

GENERAL THOMAS DRESSER WHITE:
RENAISSANCE MAN IN A DARK AGE

BY

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ABSTRACT

General Thomas D. White's path to Chief of Staff of the Air Force was unorthodox. By talent, inclination, and background, White was an intellectual and diplomat at a time when senior leader ranks were dominated by operational expertise. Not until General Larry Welch would the Air Force see as diverse a leader at its helm. White's worldview broadened Air Force priorities and policies in the early Cold War era and left a Service better able to meet national security objectives in aerospace—a term he himself championed.



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INTRODUCTION

In 1941 Major Curtis LeMay was returning in a C-47 from the Middle East and landed in South America for fuel. As he was waiting, LeMay noticed Lt Col Thomas White. White was on leave from his job as the Military Attaché to Brazil. White and LeMay were both fervent anglers, but LeMay thought White was “more than a fisherman, he’s a real ichthyologist.”¹ White and LeMay small-talked about fishing and White insisted LeMay examine some fish he found that could swim backward. These two men would later serve together as Chief of Staff and Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force. This meeting impressed LeMay, who wrapped up his account of this meeting by saying; White is “entirely different from me. He was in the air attaché business and not too much in the operations business all along. He believed, he was in the business of compromise.”² From an early age, Thomas White was destined to be a different kind of Chief of Staff.

The US Air Force was born out of the progressive ideal that airpower could attack an enemy’s homeland through strategic bombing and single-handedly create defeat.³ Man will use any technology for warfare. The invention of the airplane quickly led to the development of the Army Air Corps. Early practitioners of air war grasped the military potential of this new instrument and predicted its strategic prowess on the battlefield. World Wars I and II displayed the progression of the airplane from a supporting tactical reconnaissance platform to a weapon that would be used in the air against other airplanes. By the end of

¹ “Personal Interview with Gen Curtis E. LeMay,” interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., November 17, 1976, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

² Puryear Jr., Interview with LeMay.

³ [Mark Clodfelter, *Beneficial Bombing: The Progressive Foundations of American Air Power, 1917-1945* \(Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010\) 3-5.](#)

World War II, the bomber had achieved the pinnacle of prestige and formed the cultural backbone for a new service.

The Air Force values its technology, and this love for technology defines much of what the Air Force does. The Air Force identifies itself with flying and things that fly; the institution is secondary, it is a means to those things.⁴ It was founded on the airplane, a beacon of technology, and continued to absorb Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and the cyber mission. Those who operate such esteemed items are deemed higher on the pecking order than others. There is a sharp division between pilots, rated officers, operators and all other airmen.⁵

Even among pilots, there is a hierarchy. This can be seen in former Chiefs of Staff, where bomber and fighter pilots dominate this position. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force is the embodiment of what the service values. From General Carl Spaatz to General Mark Welsh, all 20 Chiefs of Staff of the US Air Force have been pilots. With a rare few exceptions, they [were](#) pilots of combat aircraft (fighters and bombers) and [had](#) combat experience. These generals usually excelled as tactical experts and then commanded at the tactical and operational levels. Bomber pilots held the Chief of Staff position until 1982, and since then fighter pilots have remained in control.⁶ Other services have diverse occupational specialties represented in their highest officer ranks. For example, US Navy and Marine Corps Chiefs of Staffs have been both aviators and career sailors or came from land-based specialties. The US Army also has a diverse representation, as the last three chiefs started their careers in the infantry, armor, and artillery corps. Air Force

⁴ Carl H. Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force* (New Brunswick, N.J.; London: Transaction, 2003) 37.

⁵ Builder, *The Icarus Syndrome*, 37.

⁶ General McConnell, a fighter pilot, interrupted the bomber pilot reign from 1965 to 1969 and General Schwartz, an airlift and special operations pilot, disrupted the fighter dominance after the short-notice removal of General Moseley in 2008.

leadership is representative of the core mission of the service, to project airpower. As pilots fly the planes, they are the ones who lead the service.

Early Chiefs of Staff cut their teeth in World War II as bold tactical heroes and operational commanders. General “Tooe” Spaatz was Commanding General of the Army Air Forces and then the first Chief of Staff of the newly formed Air Force. In just three short weeks of flying combat in World War I, he was credited with shooting down three enemy aircraft, earning him the Distinguished Service Cross. During World War II, Spaatz commanded the Eighth Air Force, the European Army Air Forces, and the Pacific Air Forces, overseeing the strategic bombing efforts of the Eighth and Twelfth Air Forces and later the dropping of the atomic bombs.⁷

General Hoyt S. Vandenberg followed General Spaatz as the second Chief of Staff. Vandenberg spent his junior officer years commanding pursuit and attack squadrons. During World War II, Vandenberg was instrumental in the planning and establishment of the Twelfth Air Force in Northern Africa. Later, he earned the Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for sorties he flew in the Italian theatre of operations. Eventually, Vandenberg assumed command of the Ninth Air Force in Europe in 1944 and earned an additional DFC for his role in the Normandy invasion.⁸

General Nathan Farragut Twining served as Vandenberg’s Vice Chief of Staff and followed as the third Chief of Staff. At the tactical level, Twining commanded the 90th Attack Squadron and flew in several other pursuit squadrons. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, he went to the South Pacific and assumed command of the newly formed 13th Air Force in 1942. Shortly after assuming command, Twining spent six

⁷ George M. Watson, *Secretaries and Chiefs of Staff of the United States Air Force: Biographical Sketches and Portraits* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2001).

⁸ Watson, *Secretaries and Chiefs of Staff*.

nights in the Coral Sea after ditching a B-17. Following his rescue, he commanded the Mediterranean Allied Strategic Forces and then the Twentieth Air Force during atomic bomb deliveries. After World War II, Twining commanded Air Material Command and the Alaskan Command before becoming Vice Chief of Staff in 1950 and Chief of Staff in 1953.⁹

These first three Chiefs of Staff represent the combat leaders and aviators that the Air Force values. Their experience before becoming Chief of Staff included tactical expertise and leadership. They commanded flying squadrons and wings and were the daredevils who broke records for aerial achievement. These men embodied the “knights of the air” description given to pilots of their day. They all led numbered air forces and earned medals for heroic actions during combat missions of World War II. These bomber pilots created the benchmark that following Chiefs of Staff would presumably be measured against. Then, General Thomas Dresser White became the fourth Chief of Staff.

General White is somewhat of an enigma among the early leaders of the USAF; his formative years were spent serving the country abroad instead of becoming a tactical expert and leader of aviators. Before World War II, White spent roughly half of his career in Panama, China, Russia, Italy, and Greece as an infantry officer, language student, and assistant attaché. Joining the Pacific theater late in the war as deputy commander of 13th Air Force, White’s first command opportunity was as the commander of the Seventh Air Force and later as the commander of Fifth Air Force in Japan and Hawaii. After returning from the Pacific theater, White assumed the role of Director of Legislative Liaison. From there, he served as the Vice Chief of Staff under General Twining and succeeded him as the fourth CSAF when General Twining rose to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

⁹ Watson, *Secretaries and Chiefs of Staff*.

His commands in the Pacific barely gained White acceptance into the bomber community and the prerequisite experience necessary for command in Washington D.C. Mike Worden, in his book *Rise of the Fighter Generals*, classifies General White as one of the bomber generals who competed for power with the fighter generals. This is misleading. Examination of White's record exhibits a plethora of experience in foreign affairs, especially a first-hand knowledge of Russian and Chinese culture. As the Cold War began to freeze, White seemed to be the perfect fit for a service leader who understood Communism. With his experience, it would stand to reason that White could properly oversee the USAF's organize_train_and_equip responsibilities through the force_composition debates over Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear_capable fighters. Not beholden to his background, White secured the space mission for the USAF and coined the term *aerospace*. Lt Gen Royal Allison, his former aide, described White's ability to blend strategy and technology by saying, "his grasp of overall strategy and his ability to sort of look out beyond today's world and see what might be important in the future is what really set him apart."¹⁰ Simply put, White was able to grasp the strategic guidance provided and adapt it to future development.

