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OPERATIONAL PROTECTION OF THE GUADALCANAL OPERATION
LANDINGS

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction
of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

OPERATIONAL PROTECTION OF THE GUADALCANAL OPERATION
LANDINGS

It has been argued that the operational commander's decision to withdraw the aircraft carrier-based operational protection earlier than planned at Guadalcanal placed the operation in extremis. The operational commander's decision as to what was necessary and possible to protect with the aircraft carriers was based on the means available and the risk involved. In view of the information he had his actions can be justified, but his overall command of the operation is subject to criticism. There were things that could have been done better, and there are lessons to be learned.

In this paper I look at the issue of operational protection of the landing during the planning stage, and when the operational commander made the decision to withdraw it. Centers of gravity at all levels are considered in order to analyze the operational commander's decision. Lastly I consider s what the operational commander could have done better, and look at the need to properly plan for operational protection in a future Operational Maneuver From the Sea.

I.

INTRODUCTION

"All's well that ends well" is true for "Operation Watchtower," the Tulagi-Guadalcanal Operation of the World War II Solomons' Campaign that commenced in August 1942. I start off this way because the first major allied offensive in the Pacific, defined by many as the turning point in the Pacific War, was planned and commenced with such slender resources that it was known unofficially as Operation "Shoestring." It has been argued that the *operational commander's* decision to withdraw the aircraft carrier-based *operational protection* earlier than planned placed the operation in extremis from the start.

Operational protection of the amphibious force transports, Marine landing force and cargo ships was the responsibility of carrier air and surface screening forces.¹ During and subsequent to the landings, carrier aircraft provided effective operational protection during and subsequent to the landings, but before the cargo ships had been fully offloaded the carriers were withdrawn. Shortly thereafter, a Japanese surface force surprised the surface screening force with tactics that "owned the night" at the Battle of Savo Island. Due to a myriad of errors in communications, reconnaissance, and emphasis on enemy intentions vice capabilities, the screening force was caught off guard. Because the Japanese decided not to continue the battle, the transport and cargo ships were saved. But the threat of further attacks and lack of air support following the departure of the carriers

¹ As a point of clarification, the *transports* carried the troops and the *cargo ships* carried the majority of the ammunition, food and other equipment.

prompted a decision by the amphibious force commander to withdraw the remaining cargo ships before all of the Marines' equipment had been offloaded.

*Operational protection is aimed at preserving combat effectiveness of forces so that they can be employed at the decisive time and place. Because forces and assets are finite, it is not possible to provide protection to all forces and facilities in a given theater. Therefore, the operational commander must find a balance between what is necessary and possible to protect.*² While doctrine can incorporate operational art and planners can utilize it in their planning and execution, it is the operational commander who ultimately crosses the "t" in *art*. In the Guadalcanal Operation, the operational commander made the decision as to which *centers of gravity*³ were more vital than others. This shaped his decision as to what was necessary and possible to protect during both the planning and execution. In view of the information he had, his actions can be justified, but his overall command of the operation is subject to criticism. There were things that could have been done better, and there are lessons to be learned.

Background. In April 1942 a plan was considered by the Combined Chiefs of Staff to protect Australia and New Zealand from Japanese invasion, and to protect the long lines of communication between those countries and the U.S. The principal objective chosen was Tulagi in the Solomons.⁴ In April the Japanese had overrun the British island and on

² Milan Vego, On Operational Art (Draft) (Newport: Naval War College, 1997), 187.

³ In accordance with Doctrine for Joint Operations (Joint Pub 3-0), *Centers of Gravity* are those characteristics, capabilities, or locations from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight. While VADM Fletcher did not use the term, I believe it is useful in analyzing the subject.

⁴ U.S. Navy, Combat Narratives: The Landing in the Solomons 7-8 August 1942 (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1994), 1.

