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Theater Air Forces

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THEATER AIR FORCES

Staff Presentation by
Lieut. Colonel F. A. Nichols, USAF
at the Naval War College
on 8 October 1951

Gentlemen:

This morning I shall discuss the principles and doctrines of Air Force combat units in the role of support in a *theater* campaign. During the past several years you will remember the controversies going around Washington and the Pentagon about air power. Similarly, I know most of you, at one time or another, have participated in friendly arguments as to which system, the Navy, or the Air Force was the most effective. From my experience and study of the principles and doctrine of the use of air power in a combat theater, I can see no important difference. Possibly the Air Force ideas concerning the use of air power have been misunderstood. I am sure you have heard such remarks as: "This is not a SAC mission" or "First job of Tactical Air Command is to get air superiority, the next thing TAC does is to isolate the battlefield; then it provides close support to Ground Forces." These expressions dogmatically stated and isolated from an overall concept indicate that we, in the Air Force, are advocating a tight compartmentation of our command missions and a rigid adherence to a set of priority of tasks. This is absolutely incorrect.

As you well know, one of the outstanding characteristics of the airplane is its flexibility. To adhere rigidly to a fixed priority of tasks, regardless of the situation, destroys this flexibility. Regardless of the equipment or assignment of a particular air force combat unit, it can, and will be used to aid in accomplishing that

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objective which is of primary importance to the highest authority concerned. During August you were made aware as to the nature of the functions assigned to the Air Force. Attainment of the assigned objectives demands the full utilization of all air power. One cannot arbitrarily label the mission of any combat unit as being either strategic or tactical in nature, therefore one cannot arbitrarily assign "strategic" missions to one command and "tactical" missions to another. A clear cut definition between strategic missions and tactical missions is neither desirable nor possible.

Although the labels "strategic" and "tactical" have been applied to two of our major commands, these titles were arbitrarily chosen and are not intended to connote strict compartmentation of functions. The Strategic Air Command, as it exists today, merely represents the one segment of air power reserved to the specific control of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; it is an organization which can be used either independently or in conjunction with one or more theater commands to achieve the result desired. It not only represents a potent offensive weapon capable of obtaining a decisive result through the progressive destruction of an enemy's war-making capacity, but represents as well, a mobile reserve of air power that can be turned by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the immediate support of any theater overwhelmingly in need of help. In this light, its organizational integrity, of course, must be preserved; however, whether allocated to the Strategic Air Command as we know it, or to some other Air Force unit, heavy and medium bombardment aircraft like all other combat aircraft are flexible. Their flexibility is a vital part of air power.

Now let's discuss in more detail the mission of this part of the Air Force which is organized, trained and equipped to act jointly with Army or Navy forces, or both, in a combat theater.

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This is the mission of a theater air organization.

“During wartime a theater air organization in a theater of operations will execute, either independently or jointly, sustained offensive and defensive air operations aimed at the destruction or neutralization of a critical enemy military force together with its reserves and supplies.”

Here at the Naval War College you will be concerned from time to time during the year with the joint use of Air Force combat units in a theater campaign, thus I will confine my remarks to a discussion of how they can best be employed in support of a theater action. Experience has shown us that there are three general tasks which air power can perform in support of a ground campaign. All, one or any combination of these tasks may constitute a mission of theater air power in support of a particular campaign. These tasks are:

1. The gaining and maintaining of air superiority.
2. Interdiction of the battle area — that is, prevention of enemy movement into and within the battle area.
3. Close support of friendly forces — that is, providing air strikes to assist friendly forces in the immediate zone of contact.