White was different from the CSAFs that followed him. They embodied the old breed of warrior_aviator, while White epitomized a different type of leader, an educated diplomat who approached issues differently. To understand Thomas White is to understand how different he was from his predecessors and the culture of the Air Force he served. But he never changed that culture. The CSAF that proceeded him, LeMay, was as different from White as is possible. Today, White remains

¹⁰ Mike Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals: The Problem of Air Force Leadership* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1988), 80.

an anomaly among Air Force service chiefs. But like many anomalies, much can be gleaned from his example.



Chapter 1

Early Life

Thomas Dresser White was born into a modest but politically connected and well-respected family from Springfield Illinois on August 6, 1901. His father, Rev John Chanler White, was an Episcopal bishop, and his mother was Katherine Dresser White. He was named for his paternal grandfather, Thomas Grinke White, and maternal grandfather, Thomas Dresser.

His mother's side of the family proudly held a connection to President Abraham Lincoln. Katherine's grandfather, Rev Charles Dresser, married Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln in her sister's home in 1842. A year and a half later, Dresser sold his family's five-bedroom house to Lincoln for \$1,500.¹ Working with Lincoln, Dresser also helped form and preside over the Springfield chapter of the American Colonization Society, a society promoting the abolition of slavery in the United States.² Dresser also presided over the memorial service for Henry Clay in 1852 where Lincoln eulogized him in grandiose fashion.³

Dr. Thomas Dresser, Katherine's father, was Mary Todd Lincoln's personal doctor; he testified to her mental illness; and signed her death certificate.⁴ As an only child, Katherine Dresser inherited enough wealth to subsidize school and extras for a family dependent on a traveling minister's income. While this link to the popular president seems trivial,

¹ Kenneth J. Winkle, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln*, Concise Lincoln library (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 47.

² Michael Lind, *What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America's Greatest President* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 105.

³ Lind, *What Lincoln Believed*, 69.

⁴ W. A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 306.

the family tie to Lincoln and Springfield politics would benefit White in his early days as a lieutenant in Panama.

White's paternal line traced backward from Bishop John Chanler White, whose family descended from Colonel Sir John White of Canterbury, who sailed across the Atlantic with William Penn in 1682. Col John White's son, Blake White, married the daughter of the famous Revolutionary War General, Marquis de Lafayette. Bishop White's father, Thomas Grinke White, was a Captain in the Confederate Army of South Carolina before later practicing medicine and law. Thomas G. White's wife was the granddaughter of Vice President John C. Calhoun and related to the famous General Francis Marion, also known as "the Swamp Fox."

Bishop White attended college in New York and finished his seminary studies, being made a priest in 1892. While White's pastoral flock started small with lower responsibilities in the church, by 1924 he was elected Bishop of the Springfield Diocese, which comprised sixty counties in Illinois. Rev White was also a 32nd degree mason and member of the Knights Templar. *The Illinois Democracy*, a book that serves as a "who's who" in the Illinois state Democratic party, praised Bishop White by saying, "No man identified with Illinois Democracy holds a more respected and revered position...a man of splendid endowments of high faith, and deep understanding of his fellowmen."⁵

Growing up, young Thomas White developed a love for the outdoors, especially fishing, that followed him throughout his life. From early childhood, the White family spent their summers at an inherited cottage in Michigan. Fishing was a family affair as father and son fished while his mother rowed the boat. Tommy took his sister fishing with him

⁵ Walter A. Townsend, *Illinois Democracy: A History of the Party and Its Representative Members - Past and Present*, ed. Charles Boeschenstein, vol. II (Springfield, Il: Democratic Historical Association, Inc., 1935), accessed December 29, 2014, <https://archive.org/details/illinoisdemocrac03town>, 31.

and together they would take snakes they caught back on the train to Springfield. In Springfield, Thomas spent his free time fishing in the artificial lakes and exploring the outdoors. Rev White encouraged his son's enthusiasm for the outdoors by volunteering as his scoutmaster.⁶

While Katherine and Thomas were young children, Rev White spent a good portion of time away from home tending to churches in other towns. White remembered, "My mother was somewhat austere, no doubt somewhat spoiled, and not always in good health...Her mind was quick, incisive, and practical. She – not my father – raised the family."⁷ The Reverend was not an absentee father by any stretch, however. The family ate dinners together each night after the children were called in from playing outside and before schoolwork began. In the mornings before school, their father held five-to-ten minute prayer meetings, as he read from the prayer book. If friends stopped by too early on their way to school, then they were asked to join in with the family.⁸

White enrolled in the ninth grade at St John's Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin at the age of 12. There are many reasons why White left his family at an early age for boarding school. It was a trying time for the family as Mrs. White suffered from a "leaking" heart and was hospitalized. During this period, Katherine lived with a great aunt in Springfield.⁹ Moreover, local schools suffered from a poor reputation due to overcrowding, and St. John's was a church-affiliated school that offered him a reduced tuition because of his father's ministry. With his

⁶ "Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., October 23, 1978, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁷ Thomas D. White, "Autobiography Notes," n.d., Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁸ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry."

⁹ Despite living her whole life with a heart condition, Mrs. White lived well into her eighties and traveled to almost every location that General White was assigned. General White's sister cared for their mother and father into old age and would not marry until both were deceased. For this reason, General White gave all interest on his inheritance to her as he said she did more for the family than he had.

father's discount and his mother's inheritance, White was able to attend St. John's Military Academy. It marked the beginning of his goals to see the world while serving in the military.

White made a definite impression in his time at military school. He played football, ran cross-country and competed on the track team. When not singing in choir or playing sports, he edited the senior yearbook and the school newspaper. His interest in writing and editing followed him throughout his career, and after the Air Force, as White later published several columns and articles about a myriad of topics.¹⁰ In a response to White, his former headmaster expressed White's unique ability to express his opinions in written form, "Prolixity, thy name is Thomas Dresser White; and yet proluxity is something that one can prune if one has it, out which one can never attain if one has it not. Therefore, proluxity is not a bad thing."¹¹

White also began his study of languages at SJMA, [taking](#) Spanish for three years.¹² Eventually White added another six languages to his repertoire. He wrestled with the possibility of entering the Foreign Service while at St John's. Instead, he stayed with the military academy because it was more financially feasible with his [father](#) a minister. Additionally, his experience at military school solidified White's desire to attend a service academy for college.

His intention was to attend the Naval Academy in Annapolis, as it would satisfy his desire to see the world.¹³ White said his wanderlust and military interest began with his stamp collection, "More than anything...I was interested in seeing the world. I collected stamps as a

¹⁰ Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight: A Study in Air Force Character and Leadership* (San Rafael, Calif: Presidio Press, 1981), 165.

¹¹ H.M. to Thomas D. White, September 13, 1917, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

¹² Michael A. Henderson, "Thomas Dresser White and the United States Military Attache' System, 1927-1935" (The Pennsylvania State University, 1994).

¹³ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry."

kid and that had a great impact on me...collecting stamps made me interested in geography, and...I became interested in various languages that appeared on these stamps and I said to myself; 'Well, how am I going to see the world for free?' The answer was military service."¹⁴

Entrance into the service academies was not easy. In preparation for the entrance exams, White requested previous exams from the Naval Academy and the United States Military Academy (USMA). The Naval Academy sent previous tests dating back to 1900 but West Point did not send any because they did not keep previous years' exams. White studied every question for the naval test and prepared for West Point for a full year before taking the exams while at St. John's.¹⁵ A classmate of White's at St John's said that he and White were only two of the four who passed the exam out of the 34 applicants who took it at Jefferson Barracks on March 19, 1918. After passing the exam and acquiring a congressional sponsor, White was admitted to the US Military Academy at the age of 16.

Relinquishing his dream of joining the Naval Academy, White decided upon the Army because West Point was graduating officers in a shortened two-year program due to the demands of World War I. [Too](#), as graduates of St. John's, a limited number of students were granted appointments directly to West Point.¹⁶ Had he attended Annapolis, he would have been required to wait another year as well due to his age. His goal was to get to the action as soon as possible.¹⁷

Before attending West Point, White could not resist the call to adventure beckoning across the Atlantic. White fled to Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force at the age of 16, which was too young for armed service in the United States. However, his family

¹⁴ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 166.

¹⁵ "Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., February 11, 1976, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

¹⁶ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 167.

