

By Robert S. Dudley, Editor in Chief

## The Guns of August 1964

AS OF this month, we can look back with 40 years of perspective at the Vietnam War, which began in earnest in August 1964.

Congress, responding to a clash of US and North Vietnamese naval vessels, passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on Aug. 7, 1964. It empowered President Lyndon B. Johnson to take "all necessary steps, including the use of armed force" to halt armed aggression in Southeast Asia. The Air Force moved in force into South Vietnam and Thailand. By year's end, combat had begun.

It was a vast and sprawling war, a fact made clear by John T. Correll, a former Editor in Chief of *Air Force Magazine*, in a new statistical almanac prepared for the Air Force Association. We will publish his work in next month's issue, but herein we provide some important facts.

Vietnam was America's longest war, lasting nine years. By the time it ended in 1973, it had drawn in 3.4 million US servicemen and -women.

In the theater, the war resulted in 47,378 battle deaths, 10,799 other deaths, and 153,303 wounded who required hospital care. There are still 2,300 missing in action.

Hanoi acknowledges 1.1 million battle deaths among communist forces. South Vietnamese battle losses came to 254,000.

The conflict was predominantly a ground war. When the US armed presence peaked in 1968, there were 584,000 US troops in Vietnam, Thailand, and nearby offshore waters. The USAF complement numbered 94,000, 16 percent of the total. The Army and Marine Corps provided about 450,000 of the troops.

Because of the ground-air ratio, US attention tended to focus on land operations. Even after 40 years, the role of airpower in the Vietnam War is not always understood.

The overall Air Force effort in the Vietnam War was enormous.

Vietnam was twice as long as World War II, and the Air Force flew twice as many sorties in Southeast Asia as Army Air Forces carried out in World War II. A huge number of the

sorties—about 1.4 million—were of the ground attack type.

Air Force aircraft dropped 6.2 million tons of munitions, three times the amount in World War II.

The Air Force devoted a large share of its sorties to support ground forces operating in the South. USAF also mounted extensive attacks on North Vietnamese targets, despite

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heavy political restrictions. In the period 1965-68, the Air Force destroyed or damaged 9,000 military vehicles, 1,800 railcars, 2,100 bridges, and 2,900 anti-aircraft artillery guns.

By 1969, the Air Force had built within the theater a powerful fleet of 1,840 combat and support aircraft.

For the Air Force, the human cost was high. It suffered 1,741 battle deaths, 842 nonbattle deaths, and 1,000 seriously wounded airmen. Hundreds were held in squalid communist prison camps.

The Air Force lost 2,255 aircraft, of which 1,737 were combat losses.

Despite this, says noted airpower analyst Phillip S. Meilinger, "The Vietnam War has engendered more emotion, more loose talk, and more misunderstandings about airpower than any conflict since the 1940s." Some claim airpower was ineffective, killed excessive numbers of civilians, and was insufficiently responsive to Army needs.

Meilinger, among others, has exploded these and other myths (see Meilinger's "More Bogus Charges Against Airpower," October 2002), and they need not be taken up here.

What we know, with 40 years of hindsight, is that the Vietnam problem—for the Air Force and every other service—was much more basic. It was this: For America's political leaders, the objective was never victory.

Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, in his 1995 book, *In Retrospect*, acknowledges that the service Chiefs told him in 1964 that

the Johnson Administration had not defined a "militarily valid objective" in Vietnam. He seemed not to care.

The war's purpose shifted year by year. Rather than fighting to defeat North Vietnam, Washington was bent on sending signals to Hanoi.

Correll itemizes seven officially declared bombing halts and pauses in air operations over North Vietnam by 1969. LBJ was attempting to entice Hanoi to negotiate, to no avail.

Incrementalism, gradualism, and hesitation vitiated the impact of airpower. Micromanagement ran rampant. Air Force operations were so tightly leashed that LBJ once boasted, "They can't even bomb an outhouse without my approval."

In the 1965-68 Rolling Thunder air campaign against the North, targets and even tactics were set in Tuesday luncheon meetings in the White House, with no airman present.

It is worth noting what happened on two occasions when airpower was unshackled. In early 1972, Hanoi's "Easter Offensive" with 40,000 troops and 600 armored vehicles was halted and then turned back largely by US air attack. In December 1972, the B-52-led Linebacker II raids on Hanoi and Haiphong forced North Vietnam to halt its aggression and reach peace terms with Washington. Said Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "Airpower, given its day in court after almost a decade of frustration, confirmed its effectiveness as an instrument of national power—in just nine-and-a-half flying days."

James H. Webb, a former Marine, Vietnam veteran, and former Navy Secretary, has said that most Vietnam veterans believe the war was "justly begun, well-fought on the battlefield, and mindlessly bogged by the political process at home."

South Vietnam and Cambodia fell to communist forces in April 1975, bringing the long Southeast Asian war to an end. By that time, virtually all US military forces had been gone for two years. They, if not their political leadership, had performed with courage, competence, and honor. ■