04 July, its neighbor Guadalcanal to the south. Allied reconnaissance planes observed an airfield under construction on Guadalcanal. This new airfield and a simultaneous Japanese movement down the east coast of New Guinea "increased the desirability of prompt action" and "national interest required quick action."⁵ On 16 July 1942, VADM Robert L. Ghormley (Commander South Pacific Area or COMSOPAC, under Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander Pacific Ocean Area or CINCPAC) issued his operational plan (today's *campaign plan*) consisting of three tasks (today's *operations*). Operation Watchtower was Task One.

VADM William F. Halsey had been sick since 26 May, so VADM Frank Jack Fletcher became the senior Pacific Fleet carrier commander. While a surface warfare expert, no one else had accumulated as much carrier combat experience.⁶ RADM William Smith, his cruiser commander at the battles of Coral Sea and Midway, described him: "Frank Jack was a man's man. He made quick decisions, usually the right ones." Nimitz chose him to go south to command the carriers covering the Tulagi offensive.⁷

Under the command of Fletcher would be RADM Leigh Noyes' aircraft carrier support for the attack, and RADM Richmond K. Turner's amphibious force. Noyes' force would include the carriers U.S.S. Enterprise (CV-6), U.S.S. Saratoga (CV-3) and U.S.S. Wasp (CV-7). Turner's force would include transport groups, fire support groups, a screening group (under the command of RADM V.A.C. Crutchley, R.N.), an air support group, and the Marine landing force under MGEN Alexander A. Vandergrift. A third

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ John B. Lundstrom, The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign: Naval Fighter Combat from August to November 1942 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 6.

⁷ Ibid.

force, under RADM John S. McCain and directly responsible to Ghormley, would provide scouting and advance bombing.⁸ The Supreme Commander Southwest Pacific Area, General Douglas MacArthur would provide interdiction of enemy air and naval activities west of the operational area.⁹ McCain and MacArthur were in supporting roles.

⁸ Combat Narratives, 6-9.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

II.

THE PLAN FOR OPERATIONAL PROTECTION

*"Seldom had an operation been begun under more disadvantageous circumstances."*¹⁰
MGEN Vandergrift

Without proper *operational logistics* a major operation will reach its *culminating point* before operational objectives are accomplished.¹¹ To preclude reaching the point of possibly having to shift to a defensive operation, operational protection is necessary. By protecting against enemy attack *time* can be gained. Time was necessary at Guadalcanal for the offloading of supplies from the five cargo ships in order to sustain the Marines while they obtained their objective. The length of time carrier based operational protection would be available in the operational area was the contentious issue during the planning stage.

Feasibility as defined in the 1942 Naval War College textbook Sound Military Decision is determined by the factors of the *means* available; and *acceptability* is determined by the factor of the consequences as to *costs*.¹² Associated with cost is risk. On 09 July Ghormley recommended to Nimitz and Admiral Ernest J. King (CominCh) that the operation should be postponed until adequate *means* were available. Neither Ghormley or MacArthur liked the proposed date of 01 August because of shortages of allied planes, airfields, transports and troops. Ghormley estimated it would take 36 hours to 4 days to unload, and was "extremely doubtful" that the carriers could offer close air

¹⁰ Frank O. Hough, Verle E. Ludwig, and Henry I. Shaw, Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II Vol I (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 248.

¹¹ Vego, On Operational Art, 183 [emphasis added].

¹² Sound Military Decision (Newport: U.S. Naval War College, 1942), 39.

support during whole time. It was, "...our joint opinion that the initiation of the operation at this time, without reasonable assurance of adequate air cover during each phase, could be attended with the gravest risk."¹³ "The carrier task group will be themselves exposed to attack by land-based air while unprotected by land-based aviation and it is extremely doubtful that they will be able to retain fighter escort to the transport area, especially should hostile naval forces approach."¹⁴ Both Nimitz and King disagreed with postponement.¹⁵ But due to delays in cargo loading in New Zealand, D-day was eventually postponed to 07 August.