¹⁷ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry."

intervened and quickly whisked him back to the United States and off to West Point.¹⁸

While attending West Point, White again attempted to join a foreign military. He wrote to his family about his longing to travel, “every time I hear the whistle it makes me have a strange feeling – like far-off lands – and how I want to travel.”¹⁹ His wanderlust would not rest even under the strains of academic and military training. White attempted to gain a commission in the Polish military to fight in the Polish-Soviet War. However, the assistant military attaché for the United States to Poland responded that Poland would not accept anyone as a commissioned officer who had not been commissioned in their own host nation’s military.²⁰ Disappointed, White would have to wait another twenty years before he would get a chance to serve in war.

With his Canadian excursion behind him, White began his education at the US Military Academy on June 14, 1918.²¹ Starting at the age of sixteen meant that his parents would pay for his room and board for two months until he turned seventeen.²² White’s roommate and later fellow Joint Chief, General Lyman Lemnitzer wrote, “His family loves to tell how he entered West Point before the ‘legal’ age of entry, and how his father had to pay for the food bill until his son reached his 17th birthday.”²³ The Army recorded White’s attendance as, “Reported June 14, 1918; permitted to remain at his own expense until legal age for admission.”²⁴

¹⁸ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 166.

¹⁹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 167.

²⁰ Assistant Military Attache to Poland to Thomas D. White, April 21, 1920, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

²¹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 167.

²² Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry.”

²³ Lyman L. Lemnitzer, “Thomas Dresser White,” *Assembly*, Fall 1971, 113.

²⁴ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 166.

As a cadet, White stood out from the very moment he began at West Point. His good looks gained the attention of everyone around him. His fellow cadets constantly reminded him of it. Throughout his career, both men and women would [comment on his](#) remarkable appearance. A fellow classmate, Col Wilbur S. Nye remarked, “His first impression on most of us was...he was unusually good-looking, with fine features, an excellent physique, and well set up. He was the perfect picture of a West Pointer, from the very start.”²⁵ His senior yearbook noted White was “possessed of a handsome phiz.”²⁶

During his plebe year at the academy, White endured more ridicule than normal because of some publicity he received while at St John’s. Because of his handsome appearance, the staff at St. John’s created an advertising brochure with White as the shining face for the school. White warned his family not to publish anything, but his proud grandfather in South Carolina published his grandson’s honors at St. John’s and his acceptance into West Point in the local newspaper. Any notoriety that an incoming plebe garnered before arrival would be levied as a recitation by the upper class.²⁷ Sadly, White’s fame preceded him and the upper class knew all too well about their incoming freshman. His woes were recorded in his senior yearbook, “How often, oh how often, we have heard him recite his honors and his accomplishments as set forth in a clipping from his home Podunk. Life was no long, sweet dream for him in summer camp.”²⁸

White would not remain a plebe but for a matter of months due to the shortened program. In all, his class spent [only](#) two years at the

²⁵ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 169.

²⁶ White, Thomas D., ed., *The Howitzer* (Buffalo, NY: Baker, Jones, Hausauer, Inc., 1920), accessed February 7, 2015, <http://cdm16919.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/howitzers/id/13564/rec/18>, 169.

²⁷ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry.”

²⁸ White, Thomas D., *The Howitzer*, 169.

academy instead of the normal four. Therefore, younger cadets were thrust into leadership positions sooner than would normally be expected. Cadets with prior military training were usually picked for student leadership positions, as they were [already](#) familiar with the basics. White's experience at St John's was an asset in this regard. Due to his "tin school" and Canadian military experience, White was placed high on the list for student leadership.²⁹ Because of his knowledge of drill and commanding presence, White was placed as a company commander and led successfully.³⁰ Despite his age, his classmates were amazed at his leadership. Some classmates were already veterans of World War I by this time, and yet naturally followed White, now [a](#) 17 year-old cadet. One fellow classmate remembered, "Cadet Captain White was the baby of the class, but in spite of his age and in spite of considerable variance in military experience, he forged ahead to become one of the leading members of the class."³¹

[He](#) did all of this with humility and respect for others. A former classmate remarked that, "as a cadet officer, with many stripes on his sleeve, and...a star on his collar for academic efficiency, he was always available to...the rank and file of the cadets generally. He was considered then by everyone as a natural-born leader."³²

Not only did White lead as a company commander, he also continued his tradition of writing and editing as editor of the school newspaper, *Bugle Notes*, and later as editor-in-chief for the school's yearbook, *The Howitzer*.³³ His extracurricular activities consumed much of his time and hampered his class ranking. When asked how many hours he contributed to the yearbook during his senior year, White

²⁹ "Tin-School (n.) Any military academy, school or college except West Point, including V.M.I." Ibid, 355.

³⁰ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 168.

³¹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 168.

³² Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 170.

³³ White, *The Howitzer*, 169.

responded excitedly with, “600 hours!” While popular amongst faculty and students, he graduated only 148 of 270 students.³⁴

While at West Point, White’s interest in foreign languages and foreign travel flourished. He continued his studies in Spanish through formal classes but also became interested in Chinese through a classmate. During his first year, White befriended Linson Edward Dzau, a Chinese army student, who encouraged White’s interest in Chinese language and culture.³⁵ Another fellow classmate remembered White’s love for [learning](#) language. White “believed that he wanted to learn language and prepared in his spare time a box full of cards on one side of which was a Chinese character and on the side was the English equivalent. These he studied religiously and eventually he became a fluent Chinese scholar.”³⁶

White’s interest in languages was not the only [manifestation of his international outlook](#). Thoughts of Foreign Service and desire to travel stirred again while at West Point.³⁷ Prophetically, the yearbook foretold of his future endeavors, “The echo of a steamboat whistle never fails to awaken in him the wanderlust, and he is always [thinking of] Foreign Service. The best we can wish for him is that on graduation he will have his chance as attaché in some far capital.”³⁸

His roommate, however, claimed that White’s career goals were more than Foreign Service. His desire was to return to West Point as an instructor, go to China as a language officer, and fly for the Air Service.³⁹ White accomplished two of his three goals, with the third goal being interrupted by his own success. White wanted a diverse career from the

³⁴ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 169.

³⁵ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry.”

³⁶ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 171.

³⁷ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White.”

³⁸ White, *The Howitzer*, 169.

³⁹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 170.

beginning, and his educated manner and thorough background built the bedrock for his success.

Upon graduating, White, still 18 years old, was finally able to stretch his legs and see the world for a bit. He and other newly appointed lieutenants traveled to Europe in search of the freshly ground battlefields from World War I. After seeing the sights in England, the group ventured through Paris and into Belgium. White, ever the diplomat, called on the American ambassador before they rented a car to tour the French battlefields.⁴⁰ The trip lasted throughout the summer and the young men started their officer careers on their return.

Fort Benning and the US Army Infantry School were White's next stop after returning from Europe. There, he excelled in his classes and impressed his fellow students as one of the outstanding officers. However, his friends also remembered a distracted young officer who could not shake the desire to fly from his mind. Maybe because of this distraction, his training report listed him as average.⁴¹

During White's time at West Point, the Air Service did not take any cadets, and he understood the commission was just as important to enable a transfer later.⁴² As some classmates transferred immediately from the Infantry School to the Air Service, White was torn between a foreign assignment and flying. He recounted, "I thought about it, but I had applied for foreign duty – there again you can see that travel bug came in. I had asked for several places and my orders came in to go to Panama. So I thought, well, I will go down there and then I will see what I can do about flying. I hadn't much more [than] arrived there before I wished I had gone into flying."⁴³ Throughout his career, the desire for

⁴⁰ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 171.

⁴¹ "Officer Remarks for Gen Thomas White Performance Reports," 1961 1920, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴² "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White," interview by Kenneth Leish, July 1960, 1.

⁴³ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 172.

overseas assignment competed directly with his dream of flying. His assignment in Panama is the first example of many where White chose to travel abroad instead of pursuing and specializing in a flying career.

Lieutenant White reported to the Panama Canal Zone on September 10, 1921 and stayed there for nearly four years. His first jobs were as company commander and then battalion adjutant. As a lieutenant, his supervisors rated him average at best. They stated he was an outstanding rifle instructor, and the next year a Major Hooper described him as “very young – not fully developed – has promise.”⁴⁴ The reason for White’s early lackluster performance may [have laid](#) in his disappointment with the locale, lobbying for a transfer to the Air Service and Foreign Service, time spent writing, or focus on extracurricular language studies. There is no need to pin the measure of his performance on one singular cause, for the point remains that White was unhappy in Panama.

