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CLOSE AIR SUPPORT AFTER VIETNAM

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CLOSE AIR SUPPORT AFTER VIETNAM

AN ESSAY

by

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ABSTRACT

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Close Air Support was one of the most important tactics used by the U.S. military in fighting the war in Vietnam. A sizeable portion of future defense dollars will be allocated for forces and equipment to insure America maintains a credible capability for close air support. A major obstacle to establishing this capability, however, is a conflict over roles and missions for individual services especially between the Army and Air Force. This essay discusses some of these obstacles, the status of the present debate, and suggests some way how the issues might be resolved.

## CLOSE AIR SUPPORT AFTER VIETNAM

Some five years of employing close air support as a primary tactic in Vietnam has taught the U.S. military important lessons. Few, if any, would challenge that as a general tactic close air support is here to stay and in a big way. This means that a sizeable chunk of the U.S. defense dollar, regardless of who actually spends it, will be stamped, "CAS." It will purchase the equipment and pay for the men who will perform the mission. But from this somewhat noble base of near universal agreement begin the cracks, gaps, and chasms of disagreement. While Vietnam experience was accenting the role of close air support, it simultaneously taught us that close air support was a 'purple' suit operation, the likes of which we have never before seen in the fighting history of our nation. Never before had various services and branches worked so closely together on such a vast and complex operation which eventually matured into a magnificently effective war tactic. It may take years to fully appreciate the impact of just how tremendously effective it was.

But the very nature of these past cooperative successes sets the stage of conflict in the future. For the very first questions that must be asked after agreeing that we need close air support for the future is, "What do we do, and who is going to do what?" What are the roles and missions for each participant in close air support?

It is not the purpose to even suggest that a solution to this highly complicated subject could be attempted here. But it is important to examine where we now stand on the close air support issue. It is useful to draw on our Vietnam experience and identify the successes while we observe some of the conflicts and obstacles. Hopefully from these some valid guidance for the future may surface. The view must be based on interest of national defense and not the personal interest of any one service.

#### WHERE WE NOW STAND ON CLOSE AIR SUPPORT

A logical point of departure is to examine our Joint Doctrine on close air support. This can be accomplished with great dispatch because there isn't any. To the outside observer it might seem incredible that the United States has fought the longest war of its history in which the tactic of close air support played a major role, yet there has never existed Joint Staff Doctrine on how Close Air Support should be accomplished. This viewpoint may come from the mistaken belief that doctrine must precede tactics. In reality most practical doctrine is an after-the-fact observation of a successful tactic. Besides, as close air support was maturing in Vietnam, an outmoded doctrine might have proven to be more of an obstacle than an aid. The concept of operation, specific tactics and the overall use of forces was in a constant state of change in attempt to seek improved methods and to meet the changing situation. Doctrine or no doctrine, a close air support was was successfully fought.

Perhaps this was the mood if not the reason why no great pressures from high levels were exerted to agree on a joint doctrine. To be sure there was a monumental concern at the action officer level in the efforts to come up with a proposal. In 1965 a broad close air support agreement was signed by the Army and Air Force Chiefs of Staff. After a period, the Army recommended that a joint doctrine be developed. So in 1967 the Air Force was tasked with developing an initial draft.

The history of this and three subsequent drafts is a nonproductive story. Draft number five hit the bumpy road of coordination early in August 1970 and as the final days of 1970 become history there are no strong signs of satisfactory agreement even at the lower staff levels. Some of the more gloomy outlooks predict that even if a joint doctrine is agreed upon, it will be virtually useless as a practical document because it will be so vague and conditioned.

This leads next to the question, "Is a joint doctrine necessary at all?" A strong case can be developed support the view that yes, we do need a sound and workable Joint Close Air Support Doctrine. Vietnam served as a huge test area and concept implementation ground. To be sure there were errors but there were also some outstanding successes. It's time now to take account of Vietnam successes and mold our plans for the future close air support around those concepts which can be adopted for general worldwide application. It's time to align and orient our forces so we're

all going in the same direction. Because of social pressures, congressional and administrative leaders are turning the most critical eye in 20 years on every military move. Many cry to cut off the 'fat,' and some advocate drastic cuts in the lean as well. Even such a staunch supporter of the military as L. Mendel Rivers, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee has called for "more defense for the dollar." Under such close scrutiny we cannot afford to design our future tactics and operation on a 'trial and error' basis. Good doctrine can provide a sound basis for specific operation procedures, tactics, and the critically important task of medium and long range planning. These elements lead to an efficient and effective force with "more defense for the dollar."

