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Command and Control of Air Operations in the Vietnam War

**Colloquium on
Contemporary History
January 23, 1991
No. 4**

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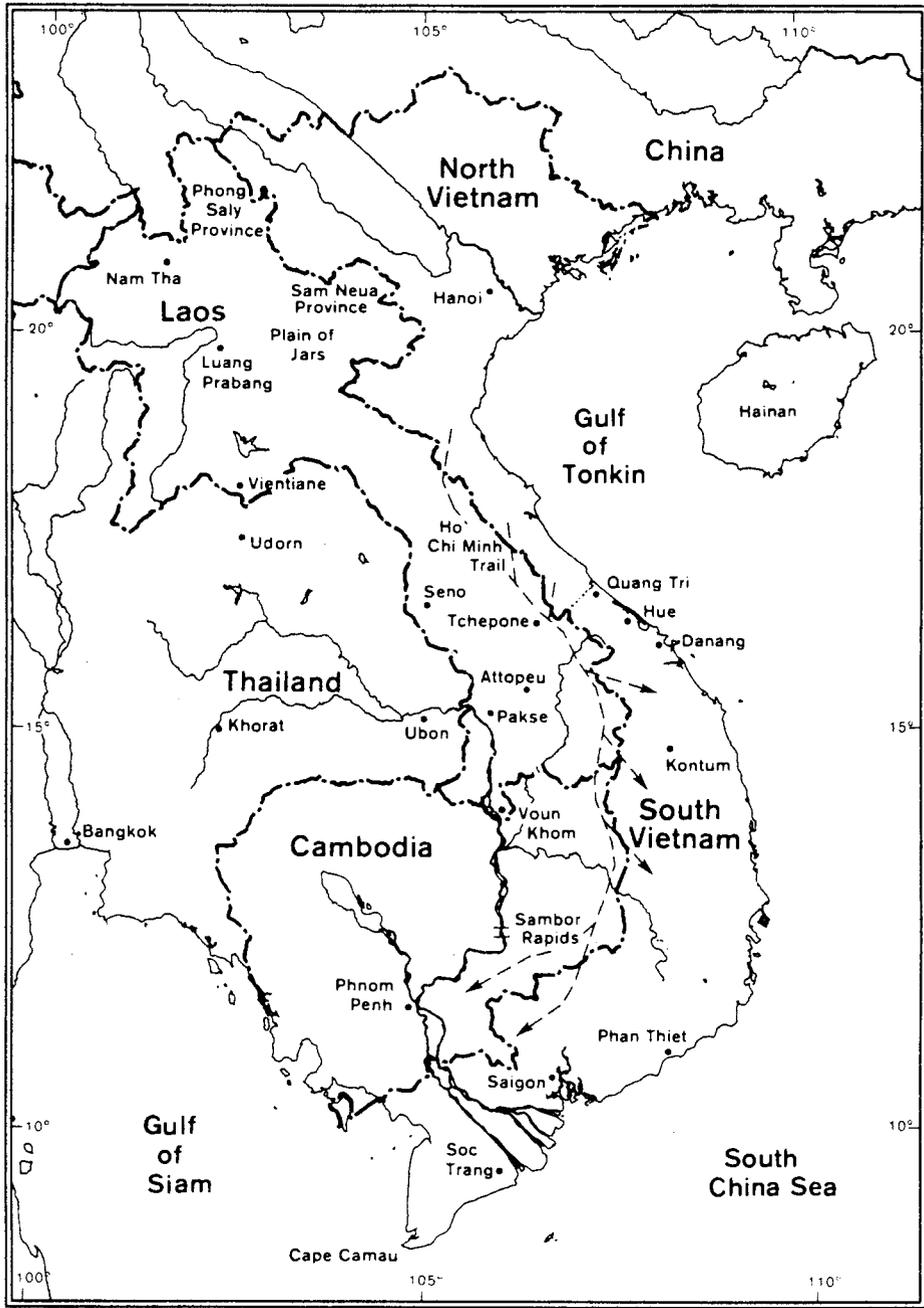
WELCOME

