

Innovate or Die: Our Fight to Stay Relevant

By MAJ Zachary D. Daker and MAJ Patrick J. Shaver, Jr.

Gun pilots, let's have a real talk about the Army's Transformation Initiative, or ATI. All of us live for that Apache rush, dropping buildings with Hellfires, eviscerating enemies with 30mm, full trust in the machine and the team. But let's face reality, we were all aware of our woefully undermanned formations, with pilots and maintainers spread too thin, further aggravated by a widening experience gap. The modern battlefield is evolving weekly, and now our branch stands at a defining crossroads. The ATI is not a distant policy. It

is our rallying cry to evolve and reclaim our role as the Army's unrelenting force multiplier. As attack aviators, we have always charged forward, and this is no different. Ukraine's scorched skies and China's looming threats aren't warnings; instead, they're urgent signals that our old ways are obsolete. Although critics argue our era is over, we argue that this is our moment to adapt, dominate, and ignite innovation from the ground up—ensuring our legacy endures. **This is our inflection point.**

The Wake-Up Call: Change Isn't Optional

The war in Ukraine has exposed the heightened vulnerability of attack helicopters to proliferated low-cost drones, dense air defenses, and long-range precision fires targeting rear-area airfields. Proof that lingering in contested airspace without setting conditions invites destruction. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's nightmare is worse. China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) fortress bristles with advanced air defense artillery, industrial-scale drone production,



The Joint Multinational Training Group—Ukraine conducts a Live Drop 5.0 exercise with a Skydio X10D drone. U.S. Army photo by SFC Arturo Guzman.

Munition	Range	Payload	Guidance	Targets	Integration & Mods	Max Loadout	Cost	Key Vulnerabilities
Lockheed Martin Hellfire AGM-114R/K	8–11+ km	9 kg	SAL or MMW	Tanks, armor, bunkers, structures	M299 rail; none	16	~\$120–150K	Short range; LOS laser; smoke/obscurants
Lockheed Martin JAGM AGM-179A	8–16+ km	9–12 kg	Dual SAL + MMW	Moving land/maritime targets	M299 rail; none	16	~\$250–325K	Short range; seeker jamming; weather effects
Rafael Spike NLOS	32+ km	~13 kg	Fiber-optic + EO/IR; man-in-loop/F&F	Tanks, armor, ships, C2, structures	M299 + major mod (datalink antenna/software)	4	~\$200–250K	Fiber-optic severable; subsonic; MANPADS
Anduril Barracuda-100M	157+ km	16 kg	GPS/INS + EO/IR; autonomous	Vehicles, armor, structures, C2	M299 rail; minimal adapter	16	<\$150K	Subsonic; GPS jamming; low-alt SAMs
Anduril Altius-600M	160+ km	3–4 kg	Autonomous EO/IR/RF	Light armor, drones, artillery, troops	ESSS tube pod required	16	~\$80K	Small warhead; RF jamming; engine failure
Anduril Altius-700M	160+ km	15 kg	Autonomous EO/IR/RF	Tanks, ships, bunkers, infrastructure	Same tube pod	8	~\$150K	Heavier/fewer carried; RF jamming; limited loiter
Anduril Barracuda-250M	370+ km	16 kg	GPS/INS + EO/IR; autonomous	Vehicles, armor, structures, C2, corvettes, patrol boats	M299/ESSS; simple adapter	4	~\$150K	Subsonic; long flight/fuel burn; GPS jamming
L3Harris Red Wolf Kinetic	370+ km	16–20 kg	GPS/INS + EO/IR/MMW/SAL; swarm	Armor, C2, radar, artillery, small–medium ships	M299 adapter; simple bolt-on	4	~\$400–500K	Subsonic; GPS jamming; low-alt SAMs; high cost

Figure. Comparative technical characteristics of selected air-to-surface missile systems. Technical data table compiled from manufacturer data and provided by the authors, 2025. ¹

vast oceanic expanses and archipelagos, and electronic warfare (EW) that blinds our networks. Our counterinsurgency playbook, loitering for close support, may be a relic of the past. We need munitions with significant standoff and air-launched effects (ALE), resilient networks, a reindexing of manned and unmanned platforms, and, most of all, a mindset shift. However, ATI isn't entirely threat-driven; we were trending toward a static perspective at home as well.

In Fiscal Year 2026, the AH-64D costs \$7,954 per flight hour, nearly double the AH-64E's \$4,318 per flight hour, which is simply not sustainable in a flat-budget environment (Department of the Army [DA], 2025). However, the previous manning and experience gaps weren't much better. Pre-ATI, the average attack battalion/squadron was manned at ~75% and ~50% in key billets like instructor pilots and maintenance test pilots (DA, 2025). These numbers aren't just data in a spreadsheet—they are facts on the ground. They choke our readiness, forcing lose-lose choices between training and maintenance, while global threats continue to evolve around us.

