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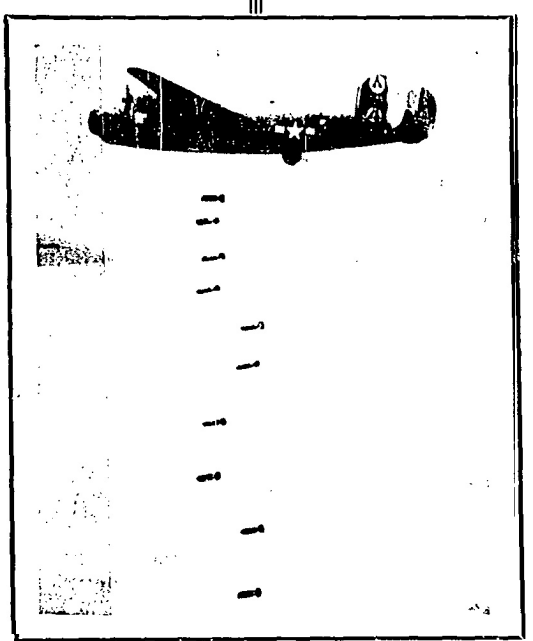
COMMAND OF THE AIR

DOUHET'S VIEWS IN PERSPECTIVE



The third battlefield is indeed a reality but in modern context must be viewed with realistic eyes.

By Col Joseph A. Mitchell

UNTIL just after the turn of the century, the only two distinct fields of battle for conducting war were the land and sea. Students of strategy read Clausewitz and Jomini, the acknowledged experts on the art of land warfare; for seapower and its significance, Admiral Alfred T. Mahan was emerging as the foremost authority. But along came Orville and Wilbur Wright with their flying machine to upset what had come to be the accepted ways of waging war.

Everyone marveled at this new contraption and was elated with the success achieved after years of frustration. At last it was a fact—man could fly! Yet only a few could grasp the true significance of this achievement and how fast the aeroplane would evolve to seemingly reduce the size of the globe in the short span of history just ahead. Still

fewer had the foresight of the tremendous impact that the rickety flying machine would have on the conduct of future wars.

Among the few who speculated on the potential of the aeroplane in war was an Italian Army major by the name of Giulio Douhet. Today, many theorists consider him the most profound visionary of them all. As early as 1909 when the aeroplane was in its embryonic stage of development, Douhet at the age of thirty predicted in writing that the sky was about to become the third battlefield in war, no less important than the battlefields on land and sea. At the same time he foresaw the great potential of air power in war, when he wrote:

> We are fully conscious today of the importance of having command of the seas, but soon the command of the air will be no less important because only by having such a command—and only then—can we make use of the advantages made possible by aerial observation and the ability to see targets clearly—advantages which we shall not be able fully to enjoy until we have aerial power to keep the enemy grounded.

Douhet visualized a bitter struggle being waged for air supremacy among the so called civilized nations of the world. This struggle would take the form of a race for the command of the air. He predicted that the race would go on and on, checked from time to time only by economic considerations, with each nation striving to develop the most telling weapon of conflict possible. It seems paradoxical that just such an arms race has been raging and goes on even today, seemingly unchecked.

Until his death in 1930, Douhet continued to advocate air power as the predominant instrument for modern war. He was considered an extremist by all but a few of his close associates, and labeled a nonconformist. In reality, he was simply a man of great imagination and vision, imbued with a penchant for logical reasoning, and years ahead of his time. He was strong willed and severely critical of the Italian staff's policy on the conduct of World War I. He was so critical, in fact, that a letter he wrote in 1916 to a member of the Italian cabinet resulted in his being court-martialed and sentenced to a year in prison. It wasn't until after the war in 1920 that the court-martial charges were reviewed and he was cleared. The postwar review revealed that his criticism had been justified and, if heeded, could have averted a disaster at Capretto. Absolved from this injustice, Douhet was viewed in a different light. Though retired in 1918, he was honored with a promotion to the rank of general in 1921.

During World War I and the years immediately following, Gen Douhet continued to develop his air power theories. It was in 1921 that he published his original book entitled *Command of the Air*. The preliminary ideas and views expressed in his first edition were further refined and amplified in 1927 in a book called: *Il Dominio dell' Aria, (Command of the Air)*, second edition. For the most part, these and other of his notable works were read only in Europe. The writings of Douhet were not actually introduced to the English speaking world until 1933. During that year, Mrs. Dorothy Benedict's translation of a French translation of selected short extracts from three of Douhet's books was distributed by the United States War Deparment. In 1942, the final and most valuable collection of his writings, including those previously mentioned, was published in the United States in a single book, *Command of the Air*, translated by Dino Ferrari.