The allure of a foreign assignment in Panama quickly faded into mundane army life for Lt. White. [He](#) was unhappy with the monotonous schedule for a soldier in the Canal Zone. In a letter to his father, White admitted, “I have sometimes seriously reflected in my mind whether or not I am going insane. Nearly every week some soldier does go crazy here...Yet I haven’t the nerve to resign...I know I belong in the Army and wouldn’t be happy anywhere else—but I sure got the wrong place—and the wrong branch down here.”⁴⁵

White was looking for something better, be it aviation or a diplomatic assignment. It took just over two months for him to request a transfer to the Air Service. His first application is dated December 17, 1921, and he quickly followed it four days later with a letter to his representative, the Honorable Loren Wheeler from Springfield Illinois on December 21. White expressed his frustration with the infantry and his

⁴⁴ “Officer Remarks for Gen Thomas White Performance Reports.”

⁴⁵ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 172.

potential in the Air Service to Wheeler, “the Infantryman leads a stagnated life with little or no professional brainwork involved in times of peace; that the room for a man’s initiative in a non-technical branch of the service is extremely limited and that the routine of the doughboy tends to minimize one’s ambitions and outlook...[the Air Service] is a new field and contains big opportunities for a man with ideas and initiatives.”⁴⁶ He asked Wheeler to expend no political capital but help if he could. Wheeler replied ten days later that it would be best to place an officer where he was most interested and that he would help the transfer as long as it did not hurt White’s future standing.⁴⁷ Despite his political pleadings, White’s application was disapproved on January 27, 1922. However, he would not give up his relentless drive to transfer out of the infantry.⁴⁸

Lt. White’s next application was more successful. White followed it with a letter to a classmate’s father, Col J.P. Barney, Chief of Purchase in the Army Quartermaster Corps. Col Barney replied to White and told him he would write his old friend, the Executive of the Air Service, and then relayed fatherly advice of staying safe and away from alcohol.⁴⁹ Thanks to Col Barney, White was finally accepted into the Air Service toward the end of 1922. To persuade the Chief of Infantry to permit the transfer, Col Barney arranged shipment of two freight cars of much needed office furniture to Fort Benning.⁵⁰ Even though he obtained the release, regulations restricted an immediate transfer because White was

⁴⁶ Thomas D. White to Loren E. Wheeler, December 21, 1921, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴⁷ Loren E. Wheeler to Thomas D. White, December 31, 1921, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴⁸ Adjutant General of the War Department to 1st Lt. Thomas D. White, “Application for Transfer,” January 27, 1922, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴⁹ Col J.P. Barney to 1st Lt. Thomas D. White, June 21, 1922, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁵⁰ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 174.

on a foreign assignment. Despite a number of other requests for release over the next two years, he would have to wait until his duty in the Canal Zone was over before attending pilot training.

While he waited, White did not give up on his other pursuit of language study. He continued studying Spanish at the Panamanian National University and began another course in Portuguese.⁵¹ To capitalize on his language ability, White requested three books on native Panamanian language so he could speak with the natives on expeditions into the jungle. He also kept up with his Chinese studies and frequented the Chinese shops in Panama.⁵²

Before he left the Canal Zone, and after acceptance into the Air Service, White applied for language study in China.⁵³ Additionally, he applied to the Department of State for diplomatic service. However, in December 1923, the State Department would not approve his request without White obtaining permission from the Army first.⁵⁴ The Army would not approve his request for transfer because he was slated for an instructor assignment at West Point.⁵⁵ Despite his desires, White remained in the Canal Zone another year. As fate would have it, White benefitted from his rejection letters, and the time spent as an adjutant for Brig Gen John M. Palmer starting in the winter of 1923.

For White, Brig Gen Palmer was a Godsend and the perfect mentor. Their similarities were uncanny and the two men developed a lasting relationship. Palmer came from another well-connected Illinois family that knew White's family. After taking command of the 19th Infantry Brigade, Palmer requested White because Bishop White

⁵¹ Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 to Thomas D. White, March 4, 1924, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁵² Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. C. Conry."

⁵³ Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 to Thomas D. White, March 4, 1924.

⁵⁴ Department of State to Thomas D. White, December 19, 1923, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁵⁵ Michael A. Henderson, "Thomas Dresser White and the United States Military Attache' System, 1927-1935," 6.

(Thomas' father) was an old family friend. Palmer's grandfather was named John M. Palmer also, and was friends with Abraham Lincoln, and the governor of Illinois from 1869 to 1873.⁵⁶ Bishop White's political connections connected his son to a valuable mentor. Palmer looked favorably upon White and rated him well on his performance reports. He [cited](#) him as an officer of "unusual capacity, energy and force" and then "very promising."⁵⁷ In writing Palmer's biography, I.B. Holley wrote to White about his relationship with Palmer. White replied, "You are indeed right that I looked upon General Palmer as a second father and I am certain he had great affection for me."⁵⁸

Palmer was a West Point alum, infantry officer, and World War I veteran. In World War I, he served on Pershing's staff and served twice in China. Additionally, Palmer worked heavily on the National Defense Act of 1920 where he advocated publicly for an increased role of the citizen soldier. In doing so, Palmer published several articles in journals and newspapers and wrote five books throughout the course of his life.⁵⁹ As a mentor, Palmer assigned White books to read.⁶⁰

Like Palmer, White published throughout his career on various topics and in various periodicals and journals. In Panama alone, young Lt. White published five articles in *Infantry Journal* about his experiences in Central America. Despite his discontent with his lot, Lt. White matured through his writing and contributed a thoughtful piece on

⁵⁶ [Irving](#) B. Holley [Jr.](#), *General John M. Palmer, Citizen Soldiers, and the Army of a Democracy*, Contributions in military history no. 28 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1982), 527.

⁵⁷ "Officer Remarks for Gen Thomas White Performance Reports."

⁵⁸ Thomas D. White to Dr. I.B. Holley, Jr., July 16, 1954, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁵⁹ Palmer authored *An Army of the People* (1916), *Statesmanship or War* (1927), *Washington, Lincoln, Wilson* (1930), *General von Steuben* (1937), *America in Arms* (1941), and contributed to the first part of his biography by I.B. Holley.

⁶⁰ Edgar F Puryear, *American Generalship: Character Is Everything: The Art of Command* (Novato, Calif.; London: Presidio ; Greenhill, 2002), 350.

jungle warfare upon leaving the Canal Zone. Less than two years after his arrival, White published three articles. His first article, "Service in Panama," appeared in the February 1923 issue of *Infantry Journal*. In it, he described the everyday life of a soldier from arriving in Panama to the joyous day of his departure. It truly reflected his sentiments of his duty there. He wrote, "However beautiful and placid the little island may be, however warm and sensuous the breezes blow, the days grow monotonous, the months drag by – three years become appallingly long."⁶¹

His next article, "Service in Porto Rico," paralleled his first report as it chronicled the 65th Infantry Regiment stationed there. It and his Panama article could have served as a welcome brochure to daily living in both locations. His final article in 1923 was a fictional piece titled "Fair Bargain." In it, White tells the story of twin brothers who are cadets at West Point and Annapolis. On a break, they decide to switch identities only to find the proverbial grass is not greener on the other side. His tale is more of a campfire story than an academic addition to thoughts on army study. However, the article shows that White was not interested solely in nonfiction writing. The July 1924 issue of *Infantry Journal* contained White's article, "Tale of an M.P." His last article before leaving Panama combined a narrative found in "Fair Bargain" with the depiction of everyday life found in his service location descriptions. White gave the account of the interaction between local and military police in the Canal Zone while following a day-in-the-life tale of a lieutenant and sergeant.

Lt. White's final article, and his most promising, was published after White arrived at pilot training. In "Jungle Fighting," he described the problems with jungle warfare, particularly the climate and vegetation. White not only described the problem with jungle fighting but also listed

⁶¹ Thomas D. White, "Service in Panama," *Infantry Journal* 22, no. 2 (February 1923): 177.

a prescription for employing defensive positions to lay down effective machine-gun enfilades to cut through the undergrowth and offensive maneuvers by column formations. He covered the use of runners to overcome telephone problems and the use of pack mules to overcome the impassable terrain.⁶² “Jungle Fighting” represents the maturation of professional thought that White accomplished while serving his time in Panama. It also was probably written under the tutelage of Brig Gen Palmer. White would continue to write and publish about his experiences when on attaché duty in far lands and later while in Washington as Chief of Staff.

