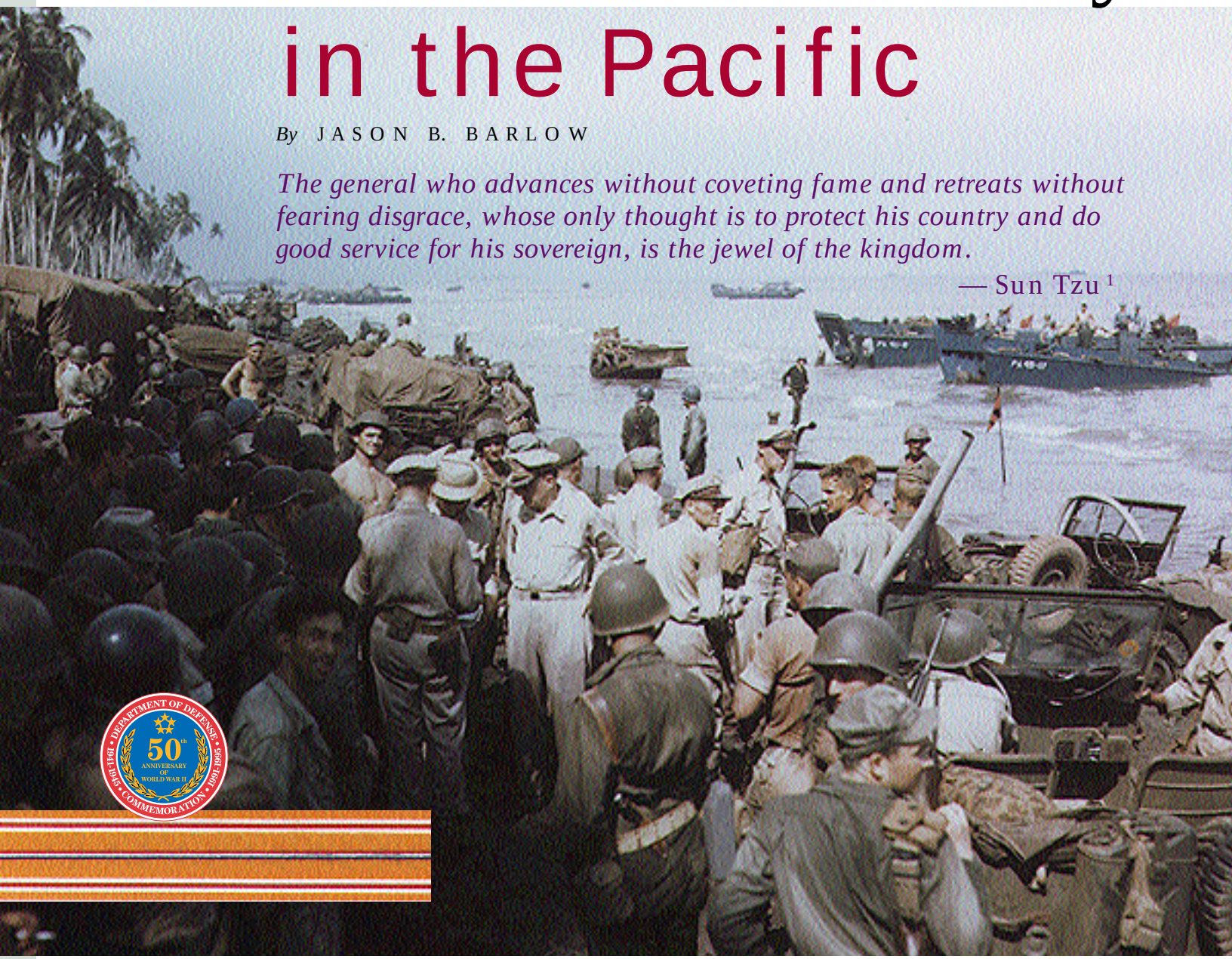
Interservice Rivalry in the Pacific

By JASON B. BARLOW

The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom.

— Sun Tzu [1]



U.S. Navy

General MacArthur inspecting beachhead on Leyte.

