

Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore and South Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky discuss the air war. As the initial Seventh Air Force Commander, General Moore approved the 1965 expansion of Project CHECO activities in Southeast Asia.



Projects CHECO and CORONA HARVEST: Keys to the Air Force's Southeast Asia Memory Bank

by Warren A. Trest



Undersecretary of the Air Force Townsend W. Hoopes examines an AC-130 Gunship III during a September 1968 visit to Southeast Asia. Undersecretary Hoopes chaired the Blue Ribbon committee which reorganized the Air Force historical program in 1969.

AMONG Air Force scholars, the terms CHECO and CORONA HARVEST are synonymous with the institutional documentation and analysis of combat air operations in Southeast Asia. The birth and evolution of these two introspective projects were inspired by the unique air-power role in the controversial conflict, which escalated in the mid-1960s from a low-intensity counterinsurgency undertaking into full-scale, protracted conventional warfare.

Both projects fathered a literary cornucopia of Air Force combat experience and preserved a veritable treasure of documents to further the work of present and future historians. Both shared the dream of making a truly worthwhile contribution to the furtherance of Air Force history and doctrine. Both, too, shared the frustrations that came from examining evidence which was oftentimes inconclusively one-dimensional, made so by the irresolute political conduct of the war. Mirrored therein were the far greater frustrations our nation's military leaders faced in having to wage a costly, graduated air campaign, hamstrung by political constraints such as highly restrictive rules of engagement, the compromise of proven air warfare principles, the absence of well-articulated objectives or a grand strategy for winning the war, and the divided home front.¹

Veterans of these two projects labored, ever mindful that their extensive documentation and study, along with unit histories, might well be all that was left of more than a decade of air warfare for historians to ponder.

Project CHECO was the pilot endeavor. It evolved from a request made in March 1962 by the Vice Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Air Forces, for a completely documented history of USAF operations in the burgeoning counterinsurgency war. A brainchild of the USAF Historical Program, the CHECO acronym stood for Current Historical Evaluation of Counterinsurgency Operations when its birth was announced on 30 June 1962.² The subsequent growth of the Air Force presence in Southeast Asia and of the mission of the special historical project itself are reflected in revisions that were made to this title over the next several years. Because the word "Contemporary" was thought to better convey the dual qual-

ities of "Polaroid" development and historical longevity inherent in Project CHECO, it replaced "Current" in the title in 1964. This change was codified in May 1965 when the Air Staff belatedly issued terms of reference for CHECO's activities. Revised terms published in April 1966 made another change, inserting "Combat" in place of "Counterinsurgency" to reflect the higher level of air operations in the war zone.

In early 1968, after the North Koreans seized the USS *Pueblo* and its crew, the Air Staff saw a need for specialized historical coverage of contingencies other than the conflict in Southeast Asia. This was reflected in a final change of the title to Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations. The new title also made allowances for the interpretative or analytical qualities of CHECO studies as opposed to evaluation per se, and the continuing need

CHECO — Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations.

for the project's services following the cessation of hostilities.³

Organizational alignment and manning for Project CHECO were affected similarly by changing events. As an offspring of the USAF History Program, the infant project was born into a disjunctive family arrangement which had been several years in the making. Unlike most Air Force functions, guidance for the worldwide History program came from the USAF Historical Division at Maxwell AFB, Alabama, rather than from the Air Staff level. The division maintained an office in Washington, but this was primarily for liaison with the Air Staff and other agencies. This inverted arrangement had existed since 1949, when the USAF Historical Division moved its extensive document holdings from the Washington area to become part of the newly formed Air University.

There was precedent for believing that the existing management structure was suitable for overseeing the special historical requirements of Southeast Asia. It had worked well enough during the Korean conflict.

Combat units in Korea had produced excellent accounts of their operations, and Dr. Robert F. Futrell, the division's senior historian, had relied on these and other documents when researching and writing his official one-volume history of the Air Force's wartime experience.⁴ Under the existing arrangement, the program also had developed effective worldwide unit historical reporting procedures and a useful monographic study series prepared by historians at the Air University, the Washington office, and some major commands. The monograph series seemed to be a suitable prototype for Project CHECO to follow, but there were other factors that began to make established reporting procedures appear more problematic than practical.