Controversial though his writings were, the greatest criticism in the 20s and 30s seemed to come from those who were either desperately clinging to the past or who apparently had not read his complete works and did not fully understand his views. He was often quoted out of context by newswriters who stressed that he emphasized the bombing of civilians, believed that the surface forces should be abolished, and advocated that air power could be the sole factor in winning a war. There is little wonder, with such misinterpretations, that so many wanted to dismiss Douhet's doctrines as false. What then were some of the basic views of this prophet of the future of air power?

In order to examine Douhet's views in their proper perspective, it is necessary first to realize that they were developed from the viewpoint of an Italian. His doctrines applied primarily to Italy and its strategic position in relation to Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. In writing, *The Probable Aspects of the War of the Future*, Douhet made clear the importance of air power. He emphasized the revolutionary changes the air arm would have on the forms and characteristics of war. His primary concern was for his country to translate this formidable new weapon into a winning formula for future wars. He did not consider his ideas wholly applicable to any other nation without appropriate modification derived from further study, in each case, of conditions and resources. He offered his solutions for Italy as alternatives to the horrible stalemate of trench warfare in World War I.

In the new third dimension of warfare, Douhet believed that an adequate national defense could not be assured except by an aerial force capable, in case of war, of conquering the command of the air. He meant by command of the air to be in a position to prevent the enemy from flying, while at the same time retaining the ability to fly oneself. His formula for his nation's defense was

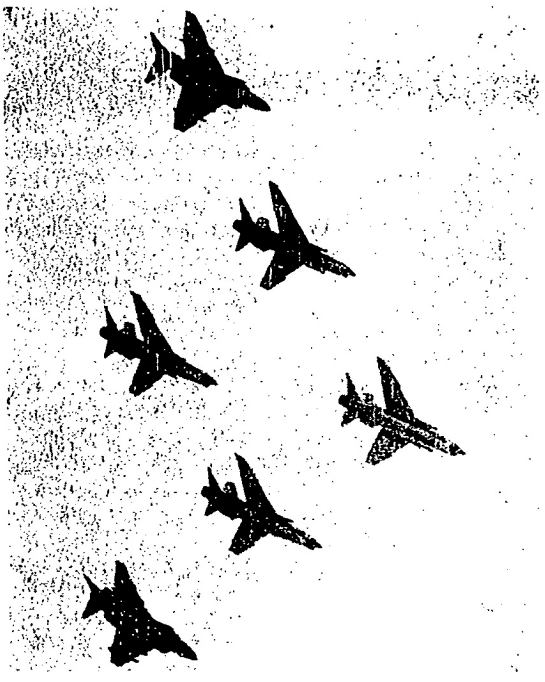
to defend on the ground and mass in the air. He recommended a progressive decrease of land and sea forces, with a corresponding increase of air forces strong enough to achieve command of the air. He argued that once command of the air was realized, a nation keeping up its own air strength could crush an enemy's war-making capacity and his will to resist. He was incensed over what he considered the illogical concept in World War I of utilizing the new aerial weapon solely as an auxiliary to the army and navy. He was highly critical of the total neglect during the war for either side to exploit the airplane by entrusting aerial forces with independent offensive missions. In his opinion auxiliary aviation of the army and navy, as then constituted, was incapable of attaining command of the air and could not possibly be considered a real air force. Therefore, he strongly advocated an independent air force, made up of a mass of battle units, capable of launching powerful offensives over land and sea and deep into the heart of the enemy's territory. He believed that the creation of an independent air force was an absolute necessity and that such an air force should be on an equal status with the army and navy. He saw auxiliary aviation as a luxury his country could not afford. His feelings were clearly evident in the definition he gave:

> Auxiliary aviation is defined as that mass of air power which facilitates or integrates land and sea actions, or a mass of air power delegated to render designated service to the army or navy and strictly confined to that purpose; therefore not designed for the conquest of the command of the air. Consequently, auxiliary aviation can in no way influence the issue of the struggle for command.

Thus, Douhet concluded that the independent air force should be composed of the greatest air power that the country's resources could place at its disposal. In other words, Italy should not divert under any circumstances its limited aerial resources to secondary purposes, such as auxiliary aviation for the army and navy, local air defense, or anti-aircraft defenses.

The first and foremost mission of the independent air force would be to attack and destroy all aerial means of the enemy whether in air combat, at their bases and airports, or in their production centers. Douhet's idea was to inflict the greatest damage in the shortest possible time. He pointed out that the air war would be decided by "those aerial forces which are in being and ready when hostilities break out." The principle of mass had to be followed. All available air forces had to be used at the outset. In winning command of the air, he feared that to reserve any means for some other use could cause the scales to tip unfavorably to the side of the enemy.

