



Defining "Carpet Bombing" in the Afghan War

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There is no fixed definition of carpet-bombing, and what we do today is nothing like the carpet-bombing in Vietnam or area bombing in Korea.

In Vietnam, "carpet bombing" referred to the bombing of broad areas, usually by multiple B-52 strikes. It generally involved dumb bombs or napalm, but sometimes cluster bombs.

Navigational errors of several kilometers could occur at the point the lead plane dropped the bombs. Errors of half a kilometer were routine. Bomb racks and bomb vanes led to additional levels of inaccuracy of several hundred meters. Relatively primitive targeting compounded these problems.

The result was to create craters over very large areas-sometimes the wrong ones-with a great deal of shock effect, but limited killing effect unless we were lucky enough to catch enemy forces exposed in the field or to drop on a large military complex or exposed "soft skin" vehicles like trucks. The myth grew up that such strikes were very effective, but Air Force studies of such bombing concluded they general left many craters while doing little to kill entrenched troops. Strikes on areas with tunnel complexes were largely a failure. There is still a debate over the psychological effect of such bombing. The Air Force argues it was high; DIA prisoner interviews suggest it was not.

The killing impact of napalm on civilians led us to stop using it. We did continue to use cluster bombs that left many active bomblets unexploded in the area after a strike. These often acted as "mines," exploding when picked up, struck, or kicked.

By the Gulf War, in 1991, the introduction of GPS, new bomb racks and vanes, and better targeting improved the accuracy of such strikes by 6 to 10 times. We also have joint land-air planning. In Vietnam, most such air strikes were conducted by an Air Force command separate from MAC-V, creating all kinds of additional targeting problems.

The USAF carried out a number of such strikes on key dispersed land targets like the Republican Guards, but again found that they had little killing effect against dug-in and well dispersed targets. These strikes seem to have been conducted largely by single bombers hitting a given area, rather than having large numbers of bombs dropped at once. Other bombing involved large numbers of strike fighters using cluster munitions, but sources disagree as to whether this was carpet bombing.

No effort was made to use B-52s in carpet bombing against more exposed Iraqi troops that moved or who were in combat. It was concluded, however, that they would have been far more effective if the enemy had been forced to expose itself in combat and move. Certainly the strike fighter use of large numbers of cluster bombs on the Iraqi forces fleeing north from Kuwait City argued that such attacks would be effective. Unexploded cluster bombs still acted as mines and had to be cleared in a major effort after the fighting.

Today, we seem to refer to carpet bombing as bomber strikes with large numbers of 500-pound dumb bombs on the same target area (one about the size of one to five football fields). These are generally partial loads from one bomber, dropped with great precision on one general target area, and not multiple bombers dropping at the same time. We have not made major improvements in weapons accuracy, but we can now call in such strikes on secure satellite phones from the ground with new coordinates. But the problem is that cluster bomblets still act as mines.

We seem to have avoided carpet bombing of any area targets in built up areas in Afghanistan in the true sense of the term. We seem to have used them against Taliban and Al Qaeda camps in the field with good effect.

The phrase carpet bombing most often seems to refer to a single U.S. bomber dropping many bombs on Taliban infantry targets in the field. These Taliban/Al Qaeda forces are normally so well dug in that such bombing will probably have limited effect unless they are forced to move and expose themselves or use their heavy weapons in ways that allow us to use the Sensor Fused Weapons (SFW), if they become available. The use of large numbers of cluster bomblets in such strikes does not seem to have been common, but would greatly complicate Taliban/Al Qaeda movement, even if they did not kill.

The psychological or terror effect of carpet bombing is uncertain as ever. However, if special forces are present and can call in strikes at the right place and time during an opposition advance-after Taliban forces have been forced to expose themselves-they can now do so relatively close-by the standards of Vietnam-to advancing friendly forces. Under these conditions, carpet bombing could have a totally different killing effect from Vietnam or the Gulf War.

We also have SFW in development that are cluster bombs with smart bomblets that can sense armor and artillery and guide the vanes of the bomblets to strike at active weapons. These do not seem to be combat ready but some may be. This kind of bombing is not referred to as carpet bombing.

Similarly, we do not refer to the rapid firing of multiple strikes by smart guided weapons like the JDAM against point targets in the same target area as carpet bombing. But some who see such strikes from the ground may refer to them in this way.

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