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The Air Force Way of War: U.S. Tactics and Training after Vietnam

by Brian D. Laslie.

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Review by Corbin Williamson, Air War College (corbinmwilliamson@gmail.com).

Changes in Air Force training after the Vietnam War were instrumental in forging strategic and tactical airpower into a single force—the Air Combat Command—in the early 1990s. Some scholars[1] have attributed these changes to the work of mid-level officers, dubbed "iron majors." Author Brian Laslie (US Air Force Acad.), however, argues that hitherto unrecognized *senior* officers, especially generals William Momyer and Robert Dixon, played critical roles in making these changes based on their Vietnam War experiences. Specifically, Vietnam demonstrated that the Air Force's early Cold War focus on strategic nuclear warfare and aversion to training accidents created a generation of fighter pilots with inadequate training in air-to-air combat and tactical air support. *The Air Force Way of War* highlights training over the technological developments that made possible advanced aircraft like the F-15, F-16, and A-10 in the 1970s and 1980s.

Laslie begins with the experience of fighter pilots in Vietnam. He contends that Air Force training policies sent them into combat in the mid-1960s with little expertise in vital air-to-air combat and air defense suppression. This training failure led directly to the heavy casualties the Air Force suffered in Vietnam. The priority given in prewar fighter training to bomber escort and nuclear strike preparation reflected the domination of the early Cold War Air Force by Strategic Air Command (SAC). Like Mark Clodfelter,[2] Laslie identifies SAC's preoccupation with preparing for a massive thermonuclear exchange as rendering the Air Force unready to meet the challenges of Vietnam, but with a heavier stress on training deficiencies. That is, Clodfelter seeks to explain the failure of airpower to achieve policy objectives, while Laslie seeks to account for the Air Force's heavy losses in Vietnam. Laslie writes that

> Many pilots, tasked to perform many types of missions [in Vietnam], could not become proficient in any of them. Aircraft designed for one purpose (air-to-air intercepts, nuclear delivery, or deep interdiction) and their crews performed air-to-air missions one day only to be sent against ground targets the next.... Many fighter pilots became jacks of many trades and masters of none. (7)

In response to effective North Vietnamese air defenses, Tactical Air Command (TAC) created single-purpose squadrons, a decision Laslie should have explored in more detail. Did single-role squadrons jibe with airpower advocates' belief in the inherent flexibility of airpower or was the Vietnam case an outlier? As the author demonstrates, beliefs about airpower flexibility also shaped personnel policy. In 1969, Air Force leaders stipulated that pilots would not serve a second tour in Vietnam until every pilot finished a first tour; the thinking was that a pilot trained to fly one type of aircraft would be able to operate a different one. Laslie shows that, to the contrary, pilots trained to fly, say, refueling tankers

1. E.g., C.R. Anderegg, *Sierra Hotel: Flying Air Force Fighters in the Decade after Vietnam* (Washington: Air Force History and Museums Program, US Air Force, 2001).

2. In *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (NY: Free Press, 1989).

or heavy bombers could not easily shift into operating fighter planes in the limited time they were allowed.

After aircraft losses mounted in Vietnam (to over 1,700 by 1973), the Air Force issued a number of reports and studies exhaustively detailing the shortcomings of pre-deployment fighter-pilot preparation and laid the foundation for eventual training changes. But the Air Staff in the Pentagon initially dismissed these findings, for fear of having to admit "overall service inadequacy" (28) and to relinquish preconceived notions about airpower. Laslie notes the effect of the service's relative youth, compared to the Army and Navy, on its willingness to learn from its mistakes.

Laslie analyzes training changes introduced after Vietnam by a series of TAC leaders. Among them were improvements in air-to-air drills, more realistic training exercises, and an emphasis on complementing missiles with gunfire. The Command also assigned each fighter squadron a primary and secondary mission, allowing them to tailor their training to their assigned roles. New "aggressor squadrons," equipped with planes similar in performance to Soviet aircraft, provided practice coping with Soviet-style fighters and tactics.

The best known change came in 1975 with the introduction of the Red Flag exercises. These involved large numbers of aircraft flying different missions in true-to-life training environments. Data from Vietnam suggest that a pilot's odds of surviving a combat tour increased dramatically after ten missions. Red Flag's purpose was to enable pilots to fly those first ten missions in an exercise environment that mirrored combat conditions. The exercises typically lasted two weeks, during which the missions became progressively more difficult. By the 1980s, over a dozen foreign allied air forces as well as US bomber, transport, and refueling units regularly took part in Red Flag. Laslie provides a detailed description of the program's mechanics and the realism built into every stage of the exercises. At the same time, the Air Force began to acquire the new generation F-15 and F-16 fighter-bombers, the A-10 ground attack aircraft, and the F-117 stealth bomber. Laslie describes how Red Flag incorporated each aircraft into its annual exercises.

In his discussion of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the author identifies a new style of air campaign that blended tactical and strategic airpower. Specifically, he traces Col. John Warden's air campaign policy of targeting main Iraqi centers of power. He shows, too, that the Red Flag training program brought real-world American victories in air-to-air combat. By contrast, Laslie condemns SAC for having "the wrong equipment, the wrong mentality, and the wrong grasp on the history of aerial warfare to adequately provide useful contributions to the war" (144–45). In the wake of Desert Storm, the Air Force merged SAC with TAC to create the Air Combat Command, thus eliminating the distinction between tactical and strategic airpower. Laslie sees the merger as the natural culmination of the post-Vietnam training revolution.

Turning to NATO's campaign in the Balkans, Laslie rejects the argument of those who attribute its success to airpower alone[3] and argues that the Balkans air campaign exposed the limitations of the Blue Flag staff and planning exercises: "Blue Flag trained personnel how to conduct a large-scale air campaign but not how to fight a war based on a strategy of attacking targets as they emerged" (169). The Balkans air campaigns also revealed a growing gap between USAF capabilities and training and those of America's NATO allies. In particular, US pilots were more comfortable operating at night, thanks to Red Flag nighttime exercises.

3. See, e.g., John Keegan, "Please, Mr. Blair, Never Take Such a Risk Again," *Daily Telegraph* (6 June 1999), available online – www.miwsr.com/rd/1711.htm.

By placing pilots themselves and their training at the heart of his work, Brian Laslie has produced an exemplary corrective to the typical airplane-centered view of Air Force history.[4] Military historians and personnel as well as interested nonspecialist readers will learn much from his seminal treatment of the "Air Force way of war."

4. See also Craig Felker, *Testing American Sea Power: U.S. Navy Strategic Exercises, 1923–1940* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2007; Albert Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems, 1923–1940* (Newport, RI: Naval War Coll Pr, 2010); and John Lillard, *Playing War: Wargaming Problems and U.S. Navy Preparations for World War II* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2016).