

Air Support in Counterinsurgencies

by Maj Charles D. Melson, USMC(Ret)

ost Marines are familiar with the literature of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Indeed, insurgencies have been more common than major conflicts in the history of mankind and deserve equal concern. Others have recently begun to do their homework into what may be the distinctive form of conflict of the 21st century. A new element since the dawn of the previous century has been aviation technology, though more useful on the side of the counterinsurgent than the insurgent, and even the rebel has had to adjust to this new element or suffer

examining a spectrum of small wars that had airpower as an element. The result is a well-documented account of some 10 chapters that address the spectrum of fighting from early American and European colonial wars through modern British, French, and American experience up until Vietnam. Contemporary conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and South America move history into current events. Both authors establish the background to the various conflicts, the forces involved, and the part played by airpower in resolving the

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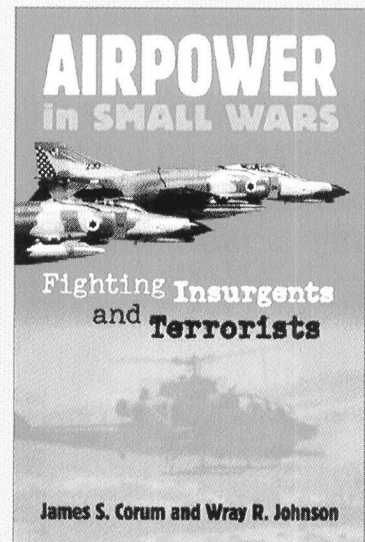
accordingly. But while aerospace theorists have expounded airpower from the beginning, they have paid little attention to the impact of this modern means of warfare on one of its most ancient and recurrent military problems—small wars.

Two recent books tackle the theory and practice of how to employ air weapons in the suppression of insurgency. The first is by two authors who have made a career of teaching both U.S. airmen and Marines. Professor Wray R. Johnson is currently at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, while coauthor Professor James S. Corum instructs at the U.S. Air Force School of Advanced Airpower Studies in Montgomery, AL. In addition to academic qualifications, Johnson is a career U.S. Air Force special operations officer, and Corum has a U.S. Army intelligence background as a Reserve officer. Their goal was to fill the gap in writing on this subject by

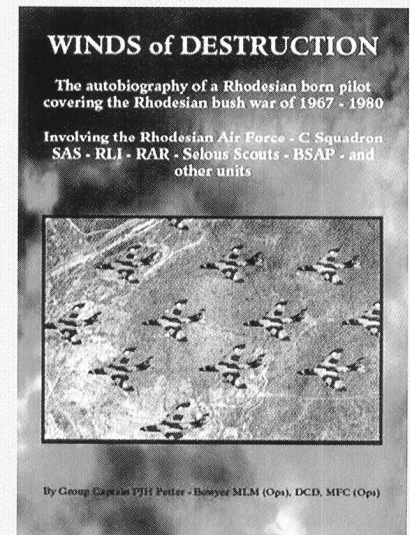
issue. Sometimes this was decisive, and sometimes less so. For example, only the unconventional aspects of airpower in Vietnam were discussed rather than the conventional air campaign in North Vietnam and air support in the south.

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AIRPOWER IN SMALL WARS: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists. By James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2003, ISBN 0700612408, 507 pp., \$24.95. (Member \$22.46)



WINDS OF DESTRUCTION. By Peter J.H. Petter-Bowyer, Trafford Publishing, New Bern, NC, 2003, ISBN 141201204X, 590 pp., \$43.50. (Member \$39.15)

and Israel in Palestine against Islamic extremists. The section on southern African conflicts through 1990 is unique, and one that I responded to, involving Portugal, Rhodesia, and South Africa. These wars took place while the United States was focused on Southeast Asia. Yet, along with the British experience during the same period, they provide a wealth of useful study on how to handle low-level conflict with limited resources. In each, air forces played a critical tactical role, although politics decided the final outcomes.

This leads to the second book under consideration, moving from theory into practice—in this case Rhodesia. Group Capt Peter Petter-Bowyer flew from 1957 until 1980.

