



# American Airpower Biography



*American Airpower Biography: A Survey of the Field*, by Colonel Phillip S. Meilinger, USAF, can view individual bio's in HTML format from the listing below.

It is the involvement of people that has given history its enduring fascination and popularity. One field within history, biography, has always been especially appealing. All of us have a deep interest in knowing how others, perhaps like our selves, have met challenges, dealt with failure, and accommo dated themselves to victory and fame. On a more mundane level, there is a curiosity to see how those who were great lived their day to day lives and how they handled their loves, short comings, attributes, frailties, and quirks. Knowing that great men and women were, at base, quite human is a comfort. It is also a source of hope and encouragement because it means that even the most humble of us can aspire to greatness.

Certainly there are geniuses born among us, but the lives of most of those we consider noteworthy are marked by an unexceptional background and a fortuitous turn of events. Sincere, hardworking, and courageous people find themselves in positions of responsibility when circumstances of great pith and moment are thrust upon them. It is remarkable how difficult it is to predict how individuals will react in such circumstances. Often, those groomed for leadership are found wanting in times of crisis, while those who do step forward are from unexpected quarters. Indeed that has been the case with many of our country's great airmen.

These essay's review the state of American airpower biography and autobiography. Certain parameters are set to define the boundaries of the discussion. The literature is presented in the categories of biographies and autobiograpies, anthologies, and oral histories. Individuals included here are military officers who served in senior positions. Thus, although the stories of great aviators like Eddie Rickenbacker, Charles Lindbergh, and Chuck Yeager are important, they did not command large forces in combat nor in peace and had only a temporary effect on the development of strategy and doctrine. Similarly, civilian political leaders and industrialists like Stuart Symington and Donald Douglas, though playing key roles in their own spheres, are not included. What follows are the stories of America's greatest military airmen: some told by themselves, others by biographers; some have been published, and some have not. Surprisingly, a number of air luminaries are not noted here, so there is still much work to be done.

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## Biographies and Autobiographies

Mason M. Patrick William ("Billy") Mitchell Benjamin O. Foulois Oscar M. Westover William A. Moffett John H. Towers Henry H. Arnold Augustine Warner Robins Claire L. Chennault James H. ("Jimmy") Doolittle Ira C. Eaker Carl A. Spaatz Laurence S. Kuter George C. Kenney Donald Wilson Kenneth N. Walker Ennis Whitehead Lewis H. Brereton Hugh J. Knerr Hoyt S. Vandenberg Elwood R. Quesada Orvil A. Anderson Howard A. Craig Frank Armstrong Charles P. Cabell Nathan F. Twining Curtis E. LeMay Edwin W. Rawlings William H. Tunner Benjamin O. Davis, Jr Daniel ("Chappie") James, Jr George S. Brown

Anthologies  
Oral Histories  
Conclusion  
About the Author

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## Anthologies

There are also several anthologies containing brief biographies of leading airmen. One of these is Edgar Puryear, Jr.'s, *Stars in Flight: A Study in Air Force Character and Leadership* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1981). The theme of this book is leadership, and the airmen chosen to illustrate it are the first five leaders of the modern Air Force: Hap Arnold, Carl Spaatz, Hoyt Vandenberg, Nate Twining, and Thomas White. The research is based largely on interviews and correspondence between the author and general officers who knew or worked for these men. Puryear's conclusion is that the key to leadership can be summed in the five qualities of duty, honor, service, courage (both moral and physical), and decisiveness—qualities possessed by the airmen discussed. As with his biography of George Brown, the result is not successful. Because Puryear is aiming at an audience of cadets or junior officers, the biographical sketches amount to hero building rather than critical analysis. In addition, his heavy reliance on interviews and letters results in this being little more than a series of quotations and stories strung together with little cohesion or overall point. This approach does, however, give some insights into the personalities of these men, insights that would be a useful starting point for someone wanting to begin a serious study.