Lt. White finally got his wish to leave Panama and pursue his dream of flying in August 1924. Panama was the culmination of White’s experience in the infantry. While he was there, White matured from the 19-year-old cadet to an officer who would continue to pursue his aspirations to fly, travel and serve his country abroad.

⁶² Thomas D. White, “Jungle Fighting,” *Infantry Journal* 29, no. 1 (July 1926): 65–66.

Chapter 2

Air Corps and Attaché Life

Trading the Infantry for the Air Corps ended the first chapter in White's military career. Little did he know that his Air Corps would hold all of the dream assignments the Army denied him in Panama. White's career would not follow the typical pilot's career path. He ventured into the attaché [world](#) instead. Over the next twenty years, White spent his career between flying assignments, language assignments, and attaché jobs in China, Russia, Italy, and Brazil, before finally commanding air forces in the Pacific during World War II.

Thomas White reported to Kelly Field in September 1924 for primary flight training. He was an average pilot through the primary phase, but Lt Col C.C. Culver thought he was good officer material; "A fine young officer, energetic in performance of duty, anxious to learn; a very good pursuit pilot."¹

During his first solo flight, he lost a tire on takeoff. Luckily, he landed. A couple of days later, his fuel tank started leaking and sprayed him in the face on takeoff. His emergency fuel tank lasted just long enough for White to land at nearby Fort Sam Houston. During advanced training, White's string of bad luck continued. One requirement demanded the students land over an obstacle. While trying to accomplish this event in a 50-mph wind, White came to a stop, nosing over the aircraft. With sympathy, his instructor passed him saying, "you [ought](#) to be able to do better than that, in a little zephyr like this."²

Besides earning his wings, White gained valuable connections with other future leaders of the Air Force. [Nathan](#) Twining was an instructor at Kelly Field during this period, and White would later serve under him as his Vice Chief of Staff. Another valuable friendship blossomed

¹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 174.

² Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White," 3-4.

between White and Elwood Quesada. White earned Quesada's friendship when White, as a seasoned lieutenant, treated him as an equal, despite Quesada being an inexperienced aviation cadet. White made an impression on Quesada. To him, White "was a little different from most...Tommy had a tendency to be a little bit vague and a little bit restless...he used to do some things that the rest of us didn't do very much. He...was more interested in intellectual pursuits than the rest of us."³ Quesada recounted that White "used to go out of his way to be pleasant to me even though he was an officer and I was just a cadet. I always believed it was because he had observed that I read a great deal, and he and I would discuss subjects that he had an interest in. I was a real history buff at that time in my life. We often ate out together...I recall several occasions when I would go with Tommy to a concert; we would also go to art galleries. We didn't like to tell people because we were a little bit fearful that they would think the thing sort of sissy-like."⁴ Quesada and White remained [fast](#) friends and served in each other's weddings.

Ever the writer, White served as literary editor of the flying school's bi-weekly newspaper, *The Pilot Book*. In the Christmas edition of 1924, White published his short story of "Buried Treasure." The article was written during his time in the Canal Zone and featured a vice consul to Panama who, while suffering from the "tropical blues," finds what he thinks to be buried treasure. In the end, the hidden beach treasure is only an instruction booklet on how to play Mah Jong.⁵ The February 4, 1925 paper held White's article, "The Army Bachelor." [In yet another](#) article written in Panama, White tells of a group of bachelors complaining

³ "Personal Interview with Lt Gen Elwood R. Quesada," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., June 22, 1977, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 174.

⁵ Thomas D. White, "Buried Treasure," *The Pilot Book* 1, no. 3 (December 15, 1924): 3.

about the lack of pay and lack of freedom that bachelors get in comparison to married cadets and officers. The single men complained because they were often confined to post or quarters when their married counterparts lived off post and were absent when random taskings arrived at the barracks.⁶

White graduated with his wings in September 1925 and moved to Bolling Field, Washington DC. At Bolling, White served as engineering officer in the 56th Service Squadron.⁷ He oversaw overhaul and repair of the few aircraft at the base. White recalled that Bolling was a hodgepodge of aircraft, so nearby staff officers could maintain flight currency and pay. However, by virtue of his role as the Engineering Officer, White enjoyed the luxury of testing out the few new aircraft that shipped to Bolling.⁸ After leaving the service squadron, he flew and worked as Supply Officer of the 99th Observation Squadron.

As in his previous assignments, White continued his foreign language studies in preparation for potential foreign service. At night, White enrolled in classes at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, taking diplomatic Spanish, Portuguese, [and](#) commercial and international law. He also continued his studies in advanced Chinese and started studying Russian.⁹

However, White was apprehensive about leaving the Air Corps for a diplomatic assignment because he felt diplomats at the top [go there by](#) attaining an economic and social status he could not achieve. In an October 1925, letter to his mother, he wrote, "I'm waiting for things to settle here before trying to formulate any definite plans of action for the future. One thing is sure, I want to take these diplomatic examinations

⁶ Thomas D. White, "The Army Bachelor," *The Pilot Book* 1, no. 6 (February 4, 1926).

⁷ Statement of Service, May 24, 1961.

⁸ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White," 6.

⁹ Thomas D. White to Chief of Air Service, Washington, D.C., January 5, 1926, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

as soon as I'm prepared for them. I'm quite delighted to find that I'm bored to death with most of the affairs in Washington...Some of the so-called diplomats at the ball the other night gave me such a pain that I've almost lost all interest in trying it. Immediately thereafter I wanted to cling to some of the good old ways of the Army."¹⁰ He attempted to gain advice from a general, who "suggested that I quit the Army and be a hobo for a few years. He highly recommended it – and he wasn't being sarcastic with me for being unsettled...when it is nice and warm I'm ready to quit and take a chance in the world, but when it gets cold I feel thankful to have a nice job."¹¹ Obviously, White was torn between a traditional military career and diplomatic assignment, and his superiors noticed his wavering dedication.

Nonetheless, White overcame his trepidations and applied to the War Department's language program in January 1926. Earlier applications in Panama, [had also](#) expressed his desire to continue study in Chinese. Oddly, White requested language detail in Tokyo while using his four years of Chinese and other language study as his rationale to request assignment in Japan.¹² The Army Air Service rejected his request because White had only been in the Air Service a year and most of that time was spent in school. His rejection letter included an accurate appraisal of White. "It is believed that this officer's history will show that he is somewhat of a nomad and it is believed that it is very bad practice to permit a young officer to accumulate a nomadic habit." Despite the negative description, it continued, "Except for the above objection it is believed that this officer would be an excellent one for this detail...everything has shown that he is an A No. 1 Officer."¹³

¹⁰ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 176.

¹¹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 176.

¹² Thomas D. White to Chief of Air Service, Washington, D.C., January 5, 1926.

¹³ "Dissapproval for Oriental Language Service," January 11, 1926, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

White reapplied in 1927, this time for China. In his second application, Brigadier General Palmer wrote in his recommendation that White “is well fitted in all respects for the proposed assignment and especially so because he [has](#) a natural aptitude for languages and has been studying Chinese on his own initiative for several years. I know no other officer who, in my opinion is so well qualified to fulfill the government’s purposes in establishing the language detail in China.”¹⁴ He was accepted on March 27 to the Chinese language program and served as a student and assistant military attaché in Beijing. Twice now, in his seven-year service, White left his main career field to pursue another career path.

The Army language program White entered in 1927 began as part of the attaché program created in 1888. As the United States emerged from isolationism, the military recognized the need for some of their own to accompany foreign delegations. These early attaches were more than intelligence gatherers; they represented the official military [liaison](#) between the two countries.¹⁵ However, it was not until 1919 that the Army created the first training program for attaches. The rationale behind the language program lay in the lack of language-trained officers in France during the war. The Army Appropriations Act of July 12, 1919 funded the War Department’s solution to the linguistics shortfall. The Military Intelligence Division of the G-2 staff ran the program and assigned four students to study Japanese and Chinese each year for four-year assignments. The students reported to the military attaché of

¹⁴ Henderson, “Thomas Dresser White and the United States Military Attache’ System, 1927-1935,” 13.

