Control, Coordinate, or Deconflict? Senior Air Force Leaders' Views of Rolling Thunder Joint Air Operations, 1965 - 1968

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The Rolling Thunder bombing campaign the United States conducted against North Vietnam from 1965 to 1968 was a protracted and unsuccessful joint air operation. The campaign's political purpose was to help coerce the communist regime in Hanoi to accept an independent South Vietnam without provoking direct Chinese or Soviet intervention. President Lyndon Johnson hoped to convince the North that a military conquest was unattainable and that a negotiated political settlement was the only viable alternative. American policy makers intended Rolling Thunder to support a broader military strategy emphasizing ground combat in South Vietnam. Desiring careful integration between bombing in the North and ground combat in the South, President Johnson personally supervised the bombing very closely. Based on advice from Secretary of Defense Robert S McNamara and other officials, the President specified many operational details such as targets, allowable numbers of strike sorties, and the geographic areas within which bombing was permitted. Senior American officials thought the infiltration of men and war materiel into the South was the North's primary way of threatening South Vietnam's independence so Rolling Thunder featured gradually escalating US Air Force (USAF) and US Navy (USN) air strikes throughout the North to interdict southbound men and supplies. Some bombing sorties struck preplanned fixed targets such as railroad yards, but most were armed reconnaissance sorties that patrolled transportation routes and attacked vehicles or other authorized targets they encountered. Military leaders chaffed under the Johnson Administration's bombing restrictions and advocated heavier attacks. President Johnson ultimately suspended the bombing without having persuaded the North to end the war.

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A B-52 attacking North Vietnamese artillery positions. Although a strategic bombing asset, the B-52 played little part in Rolling Thunder; the lion's share of USAF sorties were flown by units equipped with tactical fighter-bombers such as the F-105 Thunderchief and F-4 Phantom.

Writers have attributed Rolling Thunder's failure to various American errors such as inappropriate air doctrine, misunderstanding the war's nature, and excessive political meddling in military affairs.[1] Criticisms of the U.S. military's joint operations performance are often blended with those explanations.[2]

Joint operations are military activities requiring coordination between two or more military services. Rolling Thunder was a joint Air Force – Navy campaign. Interservice coordination is a multifaceted process, but Rolling Thunder criticisms frequently involve three interrelated items the command structure, route packages, and interservice rivalry. However, during and shortly after Rolling Thunder, top Air Force and Navy officers were more apt to praise than condemn those three aspects of the campaign. If interservice cooperation were indeed faulty, why would senior Air Force and Navy officers so seldom complain about it? This paper is not intended to rehabilitate Rolling Thunder's tarnished joint credentials, but to suggest possible reasons why senior commanders seemed so satisfied with them. With an emphasis on the Air Force perspective, the discussion will also show that the command structure and route packages had some merits and that the relations between high-ranking Air Force and Navy members were at least partially harmonious. Lower ranking Air Force and Navy members had a different perspective of Rolling Thunder's joint operations qualities, but their views fall outside the limited scope of this paper.Rolling Thunder's joint command structure was complex and split along several lines. Pacific Command (PACOM), the joint Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps regional command responsible for practically all US military activities in the Pacific region, exercised overall supervision from its Hawaiian headquarters. Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp served as Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) until Rolling Thunder's final months, but Rolling Thunder was only one of the many operations that fell under CINCPAC's purview. No single commander controlled the Rolling Thunder effort. Instead, separate service commands existed under PACOM. Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) was PACOM's Air Force component, while Pacific Fleet (PACFLT) was the Navy component. During most of Rolling Thunder, Seventh Air Force, a PACAF subsidiary headquartered near Saigon, coordinated Air Force operations throughout Southeast Asia, while Carrier Task Force 77 (CTF-77), a PACFLT

