Joint Operations in the Southwest Pacific, 1943–1945

By Kevin C. Holzimmer

In the last strategically significant amphibious landing in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) during World War II, the Armed Forces landed 175,000 men—organized into I and XIV Corps—on a 20-mile stretch of beach on the Philippine island of Luzon. The operation capped a 2-year campaign that spanned thousands of miles of ocean and included 73 amphibious assaults. While difficult, all of these landings and subsequent actions succeeded. Indeed, U.S. joint operations in SWPA—involving Army, Navy, and air assets—contributed significantly to Japan’s defeat.

The few historians who have treated joint operations in SWPA—most prefer the Marine Corps in the Central Pacific—fall into two schools. The larger and more traditional school argues that these operations succeeded because the area had an overall commander, General Douglas MacArthur, USA, who unified the services. The smaller and more recent school pins success on General Walter Krueger, USA, who not only helped develop joint operations doctrine in the interwar era but also executed it as commander of U.S. Sixth Army. However, neither explanation is sufficient by itself. This article examines joint operations prior to World War II and offers an explanation for the success of joint operations in SWPA despite the lack of joint doctrine and command.

Reserved and Fastidious versus the Frontier Type

The Army and Navy first seriously considered joint operations in the wake of the Spanish-American War. The campaign against Santiago de Cuba, in particular, starkly showed the two services that planning and executing joint operations required substantial investment. Army and Navy commanders were subordinate to their own chains of command instead of unifying under a joint campaign commander. With no way to develop or coordinate a single plan, the services conceived their campaigns independently. With the Spanish squadron bottled up in Santiago Bay, for

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example, Rear Admiral William Sampson of the North Atlantic Squadron—described as a reserved and fastidious technician—suggested that the Army, under Major General William Shafter, take out the fortifications guarding the mouth of the bay so his ships could engage the Spanish fleet. Overweight, often profane, and called the “frontier type” by his biographer, Paul Carlson, Shafter wanted his V Corps to focus on capturing Santiago itself.

These divergent views and personalities led to poor coordination and likely prolonged the campaign. A short time later, even after the Spanish fleet had been sunk or grounded while attempting to escape, Sampson refused another request from the V Corps commander to bombard Santiago de Cuba and its fortifications on the grounds that the Army had not yet cleared the entrance of the bay so his ships could safely pass.

Assessing the two commanders’ roles in the ineffective joint operations, Carlson concluded that:

[Shafter and Sampson] could not cooperate. Too often Shafter thought in terms of a frontier command where he alone held authority and did not, could not, share responsibility for success or failure of an expedition. Conditioned by such narrow thinking and piqued by the difficulties with Sampson, Shafter refused to recognize the equal role the Navy played in the war. His position wrecked chances for a smooth campaign, but Shafter was not alone at fault. Sampson, too, possessed a short temper as well as a desire to claim the major honors for success in war.1

Just as the joint military operation lacked an overall coherent strategy, the landing operations reflected a lack of prewar consideration. Ships were loaded in haphazard fashion, assembled from a wide variety of sources, and approached the landing sites without a standard operating procedure. Chaos marked the actual landing as the Army lacked adequate command and control procedures and enough boats. As William Atwater suggested:

In sharp contrast to the relatively efficient Navy/Marine Corps landing at Guantánamo, the Army and Navy in a slipshod operation barely managed to put ashore an expeditionary force at Daiquirí, about 15 miles east of Santiago. The entire amphibious phase of this expedition was marked by inefficiency, inexperience, and simple incompetence.2

Two themes concerning joint operations emerged from the war with Spain. The first surrounds the tactical issue of procedures that govern loading, transporting, and landing troops on hostile shores. The second and more contentious theme involves command. As Shafter’s and Sampson’s divergent plans illustrate, deciding who commands joint operations is paramount. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the Army and Navy settled the first issue but not the second. They failed to articulate a doctrine for establishing unified command structures in joint operations between the Spanish-American War and World War II and beyond.

