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Reexamination of a Quintessential Joint Force Operation Case Study: Urgent Fury

by Thomas Bundt

Hell no, none, zero! You can scream and shout and gnash your teeth all you want, but the folks out there like it. It was done right, and done with dispatch.

-White House aide on being asked if Grenada had any political fallout[1]

Although Operation Urgent Fury, the 1983 American-led intervention in Grenada, was a successful operation from a public approval standpoint, significant concerns developed over the performance of the joint command structure charged with the conduct of the mission.[2] Examination and reassessment of relevant literature reveals the overall operation as a textbook case study of the intricacies of joint forces command.[3] In an effort to continue to capture historical lessons learned, further introspection of Operation Urgent Fury, if only to reexamine the primary shortfalls of a joint command experience, is necessary. Reviews of literature mixed with current updates to this operation delineate significant components and recommendations for consideration in future joint doctrine reviews. This analysis narrows the components and recommendations into three mutually 'inclusive' categories as they relate to three key joint force doctrine tenets: command and control, operational techniques, and equipment interoperability (joint procurement/acquisition).

Operation Urgent Fury was the U.S. response to the growing destabilization in Grenada that climaxed with the assassination of Maurice Bishop, Grenada's president.[4] Following the Iranian crisis and expansion of communist presence in the region, this operation proved critical to America's prestige and commitment to national security.[5] Because of the nature of the crisis, the time in our nation's history, and the prior military fiasco demonstrated by Operation Desert One,

[1] Mark Adkin, *Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 333.
[2] Ronald Cole, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada 12 October—2 November 1983*, (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997), 63-67; and Lind, William S. *The Grenada Operation*, Report to the Congressional Military Reform Caucus, Washington DC, Apr 1984.
[3] Jerome Edwards, Anastasio, M. A., Harper, G. S., and Simmons, M. E., *National Security Program, Grenada: Joint Logistical Insights for "No-Plan" Operations*, (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, 1989), vi.
[4] Nicholas Dujmovic, Special Report: *The Grenada Documents: Window on Totalitarianism*, (Washington D.C: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Inc., 1988), 7-9; 18-21; and Loppnow, R. E. *Deciding Quickly and Deciding Well: A Case Study of Grenada*, UMI Dissertation Services, (Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell Co., 1996), 363.

[5] James Ferguson, *Grenada: Revolution in Reverse*, (Nottingham, Great Britain: Russell Press, 1990), 5.

diplomatic and military bodies seriously considered the measures necessary to ensure success.[6] The primary mission imperatives included the neutralization of the Grenada forces, protection and evacuation of US and designated foreign nationals, stabilization of the internal situation, and transition to peacekeeping.[7] To complete these mission imperatives, the US deployed nearly 6,000 soldiers, marines, airman, and sailors to the region under the command and control of a single joint force commander.[8]

Although this vast force complied with the mission imperatives, significant incidents and unintended casualties resulted from deficient command and control relationships, unfamiliarity with operational designs, and the lack of interoperability of key equipment.[9] Some of these same themes likewise resonate with current challenges in present day joint operations such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan.[10] Specific to Operation Urgent Fury case study these issues raised great concern for Department of Defense planners, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of Defense in the mission's aftermath. Aside from specific lessons learned annotated in after-action reviews, the single greatest commitment to amend these shortcomings was the enactment of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act legislation.[11]

The Goldwater-Nichols legislation of 1986 was required address many of the challenges facing a military commander during joint operations.[12] A primary challenge was the perceived inherent parochialism of individual branches and the competition for resources that kept many of the relevant components from finding joint solutions. In the end, joint doctrine was rarely adhered too.[13] To rejuvenate the need for "jointness," the legislation refocused efforts through the participation of high-ranking advocates from the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) position to the individual service chiefs. The challenges of joint command are multifaceted and become increasingly complex in the confusion of a rapidly evolving situation. The command faced critical concerns such as mutual distrust among service components and the needs of the political body over-watching the military action, as these would likely compound the complexity of a joint mission.[14] Therefore, understanding the critical relationships involved in the planning and execution of a joint operation helps define the three thematic points of concern. The most

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[6] Cole, 1.
[7] Ibid 27-29; and Joseph Doty, "Urgent Fury—A Look Back…A Look Forward," Paper for Joint Military Operations Department (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1994): 4.

