

# US JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS

LESSONS FROM GRENADA TO IRAQ  
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## **Introduction**

The projection of combat power is a decisive variable for states or military forces entering into battle. This has been true since antiquity and will hold true for centuries to come. Cooperation on and off the battlefield is striking and important, though hardly a surprising, characteristic of military operations and warfare in the contemporary period. While it is by no means new, state approaches to conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in the post-9/11 era, have become steeped in the concept of jointness, partnership, and coalition as well as tactical, operational, and strategic objective-setting. Cooperation and cooperative efforts like coalition warfare retains immense relevance today given the emergence of manifold traditional and non-traditional threats, battlefield/battlespace reconceptualization, and military drawdown, among other factors. In debating the meaning of these terms and how they ought to be understood in principle and practice, at the same time it is necessary to revisit missions undertaken in the past, to learn from both success and failure, and consider how those lessons can be applied today.

## **Joint Operations – Operation Urgent Fury (OUF) (Grenada)**

When Sir Eric Gairy, Grenada's first prime minister was ousted from office during the course of the "New Jewel" (New Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education, and Liberation) movement leading to the subsequent People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) under the leadership of Maurice Bishop. The collapse of civil order coalesced with Marxist-Leninist political views, and new and ideologically dangerous partnerships with the Soviet Union, Cuba, and an assortment of other pro-Soviet, anti-liberal-democratic governments. Washington's response, coordinated with several other Caribbean states, led to Operated Urgent Fury (OUF) – a unique case of US joint operations.

OUF was a case of both failure and success, with the latter often overshadowing the former. But where were the problems? What can we learn from this operation today? Unfortunately, high-ranking officers in the contemporary US military establishment gained their valuable experience from the many battles that comprised Operation Desert Storm (ODS). In this, OUF presents itself as somewhat of a detached case, an orphaned operation in military learning. It therefore seems fitting to take a step back from ODS and start with the largest US military operations to have taken place since Vietnam.

What we were witnessing at the time was the development of information operations in a mode of warfare that would become increasingly dominant in the coming years. Where we have been seduced indefensibly so by military accomplishment (whether we have a firm understanding of why or not), OUF is a historically atypical and so critical case to revisit in light of deepening and interconnected commitments strewn around the world. Lessons from OUF can be drawn from three specific areas: integrated planning time, forces in place, and intelligence.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent operations undertaken by the US

such as Operation Just Cause (Panama - 1989) and ODS (Kuwait and Iraq - 1990-91) also provide indispensable backdrops against which we can analyze some of the key shortcomings, challenges, and fruitful outcomes of OUF.<sup>2</sup>

OUF commenced without the proper time allocated for planning and coordination.<sup>3</sup> The US did not provide its military services with sufficient time to prepare for the coming mission as with operations in Panama and the Middle East that would follow. Those units that were involved in OUF were not provided with the opportunity to rehearse, military forces were not properly positioned, and the necessary intelligence to inform an acceptable level of achievement for the operation was virtually non-existent.<sup>4</sup> In the two successful cases mentioned, the US boasted and therefore was able to capitalize on these advantages.

Since stepping in and out of time remains an impossibility that we have to learn to live with, we ought to take a deep look at our success and failures in the context of scheduling and timetabling. Daniel L. Davis presciently reminds us that, "[t]he level of difficulty and set of challenges the Army has faced since 1980 isn't comparable to those faced by uniformed leaders during World War II, Korea, and even the initial stages of Vietnam. Our senior leaders have spent virtually their entire careers in environments where they were able to schedule 'war' as if it were a training event. They had the luxury of establishing deployment schedules, often times years in advance."<sup>5</sup>

OUF was planned with some of the key principles of war in mind. The JCS directed C-in-C, Atlantic (CINCLANT) to strive for the following: (1) Conduct military operations to protect and evacuate US as well as designated foreign nationals from Grenada, (2) Neutralize Grenadine forces (People's Revolutionary Army), (3) Stabilize the internal situation, and (4) Maintain the peace.<sup>6</sup>

A Joint Task Force (JTF) was also created to assist in the accomplishment of those objectives. The necessary intelligence was there, it existed and could have been channelled to the forces that relied on it to carry out their missions and achieve the military political objectives set out for them. Unfortunately, on the ground little can be done when rescue-target locations remain undisclosed. In essence, US forces were searching for a needle in a haystack.

Because the military was not fully aware of the location of its rescue targets, it was unable to fulfill some of its most critical objectives. In this, JTF was operating blindly. Given that tactical objectives had not been (properly) secured, OUF's overarching strategic goals were jeopardized. To be sure, the lack of information provided violated US joint doctrine and resulted in unnecessary US casualties. This same story was observed in Afghanistan on more than one occasion.