The elemental source of difficulty was the anatomy of the project itself. Although CHECO was established as an arm of the traditional History program, its charter was to be "readily responsive" to Air Staff needs for timely analytical studies. This meant that CHECO historians were subject to specific Air Staff guidance, which would be channeled from Washington (via the liaison office) through the historical division at the Air University. This seemed simple enough but was compounded by an aberrant organizational arrangement that existed for administering historical activities in the major commands. Partly the result of fiscal austerity, the responsibility for organizational histories in the Air Force had fallen to the Information function in the years following the Korean War. This added another reporting channel, as Information officers had their own higher echelon in the Pentagon, serving directly under the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. Depending on personalities, this novel arrangement worked reasonably well in some commands, not so well in others. The Information officers naturally were more preoccupied with their primary mission of public affairs, and the unit historical functions often became unwanted stepchildren. The early Project CHECO experience was no exception.

THE CHECO operation initially was authorized four historians — one officer and one civilian with the Pacific Air Forces command History office in Hawaii, and another officer

and civilian with the 2nd Air Division in Saigon. These authorizations assumed that the paper trail of USAF activities in Vietnam would remain relatively constant, that the project would initially last two years, and that the existing command History organization would provide the needed supervision and whatever administrative support the project required. These assumptions proved optimistic. The workload grew, while support came grudgingly.

Under the original concept, both CHECO teams were to focus their efforts on researching and writing. In addition to gathering documents, the team in Saigon was tasked to send back monthly progress reports and to prepare special studies on USAF operations. The PACAF team was to combine the reports from the war zone with its own research to prepare an inclusive, evaluative report. The command Information office further tasked the civilian member of the Southeast Asia team with the additional duty of researching and writing "comprehensive" semiannual histories of the 2nd Air Division.⁵ This additional tasking ran counter to guidance the team had received from Washington and brought an added reporting channel into play — that of the 13th Air Force History office, which was responsible for monitoring the division's periodic reports. Given the special dimensions of the project and its multiple tasking, the evidence suggests that the number of historians assigned to CHECO was modest even had the fighting not escalated.

After meetings in Washington, the Southeast Asia team members reported to Saigon in early October 1962. Few historical projects had received more special attention or held more promise when the team departed the United States. Even fewer perhaps had such an inauspicious beginning after arriving at their destination. Because of their direct channel to the Air Staff, the historians were slow in gaining the confidence of local staff members. Their progress was further stymied by seemingly insurmountable equipment and supply problems, which had not received adequate attention from higher headquarters. Adding to the difficulties, the CHECO officer was not a trained historian, and the civilian member was unprepared for the primitive living and working conditions. Two

months after their arrival, the CHECO officer injured his knee and had to be evacuated to the Philippines in February 1963 for orthopedic surgery. It was several months before his replacement, also a non-historian, was established. Less than a year later, the CHECO civilian, Joseph W. Grainger, left for a position with the Agency for International Development. He was captured by the Viet Cong in August 1964 and was killed by them in January 1965 after he had escaped and had been recaptured.⁶

Nearly all that came from the early CHECO team effort in Vietnam was an assorted collection of documents and the lesson of how not to go about researching and writing combat history. There is a record of uneven monthly reports for the team, but no histories or studies. Fortunately, the usefulness of the initial project was salvaged by the CHECO members in Hawaii who spent many hours overtime screening more than 30,000 documents gathered in Vietnam and the harvest from their own research to prepare a valuable five-volume narrative of the early USAF combat experience in Vietnam, with a summary and an abstract. The volumes comprised over 650 pages of narrative, thoroughly documented by more than 800 footnotes and 450 supporting documents. The Hawaii team also prepared the delinquent introductory 2nd Air Division history. The team chief and principal author, Lt. Col. Donald F. Martin, described the first CHECO report as more of a history than an "historical evaluation." However, considering the pressures under which it was prepared, this first report is an extraordinary product which set a high standard for those which followed. Martin was critical of the lack of support given to CHECO by the traditional History function and its foster parent, the Information office, both at the higher level and in Saigon. To the benefit of today's Air Force, Martin's team was able to overcome the obstacles that had overburdened its counterpart in the war zone.⁷

There was debate at this juncture as to the need for continuing Project CHECO. The USAF Historical Division and the Directorate of Plans in the Air Staff concluded that the special coverage it afforded was still desirable, even more so given the increasing intensity of the conflict. The

five-volume study had proven useful to the Air Staff. A new civilian historian, Kenneth Sams, had joined the Information function in Saigon in May 1964 and was making progress on preparing special studies as well as updating the air division's History program. Yet, support for CHECO continued to be minimal. Sams was able to obtain the assistance of two enlisted historians, but it was nearly a year after his arrival before a new CHECO officer was on board. Requests for TDY assistance through normal History channels went unfulfilled.