It was over fifty years ago that General Douglas MacArthur, on orders from President Franklin Roosevelt to save himself from certain Japanese capture, escaped from Corregidor for Australia. MacArthur's escape and newfound presence in the South Pacific triggered a chain of events that led to one of the more interesting and controversial decisions of the Pacific War: why did the United States adopt a divided command and attack strategy against Japan? Unfortunately, the record shows that the division of Army and Navy forces in the Pacific was more a solution to satisfy interservice rivalries and personal egos than an example of sound military practice.

But the war is long over and the United States won. Why is this historical episode of any importance today? Because joint warfighting is the way of the future. Admiral

U.S. Marine Corps

Marine working on Vought F4U Corsair aboard *USS Block Island* off Okinawa.

William Crowe, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it this way:

> *I am well aware of the difficulty of shedding . . . individual service orientations and addressing the broader concerns of the joint arena. The fact is, however, that the need for joint operations, joint thinking, and joint leadership has never been greater as we meet the global challenges and in order to get the most of our finite resources.*[2]

Our war against Japan was costly in lives and resources. To think that it might have been made even a greater hardship by the inability of senior officers to share leadership and resources is disturbing, even if an effort on that scale had never been attempted. The five weeks it took the Joint Chiefs to arrive at an interservice agreement dividing the Pacific "had to be bought back in blood later, because the enemy used them to capture and fortify the Admiralty Islands, Buka, Bougainville, Lae, and Salamaua."[3]

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To joint warfighters of the future the action of these wartime leaders may sound incredible if not self-serving. The intention here is not to detract from the memories or accomplishments of these great men, but rather to ask why they made the choices they did. First, we need to look at why there was a need for unified command in the Pacific and how interservice rivalry negatively affected that decision. Second, we will explore why some historians and participants found the lack of a unified strategy costly, inefficient, and unsound militarily. Finally, I will suggest some lessons I think any future military commander can learn.