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Curt Anders's intent is to describe the lives of seven great American airmen: Billy Mitchell, “who had the initial vision”; Curtis LeMay, who brought that vision “to its closest approximation in practice”; and five others who kept that vision alive through their combat leadership—Eddie Rickenbacker, Hap Arnold, Jimmy Doolittle, Claire Chennault, and George Kenney. Anders's book, *Fighting Airmen* (New York: Putnam's Press, 1966) is little more than a series of tributes with no attempt at balance. Like Puryear, however, there is some useful information here that can get one started on a serious investigation of air leadership.

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An extremely well written and interesting piece regarding the early careers of Arnold, Spaatz, and Eaker is “Leadership in the Old Air Force: A Postgraduate Assignment” by David MacIsaac, which was the 1987 Harmon Memorial Lecture. (Located in Harry R. Borowski, ed., *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, 1959–1987* [Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1988]).

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The best of the anthologies is edited by John L. Frisbee, *Makers of the United States Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1987). This work contains chapter length biographical sketches of the following: Benjamin Foulois (Fred Shiner), Frank Andrews (DeWitt Copp), Harold L. George (Haywood Hansell, Jr.), Hugh Knerr (Murray Green), George Kenney (Herman Wolk), William E. Kepner (Paul Henry), Elwood R. Quesada (John Schlight), Hoyt S. Vandenberg (Noel Parrish), Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. (Alan Gropman), Nathan F. Twining (Donald Mrozek), Bernard A. Schriever (Jacob Neufeld), and Robinson Risner (T. R. Milton). These individuals were selected not only because of their importance but because they had received insufficient attention from historians. Although the essays are not footnoted, they are of a high caliber and are able to describe not only the personalities of the men but also their significance.

The most interesting essays are those dealing with “the forgotten airmen.” Frank Andrews was the first commander of the GHQ Air Force in 1935, was the first airman ever promoted to three star rank, and was commander of the European theater at the time of his death in a plane crash in 1943. Hal George was one of the key figures in the development of bombardment doctrine at the tactical school in the 1930s, helped author AWPD 1, and was wartime head of Air Transport Command. Hugh Knerr was Carl Spaatz's administrative chief in Europe and the Air Force's first inspector general. William Kepner was a famous balloonist in the interwar years and head of VIII Fighter Command at the time of “Big Week” in February 1944. He finished the war as commander of the Eighth Air Force. “Pete” Quesada was one of the Question Mark pilots in 1929, led the IX Tactical Air Command across Europe in 1944–45, and was the first commander of Tactical Air Command after the war. Bernard Schriever was a pilot turned engineer who is considered the father of the ICBM program. And Robbie Risner was a fighter pilot and ace in the Korean War, won the first ever Air Force Cross in 1965 over the skies of Vietnam, and endured seven years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. This is an excellent book and should encourage historians seeking a topic worthy of a full length biography. All of these men are excellent candidates.

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Another effort, sponsored by the Air Force History Office, is *Air Leadership: Proceedings of a Conference at Bolling Air Force Base, April 13–14, 1984*, edited by Wayne Thompson and published by the Office of Air Force History, Washington, D.C., in 1986. Several papers were given that concentrated on differing leadership styles. Two airmen, Carl Spaatz (Dave Mets and I. B. Holley) and William Moffett (Thomas Hone) were singled out for examination. (Other papers discussed RAF AAF relations during World War II and the manager versus leader debate

in the postwar Air Force.) Although these biographical sketches are useful, of greater interest are the panel discussions by luminaries such as Generals Curtis LeMay, Mark Bradley, Bryce Poe, Brian Gunderson, and Al Hurley. The reminiscences of these men, prompted by questions from the audience, are quite enlightening.

