

B-29 bombers operated from bases in Pacific against mainland Japan

By THOMAS ALEXANDER HUGHES

A General Airman

MILLARD HARMON AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC IN WORLD WAR II

U.S. Air Force

Last summer's forced resignations of U.S. Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne and Chief of Staff T. Michael Moseley scratched old scabs produced by decades of contention between the Air Force and the Nation's wider military establishment. Disputes over the proper role of airpower predate the court-martial of Billy Mitchell in 1925. In the years since, these arguments have been marked by transcendent issues, such as the command and control of aircraft, and matters more idiosyncratic to time and place, such as the pattern and practice of Air Force procurement programs. Setting aside whatever may be the relative merits in this most recent flap, the stewards of the Nation's air arm and those of the Department of Defense have been at this debate for a long time, sometimes with depressing results.

One indication of the persistent ebb in these relations is the dearth of Air Force representation among U.S. geographic combatant

commanders. Since the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act in 1986, these officers have been the senior military men most responsible for fighting the Nation's wars. From that time, only three Air Force officers have held these vital positions, a scarcity that extends back to the birth of the Air Force in 1947. In fact, from that time to now, many dozens of Army, Navy, and Marine Corps officers have occupied these powerful positions while fewer than a handful of these commanders have come from the ranks of the Air Force.¹

Parochial Service interests might explain some of this imbalance. One recent attempt to assign an Air Force officer to a geographic combatant command illustrates how Service prerogatives have torpedoed Airmen's chances for these influential posts. In 2004, President George W. Bush nominated General Gregory Martin, USAF, to lead U.S. Pacific Command, long a bastion of Navy admirals. General Martin was supremely qualified for

the job, not only possessing the expertise of his Service but also blessed with the comprehensive mind required of a joint force leader. Once in the Senate, however, his nomination crashed against the shoals of Navy interests. Senators with close ties to the Navy seized upon Martin's passing association with the ill-fated scheme to lease aerial tankers from the Boeing Corporation, dooming his chance for selection. Shortly thereafter, yet another admiral assumed command in Hawaii, as they had since before World War II. Martin's stillborn chance was remarkable not for its outcome—for the Air Force is often left the odd man out when it comes to these jobs—but for how close he came to command. Most Airmen never get anywhere near a Presidential nomination for a geographic combatant command.

Dr. Thomas Alexander Hughes is a Faculty Member in the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies at Air University.

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 2009	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A General Airman: Millard Harmon and the South Pacific in World War II		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER			
		5b. GRANT NUMBER			
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER			
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER			
		5e. TASK NUMBER			
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 260 Fifth Ave SW (BG 64) Fort Lesley J McNair, Washington, DC, 20319		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER			
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)			
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)			
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	Same as Report (SAR)	7	

Becoming an Airman

If examples of Airmen as true geographic combatant commanders are few and far between, some flyers have served brilliantly in billets requiring expertise in more than air matters and in jobs where obligations ran well past narrowly construed Service interests of any color or hue. One such officer was Lieutenant General Millard F. “Miff” Harmon, the senior Army Air Forces officer serving in an Army—not an air forces—billet during World War II, whose service has hidden in the shadows for far too long. His younger brother Hubert, the first superintendent of the Air Force Academy and namesake of the school’s Harmon Hall, has garnered most of the family’s name recognition. But the older Harmon’s service was every bit as illuminating.

Born into an Army family in 1888, Miff Harmon graduated from West Point in 1912, entered the Infantry, and served in the Philippines, which was the proving ground for so many of the Nation’s bright young Army officers in the early 20th century. In 1916, he transferred to the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps and was a pilot in the Punitive Expedition into Mexico, making him among the first few American aviators to serve in combat. During World War I, he was in France as the Assistant Chief of the

Harmon was a pilot in the Punitive Expedition into Mexico, making him among the first American aviators to serve in combat

Air Service, in which capacity he certified William “Billy” Mitchell as a Junior Military Aviator. Later, he worked by Mitchell’s side planning the seminal American air offensives of 1918 and with Edgar Gorrell on the latter’s famous airpower survey of World War I.