We, in the Air Force, are now attempting, in our instruction of Air Force doctrine to eliminate any misunderstanding as to a set priority in relation to those tasks, thus, I want to emphasize that no particular importance or priority is attached to the order in

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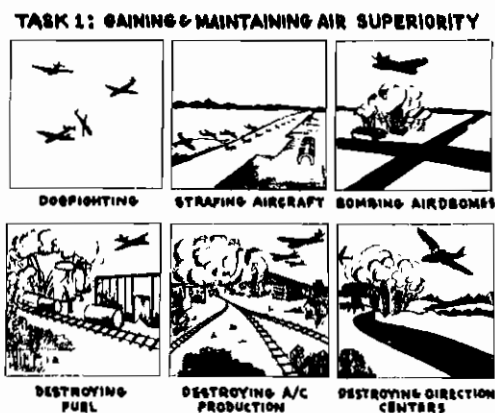
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which these tasks are listed. In the past, these tasks have been referred to both as "phases of tactical air operations" and "priorities of tactical air operations." These were poor terms since they implied a set procedure of operations and have led to erroneous impressions of the proper employment of air power. Performance of any one of these tasks may be the predominant concern of theater air power in a particular campaign, or during some phase of that campaign. In situations such as those experienced in Europe during World War II, changes of emphasis on the tasks occurred almost daily depending on the requirements of the ground campaign. In the present campaign in Korea, we see little, if any, emphasis required or placed on the task of "gaining and maintaining air superiority."

To give you an idea of the capabilities and employment of air power in support of a theater operation, let's look at the first task in a little more detail, the gaining and maintaining of air superiority.

ILLUSTRATION

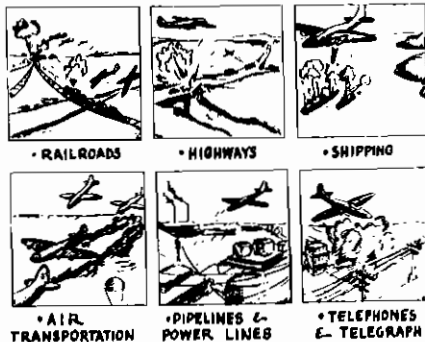
TASK 1



Insuring a satisfactory degree of air superiority is, nor-

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mally, in the vast majority of operations, the first task to accomplish. This task is a major job which may require our entire air strength. Also, it is just as necessary in the support of air operations as in the support of land or sea operations. Heavy and medium bombardment units can and normally will hit the aircraft plants, air fields, and oil distilleries beyond the range of our other aircraft. Air defense units normally will destroy invading enemy aircraft. Fighter-bomber units normally will destroy enemy aircraft in the air or on the ground. Since this task of gaining an acceptable air superiority is normally an initial step in any type of theater action, the Theater Commander can usually be expected to begin his day-to-day plans with considerations for maintaining and even increasing this general air superiority within his theater of operations.

ILLUSTRATION**TASK 2****TASK 2 - INTERDICTION OF THE BATTLE AREA**

The immobilization of the enemy is another task of whole theater air power—not of any compartmented portion of it. Isolation of the battlefield is only a part of the job of interdiction. The

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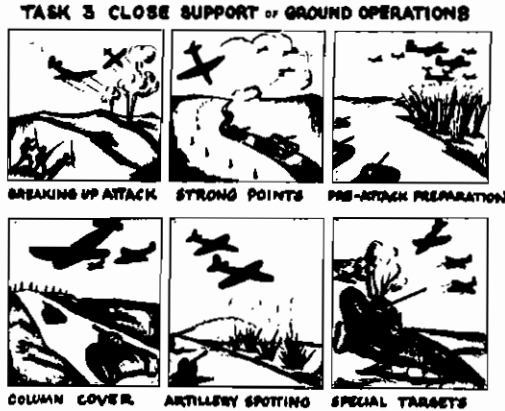
enemy's supply problems begin at the factories where his materials are manufactured and do not end until his supplies are in the hands of his combat soldiers. Preventing the enemy from supplying the battlefield or the airdrome is not a compartmented job assigned solely to one organization. If it were, we would be failing to take maximum advantage of our flexibility.