If, then, we do not have a joint close air support doctrine and we need a good one, what has been the problem blocking this need?

#### OBSTACLES TO JOINT CLOSE AIR SUPPORT DOCTRINE

Why have we been struggling unsuccessfully for over three years in the most recent attempt to reach agreement in a doctrine for close air support? Perhaps the stem lies in the very nature and purpose of doctrine. Doctrine spells out roles and missions. Roles and missions in turn are key items in determining force structures and equipment buys. As the defense dollar becomes more and more squeezed and scrutinized, each service is forced into agonizing decisions about the mix of forces and equipment along with capabilities

and commitments. It is over simplified and fundamentally incorrect to call these interest "parochial." The leaders of the United States Military are as responsible as any other segment of our society and more aware of national goals and interests than most. It is both understandable and reasonable for each service to be highly reluctant to agree and accept roles and missions which may degrade their overall capabilities and (in their view) those of the nation as a whole. This is especially true in those cases where two or more services develop specific tactics with overlapping capabilities. These capabilities were developed and based on need. If unnecessary overlap should occur between missions of two services, each service might have understandable doubts that the "other guy" could do the job well enough to satisfy the need of all the parties. If, for example, roles and missions were conceded to the other service and the tactical situation arose where demand exceeded capabilities, who would determine the priorities? Even in priorities were pre-established, would they be rigidly honored? What about new concept of operation? Would the other service change appropriately to meet your changing need? These basic concerns emerge as specific issues. And, unfortunately, reasonable doubts sometimes degenerate into unreasonable bickering on requirements and capabilities.

Some past problems, for example, provide the seed of dissent. The Army had a legitimate beef at the beginning of major hostilities



in Vietnam that the Air Force had inadequate capability for close air support. The Air Force vigorously denied this and pointed to their rapidly expanding Counter Insurgency (COIN) force. But by 1966 it would have taken a wild imagination to consider the Vietnam war as an "insurgency." A House Armed Services special subcommittee on Tactical Air Support investigated the issue and published a report in February 1966 which criticized the Air Force for deficiencies in close air support capabilities. They didn't have enough people, they didn't have enough or the right type of equipment, and they didn't have the system established to do a creditable job.

But the key word here is 'didn't have.' The Air Force quickly recognized their weak points and moved equally as rapidly to correct deficiencies. In 1967 the complaint was no longer valid and the proof came in the massive close air support which took place from mid 1967 to mid 1968. By this time, also, the Air Force had submitted their A-X SOR (specific operational requirement) to obtain an aircraft designed solely for close air support. Even though the Air Force concern for close air support has vastly changed, the same tired old "Yes, but I remember when . . ." still is sometimes used in what would otherwise be a valid discussion.

About the same time the Army's desire for an improved gunship the "Cheyenne" soon developed into an all out hassle on roles and missions between the proposed A-X and the Cheyenne. The battle was not limited to lower staff levels nor kept within the confines of intraservice debates. In the March 1970 issue of Government

Executive an article appeared called, "Army Aviation After Vietnam, What?" It waved a red flag at the Air Force by stating, "Plans and programs underway at Army Aviation Systems Command in St. Louis suggest a confrontation with the Air Force over aerial missions may be in the offing." "The Air Force F-100 and F-4 loss rate is over five times the loss rate of the Army's two attack helicopters." The author concluded that, "The myth of the helicopter vulnerability, now shattered, provides the basis for a well-reasoned Army argument for going into aviation in a big way."

As expected, the Air Force responded with a blaze. They pointed out that a loss rate based on 'number of sorties' (as was this case) is totally unrealistic since the nature of helicopter missions involves multi-short range, short duration operations. The Air Force countered with an analysis of the same Army helicopter losses based on "losses vs average number of helicopters possessed" over a period of time. The Air Force underscored the period which showed more Army helicopters lost in a year than the average number of total possessed during that year. Such vulnerability is some "myth" the Air Force contended.

Underlying all this bickering was some sort of connotation that the Cobra gunships, the F-100s and the F-4s, the Cheyenne and the A-X were all doing or scheduled in the future to do the same roles and missions. This completely invalid comparison is as meaningless as the "apples and oranges" comparison.

The Army and Air Force finally concluded that, indeed, the A-X and the Cheyenne were not competitive but complementary.

Quoted in the 25 Apr 1970 issue of the Armed Forces Journal, the Army Chief of Staff said, "The A-X will perform those missions requiring penetration over a hostile environment to deliver heavier munitions against less fleeting targets. There will be some overlap, but this is true for all weapons. I believe the overlap will be small and desirable."