Harmon filled key air posts in the years between the world wars. In the mid 1920s, he was the commanding officer of the Air Corps’ flying school at March Field, where he oversaw the flight training of such later luminaries as Hoyt Vandenberg, Nathan Twining, Haywood Hansell, and Curtis LeMay. In the 1930s, he commanded both a pursuit and bomb group and served as the inaugural commander of Barksdale Field in Louisiana. Later that decade, he was the Assistant Commandant of the Air Corps Tactical School, where he was the de facto chief curriculum officer.

In 1940, he was among a handful of officers that the air arm chief, General Henry “Hap” Arnold, sent to England to glean lessons from the aerial Battle of Britain. Harmon did this job to such satisfaction that in the summer of 1941 Arnold promoted him to major general and tapped him to lead the Army Air Forces’ Air Combat Command, making Harmon the senior combat airman in the country. For the 6 months after Pearl Harbor, Harmon was Arnold’s chief of staff in Washington, putting in 18-hour days as airmen strived to bring order to chaos, to begin building the air forces from perhaps 75,000 men to more than a million, and to get scarce planes and precious pilots to the four corners of the globe.

Harmon was by then an airman through and through, comfortable within the fraternity of pilots and acculturated to the canon of air doctrine. As early as World War I, he believed it essential that air operations be directed by an airman whose authority in the air war should override that of the most senior generals responsible for the ground fight. In the 1930s, he championed the concept of centralized command and decentralized execution of air operations, many years before Field Manual 100–20, *Command and Employment of Air Power*, made it a central battle cry for airmen. While in England during the Battle of Britain, he criticized the Royal Air Force’s nighttime bombing operations, believing the American doctrine of daylight precision raids would have yielded far better results. And in an essay laying out an educational scheme for airmen that later became the basis for an independent Air Force’s entire system of professional military education, he believed the Nation’s air arm was destined either to achieve “parity with the Army and Navy in the scheme of National Defense or absorb them one or both.”²

But he never became a zealot in the interwar years’ heated skirmishes over airpower, maintaining instead a discriminating advocacy for military aviation. He had witnessed how the austere desert had wreaked havoc on the men and machines of the Punitive Expedition, and forever after trained a skeptical eye on some of the more fantastic claims being made for airpower. In the early 1930s, he mocked the notion that air war had mitigated age-old matters such as weather and logistics. “It is difficult to understand how adequate bases are to make flying in bad weather any less difficult,” he wrote in response to one prominent Air Corps treatise,

adding “surely an air force, like any other force, can be defeated by stopping its supplies or replacements.” When the same text claimed the marvel of modern airplanes had made the men who flew them “inferior in importance,” Harmon decried the fanciful “exactitudes” of contemporary air concepts, writing, “A note of caution should be sounded against the too ardent adoption of peace time theories and hypothesis.”³

Harmon championed the integrative nature of airpower as an alternative to these views. When in the early 1930s the bomber mafia and its notions of autonomy gained ascendancy, he clung to a belief, first articulated in World War I, that success in the air war sometimes required “as close a cooperation with the infantry as possible.” Likewise, his student paper while at the Army War College had argued for the “closest cooperation and the most efficient coordination of effort between the Army and Navy” if the United States should ever confront large-scale maritime war. Later, while serving as the Assistant Commandant of the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, Harmon played a key part in restoring balance among the bombing, pursuit, and attack courses, even orchestrating close air support exercises with the Infantry School at nearby Fort Benning. This last endeavor earned him a rebuke from Arnold, who, from his perch as Chief of the Air Corps, warned Harmon his curriculum reforms threatened to transform the tactical course “from an air to a ground school.”⁴

Despite this chiding, Harmon remained committed to most of the important airpower orthodoxies of the day, which saved him the ignominy suffered by iconoclast nonconformists such as Claire Chennault. By 1941, he was a Hap Arnold confidant, an Ira Eaker writing cohort, and a Carl Spaatz poker partner. According to Grandison Gardner, Harmon’s

Harmon remained committed to the important airpower orthodoxies of the day, which saved him from the ignominy suffered by nonconformists such as Chennault

boss at the Air Corps Tactical School in the late 1930s, Harmon was one of two officers whom Arnold leaned on the most in those crucial years before World War II; the other

was Spaatz. When war came to this greatest generation of airmen, Harmon was among the handful of senior pilots primed to contribute in the approaching air war.⁵

