

# Primacy of Coalition Warfare

First hand experiences  
by LtCol Tom Williams (Ret)

Whenever I hear someone call themselves an expert or claim to know the formula for success, I am immediately suspicious. Success is often disguised as hard work, and in truth, there is no magic formula. However, successful tactics, techniques, and procedures employed in past conflicts are a good place to start. Every conflict, crisis, or war is unique, as are the military lessons I have learned from my participation in two tours in Vietnam, 1969–70, 1972–73, and the First Gulf War, 1990–91, also known as DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. The purpose of this article is to make a comparison between both conflicts and to explain from my perspective the major differences. It is not my intent to glorify war, but once we, as nations of the free world, have exhausted all diplomatic options and have committed ourselves to a conflict, we must fight to win without additional risk to life, operational costs, and human resources as we mistakenly did in Vietnam. With the benefit of hindsight, useful and real benefits arise from my participation in both Vietnam and the Gulf War. Therefore, I have a clear understanding of the true cost and carnage of war, and I have formed strong opinions regarding our successes and failures during these conflicts. During the Vietnam War, there was no serious consideration given to destroying the will and capacity of the enemy to fight as we did in the Gulf War. The body-count measurement of success was not valid, nor was it a winning strategy, especially when the enemy was so resilient and willing to throw more human resources into the

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conflict. There has been much written about the Vietnam War, and there have been many who have expressed their reasoning for why we were there. As a young inexperienced company-grade

officer at the time, I did as I was ordered. *An order isn't an invitation to debate*, and I went to war.

Initially, after World War II, America wrongly supported the First French



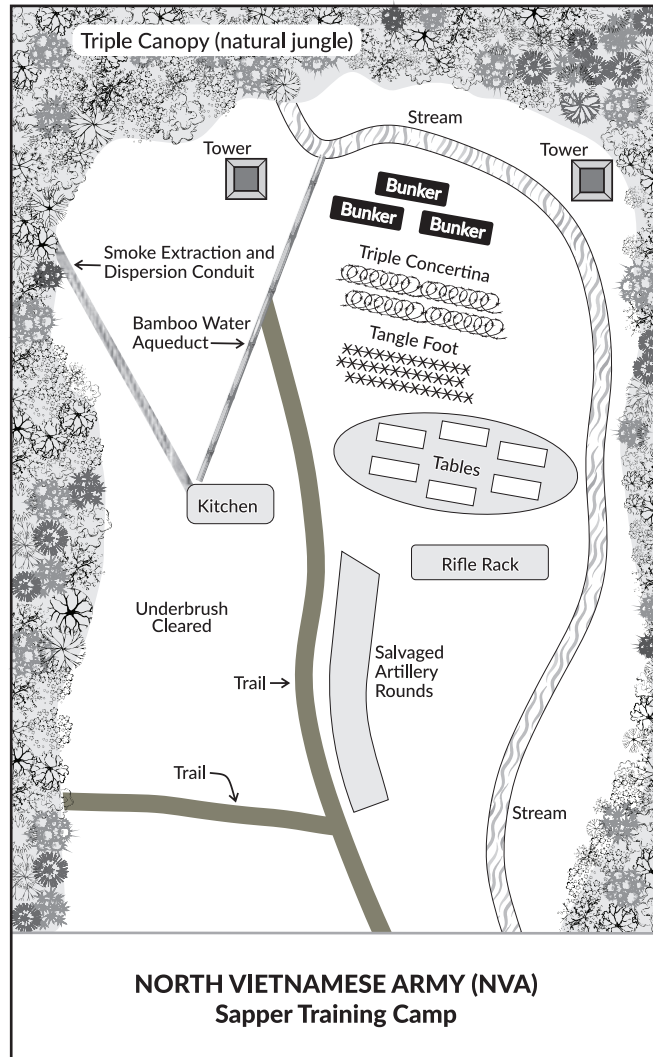
**The author discovers a 1,000 pound North Vietnamese Army rice cache among other in the notorious "Arizona Territory" west of Da Nang in the central I Corps zone. (Photo by author.)**

Indochina War in Vietnam while the French were rebuilding their colonial empire. Following the defeat of the French by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu, America then backed a corrupt South Vietnamese regime against the Communists. This was the “Second Indochina War,” it was our Vietnam War. It was also a war in which America failed to bring the enemy to its knees, lost the support of the American people, and was finally forced, by public opinion, to withdraw.