by

Dr. Dean C. Allard
Director of Naval History

I welcome you to our Colloquium on Contemporary History, the fourth in this series of semi-annual conferences focusing on the history of the American armed forces in the post-World War II era. The purpose of these gatherings is to promote a broader understanding of the key issues and events of the period by those of us in the Washington area who are involved in recording the modern contributions of the U.S. armed forces or have an interest in the subject. I might add that we welcome your suggestions for pertinent topics of discussion at future colloquia. Past conferences have dealt with strategy and military operations in the early Cold War years, the Dominican Republic intervention of 1965, and the Korean War, but every bit as pertinent would be such themes as military-industrial relations, the armed forces and society, weapons development, and arms control.

We hope that you find today's discussion informative and that it stimulates further interest in the defense establishment's recent, eventful past.



Mainland Southeast Asia

OPENING REMARKS

by

Dr. Edward J. Marolda
Head, Contemporary History Branch
Naval Historical Center

For the last week, an allied air armada, perhaps the most powerful ever assembled, has visited modern war on Saddam Hussein's Iraq. We have chased the Iraqi air force from the sky, neutralized Hussein's chemical, biological, and budding nuclear capability, forced the Republican Guard reserves to keep their heads down, and begun the isolation from support of his immobilized army in the environs of Kuwait City. This has been accomplished by the bombers, fighters, attack aircraft, electronic warfare planes, and helicopter gunships of each of the four American armed forces and seven allied nations. The United Nations air campaign has not been an example of absolutely flawless planning and unblemished execution. Certainly history teaches us not to expect such things. In this instance, the fog of war has turned out to be just that -- fog. But I think we can safely say that the Desert Storm air campaign has seen major gains for allied arms.

Masterful command and control by our leaders can be credited, in large part, for the initial success of the operation. But of relevance to this morning's discussion, we can almost see floating around the heads of our political and military leaders a ghostly figure intoning, "no more Vietnams." Their adherence to this advice is clearly reflected in the nature of Desert Storm's direction and execution. For instance, while President Bush established clear political objectives at the outset, he has given the coalition's military commander, General Schwarzkopf, great latitude in taking those military actions the general deemed appropriate to defeat the enemy's armed forces, a far cry from Lyndon Johnson's approach; further, force has been

employed quickly and massively against the foe; there have been no bombing halts in hopes of stimulating the enemy to negotiate. In short, to use the President's words, the military would not be compelled to fight this war with "one hand tied behind their back." Moreover, Air Force General Horner, Schwarzkopf's air deputy, following a single targeting plan -- "a single sheet of music" -- has had the ability to coordinate the actions of most, if not all combat aircraft in the Central Command operational theater. That includes the air assets of the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Army, as well as those of our coalition partners. Finally, unlike in Southeast Asia, the Commander in Chief, Central Command is the sole operational commander of Desert Storm.

Hence, our conference today on the "Command and Control of Air Power in the Vietnam War" could not have been more timely. As our speakers will detail, there were significant problems with our employment of air power in the Southeast Asian conflict. The confusion of political and military objectives, excessive fine-tuning of operations from Washington, a cumbersome theater command set-up, and different service doctrines and operational concepts marred execution of the Rolling Thunder and Linebacker campaigns.

At the same time, we should not lose sight of what worked in Vietnam. Operating from shore bases and aircraft carriers, the air forces of the United States ruled the air over Indochina, delayed and cut short the enemy's ground offensives, and saved the lives of thousands of "grunts" with effective close air support.

With the backdrop of such dramatic current events, I'm hopeful that our discussion today can add some insight to our evaluation of air power's role in Southeast Asia.