Given the dissatisfaction with existing arrangements, Lt. Col. Don Martin sought and obtained a new charter for CHECO before he left the job in Hawaii. In May 1965, CHECO was reorganized. The Director of Plans became the office of primary interest on the Air Staff for CHECO matters. The headquarters CHECO function was placed under Tactical Evaluation, and the office in Saigon came under the Directorate of Operations Analysis. This organizational alignment brought CHECO activities directly under the control of the local Deputy for Plans and Operations. Both CHECO offices were assigned more historians and support personnel.⁸

UNDER the new charter, the Air Staff recognized that Project CHECO was not an evaluative activity, but rather a specialized historical function which was distinctly different from the normal unit histories. The Air Staff's original perception of CHECO evaluation had been partially overtaken by the changing scope of operations and resultant large analysis activities such as the tactical evaluation office in Hawaii, the combat analysis center in Saigon, and the concern at each command echelon with the identification of problems and their solutions. As Maj. Gen. John W. Vogt, Deputy for Plans and Operations, Pacific Air Forces, explained in his guidance for CHECO historians, their "principal responsibility" was "to document significant application of Air Force doctrine, concepts and policy in specific events" as they occurred. Reports were to emphasize the historical development of the subject and provide full and accurate documentation. Historical evaluation was to be limited to "objective judgments," which could

Gen. William W. Momyer shown with Gen. Cao Van Vien, Chairman Joint General Staff, ARVN, after being awarded the National Order of Vietnam (5th Class). As Seventh Air Force Commander, General Momyer had a special interest in Project CHECO and CORONA HARVEST evaluations. Upon retirement, he personally took over preparation of the final CORONA HARVEST reports.



be derived as conclusions from the documented facts.⁹

Given new life, CHECO production soared. Guidance on study topics came directly from the Air Staff, while other topics were developed by the CHECO teams. Most of the researching and writing of studies was centered in Southeast Asia. Although the Hawaii office prepared some studies, it primarily edited, published, and distributed those prepared in the field. In Saigon, Sams personally completed five studies for publication over the next year, beginning with a classic top secret report entitled, *Escalation of the War, July-December 1964*.

From May 1965 until the Tet offensive at the beginning of 1968, more than 50 CHECO reports were published and distributed throughout the Air Force. These classified reports ranged in scope from small operational studies, such as *The Siege at Plei Me*, to comprehensive topical histories, like *Control of Air Strikes in SEA, 1961-1966*. Assistance other than the assignment of new historians was readily available under the more dynamic relationship with Operations. Rated officers, such as Capt. Gary D. Sheets, who had completed their flying assignments early, joined CHECO to write reports in their areas of expertise. In the summer of 1966, two Air Force Academy officers served with the project on temporary duty to produce special reports, opening the window for much wider Academy participation in the years ahead. The CHECO office in Hawaii also provided TDY assistance and in 1968 added a new dimension to the project when Col. Edward C. Burtenshaw, the second chief of CHECO, and two other officers prepared a special report on *The Pueblo Incident in Korea*, setting the stage for expanding the CHECO concept worldwide.¹⁰

