

Laser Gunship Fires; 'Deniable' Strikes Ahead?

By David Hambling  August 13, 2008 | 1:02:00 PM Categories: [Bizarro](#), [Lasers And Ray Guns](#), [Less-Lethal](#)

Boeing announced today the [first ever test firing](#) of a real-life ray gun that could become US special forces' way to carry out covert strikes with "plausible deniability."

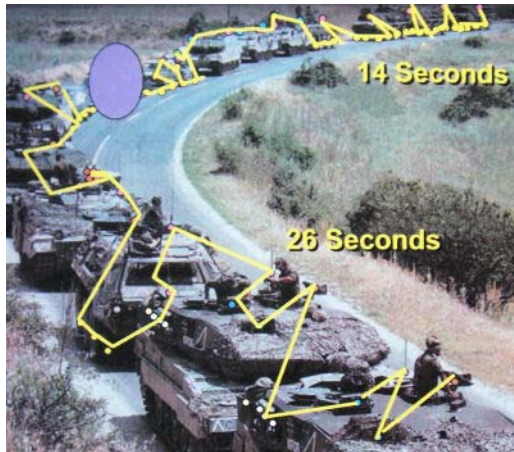
In tests earlier this month at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, Boeing's Advanced Tactical Laser -- a modified C-130H aircraft -- "fired its high-energy chemical laser through its beam control system. The beam control system acquired a ground target and guided the laser beam to the target, as directed by ATL's battle management system."



"By firing the laser through the beam control system for the first time, the ATL team has begun to demonstrate the functionality of the entire weapon system integrated aboard the aircraft," Boeing exec Scott Fancher said, in a statement.

But what Fancher didn't mention (and what I explore over on the [New Scientist web site](#)) is that this capability will [allow Special Forces to strike with maximum precision, from long distances -- without being blamed from the attacks](#). "Plausible deniability" is how the presentation put it.

The claim that a laser strike could be carried out without attribution appears in two [separate briefing documents](#) by Air Force personnel, describing the benefits of the new directed energy weapon.



The Advanced Tactical Laser, weighing twelve thousand pounds and mounted in a Hercules transport plane, is intended to give Special Forces Command "ultra-precision strike capability" against a wide range of ground targets. Its power is somewhere in the hundred-kilowatt range.

According to the developers, the accuracy of this weapon is little short of supernatural. They claim that the pinpoint precision can make it lethal or non-lethal at will. For example, they say it can either destroy a vehicle completely, or just damage the tires to immobilize it. The illustration shows a theoretical 26-second engagement in which the beam deftly destroys "32 tires, 11 Antennae, 3 Missile Launchers, 11 EO devices, 4 Mortars, 5 Machine

Guns" -- while avoiding harming a truckload of refugees and the soldiers guarding them. It reminds me of how the Lone Ranger could always shoot the gun out an opponent's hand without injuring them; if that could really be done from an aircraft circling overhead, it would certainly be an impressive feat.

This precision should make the ATL a highly effective anti-personnel weapon, able to target (or "assassinate," depending on your politics) a specific individual in a group with sniper-like precision. A request for the Advanced Tactical Laser [to be deployed to Iraq](#) lays out the benefits:

Precision engagement of a PID [Positively Identified] insurgent by a DEW [Directed Energy Weapon] will be a highly surgical and impressively violent event. Target effects will include instantaneous burst-combustion of insurgent clothing, a rapid death through violent trauma, and more probably a morbid combination of both. It is estimated that the aftermath of a sub-second engagement by PASDEW [Precision Airborne Standoff Directed Energy Weapon] will also be an observable event leaving an impression of terrifyingly precise CF [Coalition Force] attribution in the minds of all witnesses.

While covert strike is a key part of the justification for the ATL (the [budget document specifies](#) "extremely precise covert strike"), would such an action be deniable? The attack described would seem to have quite a distinct signature, and no other nation has similar lasers ready to deploy (as far as we know). The laser is silent and invisible, and can strike at long range in darkness, so witnesses need to be aware there was a US aircraft in the area. Without any previous cases to go on, no pathologist could definitely say that a laser was involved. The injury might resemble a lightning strike more than anything else.

The second question of course is whether deniability should ever be an issue. Providing this kind of capability may encourage exactly the sort of questionable clandestine operations that have caused so much trouble in the past. And what happens when everyone starts doing it?

Of course there are other ways of carrying out covert strikes. But this is a case where advancing technology may hurl us into a future which nobody is prepared for.

(Picture: Boeing)

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