Douhet totally subscribed to the maxim that in



Douhet did not foresee the concept of CAS.

aerial warfare the best defense was a crushing offense. In his words, "Aerial warfare admits to no defensive attitude, only the offensive." He was sure that a determined bomber attack would get through to its target even in the face of a much larger defensive force. According to his reasoning, it was necessary to resign yourself to the offensives that the enemy would inflict upon you, while putting all of your own aerial resources to work against the enemy to inflict even heavier damage on him. While not dismissing air-to-air combat, Douhet held that it should not be the purpose of strategic air to seek out and fight the enemy in the air. He conceded that should opponents meet in the air, an air battle would be inevitable. But, the most effective way to defeat enemy air power, in his view, was to seek it out on the ground, in any form, and destroy it.

After acquiring command of the air, the independent air force could provide some of its resources to meet the auxiliary air needs of the army and navy. Together with this job, Douhet envisaged the continuation of violent uninterrupted air action against surface objectives. Air power could strike at will throughout the enemy's territory. Troops, trains, naval bases, ships, arsenals, ports, oil stores, railroad junctions and depots, population centers, bridges, roads and junctions, and other targets could all be hit with relatively little risk. Further, he placed great emphasis on terrorizing and crushing civilian morale by simultaneous bombing with a combination of high explosive, incendiary and poison gas bombs. It

was Douhet's firm belief that such air actions would play a large, if not decisive, part in deciding the issue in war.

Douhet insisted that he was not minimizing the value of land and sea forces. Rather, he asserted that the three armed forces under their respective ministries would constitute an indivisible whole. This whole had to be united under a single comprehensive direction. He felt that such overall unity of action and coordination could best be effected by a superior organization of national defense over the three ministries and under the commander-in-chief. In other words, a department of national defense. Douhet was certainly one of the leaders of strategic thought in pointing the way to a new and higher concept of strategic operations based on coordination of combined land, sea, and air forces under the direction of a single unified commander.

Douhet calculated that the offensive power of an independent air force would be in direct proportion to the effectiveness of the destructive materials at its disposal. Consequently, he believed that the effectiveness of destructive materials, particularly for aerial delivery, could and should be improved on a continuing basis through research and development. He had no qualms against the use of poison gas. In fact, he believed that because of its terrible effects, poison gas would be largely used in future wars. He wrote:

> It is useless to delude ourselves. All the restrictions, all the international agreements made during peacetime are fated to be swept away like dried leaves on the winds of war. A man who is fighting a life-and-death fight—as all wars are nowadays—has the right to use any means to keep his life. War means cannot be classified as human and inhuman. War will always be inhuman, and the means which are used in it cannot be classified as acceptable or not acceptable according to their efficacy, potentiality, or harmfulness to the enemy. . . . He is a fool if not a patricide who would acquiesce in his country's defeat rather than go against those formal agreements which do not limit the right to kill and destroy, but simply the ways of killing and destroying.

From the foregoing, it is clear that Douhet's major thesis was fundamentally grounded on what he considered to be the contrasting situations on land and in the air. The defensive in World War I had proved superior to the offensive on the ground as a result of improved armaments and fire power. Since fire power would logically be improved upon with time, he concluded that ground forces were destined to be deadlocked again on static land fronts. The great air offensives would make the big difference.

Douhet did not foresee the probability of limited war of the Korean style nor for that matter counterinsurgency wars of the kind we are currently fighting in Vietnam. His concepts were geared to a general or total war which would inevitably involve a nation's total resources. There would be no distinction between soldier and civilian. Everyone would be subject to the crunch of war from the battlefronts to the previously safe rear areas. A nation would have to use its materials and war-making capacity in the most efficient manner to survive. The most efficient manner to him was to build an unbeatable, offensive, independent air force.

Before his death in 1930, Gen Douhet had the personal satisfaction of seeing his basic principles adapted in Italy. As early as 1927 the Italian armed forces were reorganized. But it did not stop there. His ideas had a resounding impact and influence on other European military strategists as well. Certain of his concepts were accepted in England, Germany and other countries to varying degrees. No country accepted them totally. American air strategists who have formulated current air doctrine also were unquestionably and significantly influenced by the philosophy and views of Douhet. During the thirties, simultaneous cries were heard in the United States from General "Billy" Mitchell for an autonomous air force. The officers of the U. S. Army Air Corps were spurred on in their fight for this goal by the parallel views of Gen Douhet. In 1941 a former reserve lieutenant colonel in the U. S. Army, Louis A. Sigaud in his book, *Douhet and Aerial Warfare,* inferred that this necessary step should be taken by the United States. But the clamor went unheeded until after World War II. In 1947 a Department of Defense and a separate air force became a reality.