TACTICAL COMMAND AND CONTROL OF CARRIER OPERATIONS

by

Admiral James L. Holloway III, USN (Ret.)
President, Naval Historical Foundation

These remarks are based mainly on recollections from the perspective of a carrier commanding officer and a fleet commander during the Vietnam War. From July of 1965 to July of 1967 I served as Commanding Officer, USS Enterprise, the first nuclear powered aircraft carrier, which made two complete combat deployments to the SEVENTH Fleet for Vietnam combat operations during that time. Later in 1972 and 1973 I was Commander of the U.S. SEVENTH Fleet.

The operational chain of command for combat activities within the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) emanated from the National Command Authorities (NCA) -- the President and the Secretary of Defense; to Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), the unified or theater commander; then to Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV), who further delegated operational authority to his subordinate service commanders. In the case of naval forces (in country) these were under Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Vietnam (COMNAVFORV). The forces assigned to NAVFORV were mainly military assistance people and the riverine forces. There were no major combatants assigned to NAVFORV.

The aircraft carriers and their task forces came under a different chain of command, originating with the NCA through CINCPAC, but then via Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT), Commander SEVENTH Fleet (COMSEVENTHFLT), and Commander Task Force 77 (CTF 77), the Carrier Striking Force. The rationale for this separate chain of command was that COMSEVENTHFLT had broad area responsibilities throughout the Western Pacific, which included the command of major naval forces in employment plans and war plans covering a wide array of contingencies outside of the Vietnam conflict, and responsibility

for the planning and the conduct of a general war with the Soviet Union, including the fleet's nuclear capability. The doctrine of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) had for years included a provision for such a chain of command for naval forces, in consideration of their mobile character and the wide range of their responsibilities from contingency operations to general war plans. Under the JCS doctrine, naval forces in the SEVENTH Fleet operated "in support" of USMACV.

Task Force 77, the Carrier Striking Force, included all of the carriers and major combatants assigned to the carriers in a support role. Although the major surface combatants -- cruisers, destroyers and frigates -- were deployed from their administrative commands in the Continental United States (Cruiser Force, Atlantic Fleet or Pacific Fleet) to Task Force 75, the Surface Warfare Force of the SEVENTH Fleet, these units were transferred to Task Force 77 in order to form up the carrier task groups which were the basic tactical entities for carrier strike operations. A typical carrier task group would consist of one carrier, several destroyers, and three or four frigates. Occasionally a cruiser would be assigned to a carrier task group when it was not committed to gunfire support or other independent operations.

The major surface combatants rotated in and out of the carrier task groups to other assignments such as gunfire support (shore bombardment) and escort of the underway replenishment groups (URG). The carrier task groups (CTG) always remained about the same size, but the identity of the surface combatants in the group was constantly changing.

Commander Task Force 77 (an aviation vice admiral) and his staff did most of the tactical planning for the carrier air operations. In particular, CTF 77 was responsible for the coordination of carrier air operations with land-based tactical air operations of U.S. Air Force units based both in Vietnam and in Thailand. For this purpose, CTF 77 had a permanent representative at the USMACV headquarters in Saigon, usually a

senior Navy captain. CTF 77 and his staff were embarked in a carrier. As the carriers rotated in and out of the SEVENTH Fleet on six or seven-month deployments, CTF 77 was continually shifting his flag. This also meant that when CTF 77's carrier flagship went into port after thirty days on the line for a week of maintenance, replenishment, and R&R, CTF 77 and his staff were absent from the Gulf of Tonkin.

To cover these absences of CTF 77, the position of Commander Task Group 77.0 was created. This was an aviation two star flag officer, one of the several carrier division commanders constantly being rotated to the SEVENTH Fleet on six or seven-month deployments from Air Forces, Atlantic Fleet and Air Forces, Pacific Fleet. CTG 77.0 was always on the scene in the Gulf of Tonkin and was assigned operational control (OPCON) of all of the carrier task groups in the gulf. The carrier task groups in the SEVENTH Fleet, and there could be as many as six, were assigned designations of CTG 77.1 through CTG 77.6.