Island-hopping in the South Pacific

Then the war exercised its own prerogative. In the summer of 1942, it sent Harmon to the far end of the world to be commanding general of U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific Ocean Areas, working for Admiral William Halsey. The move made Harmon the senior air forces officer serving as an Army general in a combat zone. His unusual appointment stemmed from concerns of both Soldiers and airmen in Washington about the conduct of operations in an overwhelmingly naval theater. When he took up his post in Noumea, New Caledonia, for instance, the South Pacific joint staff of 103 included just 3 Army or Army Air Forces officers and 100 naval and Marine men—all of whom were clamoring for Army Air Forces’ B-17s to conduct maritime reconnaissance. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall wanted Harmon to leave this staff with Army acumen, and Hap Arnold agreed to part with his trusted assistant to ensure a more appropriate use than patrol for the powerful and still-too-few B-17s. Technically, Harmon’s orders conferred to him only administrative control of all Army and air forces units in the South Pacific—a command that eventually numbered over 100,000—but the idiosyncrasies of the South Pacific theater offered ample opportunity for forceful commanders to stretch toward tactical and operational control of combat forces.⁶

This is just what Harmon did, especially as that control related to the ground fight. He arrived in theater a week before the battle for Guadalcanal began on August 7, and he understood earlier than many the meaning of that colossal struggle. Almost immediately he pushed for a clear-minded focus on Guadalcanal operations. He waged a lonely staff battle to eliminate a supplemental landing planned for the small island of Ndeni, a move he argued would free up the 147th Infantry Regiment for important tasks on Guadalcanal. When difficult conditions on Guadalcanal persisted well into October, Halsey cancelled the Ndeni invasion and sent the 147th to the main fight on Guadalcanal, where it played a decisive role clearing space for a crucial airfield.

To meet the continuing crisis on Guadalcanal, in November Harmon lobbied General Marshall in Washington and Admiral Chester Nimitz in Honolulu for the 25th Infantry Division, which was in Hawaii and tentatively slated for General Douglas MacArthur’s invasion of Papua New Guinea. Having won the division’s release over MacArthur’s objections, Harmon then sent it directly to Guadalcanal, bypassing an intermediate stop in Noumea where Army officers had planned a more orderly introduction to combat. Redirecting an entire combat division while at sea was a risk that drew a sharp cable from Marshall to Harmon. In it, the Army chief did not “propose to question your decision as to the tactical utilization of forces under your command,” but he did want to remind Harmon of the peril inherent in landing a large force “in an area where security is questionable and port facilities practically non-existent.” Yet the division, led by Major General Joe Collins, reached Guadalcanal safely, raising both the morale and the fight of the Americans just as the last of the major Japanese reinforcements to the island arrived.⁷

Impressed by Harmon’s keen judgment, in December Halsey rewarded the airman with “direct authority over tactical operations” on Guadalcanal, which in effect placed Harmon in operational command of the XIV Corps, comprised of elements of the 25th and 43^d Divisions. In the years after World War II, much would be made of General George Patton’s rhetorical offer in 1944 of a ground division for his air commander, the redoubtable O.P. Weyland. Two full years before those famous events on the Normandy plain, however, another remarkable airman had combat control of an entire Army corps—and nearly all of the fighting ground forces—in the most crucial offensive then being waged by Americans in any theater of the war.⁸

In February 1943, Harmon earned his third star, relinquished control of the fading fight on Guadalcanal to Major General Alexander Patch, and commenced planning the invasions of the New Georgia and Bougainville island groups, farther up the Solomons chain and closer to the South Pacific’s ultimate objective of Rabaul. Command arrangements for these operations were muddled, providing yet more opportunity for Harmon as an Army general. For instance, although Halsey nearly always served as the overall commander as

well as the Navy component commander, the respective invasion, ground, and air commanders were often different for each island campaign. Because operations on one island exerted operational influences on those of another, Halsey needed someone to act as his de facto deputy for the air and ground operations throughout the theater. As his confidence in Harmon grew, Halsey increasingly looked to the airman to fill this role.