World War II did not cause the dismissal of Douhet's principal views, in spite of the fact that he was proved wrong or overly optimistic on many of the important points he made. Even though the war proved to be total for the major nations involved, the great static land fronts he predicted did not materialize. Bombings of major centers and cities were devastating and the morale of the people affected, yet the anticipated crippling effect that such action would have on civilian morale and the will of the people to resist was far less than Douhet predicted. The German air attacks on England had almost the opposite effect. The English will to resist strengthened as the bombings intensified. It is thought that to some extent this is happening in North Vietnam today. Strategic bombings by the allies against Germany and Japan certainly played a large part in ultimately extracting a victory. Yet, the swift decisiveness expected by Douhet of such air actions

was not realized. The great land and naval actions in all theaters during the war played a much more decisive role in achieving victory in Europe and the Pacific than Douhet would have expected. Contrary to Douhet's harsh contempt for any form of aerial defense, the British fighters in the "Battle of Britain" took a heavy toll of German fighters and bombers. The toll was so heavy that the ultimate victory went to the defensive side. It remains a question whether Germany would have been more successful in this battle if she had put more of her resources into air power. Even the anti-aircraft weapons of World War II gained far more respect from flyers on both sides and were more effective than Douhet ever dreamed possible. He failed to see that there could be a corresponding development of the airplane. Radar and radar controlled intercepts, electronically controlled anti-aircraft guns and missiles, supersonic fighters with deadly guided missiles and other advances are all part of the story. The fact that Douhet did not foresee these advances is understandable, but his complete dismissal of all defensive measures must be recorded as an error.

As a mathematician Douhet was far from perfect. World War II revealed that he had considerably overestimated the destructive effects to be achieved per ton of high explosive bombs dropped. However, the development of nuclear weapons, which he had not perceived, changed all that and breathed new life into his thoughts.

World War II proved that strategic bombing was an important factor and that it did provide many direct and indirect results. Since then it is logical that the United States has maintained the most powerful strategic air forces in the world. It may not be quite so obvious that tactical air or auxiliary aviation also played a dominant role in the successes of World War II. In the great land battles in Europe and sea battles in the Pacific, the direct and indirect support rendered by the tactical air arms of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps stand out as indispensable ingredients in the formula for victory. Experiences in Korea and in Vietnam today reaffirm the importance of these air elements combined with land and sea forces for the conduct of modern war. The development and effectiveness of the helicopter as a mobile air transport, assault and liaison aircraft, further emphasizes the absolute need for auxiliary aviation in the armed forces. Just as in Douhet's time, we are constantly faced with three basic choices in employing the airplane. It can be employed as (1) an auxiliary to the land and sea forces, (2) an independent strategic air force, or (3) a combination of both. Thus far the United States has wisely chosen to maintain a combination of both. A nation as powerful, and one that can afford both, would be foolhardy to choose otherwise.

For a time between the Korean and Vietnam wars, over-emphasis on the strategic air force all but permitted the tactical air force to dwindle away. It might have been far more practical, when the U. S. Air Force became autonomous in 1947, to have left the tactical air force element as an integral part of the U. S. Army's auxiliary aviation. The independent air force would then have only been concerned with offensive and defensive strategic air matters. This would have been consistent with the concept of maintaining a Navy with its offensive and defensive air arm, and a Marine Corps with its essential integrated air-ground team. Few, if any, army officers do not envy this latter model of a modern integrated fighting force. Every soldier and Marine knows that the fighter bomber combination with infantry, artillery, and tanks is the only practical battlefield force in modern war.

Since near nuclear parity has been achieved, both sides seek to avoid, if possible, the holocaust of a total nuclear war. Limited wars and so called wars of national liberation, with limitations imposed by both sides, are far from being total and therefore are much more probable. To ensure a flexible response to all possibilities, it is necessary to maintain a balance of forces to meet the wide spectrum of threats. While Douhet's concepts are not applicable to counterinsurgency and limited war situations, they are, because of the introduction of nuclear weapons, made more valid today in a general or total war environment.

Most theorists had seen renewed validity in Douhet's theories when the United States had a nuclear monopoly. However, another theorist more recently suggests that perhaps since the age of nuclear parity, Douhet's philosophy may be threatened with utter finality. It might be that we would be inviting national disaster for the sake of achieving command of the air in the Douhet sense. Instead of war remaining the means of attaining a suitable political end, an unlimited nuclear war could become an end in itself. In his wildest dreams Douhet certainly did not conceive that the efficacy of weapons would be increased to the extent that the future of whole nations could be destroyed. He was quick to point out the danger of consulting what Napoleon did as being applicable to a more modern situation. It would be entirely unfair not to expect that in our circumstances Douhet would be anything but an imaginative, wise and most helpful counsel.

The inexhaustible source of reflection found in Douhet's writings has surely earned for him a place beside the likes of Clausewitz, Jomini and Mahan. The students of war strategy will find him invaluable to ponder. One cannot help but learn from such a prophet. Indeed, the sky has become the third battlefield in war. As the circumstances before us continue to change so drastically, we need only remind ourselves of the importance of keeping the views of these past pioneers of strategic thought in proper perspective. USMC