DEFENCE ANALYSIS

LESSONS FROM THE GULF
A US survey commissioned to look into the impact of US military aviation on the 1991 Gulf War throws

a fresh perspective on what seemed at the time to be dramatic advances in air combat

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peration Desert Storm
demonstrated the poten-
tial of air power and some of
its limits, according to Dr. El-
liot Cohen, who served as di-
rector of the Gulf War Air
Power Survey, an independent
study group commissioned by
the US Air Force to examine
the impact of US military avia-
tion in the 1991 Gulf conflict.

The survey, commissioned in
August 1991, cost the US tax-
payer about $5.8 million. It
includes ten reports classified
"secret" and an unclassified
summary. The survey con-
cludes that US air power was
not the "military-technical rev-
olution" which some advocates
claimed it to be.

If such a technological revo-
lution is under way, says
Cohen, a strategic studies pro-
fessor at Johns Hopkins Uni-
versity, Washington DC, "...it
is only in its early stages. But
there are glimmerings of some-
thing very different ahead, in
the role played by space-based
assets, the unified command-
and-control apparatus and the
routine precision of air attacks.
"A great deal of organisa-
tional and doctrinal prepara-
tion would be needed to make
the promise of such a revolu-
tion a reality," he writes.
After careful examination of
the evidence, "...some of the
aspects of the war that seemed
most dramatic at the time ap-
pear less so than they did in
the immediate after-glow of
one of the most one-sided cam-
paigns in military history",
Cohen concludes.
"True revolutions in war
may take decades and require
not merely new technologies,
but new forms of organisations
and behaviour to mature. But
as we consider the war, some
signposts of change surely
stand out," he adds.
Cohen says that there were
new technologies which gave
the air campaign its distinctive
character. They included the
effective use of laser-guided

bombs and Texas Instruments
High-speed Anti-Radiation Mis-
siles (HARM).
Air refuelling was also con-
sidered to be a critical factor,
as was the use of the Lockheed
F.117 stealth fighter.
Cohen says that the HARM
limited Iraqi forces to using
short-range air defences, while
the F.117 was used to hit
strategic targets, paralysing
enemy air-defence systems

from the outset of the war.
The USA and its allies com-
mitted about 1,760 combat and
747 support aircraft, with the
USA providing about four-
fifths of each. The USAF de-
ployed slightly more than one-
quarter of its tactical aircraft,
with the US Marine Corps, US
Navy and US Army committing
much higher percentages.
In terms of armaments, two-
thirds of the USAF's laser-
guided bombs and its Maverick
missiles were shipped to the
Gulf, with about half of these
weapons being consumed.
Facing the Coalition force
was "a third-rate opponent",
with badly trained pilots. By

the time of the Coalition's
ground offensive, air power
had destroyed or physically
disabled more than half of the
armour in front-line divisions,
one-quarter in the Republican
Guard divisions.

Coalition air forces probably
suppressed the Scud missile
launch rate by 30-40%, but
"...we have no hard evidence of
the destruction of mobile Scuds
from the air", Cohen adds.

Coalition forces clearly con-
trolled the airspace, with the
Iraqi air force either destroyed,
grounded or sheltering in Iran.
Nearly 400 of 600 Iraqi aircraft
shelters were destroyed and 33
aircraft shot down.

The naming of a Joint Force
Air Component Commander
(JFACC) responsible for plan-
ning and executing theatre air
operations was controversial.
USAF Lt Gen Charles Horner
exercised his authority through
the daily air-tasking order.
"The daily air-tasking order
became a subject of contention.
The [US] military services and
Coalition forces accepted the
need for a single author-

ity... [but] they had, to varying
degrees, reservations about
Gen Horner's authority to se-
lect the targets and prescribe
the flight operations for the
many elements of the Coali-
tion's air forces," says Cohen.
Before the war, commanders
had planned to confine bomb
runs from medium altitude to
daylight. After three days of
combat, and the loss of several
aircraft, commanders restricted
bombing missions to 10,000-
15,000ft (3,000-4,600m),
which is above the reach of
anti-aircraft artillery.
This reduced bombing accu-
racy and required higher
weather ceilings for visual
bomb runs. About half of the
attack sorties into Iraq had
been diverted to other targets
or were cancelled because of
weather-related problems.
The role of the Boeing B-52
bomber was highlighted in the
survey. The B-52 was estimated
to have been used to drop
nearly one-third of the bomb
tonnage in the war "becoming
one of the most sought-after
aircraft by the ground com-
manders for strikes against
Iraqi ground forces", says
Cohen. Use of the B-52Gs from
Barksdale AFB, Los Angeles,
helped to open the air war.
Carrying conventionally
armed air-launched cruise mis-
siles, the B-52s were used to hit
communications and power
plants deep inside Iraq. The
round-trip lasted over 35h, the
longest air-combat mission in
history, and the occasion of
the first use of conventional
air-launched cruise missiles
in combat.

While Operation Desert
Storm was successful for US air
power, it would be dangerous
to consider that future wars
will be fought in the same way.
Thus, care must be exercised
before applying the lessons of
the Gulf War to future battles,
he concludes.

BY RAMON LOPEZ •

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