After the Battle of Midway the Pacific Fleet controlled only four carriers (Saratoga, Enterprise, Wasp and U.S.S. Hornet (CV-8)). The Allied position in the Pacific rested largely on these carriers, while inferior aircraft and deficiencies in tactical refinement, radar, and radio hobbled the performance of their air groups."¹⁶ Due to the limited number of aircraft, trained pilots and to the long distances for land based air, carrier based planes would be assigned the brunt of the air support mission in support of the Naval forces.¹⁷

At an early July meeting between Fletcher and Turner at Pearl Harbor it was decided that the carriers would provide close air support two days prior to and on D-day. Turner was to offload and withdraw the transports the night of D-day with carrier cover if possible, and the carriers would be free to move around in case of enemy

¹³ Denis Ashton Warner, Disaster in the Pacific (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 30.

¹⁴ Stephen D. Regan, In Bitter Tempest (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 183.

¹⁵ John B. Lundstrom, "Frank Jack Fletcher Got a Bum Rap," Naval History, Fall 1992, 24.

¹⁶ Richard B. Frank, Guadalcanal (New York: Random House, 1990), 205.

¹⁷ Jeter A. Isley and Philip A. Crowl, The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 106.

counterattacks.¹⁸ After the war Fletcher wrote that at the meeting he had pointed out to Nimitz, "...the stay of the carriers to provide the umbrella would be very limited. Nimitz gave me the impression that the landing force would be ashore in two days and could dig in and accept air attacks."¹⁹ A July entry in the CincPac greybook commander's estimate states: "If this operation is a success, the task is a cinch. If not, we may lose a carrier."²⁰

On 25 July Turner advised Fletcher that if the landings went well, he would send all transports out by D+1. He stressed "the great difficulty is going to be with the five cargo vessels," estimating that three to six days would be required to offload them, and "we would need air protection during this entire period."²¹ Fletcher consulted with his air experts who determined that to provide the protection the carriers needed to stay 60 miles from Tulagi within a southward arc. Their concern was the narrow area of operation that restricted mobility and increased risk.²²

The first opportunity Fletcher had to confer with all of his key subordinates was on 27 July, 11 days prior to the landings. Fletcher stated that instead of the five days requested by Turner, he would leave in two, "...because he refused to risk air attack against his carriers for a longer period." To Vandergrift, "...even the five days mentioned by Turner involved a tremendous risk".²³ RADM Daniel C. Callaghan was Ghormley's representative at the meeting. His notes from the meeting record: "...nearly all of TF-61

¹⁸ Lundstrom, "Frank Jack Fletcher Got a Bum Rap," 24.

¹⁹ Fletcher, Frank Jack to Hanson Baldwin (New York Times), 08 July 1947. Naval War College Library "Manuscript Collection MS Coll 136."

²⁰ Lundstrom, , The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign: Naval Fighter Combat from August to November 1942, 18.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lundstrom, "Frank Jack Fletcher Got a Bum Rap," 24.

was planned to withdraw within two days after D-day and transports the evening of; that cargo ships which might need three to four days would be screened by TF-44.²⁴ In other words, *the agreed upon plan was for all of the ships to depart by D+2 with the exception of Crutchley's screening force that would remain to protect the five cargo ships.* With regard to Fletcher's retirement plans Callaghan's reported, "This sounds too sanguine to me, but they believe it can be done...AKs [cargo ships] may not be unloaded for three or four days."²⁵ According to RADM Thomas C. Kinkaid (Commander of Enterprise Task Unit) Fletcher went as far as "calculated risk warranted."²⁶ Fletcher felt bound to Nimitz's letter of instruction to him prior to the Battle of Midway, that he was governed by the "principle of calculated risk" to accept battle only where he found prospects of inflicting more damage than he could receive.²⁷

*"The operational commander in planning a major operational....is faced with some choices, because of the competing demands between force protection in the theater and protecting his operational center of gravity."*²⁸ The U.S. centers of gravity in the Pacific War in August 1942 at the different levels of war could be considered as follows.