Nevertheless, largely owing to joint operations problems in the war with Spain, the services did address the issue, specifically at the Army and Naval War Colleges and the Joint Army and Navy Board (created in 1903 and usually called the Joint Board). The Armed Forces published documents that addressed joint operations throughout the early 20th century. While many dealt with the tactical issue of landing procedures and made great strides in formalizing ways for the Army and Navy to reach and then assault beaches, none adequately addressed who would command the joint force. In fact, while the War and Navy Departments tried to create a common doctrine for joint command, the proposed solutions often caused more confusion.

Cheerful Cooperation

The years up to 1941 fall into three periods of thinking about joint command. The first was introduced by a 1905 Army and Naval War College study, Rules for Navy Convoy. Revised in 1917, the inquiry suggested that command arrangements in a joint operation should not rely on a single joint commander, but on cooperation, which Atwater described as “a form of command whereby neither . . . commander would be placed in an inferior position or be placed under the command of the other. Command issues would be settled by agreement and compromise . . . rather than by issuance of an order.”3 While pains were taken to define separate Army and Navy functions to minimize friction, the War and Navy Departments never tackled exactly how this cooperation would work under the stress of war. Instead they left command to the whims of individuals who were in actual command of their respective service components. An officer wrote in 1910, “Above all else is the importance of a hearty and cheerful cooperation between the two services in all matters pertaining to these operations.”4

The issue of command was further clouded, if relying on cheerfulness did not sufficiently cloud it, when Joint Army and Navy Action in Coast Defense (JANA) of 1920 replaced the principle of cooperation with that of paramount interest, which gave command to either an Army or Navy officer, based on which service “function and requirements are, at the time, of the greater importance.” In this second period, the joint commander had the authority to designate missions for both services while the subordinate commander did not yield actual command of his
own forces. Obviously that would only work with a common conception of the circumstances making one’s service functions and requirements of “greater importance.” Neither edition of JANA defined the parameters of “function and requirements.” As Atwater concluded, “The problem in utilizing this form of coordination is how to define the circumstances under which it would apply and then assigning command to a particular service. What ‘paramount interest’ meant in a practical sense was that each specific case would have to be dealt with on its own merits.” As the Santiago campaign made clear, two strong-willed individuals leading their own service components may have radically different notions.

The third period in the evolution of joint command came after the failure of a joint Army-Navy exercise in 1938. As a result, Admiral William Leahy, Chief of Naval Operations, suggested in the late 1930s that the services should replace the unworkable system of paramount interest. He rejected the principle of unity of command except through Presidential mandate and instead advocated the old concept of cooperation. General Malin Craig, Chief of Staff of the Army, agreed, and it was made official in Change Number 2 to Joint Action of the Army and Navy (1935) in 1938. The return to cooperation left the Armed Forces without a coherent doctrine of joint command on the eve of World War II. As Atwater pointed out, the adoption was a “tragic choice” that caused confusion not only for commanders at Pearl Harbor who faced the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941, but also for leaders on the operational level who had to create and execute plans that would help translate tactical military victories into strategic wins.

Moving against and landing troops on enemy-held beaches emerged as the only bright point in joint operations through the first half of the 20th century. Both the Army and Navy worked the issue through extensive joint maneuvers and such publications as An Overseas Expedition (1923) and Joint Overseas Expeditions (1933). Despite the success of amphibious landings, thorny issues of joint command were never settled beyond vague notions of cooperation.

Just as service leaders faced their tasks without a coherent and usable joint command doctrine, the internal command arrangements in SWPA did not foster an institutional or organizational structure suitable for joint operations. While historians often assert that MacArthur was the de facto operational joint commander, the specific command arrangements suggest otherwise. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS)—with the approval of President Franklin Roosevelt—limited MacArthur’s ability to command troops assigned to him when SWPA was created in March 1942. MacArthur was ineligible to directly command any national force, unlike Admiral Chester Nimitz.

Furthermore, MacArthur never attempted to act as a joint commander despite JCS restrictions. Nor did he appoint one, although he had the authority. Instead, the SWPA commander’s standard way of conducting an opera-
tion was to provide a broad directive, stating both objectives and the forces available. It was then up to his lieutenants of all services to breathe life into his strategic plan. It was up to them to bury interservice rivalry. And it was up to them to plan, integrate, and execute the operation. In short, operations for all practical purposes fell under the challenging principle of cooperation rather than unity of command.