In the Gulf War, the world community of nations had a unifying purpose and a credible threat to world peace, the invasion and occupation of Kuwait by Iraq. The purpose became the unifying factor, which was the glue that held the Coalition together. Therefore, it was unanimously agreed that Kuwait must be liberated from the ruthless and murderous Iraqi occupying forces numbering approximately five hundred thousand.

Another lesson learned was the necessity for national, international, and regional support. If it were not for Watergate, Nixon would have had that necessary support, in contrast to the Gulf War, whereby the UN made its voice heard, as the founders of the UN originally intended. Every opportunity was made to resolve the crisis politically but to no avail. In the absence of Iraqi compliance, the decision was made to engage the Iraqi threat with military force.

As a precursor to military intervention, real estate, militarily known as an intermediate staging base, was needed near Kuwait to assemble friendly forces. Saudi Arabia was concerned that Iraq would continue south from Kuwait and subsequently occupy their oil industry on the east coast, the King of Saudi Arabia, King Fahd, requested the United States to protect The Kingdom against

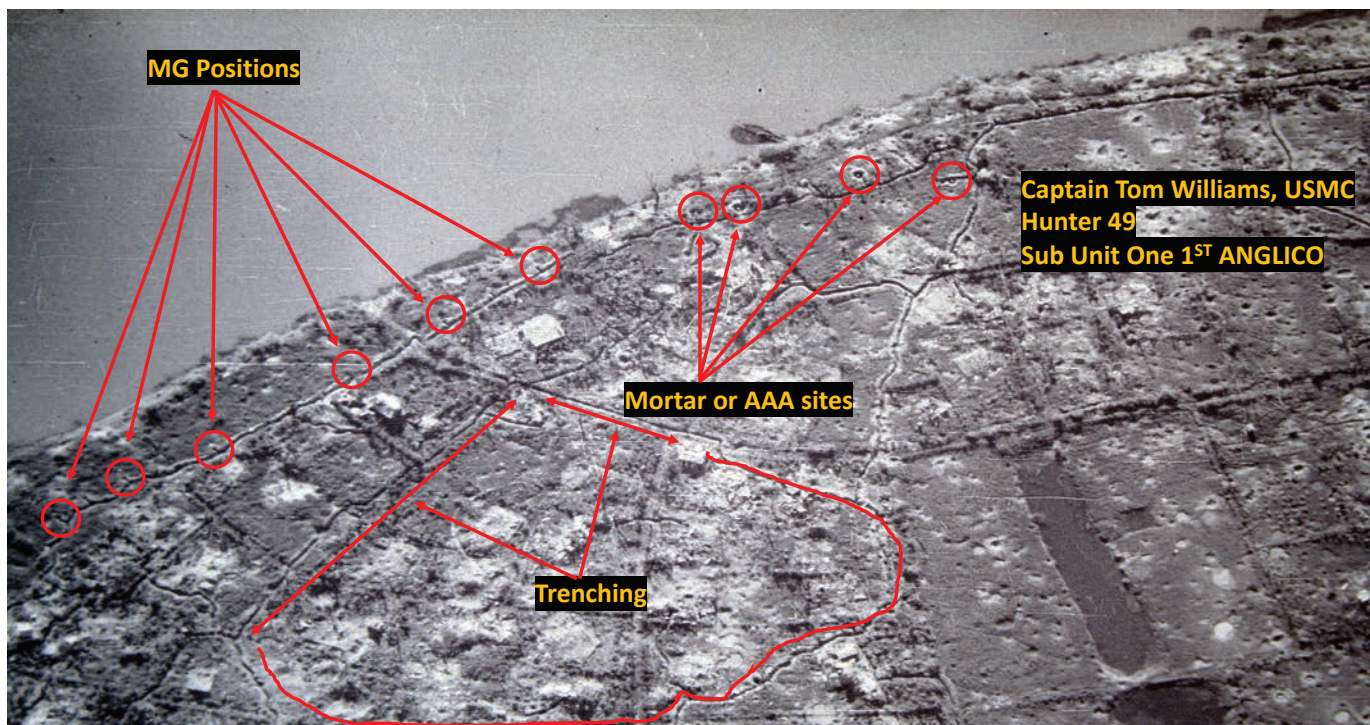


*Sketch of an North Vietnamese Army sapper training camp in Vietnam. (Image provided by author.)*