One of the more innovative concepts for augmenting CHECO professional activities in Southeast Asia was the Air Force Academy Summer Research Program. Col. Alfred F. Hurley, head of the Academy's His-

tory Department, and Col. Jesse C. Gatlin, head of the English Department, led a group of Academy professors to Southeast Asia for the summer of 1968 to produce eight studies of exceptional quality. Colonel Hurley wrote a study entitled *The EC-47 in Southeast Asia*, and Colonel Gatlin wrote about the *Igloo White* surveillance systems. The list of CHECO studies prepared by Academy officers is impressive. In the course of the war, a total of 33 professors joined CHECO on temporary duty to augment the study effort. Others, like Lt. Col. John Schlicht and Maj. Phillip Caine, spent full 12-month tours, producing more than one study apiece. The full-time Academy officers provided a ready source of management expertise when Ken Sams retired in 1971 after many years of service as an Air Force historian, the last six of which were spent with Project CHECO documenting

the USAF role in Southeast Asia. When the war ended, the CHECO effort had left a legacy of 218 special studies, 14 of which Ken Sams had either personally authored or co-authored.¹¹

When Project CHECO moved under the protective wing of Operations in 1965, it was not immediately disassociated from the traditional History function in Vietnam. With full consent of the Information office at 2nd Air Division (redesignated 7th Air Force on 1 April 1966), Project CHECO retained the unit history responsibility for almost two more years. Afterward, to avoid duplication, it was mutually agreed that CHECO would be responsible for the operations history and the History office would cover support activities.

The historical function's relationship with information was objected to by historians who were acquainted

with the neglect of the traditional History responsibilities in Southeast Asia. Colonel Burtenshaw, the chief of CHECO, suggested that Pacific Air Forces take the initiative and establish an historical program reporting directly to the Chief of Staff and establish a separate channel of communication at base and numbered Air Force to place the historian close to the commander. His suggestion was not acted upon, but a report by Max Rosenberg, head of the historical liaison office in Washington,¹² did help precipitate critical review of the History program by a Blue Ribbon committee beginning in 1968. This committee influenced a radical change in the way the Air Force managed its historical resources.

In 1969, the Secretary of the Air Force approved a proposal to centralize control of the History program under a general officer at the Air Staff level. To oversee the activities of the program, he established the USAF Historical Advisory Committee, first chaired by Dr. I. B. Holley, professor of History at Duke University and an Air Force Reserve officer. The Office of Air Force History was organized, and Maj. Gen. R. A. Grussendorf was brought back to active duty as the first chief. At the Air University, the USAF Historical Division became the Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center (changed in 1984 to the USAF Historical Research Center), and its mission was changed primarily to serve as the repository for Air Force histories and to serve worldwide research needs. At major command and below, the History offices were realigned to make them directly responsive to their commanders. In May 1970, the Office of Air Force History became the Air Staff focal point for Project CHECO. The project retained its relationship with Operations in the Pacific Air Forces until its work in Southeast Asia was completed. The Office of Air Force History institutionalized the project with the command History functions in Europe and the Pacific, and the Historical Research Center maintained a microfilm team ready for worldwide deployment. Thus, Project CHECO had come full circle. Along the way, it had played an active role in increasing historical awareness in the Air Force and had helped bring about what many saw as a renaissance within Air Force history.¹³

PROJECT CORONA HARVEST, which was conceived in 1966 to undertake the inclusive evaluation of airpower in Southeast Asia, was even more dynamic in elevating historical awareness within the Air Force. Although it was often identified with CHECO and the two were mutually supportive, CORONA HARVEST was distinct in its objectives, detail of documentation, management, and utility. Where CHECO provided timely coverage direct from the theater of operations, CORONA HARVEST reached into every depth of Air Force involvement to document the total air effort, to retrieve the lessons

... CORONA HARVEST reached into every depth of Air Force involvement to document the total air effort, to retrieve the lessons learned, and to examine the validity of USAF and joint concepts and doctrine.

learned, and to examine the validity of USAF and joint concepts and doctrine. Unlike CHECO's early institutional throes, CORONA HARVEST was born with a full measure of muscle and marrow. An Air Staff steering committee, chaired by the Vice Chief of Staff, provided broad policy guidance and made certain that support from all echelons was forthcoming. Corporate management, replete with healthy manning and technological support, was installed within the Aerospace Studies Institute at the Air University. Student and faculty resources were available to support the evaluation, and each major command and separate operating agency designated a project office to insure inclusive participation. The project got off to a false start when officials gave it the unseemly nickname LOYAL LOOK, but quickly grasping the parochial implications changed it to the more euphemistic title, CORONA HARVEST.¹⁴

CORONA HARVEST was given command emphasis at every level and was directly supported by the USAF Historical Program. In the major

commands, the project officers worked hand-in-glove with the historians to prepare study inputs to CORONA HARVEST and to insure the integrated submission of documents. At the Air University, senior historian Frank Futrell worked directly with the project, while engaged in researching and writing the official history of the Air Force in Southeast Asia through 1965.¹⁵ The Historical Division served as the central repository for Air Force documentation relating to the war. It assisted with setting up a microfilm capability and helped CORONA HARVEST establish an oral history program in 1968 to collect information that was not available by other means. CORONA HARVEST also relied on end-of-tour reports by key personnel returned from the war to fill gaps in research.