[8] Ferguson, 1.
[9] Edwards et al., 40; Peter Dunn, and Bruce Watson, ed., *American Intervention in Grenada: The Implications of Operation 'Urgent Fury*.' (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 102; Peter Petre, *General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the Autobiography: It Doesn't Take a Hero*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 252-253.
[10] Command and control relationships specific to the support elements in the Iraqi theater provided significant challenges when coordinating medical support as well as certain infrastructure development projects. This was a component of the restoration of essential services projects for the Iraqi medical establishment as a component of health attaché operations during authors' tour in Baghdad 2006-2007.
[11] Archie Barrett, "Empowering Eisenhower's Concept," *Joint Force Quarterly*, (Autumn, 1996), 13.
[12] William Depuy, *For the Joint Specialist: Five Steep Hills to Climb*, Parameters, (US Army War College Quarterly, Summer, 1995), 141-144; Lawrence Wilkerson, "What Exactly is Jointness?," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (Summer, 1997), 66-68.
[13] Richard W. Stewart, *Operation Urgent Fury: The Invasion of Grenada, October 1983*, (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2008), 30.
[14] James Locher, "Taking stock of Goldwater-Nichols," *Joint Force Quarterly*, (Autumn, 1996), 10-16.

recognized theme in Operation Urgent Fury was the challenging command and control relationships.

The command headquarters for the task force (Task Force 120) was Second Fleet headquarters under Vice Admiral Joseph Metcalf, III. Vice Admiral Metcalf reported to the USCINCLANT (US Commander in Chief, Atlantic) Admiral Wesley L. McDonald. This command structure fit the vision of the CJCS General John W. Vessey, Jr., who was placed directly into the chain of command by Secretary of Defense to ensure a singular strategic direction.[15] Additionally, Admiral McDonald and his designated Commander of the Joint Task Force (CJTF), Vice Admiral Metcalf, were provided the flexibility to augment their staffs with personnel from other components. The parochial nature of the services, however, considered this arrangement unwelcome.[16] The additional lack of staffing from relevant service components into the joint headquarters reflected this opinion that incursions from the CJCS or others were considered unnecessary.[17] Using this argument of operational and communication security the army components were kept out of the panning loop until very late. Combined with the short timeframe available (3-4 days) to plan and execute the mission, the late inclusions of key players threatened achieving early operational objectives and achieve a seamless integration (synchronization) of forces.[18]

Illuminating discussions among the commanders present revolved around the staffing relationships and the interpretation of these relationships seemed to be the cornerstone difference among those present. One case in point, an excerpt from Gen (Ret.) Schwarzkopfs' book, recollects his initial meeting with Admiral McDonalds, who emphatically states, "Now for chrissakes [sic], try and be helpful would you? We've got a tough job to do and we don't need the army giving us a hard time."[19] Historical flashbacks to the open rivalry between General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz in the Pacific War come readily to mind.[20] Vice Admiral Metcalf later expressed a more subtle but indicative opinion when he stated,

> In Grenada we demonstrated to all concerned that the joint command system works. … Within the Navy, the Commander Task Force 120 organization is unique to the Second Fleet. It is my impression that a similar operating staff does not exist in the Army.[21]

This diversion of responsibility for the strained command and control relationship on the part of Vice Admiral Metcalf results from the different perceptions across the services at the highest echelons of command. These previous misconceptions have led to the current rationale regarding joint command doctrine, which dictates the responsibility for coordination resides with

[15] Cole.
[16] S. J Labadie, Jointness for the Sake of Jointness in Operation "Urgent Fury," (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 1993): i, 2, 11.
[17] Ibid; and Edwards, et al., 16-19, 37; and Lind, 3.
[18] Lind, 3.
[19] Petre, 246.
[20] Morton, L. *Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1959-1987, Pacific Command: A Study in Interservice Relations*, (US Air Force Academy, Office of Air Force History, 1987), 129-153.