Although he was serving in an unanticipated and wholly unprecedented capacity, Harmon did not shirk his responsibilities as

Halsey needed someone to act as his de facto deputy for the air and ground operations throughout the theater

a ground forces leader. When in the summer of 1943 the fight on New Georgia stalled, Harmon recommended the relief of the ground commander, Major General John Hester of the 43^d Division, a move that the invasion commander, Rear Admiral Kelly Turner, vigorously opposed. Halsey sided with Harmon, not only replacing Hester with Major General Oscar Griswold but also directing Harmon to “assume full charge of and responsibility for ground operations in New Georgia.” Hester’s relief earned Halsey a hurried note from Nimitz, who worried about inter-Service discord, but as Halsey had relied



LTG Millard F. Harmon, USAAF

on the recommendation of his Army commander Miff Harmon, he did not think the Navy open to harsh critique and indeed not much materialized. Later, in the fall of 1943, Harmon's misgivings about the planning for the invasion of Bougainville led him to again recommend to Halsey the relief of a ground commander, this time Marine Major General Charles Barrett, an intention that may have contributed to Barrett's probable suicide on October 7 in Noumea.⁹

A General in Name and Practice

These were tough times. The war's outcome was not yet clear, the South Pacific fight was brutal, Barrett's death was tragic, and the cruel combat on those remote islands would ruin more careers before the war moved on to other battlefields. In fact, when Halsey reflected about the South Pacific after the war, he recalled that "the smoke of charred reputations still makes me cough." But the Japanese were yet too strong—and the stakes to America far too high—to excuse poor performance or tolerate mediocrity. In the end, the Army's official historians praised Halsey for his prompt attention to all manner of challenges in the ground war, which was in their judgment "a mark of the efficiency of the South Pacific command."¹⁰

It was also a matter of Miff Harmon's contributions. Neither Bill Halsey nor any of the admirals who ran the South Pacific were adept at ground operations, and they relied heavily on the senior Army officer in the area. Nimitz himself once praised Harmon as a "first-rate selection" for the difficult South Pacific assignment. In this role Harmon was not perfect, however. He tended to meddle in the fine details of subordinate commands, a habit common among the airmen who had come from the small prewar Air Corps and who were unaccustomed to the workings of large organizations. Moreover, Harmon's own staff, initially overpopulated with air officers, struggled at first to conceive, plan, and direct ground operations. But in the South Pacific's early months Harmon grew and learned. His incessant preaching about hygiene and health in the trenches, something he had learned as a young infantryman, earned him credibility with rank-and-file grunts—and his devotion to joint planning, a conviction honed during an interwar teaching tour at the Army War College, purchased for him latitude to discover the art of ground warfare.¹¹

All officers, if they become senior enough, confront unfamiliar horizons. This was Harmon's moment, and while in it he displayed an uncanny capacity to know when and to whom he should listen, and to know when to accept counsel and when to rely on his own sense. He was blessed with strong ground commanders, including Alexander Patch and two future Service chiefs—Archie Vandegrift of the Marines and Joe Collins of the Army. He wisely deferred to their judgment on many occasions. He also managed to reach difficult decisions about those less able to perform in the Solomons' harsh environment. Not once, not twice, but three times he redirected the movement of divisions or regiments afloat, each time against the advice of more experienced ground officers. Army historians later characterized these gutsy calls as "decisive," "inspired," and "brilliant," crediting the adjustments with helping turn the tide on Guadalcanal and assuring success in battles on New Georgia and Bougainville. From nearly his first day in the South Pacific, Harmon recognized that he was a general in both name and practice. The Nation asked no other officer of similar rank to stretch quite as far in quite the same way. In the process, Harmon managed to become something more than that from which he had come.¹²

Curiously, Harmon met with less direct success supervising the air war, the task for which he had spent a lifetime in preparation. When he first arrived in theater, seven of his nine staff cadre came from the air forces, including Frank Everest, Dean Strother, and Nathan Twining, a future Chief of Staff of the Air Force and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Such a staff was a clear sign that Harmon "intended to uphold the interests of the Army Air Forces in this predominately [sic] naval area." This proved difficult, partly because the Navy and Marine Corps had strong airmen of their own in the South Pacific, such as John McCain, Marc Mitscher, and Roy Geiger. Their collective excellence meant less opportunity for Harmon to extend his administrative responsibilities to operational and tactical command, no matter

how much he worried about naval and Marine sensibilities regarding aviation.¹³

Accordingly, Harmon turned to organizational matters, aiming to gain what responsibility he could for the conduct of the air war. He convinced Arnold that a numbered air force in the South Pacific would better align the air arm's organization with Navy structures and further airmen's interests. When in December 1942 the Thirteenth Air Force stood up, Harmon placed Twining at its head and pushed