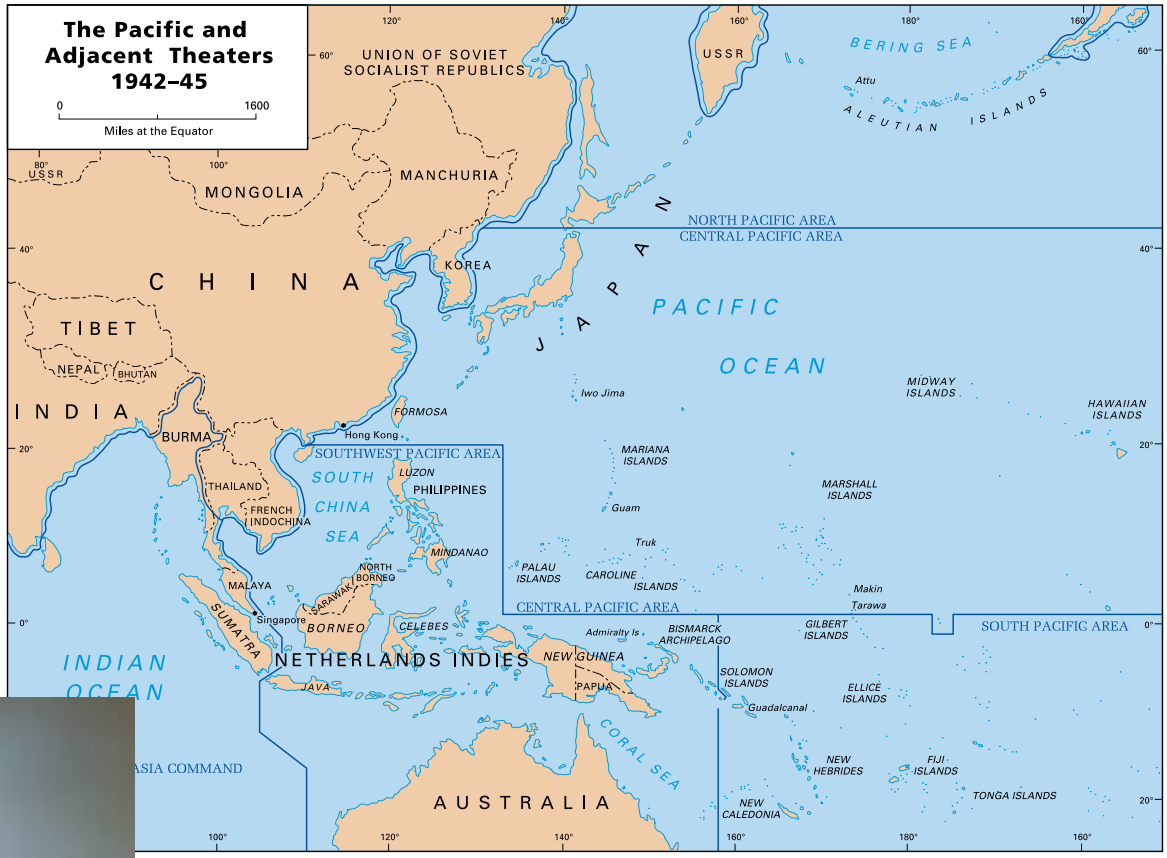
The Pacific War

At the outset of World War II the United States had four major commands in the Pacific, one each for the Army and Navy in the Philippines and in Hawaii. In both places the Army and the Navy commanders were independent and joint operations were a shaky proposition at best.[4] After Pearl Harbor was attacked it became obvious that centralized direction and control over the forces would be desirable. As historian Louis Morton observes, unity of command was necessary as "there was no single agency in the Pacific to supply these forces, no plan to unify their efforts, and no single commander to mold them into an effective force capable of offensive as well as defensive operations."[5] The Pacific had traditionally been a "special preserve" of the Navy, and the Army might have agreed to keep it that way if it had not been for the need to safeguard Australia against the encroaching Japanese. Australia's protection became primarily the Army's concern when Roosevelt authorized 80,000 men to sail for the southwest Pacific in early 1942.[6]

With both the Army and Navy now involved in the Pacific, the Joint Chiefs had the task of finding a Pacific theater commander. But who? Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander of the Pacific Fleet, or General MacArthur, who was after his exploits in the Philippines a "war hero of towering stature?" It was no secret that the President and many influential members of Congress favored the appointment of MacArthur as supreme commander.[7] But the Department of the Navy would have nothing to do with this suggestion.

Since the Pacific conflict was likely to involve naval and amphibious operations it seemed only proper to the Navy that the entire effort be directed by a naval officer. "Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations, and his colleagues in the Navy Department staunchly argued that the Navy did not have enough confidence in [MacArthur]—or any other Army officer—to entrust the Pacific to the Army's command."[8] The Navy thought that MacArthur "would probably use his naval force . . . in

Lieutenant Colonel Jason B. Barlow, USAF, is a member of the United Nations Division, Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J-5), on the Joint Staff. He has served as a U–2/TR–1 flight commander and instructor/evaluator.