When the CORONA HARVEST office at the Air University began phasing out in the early 1970s, the Historical Research Center inherited its documentation system, including the oral history program, the end-of-tour reports, and the microfilming capability. Thus, CORONA HARVEST not only helped rekindle historical-mindedness within the Air Force, but made a substantial contribution toward modernizing the History program's research capabilities.¹⁶

Project CHECO and the Pacific Air Force headquarters staff shared a special relationship with CORONA HARVEST. A fully manned CORONA HARVEST study group was set up at Hickam, first under Tactical Evaluation and then under Operations Analysis, to fulfill the command's responsibilities in support of the evaluation. This study group completed a series of key evaluative studies in various airpower activities. It also identified, reviewed, and collected thousands of pertinent documents. In Southeast Asia, Project CHECO became the CORONA HARVEST agent for document collection in 1968 and began recording in microfilm pertinent documents at Air Force headquarters in Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. The CHECO historians had begun a limited microfilming operation earlier, but this was expanded to include a team of five technicians who were dedicated full-time to the document collection mission. The versatility of this effort was demonstrated in 1969 when team members deployed to 5th Air Force

headquarters to microfilm records relating to the shooting down of a USAF EC-121 by the North Koreans. From 1968 through the end of the conflict, the team microfilmed a wealth of valuable documents but, unfortunately, because of the conditions under which it was shot, much of this film proved of uneven quality when it was developed later at the Historical Research Center.¹⁷

As the war wound down to its unhappy conclusion, officials involved with CORONA HARVEST were acutely aware that the project would not realize its primary objective of "evaluating the overall effectiveness of airpower in Southeast Asia." Unlike the conditions which prevailed for the United States Strategic Bombing Survey following World War II, the failure to pursue a winning national policy in Southeast Asia had precluded any inclusive evaluation of military results. Conclusive quantitative data simply was not available. This potential difficulty was presumed by the CORONA HARVEST group when it published the overall plan for the project in June 1967. The qualification was made that the project's final assessment would "not be confirmed until access to enemy information is obtained after the conflict is over." Such an overall assessment was further inhibited by the lack of effective evaluative data flowing through the operations reporting system, which comprised mostly immediate operational data such as sortie rates, bomb tonnages exploded, bomb damage assessments, secondary explosions,¹⁸ and body counts. On the positive side, Project CORONA HARVEST was eminently successful in completing its other objectives of documenting the Air Force's role in the war and of identifying and defining the operational, conceptual, and doctrinal lessons learned. In this regard, the project collected valuable data and prepared studies that would be necessary to any long-range assessment of the Air Force's role as an instrument of national policy in Southeast Asia.

The Air University office completed the final CORONA HARVEST report for the period, 1954-1969, comprising 11 volumes, and the Pacific Air Forces study group prepared 16 volumes for the remaining period of the war. Timely completion of these reports and the executive summaries

permitted the closing of these two project offices in 1975 and 1976. In April 1974, a new dimension was added to the project when Gen. William W. Momyer, USAF (Ret.), was hired as the Consultant to the Vice Chief of Staff, USAF, for CORONA HARVEST matters.¹⁹ General Momyer began sifting through the mass of information in the final reports to identify the relevant lessons for consideration by Air Force commanders. No one had better credentials for addressing tactical concepts and doctrine. Years on the Air Staff and in tactical command positions (as Commander of 7th Air Force during the critical years, 1966-1968, and then as Commander of Tactical Air Command until his retirement in 1973) made the General uniquely qualified to speak for airpower in Southeast Asia. After reviewing the CORONA HARVEST final reports, General Momyer prepared 21 reports containing his comments and recommendations. These became known as the "Momyer reports" and were referred by the Vice Chief to the Air Staff and relevant commands for comment and action as appropriate.²⁰ Staffing of the Momyer reports was completed in 1976. They focused on doctrinal and functional lessons and were designed for internal utility, with suggestions for improving operations and enhancing the future force.