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DeWitt S. Copp wrote two very popular books that trace the history of Army aviation from the Wright brothers through World War II: *A Few Great Captains: The Men and Events that Shaped the Development of U.S. Air Power* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), which ends in 1939, and *Forged in Fire: Strategy and Decisions in the Air War over Europe, 1940–45* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), which covers the war years. Although these works are no biographies, they tell the history of the air arm through the eyes of various air leaders especially Hap Arnold, Frank Andrews, Carl Spaatz, and Ira Eaker. The biggest disappointment for the reader is that Copp never completed the story—he spends barely 30 pages on the last two years of the war. An intended third volume was never completed. As a consequence, the great airmen who would dominate the last two years of war and the postwar era—Vandenberg, Twining, White, LeMay—are barely introduced. In addition, although Copp clearly did a prodigious amount of research, he included few footnotes, and those mostly expository, which makes it impossible for others to take a closer look at his sources and interpretations. Finally, his treatment of the famous icons of American airpower borders on hagiography; there is scarcely a discouraging word here. Nonetheless, these are very entertaining works, mostly accurate, that tell the story of American airpower with passion and verve.

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One reference work that has proven invaluable to many researchers is Flint O. DuPre's *U.S. Air Force Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1965). DuPre gives biographical sketches of American airmen who achieved at least three star rank or who were famous for other reasons: Medal of Honor winners, Air Service/Air Corps chiefs, Air Force secretaries, etc. This is a well done and important tool; unfortunately, it is now sadly out of date and in need of a major revision to include airmen from the past three decades.

## Oral Histories

Another source that can be of great use to a researcher is oral history. Although there are serious pitfalls involved with this genre (memory of past events is often clouded, people sometimes tell the interviewer what they think he wants to hear, few people are willing to admit their biggest or most embarrassing mistakes, and score settling is common fare), it can prove quite useful. Interviews can set a tone for a particular era or event, while also providing valuable context. In addition, personality traits, quirk, conflicts, and connections are often revealed in interviews that are not recorded in written histories. For example, it was a great surprise to me to learn in one interview that a certain high ranking individual was an alcoholic. The issue came up in passing; it was something that had not entered my mind as a possibility but that had significant

implications. With this revelation—which was confirmed in other interviews—other issues, decisions, and actions took on a far different light. The major caveat: the interview can open doors to interesting rooms, but a thorough examination of those rooms requires more conventional and definitive research methods.

Three organizations in particular have been especially active in interviewing distinguished airmen regarding their careers: the Historical Research Agency (HRA) at Maxwell AFB, Alabama; The History Department at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, and researchers at Columbia University in New York City. The HRA collection is by far the largest of the three, containing over two thousand interviews. It is also quite broad, covering all periods and subjects. The Air Force Academy, on the other hand, has tended to concentrate on specific subjects dealing with the academy's history. For example, they have conducted a fascinating series of interviews with a number of their graduates who were prisoners of war during the Vietnam War and Persian Gulf War. For abstracts of the interviews conducted by the HRA and the academy, see Maurice Maryano, ed., *Catalog of the United States Air Force Oral History Collection* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1989). Columbia University's collection is very large, but only a small number of its interviews concern airpower. For a list of these interviews, see Elizabeth B. Mason and Louis M. Starr, eds., *The Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 4th ed.* (New York: Oral History Research Office, 1979).

## Conclusion

Seventy nine studies, excluding the thousands of oral histories extant, have been included in the above discussion, which is more than I expected to find when starting this project. Nonetheless, the quality of those noted is quite uneven, and there are other anomalies: Claire Chennault has been overdone, while despite his importance and six biographies, the significance and leadership of Jimmy Doolittle are still obscure. Although we know enough of the details of Doolittle's life, we still need an analysis and explanation for his success as the commander of some of our most important air units at particularly crucial times. Similarly, it is doubtful whether new facts regarding the lives of Billy Mitchell, Hap Arnold, or Curtis LeMay will come to light; yet, works that analyze their impact on the Air Force and its perception by the other services, Congress, and the public would be significant additions to the literature.