Such agreement and accord is a step in the right direction, but it is also easy to see that there are many issues at hand, such as what are "less fleeting targets," "heavier munitions," and "penetrations over a hostile environment." The real point will be who gets what piece of the pie.

It soon becomes apparent how Pentagon frustrations mount with attempts to formulate some sort of doctrine for joint close air support. Impeding efforts are also a case for no doctrine at all. Without concrete doctrine there is always a degree of maneuvering and negotiating room for the bid for forces and equipment. If there is no doctrine to say who does and who does not do a certain task, then supposedly anyone is free to participate. And a very important reality in this connection is that he who has the equipment and forces to do a job, is very likely the one who will also get the mission formally assigned.

And so we arrive right back where we started from--like a trip around a ring of the Pentagon. Is there any hope, then, for reaching a meaningful agreement on close air support roles and missions? A trip away from the Pentagon may provide a clue.

## CLOSE AIR SUPPORT ROLES AND MISSIONS IN VIETNAM

Ironically while the disagreement raged in the Pentagon, a totally different picture of close air support could be observed on the battlefield. Regardless of theories, doctrine, concepts, and plans no one is in a better position to judge how a system works than those actually involved in doing the job. It is most important therefore to look at what really evoked as roles and missions during actual combat.

Perhaps one of the most valid opinions of close air support effectiveness comes from the consumer - the ground forces. Certainly among those, a highly important opinion is that of the battalion/brigade commander who used close air support as an integral part of his everyday operation.

In 1969/70 a study on close air support was conducted at the Army War College. Forty-three battalion commanders and three brigade commanders who used close air support in Vietnam completed an extensive questionnaire on the value of Air Force close air support as they experienced it in Vietnam. It is also important to reflect here that these 46 commanders were not average but rather the elite of the Army - the perceptive, the analytical, the critical top percent of officers selected to attend the War College. It is reasonable to assume therefore that the majority opinion of this select group might well represent the opinion of the Army in the future since these are the Army's top ranking officers of tomorrow.

The questionnaire gathered very interesting data. For example one question asked, "How would you rate Tactical Air Support in your operation?" Twenty-four answered, "vital", 10 answered "valuable", one said "helpful", and not a single commander marked "nonessential" or "unimportant." Not surprisingly the identical answer breakdown was recorded for the question, "How would you rate the ALO/FAC with whom you were associated?"

Equally interesting was a write-in question which asked, "what was the most important lesson you would like to pass on regarding Army/Air Force operations in Vietnam?" It was an open-ended question which could have been answered pro or con regarding Army/Air Force cooperation in roles and missions.

The vast majority of comments were complimentary to the system as a whole. The extent of working level cooperation and acceptance of roles and missions (doctrine) can be seen in some of the following comments from the question above:

--"I would say close Air Force Air Support has come of age in RVN - and stacks up with any other service accomplishments now or in previous wars. I base this on operations in Bong Son plain, Hue, Khe Sanh relief, and first opening of A Shau Valley. In each area I used lots of AF support."

--"Regardless of what animosity there may be in the 'head shed' between USA & USAF in the fight for their share of the money - when the 'chips are down' in the combat zone, all are on the same team and the Blue Suiters can be trusted as fully as your own. It's a comforting thought!"

--"Cooperation is possible between the services - once you leave Washington."

--"The closer to the actual site of a combat operation the less concerned the Army and Air Force personnel involved are with a classic discussion of roles and missions of the services."

--"At the Indian level there is seldom any conflict in roles and missions. Each service does what needs to be done to accomplish the job."

--"No problems at grass root level but as you go to higher staffs there is less understanding between AF and Army requirements."

--"Don't see how it (close air support) could have been much more responsive."

--"God Bless all FACs!!"

--"Hate to be without!" (close air support)

--"You gentlemen have saved numerous lives under my command - including my own."

--"Close Air Support in Vn is beautiful!"

--We still need the Air Force.

These comments by Army commanders in the field, conducting the war, are extremely significant. They represent a drastic opposite from the conflicts, doubts, and intraservice suspicions which echo in the halls of the Pentagon. Since these commanders are representative of those men who will soon be senior leaders in the Army, perhaps we are seeing an emergence of a new era of trust and cooperation between the Army and the Air Force that hasn't yet been 'recognized' in the Pentagon.

The Air Force combat view of the close air support comes out the same but is perhaps less complicated. The pilots flying the attack aircraft did not question the absolute command prerogative of the ground commander to whom close air support was being given, for example. There was certainly no grumbling about flying close air support missions in those instances where a squadron participated in a variety of missions. Many considered close air a preferred mission because it was more rewarding personally. For most of the Squadrons stationed in South Vietnam, they fully appreciated that their 'purpose in life' was Close Air Support. No arguments could be generated by suggesting that CAS should be responsive, versatile, accurate, or most any item that would improve overall capabilities.