¹⁵ George Anthony D’Angelo, “The Contemporary Role of the Military Attache and Problems Relating to the Attainment of a Quality Corps” (Texas Tech University, 1972), accessed February 12, 2015, <https://repositories.tdl.org/ttu-ir/bitstream/handle/2346/20568/31295009680702.pdf?sequence=1>.

each country.¹⁶

Before departing for China, White married Rebekah Lipscomb on May 28, 1927. White's father performed the ceremony and the two honeymooned before quickly leaving for China on June 10, 1927.¹⁷ While aboard ship, White continued studying Chinese and Russian while also reading other books about China.

As a language student, White's primary responsibility was to learn Chinese language and culture. Due to a problem with the Chinese school normally used by the embassy, the military attaché arranged for White to receive lessons by the assistant attaché. The students also participated in local civic organizations, churches, and educational groups. Next, the students were expected to travel outside of Beijing to experience other regions and activities. By 1929, White [had](#) visited all but three of China's aerodromes. Last, the program recommended students gain fluency in civil and military topics by translating publications, maps, and textbooks.¹⁸ White saw this assignment as another opportunity to publish an academic work.

The Chinese were well behind the United States in aviation, and White sought to remedy this situation through writing. During his first two years, [he](#) wrote a dictionary of Chinese Aeronautical Terms with approximately 1500 [entries](#). While writing this dictionary, White published an article in *US Air Service* detailing some of his difficulties [with the](#) intricacies [of](#) the language. On the impetus for compiling the dictionary, White wrote, "I promised General Patrick before leaving Washington that I would do so. Furthermore I have to read Chinese aviation papers, and as there is no dictionary on that subject I have had

¹⁶ Henderson, "Thomas Dresser White and the United States Military Attache' System, 1927-1935," 8-10.

¹⁷ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 176.

¹⁸ Henderson, "Thomas Dresser White and the United States Military Attache' System, 1927-1935, 17-19"

to make one.”¹⁹ He also wanted to publish his dictionary because it would “be of more value to the Chinese than to Americans, inasmuch as practically all Chinese publications on aviation subjects are English translations.”²⁰ During the last period of his assignment, White moved to regular attaché work under the military attaché, Major Magruder. He assigned White, the first Air Service officer in China, to cover all the aviation interests of the Chinese.

In addition to his academic study, White remained current in flying through various methods. According to him, there was little aviation development in China, for he remembered seeing only one Chinese airplane in North China.²¹ For the first 18 months of his assignment, White gained permission to fly with a Marine Expeditionary Force located in Mukden. During this period, the Marines were sent as a stabilizing force because of the warring activity between the various warlords and the Kuomintang Nationalist (KMT) government. The Chinese were unaccustomed to seeing airplanes overhead and two or three times White returned to base with bullet holes in the wings and empennage without seeing who did the firing.²²

White took advantage of his flying access to record warlord force dispositions on maps to forward back to US Army G-2 in Washington D.C. During early Japanese probes into Manchuria, White gained permission from the attaché to fly over their lines and record positions for intelligence purposes. One fellow officer remembered, “The clarity, accuracy, and objectivity of Tom White’s reports were such that they were sought throughout the War Department. From this time on, Tom

¹⁹ Thomas D. White, “Acrobatics Paper or How to Write a Chinese Dictionary,” *US Air Service*, May 1930.

²⁰ Thomas D. White to Major General James E. Fechet, December 18, 1929, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

²¹ Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White,” 7.

²² Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White,” 9.

White became a marked man.”²³ As the civil war heated up between the KMT and the Communists, White again appealed to his boss, Lt Col Margetts now, to study the fighting from the front. While initially unwilling due to the risk, Margetts realized White was invaluable in his role as an observer. “His discerning eyes picked up so much of value that he promptly sent his superiors surprisingly thorough reports.” In fact, Margetts “informed him that ‘you are free to remain on the border as long as you’re able to find the material such as that contained in this comprehensive report!’”²⁴

After the Marines returned to the United States, White flew with the Second Observation Squadron in Manila to maintain currency, flight pay, and knowledge about aviation developments.²⁵ On one flight in the Philippines, White had another misfortune with the landing gear. While on takeoff role, the plane hit a lump of dirt mistakenly left on the concrete runway. The aircraft prematurely leapt into the air but White was able to maintain control and slowly coax the aircraft into a climb without hitting any other obstacles. The right landing gear buckled with the impact against the lump of dirt however, and White was told by a chase plane to drop his fuel tank as everyone on the ground expected a calamitous crash when he landed. After shutting off the engine, White and his mechanic descended to land. White maneuvered the plane onto the runway, landed on the left wheel, and finally came to a stop after two complete circles. Both men exited the wreck unharmed and “congratulations came thick and fast as the cool-headed pilot climbed from his precarious perch.”²⁶

²³ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 181.

²⁴ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 181.

²⁵ During this period, the US government authorized several American aviation firms to sell airplanes in China to the Kuomintang government. White served as an invaluable intercessor in pointing out the obstacles within the Chinese market.

²⁶ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 180.

White fared well on his performance reports while on language duty. His first rater was Magruder. The remarks from his 1928 OPR stated White had an “Agile & critical mind. Should be of great value if not restrained.” Magruder remarked White had “Experience yet to catch up with mental superiority,” and the following year added White was “Highly spirited and intelligent.” The next military attaché, Lt Col Nelson Margetts, was not as impressed. He simply remarked that White was studying Chinese and Russian and finally that he held a “remarkable capacity for languages.”²⁷

White left China after almost four years as a language student on March 8, 1930. He returned to the United States and was assigned as Assistant Chief of the Plans Division for the Air Corps Chief, under Brigadier General Foulois. White worked on disarmament issues for the headquarters. Foulois did not rate White as high as his former attaché raters. In some categories, Foulois lowered White’s ratings from “superior” to “excellent” and even “satisfactory” in some cases.²⁸ After a short stay on the staff, White moved on to Assistant Operations Officer, Mess Officer, and Police and Prison Officer positions at Bolling Field.²⁹

The culmination of his time Washington DC did not occur at White’s behest. In 1933, President Roosevelt chose William Bullitt to be the first ambassador to the Soviet Union. Bullitt requested his own personal aircraft for his new job. In turn, his pilot would also be the first military attaché. The task for finding this new pilot fell upon the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Douglas MacArthur.³⁰ White remembered his summons to the Chief’s office, “I was commanding what they called the headquarter squadron at Bolling Field, and one day the First Sergeant

²⁷ “Officer Remarks for Gen Thomas White Performance Reports.”

²⁸ Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White.”

²⁹ “Statement of Service” (Department of the Air Force, May 24, 1961), Air Force Historical Research Agency.

³⁰ General MacArthur was also Superintendent at West Point while White was a cadet.

told me the Chief of Staff of the Army wanted to see me...I made arrangements to get over as fast as I could...There was the General with a cigarette...He took a puff of it and he said, 'White, I am sending you to Moscow.'"³¹ White credited his selection to his studies at Georgetown and fluency in Russian.

However, Mrs. White told the story a different way. She relayed, "If you only knew that Bullitt, boy, he's something. And, so he said I want this man and I want everything of the best. This is going to be the first embassy after the revolution and I want everybody, everything to be tops and I want my own airplane to be able to fly wherever I want. And so he got his airplane and MacArthur was racking his brains as to who would fit the picture that was demanded by this demanding character, he sent for poor old Thomas who was living a perfectly happy life right here and he said he was scared to death. That's one of the few things he's ever told me of being summoned by this God-Almighty MacArthur." She continued to say that White was chosen by MacArthur, not because of language, but because Bullitt wanted a handsome man and White was selected because he was handsome and dashing.³²

His departure on Feb 15, 1935 found White unhappy about leaving. This expedition was an unsolicited assignment that caused White to leave his wife and infant daughter at home. He wrote in his diary, "I felt much as though I were watching my own coffin being lowered into the grave when I watched the gangplank cast off. I'm not as blue as that but I am surprisingly unexcited. Perhaps I'm getting old."³³ He missed his family and the cold Russian winter did not help his downtrodden attitude.