South Pacific air commands were hybrid organizations, being both joint and combined and comprised of assets from the Navy, Marine Corps, and Army, as well as New Zealand

to rotate operational command of the air war among the Services. Eventually, Twining took his turn in that role, as did Harmon's younger brother, Hubert. These South Pacific air commands (first the improvised Cactus Air Force and later the more formal Air Solomons

U.S. Army Center of Military History



MG Harmon (right) discusses Guadalcanal campaign with BG Nathan Twining

Command and Air Solomons Command North) were hybrid organizations, being both joint and combined and comprised of assets from the Navy, Marine Corps, and Army, as well as from New Zealand. The potential for Service interest to detract these units from their primary task was great, and the rotational policy of command was one ingredient making possible their dogged attention to the more immediate and pressing matter of besting the Japanese in the air.

In fact, these were among the most successful air commands in all of World War II. Far from home, at the short end of logistical and strategic lines of communication, South Pacific airmen of every branch worked effectively to turn the tide of battle. For months, the fight there pitted relatively equitable ground and sea forces against each other, leaving airpower to arbitrate who would win and who would lose. Time and time again, tight ground fights and close naval encounters hung in the balance until aviation weighted the outcome. The Solomons air campaign constitutes a shining example of combined, joint, and effective air campaigning, and today remains an underappreciated and understudied part of the war. Many contributed to this success. If Harmon played a less direct role in the air war

than he wished, as the senior Army Air Forces officer in the South Pacific he possessed the rank and position to broker air-ground differences, smooth the way with the Navy, and create the circumstances whereby subordinate airmen of every Service and individual pilots in cockpits could do what they did.

Harmon did intervene personally where he was able. Like Arnold in Washington, he disagreed with naval plans to use precious B-17s for maritime patrol in the South Pacific, worried about diverting these powerful weapons from their primary task over the skies of Germany. So in the fall of 1942, Harmon embarked on an aggressive airfield construction program throughout the theater, aiming to better position shorter legged naval patrol planes for reconnaissance duties. These airfields, which required scarce resources to build, also enabled the offensive use of bombers up the Solomon Islands chain, a fact that irked George Marshall, who had sent Harmon to conduct a defensive campaign consistent with the Nation's strategic orientation toward Europe. But Harmon pressed forward. The matter of proper bomber employment was the subject of dozens of official memorandums, staff studies, personal letters, and diary entries. In the 2 years he served in the

South Pacific, Harmon probably devoted as much time trying to preserve the strategic use of bombers as he spent on any issue, and was persistently willing to court the ire of his Navy and Army superiors in so doing.¹⁴

Harmon did not always do the air forces' bidding. George Marshall and Hap Arnold had sent the airman to the Pacific with different marching orders, and once there Harmon found himself harnessed to a largely naval command that ran through Halsey to Nimitz in Hawaii and on to Admiral Ernest King in Washington. So while Harmon had responsibilities to both airmen and Soldiers subordinate to him, he also had sometimes competing obligations to superiors—to Halsey and the immediate fight in the Solomons, to Marshall and the Army in Washington, and to Arnold and the legions of airmen prosecuting the air war around the globe. These were all people of goodwill with a common commitment to the Nation, but each brought particular interests and beliefs to bear in his judgment about how, when, and with what resources to prosecute the war. Successful officers in Harmon's circumstance reconciled these influences, made them congruent when possible, and balanced them effectively otherwise. Whether he appreciated it or not, no other condition of his service indicated better that he had indeed become a senior commander.

