Screaming Eagles Bridge the Gap

By Captain James Handura

Special-operations forces from Cortina destroyed the last remaining bridge over the Mississippi River. Their timing could not have been better, because they successfully stalled the joint task force's most critical logistics push of the operation. This bridge was a vital link in Main Supply Route Ford's ability to pass traffic. The nearest ribbon-bridge assets were almost 100 kilometers to the south. The joint-task-force commander knew there was only one unit that could move bridging equipment that far, over that terrain, that quickly. The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), known as the "Screaming Eagles," was called on to help bridge the gap until a more permanent bridge could be constructed.

———

This was the scenario under which C/7-101 Aviation Regiment (CH-47), 159th Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and the 814th Engineer Company (Assault Float Ribbon Bridge), Fort Polk, Louisiana, recently conducted training. The genesis of this training event was derived from a corps-level simulation exercise in which the 101st Airborne Division had a "be-prepared" mission for just such a contingency. The training took place from 31 January to 4 February 2000, along the "old-river" portion of the Mississippi, with the help of the New Orleans District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (see map, page 33).

Soldiers from the 814th Engineer Company prepare to hook a ramp bay.

The Training

The stated training objectives were to train aircrews and engineers to sling load ribbon-bridge equipment and to construct a ribbon-bridge raft properly.

Day One

The 814th Engineer Company commander and the C/7-101 flight-operations officer held a meeting to discuss the location and layout of the pickup and landing zones, bridge components and characteristics, load-hook-up training, aircraft familiarization, daytime and nighttime pickup- and landing-zone operations, load inspections, proper rigging techniques, the situational training exercise (STX) and, most importantly, safety.

Day Two

Hooker training—the required process of maintaining proficiency in the perishable skill of hooking rigged loads to a hovering rotary-wing aircraft—was conducted. In the 101st Airborne Division, soldiers must have actually hooked a load under an aircraft within the past 90 days to be qualified, unless they are recent Air Assault School graduates. One CH-47D Chinook landed at the pickup zone at 1300 hours, where it was greeted by an enthusiastic crew and the unique pieces of equipment from the 814th Engineer Company—an interior bay, a ramp bay, and a bridge-erection boat. The Chinook company commander conducted a class with the engineers on aircraft

characteristics, aircraft safety, and actions of the hooker teams working underneath the aircraft. The daytime hooker training began at 1400 hours. Both bridge platoons had already rigged and positioned loads of all three types of equipment in the pickup zone and had rotated their personnel through the actual hooking of the loads under the aircraft. Many of the soldiers had never encountered the tremendous power and lift capability of the Chinook nor experienced its accompanying gale-force rotor wash.

When this training was completed, the Chinook picked up each load to verify the rigging, or the "link count," and then delivered it to the landing zone, which in this case was the Mississippi River. Nighttime hooker training began shortly after sundown, with the aircrews hooking the loads while wearing night-vision goggles (NVGs).

Day Three

This training consisted of slinging the bridge components and constructing a six-bay raft. The daytime portion began early, with both platoons rigging and positioning components of a six-bay raft along with one bridge-erection boat on the pickup zone. The plan was to sling bridge bays to the river (the landing zone), where the awaiting bridge crews in bridge-erection boats would assemble the sections into a six-bay-raft configuration. This raft is capable of transporting the heaviest vehicle in the 101st Airborne Division's inventory.

While engineers prepared the loads, the flight crews practiced their hovering position over the river and rehearsed ingress and egress from the pickup and landing zones. When rehearsals were completed, the individual training events were meshed and the collective training began. During this phase, the bridge crewmen assembling the rafts learned a valuable lesson: They must ensure that the sling legs were clear of the bay hinge points before the sections were unfolded or the section would remain in the folded position.

Once again, the nighttime training followed the same sequence as the daytime training, with the aircrews wearing NVGs. Aircrews are required to remain current and qualified while wearing NVGs, which is a challenging task. But flying with NVGs over water is even more challenging, especially when the landing zone must be shared with river barges that occasionally pass through the area.

The Exercise

The training event culminated with an STX, which began at 1100 hours. The flight-operations officer conducted the air-mission briefing, which included the overall enemy and friendly situation and the aircrew's role in the operation. After receiving the order, leaders finalized plans and conducted troop-leading procedures.

The STX focused solely on Phase II (Assault Across the River) of a deliberate river-crossing operation. According to Field Manual 90-13, *River-Crossing Operations*, the concept of this phase is to "rapidly place combat power on the far shore to eliminate the enemy's direct fire onto the crossing sites and secure terrain for attack positions."

The previous three days of training paid off when the operation began in earnest and the engineers rapidly and expertly constructed six-bay rafts, which—in an actual operation—would have been used to shuttle significant combat power to the far shore. The mission was clearly a success.

The Results

This unique training event, which coupled the mobility of Army aviation with the capability of the engineer float-bridge equipment, was significant in many ways. Perhaps most important was that the event proved that the 101st Airborne Division not only has the tactical mobility and lethality that sets it apart from other divisions, but it also has the flexibility to react to situations such as that in the opening scenario and quickly overcome it to accomplish the mission.

Although the stated training objectives were to train aircrews and engineers to sling load ribbon-bridge equipment and construct a ribbon-bridge raft properly, the engineer company also learned to set up and run pickup and landing zones properly. In addition, soldiers gained confidence working under the aircraft, and aviators were able to hone their over-water skills for both daytime and nighttime operations.

Captain Handura is a recent graduate of the Engineer Officers Advanced Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He was previously assigned to the 326th Engineer Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky.