

Unity of command—a long-held principle of war—was an early casualty in Vietnam.

DISUNITY OF COMMAND

By John T. Correll

In the Vietnam War, the lines of control went in all sorts of directions.

When US fighters from bases in Thailand were in the air, they belonged to 7th Air Force in Saigon. When they were on the ground, they belonged to 13th Air Force in the Philippines.

Day to day, they were part of 7th/13th Air Force at Udorn, whose commander was actually a deputy commander of both 7th and 13th Air Forces.

And that was just one organizational oddity in a war that was full of them. Unity of command—a basic principle of war since Napoleon's time—was an early casualty in Southeast Asia.

The impact was greatest on the air war.

- Seventh Air Force, which controlled all of the USAF fighters in Vietnam and Thailand, itself had two bosses. When operating in South Vietnam, it reported to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). But for operations in North Vietnam, it reported to US Pacific Command, via Pacific Air Forces in Honolulu—except in the case of Route Pack 1, the southernmost part of North Vietnam, which was regarded as the extended domain of MACV.

- Seventh Air Force did not fully control the war in North Vietnam. Navy aircraft from Task Force 77 in the Tonkin Gulf flying against North Vietnam operated separately and reported to Pacific Fleet.

- Until 1968, the land-based Marine Corps fighters in South Vietnam were controlled by the Marine commander on the ground, not by the 7th Air Force commander, who was MACV's deputy for air operations.

- Strategic Air Command kept control throughout the war of B-52 bombers operating in both North and South Vietnam.

- Air operations in Laos were controlled by US Pacific Command, except in southern Laos, which was considered an extension of the battle in South Vietnam and thus controlled by MACV. However, air strikes and targets in Laos had to be approved by the US ambassador to Laos.

- In addition, Air America flew combat missions in Southeast Asia under the separate auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency.

What Kind of War?

The obvious alternative to this convoluted arrangement would have been a theater unified command with land, air, and sea components.

In fact, just such an organization was proposed. It would have been called the US Southeast Asia Command, with headquarters at Korat, Thailand, and reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

However, US Pacific Command in Hawaii, in whose area of responsibility Southeast Asia lay, was firmly opposed. It wanted to keep control, with the air war in North Vietnam being fought by two PACOM com-

ponent commands, Pacific Air Forces and Pacific Fleet, and with another subordinate command, MACV, running the war in the south. As for MACV's air arm, 7th Air Force, sometimes it would report to MACV and sometimes it wouldn't.

In part, this fragmentation was the result of roles and missions maneuvering by the various commands and services, but there were other reasons for it as well.

In the early 1960s, the Cold War was at its peak. The conflict in Vietnam was secondary to the confrontation with the Soviet Union. The biggest concern in the Far East was China. Military leaders were reluctant to drop their existing command arrangements to focus on the lesser threat in Vietnam.

In any case, Vietnam was not expected to amount to that much. In 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that it would take no more than 40,000 US troops to "clean up" the Viet Cong threat.

The prevailing wisdom, expressed in advice to President John F. Kennedy from Gen. Douglas MacArthur, was that the United States should not become involved in a ground war in Southeast Asia.

What actually happened was mission creep. American forces went to Vietnam to provide advice and training. That escalated gradually into a combat role and then into war. US ground forces were initially introduced to protect the air base at Da Nang. Before long, the relationship

had changed, and airpower was supporting the ground forces in a ground war.

Furthermore, the armed forces were caught up in the suddenly popular concept of counterinsurgency. “Mesmerized by the faddish notion that the communists were challenging us with a new kind of insurrectionary war, we neglected to install the kind of command system that American experience would otherwise have demanded as appropriate to any war,” said military historian Russell F. Weigley.

Command and control was also muddled by micromanagement from the White House. President Lyndon B. Johnson insisted on personally approving the targets to be struck in North Vietnam. “I won’t let those Air Force generals bomb the smallest outhouse ... without checking with me,” he boasted.

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, best known of the MACV commanders, believed that many of the problems in Vietnam “could be traced to strong control of the conduct of the war from Washington, a policy born jointly of the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961, which demonstrated the perils of decentralization, and the successful outcome of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, which seemed to indicate that command from the White House was the only way to handle crisis and war in the nuclear age.”

Unity of Command

All of the services believed in the principle of unity of command, but they had different interpretations of it.

For the ground forces, it meant that everything, including airpower, should revolve around the wants and needs of the ground commander. For airmen, it meant using airpower as an undivided capability.

“Many airmen advocated establishing a single air commander for the command and control of all air operations—Air Force, Navy, and Marine,” said Gen. William W. Momyer, commander of 7th Air Force at the peak of the war.

The experience of the British and Americans in North Africa in World War II demonstrated that airpower is least effective when broken up into small packets and doled out to local ground commanders.



Gen. William Momyer (left) advocated a single air commander during the Vietnam War. Instead, military leaders kept parochial control and, worse, President Johnson (right) insisted on micromanaging target selection.

The success of integrated airpower in North Africa was codified in July 1943 in Army Field Manual 100-20—often called “the Magna Carta of US airpower”—which said: “Control of available airpower must be centralized, and command must be exercised through the air force commander.”

It also said that “the superior commander will not attach army air forces to units of the ground forces under his command except when such ground force units are operating independently or are isolated by distance or lack of communication.”

Field Manual 100-20 had been supported by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the allied commander in North Africa, and signed by Gen. George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff. Notably, though, it had not been coordinated with Lt. Gen. Lesley J. McNair and the Army ground forces staff in Washington.

The ground forces suspected that centralization of airpower was a ploy to let the Air Force concentrate on its preferred missions, interdiction and strategic attack, and pay less attention to direct support of ground forces.

Conversely, airmen feared that if the ground commander controlled airpower, it might all be used for close air support and other local purposes with insufficient resources and attention allocated to strategic attack and interdiction.

“Airpower has great flexibility to

perform many tasks in war, and its ability to respond with varying levels of firepower to a variety of targets has led Army and Navy commanders to seek control of airpower as part of their forces,” Momyer said. “But to give in to these understandable wishes of surface commanders is to destroy the very thing that gives airpower its strength—the ability to focus quickly upon whatever situation has the most potential for victory or for defeat.”

MACV and 7th Air Force

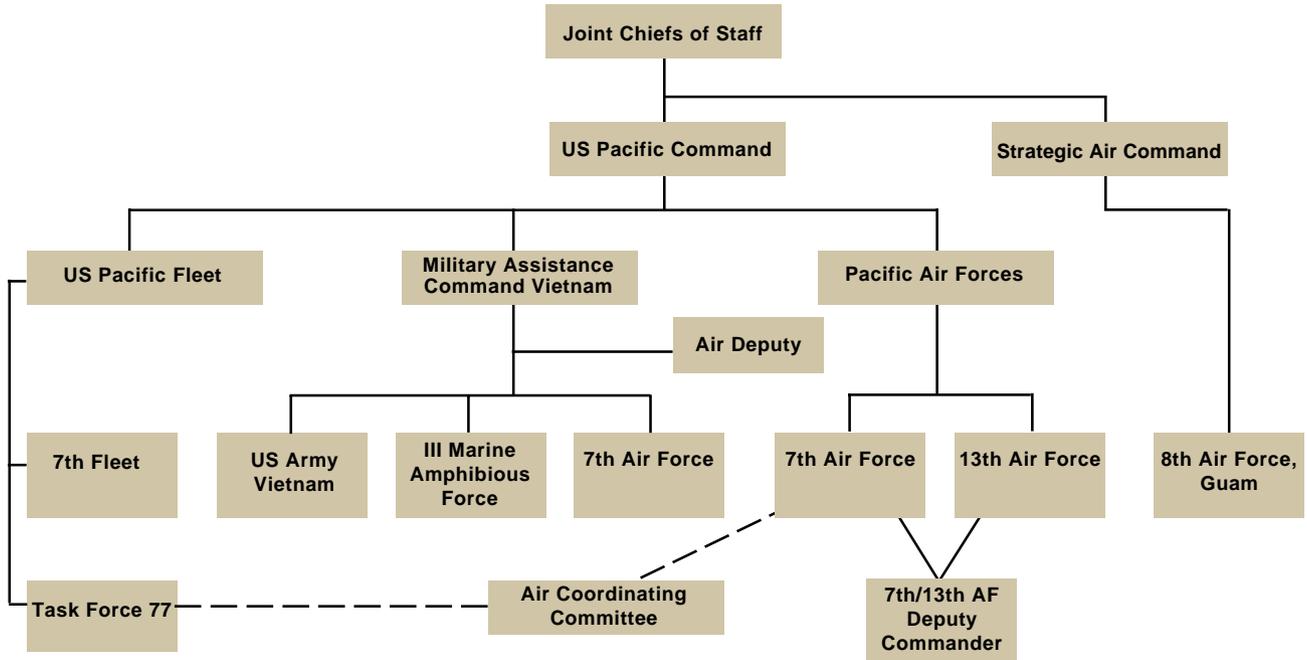
The American presence in Vietnam began in 1950 with a Military Advisory Group, redesignated the Military Assistance Advisory Group in 1955.

US Air Force advisors arrived in 1961 to train the Vietnamese Air Force. To support these advisors, 13th Air Force established in Saigon an advanced echelon (ADVON) of its 2nd Air Division. Thirteenth Air Force had no role in Vietnam, so the ADVON reported to the MAAG chief.

In 1962, Military Assistance Command Vietnam was established to replace the MAAG. The ADVON became the 2nd Air Division, with a dual role: It was the air component of MACV and the forward command element of 13th Air Force for operations outside of Vietnam. In 1966, 7th Air Force superseded the 2nd Air Division. It reported directly to Pacific Air Forces and, at

LINES OF COMMAND

1966-72



Source: Gen. William W. Momyer, USAF (Ret.), *Airpower in Three Wars*.

Military Assistance Command Vietnam was a subunified command of US Pacific Command, with Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force elements. MACV controlled the war in South Vietnam, but Pacific Command in Hawaii retained control of the war in North Vietnam, via Pacific Air Forces and Pacific Fleet. The commander of 7th Air Force was chairman of a coordinating committee for key operations in North Vietnam.

Seventh Air Force in Saigon was under operational control of MACV for operations in South Vietnam and Route Pack 1 (the southern part of North Vietnam), but 7th Air Force was controlled by PACAF for operations in North Vietnam (Route Packs 5 and 6A). Air Force wings in Thailand were part of 13th Air Force in the Philippines, but were under the operational control of 7th Air Force in Saigon. At Udorn AB, Thailand, 7th/13th Air Force was headed by a general officer who was deputy commander of both 7th and 13th Air Forces. Aircraft based in South Vietnam were used primarily in South Vietnam. Aircraft in Thailand were used in North Vietnam and Laos. Strategic Air Command retained control of B-52 bombers, tankers, and strategic reconnaissance aircraft.

the same time, was the air arm of MACV.

MACV is popularly remembered as the organization that ran the Vietnam War. In actuality, it was a subunified command reporting to US Pacific Command, and with a few exceptions, its authority was limited to operations in South Vietnam.

Each of these organizations had several commanders during the course of the war, but four of them figured most prominently in the complicated story of command and control.

- Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp was PACOM commander from June 1964 to July 1968, the pivotal period that encompassed Operation Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against North Vietnam. Sharp was a great champion of airpower, but he was also protective of control by the Navy and the Marine Corps of their air-

craft in the war zone. He clashed with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara on the conduct of the war, especially over the allocation and use of airpower for operations in North Vietnam.

- Westmoreland, MACV commander from June 1964 to July 1968, saw things from the perspective of the Army and the ground war. When he could, he shifted sorties from interdiction and strategic attack to close air support of the ground forces. Unlike Sharp, Westmoreland was a great favorite of Johnson and McNamara. “I was aware that Sharp and his staff were jealous of their prerogatives and that President Johnson seldom brought him into the front rank, despite his position as my boss,” Westmoreland said in his memoirs.

- Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore was commander of 2nd Air Division and

its successor organization, 7th Air Force, from January 1963 to June 1966. He and Westmoreland had been friends since high school in Spartanburg, S.C.

- Momyer, commander of 7th Air Force from July 1966 to July 1968, had earned a reputation in the Air Force for being tough, smart, and an extraordinarily able advocate of airpower.

Green Machine in Saigon

MACV was supposedly a joint service command, but it was basically operated by and for the Army.

In 1964, the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, tried to place an Air Force general as deputy commander of MACV, but the MACV commander was dead set against it and was able to block it.

“Aware that my deputy might have

to succeed me, I resisted pressure from the Air Force for my deputy to be an air officer,” Westmoreland said. “Why place an air officer in a position where he might have to run what was essentially a ground war? I similarly resisted pressures for an equal-quota system for officers of the various services on the MACV staff.”

Westmoreland was supported in that position by Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1964 and about to become the US ambassador to South Vietnam. Taylor said that it was “hardly conceivable” that MACV deputy commander could be anything other than an Army officer.

Although 2nd Air Division (and later 7th Air Force) was the air component of MACV, no separate ground component was ever established. The MACV commander and his staff held that portfolio themselves, further focusing the “joint” headquarters on the ground war. Eighty percent of the MACV staff’s attention went to Army matters.

From June 1965 on, the 2nd Air Division commander was also the MACV deputy for air operations. However, the air deputy was not part of the MACV staff structure.

The Navy refused to assign a service component to MACV and operated completely through Task Force 77, which reported to Pacific Fleet headquarters in Hawaii.

Moore, the 2nd Air Division commander, was often in a difficult position as the two lines of command called for the same aircraft to fly different missions at the same time. Through the war, the Air Force operated two command posts in Saigon, one for air support in South Vietnam and the other for operations in North Vietnam and Laos.

“Each time Moore, I, or a later commander decided to reassign air support from one area to another, we provoked an energetic response from the losing activity,” Momyer said. “Invariably our decisions displeased other headquarters because they, removed from the scene of action, were bound to assess the situation somewhat differently.”

The power lineup in Saigon did not change much until Vietnamization was well under way and the ground forces were pulling out of Vietnam.

In June 1972, Gen. John W. Vogt



USAF aircraft based in South Vietnam primarily covered only the south. Covering North Vietnam were aircraft such as this F-105, based in Thailand, and B-52s on Guam. The aircraft were controlled by different commands.

Jr.—the sixth and last commander of 7th Air Force—was named deputy commander of MACV when Gen. Creighton W. Abrams left and the former deputy, Gen. Frederick C. Weyland, took over at MACV.

The War in the North

Air Force aircraft based in South Vietnam were employed primarily in South Vietnam. Air strikes in the north were carried out by USAF aircraft from bases in Thailand, carrier-based aircraft in the Tonkin Gulf, and B-52 bombers controlled by 8th Air Force on Guam.

“Given MACV’s thoroughgoing commitment to treating the conflict as an insurgency which had to be settled in-country and on the ground, ... PACAF and the Air Staff were most anxious that control of the main elements of the Air Force in the Pacific remain under the CINCPAC component command structure and not under MACV as a subunified command,” Momyer said in his book *Airpower in Three Wars*.

This fit with the views of Sharp, who was determined to keep control at US Pacific Command of the air war in the north.

Southeast Asia—except for Vietnam after the creation of 7th Air Force—was the area of responsibility of 13th Air Force, which had no combat role in the war. Operational control was held by 7th Air Force.

In an unusual arrangement that caused considerable muttering at the

time, the bases, infrastructure, and airplanes (while they were on the ground) stayed in 13th Air Force. When the aircraft went into combat, they were controlled from Saigon, initially by the 2nd Air Division and then by 7th Air Force.

However, 7th Air Force did not control the Navy airplanes flying from carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. They had an independent chain of command, to Pacific Fleet. Some mechanism was required to divide the targets and keep the aircraft out of each other’s way.

The solution, invented by Sharp, was route packs. He divided North Vietnam into six sections. Route Packs 5 and 6A in the northwestern part of the country were assigned to the Air Force. The Navy got Route Packs 2, 3, 4, and 6B, which were closer to the coast and the carriers. Route Pack 1, just above the Demilitarized Zone, was assigned to the Navy at first but transferred to MACV as an extension of the battle area in the south.

The commander of 7th Air Force was chairman of the Air Coordinating Committee, which worked out differences between the Air Force and the Navy’s Task Force 77 in the Tonkin Gulf.

Momyer was no fan of the route packs.

“Dividing North Vietnam into route packages compartmentalized our airpower and reduced its capabilities,” he said. “One result was

that 7th Air Force diverted too many sorties into Route Package 1 when weather prevented strikes in Route Package 5 or 6 and the ABCCC [airborne battlefield command and control center] was fully committed with aircraft along the LOCs [lines of communication] in Laos. On the other hand, TF-77 had an inadequate number of aircraft for 24-hour coverage of its assigned route packages.”

According to Sharp, it worked.

“The organization for air operations was criticized at times, usually by people who did not understand it, and occasionally by people who had a parochial axe to grind,” Sharp said in his book *Strategy for Defeat*. “The organization satisfied diverse operational requirements and performed to my satisfaction.”

The War in the South

Operation Rolling Thunder began March 2, 1965, but within a month, the Administration became discouraged and changed the strategy. At a conference in Honolulu on April 20, McNamara informed the military leaders in the Pacific of a shift in emphasis from the air war in the north to the ground war in the south.

McNamara “insisted that the requirement for airpower in South Vietnam must get the first call on our air assets,” Sharp said. “Air assets programmed for attacks in the north would be diverted to satisfy the needs in the south.”

Westmoreland moved promptly to

take advantage of the change. The top priority, he told Moore, was close air support of ground troops in contact with the enemy. Army officers flooded the system with requests for supporting strikes.

“Considerable evidence existed that some of the sorties were dropping bombs on targets that could just barely be justified,” Sharp said. “Any request by Westmoreland for more airpower always got a sympathetic hearing from the Secretary of Defense, who was determined that all in-country requirements would be satisfied, no matter how inflated they were, before we used any effort against North Vietnam. His priorities for air strikes were (1) South Vietnam, (2) Laos, and (3) North Vietnam—and North Vietnam was a very poor third.”

Even within South Vietnam, Moore’s authority as MACV air deputy was limited. Army helicopters and land-based Marine fighters remained outside of his control.

The helicopter issue was eventually settled by a deal struck in Washington. The Air Force acknowledged Army control of the helicopters, and the Army agreed to give fixed-wing transports to the Air Force.

The issue of the Marine Corps fighters was more difficult. Westmoreland proposed in 1965 that his air deputy have operational control of the Marine squadrons, but the Marines resisted and Sharp supported them. Marine Corps aviation was

ruled organic to the Marine Amphibious Force.

“Under this directive, airpower was further fragmented by the establishing of all elements of two separate tactical air forces in the theater, one controlled by the theater air component commander and the other by the equivalent of a corps commander,” Momyer said. “This fragmentation grew unworkable as the war progressed.”

In Vietnam, Momyer explained, the Marines were assigned to sustained ground operations, a role for which they were not organized or equipped.

“The Marine system was designed for amphibious operations where the lack of supporting artillery required airpower overhead at all times,” Momyer said. “In this operation, where attaining a beachhead is critical, the use of airpower in this manner can be justified. However, it is highly expensive to keep aircraft overhead at all times throughout the day and during critical periods at night when there are no targets. ... Even so, the Marines employed aviation as though they were still conducting an amphibious operation.”

The problem was also clear to Westmoreland, who wanted to see a more effective and equitable use of the available airpower to better support all of the ground forces, not just the Marines. He continued to push for bringing Marine aircraft under centralized control.

The Marines challenged Westmoreland’s proposal. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were split on the issue and did not make a decision on it, but Westmoreland’s position was supported by the civilian leadership in the Pentagon and, eventually, by Adm. John S. McCain Jr., who succeeded Sharp at Pacific Command.

In 1968, centralization of sorts went into effect. MACV controlled 70 percent of the Marine sorties, with 30 percent left for immediate needs of the Marine commander. Some of the sorties given to MACV also came back to the Marines by allocation through the direct air support center. Consequently, they did not lose as much control as it might have appeared.