OUFs inherent challenges can be directly associated with the highest levels of command who understood the criticality of providing as much intelligence as possible to those forces that would be directly involved. On the JTF level Admiral Joseph Metcalf III was also aware that more intelligence could have been provided in order to avoid US casualties, locate student hostages quicker, and avoid the escalation of violence above and beyond vulnerable US positions for both the military and civilians.<sup>7</sup> In spite of such verities, communication through the National Command Authority (NCA) about the problems failed to take place.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the events that transpired during OUF there is a need to take note of the importance that JP-3-05.5 places on accurate intelligence in such operations.

The four-phase operation was developed by the ad hoc JTF staff to meet mission objectives. Those missions included: (1) Transit (deployment of forces to the area of operations), (2) Insertion (putting the forces on the island), (3) Stabilization/Evacuation (combat operations and non-combatant evacuation operation [NEO]), and (4) Peacekeeping operation.<sup>9</sup> They were not met because of a breakdown in phase-specific/appropriate preparation.

There was a level of awareness of the dangers of both adhering to joint doctrine and deviating from it. In this, US forces were attempting to navigate through a narrow corridor but violating many of its own rules and regulations in an attempt to see their objectives through. Waiting for further intelligence would have changed the situation on the ground and may have proven a costly decision. Moving forward without all the proper elements in place, however, surely resulted in losses. Both the mission and JTF were placed in danger due to decisionmaking coupled with a failure to ensure control during deployment.<sup>10</sup> When it came to fulfilling the phases, the necessary fire support was also missing. This was a major area that needed work although it was not neglected entirely.

Despite the shortcomings of the operation, it was a strategic and operational success. Still, the question that has seldom been visited within this military scenario is whether strategic and operations success is truly possible or even, if so, sustainable without important (or even requisite) tactical achievements. OUF illustrated the fault-lines in command and control more than anywhere else, and the problems in preparation such as three-level planning and training.<sup>11</sup>

The US military was able to draw on the operation and apply the lessons to later missions though having done so to a rather limited extent. However, what transpired at Grenada was not at all new to the US or its armed forces. Looking back, JCS should have been expected to draw on a rich collection of lessons preceding Grenada in order to apply them to OUF. This is not unlike JCS' practice seen today. The idea, however, should be that actions and patterns in such a way do not become lasting behavior. Because the US currently operates in a high-risk and uncertain security environment, in

which events can take place at a moments' notice, it must be able to conduct no-notice or last-minute operations. OUF was one such operation.

Having illustrated the fruitfulness of combining forces, OUF reinforces the value of in-depth combined operations assessment. There is without a doubt a criticality of integrated operations that has seemingly failed to resonate in subsequent military missions and campaign to the extent that we might have expected. As Higgins writes, "[m]uch of the Army's communications and electronics equipment on Grenada was not compatible with the Navy's.<sup>12</sup> This problem became particularly acute when Army and Marine units encountered each other near St. George's." Communication failure proved even more disastrous when, "the Second Brigade TOC was bombed and strafed during a misdirected airstrike" that took place on D+2.<sup>13</sup>

Looking back, a further problem arises from the subsequent successful operations in Panama and the Middle East. Later successes always have the ability to overshadow the problems of previous missions. This is arguably one area that the US continues to struggle with. Of the operation, Ballard writes, "the somewhat successful Grenada operation in 1983 (URGENT FURY) finally broke the back of service parochialism in the United States after US forces completely failed to coordinate at the operational level and suffered severe interoperability problems in tactical execution."<sup>14</sup>

## **Coalition Operations - Operation Desert Storm (ODS)**

ODS is one of the most studied operations in US military history. It followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union and was therefore the first significant international conflict of the post-Cold War era. The conflict illustrated the ability of the US to focus on regional threats as opposed to conflict that had taken place in a world of bipolarity. Following this new strategy and fulfilling, in part, an emerging role in the new security environment, the US developed one of the most powerful coalition forces, composed not just of Western states, but those of different regions (most notably Arab states of the Persian Gulf).