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subsidiary operating off the coast of Vietnam, handled Navy air operations in the area, but neither organization was in overall charge of Rolling Thunder. Additional splits existed within the Air Force command structure. Seventh AF exercised operational control of USAF units and decided when Air Force missions would fly against permissible targets and armed reconnaissance areas. Meanwhile, Thirteenth AF, headquartered in the Philippines, exercised administrative control of those same units. Administrative control meant authority over personnel issues such as assignments, but did not confer authority to direct combat operations. Therefore two numbered Air Force headquarters exercised different types of authority over the same units.
Unity of command is a basic joint operations concept that entails giving a single commander the authority to orchestrate various military efforts to achieve common objectives. Military officers normally deem unity of command a virtue, and Air Force commanders have traditionally been vigorous advocates of the centralized control of airpower. As the World War II era Field Manual 100-20 explained, "Control of available air power must be centralized and command must be exercised through the air force commander." [3]

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Despite the doctrinal precedent, air commanders applied a different standard to Rolling Thunder's command structure. The campaign's long duration afforded them ample opportunities to redress any perceived command arrangement problems, but they made few changes from 1965 to 1968. One notable exception involved the Air Force organization in South Vietnam. Second Air Division (2nd AD) controlled Air Force activities when Rolling Thunder began. As additional air units arrived in the region, Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell convinced the other service chiefs to upgrade the

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air division to the more prestigious numbered air force status. On April 1, 1966, 2nd AD was therefore redesignated Seventh Air Force. The change bolstered that Air Force organization's bureaucratic authority vis à vis the Navy's CTF 77, but did not otherwise alter basic command relationships.
The lack of basic organizational change reflected the fact that senior Air Force and Navy leaders expressed outright satisfaction with the divided command arrangements. In 1970, General McConnell said, "I don't see anything actually wrong with the command arrangements as they finally came out under the circumstances that the war's being conducted over there."[4] Admiral Sharp told the Senate in 1967 that the Rolling Thunder command arrangement was "working beautifully," and "I would not change anything about it for the war."[5]

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An EF-105F Wild Weasel SEAD aircraft releasing Mk 82 500lb bombs, 1967; note the AGM-45 Shrike ARM on the outboard wing pylon.

The route package system that divided North Vietnamese territory into separate flying zones mirrored the divided command structure. Route packages were nothing new – similar arrangements had appeared during the Korean War.[6] Vietnam route packages were a military creation rather than a Johnson Administration mandate. An Air Force – Navy agreement created the route packages in November 1965, primarily to apportion armed reconnaissance responsibilities between the services. The services initially established six of them. Route Package 1 was the area immediately north of the border between North and South Vietnam, and the others were numbered sequentially from south to north. A seventh appeared on April 1, 1966 – the same day 2nd Air Division became Seventh AF - when CINCPAC split Route Package 6 in northeastern North Vietnam into Air Force and Navy halves designated 6A and 6B respectively. The final arrangement thus featured zones numbered 1 through 5 plus 6A and 6B. The Navy supervised Route Packages 2, 3, 4, and 6B while the Air Force controlled Route Packages 5 and 6A. Route Package 1 was notionally assigned to the Air Force, but special procedures applied due to that area's geographic location. Because aerial interdiction in Route Package 1strongly influenced ground fighting in adjoining parts of South Vietnam, Army General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, usually controlled bombing in that area through his Air Force component commander, the 2nd Air Division / Seventh AF Commander.[7]