His career started with the jet fighters and bombers that had held pride of place in the Commonwealth order of battle. Petter-Bowyer moved on to helicopters and light aircraft used to kill insurgents in a real war lasting some 13 years. Illustrated were the need to integrate air support with ground maneuver, changes in air weapons and delivery (conventional bombs and rockets were traded for guns and napalm), and dependable low-tech aircraft. This transformation is documented in an autobiography that anyone who has flown will appreciate. For ground officers, it is the view from the cockpit by a professional who has much to offer.

One of the main lessons of both books is that air forces configured for

conventional operations can shift to use in counterinsurgencies by emphasizing supporting roles rather than the holy grail of “victory through airpower.” Transport, communications, and helicopter tactical support are needed more than fighters and bombers in a strategic role. This is as much a mindset as training and equipment. Flexibility in transforming this view is one Marines should be familiar with and should be willing to share with their U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Army counterparts. Both books are recommended as means to that end.

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Escape From Hanoi

by Col Arthur A. Weber, Jr., USMC(Ret)

For the past 7 years I have cotaught an elective course on the Vietnam War at the Naval War College with my friend and colleague, COL Al Bergstrom, USA(Ret). Our course is enthusiastically supported and enhanced by other Vietnam veterans who help to refine the complex mosaic of that particular war.

One of our consistent supporters and most popular lecturers has been Porter Halyburton, a retired Navy commander who is on the faculty at the Naval War College. His calm,

Porter, then a lieutenant, to a prison cell with Fred Cherry, a U.S. Air Force major. The North Vietnamese felt that the most degrading and humiliating thing they could do to a junior white officer from the south, and to a senior black officer from the south, would be to force them to share a cell.

Contrary to the expectations of their captors, the two prisoners formed a strong bond of support and respect. Fred Cherry, because of Halyburton’s help and care, overcame

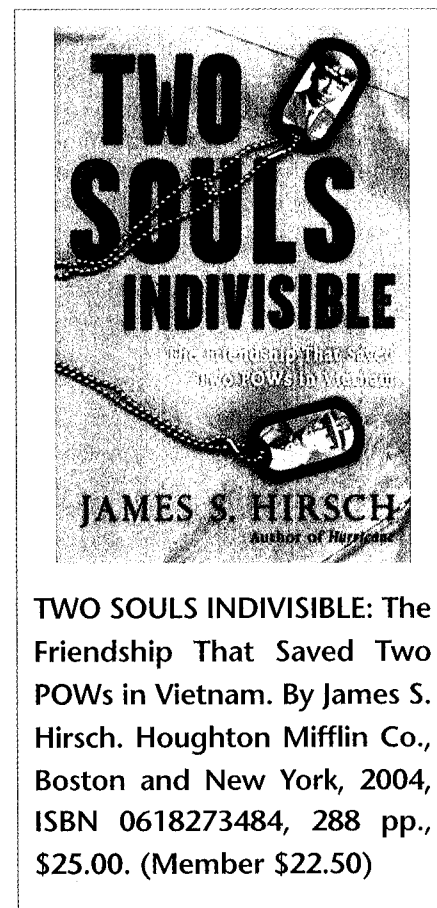
This book warmly describes this amazing relationship and story for the first time. It is a testament to the human spirit and its ability to thrive and flourish even under the worst of times, places, and treatment.

serene recounting of his experiences as a prisoner of war for 7½ years belies the inhumane treatment and suffering he endured.

Porter always tells the students that his captors gave him an option to go to “a better place or a worse place,” and his refusal to cooperate with them resulted in his being sent to “a worse place.” They moved

life-threatening physical injuries and survived. Porter Halyburton, because of Fred Cherry’s support, overcame his psychological despair and survived. And they became lifelong friends.

This book warmly describes this amazing relationship and story for the first time. It is an exceptional read and is a testament to the human spirit and its ability to thrive and



TWO SOULS INDIVISIBLE: The Friendship That Saved Two POWs in Vietnam. By James S. Hirsch. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston and New York, 2004, ISBN 0618273484, 288 pp., \$25.00. (Member \$22.50)

flourish even under the worst of times, places, and treatment.

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