any such attack. Therefore, Saudi Arabia was used as our intermediate staging base to assemble, plan, prepare, train, and ultimately launch the Coalition force to liberate Kuwait. In Vietnam, we had South Vietnam as our intermediate staging base; however, for political reasons, we allowed the enemy to operate from sanctuaries in Cambodia, North Vietnam, and Laos; additionally, we never effectively isolated the battlefield, nor did we take the war to North Vietnam until it was too late under Nixon. We had the air power, but it was not focused on eliminating the will of the enemy nor was it employed to eliminate essential support facilities as we did in the Gulf War. The next lesson learned highlighted the logisti-

cal need in providing enough time to assemble, organize, and train a credible coalition force. From August 1990 to January 1991, forces from Europe, the Middle East, and the United States flowed into locations throughout Saudi Arabia and adjacent Arabian Gulf countries. From my perspective at the time, this was a surprise. I can only assume that the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, thought that he had the high ground and that the deployment was only a huge bluff. Although the Maritime Prepositioning Force concept was frequently exercised in peacetime training, the Gulf War was the first time it was employed for a real-world contingency. Leading the way for the deployment and build-up of Marine forces was the 7th MEB from Twentynine Palms, CA. Its mission was to establish a secure operating area and logistics support facility in the port of Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia, and to achieve the quick response required. The Marine Corps employed the strategic option called the Maritime Prepositioning Force. This allowed the 7th MEB from California,

assisted by a Navy support element, to rendezvous with equipment and supplies stored aboard forward-deployed Maritime Prepositioned Ships. The employment of the Maritime Prepositioning Force concept was a real game changer for the rapid deployment of combat forces on short notice. Never in recent history had so many Marines been deployed so rapidly with the equipment and supplies to sustain them for 30 days. Not since World War II had there been such a large coalition of forces assembled in response to such an international calling. It was necessary to build a unique and exceptionally strong coalition of multinational, task-organized military force with many contributing nations providing air, ground,



*Aerial photo taken by the author while flying an aerial observer mission over the Quang Tri Citadel during the 1972 Easter Offensive. (Photo by author.)*

and sea forces—a Coalition air-ground task force.

Because of security considerations, it is difficult to be open, transparent, and inclusive when developing the war plan, but it is necessary. Therefore, a vigilant vetting process is essential to ensure there is no enemy on the inside without compromising the deep trust and relationships at all subordinate lev-

chain of command from the President through the Secretary of Defense directly to combatant commanders. Prior to the Gulf War, desert warfare training of the U.S. forces was a recurring training requirement for U.S. Services. Each U.S. Service component had its respective desert training areas. It is also significant to note that every second year a major staff exercise (Internal Look), a

region of the world. Americans often bring more to the table militarily and are often the leaders for multinational responses to international conflicts, however, they should guard against driving the situation by participating and listening more to dialogue during deliberations. In conclusion, I cannot over-emphasize the necessity to use military intelligence to drive the planning process and stress the importance of preparing the battlefield, another significant difference in our successful approach to winning the Gulf War that was a significant failure in the Vietnam War. The most noteworthy aspects of preparation of the battlefield during the Gulf War included the identification and destruction of the enemy center of gravity.

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***“Don’t allow yourself to be drawn into a fight with someone who has more reason to be in the fight than you.”***

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els across the joint and combined forces. My aphorism for achieving the necessary trust and confidence in a joint and combined environment is continuous coordination, synchronization, and collaboration to achieve common synergy for the accomplishment of the mission.