An Attitude without Service Bias

In light of the limitations that worked against joint operations—lack of joint operational doctrine and MacArthur’s command structure—it is useful to consider how SWPA staffs planned joint operations before examining why they succeeded.

Although MacArthur was not the operational commander and refused to appoint one, he sought to establish a command system that was often a throwback to the principle of cooperation. Subordinate organizations included three service commands: Allied Land Forces, Allied Naval Forces, and Allied Air Forces. Complicating this organization was that in early 1943, MacArthur designated his major Army formation, Sixth Army under General Walter Krueger, as Alamo Force, thereby keeping his ground forces independent of Allied Land Forces, led by Australian General Sir Thomas Blamey. The leaders of the Army, naval, and air units were to coordinate their planning in the absence of a joint task force commander. MacArthur’s own instructions to his lieutenants betray the lack of doctrine or serious consideration of the demands of joint operations. His component commanders were to rely on “personal relationships” to plan and execute their missions. His headquarters had “developed an attitude... without service bias,” a notion many Navy, Marine, and Army Air Corps personnel eventually found unlikely.

In practice, MacArthur designated Krueger to coordinate planning for the ground, naval, and air forces. As the official Army historian put it, “Krueger’s authority to coordinate planning gave him a preeminent position; he was first among equals.”6 Ironically, on arriving in early 1943, Krueger argued against MacArthur’s command arrangement and urged the SWPA commander to adopt the principle of unity of command. Throughout the interwar era, Krueger was one of the few officers who thought carefully about joint operations. As early as 1925, he concluded that unity of command must be adopted instead of the principles of mutual cooperation or paramount interest. Now working in a joint environment, Krueger found MacArthur’s arrangement awkward at best and dangerous at worst. Nevertheless, MacArthur would not budge. From 1943 until the end of the war, when the bulk of offensive operations took place in SWPA, the services would have to cooperate despite differences in culture and perspective. Krueger reflected in 1947 that “our command arrangements in [SWPA] left a good deal to be desired... . . . There is no doubt in my mind that split command, especially in a crisis, is fatal. To be sure, we had excellent cooperation—but we were lucky.”7

Acting as coordinator, Krueger had to make the system work, lucky or not. After receiving MacArthur’s broad directives—again usually covering objectives, mission, and forces—the principal commanders would offer any objections, which could be handled by letter, radio, or conference. Overall, however, the directives were accepted without much disagreement.

Krueger would next assemble a joint planning group (JPG) within Sixth Army to work on the particular operation. Usually headed by Krueger’s component operations staff officer, the group included members from the naval and air forces and met at Sixth Army headquarters. Krueger only intervened if the members could not solve their disagreements, which were usually interservice. Then he would consult his air and naval counterparts. As Krueger recalled, “It is remarkable that we always managed to adjust existing differences, and it was this and the spirit of cooperation displayed by ground, naval, and air forces that made
it possible for us to operate as an Army-Navy-air forces team.”

Once JPG finalized its plan, it needed approval from the ground, naval, and air commanders, usually at a commanders’ conference. Although Krueger suggested that “all spade work had as a rule been done by the joint planners [by conference time],” there was often considerable haggling over issues that needed the attention of the commanders. Whether by telephone, radio, letter, or conference, divisive issues invariably got hammered out.

Improving Coordination

By examining an operation, we may obtain a clearer picture of the joint planning process in SWPA. The Hollandia campaign (Reckless) merits consideration because it was conducted as the planning process began to mature. As the official Army historian pointed out, “Indeed, the planning for Hollandia provides an excellent case study for most amphibious undertakings in the Southwest Pacific.”

While command in SWPA cannot be described as organizationally or structurally unified, other factors made the exercise difficult on the operational level not only for Hollandia, but also for other operations. Vice Admiral Daniel Barbey, commander of Seventh Amphibious Force, recalled the locations of the headquarters of the various commanders during Reckless planning:

General MacArthur was in Brisbane, Australia. Admiral Nimitz was in Pearl Harbor. General Krueger, the commander of the Sixth Army . . . was at Finschhafen [Papua New Guinea]. General [Robert] Eichelberger, who would command the ground forces, was at Goodenough Island, three hundred miles to the eastward. My flagship was anchored at Buna, about midway between the two places. Air Force headquarters was at Brisbane, and the headquarters of those bits of the Australian Navy that would operate under my command was at Melbourne. The various units of the Central Pacific Force that were involved were scattered from the Hawaiian Islands to the Solomons.