The US provides a competence in pooling together a rich collection of states and their military capabilities. This is an important matter addressed in JP-1, which stated "[t]he ability of the US and its allies to work together to influence the global environment is fundamental to defeating 21<sup>st</sup> century threats."<sup>15</sup> The threat posed by Saddam Hussein at the time was not unlike threats posed by other states in the following decade and beyond. On the success of coalition building in the lead-up to operations in 1991, Heitmeyer writes:

After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, US President George H. W. Bush deployed US Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard

units to Saudi Arabia as a part of Operation Desert Shield, while urging other countries to send their own forces to the scene. UN coalition-building efforts were so successful that by the time the fighting (Operation Desert Storm) began on January 16, 1991, twelve countries had sent naval forces, joining the regional states of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states, as well as a huge array of US Navy, which deployed six carrier battle groups. Eight countries sent ground forces, joining regional troops of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE], as well as the seventeen heavy and six light brigades of the US Army and nine Marine regiments, with their large support and service forces. Four countries sent combat aircraft, joining the local air forces of Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the US Air Force, US Navy, and US Marine aviation, for a grand total of 2,430 fixed wing aircraft.<sup>16</sup>

Operating in a new environment such as the desert of the Middle East proved a valuable lesson, reinforcing the idea that the principles of war will not change from one environment to another. The lesson is recorded at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. During ODS, the US military anticipated and accordingly reinforced the idea of the need for land support systems like the helicopter aircraft survivability equipment (ASE), AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, CH-Chinook, and Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar Systems (JSTARS).<sup>17</sup>

Support systems of these types were critical to the operation that took place in a radically different environment from what the US was used to in the modern age. Though the principles of war do not change, the equipment demanded by the environment can and always will. In this, thermal sights proved a valuable addition to the US and coalition combat toolbox, especially during dark and dense sand storms.<sup>18</sup>

Although the US relished in months of preparation time, its highest-level generals and commanders overlooked the need for adequate numbers of heavy equipment transporters (HET). Compensating for the shortage, the Washington and its allies provided an additional 1,295 vehicles to meet the demands of the coalition operations. ODS offers a lesson through the strength of coalition forces and coalition operations in addition to combined military operations. Given that military objectives are coupled with clearly defined political objectives, the US aptly demonstrated its capacity to jointly operate at an optimal level during the course of a risky operation sanctioned by the United Nations (UN) (this was carried forward under UN Resolution 678).<sup>19</sup>

Through ODS, the importance of air superiority (bearing in mind that air power alone cannot win wars) and the value of using stealth technology in combat become apparent.<sup>20</sup> The use of remotely piloted aerial vehicles (RPAVs) (or drones) was an importance part of surveillance that informed the cunning movements of the land



components. Operation Desert Shield is a lesson in the significance of adaptation, flexibility, and communication in order to respond to fast-changing events in a large operational environment and maintain the function of a coalition comprised of numerous states. Operation Desert Shield reinforced the necessity of joint training and the Universal Joint Task List (UJTL) – a doctrine-based construct detailing a universe of military tasks linked to specific conditions and standards – particularly among a wide range of states fighting for a single cause.<sup>21</sup>

## **Peacekeeping Operations – Kosovo**

Despite the US military's focus on conventional warfare throughout most of its history (although the US has a rich history of irregular operations), operations conducted in Kosovo as a result of Serbian aggression and interethnic violence that took place in the former Yugoslavia called for the US to engage in a much different kind of war. Sanctioned by the UN and working alongside the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and European Union (EU) member states, the US entered Kosovo in June 1999 in a historic peacebuilding operation. Under the codename Operation Joint Guardian of USKFOR, the US and its allies engaged in what was very different from traditional warfighting and produced many episodes still providing valuable lessons for future warfare as well as educational tools related to peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations to this day. Whether those lessons are repeatedly revisited and given the attention they deserve is a point of deep debate.

Any discussion about US involvement in Kosovo can aptly begin with mention of the US having failed to act quickly and decisively. Washington's public announcement that it would not commit ground forces to the region spoiled an element of surprise on the part of the Allies. Although Serbian leadership was aware of the impending attacks, understanding that the US would not send ground forces into Kosovo changed the strategic calculus of Serbia's leaders.

As Phillips asserts, the lack of commitment by the US "may have encouraged Milosevic to suffer the air campaign longer than anyone expected [even though] [w]ithin USAREUR, however, there were signs suggesting that military personnel would be committed to the province soon, whether there was an agreement or not."<sup>22</sup> The US military and its partners struggled to operate efficiently given a lack of clear guidance from high levels of political and military command, leaving "staff officers to "guess" possible scenarios and then create multiple variations of plans to fit within those exigencies."<sup>23</sup>

A second lesson extrapolated from the Kosovo campaign was the apparent confusion about the role various militaries were to play in Kosovo. To some, it was a military operation but to others, the task was one of peacekeeping and peace enforcement – a

kind of policing abroad in the EU's backyard. Commander of European Command (EUCOM), General Wesley Clark, directed USAREUR to freeze all planned deployments for organizational training in anticipation of requirements for logistical resources and troop unit moves into Kosovo.<sup>24</sup> Despite adherence to JCS JP-3 and its principles of war, with the US and its partners undertaking training exercise and other forms of preparation, the political events shifted with the Serbian leadership's unexpected acceptance of NATO peacekeepers.