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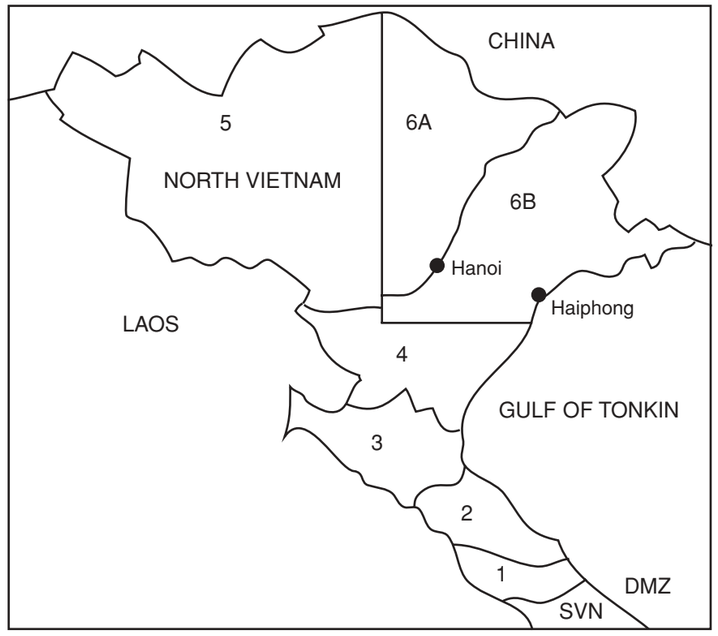
Permanent segregation of North Vietnamese territory into exclusive Air Force and Navy zones was loose at first, but practical issues such as interservice communication limits and geography helped the assignments become more entrenched over time. The services initially swapped route packages periodically, but the swapping ended within six months. Officially, the route packages did not become exclusive "turf" of the service given primary responsibility for them even after they were permanently

F-4Cs of the first USAF Phantom wing to join the air war over Vietnam — the 8th Tactical Wing (the Wolfpack), based at Ubon RTAFB, Thailand — formate on a KC-135 tanker on their way to a target in North Vietnam.



Rolling Thunder Route Packages

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An F-4D of the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron Black Panthers, 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, in its revetment at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand.

assigned to a service. With proper coordination, aircraft from either service could fly armed reconnaissance missions or strike any authorized fixed target in North Vietnam, but proper Air Force – Navy co-ordination was often too slow to permit switching sorties to alternate targets. Unexpectedly poor weather in one route package might necessitate aircraft diversions to another area, but such last minute changes were difficult to make. As Major General Gilbert L. Meyers, former Vice Commander of 2nd Air Division and Seventh AF, explained during a 1970 interview, "the theoretical agreement was that we could do this coordinate to strike Navy targets], but as a practical matter, it wasn't done very often because of lack of communications. Time didn't permit it."[8] Physical proximity between air bases and targets also favored permanent route package assignments. Navy planes usually handled targets in coastal areas while Air Force planes typically dealt with places further inland and therefore closer to their air bases in Thailand. Coastal parts of any route package sometimes became de facto Navy zones while inland areas effectively fell under Air Force purview. In effect, the route packages became a convenient way to deconflict separate Air Force and Navy air operations. Joint operations ideally involve coordination between services rather than mere deconfliction. However, much as they endorsed Rolling Thunder's command arrangements, senior Air Force and Navy officers expressed predominantly favorable opinions about how the route packages affected joint operations. Pacific Command asserted that the route packages were positively beneficial because they improved CINCPAC's control over operations. As each edition of *Rolling Thunder Digest*, a quarterly report published by Admiral Sharp's headquarters, explained, "Rolling Thunder (RT) armed reconnaissance areas, referred to as Route Packages (RP) were designed for the purpose of fixing responsibility for target development, collection of intelligence data and target analysis under the overall control of CINCPAC."[9]

Rolling Thunder Digest also insisted that route packages improved cooperation between the Air Force and Navy. Every edition stated, "To insure [sic] economical and effective use of resources, operational procedures have been developed by the operating units, 7th Air Force (7AF) and Carrier Task Force 77 (CTF-77), that permit the full range of coordination for all air operations in the Rolling Thunder program and yet permit both services to operate in all areas."[10] Those "operational procedures" featured the route packages, which Rolling Thunder Digest praised by noting, "We have found that supervision and control of strike operations can be improved, and results can be analyzed more realistically if targets are identified and interrelated in target groupings that are geographically associated."[11] The term "geographically associated" meant divided into route packages. Even after Rolling Thunder had ended, Admiral Sharp still thought the route package system was "sort of an operational necessity. It was more than a convenience, it was a pretty important thing." [12]

In response to the threat posed by North Vietnamese SAMs and fighters, EB-66 electronic warfare aircraft were used to supplement the jamming pods carried by US strike aircraft during Rolling Thunder.