[21] Metcalf III, Joseph Vice Admiral, USN. *Ambiguity and Command: Organizational Perspectives on Military Decision Making*, Decision *Making and the Grenada Rescue Operation*, edited by James G. March and Roger Wessinger-Baylon, 1988, 277-297.

the CJTF charged with integration of the task force, unity of command, synchronization and economy of force imperatives.[22]

As a result of service relationships and perceptions, the joint headquarters did not initially regard the army staff component as a viable entity, and subsequently the navy counterparts dwarfed army presence. As an example, 18th Airborne Corps Headquarters did not participate in the initial planning of Operation Urgent Fury, resulting in the lack of logistical support and priority for the 82nd Airborne Division (AB) to sustain the operation to secure the southern portion of the island.[23] The last minute request of the CJTF to task MG Schwarzkopf, and his miniscule army staff, to coordinate the entire land campaign accentuated this recognizable flaw. When Admiral Metcalf summoned the army commanders to a meeting he did not invite the marine commanders explaining that "he already knows how they operate."[24] One glaring shortcoming in this analogy is that the army commanders were not familiar with the marine doctrine (and vice versa) and follow on conduct of operations between these service components reflected this purposeful omission.

Amazingly, until the campaign began, the CJTF did not realize the management of ground forces was not in his or his staff's "area of expertise."[25] Oddly enough, Vice Admiral Metcalf's article "Decision-Making and the Grenada Rescue Operation" describes joint interactions as fully complementary and devoid of any significant altercations or confusion.[26] Although MG Schwarzkopf was eventually appointed as deputy commander, the initial failure to properly staff the joint task force headquarters and select a unified ground force commander plagued the entire operation.[27] In addition to the initially flawed command and control relationships, the services differences in tactical operations execution further exacerbated the situation.[28]

The delineation of boundaries for the marines, army rangers, and airborne units adds an underlying tenor of differences in operational modus operandi. For the most part, popular literature only lightly brushes on these operational differences although they were painfully significant among the services.[29] Marine and army units never fully realized the mutual benefits of working in coordinated operations and instead actually competed for maneuver space and resources.[30] Without knowledge of tactical and operational guidelines between services, fratricidal incidents resulted in at least17 friendly fire casualties, such as the failed coordination

[22] Edwards et al., 17-18; Locher, 10-16; Vitale, M. C. "Jointness by Design, Not Accident," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (Autumn, 1995), 24-30.
[23] Edwards et al., 35.
[24] Labadie.

[25] Petre, 252-253.
[26] Metcalf III, 277-297.
[27] Edwards et al., 34.

[28] Cole, 58.
[29] Metcalf III.

[30] Cole, 58.

between the air-naval gunfire team and the 82nd AB Division HQ.[31] In another incident, intelligence failed to provide accurate maps and pre-coordinated evacuation assets.[32] For example, the 82nd AB Division assumed a comprehensive medical package would be in the operational area. Although the navy had ample medical resources available, information was not forthcoming and prior coordination for medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) and procedures to bring in evacuation assets did not occur.[33] Overall, the mistakes of poor cross-coordination and understanding of other service doctrine cost both in terms of lives and equipment lost, regardless of the opinion that Operation Urgent Fury was designed as an instantaneous 'coup de main' thrust against an ill-prepared and incapable force.[34] Exacerbating this failure to appreciate other service operational guidelines, the level of interoperability between equipment from each component created additional complications.

Communication systems between the services were simply not compatible. Often times, individuals looking directly at one another had no means of exchanging information, calling in requests for fire, or receiving medical evacuation support.[35] Code books and other mediums required for understanding inter-service operating protocols and procedures were not practiced or distributed prior to the operation. Additionally Vice Admiral Metcalf later addressed Congress to establish the root cause of the lack of communications interoperability.[36] He highlighted the failure of interoperability of not only the aged ships, but even on the latest vessels, such as the USS Mount Whitney.[37]

From the acquisition standpoint, services position themselves for funding and create a host of contracts and independent designs for equipment that often do not operate in conjunction with comparable equipment from the other services.[38] This challenge to acquisition defined the lack of coherent systems whereby services cooperate to create a complete interoperability among common equipment items such as radios, guidance systems, and night vision devices. The proposed solution places individuals from other services into cross-functional assignments to operate service-specific equipment. Current methodology includes a joint review of requirements through what is called a Joint Requirements Oversight Council (JROC) in order to garner more standardized equipment and complementary systems across the services. This is designed to be in line with the Combatant Commands (COCOM) individualized Integrated Priority Lists (IPL). The purpose of this system is to validate as well as, evaluate and prioritize those military capability requirements across all services.[39] Historically, this modus operandi has not proven completely successful, and similarly in Operation Urgent Fury, the problem was never fully alleviated requiring strategic level amendments to remedy this inter-service shortfall.

