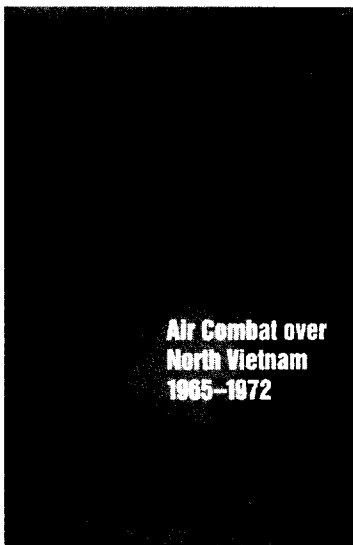


Dueling Among the Clouds

reviewed by Williamson Murray

CLASHES, Air Combat Over North Vietnam, 1965-1972. By Marshall L. Michel III. U.S. Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1997, 336 pp., \$32.95. (Member \$29.65)



If military history is the bastard child of an historical profession that looks down on the study of war, combat, and strategy, then military historians have reserved their prejudices for the study of air power. Consequently, we have had a considerable output of impressive, thoughtful, and well-researched books on the origins and conduct of the Vietnam War by the United States. Some, such as H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* and Andrew Krepenevich's *The Army in Vietnam*, have established the highest standards of scholarship and historical analysis, representing benchmarks against which future historical works on America's experience in Vietnam will be measured. However, on the subject of one of the most disastrous and intriguing aspects of the U.S. effort in Vietnam,

namely the air war against North Vietnam, we have had precious little—for the most part comic books, illustrated war books, and Air Force propaganda (see in particular Walter J. Boyne's, "LINEBACKER II," *Air Force Magazine*, Nov97).

All this has changed with Marshall L. Michel, III's superb study on the air war over North Vietnam. A former Air Force fighter pilot and retired colonel, Michel flew as a frontseater in F-4s over North Vietnam in 1972. Consequently, he has brought to this study his considerable knowledge of fighter aircraft, air-to-air tactics, the technology of the time, and a real interest in getting the story straight. In other

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words, while Michel may not have a Ph.D. in history, he possesses the fire that great historians bring to their subject and that so few possess in the departments of social nonsense and deconstruction studies that pass for the study of history in our universities.

Michel has produced a study of institutional rigidity, technological myopia, and mechanistic thinking. From spring 1965 through summer 1968, the air units of the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Navy, and to a lesser extent the U.S. Marine Corps, carried out an extensive air campaign against North Vietnam, code named ROLLING THUNDER, to persuade the North Vietnamese to desist in their support of the guerrilla war against South Vietnam. After a 4-year pause, the air forces of the United States returned to bombing North Vietnam in LINEBACKER I to halt a conventional invasion of South Vietnam, and then in LINEBACKER II in an effort to force the North Vietnamese to provide an exit for the United States from the war. At the strategic and political levels the air campaigns, particularly ROLLING THUNDER, provided a framework that rendered any use of military force pointless.

Michel's focus, however, is on the operational and tactical levels of the air war. For all the penchant for military pundits to suggest that all U.S. problems in the war were on the strategic and political levels, works like *Clashes* and *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* underline that the American effort at the tactical and operational levels, run nearly entirely by the military, hardly displayed an exceptional degree of tactical and operational virtuosity. The air war over North Vietnam, for all of the willingness of politicians to select targets, remained largely in the hands of the so-called professionals. Michel has chosen to focus his account in this area to such an extent that he has largely excluded identifying commanders and individuals. In some respects this approach gives his account an even more chilling quality in its depiction of institutions so enamored with technology as to throw the lives of their crews away with what can only be described as unconscionable carelessness.

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reached the point where the previous history of air power, as a result of technological narcissism and mechanistic thinking, had been entirely discarded. The belief was that high speed aircraft and American technology had rendered the possibility of dog fighting no longer possible. Air-to-air combat would now be a simple matter of firing U.S. missiles at enemy aircraft and watching the attacking MiGs disintegrate in balls of flame.

U.S. missiles passed their tests in a wonderful engineer's universe where all aircraft, including those of the enemy, flew straight and level, where maintenance procedures and ground conditions were always perfect, and where, if something went wrong, it could not be the result of engineering or the developmental parameters. Michel suggests:

that the main problem with the test program [for the development of air-to-air missiles] appeared to be the 'corporate' Air Force, Navy, and Department of Defense assumption that the missile would work; it followed logically, then, that when a missile did not work properly in a test, the only possible conclusions were either that the missile's maintenance was poor or that the test itself was improperly executed.

Thus, while prewar test data suggested that the AIM-7 would hit the target 71 percent of the time, it actually achieved an 8 percent hit rate, with a 29 percent miss rate, and a 63 percent failure rate. The prewar estimate for the AIM-9B was that it would achieve a hit 65 percent of the time. In actuality, it achieved hits 15 percent of the time, with a miss rate of 28 percent, and a failure rate of 56 percent.

The result during ROLLING THUNDER was nearly a catastrophe—luckily the United States was fighting a third rate power. Missiles more often than not failed even to launch—when they did, they missed their targets. U.S. fighters, with the exception of the F-105, lacked internal gun systems and, with very little training in air-to-air combat, U.S. air crews were generally unprepared for the rigors of flying and fighting in the air-to-air arena.

As a result, the exchange ratio against an inexperienced North Vietnamese Air Force in the air-to-air arena for *both* the American Air Force and Navy was an extraordinary 2:1—the worst U.S. air forces have ever experienced, with the possible exception of combat against the Japanese in the early days of World War II.

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With the bombing halt in the summer of 1968 the Air Force and Navy had 4 years to absorb the grim lessons of ROLLING THUNDER. The extraordinary part of Michel's story is that only the Navy displayed any interest in discovering and fixing those factors that had contributed to the dismal exchange ratios.

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Thus, the Navy created “Top Gun” and made considerable strides in repairing the defects in their missiles. Astonishingly, the Air Force appears to have ignored the implications of the 2:1 exchange ratio and continued along the same path.

In spring 1972, the North Viet-

namese attempted to conquer South Vietnam with a conventional military invasion—an offensive also aimed at humiliating the United States as well. But President Richard Nixon, not yet weakened by Watergate, replied with a massive air offensive against North Vietnam—LINEBACKER I. Unprepared by any serious analysis of ROLLING THUNDER, Air Force fighters again suffered a 2:1 ratio against the North Vietnamese MiGs. The naval air forces, however, prepared by “Top Gun” and a serious effort to learn the lessons of ROLLING THUNDER, rolled up an impressive exchange ratio of 12:1. One senses that the comparison was so embarrassing that the Air Force was finally forced to adapt its conceptions of air power to the real world. The result would eventually be “Red Flag.” Nevertheless, in LINEBACKER II Strategic Air Command would send its B-52s against North Vietnam at exactly the same time, at the same heading, and with the same general disregard for the experiences that tactical aircraft had had against North Vietnamese defenses throughout 1972. It is particularly worth comparing Michel's account with Col Boyne's account in *Air Force Magazine*. Institutions that display no interest in even their own past are condemned to relive their mistakes.

Col Michel has written an extraordinarily important book. His research in first class. Above all, he manages to convey his understanding of technology and war in the air-to-air environment to the reader. His style is readable and his message about the unwillingness of air forces to learn the harsh lessons of war in the real world is all too relevant. This is a book that will allow those unfamiliar with aircraft and air warfare to understand the real issues involved in the air war over North Vietnam.

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