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Pacific Command's official views about route packages were merely theoretical and possibly inappropriate ideals. As previously noted, General Meyers said communications limits hindered the Air Force's efforts to fly in Navy areas. The assertion that the arbitrarily drawn route packages divided enemy territory into logical target sets is also suspect. Target analysts and aircrews who specialized in limited geographic areas became experts on some targets, but Rolling Thunder sought operational and strategic results in South Vietnam that were not necessarily visible from the narrow perspective afforded by the route packages. Out of all the diverse entities involved in controlling the campaign, Pacific Command should have been especially focused on those broad results.

Admiral Sharp's immediate subordinates in the Air Force chain of command liked Rolling Thunder's command arrangements, but did not unanimously agree that the route packages improved joint operations. Pacific Air Forces commanders General Hunter Harris and General John D. Ryan (who succeeded Harris in February 1967) were Admiral Sharp's top Air Force commanders. When interviewed in 1971, both generals seemed satisfied with Rolling Thunder's command arrangements, but Harris criticized the route packages. Harris said, "I didn't feel any serious objection or frustration on those command arrangements," but he deemed route packages "a hell of a poor way to run a railroad" because they reduced operational flexibility and "affected the capabilities of both the Fleet units and the ground-based Air Force units to carry out a more effective campaign."[13] During his interview, General Ryan defended both the command structure and the route packages. He agreed the command arrangements were "rather complicated," but insisted, "the command arrangements did not interfere with the prosecution of the war at all." Furthermore, he added, "I know of no major problem that the division among the Route Packs caused."[14] General John W. Vogt, PACAF Deputy Commander for Plans and Operations from mid-1965 to mid-1968, agreed more closely with Ryan than with Harris. Vogt acknowledged in a 1978 interview that changing the command structure by designating a single air commander "probably would have been the better way" to control Rolling Thunder, and that "the Route Packs were picked for the convenience of the fleet, primarily," but he still thought the route packages were helpful because they obviated "a great deal of detailed coordination" between the services. He felt "You wouldn't have been able to operate" without route packages because the required degree of coordination would have been difficult to achieve.[15] None of the three officers condemned both the command structure and the route packages. A preference for simply deconflicting Air Force and Navy flights rather than meeting demanding interservice coordination requirements evidently mitigated the qualms they did express.

Seventh Air Force officials near Saigon were closer to the action and were more dubious about route packages than their Hawaii-based superiors. After retiring, Seventh AF Commander General William W. Momyer wrote, "Dividing North Vietnam into route packages compartmentalized our airpower and reduced its capabilities . . .The route package system was fundamentally wrong for the best application of all U.S. airpower . . . was a compromise approach to a tough command and control decision, an approach which, however understandable, inevitably prevented a unified, concentrated air effort."[16] Momyer therefore felt

the route packages detracted from joint air operations, but he stopped short of condemning them because they had been based on “understandable” considerations. Once again, practical concerns outweighed an Air Force general’s doctrinal predilection to exercise centralized control of all Rolling Thunder air power.

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F-105D Thunderchiefs refuelling from a SAC KC-135 tanker en route to their target. KC-135s were to play a vital role in Rolling Thunder, enabling USAF F-105s and F-4s to attack targets deep within North Vietnam.