Amazingly, however, there are some truly great airmen who have been virtually ignored by biographers. First among these is Lauris Norstad, who was one of Arnold's key staff officers during the war; chief of staff of Twentieth Air Force; Vandenberg's deputy chief of staff for operations; commander of US Air Forces, Europe; and Supreme Allied Commander Europe—the only airman ever to hold that position. Next in importance is George Kenney. Although his published war diaries are both excellent and entertaining, his importance as air component commander and tactical innovator, and his postwar activities as the first commander of SAC are largely a mystery. Others desperately in need of a biography include: John P. McConnell, chief of staff during the early years of the Vietnam War; Nate Twining; Thomas White; Frank Andrews; Larry Kuter; Bernard Schriever; “Opie” Weyland, a great tactical airman who fought in three major wars; Harold L. George; David Jones, chief of staff and chairman of the JCS who

led the fight to reform the military during the first Reagan administration; James Fechet, Air Corps chief between Patrick and Foulous; Jeanne Holm, the first woman to reach flag rank in the Air Force; and William Momyer, perhaps the most creative and innovative of the tactical airmen, who commanded the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam and Tactical Air Command after the war. There is also a specific gap in the literature concerning airmen who served as engineers or were involved in research and development. Perhaps a volume combining the biographies of men like George Brett, Oliver Echols, Benjamin Chidlaw, Laurence Craigie, and Donald Putt and discussing the technical evolution of airpower during and after World War II would be appropriate.

In addition, something must be done to encourage senior air leaders to write their memoirs. We desperately need to know their stories. Those whose accounts would be most useful include: “Ross” Milton, bomb leader at Schweinfurt, chief of staff of the Berlin airlift, chief of staff of NATO, and member of the Rostow mission to Vietnam; William Momyer (Momyer did publish a book, *Airpower in Three Wars* [Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1978], but it is more of a comment on tactical air operations in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, than it is a memoir.); Bernard Schriever; David Jones; Lew Allen, chief of staff and transitional figure between the era dominated by SAC and that dominated by TAC; Russell Dougherty, commander of SAC and one of the great strategic thinkers in Air Force history; Robin Olds, fighter ace and war hero in two different wars; Brent Scowcroft, the national security advisor to President George Bush; Larry Welch, chief of staff when the Soviet empire collapsed; Charles Horner, the hero of the Persian Gulf War and then commander of US Space Command; and Merrill McPeak, chief of staff during the Gulf War and the momentous reorganization and downsizing that followed.

In sum, although much has been done already, very much more is still in need of accomplishment. Carl Builder has commented that the Air Force culture is dominated by technology, not people. In one sense he is correct, but technology is always the tool of men and women, and we must never lose sight of the human element in air warfare. Although there are limitations to biography—a tendency to exaggerate the significance of the individual in the events of his time and to forget that institutions, groups, and simple fate can also determine history—the insights into character, culture, behavior, and emotion far outweigh any potential drawbacks. We have much to learn from our past leaders. The challenges they faced are not so different from those we confront today and will meet in the future. Thorough, critical, dispassionate, and honest biographies and autobiographies are essential in assisting future airmen to meet their challenges.

## About the Author

A graduate of the Air Force Academy in 1970, Col Phillip S. Meilinger received an MA from the University of Colorado and a PhD from the University of Michigan. After a tour at the Air Force Academy, Colonel Meilinger was assigned to the doctrine division on the Air Staff in the Pentagon, where he was responsible for writing and editing numerous Air Force and joint doctrine publications, working roles and missions issues, and participating in the planning cell for Instant Thunder during the Gulf War. He is a command pilot who has flown C 130s and HC

130s in both Europe and the Pacific, while also working as an operations officer in the Pacific Airlift Control Center at Clark Air Base.

Colonel Meilinger is dean of the School of Advanced Airpower Studies (SAAS), the Air Force's only graduate school for airpower strategists. He has been the dean of SAAS since July 1992. He is the author of *Hoyt S. Vandenberg: The Life of a General* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989), as well as several dozen articles and reviews on airpower history and theory in journals such as *Armed Forces and Society*, *Armed Forces Journal International*, *Comparative Strategy*, *Journal of Military History*, and the *Airpower Journal*.

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