If Harmon's dogged stewardship of the South Pacific bombers heartened Arnold, his pursuit of P-38 fighter planes to replace his commands' aging P-39s annoyed his air boss. Harmon believed the newer planes were necessary to combat the agile Japanese Zero, while Arnold—who had his own obligations to prioritize the fight in Europe—felt the older planes were “good enough for fighting the Japanese.” Undaunted, Harmon pressed his request within Navy channels, first through Halsey and ultimately via Nimitz, who, in Arnold's words, then “took up Harmon's battle cry and shouted to high heaven until every brass hat in Washington heard the echo.” Harmon got his P-38s, but at a cost. “Tell General Arnold it won't be long now before I am wearing bell bottom trousers,” he wrote to a friend on the Air Staff in an effort to both explain his position and maintain his standing among pilots. “Of course, it's a bit tough at times not to be operating one's bombers and to listen to a Navy chap talking about 'my B-17s,' but everything goes as long as we lick the Japs.” Arnold, who believed that



LTG Harmon (right) confers with (left to right) MG Richard Sutherland, ADM Chester Nimitz, and VADM Robert Ghormley during Solomons campaign

U.S. Naval Historical Center

“success in the Pacific Theater will not win the war” elsewhere, was not so sure.¹⁵

Arnold and Harmon, friends of 30 years’ standing, never quite found the sweet spot where their respective obligations might find equilibrium. As the South Pacific fight waned in the summer of 1944, the air chief reassigned Harmon as the commanding general of all Army Air Forces units in the entire Pacific. This affirmation of confidence was more apparent than it was real. The job made Harmon, among others things, Curtis LeMay’s proximal boss in the strategic air campaign against Japan, although the position conferred, once again, only administrative and logistical authority. Unhappy with the Navy’s stranglehold on the conduct of the Pacific war, and perhaps wary of Harmon’s close working ties with Halsey and Nimitz, Arnold had decided to retain operational control of LeMay’s Twentieth Air Force and its air war over Japan.

This unusual arrangement meant that LeMay’s planes would operate administratively and logistically within Harmon’s area of responsibility, yet report operationally to Arnold, sitting in Washington and well outside the theater. At the same time, the Navy would continue to exercise its own

perhaps wary of Harmon’s close ties with Halsey and Nimitz, Arnold decided to retain operational control of LeMay’s Twentieth Air Force and its air war over Japan

privilege in the area, as would the ground Army, and Harmon would report not only to Arnold but also to Nimitz. Arnold knew well the straits in which all this promised to place Harmon. “If you find it beyond your capacity to reconcile these conflicting loyalties,” he wrote Harmon in June 1944, “then I shall expect you to acquaint me with that fact; and if I find that my interests are not being adequately cared for, I shall not hesitate to resolve this difficulty by relieving you of further responsibility as my deputy.”¹⁶

As the senior air general in the Pacific, Harmon spent many months productively building the massive airstrips the new B-29s required for their assault on Japan. In December 1944, Nimitz greatly expanded Harmon’s authority, giving him operational command

of all land-based Navy and Marine planes as well as portions of the Seventh Air Force. Still, direct command of the Air Force’s strategic bombers eluded him, and Harmon struggled with LeMay, 18 years and one grade in rank his junior, over the boundaries of their respective powers. This was especially true as it related to control of the Twentieth’s escort fighters. Binding the fighters to the sole role of B-29 escort duty, Harmon feared, would render them “frozen” for the many other tasks in the Pacific when the bombers were not striking Japan. LeMay pushed back, insisting he “must have absolute operational control of the fighters” for the penultimate strategic air campaign of the war. It was a thorny situation, one that Arnold in Washington appeared disinclined to resolve, prompting the air forces’ official historians to claim Harmon had “one of the most difficult and complex assignments of the war.”¹⁷

To force a break in this and other jurisdictional problems, Harmon headed to Washington in February 1945. Girding for a fight, one air staff colonel encouraged LeMay not to take “bull from anyone, I don’t care who he is,” adding, “You probably know that General Harmon is coming here. We don’t know what all he is going to raise, but [we are] fully prepared.” Arnold’s precise thoughts are not known—and were likely more nuanced than a colonel’s convictions—but people on his staff surely believed that Harmon and other flyers in the Pacific “have been blinded by star-dust” and were “probably too old to cure.” As Harmon saw it, however, in this dispute he was merely advocating a command setup that would best enable both the flexibility and versatility of the Twentieth’s fighter planes. He, and not LeMay, occupied the doctrinal high ground.¹⁸