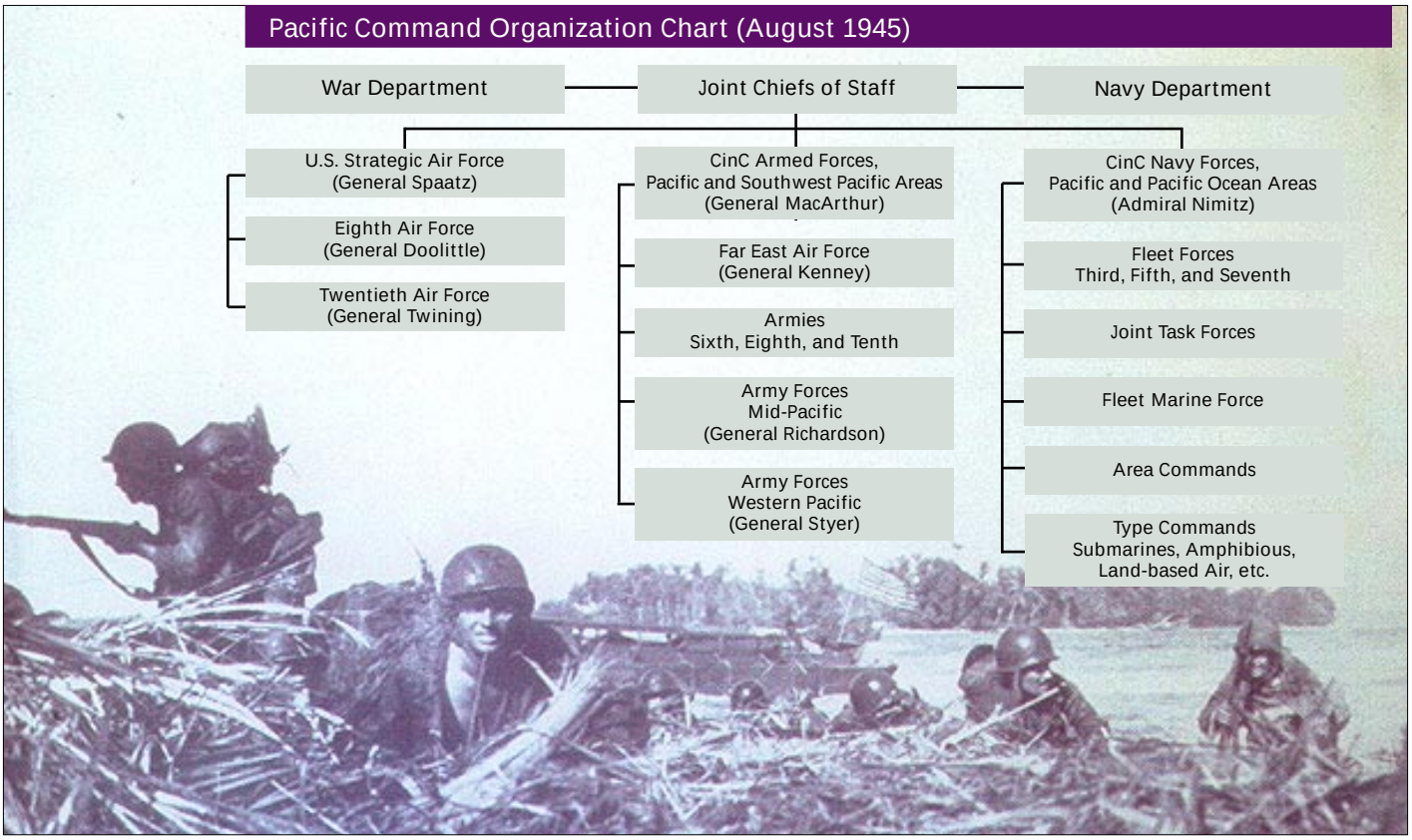
U.S. Army Center for Military History

U.S. Navy

***USS Idaho* bombarding Okinawa.**

the wrong manner, since he had shown clear unfamiliarity with proper naval and air functions" in the past.[9] This concern may have stemmed from MacArthur's defeat in the Philippines, where he lost most of his naval and air assets.[10] The problem of choosing a naval commander was further complicated by MacArthur's obvious seniority to any available admiral, his having returned to active service after retiring as Army Chief of Staff in 1935.[11] Unable to find a satisfactory solution and to "prevent unnecessary discord," the Joint Chiefs after five weeks of deliberations divided the Pacific into two huge theaters. MacArthur was appointed commander in chief of the Southwest Pacific Area which included Australia, the Philippines, Solomon islands, New Guinea, and Bismarck Archipelago. Admiral Nimitz would command the remainder of the Pacific Ocean except for coastal waters off Central and South America.[12] There would be no unified command in the Pacific, but rather two separate commands. MacArthur would receive his orders from the Army Chief of Staff, and Nimitz from the Chief of Naval Operations.[13] "In essence, the Joint Chiefs (now) acted as (their own) overall Pacific Commander."[14] Little did they know "the traditional elements of careerism and doctrinal differences within the Armed Forces had combined to produce a monstrosity."[15] Divided command may have been politically expedient but it was also to prove costly and inefficient.

"The command arrangements in the Pacific led to duplication of effort and keen competition for the limited supplies of ships, landing craft, and airplanes."[16] And as control over the entire theater was vested in the Joint Chiefs, who in effect became the directing headquarters for operations in the Pacific, "it placed on the Joint Chiefs the heavy burden of decision in many matters that could well have been resolved by lesser officials."[17] For example in March 1944, after successes in Rabaul and Truk, it took the Joint Chiefs "months of deliberation" to settle what would have been a simple matter



Naval Historical Center

Troops assaulting New Guinea.