Command arrangements and route packages were administrative matters, but a broader explanation of how they affected joint operations requires examining the related phenomenon of interservice rivalry. Rivalry reflected political undercurrents and focused on deciding which service would control air operations. The Air Force and Navy certainly competed to show which service could best accomplish Rolling Thunder missions, but their rivalry was neither unique to that campaign, nor did it necessarily undermine joint operations. Competition between American air and naval commanders has been a fact of life since before World War II and continues today, albeit in more subtle ways. Air Force commanders during Rolling Thunder privately admitted competing with the Navy, but they did not mention sabotaging Navy operations or imperiling the campaign’s success. Lieutenant General Joseph H. Moore, Second AD / Seventh AF commander until July 1966, said during a 1969 official USAF interview, “Now this is for USAF eyes only, and ears… Putting it bluntly, it was a competition between the US Navy providing tactical air on the scale that the US Air Force could do.”[17] When he was Vice Commander of 2nd Air Division and Seventh AF, Major General Meyers worried about whether his crews would be able to strike the new targets the administration released during each Rolling Thunder cycle. During an interview, Meyers described a period during which the Navy and Air Force were each receiving a quota of three new targets every two weeks. Meyers recalled, “we would have been in a hell of a position if the Navy got their three targets and we didn’t get ours in the same time period. So this puts additional pressure on you to get them and – let’s be honest about it – we kept getting telephone calls all the time saying, ‘Hey, the navy got their targets. Why haven’t you got yours?’”[18] Such remarks sound more like healthy competition than pernicious rivalry, and they might have been made during other joint air operations – including some highly successful ones. However, Meyers’ comments were at least partly a product of the graduated bombing strategy imposed on air commanders by Johnson Administration officials who tightly regulated Rolling Thunder’s conduct.

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Unbridled competition did not characterize all interservice relations during Rolling Thunder. Considerable cooperation prevailed in public, and senior officers downplayed the significance of rivalries. None of the service chiefs or commanders who testified about Rolling Thunder before the Senate’s Stennis Committee in August 1967 made disparaging remarks about the other services or exhibited any other overt signs of interservice rivalry.[19] All the chiefs of staff – including the Army Chief of Staff and the Commandant of the Marine Corps - agreed that bombing was essential and insisted the best way to maximize its success was to let the military bomb with minimal political restraints. During an official 1969 interview, retiring Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. McConnell described cooperation between the services during Rolling Thunder by stating, “Well, there was to begin with, service rivalries and things of that nature were, of course, all involved in it. Everybody wanted to show up that he could do better than anyone else. But that didn’t last very long. It gradually subsided and pretty soon there was no problem at all, no problem at all, either about the control of the missions or about the selection of targets or anything else. It all worked fine.”[20] Since McConnell was retiring, he was in a position to express his thoughts more candidly than during the Senate hearings two years before, but he still expressed satisfaction with the interservice cooperation he had experienced during Rolling Thunder. Today, Rolling Thunder has become an example of how not to conduct joint air operations, so why did contemporary air leaders so often defend the campaign’s command arrangements, route packages, and interservice cooperation? No definitive answer is available, but possible explanations are distinguished by the assumptions made about senior officers’ motivations.

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One explanation assumes officers’ favorable comments reflected ulterior bureaucratic motives within the armed services themselves. Defense Department analyst James Clay Thompson suggests that a tangled military command structure that hindered joint control of Rolling Thunder might have compromised overall effectiveness in order to satisfy military bureaucratic needs. Thompson says both the Air Force and Navy wanted a divided command because having one service in charge was mutually unacceptable. He concludes that if the operation had gone well under Air Force control, the Air Force would have gained political prestige over the Navy and vice versa.[21] Thompson implied the command arrangements reflected underlying discord between military services, so perhaps interservice rivalry also helped explain the air commanders’ tolerance for divided control of air operations.

A second explanation is related to the first and derives from the stringent political controls the Johnson Administration placed on the campaign. Bureaucratic tensions between military and civilian leaders may have induced air commanders to mute criticisms they might otherwise have expressed about Rolling Thunder’s joint qualities. Air Force and Navy officers were frustrated by the operational restrictions they faced. While seeking clearance to conduct the intensified bombing they all recommended, senior officers may have tacitly chosen to downplay command and control disputes in order to show solidarity against their common opponents in the Administration. Senior officers’ closing ranks against Secretary of Defense McNamara to resist his tight controls over Rolling Thunder operations may also have denied that interservice rivalry was a problem. That explanation is troubling because it implies that the air commanders might have exhibited less interservice cooperation if the Johnson Administration had let them prosecute the campaign without many political constraints.