Legacy Lost in the Shuffle

It is hard to know who was right and who was wrong in all this. Just as George Marshall, Hap Arnold, and Bill Halsey had placed overlapping demands upon Harmon’s loyalties in the South Pacific, elements completely within the air arm now competed for his allegiance. If it was a difficult circumstance, Harmon was a seasoned officer whose rank required that he solve or at least manage these irritants. LeMay surely had the cleaner command task: to push with single-minded intensity the strategic airstrikes against Japan, a duty for which he possessed a special talent. For his part, Arnold’s position in Washington offered a horizon that extended beyond the

war to legitimate matters of postwar defense structure and air arm autonomy, making him perhaps less sensitive to matters still festering within the war at hand. As for Harmon, it was not the first and would not be the last time war placed a senior commander between a rock and a hard spot.¹⁹

How well Arnold, Harmon, and LeMay together might have navigated these complexities will never be known. On his way to Washington in February, Harmon’s plane was lost at sea. The largest air-sea rescue and recovery effort of the entire war failed to find as much as a rivet. Harmon’s body was never found. A year later, he was declared dead, along with the others aboard, including Brigadier General James Andersen, for whom Guam’s Andersen Air Force Base is named.

after the war, the Army and Navy had their own heroes to memorialize, and Harmon’s joint Service legacy poorly fit the needs of a newly independent Air Force

Harmon got considerably less recognition. Despite his contributions in World War II, he appears in only the most detailed of books and it is his little brother’s name that graces buildings at the Air Force Academy. Harmon’s untimely death surely accounts for some of this amnesia; the rush of wartime events left little time to commemorate individuals. But there is more to the continuing silence that surrounds Miff Harmon’s career. After the war, the Army and Navy had their own heroes to memorialize, and Harmon’s joint Service legacy poorly fit the needs of a newly independent Air Force. Through much of the Cold War, the Air Force focused on its important stewardship of an autonomous atomic mission, so when this most forward-looking of the Services remembered World War II at all, it heralded flyers such as Jimmy Doolittle, Carl Spaatz, and Curtis LeMay. These and others were great airmen, worthy of enduring emulation.

Harmon deserves his place in this pantheon. One of the few reminders of his career is a building named for him at Maxwell Air Force Base. It is there, at Maxwell’s Air University, home today for all Air Force officer education, where Harmon’s service can begin to teach a new generation of Airmen. Early

in his career Harmon came to believe that air war was an integral part of general war. Later, his World War II service underscored the imperative for airmen to be versed in all aspects of war if they hoped to command operations beyond the aerial fight. Yet today, Air University does not champion the integrative nature of airpower. A far better educational institution than its critics acknowledge, its classrooms nonetheless still aim to delineate the manner by which airpower changes war—which it certainly does—when they should strive to teach how airpower has become part of war—which it certainly is. To this day, the inspiration for its curriculum and aspiration for its students remain air war and air component command. In the past 10 years, four Air War College commandants have proclaimed as their primary intent to get—or return—the “air” into the college. Air generals have trumpeted the Air Command and Staff College as the “Cathedral of Air Power.” And each school at Air University has vied to claim the proud heritage of the Air Corps Tactical School as their own, even though the Tactical School was always more concerned with air combat than with general war, and today would be as analogous to the Weapons School at Nellis Air Force Base as any school at Air University.²⁰

Air University should—indeed, must—advocate air war and teach its associated competencies. But it ought to do so in a tone more befitting the heritage of Miff Harmon, who once told a friend that the 1930s focus on bombardment at the Tactical School “irked me to no end,” not because he did not share a faith in the idea but because it brokered an ignorance of airpower more broadly considered and of war more widely understood. Harmon did not see air war and general war as subtractive elements, where emphasis on one led to a diminution of the other. If this was a notion of limited appeal to a new Air Force consolidating its independence, it should be a proposition of wide allure to a more mature air arm. Already, an Air University student has produced a very fine Master’s thesis extolling Harmon. But the school must do more to educate Airmen in the comprehensive relationship between air war and war. Perhaps it might even aspire for its students something beyond air component command.²¹