for a single commander—how to reapportion the force.[18] Save for the President there was no single authority. The process operated as a committee rather than a staff, and command was diffused and decentralized, making decisions on strategy and theater-wide problems only available by time-consuming debates and compromises. In theater there was no one authority to choose between strategic options or to resolve conflicts between MacArthur and Nimitz for manpower and supplies, "no one to assign priorities, shift forces from one area to another, or concentrate the resources of both areas against a single objective."[19]

in theater there was no one authority to choose strategic options or to resolve conflicts

How could great leaders have forgotten the fundamental of unity of command? One of the country's leading experts on war felt that the decision to split the command in the Pacific Theater was a direct result of "service interests and personality problems."[20] Unity of command is key in war to "vesting appropriate authority and responsibility in a single commander to effect unity of effort in carrying out an assigned task.[21] Frederick the Great espoused this idea when he stated: "It is better to lose a province than split the forces with which one seeks victory."[22] MacArthur even showed his dismay in a letter written after the war about this very issue:

> *Of all the faulty decisions of the war perhaps the most unexplainable one was the failure to unify the command in the Pacific. The principle involved is perhaps the most fundamental one in the doctrine and tradition of command . . . the failure to do so in the Pacific cannot be defended in logic, in theory, or even in common sense. Other motives must be ascribed. It resulted in divided effort, the waste of diffusion and duplication of force, and the consequent extension of the war with added casualties and cost.*[23]

As MacArthur pointed out, the real danger of split command was that it pitted Army against Navy for scarce resources and forced commanders into questionable positions of greater risk. Admiral Halsey's daring raid on Bougainville in support of the Army's advance was just such an example.

The large island of Bougainville at the northern end of the Solomons was the final link in the "iron chain" that the Allies were stretching around New Britain and Rabaul. The Japanese, having other plans, sent eight cruisers and four destroyers in an effort to wipe out the advancing American forces. Halsey had only two carriers to support the Army since other major warships had been siphoned off to prepare for a new Navy offensive in the central Pacific. As Halsey later recorded, he fully "expected both air groups to be cut to pieces," and they probably would have been had the Japanese been more skillful and he less lucky. As it turned out, he was successful thanks to favorable weather, Japanese mistakes, and the skill and courage of his carrier pilots. It seems Halsey ". . . would not have had to take desperate risks if the Americans had not been trying to do two things at once. They had needlessly divided their forces in the Pacific so that the weaker half could be menaced by a relatively small enemy force."[24]

U.S. Army

Army mortar firing at Japanese on Bougainville.

The Pacific generated many examples of interservice bickering, rivalry, one-upmanship, and downright nastiness. MacArthur and Nimitz were supposed to have cooperated but both man were strong-willed and highly opinionated. One senior naval officer referred to "the complete lack of coordination between Army and Navy as one of the worst managed affairs ever seen."[25] This rivalry for overall command continued throughout the war even though both commanders had substantially the same goals.[26] An example is the campaign for Rabaul.

no commander is so priceless that he cannot be replaced

MacArthur and Nimitz argued long and hard over the capture of Rabaul. They agreed it had to be taken, but apparently neither trusted the other to command the joint force to do it. The Chief of Naval Operations thought that if any of his carriers came under Army command the whole role and strategy of the Navy and his influence in the Pacific would be diminished.[27] MacArthur, on the other hand, had no trouble with the approach to Rabaul suggested by the Navy but demanded that, since the operations lay in his theater, he should command. The Joint Chiefs finally solved the argument by moving Nimitz's theater boundary one degree to include the island objective and then split up the rest of the operation with MacArthur.[28]

MacArthur referred often to what he saw as a Navy cabal that plotted at every opportunity to prevent him from taking overall command of the Pacific War. The "Navy's obstinacy was part of a long-time plot to bring about the complete absorption of the national defense function by the Navy, (with) the Army being relegated to merely base, training, garrison, and supply purposes." MacArthur even took his case to the President in one instance, accusing the Navy of failing "to understand the strategy of the Pacific," and charging that "these frontal attacks by the Navy, as at Tarawa, are tragic and unnecessary massacres of American lives."[29] Others joined in the fray.

Comments by General St. Clair Streett, an air officer and a JCS staff member at the time, indicate he thought a single commander should have been appointed by the President. He went on to say: "At the risk of being considered naive and just plain country-boy dumb, the major obstacle to any 'sane military solution' of the problem was General MacArthur himself. Only with MacArthur out of the picture would it be possible to establish a sound organization in the area."[30] Moreover, Streett thought that with MacArthur out of the way, the Supreme Commander's job should go to an Army Air Corps or Navy commander, depending on who the President believed would have the dominant role in the war.

