on seizing and maintaining the initiative. Mobility is a huge issue generated by the specificity of the mountainous environment, and it is not the only one. Communications and signals are severely restricted, this fact having negative consequences for the command and control process. Shifting fire support from one direction to another is difficult due to the terrain fragmentation. In this idea, mutual support is hampered too. The forces engaged in operations in this type of terrain become vulnerable in choke points and along the narrow lines of communications. Moreover, they are highly exposed to inherent risks generated by environmental and meteorological conditions. Achieving efficient logistical support is a real challenge for mountain brigades, especially when part of the forces acts on an independent direction.

Taking into account mountainous terrain particularities generated by this environment, we emphasize that the offensive is not recommended in the mountains and its success depends essentially on the way in which forms of maneuver are conducted. The most appropriate form of maneuver for offensive actions in mountainous areas is the turning movement. In this respect, mountain brigades are projecting company level detachments in order to execute this kind of maneuver and to obtain the desired effect. At the same time, mountain battalions could create their own turning movement force which is usually based on a mountain platoon structure reinforced with mortars, antitank means, etc. However, the detachments' organization largely depends on the type of mission received and the existing situation. Large tactical units such as division or army corps, in combat large-scale operations, could build a turning movement detachment using a mountain battalion from a

mountain brigade of the second echelon. The unit will temporarily become subordinate to the higher echelon, until the mission is accomplished. The mission of these detachments is to strike the enemy's second echelon and reserves, consequently forcing it to direct forces from the main effort direction in order to counter the threat. This "reversed front" put the enemy in the impossibility to counterattack in order to close the gaps created in the defence disposal. Detachments may also be tasked with temporarily occupying key terrain and maintaining them in order to facilitate the offensive of the main forces.

The infiltration's chances for these detachments are substantially increased by air transportation and this way the risk to be discovered before engaging is reduced. The successful execution of the offensive operation depends to a large extent on the success of the detachments' action. Their efficiency generates the premises for destroying the cohesion of the enemy's defence, and forces him to withdraw. Consequently, a pursuit can be mounting up against the enemy's forces where airmobile force could play a decisive role by intercepting its lines of communication and hamper its freedom of movement.

The need for using airmobile force into battle also is necessary during the defence operation in the mountainous environment, with the purpose to timely counteract to the offensive actions of the attacker. Thus, the airmobile forces in support of mountain brigade's operation will allow striking the infiltrated enemy's detachments as much as the rapid intervention in independent directions, or in support of the encircled forces. The accurate and timely use of the reserves can be facilitated through air transportation, from one direction to another. Rapid intervention, to neutralize the enemy airborne forces, requires the use of forces that have the necessary mobility and speed. This entity can be materialized by the airmobile force build in support of the mountain troops, as said before.

No matter what the tactical activity is, the challenge remains, as I said before, the manner in which special detachments are brought to bear and introduce in combat. I emphasize, once again, that the success of the conducted operations depends decisively on their infiltration. Given the increasing development of ISR capabilities and taking into account the opportunity to conduct land maneuvers,



it could be concluded that ground infiltration, mounted or on foot, is difficult to achieve even for small units as companies or battalions. Moreover, the mountainous environment, through the terrain special configuration is favoring the infiltration by air, with the use of helicopters. The mountains provide visual and sound masking, allowing the airmobile force to get both a greater tactical surprise and protection against early combat engagement. The airmobile operations give the brigade's staff the opportunity to quickly reposition its forces and strength in decisive points in order to obtain a position of advantage against the enemy. By doing so, the chances to strike enemy's vulnerabilities and subsequently exploit new opportunities are enhanced. Another advantage obtained by conducting airmobile operations in support of the mountain operations is to ensure the possibility of forces' concentration in rough terrain which is usually inaccessible with the conventional technologies and means. By a swift key terrain control, or by realizing surprise by performing actions in unlikely directions, those shaping operations are set up in order to support the brigade's decisive operation.

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that airmobile operation's specificity ingrains the subsequent actions with special features such as independence, high degree of risk, while determination, courage and military professionalism become real imperatives. Therefore, we can say that airmobile forces and mountain troops are connected through the same "esprit de corps" that empower them to operate in hostile environment, usually with small combat units.

Starting from these premises, we need to reiterate once again the reason to build airmobile forces in support of mountain brigades in order to enhance their abilities to conduct military operations. Moreover, I have tried to identify those mandatory directions regarding the achievement of the capability described. Therefore, to build and integrate airmobile forces, several aspects must be taken into account:

- the type of mission that the airmobile force can carry out in support of the mountain brigade's operations;
- adapting the doctrinal stipulations and regulations, regarding the military operations in the mountainous environment, as well as the

elaboration of the norms and instructions necessary for the accomplishment of the training process;

- the airmobile force's size projection, composition and organization according with the missions received;
- the airmobile force integration's proceedings with respect to the mountain brigade's structure and organization or its higher echelon;
- the mandatory measures to train and prepare air units with the necessary capability to conduct air infiltrations in order to insert a designated ground force in combat; this activity should be performed, respecting the requirements of the "early insertion" concept, as well as the extraction of force, if the situation requires it;
- special attention to the acquisition and endowment regarding necessary weapons and combat equipment, as well as special equipment, in order to enhance the force's ability to survive; in this regard, we should emphasize the need for reliable and compact small arms fire, man-pad mortars and antitank systems, but also global positioning systems – GPS, tactical drones, night vision equipment, securitized communications including satellite systems, thermal and infrared camouflage equipment, etc.;
- maximizing the possibilities of providing fire support, both during the infiltration and the execution phase;
- ensuring appropriate logistical support and providing the necessary facilities for the integration of aviation units;
- an adequate personnel selection process;
- the establishment of special training programs in order to provide an appropriate training for selected personnel; designated training facilities and bases are required.

These are just a few aspects that I believe should be taken in consideration in order to create airmobile forces in support of mountain operations. Definitely, the list is far from being complete. Future acquisition programs hopefully will allow building organic aviation unit for land forces, and also will open a certain way to use this type of force. Consequently, this fact will generate the need to rethink the new combat requirements. In this context, the mountain troops will have the opportunity to obtain the appropriate aviation resource in order to set up an airmobile force when it is necessary. By realizing this important



capability, a decisive instrument for conducting military operations could be achieved.

NOTES:

1 *** *Strategia Națională de Apărare a Țării pentru perioada 2020-2024*, Bucharest, 2020, p. 18.

2 *** *Carta Albă a Apărării*, Bucharest, 2020, p. 31.

3 *** *Large-Scale Combat Operations – The Division Fight*, US Army Command and General Staff College Press Book Published by the Army University Press, 2019; The Publications outline the necessity to reconsider the old concept of *combat-large-scale operation*, as much as the way in which division operations must be conducted; the evolution of the international environment and the existence of a peer enemy enforce this changes, as revealed by the publication; by illustrating several historical case studies, the importance of forces' mobility and maneuver, but also command and control system's flexibility, are also highlighted.

4 *** *ATP-3.2.1, Allied Land Tactics*, Edition B, Version 1, August 2018, pp. 3-16.

5 *** *F.T.-3, Manualul de tactică generală a forțelor terestre*, Bucharest, 2020, p. III-19.

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*** *Framework for Future Alliance Operations*, 2018, www.act.nato.int, accessed on 11.01.2021.

*** *Strategic Foresight Analysis*, Report, 2017, www.act.nato.int la 14.01.2021.

*** *Large-Scale Combat Operations – The Division Fight*, US Army Command and General Staff College Press Book Published by the Army University Press, 2019.