At the *national strategic* level, the center of gravity (COG) was the will of the American people. After the landings, Americans read and heard daily about the progress on Guadalcanal. Arguably, either the loss of the American carriers and sailors, or a defeat

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Isley and Crowl, The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific, 252.

²⁶ Lundstrom, , The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign: Naval Fighter Combat from August to November 1942, 28.

²⁷ Frank, Guadalcanal, 94.

²⁸ Vego, On Operational Art, 189.

of the Marines would have equally impacted the people's will. At the *strategic* level in the Pacific Theater of War, the COG was the small fleet of aircraft carriers. They were the main strength with which to carry the fight to the Japanese. At the *operational* level, the centers of gravity changed as "Operation Watchtower" went through its phases: in the movement towards the objective the COG was the Navy ships and aircraft; during the maneuver from the transports to shore, it was with the troop carrying transports and landing craft; after the landings it became the ground forces as they gained control of the island and airfield; and lastly the COG was the airfield on Guadalcanal.

The centers of gravity at all levels are interrelated. For example, loss of the COG at the strategic level could result in defeat of a campaign or operation. Conversely, loss of the COG at the tactical or operational level might not result in the failure of a campaign or war; nevertheless, it could affect the national strategic COG or will of the people. Fletcher's dilemma was that operational protection (excluding the surface screening force) was to be provided by a strategic center of gravity.

III.

DECISION TO WITHDRAW AIR OPERATIONAL PROTECTION

*Before midnight 08 August, all objectives had been met and "everything looked rosy."*²⁹

At 1807 on 08 August (D+1) Fletcher sent the following dispatch to Ghormley:

"Fighter plane strength reduced from 99 to 78. In view of the large number of enemy torpedo planes and bombers in this area, I recommend the immediate withdrawal of my carriers. Request tankers sent forward immediately as fuel running low."³⁰

What was Fletcher's understanding of the situation at Guadalcanal? On 07 August (D-day), Turner advised Ghormley and Fletcher that all troops had disembarked on Guadalcanal, and heavy fighting continued on Tulagi.³¹ Early on 08 August Turner had committed the last reserve troops to the hard fighting on Tulagi. His transmission to Ghormley and Fletcher, "Owing to reinforcements...will not commence retirement as planned," *was not received by either when transmitted*. Turner had decided to stay until unloading was complete.³²

Since Fletcher believed Turner still planned to pull out most of the ships on the night of 08 August (D+1), he had reconsidered plans to keep the carriers near Guadalcanal through 09 August (D+2). While waiting for Ghormley's reply, Fletcher kept the carriers to the southeast, still in position for 09 August support of the five cargo

²⁹ Samuel Eliot Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume IV: Coral Sea, Midway and Submarine Actions May 1942-August 1942 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949), 296.

³⁰ Samuel Eliot Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume V: The Struggle for Guadalcanal August 1942-February 1943 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949), 27.

³¹ Lundstrom, "Frank Jack Fletcher Got a Bum Rap," 25.

³² Ibid.

ships and Crutchley's screening force. Ghormley had every reason to believe the plan was going as Turner had projected, so he approved Fletcher's recommendation.³³

Ghormley later explained: "When Fletcher, the man on the spot, informed me he had to withdraw for fuel, I approved. He knew the situation in detail; I did not. This resulted in my directing Turner to withdraw his surface forces to prevent their destruction. I was without detailed information as to Turner's situation, but I knew that his forces had landed and that our major problem would become one of giving every possible support to Vandergrift."³⁴

How did the decision affect operations? Because of Fletcher's decision to depart and Turner's decision to remain longer, the amphibious force would be dangerously exposed to air attack, so Turner decided to move out the transports and cargo ships at 0600 the next morning. Vandergrift's division commander report states: "As the operation had been planned with the expectation that the transport force would remain in the area until D-plus 4 days, and in view of the unsatisfactory progress of unloading supplies, the decision to withdraw the surface vessels was most alarming, as its execution would profoundly affect the entire future course of operations in the Solomons."³⁵ When Turner's transports and cargo ships eventually departed late in the afternoon of 08 August, the Marines had four units of fire (theoretically four days of ammunition per weapon) and a 37 day supply of food³⁶; about 1400 Marines had not yet been

³³ Ibid., 26.