The events brought about an abrupt need for the US to deploy any of the forces that were ready and available. However, when the US forces slowly trickled into Kosovo, they followed on their objectives swiftly and in close coordination with military units sent from the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France, and Italy.<sup>25</sup> Securing each sector highlighted the US military's post-Cold War capacity to work in close combination with other states among the security zones in addition to militaries like those working together in the joint Polish-Ukrainian unit.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the problems deriving from the operation came in the form of understanding shared terminology such as establishing a "safe and secure environment." Politically language of this kind carried divergent meaning for each of the actors in the area. Another objective focused on achieving a self-sustaining and secure environment in which the successful transfer of public responsibility over to civil authority could occur. As far back as 2007, there were still major questions about the level of peace and security that was established. Intervening forces improperly anticipated levels of violence and lawlessness, signalling a learning opportunity in terms of preparation for the situation in which military forces were to be deployed.

Whereas the US performed marvellously in the previous air campaign against Serbia, its land-based involvement showed major signs of weakness and a lack of focus and planning.<sup>27</sup> In this we find that the US and its partners failed enormously to comprehend the inter-ethnic politics and social environment in which they had committed their forces. Ongoing operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere in Central Asia and Eastern Europe crisply mirror this claim. The level of retribution that took place surprised many US officers and soldiers.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently the US needed to concern itself with policing deliberate and highly organized violence against ethnic Serbians, targeted by ethnic Albanians over historical grievances.

Washington was unprepared for the mixed range of tasks and sudden changes in the Kosovo security environment. The events shifted from military operations to humanitarian efforts with little-to-no notice and with vital tasks having oftentimes overlapped. Once again, no single state is in complete control of its military scheduling, nor can and form of leadership retain mastery over tactical, operational, and strategic calculation in the context of time and space. However, US military units operating in all three operational environments adapted and continued to work well with numerous

states and agencies such as non-government organizations (NGOs) and interest groups that also maintained a presence in the region to assist with the peacebuilding efforts.

The discipline of US soldiers was highly praised despite struggles to deal with levels of violence and the blurring of lines between soldiers and civilians undertaking their own violent acts, which are overwhelmingly characteristic of current operational environments. "Controlling large, hostile crowds," writes Phillips, "was never easy because of so many variables that might influence a particular situation."<sup>29</sup> Projection of disengagement for the US remained difficult and after its confused role and lack of ground commitment and preparedness; the peacebuilding operation in Kosovo arguably remains an unfinished or ongoing success story.

Operation Joint Guardian is a case full of challenges and lessons, and requires a breadth of further analysis. The US military was required to think in entirely different ways, and re-conceptualize the landscape of conflict and war, especially what it means to be involved in peace enforcement and peacekeeping as opposed to traditional warfighting. Many of the events like excessive civilian violence and anger caught military forces off-guard. Deployment was somewhat clumsy and frustrated military commanders, who ultimately have to carry the responsibility for this.

Kosovo, in spite of coordination and working in close partnership, remains a story of failure at least when we focus on the sharing of information and intelligence dimension of the campaign. This, in spite of the perceived political success of the mission that ultimately led to the continuation of Kosovo sovereignty, has become hazardously overshadowed. Part of the problem stemmed from the military doctrines of each military actor on the allied side. Acting jointly in spite of addressing the problems of discrepancy in doctrine set a dangerous precedent that we still see active to this day.<sup>30</sup> The orchestration of such a complex operation cannot take place successfully when the languages of military doctrines are incompatible with one another. Unfortunately, such a practice was perpetuated and forged for itself a nefarious role during military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the ill-famed "War on Terror" (WoT) wars. The story perpetuates today.

Kosovo, not unlike US combined operations in Grenada, was a valuable opportunity for America and its soldiers, and indeed for the command of European military institutions to learn how to operate in a unique and uniquely different environment. However, it remains a misplaced experience that could otherwise enhance our contemporary understanding and capacity for projecting decisive joint capabilities in the far more volatile, demanding, and unavoidable security environment that we attempt to understand today.

## Endnotes

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*Cover photo: USAF aircraft of the 4th Fighter Wing (F-16, F-15C and F-15E) fly over Kuwaiti oil fires - Wikimedia, 2016*