The most unifying influence for U.S. forces was the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which streamlined the U.S. military

command post exercise was conducted at the U.S. Central Command Headquarters, MacDill Air Force Base, near Tampa, FL. At the time of the Iraqi occupation, this exercise was just reaching a conclusion. Therefore, much of the exercise discussion came to fruition in the form of reality on the ground in the Middle East with the U.S. Central Command as the responsible headquarters for responding to a crisis in this

**Personal Insight**

Any consideration for the involvement of U.S. forces in future wars should always consider: how will we account for funding the war? What are our national security interests? Do the American people support our involvement? What is our mission and what is the desired end state? What is the strat-

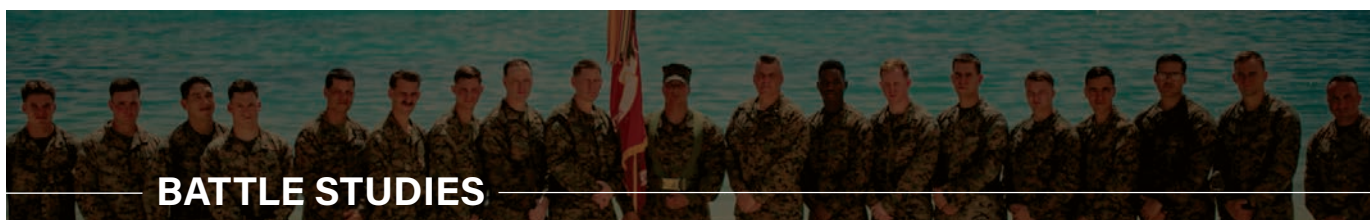


**An Iraqi defensive sand table of Kuwait City. The author took this photo on the last day of offensive operations during the 1990–91 First Gulf War. (Photo provided by author.)**

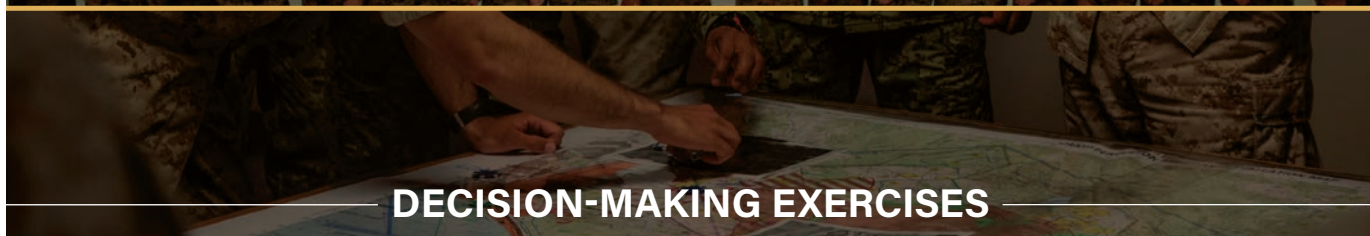
egy for winning the war? And how do we plan to restore the region to peace after the war? *Without clear answers to these questions, the United States should not be involved in any war.* Furthermore, we should never allow ourselves to be drawn into another country's civil war.

*Don't allow yourself to be drawn into a fight with someone who has more reason to be in the fight than you.*

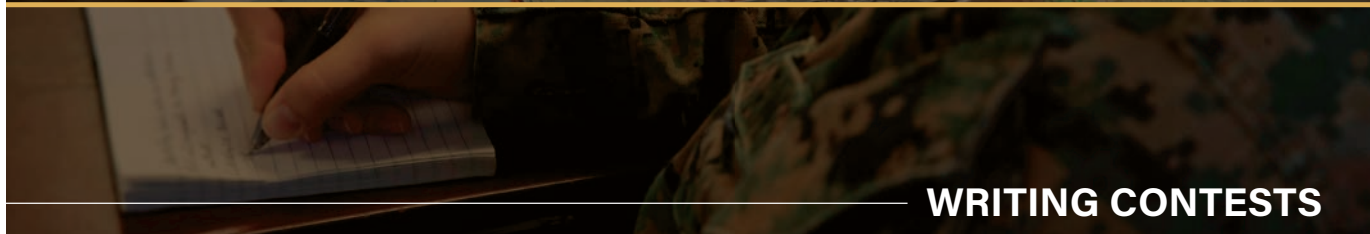
Failure to learn from these mistakes will ensure their repetition!



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