A third explanation assumes the commanders genuinely believed Rolling Thunder’s command and control arrangements were logical and appropriate responses to the military situation. Based on longstanding doctrine, Air Force leaders would have preferred to control all Rolling Thunder air operations, but knew Navy commanders were not willing to place carrier aircraft under Air Force operational control. The command structure and route package compromises the services reached might have seemed adequate and even praiseworthy. Existing statutory requirements for the services to operate jointly were much less comprehensive than those later enacted in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. Each service was equipped to operate with minimal reliance on the other and

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enemy opposition was mostly confined to defending target areas. Divided command arrangements facilitated each service's semiautonomous operations. The route packages deconflicted those air operations much as they had during the Korean War. Once the major points of interservice conflict had been resolved in mutually acceptable ways, rivalry was confined to narrower competitive issues such as which service struck its target quota first. The commanders' favorable comments about command arrangements, route packages, and interservice rivalry would therefore have reflected a modus vivendi. Presumably they would have made other arrangements under different military circumstances, but they would have found some practical way to get along with each other while they fought the enemy.
The third explanation is the most plausible one because it makes the fewest assumptions about senior officers' motivations. Profound skepticism of top civilian and military leaders has been fashionable in the United States since the Vietnam War, Watergate, and other unpleasant events. Admiral Sharp and the Air Force generals were concerned with their respective services' institutional interests, but there is no reason to assume they selfishly placed those interests above the nation's interests. Rolling Thunder's command structure and its reflection in the route packages were compromises to parochial service interests, but did not reflect subversion of American military objectives. All the senior officers were dedicated professionals who sought the best available joint air power solution to a difficult problem in Southeast Asia.

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Notes:

1 Earl H. Tilford, Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1991), blames inappropriate doctrine. Mark Clodfelter, The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam, (New York: The Free Press, 1989), says the US misunderstood the war's guerrilla nature and used improper doctrine. Most senior military officers, such as Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), blame excessive political interference.
2 James Clay Thompson, Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure, (Chapel Hill, NC: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), focuses on organizational maladies such as interservice rivalry. Clodfelter, pp. 128-129, critiques inter service cooperation.
3 War Department, Field Service Regulations, FM 100-20, Command and Employment of Airpower, (Washington, D.C., 1943), p. 2.
4 Gen. John P. McConnell, Oral History Interview (OHI) transcript, Nov. 4, 1970, K239.0512-371, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, p. 2.
5 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Air War Against North Vietnam, Hearings before the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, 90th Cong., 1st sess., Part 1, Aug. 10, 1967, p. 103.
6 See Gen. William W. Momyer, Air Power in Three Wars, (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1978), pp. 58 – 59 and James A. Winnifeld and Dana J. Johnson, Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942 – 1991, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993), pp. 77 and 158.
7 Clodfelter, p. 129 summarizes the route package system.
8 Maj. Gen. Gilbert Meyers, OHI transcript, May 27, 1970, K239.0512-282, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, p. 87.
9 Headquarters PACOM, Operations Division, Rolling Thunder Digest, all vols., p. 2.
10 Rolling Thunder Digest, all vols., p. 2.
11 Rolling Thunder Digest, Jul.- Sep. 1966, p. 16.
12 Adm. U. S. G. Sharp, OHI transcript, Feb. 19, 1971, K239.0512-409, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, p. 13.
13 Gen. Hunter Harris, OHI transcript, Apr. 22, 1971, K239.0512-403, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, pp. 10 and 27-28.
14 Gen. John D. Ryan, OHI transcript, May 20, 1971, K239.0612-476, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, pp. 5 and 8.
15 Gen. John. W. Vogt, OHI transcript, Aug. 8-9, 1978, K239.0512-1093, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, pp. 120-122.
16 Momyer, p. 95.
17 Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, OHI transcript, Nov. 22, 1969, K239.0512- 241, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, p. 18.
18 Maj. Gen. Meyers, OHI transcript, p. 80.
19 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Air War Against North Vietnam, Hearings before the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, 90th Cong., 1st sess., Parts 1 - 5, Aug. 1967, passim.
20 Gen. John P. McConnell, OHI transcript, Aug. 28, 1969, K239.0512-1190, in USAF Collection, AFHRA, p. 22.
21 Thompson, p. 76.