



**Center for Strategic and International Studies**

**Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy**

1800 K Street, N.W. • Suite 400 • Washington, DC 20006

Phone: 1 (202) 775-3270 • Fax: 1 (202) 775-3199

Email: [BurkeChair@csis.org](mailto:BurkeChair@csis.org)

## **US Airpower in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2004-2007**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy

[acordesman@gmail.com](mailto:acordesman@gmail.com)

**December 13, 2007**

## **US Airpower in Iraq (OIF) and Afghanistan (OEF): 2004-2007**

### **Anthony H. Cordesman**

The attached chart summarizes the trends in the US use of airpower in the Iraq and Afghan Wars during 2004-2007. While airpower is scarcely a forgotten dimension of both wars, it is clear that it is playing a steadily more important role over time. The data show a steady rise in air activity, with particularly sharp rises in the case of Afghanistan.

The data for total annual close air support/precision strike (CAS) sorties do not show a dramatic increase for Afghanistan between 2004 and 2007, but doubled in the case of Iraq. It is also the number of such strikes that actually used major munitions, however, that measure combat activity, and these data reflect a dramatic increase in both the use of airpower and the intensity of combat in both wars.

Sharp increases took place in the levels of CAS delivery of major munitions between 2004 and 2007, with very sharp rises between 2006 and 2007. In the case of Afghanistan, the total number of close air support/precision strike sorties flown in that dropped a major munition rose from 86 in 2004, and only 176 in 2005, to 1,770 in 2006 (10-fold annual increase), and 2,926 in 2007 (1.7 times higher as of 5 December). The number of CAS sorties that used a major munition in Iraq increased from 285 in 2004, 404 in 2005, and 229 in 2006, to 1,119 in 2007 (Nearly 5 times higher than in 2006 as of 5 December).

The rise in the use of combat airpower in Afghanistan was driven both by a major increase in Taliban activity after 2005 and the lack of adequate NATO/ISAF and Afghan ground forces. The data for Iraq clearly reflect the impact of the “surge” in 2007, and a far more intense level of combat in the field. It is clear from the ratio of total CAS sorties flown to sorties where munitions were used, however, that considerable restraint was used in both wars actually dropping air munitions. Most sorties remained on call without using a major weapon.

This does not mean that there were not civilian casualties or collateral damage to civil facilities. Such figures do, however, provide an important caution about claims based on reports from hostile regions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and from “civilians” that support the Taliban or Iraqi insurgents. Moreover, both the Taliban and Iraqi insurgents often located hostile forces in civilian areas and compounds, and steadily increased their efforts to use them as human shields.

It is also important to understand that the US and NATO/ISAF made major improvements in the quality and size of the intelligence and targeting collection analysis efforts used to ensure that there would not be civilian casualties or collateral damage during 2004-2007. There was a major increase in the number of analysts reviewing and vetting each strike, and in the number of “red cards” that prevented a strike where civilians were at risk. Procedures were improved to allow for more extensive review, and

air tactics and the size of the munitions used were also altered to reduce the level of risk and unintended casualties.

As for the other indicators on the chart, there has also been a rise in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance sorties since 2005. This rise, however, has been restricted by the fact that there were severe limits on the number of additional enabling aircraft that could be deployed. Had more assets been available, the rise might have been much higher.

The data on airlift and tanker flights reflect the fact that this is a war where virtually all troops move by aircraft, and where air cargo plays a critical role in both theaters. There has been a major increase in tanker refueling since 2006 (42,083 receiving aircraft in 2006 versus 73,174 in 2007). Passenger transfers essentially maxed out in 2005, but total short tons of cargo delivered increased by nearly 50% between 2005 and 2007.

The airdrop data reflect the capability to supply forward troops and facilities in Afghanistan without making NATO/ISAF and Afghan troops vulnerable by using road-bound supply. This need is less urgent in Iraq, where transport aircraft can land at a wide range of bases and road movement is somewhat more secure.

**2004-2007 Combined Forces Air Component Air Commander Statistics  
(As of December 5, 2007)<sup>1</sup>**





	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2007</u>
<b><u>Tanker</u></b>				
Sorties	12,465	12,391	12,787	14,613
Fuel Off loaded (million lbs.)	740	778	871	865
Receivers	N/A	N/A	42,083	73,174
<b><u>Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance</u></b>				
Sorties	7,400	6,165	7,478	8,541
<b><u>Airlift (U.S. Air Force only)</u></b>				
Sorties	47,450	54,727	57,943	49,250
Cargo (Short tons)	150,580	113,359	152,084	165,202
Passengers	702,000	933,806	1,099,464	999,719
<b><u>Airdrop</u></b>				
Troop supplies airdropped (lbs.)	N/A	2,000,000	3,500,000	6,790,000
<b><u>Close Air Support/Precision Strike</u></b>				
OIF: CFACC CAS Sorties	14,292	16,924	15,676	17,893
OEF: CFACC CAS Sorties	6,495	7,421	10,519	12,775
OIF: CFACC CAS Strikes (munitions dropped)*	285	404	229	1,119
OEF: CFACC CAS Strikes (munitions dropped)*	86	176	1,770	2,926

\* Does not include 20 mm and 30 mm cannon or rockets





***\*Monthly CAS Strikes with munitions dropped***

	2004		2005		2006		2007	
	OIF	OEF	OIF	OEF	OIF	OEF	OIF	OEF
Jan	4	1	27	1	20	5	89	178
Feb	7	3	4	1	10	23	36	163
Mar	3	7	0	1	3	42	52	310
Apr	54	1	14	23	6	63	45	202
May	9	3	28	7	30	59	44	179
Jun	13	24	38	10	17	141	171	288
Jul	25	16	24	16	9	216	303	368
Aug	48	9	50	20	12	242	166	670
Sep	34	13	35	9	22	329	90	181
Oct	35	4	64	19	16	240	42	98
Nov	35	1	56	23	48	201	81	289
Dec	18	4	64	46	36	209		
<b>Total</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>1,770</b>	<b>1,119</b>	<b>2,926</b>

**Airlift Records**

-  17 Feb 2006 § largest amount of cargo moved in a day 3.7 million lbs.
-  Mar 2006 § largest amount of cargo moved in a month 60.9 million lbs.
-  19 Sep 2007 -- largest # of passengers moved in a day 5,500
-  Jan 2006 § largest # of passengers moved in a month 103,000

**Airdrop Records**

-  5 Jun § 4 Jul 2006 § most airdrops in a 30-day period 64
-  5 Jun § 4 Jul 2006 § most weight dropped in a 30-day period 908,032 lbs.
-  4 Jul 2006 § most drop zones in one day 11
-  4 Jul 2006 § most weight dropped low-level in one day 115,137 lbs.

<sup>1</sup> Source: US CENTAF Combined Air and Space Operations Center