Are there any conclusions we can draw from these divisive moments? Certainly one of the first things that comes to mind is the importance of unity of command. As noted, MacArthur even admitted after the war that the lack of a single commander in the Pacific "resulted in divided effort, the waste of diffusion and duplication of force (and) undue extension of the war with added casualties and cost."[31] Secondly, we can appreciate that no commander is so priceless that he

cannot be replaced. This should be especially true when his popularity (such as MacArthur's at the time) threatens his superior's ability to make rational decisions about his service. Seemingly all decisions the Joint Chiefs made had to be weighed foremost against the consequences of offending either a personality or his "service." Finally, we have to learn how to fight jointly. Congress had mandated it and Desert Storm validated it. As for the Pacific, it was only "because of our material superiority (that) the United States could afford such expensive and occasionally dangerous luxuries as a divided command . . . in its war with Japan."[32] Given our finite resources, it seems unlikely that we could afford to fight a divided, multiservice war again.

Today's often innocent banter of interservice competition can be healthy and productive up to a point. That point is reached when lives or country are at risk. The military leaders of the future must learn to work and fight together or we will surely, at the very least, risk losing the confidence of the American people. Sandwiched between determined personalities and unable to shake loose from their own service interests, the Joint Chiefs deliberately chose a divided strategy of dual command in the Pacific. America cannot afford waging war by service for the sake of appeasing service pride or delicate egos. Clayton James, in his authoritative work on MacArthur, said it best: "There can be no substitute for the essential unity of direction of centralized authority. The hardships and hazards increasingly resulting were unnecessary indeed."[33] **JFQ**

Marine gunners with 75mm pack howitzer on Bougainville.

U.S. Navy

NOTES

[1] Samuel B. Griffith, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 128.

[2] Air University Press, *Conventional Warfare*, vol. 8 (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, January 1991), p. 3.

[3] William Manchester, *American Caesar* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), p. 282.

[4] Louis Morton, "Pacific Command: A Study in Interservice Relations," *Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History*, no. 3 (Colorado Springs: U.S. Air Force Academy, 1961), p. 3.

[5] Louis Morton, *U.S. Army in World War II: The War in the Pacific*, vol. 10, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 240.

[6] Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1985), p. 143.

[7] Ibid., p. 144.

[8] Clayton James, *Command Crisis: MacArthur and the Korean War* (Colorado Springs: U.S. Air Force Academy, 1982). Louis Morton agreed MacArthur was the "outstanding commander" in the Pacific. See Morton, Lecture, p. 7.

[9] Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 141.

[10] Manchester, *American Caesar*, pp. 212–16.

[11] Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 144.

[12] John Costello, *The Pacific War* (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, 1981), p. 225.

[13] Morton, *The War in the Pacific*, p. 250.

[14] John H. Bradley and Jack W. Dice, editors, *The Second World War: Asia and the Pacific* (Wayne, N.J.: Avery Publishing Group, 1989), p. 102.

[15] Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 145.

[16] Ibid., p. 145, and Morton, *The War in the Pacific*, pp. 40–43.

[17] Morton, *The War in the Pacific*, p. 145.

[18] Morton, "Pacific Command," p. 23.

[19] Morton, *The War in the Pacific*, p. 250.

[20] Morton, "Pacific Command," p. 26.

[19] Morton, *The War in the Pacific*, p. 250.

[20] Ibid., p. 250.

[21] U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force*, Air Force Manual 1–1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 2–8.

[22] Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 35.

[23] James, *Command Crisis*, p. 123.

[24] Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, pp. 240–49.

[25] Ibid., p. 179.

[26] Bradley, *Asia and the Pacific*, p. 122.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 185.

[29] Costello, *The Pacific War*, p. 449.

[30] Morton, "Pacific Command," p. 15.

[31] James, *Command Crisis*, p. 123.

[32] Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, p. 560.

[33] James, *Command Crisis*, p. 123.

[34] Morton, "Pacific Command," p. 3.

[35] Morton, "Pacific Command," appendix, chart 3.