

Naval Officers Need "Joint Legs"

By Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Adolph Jr., U.S. Army (Retired)

Joint staff legs, unlike sea legs, don't appear to come easily to some naval officers. Naval officers seem to take longer to integrate into joint staff assignments than their multiservice counterparts. They initially have difficulty with joint staff coordination procedures, and take longer to learn about the doctrinal roles of the other services. The reasons for their initial difficulties may have something to do with the Navy's institutional subculture.

Naval officers' general ignorance of the Army, for example, is astounding. Perhaps this is because many Naval officers feel that they don't really need the Army, and they would be right. The Army needs them. Army officers view naval vessels as potential fire support and troop movement assets. Army officers are interested in everything the Navy possesses that can kill a potential enemy or block his lines of communication. I have yet to meet a naval officer who has demonstrated an interest in, say, the mechanized division in the attack or brigade infantry tactics.

Another barrier to joint understanding is the well known naval insularity.

Naval officers at sea are singularly powerful. Little coordination is required before key decisions are made afloat. A ship's captain makes dozens of rapid fire critical judgments every day without consulting anyone. These habits can be disastrous on a joint staff where decision making is generally reserved for officers of flag rank. Army officers, on the other hand, are taught from their first days as second lieutenants that nothing is accomplished without detailed, exhaustive, and continual coordination with higher, lower and adjacent headquarters. These ground-pounder habits serve Army officers well on a joint staff. Joint action officers live or die depending upon the quality of their coordination.

Naval officers also seem to have a hard time with doctrine—an issue of extreme importance to the Army. It seems as though the Navy has developed little of what Army officers might perceive as real doctrine. Doctrine is the cornerstone of how the Army fights and is fast becoming an essential pillar of inter-service coordination, which seldom in the past has been an issue of

pressing importance to the Navy. One naval officer told me that most of his brethren view doctrine as an impediment to independent action and thought.

I am sure that Army officers possess a number of quirks that don't endear us to the naval services. What is most important, though, is that officers from all the services doing duty on joint staffs come to understand the strengths and weaknesses produced by one another's institutional subcultures. With understanding comes trust—an invaluable commodity on any warfighting staff.

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