MacArthur’s headquarters was over 1,500 miles from Sixth Army’s. “Joint planning,” Barbey concluded, “posed more than the usual problems because of the great distances.”

Formal planning for Reckless began March 5, 1944, after the receipt of the general headquarters (GHQ) SWPA order, but actual planning began in the
wake of the Admiralty Islands success. According to Krueger, a series of conferences took place to refine the plan his JFG created. The meetings included the obligatory commanders’ conference consisting of Major General Stephen Chamberlain, G–3, GHQ SWPA; Major General Ennis Whitehead, commander, Fifth Air Force; and Major General James Frink, commander, U.S. Service of Supply, along with Krueger and Barbey. Several days later, a task force commanders’ conference was held at Sixth Army headquarters at Finschhafen, attended by Lieutenant General Robert Eichelberger, commander, I Corps, who led one task force, and Brigadier General Jens Doe, who led another. The commanders discussed the timing of D-day and H-hour, securing air superiority, shipping schedules, deception measures, naval support, command arrangements, and intelligence reports. More conferences followed, including one in Brisbane at GHQ SWPA and another involving Alamo Force and Seventh Amphibious Fleet. The last took place April 12 between the staffs of Krueger and Barbey on the headquarters ship of the fleet and apparently finalized shipping issues for the overwater movement of personnel, equipment, and supplies. The frank tone described in accounts of the meetings showed that if a joint atmosphere did not permeate GHQ SWPA, it existed at headquarters Sixth Army.

While these conferences were important, they do not tell the whole story. The journal of Sixth Army headquarters shows a steady stream of commanders of all services coming and going throughout the planning of Reckless, demonstrating a less formal yet intensive joint planning process than Krueger suggests. Distances between headquarters notwithstanding, these visits indicate the degree to which Army, Navy, and air leaders worked to forge a joint operational planning team.

There were problems. Navy commanders felt overshadowed by the Army in the planning process. During the Hollandia operation, Barbey suggested that the Army use a different landing beach than Krueger’s staff offered and believed the Army was rejecting Navy advice. Krueger responded that Barbey was the one placing naval over military interests and offered a lengthy critique of Barbey’s proposal. The Sixth Army commander reminded Barbey that while the beaches the admiral proposed would be better for the Navy, they would place the ground forces of Reckless “in a pocket from which they may find it extremely difficult and time-consuming to extricate themselves in order to attain their objective.” Nevertheless, Krueger admitted that the alternate site might indeed be better after “further study and reconnaissance.” In the end, the Sixth Army site was used and proved the right choice. Having rejected Barbey’s suggestion, Krueger told him, “While I am not unmindful of the naval difficulties you present, such as the necessity of minesweeping, I urge that you give serious consideration to the disadvantages to the ground forces when the naval viewpoint is given undue weight in the selection of landing beaches.”

Such frank exchanges occurred not only in planning, but also as operations were ongoing. During the land campaign against the Japanese on Leyte, for example, planes of Fifth U.S. Air Force, commanded by Lieutenant General George Kenney, strafed American troops. In a fit of anger, Krueger fired a radio message to Kenney blaming Fifth Air Force for deliberately attacking his men. Kenney reacted defensively. After a heated conversation with Krueger’s chief of staff, he talked with Krueger personally. During this conversation, Krueger not only apologized for the accusations but also agreed to work with Kenney on improving coordination between their services.

The joint planning process for Hollandia, along with the Leyte incident, demonstrated that while the Navy sometimes felt shunned by the Army and there was interservice bickering over serious issues, overall planning took place in a joint environment on the operational level largely due to Walter Krueger, who was responsible for planning. But beyond that, what enabled effective joint planning and execution remains unclear. One might argue that, unlike during the Spanish-American War, the personalities were more conducive to a joint environment so the principle of cooperation worked. But that thesis does not recognize that SWPA commanders could be as uncooperative as their counterparts 50 years before. Krueger was criticized as being stubborn and difficult to work with. Kenney was outspoken and confident to the point of arrogance. Barbey was known as self-serving and pushy.