³¹ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White."

³² Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White."

³³ Thomas D. White, "Diary of Thomas D. White," February 15, 1934, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

Additionally, the rationed per diem was so lacking that it caused strain on the embassy staff. White complained of the expenses from travelling with Bullitt through Paris en route to Moscow. After negotiating with Ambassador Bullitt, the staff earned two dollars per day for meals, up an additional twenty cents. The average expense for two meals cost \$2.10. To overcome this nagging problem, White arranged for meals at the hotel for a monthly cost of \$45 per person.³⁴

White was popular amongst the embassy staff and made friends with members of the Russian military. [He](#) arrived as the acting military attaché before a Colonel Faymonville arrived months later to fill the permanent position. Meanwhile, White pressed forward to fill the social obligations required of an attaché. He attended the social engagements given by the Russian and Japanese delegations and even hosted his own party at the embassy. Loy Henderson, the Chargé d’Affaires, remembered, “the most pleasant party which we ever had during my whole experience in Moscow was a party given several weeks after our arrival by Tommy White [for](#) Soviet officers...the highest ranking officers were there...there was really an air of friendship which was very encouraging ...He felt he was a member of the embassy family.”³⁵ This air of friendship was only temporary between the embassy staff and the Russians.

Unfortunately, White found that nothing happened in a hurry in the Soviet Union. On the advice of Chairman Vyacheslav Molotov, Bullitt shipped an airplane for White to shuttle him between engagements. It caused a jurisdictional fight in the Soviet bureaucracy between the civilian and military offices over who would control it.³⁶ Because of the confusion, the airplane got waylaid in Hamburg. White sent wires and

³⁴ White, "Diary of Thomas D. White."

³⁵ "Personal Interview with Loy Henderson," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., January 25, 1978, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

³⁶ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White."

airmailed letters to the embassy in Berlin in an attempt to expedite the shipment. He recorded in his diary that he was “thoroughly griped and annoyed – so long to get things done.”³⁷ His bad mood continued while waiting on the plane to arrive. On April 13th, he entered, “Friday the 13th but seems no more than any other day. They are all bad!”³⁸ His mood would lift in a month when the plane arrived on May 7. With his mechanic, they had the plane assembled and ready to fly in a week. After White gained a Soviet pilot’s license and registration for the plane, White and Bullitt were ready to travel the Soviet Union.

The freedom of flying lasted only a month and came to a crashing halt. On June 25th, White flew Bullitt to meet his daughter in Leningrad. A large crowd gathered at the field to see the American ambassador. White approached the roughly plowed airfield for a low approach to survey it for landing. He placed the engine at idle and then the throttle failed to respond to his input on climb-out. He recalled the engine “failed to take when opened up, landed straight ahead out of steep sideslip, just cleared deep ditch and nosed over after 25 yard run just short of swamp. No injury except for skinned finger and stiff back. Ambassador apparently calm and very decent about matter. He sent wires to the President and Secretary of State!”³⁹

Bullitt remarked favorably on White’s ability, “I was deeply impressed by the skill and resource of White in handling the ship. He had no recourse but to land the ship as he did.” To calm fears in Washington, Bullitt wired President Roosevelt and joked, “Plane landed upside down, but we emerged right side up.”⁴⁰ Although not a total loss, the plane did not fare well, White arranged for the shipment via train back to Moscow.

³⁷ White, “Diary of Thomas D. White.”

³⁸ White, “Diary of Thomas D. White.”

³⁹ White, “Diary of Thomas D. White.”

⁴⁰ “Envoy Bullitt in Plane Crash,” *Universal Service Special Cable* (Moscow, June 24, 1934).

The year in the Soviet Union took a toll on White's patience. At one point, he proclaimed, "Six months in Moscow with its teeming millions, grating streetcars, everlasting rumble of subway and building construction; four months in a dingy hotel where garbage day exceeded a gas attack in intensity, where flies swarmed as aimlessly as Russians and as persistently; all this and more had conjured up the happiest spot as being one far from civilization and especially the Russian brand."⁴¹

The freedom to move around and report on what he wanted was more restricted in Russia than his experience in China. The State Political Directorate (GPU), or Russian secret police, escorted or followed White and the embassy staff wherever they went. Even when [he was](#) flying, the GPU would try to keep up [with White and Bullitt](#) by car or insist on an itinerary and meet White where he landed. On rare occasions the GPU insisted White fly with a Russian plane escorting him to his destination. With his frustrations mounting, White sought a quiet place where he could escape the urban setting.⁴²

To ease his mind, White turned to fishing. He recorded in his diary on June 28, "Planning to go fishing and forget my troubles...I want to go but know damn well that the grief and trouble involved will far worse than outweigh any pleasure. That is my greatest trouble I am ashamed to say. I haven't had one simple moment of unadulterated quiet since I left the USA!"⁴³ Along with Private Lepley, a mechanic, White traveled to the region of Karelia, which borders Norway, known for its tremendous lakes and sparse population.

⁴¹ Thomas D. White, *Travel Account of a Fishing Trip through Karalia and Murmansk, Embroidered with the Personal Reactions of an American Officer*, G-2 Report (Moscow, USSR: US Army, August 9, 1934), Air Force Historical Research Agency, 1.

⁴² White also complained about the constant surveillance by the GPU, or political police. The GPU never harassed embassy staff and were often friendly to foreigners if they were in need of assistance. However, the GPU was notorious for its political crimes against Russians.

⁴³ White, "Diary of Thomas D. White."

After debarking the train in Imandra, White asked the stationmaster if he could speak to a member of the GPU. White declared that they were two Americans who wanted assistance from the GPU to get a boat and hotel. The stationmaster answered that there were no GPU there. The two Americans quickly found accommodations amongst the crowd of people who recognized they were foreigners. White found these people to be the first friendly Russians he had encountered. One man, a Comrade as White referred to him, took them in his home before acting as their guide. They stayed with his family nearby before departing for the fishing camp.

The two adventurers caught their fill on fish after nine days in camp and returned to Imandra. When they left, White and his Sergeant gave their Comrade and his assistant some food, furs, forty rubles and an American dollar. On their return, they noticed the atmosphere was not as hospitable as before. When checking back in with the Comrade's family, the wife appeared with fear on her face and told White that the GPU had arrested her husband. White passed her his information and continued on his trip, hoping to rectify the misunderstanding when he returned to Moscow. However, on the train back to Moscow, they learned the situation was more sinister than they realized.

A man approached White on the train and invited him into his cabin. The young man told White he was at the plane crash in Leningrad and asked White if he knew anything about that. When White told him that he was the pilot, the man seemed astonished. The next day, another man from the train company told White the extent of what would happen to their friend. He said, "He will suffer plenty – he and his family. That young man you were talking with was the Chief of the GPU in this area. He had an entire charge sheet in his pocket against the old man."

White was devastated that his actions harmed someone who treated him with kindness. He failed to realize that the GPU followed

him everywhere he went. When he returned to the embassy, White appealed to the military attaché and their Soviet counterparts. The attaché reiterated White's legal right for his trip without disagreement. White received confirmation from the Soviet attaché that no harm fell on his friends. Instead, the Russian attaché told White when he left his office, "I will be glad when your wife gets here, so you will have a permanent base."⁴⁴

This was not the only instance of White's trouble with the GPU. Part of White's job in the attaché office was to report on the progress of Soviet aviation. Lemnitzer wrote of White's "excellent air intelligence reports from Moscow" which earned him "the reputation as a close observer of the Soviet's growing air power."⁴⁵ In line with his job, White requested to see the new six-engine sheet-metal aircraft, the Tupolev ANT-20 Maksim Gorky, as it was still undergoing tests. His escort, "Mr. X," took him to see the plane and then back to the embassy. On the ride back, White mentioned, "Well, it's a fantastically big airplane, but I hope you don't ask me to ride in it for the first flight."⁴⁶ The next day, White's boss summoned him to the attaché office in front of a panel of Russian officers who were there to ask him about his comment. They feared he knew something was amiss with the mechanics of the plane. White backpedaled quickly and explained he was cautious in nature and would not make the first flight of any aircraft. His explanation seemed to appease the officials.⁴⁷

Some time later, White worked with a Soviet Inspector on getting the ambassador's plane equipped with skis. White remarked that he had not seen Mr. X since the day with the Gorky. The inspector replied with

⁴⁴ Thomas D. White, *Travel Account of a Fishing Trip through Karalia and Murmansk, Embroidered with the Personal Reactions of an American Officer*, 2.