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[31] Adkins, 308-309; and Cole, 4-5; and Douglas Lovelace, "Unification of the United States Armed Forces: Implementing the 1986 Department of Defense Reorganization Act," (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1996), 6.
[32] Edwards et al, 30.
[33] Ibid.

[34] Petre, 248; Cole, 2.
[35] Adkins, 221-230, 333-342; Lovelace, 6.
[36] Metcalf III.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Department of Command, Leadership and Management, *How the Army Runs*, A Senior Leader Reference Handbook, 2007-2008, 26th Edition (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2008), Chap. 4 and 9.
[39] Lovelace, 30-35; 59.

Consistent throughout the literature resources, including primary source personal accounts, websites, and journals, the single greatest lesson learned from the multifaceted outcomes of Operation Urgent Fury was the enactment of Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act. This act, intended to address a myriad of issues resulting from this operation as well as Operation Desert Eagle, accomplished many of the stated objectives mentioned specifically in this case study. The command and control relationships as well as tactical, operational and strategic improvements in mission accomplishment are noteworthy when reviewing other operations such as the follow on successful campaigns in Panama, the Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, and the ongoing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.[40] Although this legislation has not completely alleviated all the challenges with joint operations and relationships, there are marked improvements in command relationships and a renewed emphasis on the importance of the effects of a functional joint team.[41] In this reevaluation of a joint operation, it is critical to note these positive outcomes, derived from legislative mandate, promoted greater leadership attention and adherence to joint doctrine tenets.

However, from this case study what requires reexamination are those constructs that remain wanting now for over 25 years since the operation. Principally, from findings in this case study and current events, the joint acquisition and procurement processes continue to lag behind. This element, often plagued by myopic service interests, does not always correlate to the needs of the Joint requirements and continues to be a point of debate even today at the highest level military institutions.

Current reviews of the legislation as well as present day revisions to the acquisition and contracting processes are at the top of the agenda in Washington, specifically since the change in leadership of the executive office. The effects of frustrations and ongoing critiques of the process abound and have evolved quite recently with Secretary Gates, and the Secretary of Defenses intent to cut and curtail certain key service programs.[42] These recent decisions met with a storm of controversy and open discussions focused on removing the parochial nature of any one service body and instead reviewing redesigning resources to current versus future needs.[43] The future systems, though very advanced, are often looked at through a scope that is does not always conform to the needs of other services.[44] The separation of funding streams and ownership of certain resources will continue to play a significant role in future acquisitions as well. As a result, the future of interoperability of equipment and other revisions currently underway such as the Program, Planning, Budgeting and Execution Systems, (PPBES) and the acquisition process, will likely be the next step towards addressing some of the key remaining joint operational provisions currently, and into the future.

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[40] Clark A. Murdock, Michele A. Flournoy, Christopher A. Williams, and Kurt M. Campbell, "Beyond Goldwater-Nichols: Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era," Phase I Report, (Washington DC: Center for Strategic Studies Institute, March 2004), 17.

[41] Richard B. Myers, "A Word from the Chairman," *Joint Force Quarterly*, (Summer, 2002), 5; Murdock et al.
[42] Internet, CNN Politics.com website, http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/06/gates.budget.cuts/index.html, "Gates Announces Major Pentagon Priority Shifts," (accessed 5 May 2009).
[43] Ibid.
[44] Lovelace, 30-35.

Operation Urgent Fury combined the navy, army, marine, air force, special operations, and seals into one command structure. Although Urgent Fury demonstrated the essence of joint command challenges, operations of this scale were atypical and often rarely practiced. Operation Urgent Fury provides a historically accurate model, which acted as a catalyst for change of joint command relationships, functions and priorities. Lessons learned include command and control equanimity, understanding the differences in operational techniques among the services, and readdressing the rationale for equipment interoperability. These represent some of the more predominant themes in this joint operational case study (although not all inclusive). We would be wise to review these same constructs in future operational designs as well.

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