Military Managers and the Applicatory Method

Neither personalities nor concepts of command arrangements in joint operations changed significantly after the Spanish-American War and therefore cannot account for the joint success in SWPA. However, both the way senior commanders viewed their profession and the manner in which high-ranking officers worked together did fundamentally change. What separates Sampson and Shafter from Krueger, Barbey, Kenney, and Rear Admiral Thomas Kinkaid in terms of organizing and executing joint operations is the rise in the early and middle 20th century of what Morris Janowitz characterizes as the managerial style of military leadership. Janowitz utilizes heroic and managerial styles to explain the modern professional officer corps:

The history of the modern military establishment can be described as a struggle between heroic leaders, who embody traditionalism and glory, and military “managers,” who are concerned with the scientific and rational conduct of war.
This distinction is fundamental. The military manager reflects the scientific and pragmatic dimensions of warmaking; he is the professional with effective links to civilian society.14

What stands out is characterization of the military manager as “concerned with the scientific and rational conduct of war” and “pragmatic dimensions of warmaking.” Also of note in Janowitz’s thinking is the division of managerial style leaders into “skill groups,” one being the staff officer—“essentially a specialist in coordination.” While not all senior commanders in SWPA could be classified as solely staff officers, they were competent in staff work, as was manifested through the planning and execution of joint operations.

To be an effective staff officer, one must cultivate the ability to communicate and work with others. Explains Janowitz:

Interpersonal skill is of the essence for those who must operate in the ever-changing environment of the higher levels of military administration. . . . The results reveal that, for officers from all three services, the higher the administrative level, the greater the emphasis on interpersonal skill. . . . The conference technique is not a foreign importation, but an inevitable aspect of modern managerial techniques.15

The conferences and the overall dialogue between SWPA commanders betray the high degree of coordination and communication, especially compared to the Spanish-American War.

While several institutions and factors played a role in developing the managerial style, one stands out with regard to joint operations in SWPA: education, derived specifically from the Army and Naval War Colleges. Education—receiving information about a subject—does not mean the same thing as managerial style here. Shafter and Sampson, Civil War veterans, were well aware of the joint operations in that war. That knowledge did not translate into a joint working environment. An increased emphasis on the larger dimensions of strategy and operations at the war colleges contributed to the managerial style. However, the collective approach to learning and planning in professional military education (PME) no doubt helped turn officers from heroic to managerial leaders, particularly in its emphasis on the cooperative nature of managerial leaders. From their days at intermediate and senior service schools, these officers worked in groups and seminars, analyzing readings and lectures, planning and executing war games, and participating in problem-solving exercises. Many activities involved joint considerations, and all were part of the applicatory method of instruction adopted by both war colleges in the early 20th century. That method proved to be the most important mechanism of PME in creating managerial officers and was vital to joint operations in the absence of joint doctrine and command arrangements.

Modified from the German applicatory method, the American version was an approach to solving military problems. Both the Army and Naval War Colleges adopted the same basic educational methodology in 1903 and 1909, respectively. The first phase—the heart of the method—was the estimate of the situation, described by the Naval War College faculty as a “logical process of thought, which, applied to a concrete strategical or tactical problem, enables one to arrive at a definite strategical or tactical decision.” The early list that comprised the estimate incorporated four considerations: the mission; enemy force strength, disposition, and intentions; friendly force strength, disposition, and available courses of action; and the decision.

The second phase of the applicatory method was to translate the decision into clear orders for subordinates. The third phase translated “the mental processes into action” for “carrying out on the field or in the game the tactical or strategical dispositions made in the order.” In other words, the final phase evaluated the estimate of the situation and the orders to subordinates through wargaming.

