

During two of the largest U.S. military conflicts of the past 50 years, U.S. leaders faced the difficult challenge of finding and destroying well-hidden adversary ground targets. During the Vietnam War, Hanoi moved men and materiel along a logistical pipeline in Laos that was heavily camouflaged. The 12,000 miles of trails, footpaths, and roads that made up the Ho Chi Minh Trail played a critical role in supplying communist forces operating in South Vietnam. For President Lyndon Johnson and his senior advisors, interdicting the logistical flow down the trail became a goal of paramount importance. However, using air power alone to find and destroy targets hidden under the trail's jungle canopy was less effective than administration officials had hoped. Given the ostensible neutrality of Laos and U.S. reluctance to further widen the conflict in Southeast Asia, the Johnson administration ruled out the use of conventional ground forces to cut the trail. Instead, policymakers turned to unconventional means. Using special operations forces (SOF), strike aircraft, and a network of ground sensors, the United States military embarked on a six-year effort to cripple Hanoi's jungle supply system.

Thirty-five years later, during the Persian Gulf War, U.S. officials were again confronted with a strategically important but equally elusive set of ground targets. Saddam Hussein was employing Scud missiles to attack targets in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain in an attempt to force Israel into the war and rupture the fragile coalition established to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait. As in the Vietnam War, the U.S. adversary used deception techniques to prevent coalition forces from finding and destroying the mobile launchers that fired the Scud missiles. And as in the case of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, air power alone

was not enough to locate and destroy strategically important ground targets. Once again, American policymakers embraced the notion of using SOF behind enemy lines to hunt for critical ground targets and call in air strikes.

In both instances, however, the operations proved less successful than U.S. officials had hoped. During the war in Southeast Asia, and later, in the Persian Gulf conflict, countermeasures by a determined adversary proved highly effective. In both cases, shortfalls in sensor capabilities and other technical problems made it difficult to identify and destroy targets from the air. Perhaps even more significant, however, was the nature of the environment in which SOF and the strike aircraft that supported them conducted their operations. In both conflicts, enemy forces operated in vast areas of difficult and unforgiving terrain. Lacking a thorough awareness of where the targets were likely to be, U.S. (and in the case of western Iraq, British) ground reconnaissance teams were forced to patrol huge amounts of territory searching for well-hidden targets. Adding to the challenge was the fact that the adversary had to ensure the survival of only a small number of its key assets to achieve success. For the United States to succeed, however, its military forces had to be able to destroy most if not all of these key targets.

This is not to suggest, however, that these operations were without merit. In Laos, the U.S. campaign succeeded in harassing the North Vietnamese army and in forcing Hanoi to divert resources to defend the trail—resources that otherwise would have gone to waging war against South Vietnam and the American forces deployed there. Although these operations entailed political risks, they were financially inexpensive when compared with conventional U.S. operations in the region, and they offered the promise of a high strategic payoff. Given the critical nature of the trail, the protracted nature of the conflict, and America's high stakes in Southeast Asia, it was understandable that American policymakers would embark on a bold campaign to choke off Hanoi's logistical lifeline to the south. In the case of western Iraq, the air-ground Scud-hunting campaign was equally unsuccessful at the tactical and operational level. At the strategic level, however, this campaign could claim a measure of success. In committing its best military forces to the Scud hunt, the coalition appears to have convinced Israel not to enter the war against Iraq. In helping to preserve the coalition, and consequently

the eventual liberation of Kuwait, the SOF–air power campaign against Iraq’s mobile missiles could be considered a strategic success.

The operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the mobile Scud launchers suggest a number of possible lessons for the future. Although advances in communications, sensors, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) could make such operations more effective, the use of ground observers to search for elusive targets in hostile or denied areas will remain problematical.¹ Even when equipped with new technology, SOF will confront the daunting challenge of searching vast expanses of difficult terrain for targets that the adversary will take vigorous steps to hide or otherwise defend, such as nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons and their delivery vehicles. There are, however, a number of possible roles that SOF could play in enhancing the U.S. ability to find and destroy elusive targets on the ground, such as planting sensors and conducting bomb damage assessment (BDA).

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

Detailed case studies of U.S. operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Iraq’s mobile Scud launchers form the centerpiece of this report. These cases were selected for three reasons. First, in examining campaigns in two very different environments, the cases present an analytically useful range of operations. Second, they are near enough in time to be useful for drawing implications for the future. Finally, a wide variety of accessible primary and secondary source material exists for both campaigns. In both cases, the strategic environment, air operations, SOF missions, and the question of effectiveness are considered in depth. The information used in this report is from open primary and secondary sources, including official military histories, government-sponsored studies, interviews with service personnel, and memoirs by participants.

¹Because such operations will be conducted covertly and clandestinely, they will most likely need to be carried out by SOF. Thus, throughout this report, the terms “ground observers,” “ground reconnaissance teams,” and SOF will be used interchangeably.

This report consists of four chapters. Following this Introduction, the report presents the case studies. Chapter Two focuses on the U.S. campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Chapter Three examines coalition Scud-hunting operations in western Iraq. Finally, in Chapter Four, possible future roles for ground SOF in finding and destroying elusive adversary ground targets are explored.