The job of carrying out long-range missions against the industrial strength of an enemy nation is again one that must be carried out by indivisible air power. If transport aircraft even though assigned to troop carrier units are needed, then they may be used to support this job. If needed, fighter aircraft regardless of assignment will be used to defend heavy bomber bases or to accompany the bombers. All aircraft, light, heavy, Air Force or Navy which are available to the Theater Commander and have the capability of reaching the objective with a useful bombload will be used if necessary.

We believe that the job of carrying out long-range attacks against the heart of the nation will produce the greatest results for the amount of effort. However, we believe that these results would not fall into any one category such as attaining air superiority, interdiction, etc., but rather a task of major contribution of all air power. It extends the paralysis of an enemy's transportation system from the battlefield to the heart of the nation. Enemy forces that cannot move, raw materials that cannot reach the factory, and supplies and equipment that cannot reach the user, military or civilian, are useless. A nation deprived of its means of moving is defeated. Additionally, it could contribute to lowering the will to resist. This is particularly true in cold climates where housing is destroyed. This type of operation, while it might not produce the immediate effect, could be one of more far-reaching and tremendously greater effect.

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ILLUSTRATION
TASK 3



The first question in the theater of operations would be, what units are available for the direct support of ground troops? Again, once the theater decision has been made that this job is of overwhelming importance, all units allocated to the theater commander by the Joint Chiefs of Staff are available whether it be heavy bomber, troop carrier, jet fighter, land or carrier-based. *The priority of operations is determined by the relative importance of all the tasks confronting the theater commander. (I repeat). The priority of operations is determined by the relative importance of all the tasks confronting the theater commander.* Too often, as I mentioned earlier, we overstress the importance of priorities of support missions on a chronological basis — air superiority, interdiction of the battlefield, close support. None of these missions is ever completely accomplished. Too often we create the erroneous impression that we can never isolate the battlefield until we have permanent and complete air superiority; that we never provide close support until we have achieved absolute isolation of the battlefield. This is certainly a mis-conception.

Once the theater decision has been made on the relative

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urgency of the job to be done, the decision as to the weapon to be used depends upon its characteristics, its availability, and its economy. The Army, for instance, does not use heavy artillery when Infantry weapons are available and can do the job; the Navy does not use a battleship when a destroyer is available and can do the job; nor does the Air Force use heavy bombers when fighters are available and can do the job.

The characteristics of the aircraft and other equipment of a unit and the training of the combat crews are designed to meet certain requirements. It is uneconomical to use a weapon in a role for which it is not designed except when the requirements of that role are of overwhelming importance. The destructive and cumulative effects of heavy bomber attacks against the concentrated targets in the interior of a nation are far greater than against the small dispersed targets of the battlefield. Only when the immediate results are of critical importance is it appropriate to divert heavy bombers from their normal role. When this situation does arise, the theater commander concerned will not hesitate to concentrate his available air power as necessity demands.

To briefly summarize, the terms "Strategic" and "Tactical" have been arbitrarily selected to designate certain commands. It is not our purpose in the Air Force to advocate a compartmented type of mission nor to indicate the sole purpose or mission of any unit.

Within the technical limitations of their equipment, all air units have a degree of capability to carry out any mission. The particular combat mission to which a unit is assigned depends upon:

The objectives to be accomplished

The force necessary

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Availability of units

Economy in the use of forces

The flexibility of the force available

The flexibility inherent in the airplane must be utilized to the maximum in order to provide overwhelming force at the place and at the time dictated by the situation.

We believe that only a theater air organization under one control will permit the maximum use of this flexibility.

While the flexibility of the airplane and a correct organization permits massing overwhelming force where needed, the equipment and training of a unit makes it more economical and adaptable to certain missions than to others.

The diversion of long-range bombers to short range missions is profitable only when other forces are unavailable in sufficient numbers to get the desired immediate effect and when that effect is of sufficient importance to the Joint Chiefs of Staff to justify the temporary change of assigned missions.

The strength of air power primarily lies in its flexibility. Compartmentation of tasks and missions subverts the unified effort required to accomplish an objective.

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