³⁴ Hough, Ludwig, and Shaw, Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II Vol. I, 259.

³⁵ Combat Narratives, 88.

³⁶ Hough, Ludwig, and Shaw, Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal: History of U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II Vol. I, 260.

disembarked³⁷; and less than half their supplies and equipment, no radar, no coast defense guns, and no heavy construction equipment had been offloaded.³⁸ Resupply would not begin until the first high speed transport runs of 15 August.

Was Fletcher wrong? Naval historian Samuel E. Morison wrote that Fletcher's reasons for withdrawal were "flimsy". In response to the reasons Fletcher cited in the 08 August message, Morison rebutted: Fletcher had more fighter strength than the three American carriers before Midway; any Japanese planes in the area were an infinitely greater threat to the anchored transports than to the carriers; and there was sufficient fuel to remain on station for several more days.³⁹

With regard to the fighter strength, there were three sources of fighters and pilots in the Pacific: the first was on the carriers; the second consisted of forty-nine fighters scattered throughout the Pacific for island defense; and the third consisted of two squadrons still training in Hawaii.⁴⁰ As for Morison's comparison to Midway, the difference was that Japanese land based fighters and bombers that had made their appearance at Guadalcanal, had not been a force multiplier available to the Japanese at Midway.

With regard to the enemy threat, in 1963 Fletcher stated that his decision was based on the following: only four carriers with no replacements due for nine months; the

³⁷ Isley and Crowl, The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific, 130.

³⁸ Russell F. Weigley, The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 276.

³⁹ Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume V: The Struggle for Guadalcanal August 1942 February 1943, 28.

⁴⁰ Frank, Guadalcanal, 138-9.

Japanese could put more carriers in the area than the U.S.; Japanese land-based high level and dive bombers, and torpedo planes in the area; CINCPAC instructions specifically limited the risk to carriers in the operation; and COMSOPAC intelligence reported an enemy submarine division moving into the area.⁴¹ While intelligence held the Japanese carriers still in home waters, Fletcher did not discount them as a potential threat.

With regard to the fuel situation, in 1947 Fletcher wrote that he had recommended withdrawal because of the fuel shortage. He had been surprised to find the destroyers running short almost at once and some of the carriers and cruisers using much more than expected. He attributed the fuel usage to steaming in the doldrums which required them to run at 30 knots most of the daylight hours because of almost constant air operations. Had they stayed one more day, which would have required fueling the destroyers at night, they would "have to proceed quite slowly to our rendezvous and would be caught in a very bad position if enemy carriers appeared on the ninth."⁴² RADM Kinkaid's war diary of 08 August noted, "Fuel situation of this force becoming critical. It is estimated the destroyers have fuel for about three days at 15 knots and the heavy ships a little more." Additionally, Noyes sent a message the same day stating that his destroyers had 31 hours of fuel at 25 knots.⁴³

Nimitz later wondered why the carriers were not refueled one at a time. "Admittedly these carriers were precious," as Nimitz pointed out, "only because they could be used."⁴⁴ Could the carriers have helped at the Battle of Savo Island? In 1947

⁴¹ Regan, In Bitter Tempest, 191.

⁴² Fletcher, Letter to Hanson.

⁴³ Regan, In Bitter Tempest, 192.

⁴⁴ Isley and Crowl, The U.S. Marines and Amphibious War: Its Theory, and Its Practice in the Pacific 128.

Fletcher wrote, "The carriers would have been of no value in a night action and we were confident that the cruisers could look out for themselves in that kind of action."⁴⁵ In 1963 Fletcher stated if he had it all to do over again that morning, and knew about the losses he would, "leave one carrier group behind to fuel and would move two carrier groups up to attack and continue to provide air support to Kelly Turner. This did not occur to me at the time as being sound."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Fletcher, Letter to Baldwin.