While the colleges adopted the method in the early 20th century, both schools had the goal of creating a truly corporate atmosphere from the beginning. Admiral Stephen Luce, first president of the Naval War College, remarked that in his institution, “Officers meet together to discuss questions pertaining to higher branches of their profession.”16 Similarly, the Army War College stressed that “solutions to problems were found by a group, not by the individual.”17

In a lecture at the Naval War College in 1914, for example, Captain William Sims, who became president in 1917, expanded on Luce’s vision, emphasizing that the conference method of learning was central: “The War College is an organized body of naval officers who are trying to arrive at the truth concerning the best methods of conducting war. . . . The basis of its methods of research is discussion. This discussion is free and frank. . . . The War College is a team.” Contrasting the traditional method of command in which “the old man” made a decision on his own—a characteristic of the heroic leader—the “organized-team” concept promoted an atmosphere in which ideas were raised, discussed, and passed to the commander, who made the final decision based in part on his staff’s work. Concluded Sims, “The conference method develops a real team spirit, and this makes everything else comparatively easy. The officers feel that to them alone—to their team—is due the credit.”18

The Army War College likewise fostered teamwork as an essential feature of modern warfare. Extolling the
virtues of joint effort for the General Staff as Sims did for the Navy, Major George C. Marshall lectured the college in 1922 about what makes a general staff officer, a position for which the college prepared students. He suggested that the Army needed the spirit of “perfect cooperation” and “a sympathetic understanding with the other elements of the Army. . . . The success of the War Department General Staff, however, is believed to depend primarily on the diligent efforts of its membership to promote a spirit of cooperation and, most important of all, to develop and maintain a sympathetic attitude of understanding with the services and line of the Army.” A successful commander is “aware of the vital importance of maintaining a spirit of good will and generous understanding among the officers of the command. He realizes the battle cannot be won without an harmonious, united effort.” An Army leader had to listen, understand, and work with his colleagues, skills that were taught and practiced by students both in Washington and Newport.

Although both Sims and Marshall emphasized the need to work with one’s own service, they taught a way of working within groups, including interservice groups. Within this framework of the applicatory system, students and faculty alike explored the possibilities and systemic shortcomings of joint operations within the War and Navy Departments. Krueger—who instructed at both colleges during the interwar period—taught that should the two services not formalize the issues of command in joint operations, they “must have a common, definite understanding of their respective functions in national defense and of the best method for attaining coordination in operations. . . . They must speak the same language.” This ability came in large part from PME offering a formal setting in which to analyze, discuss, and provide solutions via the applicatory method. Reflecting on joint operations in SWPA, Krueger told the Armed Forces Staff College in 1947, “Many problems arising during the operations themselves, due to conflicting demands that seemed incapable of adjustment, required much time, energy, and patience for solution . . . clearly [indicating] the vital necessity of close
and sympathetic understanding . . . of the powers, limitations, and requirements of the other services.”21

With applicatory instruction in advanced PME, it was no longer expected that leaders such as Shafter would by themselves formulate battle plans based on their own experience and expertise in complex joint operations. No longer was the individualistic and heroic leader the ideal. Instead, officers collectively analyzed issues from a broader vantage point, seeking inputs from sister-service counterparts. With the rise of the managerial style—introduced in part via PME—the commanders of SWPA defaulted to skills they acquired at the war colleges. Within a cooperative framework, they first analyzed the problem before planning and finally executing, perhaps not even recognizing that the frontier individualism of the old Army epitomized by Shafter had passed. The managerial style of leadership that allowed cooperation to work at all is what explains the success of joint operations in SWPA.

Being military managers allowed SWPA leaders to function on the operational level without a unified command structure or a history of joint doctrine. While the personal characteristics of Krueger, Kinkaid, and Kenney resembled those of Shafter and Sampson, their ability to settle personal and professional differences during both planning and operations by conference, letter, radio, and telephone demonstrated the degree to which the managerial style had overtaken the senior military leadership. Facing the complexity of joint operations in the absence of a unified task force commander, the Army, Navy, and air commanders resorted to the techniques of analyzing problems and decisionmaking they employed in the war colleges in the interwar period. The managerial style thus played its biggest role in SWPA in how the service commanders thought and solved problems. It was not doctrine, knowledge, or organization that played the decisive factor, but rather a mental outlook.

**NOTES**

3 Ibid., 22.
7 Walter Krueger, letter to Oscar W. Griswold, February 14, 1947, Krueger Papers, box 11, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY.
9 Ibid., 137.
12 Ibid., 159.
13 Walter Krueger, letter to Daniel E. Barbey, March 26, 1944, Krueger Papers, box 7, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY.
15 Ibid., 70–71.
16 Stephen B. Luce, address to Naval War College, 1896, Naval War College Archives, Record Group I.