The tactics employed by the carrier task groups and their embarked air wings were the standard doctrines set forth in the U.S. Fleet Tactical Publications and the Naval Air Training and Operational Procedures (NATOPS). NATOPS by that time had largely eliminated the differences that had grown up during previous years between the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets. However some modifications to the NATOPS were made specifically for "special operations," the euphemism used to describe combat operations in the Gulf of Tonkin against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese.

The carriers and their air wings trained and exercised in these special doctrines during their work-up periods in preparation for deployment to the Western Pacific area.

The targeting, in terms of general policy, broad guidelines, and sometimes even specific objectives, came from Washington to CINCPAC. A specificity of the Washington targeting directions varied, depending upon political circumstances in the White House and the degree of involvement on the part of key individuals in the Pentagon. From the Washington guidance provided through JCS

channels, CINCPAC prepared a target list, which was drawn on by MACV and CTF 77, who coordinated carefully to ensure that national and JCS priorities were followed, that all assigned targets were covered, and that Air Force and Navy units were given targets that best suited their special capabilities. CTF 77 and USMACV could also add targets, as long as the national requirements were fulfilled.

CTF 77's target list and general guidance was provided to CTF 77.0 who then assigned daily strike responsibilities to the carriers, depending upon how many carriers were on the line and the aircraft composition of their air wings. Upon receipt of the daily air plan, each carrier's operations department then assigned specific mission sorties to the squadrons. It was up to the squadrons to ensure that adequate planes were available and that pilots and strike leaders were detailed.

Over the period of the Vietnam war, the Navy carrier force level was stabilized at sixteen attack carriers, although this number included one antisubmarine or CVS carrier operating in the role of an attack carrier, or CVA. Administratively, nine carriers were assigned to the Pacific Fleet and six to the Atlantic Fleet. However all carriers, regardless of fleet assignment, shared in the combat deployments for special operations (SPECOPS). This was different from the Korean War when Atlantic Fleet carriers continued to exclusively deploy to the SIXTH Fleet in the Mediterranean, while the Pacific Fleet carriers made their deployments to Korea. For the Atlantic Fleet carriers deployed to Vietnam, Commander in Chief Atlantic (CINCLANT) retained administrative control (ADCOM) but the units were chopped (meaning that their operational control was changed) to CINCPAC when the ships entered the geographical boundary of CINCPAC's theater. In addition to keeping five or six carriers in the SEVENTH Fleet, the U.S. Navy also was committed to maintaining at all times two carriers in the SIXTH Fleet. The pressure of maintaining half the carrier force deployed over the long period of the Vietnam War eventually caused severe

deterioration in the material condition of the ships, from which the carrier force really didn't fully recover until the late seventies.

General Westmoreland, as COMUSMACV, defined two air wars in Vietnam. The "in-country" war was that in which U.S. Air Force and Navy (including Marines) tactical aircraft operated in close support of U.S. and allied ground forces fighting in South Vietnam. The Air Force and Marine tactical air operated from bases both in Vietnam and Thailand. The other air war, known as special operations, were the strikes into North Vietnam. These operations, which had the code name of "Rolling Thunder," were conducted by SEVENTH Fleet carriers and U.S. Air Force tactical air units from Thailand. Marine A-6s from bases in South Vietnam also participated in "Rolling Thunder."

There was considerable difference in the character of these two wars. In the South, the operations were less complex, more efficient, and considerably less hazardous. The antiaircraft artillery (AAA) was not intense, there were no surface-to-air missiles (SAM), or fighter planes. As a consequence, the composition of the strike groups consisted mainly of weapons carriers. There was no need for flak suppressors or fighter cover. If a friendly plane was shot down, it was highly probable that the crew would be rescued because of the presence of friendly forces in the vicinity and the absence of a hostile civilian populace.