⁴⁶ Regan, In Bitter Tempest, 199.

IV.

HINDSIGHT AND FORESIGHT

While an operational commander is responsible for considering the strategic consequences with regard to risking forces, committing the carriers to the South Pacific operation and the attendant risk involved had been considered and accepted by his superiors. They knew the feasibility of the operation and had accepted the potential costs. Fletcher focused on these strategic assets at the expense of orchestrating the overall operation as operational commander. According to Fletcher's flag lieutenant, Harry Smith, Fletcher understood his role to be rather minimal. Once the Marines had landed, Turner would be in charge of the amphibious ships and McCain would cover the air with his land based planes.⁴⁷ Had Fletcher left the responsibility of aerial force protection to Noyes and concentrated on the overall operation, it is possible that the carriers would not have withdrawn as they did (although doubtful as Noyes did agree with Fletcher's decision). More importantly, Fletcher might have demanded more effective, coordinated aerial searches by his, MacArthur's and McCain's air forces; and closer communications between the protection and amphibious forces. These actions might have improved unity of effort, precluded to some extent the disaster at Savo Island, and the years of controversy over the decision to withdraw the carriers.

In 1942 amphibious operations were largely in the developmental stage. The first major annual fleet landing exercise (since the first held in 1935) to include aircraft

⁴⁷ Ibid., 186.

carriers with an air attack group had been only one year earlier. At the time, the Navy was focused on Plan Orange, the Mahanian fleet battle to defeat Japan. I would argue that this was reflected in Fletcher's decisions for the employment of the carriers

In 1998 the U.S. Marine Corps' concept of Operational Maneuver From The Sea (OMFTS), is largely in the developmental stage, much like the amphibious operations of 1942 were. OMFTS is an operational concept for which *operational reach* is vital for sustainment (combat service support) from vessels in or near the littoral. "Combat service support flow must be efficient, *secure* and timely, with the option to remain sea-based or to buildup support areas ashore."⁴⁸ In accordance with the Navy concept, "We will be a full partner in developing new amphibious warfare concepts and capabilities for implementing the Marine Corps concept OMFTS. We will provide *force protection*...and logistics support..."⁴⁹ We must plan for sustained operational protection during an OMFTS. One of the principles of the "National Military Strategy" is that "we will...apply decisive force."⁵⁰ This must include not only forces marked for the objective, but also forces provided for operational protection. In today's threat environment with a proliferation of missiles and submarines, friendly *providers of operational protection* (surface fire support groups and carrier battle groups) for sea-based logistics bases of operations (transport groups) can be easily targeted. With a limit of twelve aircraft carriers in today's Navy, arguably strategic assets, will the operational commander be willing to risk one of them to provide operational protection for an operational or tactical

⁴⁸ Charles C. Krulak, Operational Maneuver from the Sea (Department of the Navy, United States Marine Corps. 04 January 1996), 13 [Italics added].

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of the Navy, Washington, D.C. Forward...From the Sea: The Navy Operational Concept (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Navy, March 1997), 10 [Italics added].

⁵⁰ National Military Strategy of the United States. Washington, D.C., 1995.

asset in support of an OMFTS? What if maritime superiority has not been achieved in an operation, yet that operation is prolonged and requires continued sustainment?

At the 27 July 1942 conference in preparation for Operation Watchtower, Callaghan reported, "Everyone deplored the lack of time to plan carefully and thoroughly, but saw no way out except to whip plans into shape as rapidly as possible."⁵¹ In today's plans, *branches* or options must be considered to add flexibility and alter the basic plan, such as availability [or non-availability] of friendly capabilities or resources.⁵² In order to prevent what happened to operational protection at the beginning of Operation Watchtower, planners must consider what impact the withdrawal of operational protection will have on the operation before any forces are committed.

⁵¹ Morison, History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II Volume IV, 281.

⁵² Doctrine for Joint Operations (Joint Pub 3-0 01 February 1995), III-20.

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