Although both CHECO and CORONA HARVEST earned high marks for their immediate utility to Air Force planners and operators, the concern now is for the more lasting promise their legacy holds for historians whose field of study embraces air warfare in Southeast Asia. As guardian of the CHECO and CORONA HARVEST collections, the USAF Historical Research Center holds the keys to the substantial documentation derived from the two projects. Thus far, access to many of the documents within the two collections has been restricted because of their security classifications. Primary users have included Air War College students, who published a series of unclassified monographs on Air Force operations in Southeast Asia.²¹ General Momyer relied on the documents to write portions of his book, *Air Power in Three Wars*, which was published in 1978.²² Perhaps the largest beneficiary has been the Office of Air Force History, which has been dependent upon the

document collections to support the bulk of research for its official histories of the war. To date, the Office has published five special studies and four major volumes on the Air Force's history in Southeast Asia. Another six volumes are in various stages of production.²³

Upon completion of CORONA HARVEST, senior USAF officials were sensitive to the need for obtaining the widest possible dissemination of information concerning the Air Force's role in Southeast Asia. The Vice Chief of Staff directed that a concerted effort be made to downgrade CORONA HARVEST material on the war for the purpose of reaching a wide audience. A sensitivity review panel was formed under General Momyer and was given classification downgrading authority to carry out the process. This panel acted to insure that the CORONA HARVEST reports were downgraded to the lowest classification "consistent with current security policy." A number of documents were declassified.²⁴ Since that date, the primary responsibility for downgrading documents of the Vietnam era has rested with the originating authority. This means that the primary downgrading authority for the CHECO reports and a sizeable number of documents in the CORONA HARVEST collection is vested in the Pacific Air Force headquarters as the originating command, rather than in the USAF Historical Research Center as the keeper of the collections. The Office of Air Force History has obtained limited authority to downgrade some CHECO reports on an individual basis. The Center was given limited downgrading responsibilities under Project SAFE PAPER in 1972, but as presently constituted, this does not extend to documents that originated in the past 30 years which are exempt from automatic downgrading. SAFE PAPER brings documents of the Korean conflict under blanket review, but not those for Southeast Asia. According to Center Director Lloyd H. Cornett, Jr., 22 of the 218 CHECO reports are presently unclassified. Efforts are underway to have additional reports reviewed for downgrading.²⁵ For scholars who wish to research the collections, historical researcher access to the classified documents is controlled by the Air Force Office of Public Affairs — Magazines and Books (AFOPA-MB).

Scholars seeking access should write to AFOPA-MB, 1221 South Fern St., Room D159, Arlington, VA 22202. Before being granted access, scholars must obtain a researcher's agreement to safeguard classified information and submit notes and manuscripts for security review.²⁶

IN conclusion, the Southeast Asia conflict was the most well-documented of American wars, and Projects CHECO and CORONA HARVEST joined with the USAF Historical Program to preserve the Air Force's share of that documentation. Although CHECO and CORONA HARVEST provided the Air Force with timely and lasting corporate insights into operational, conceptual, and doctrinal lessons from the war, their own unique accomplishments are an encouragement to the larger family of official historians. Both projects were born of an explicit need for their services. Both were dedicated to mission, utility, and scholarly achievement. Both were innovative in the use of new methods and new technology. Both were essentially an adjunct to the classic official histories, but also served as a catalyst for helping revitalize the Air Force's official history program. Their substantial contribution to greater historical-mindedness within the Air Force is a tribute to the exceptionally high level of meaningful production achieved by both. They did not write history for history's sake. They did not collect documents for the shelf. Any historical analysis of their achievements must question whether or not there would have been a CHECO program as we know it had Lt. Col. Don Martin not made such an extraordinary first effort and had he not produced such a useful pilot historical study. After all, it is by their deeds that we shall know them. Their legacy is one of production and utility. Nothing less, nothing more.

NOTES

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