The air war in the North was quite a different story. Strike groups had to penetrate what at that time was the most intense and modern air defense environment in existence. The strike groups faced fighters, high and medium-altitude surface-to-air missiles, and highly accurate automatic weapons fire at low altitudes. Flight groups had to be accompanied by fighter cover, "Iron Hand" anti-SAM pouncers, electronic jammers, antiradar missile shooters, plus rescue units held in reserve for downed aircraft. Most of the shoot-downs of friendly aircraft occurred in the North, and although in many cases

survivors were able to eject and land safely in their parachutes, only a small percentage of the surviving air crews were rescued. The air defense environment encountered by rescue helicopters was simply too intense in most cases to penetrate any distance into North Vietnam to rescue downed air crews.

Except during the several bombing pauses that occurred during the war, the principal combat effort of the carriers was in the air war in the North. However some tactical air effort from the carriers was still employed in the "in-country" war in South Vietnam.

Carrier operations in the northern gulf were conducted from the vicinity of a geographic reference point Y, called "Point Yankee," so called because Y is "Yankee" in the phonetic alphabet. Carrier assignment to SPECOPS in the northern gulf came to be known as "Yankee Station."

Operations in the southern Gulf of Tonkin into South Vietnam were conducted from an area referenced to a grid lock point, "Point Dixie," so that carriers conducting the air war in the South were termed at "Dixie Station."

Normally three carriers were at Yankee Station at all times, each conducting air operations for twelve hours, and then repairing, replenishing, and doing maintenance for the next twelve hours. One carrier operated from noon until midnight, the second from midnight until noon and the third covering the daylight hours. This meant that targets were covered twenty-four hours a day, and the heaviest effort was during daylight hours when tactical air was most accurate and effective.

The large deck carriers -- Forrestal and subsequent -- normally had a complement of between 80 and 90 aircraft, consisting of two squadrons of F-4 Phantoms, two squadrons of A-4 Skyhawks or A-7 Corsairs, and one squadron of A-6 all weather Intruder medium bombers. In addition, the carrier operated helicopters, tankers, reconnaissance aircraft, and early warning E-2 aircraft in its organic air wing.

The Phantom squadrons flew combat air patrol (CAP), armed

reconnaissance, and strike missions. The Skyhawk and Corsairs flew strike and air ground support missions, using visual detection and arming. The A-6 Intruder squadrons had the only real capability for all weather attack. In this role they proceeded individually into their targets, bombing by radar. The A-6 was also the main element in the major daylight strikes because of its heavy load-carrying capability. An A-6 could carry more than 15,000 pounds of bombs. The F-4s, A-4s and A-7s also flew night missions using flares to locate and illuminate targets for visual attacks by bombs and rockets. They, like the A6s, also operated either alone or in pairs at night.

The carriers employed two modes of flight operations, cyclic operations and Alpha strikes.

During cyclic operations, a carrier would launch and recover 25 to 40 aircraft every hour and a half during its twelve-hour assigned period of flight operations, conducting eight cycles or events during each flying day. The first event would launch, the second event would launch an hour and a half later, and the first event would immediately land. Planes from the first event would be quickly refueled and rearmed, pilots briefed, and then launched again before the second event landed. Launch and recovery times were staggered among the carriers during the day to keep planes over the target area at all times. The largest number of aircraft committed to a single target in one strike under the cyclical mode would be 15 or 20.

Alpha strikes were used when it was needed to put a very heavy weight of effort on a single target complex in a very short period of time, either for the shock effect or because of the necessity to penetrate very heavy defenses, such as in the case of attacks in the vicinity of Haiphong and Hanoi. On an Alpha strike, all available aircraft on the carrier were organized into a single strike group. Alpha strikes were normally coordinated with the other carriers on the line and quite often with major U.S. Air Force strike efforts coming out of Thailand. On occasion, as many as five carriers could be available on the line