ATI's Blueprint: Adapt to Dominate

So, what does ATI do for Attack

Aviation? The goal from the top is to rebalance our current overinvestment in manned assets, streamline costs, and transform to the emerging threats, and like all change, it's not pain-free. Here's what it means for the active-duty attack community:

- Elimination of all air cavalry squadrons and consolidation into 1x attack battalion at each combat aviation brigade (CAB)
- Divesting of all 133x remaining AH-64Ds
- Translating the excess AH-64Es into 6x AHs as operational readiness floats per attack battalion
- Branch-wide reduction in ~6,500 spaces, which, with our current undermanned levels, will translate to a reduction in ~1,600 personnel (100 Officers, 200 Warrant Officers, and 1,300 enlisted Soldiers)

This consolidation allows CABs to attain 90% on tracked positions. Units will remain 125% fill until the rebalance in the 26-02 movement cycle. For those ~1,600 personnel, the Aviation Talent Panel continues in its efforts to stratify the cohorts and provide options (DA, 2025). A subjective endeavor, the goal is

to retain our top talent, while still finding venues where those below the cutline can contribute to the larger fight. As of writing this article, the branch is firmly committed to maximizing voluntary options and sees involuntary separation as a last resort measure that is not under consideration for action over the next year. By April 2026, the results of the Voluntary Transfer Incentive Program/Officer Rebranch Program should be published, marking the conclusion of the process. Though not perfect, the Aviation Talent Panel aims to bridge experience gaps by retaining seasoned aviators and maintainers and fostering a culture where expertise drives progress by investing in our most promising warfighters.

Tactical Revolution: Innovation From Within

Modernization provides tools, but their true potential is unlocked through iterative refinement at the unit level. Attack Aviation must evolve beyond Global War on Terror close-combat paradigms to address peer A2/AD networks and proliferated unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). The ATI's six float aircraft should serve as a battalion-level test bed, enabling organic experimentation in lethality and survivability. Equally vital is the rapid dissemination of these

¹Sources include Lockheed Martin Corporation Hellfire Air-to-Ground (AGM) Missile 114 R/K (2025a); Lockheed Martin Corporation Joint Air-to-Ground Missile (JAGM) AGM 179A (2025b); Rafael Advanced Defense Systems SPIKE® Non-Line-of-Sight Missile (2025); Anduril Industries Barracuda-100/250 (2025b); Anduril Industries Altius-600-700 (2025a); L3Harris Technologies Red Wolf Kinetic (2025).

new ideas and lessons learned across the broader community. Here are some questions to provoke thought:

- How do we employ ALE to enable organic suppression of enemy air defenses ("self-SEAD")? Moreover, are we the optimal launch platform, or is this a better fit for lift aircraft, allowing us to focus on the deep fight?
- No A2/AD architecture is invulnerable. How do we exploit radiating windows, operationalize minimum engagement altitudes, and maximize terrain masking/ground clutter to penetrate? Leveraging institutional knowledge from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment's Aviation Denied Area Planning Team never hurts.
- How should manned-unmanned teaming mature? Is an F-35 Collaborative Combat Aircraft-equivalent model feasible with attritable systems? What novel UAS employment concepts suit increased engagement distances? What about crewed/partially crewed teaming?
- What is the attack helicopter's expanded role in the deep fight? The AGM-114 Hellfire's limited range is inadequate for large-scale combat operations. Emerging standoff munitions demand parallel internal tactical innovation to maximize their employment (Figure).

While industry develops materiel solutions, units retain agency to innovate internally by prototyping techniques, validating concepts in training, and feeding requirements upward. This grassroots approach, executed with discipline and intellectual rigor, complements strategic modernization and accelerates overmatch against pacing threats—*Transformation in Contact*. Junior officers proposing novel concepts, warrant officers developing technical and tactical solutions, and noncommissioned officers conducting daily experimentation are how we

remain relevant. Leadership's primary role is to foster this culture. Battalions should harness internal talent to spur an innovation cell, tackling tough problems like countering drone swarms or adaptive tactics against EW. Commanders should treat promising initiatives like venture investments—commit resources to high-potential experiments, terminate failures quickly,

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and rapidly scale successes across the formation. This disciplined, bottom-up ingenuity is how the attack community regains the initiative. Now let's address the inevitable, but warranted, pushback about needing to be good at the basics before moving on to graduate-level initiatives. The critique is fair: grasping the fundamentals before chasing innovation.

We've all watched units falter because of an undisciplined foundation—maintenance hinders operations, Q2-heavy gunneries, and greater "unknown risks" assumed on Risk-Common Operating Pictures. We will be perfectly clear—priority number one is to be the most lethal attack formation, having a strong handle on maintenance and decisive in the deep fight. However, excellence in the basics and bold

experimentation are not mutually exclusive. Master fundamentals with iron discipline and then channel that same grit into prototyping tomorrow's fight. Demand excellence in daily operations, while giving your sharpest minds space to experiment. It's not either/or—it's a cohesive attack community that out-thinks the Chinese threat.

Cauntlet Thrown: Your Move

Gun pilots, this is our call to action. The mission that drives us, delivering lethal aid in support of the ground force, remains unchanged, but the pacing threat has outgrown our playbook. The counter-insurgency era is over; we now face a peer adversary in the Pacific that demands new tactics, ranges, and survivability. For too long, we accepted understrength formations, experience gaps, and unsustainable costs as the new normal. The Army Transformation Initiative is not a threat to our identity. It provides the necessary disruption to end stagnation and retool our community. We can resist the change, or we can own it, but history shows that Attack Aviation thrives when we confront hard problems head-on. Embrace ATI as the catalyst. Test bold ideas, resource sharp teams, prototype aggressively, fail quickly, capture lessons, and disseminate them widely.

The choice is yours. Fade into irrelevance or innovate to redefine Attack Aviation for the Chinese fight ahead. You have the controls.

Default Aggressive.

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