The enduring scarcity of Air Force generals in joint or combined command has

convinced many Airmen that Beltway politics and Service parochialism have conspired against them. But this condition might also be attributable to how the Air Force nurtures and develops its own. It is time for Airmen to examine that possibility as well. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Of the six geographic combatant commands, only U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) is currently led by an Airman, General Victor Renuart. Over the past 60 years, only three other Air Force officers have led any of these organizations or their antecedents: General Lauris Norstad (U.S. European Command, 1956–1963), General Joseph Ralston (U.S. European Command, 2000–2003), and General Ralph Eberhart (USNORTHCOM, 2002–2004). The Air Force has fared better filling the functional commands. Of these, Airmen have on single occasions led U.S. Special Forces Command and U.S. Joint Forces Command, have always led U.S. Transportation Command or its antecedents, and nearly always U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) or its predecessors. Recently, however, Airmen’s hold on USSTRATCOM, the descendant of General Curtis LeMay’s vaunted Strategic Air Command, has weakened. Navy admirals and Marine generals led the organization during 1994–1996 and 1998–2007.

² Millard F. Harmon, “Preliminary Rough Draft on Policy for Future Military Education of Air Corps Officers,” 245.04B, Air Force Historical Research Agency (HRA).

³ “Criticism of Air Corps Tactical School Text ‘Air Force,’” memorandum, 248.126–4, HRA, March 14, 1936.

⁴ Millard F. Harmon, “Notes of Trip to the French Front in the Region of Chalons sur-Marne, June 1917,” Millard Harmon Papers, 168.604–6, HRA, 7–8; Arnold to Harmon, February 1, 1940, Millard Harmon Papers, 168.604–11A, HRA.

⁵ Grandison Gardner, *Life Memories of Grandison Gardner*, 160, HRA.

⁶ Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, vol. IV, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan August 1942 to July 1944* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1950), 32, available at <www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/IV/index.html>. Harmon first reported to Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, but spent the bulk of his time in the South Pacific working for Halsey.

⁷ Cable, Marshall to Harmon, December 8, 1942, Millard Harmon Papers, 750.161–1, HRA.

⁸ John Miller, Jr., *U.S. Army in World War II: Guadalcanal, The First Offensive* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1995), 174, 232.

⁹ Louis Morton, *U.S. Army in World War II: Strategy and Command, the First Two Years* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1962),

509; Millard F. Harmon, “The Army in the South Pacific,” report, June 6, 1944, Millard Harmon Papers, 750.04A, HRA; Nimitz to Halsey, and Halsey to Nimitz, August 8 and August 19, 1943, William Halsey Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ William F. Halsey and J. Bryan III, *Admiral Halsey’s Story* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2008), 161; Morton, *U.S. Army in World War II*, 509.

¹¹ Nimitz to John McCain, July 27, 1942, Chester Nimitz Papers, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center.

¹² Samuel B. Griffith II, *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 142, Morton, *U.S. Army in World War II*, 509.

¹³ Louis Morton, “Pacific Command: A Study in Interservice Relations,” *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History* Number 3, 139, available at <www.usafa.af.mil/df/dfh/harmonmemorial.cfm>.

¹⁴ Harmon’s personal papers at the HRA contain many examples.

¹⁵ Henry Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), 337, 343; Harmon to Laurence Kuter, September 11, 1942, L/C Box 88, 8.59, Murray Green Collection, U.S. Air Force Academy Special Collections.

¹⁶ Arnold to Harmon, June 6, 1944, 750.041–A, Millard Harmon Papers, HRA.

¹⁷ Craven and Cate, 525, 530.

¹⁸ S.A. Rosenblatt to LeMay, January 10, 1945, Curtis LeMay Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Today, the Air Force devotes considerable attention to the nuances of authority, relative prerogatives and mutual obligations of administrative oversight, operational command, and tactical control. Although they did not have the benefit of the subsequent 60 years’ experience with such matters, air arm leaders of World War II struggled with the same issues.

²⁰ The author bases this assertion on 12 years of teaching experience at Air University schools. The university policy of nonattribution precludes naming these officers. Air University is today a far more comprehensive institution than was the Air Corps Tactical School in the interwar years. Still, air war remains its cultural core.

²¹ Harmon to Bart Yount, November 25, 1939, cited in Robert Novotny, “Tarmac to Trenches: Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon” (Master’s thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2007), 38. For more on the remarkable Miff Harmon, see Novotny’s groundbreaking thesis.