An academic debate over roles and missions is meaningless to an Air Force close air support pilot receiving a rapid-fire prestrike briefing on a desperate ground situation where lives of our forces hang in the balance of his CAS effectiveness. He'll do what must be done and so will everyone else.

To really cinch down the extent of AF cooperation and coordination with the Army one has only to examine the role of the Forward Air Controller in Vietnam. Army battle summaries abound with lavish praise for FACs who were sometimes performing roles that would 'tight jaw' the purist Army doctrineers in Washington. Similarly the faith and cooperation between strike pilots and FACs is well documented in Air Force historical reports.

These descriptions of Army/Air Force harmony do not automatically claim that everything was always bliss. Of course there

were differences and conflicts t various times. Some were settled better than others. But the important thing to recognize is that many of the very issues being debated in the Pentagon today were not issues at all during actual battle conditions.

#### CLOSE AIR SUPPORT - WHERE TO FROM HERE?

In the opinion of those who did the job in Vietnam, there is no doubt that close air support played a major role in the outcome of the war. There is no doubt, too, as the one colonel put it, "that close air support has come of age." What can we do to preserve this superb military tactic and enhance it to an even more sophisticated state? One approach might be to look at both some possible 'Do's' and some 'Don'ts' down the path to Joint Doctrinal agreement for close air support.

#### SOME DO's

---We DO want to reach a meaningful agreement on Joint Doctrine for close air support. If the doctrine is filled with broad and wishy-washy concepts, we have gained little. The doctrine must provide a solid base for guidance in the future forces and procedures. At the same time we must not surround clear but flexible concepts with rigid tactics. Tactics belong in tactics manuals not in doctrine. Mixing doctrine and tactics merely ties the combat commanders hands to a specific procedure that just may not work in his particular situation. When that happens the tactics and the doctrine go down together to uselessness.



---We DO want to take advantage of the great successes in close air support application that we learned in Vietnam. We need to look objectively at what happened in every facet and in every phase. We can then make judgments about application to future situations. We can also use the failures and trouble spots to point ways for better solutions. And the beauty of this approach is that the facts have been carefully preserved. Air Force has done an outstanding job in recording the contemporary history of Vietnam in their CHECO reports. These volumes cover the war from nearly every angle. Many answers and many verifications wait there to be duly recognized. A similar case can be made for the Army Battle Summary Reports.

And these aren't the only sources. For example, the Air Force now has in draft a tactics manual for Forward Air Controllers (proposed AFM 3-2) which was written by a group of the Air Force's most knowledgeable FACs. This document is somewhat of a cart-before-the-horse again, but still it is another source which describes how it can be done effectively and why. It may assist in solution for some issues.

---We do want also to insure that our peacetime structure for close air support training is maintained at a high level. Our ALO/FAC program must be vigorously supported. Our attack aircraft must be thorough and frequently engaged in combined operations. We must build Army/AF cross-feed in all sectors of the operation. This must all be done because important doctrinal improvements can come from empirical data.

## SOME DON'Ts

---We DON'T want to revert to a parochial shield of backwardness. We have already made great progress toward a superb intraservice close air support system. We must not let the pinch for the defense dollar drive us into unreasonable self interests at the expense of national capabilities. This will be difficult because rationalization can cloud what is "good for the nation." Our highest leaders and their staffs will have to take a more objective view than ever before. The law of the nation has already established the system of Unified Commands. A close air support joint doctrine is in complete consonance with that law.

---We DON'T need to create unnecessary intraservice battle. Public press releases which taunt the other services by suggesting fabricated or real deficiencies can only set the stage for a return attack and subsequent escalation. This can only lower the public and congressional confidence in the military's ability to evaluate and provide for the country's defense.

## SUMMARY

Vietnam has shown us that close air support is a jewel among effective combat tactics. Its complex nature makes it difficult and the number of participants makes it as awesome a task as coordinating a great symphony orchestra. But perhaps in its difficulty may lie the reason for its great value.

We need to set the stage for tomorrow's close air support capability with a practical and meaningful joint doctrine as an excellent launching base. We don't have that doctrine. We are at a stage of development where we can grasp it or let it flounder. As our defense posture is pared nearer and nearer to an absolute minimum for the safety of our nation, we must recognize every opportunity for efficiency and effectiveness. Here is a golden one.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Norman G. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "S" at the end.

NORMAN G. SMITH  
LTC, USAF

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