The issue faded away as Vietnamization of the war led to the departure of US ground troops and the



Whenever possible, MACV chief Gen. William Westmoreland shifted air strikes from interdiction and strategic attack to ground force support. Above, Col. Gordon Bradburn, head of 14th Air Commando Wing, speaks with Westmoreland.

withdrawal of Marine Corps airpower.

More Lines of Command

Laos was supposedly neutral territory. In actuality, the United States began flying missions there in 1964, even though this was not publicly disclosed until 1970.

A host of political considerations, including the cover story of neutrality, put the US ambassador in Vientiane in charge of all US military activities in Laos. Foremost of the ambassadors in those years was William H. Sullivan, known as the “Field Marshal” for the strong control he exerted on targets and rules of engagement.

“Command relationships with the ambassador in Laos were complex and difficult,” Momyer said. “The ambassador, as the senior United States official, was responsible for all US military activities; consequently, all air operations came under the detailed surveillance and control of the embassy. In effect, the embassy air attache functioned as an air commander since he could determine 7th Air Force employment through the authority of the ambassador.”

Oversight of 7th Air Force operations in Laos was further subdivided. Pacific Command held operational control in the “Barrel Roll” area in the north and most of the “Steel Tiger” area in the south. However, the “Tiger Hound” portion of the eastern Laotian panhandle was an extension of MACV’s area of responsibility. (See “The Vietnam War Almanac,” September 2004, p. 42.)

The Air Force set less than a perfect example of centralized airpower because, as Momyer said, “We airmen couldn’t agree on the operational control of the B-52s.”

No additional bombers or tankers were bought for Vietnam. Strategic Air Command supported the war with its existing fleet, the same resources SAC employed in its primary mission of strategic deterrence.

Neither 7th Air Force nor US Pacific Command had control of these aircraft. SAC’s 8th Air Force on Guam commanded all of the B-52s,



Lt. Gen. Joseph Moore (right), head of 2nd Air Division, and his deputy, Maj. Gen. Gilbert Meyers (left), review aerial photos with Task Force 77 boss Rear Adm. James Reedy. Such collaboration was rare.

tankers, and strategic reconnaissance aircraft in Southeast Asia. SAC did, however, establish a liaison section at MACV headquarters.

Lessons Eventually Learned

It is difficult to say how much difference the fragmentation of command and control made in the long run.

“Creating a unified command for all of Southeast Asia would have gone a long way toward mitigating the unprecedented centralization of authority in Washington and the preoccupation with minutiae at the Washington level,” Westmoreland wrote in *A Soldier Reports*.

However, given the inconsistent strategy and the on-again, off-again nature of the air war, the disunity of command may have been just one more drop in the bucket. In fact, considering MACV’s bias toward the ground war, the air war in the north might have been shortchanged even more had MACV been a unified theater command.

The solution today would be different, partly because of the lessons learned from the disastrous experience in Vietnam. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 empowered the theater commands and ushered in a new era of jointness. That same year,

the position of a joint force air component commander was first defined by JCS Publication 26, *Joint Doctrine for Theater Counterair Operations (for Overseas Land Areas)*.

“The joint force air component commander’s responsibilities will be assigned by the joint force commander (normally these would include, but not be limited to, planning, coordination, allocation, and tasking based on the joint force commander’s apportionment decision),” it said.

Neither jointness nor the JFACC concept were universally accepted right away. The Marines got an exception to JCS Pub 26 before it was published, and naval aviation was not integrated as well as it might have been into the JFACC’s operation during the Gulf War in 1991.

By the end of the 1990s, though, the roles and missions disputes had abated, and the role and authority of the combined force air component commander, or CFACC, was fully recognized in coalition operations.

Analyzing Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, defense analyst Rebecca Grant noted that “sea-based airpower blended seamlessly with land-based airpower” and that all Marine Corps aviation was on the air tasking order and thus under CFAAC control for the first time.

After 60 years, the possibility looms that the lessons from North Africa in World War II and the key precepts of Field Manual 100-20 may finally be coming into their own. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, “Impossible Odds in SAM-7 Alley,” appeared in the December 2004 issue.