⁴⁵ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 189.

⁴⁶ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White, 14"

⁴⁷ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White" 15.

shock and asked White if he had not read *Pravda*, the communist newspaper. After White returned, he checked the newspaper the inspector hinted at. On December 14th, *Pravda* listed Mr. X as one of the members arrested and summarily executed. White later learned Mr. X actually was banished to Siberia instead.⁴⁸ White remarked, "His crime, I supposed, was being my contact man and what must have seemed to the Soviets a very egregious error on his part."⁴⁹ White learned the hard way of communist repression in his fishing and Gorky experiences.

As his life seemed it could not get any more difficult, White's family life also fell apart while he was in the Soviet Union. After a couple of months in Russia, Becky and their daughter joined him. Although the family was popular among the Russian diplomats and embassy staff, Rebekah and Tommy could not make their relationship last. She was unhappy with him because he would not leave the service.⁵⁰ He arranged a divorce through a colleague on the embassy staff and created a cover for their departure with a story about a family illness back home.⁵¹

White managed some writing besides his journal during his free time. Probably his most popular and proudest writing accomplishment concerned his fishing trip in Karelia. After retirement, White published his experiences in an article for *Field and Stream* titled "Red Trout." It reads almost identical to his reports submitted to G-2 while he was an attaché. His opening paragraphs summarizes his experience in the Arctic Circle, "Fishing in America is a sport, often an adventure. And sometimes it even takes on comedy aspects. In the USSR, though, it is

⁴⁸ Mr. X was never mentioned in any of White's records by any other name. He was abducted by the political police as part of the early days of Stalin's Great Purge.

⁴⁹ White, "Autobiography Notes."

⁵⁰ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White."

⁵¹ The Russian divorce was not legal in the US courts and White accomplished the divorce proceedings three years later before he could marry his second wife.

emphatically *not* a sport, and it may become cloak-and-dagger melodrama if the fisherman is an American. I know because I tried it.”⁵²

Although White’s career in Russia lasted but a year, it influenced [him](#) greatly. Besides gathering intelligence on Soviet military developments, the young attaché gained valuable insights into foreign relations. Puryear summed up White’s experience, writing, “The tour in the Soviet Union was a broadening experience for the future Chief of Staff of the Air Force. The essential education was learning about Communism as it was practiced in the Soviet Union and about the nature of the people and government officials.”⁵³

Besides learning about Russian aviation advancements, White’s experiences with the communist government provided valuable insights [to](#) his thoughts as Chief of Staff. George Kennan, who went to St. John’s and worked with White at the embassy, said White’s time in Russia was marked with “the same enthusiasm and distinction that marked his military career.”⁵⁴ [Loy Henderson, his coworker in Russia](#), recalled, “He was a soldier-statesman but he’d been preparing to be a soldier-statesman from the time...he was a very young man. That shown by the way he studied Russian and Chinese and these other languages and I’m not competent to discuss his technique in flying but I am competent to discuss his fledgling statesmanship and I saw it in action. I think that Tommy learned “a great deal about adversity in Moscow; about difficulties, about how to overcome difficulties, how to have patience when you are in a very exasperating position...He also learned how to deal in difficult international problems...not only about the Soviet Union but of the problems of other countries during that period.”⁵⁵

⁵² Thomas D. White, “Red Trout,” *Field and Stream*, December 1962, 29.

⁵³ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 185.

⁵⁴ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 208.

⁵⁵ Leish, “Personal Interview with Loy Henderson.”

In March 1935, White received orders to report to Rome as the Assistant Military Attache and Assistant Military Attache for Air. His tour in Russia was shortened because Ambassador Bullitt withdrew the staff in country in opposition to the coming Communist conference in Moscow. White was pleased with his new assignment and did not look back. In Italy, White was free to travel as he pleased. His counterparts from Italy were also more cordial than in Russia.⁵⁶

On his way to Italy, White attempted to rekindle his relationship with his wife. He arranged for her to join him in Italy, and then get married aboard a ship with the captain officiating. Just as before, the marriage was short-lived and Becky returned to the United States looking for a divorce.⁵⁷

White excelled at his job in Rome. His supervisor, Colonel G.J. Pillow, wrote that White was “one of the best I have ever known. His intelligence, great energy, pleasant disposition and high sense of duty will make him a valuable officer in any command.” However, Pillow’s supervisor in Washington, Brigadier General H.E. Knight disagreed, “I know neither the reporting officer nor the officer reported upon. However, I cannot conceive of an officer who is qualified to a preeminent degree in each and every qualification listed. It would seem the reporting officer has allowed his enthusiasm for the officer reported upon to unduly influence him in the preparation of this report.”⁵⁸

Through the British attaché in Italy, White met his next wife, Constance Millicent Rowe. She was the British attaché’s sister-in-law, and they met in the fall of 1935 while she visited her [sister](#). The two dated until White moved back to the United States and then married in March 1938.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White.”

⁵⁷ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 191.

⁵⁸ “Officer Remarks for Gen Thomas White Performance Reports.”

⁵⁹ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White.”

White was reassigned to attend the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS) at Maxwell AFB, AL in May 1937, [and](#) his career [conformed](#) to normal duties the first time in years. He studied under instructors and future fellow leaders such as Major Muir S. Fairchild, Captain Hoyt S Vandenberg, Captain Laurence S Kuter and First Lieutenant Haywood Hansell.⁶⁰ One of his fellow classmates was Captain Otto P. Weyland. White recalled his studies at ACTS. “I particularly remember the problems we had in tactical aviation: interdiction...problems were laid out to cut railroads, first what would do the most damage under certain situations...Bridges, railroads, marshaling yards, and that sort of thing, all that business really set the stage for the application of airpower in World War II for the first time on a scientific military basis.”⁶¹ As fitting with the period, White’s paper at ACTS focused on defeat of Japan.

His assignment for individual research was the Japanese Empire, in which he was to analyze “the Economic, Political, and Military structure of Japan from the viewpoint of its vulnerability to air attack. Collect, analyze, and summarize all available source material, and draw conclusions indicating specific lines of action for an attacking air force.”⁶² Titled “Japan as an Objective for Air Attack,” White’s paper addressed how airpower could attack vital targets in Japan and enable its defeat. The thesis was that Japan’s interconnected economy could be attacked at one vital link, which would bring the downfall of the nation without occupation. His thesis reflected airpower’s strategic bombing and industrial web theories and was an entirely standard rendering of prevailing orthodoxy at ACTS while White was a student.

White identified vital targets from shipping lanes, aircraft manufacturing, textile plants, railways, and various other target sets. In

⁶⁰ Air Corps Tactical School, “Air Corps Tactical School Graduation Program,” June 3, 1938, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁶¹ Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White.”

⁶² H.A. Dargue, “Assignment for Individual Research,” February 1, 1938, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

summary, White thought railroads, blockade of sea lanes, and the hydro-electric installations should be the highest priority targets. Admitting an airpower limitation, his strategy relied on naval operations to enact a blockade with airpower supplementing. He concluded his target summary by saying railroads were the most vital objective of the Japanese national structure that were vulnerable to air attack with the least defenses.⁶³

White's closing recommendations constituted the one place where he drifted from standard thought on air power. His experiences in China, Russia, and Italy created his view that intelligence gathered by attachés was important to the strategic-planning process. White recommended that an airminded officer be attached to the War Department's G-2 staff to aid in analysis. He thought this planning process should be in place during peacetime as well. Attachés should report on countries' vital targets for all areas that were within their expertise to include air defenses. Finally, he urged cooperation between the attachés and large international corporations. This cooperation, he thought, would yield detailed information from these companies about vital elements known to their foreign residents.⁶⁴ Upon graduation in August 1938, White proceeded to Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, KS.

After another year of school, White became the Chief of Intelligence for the Air Corps in the War Department in June 1939. His new assignment filled one of his recommendations for an airman assigned to the G-2 and A-2 staffs and for inclusion of attaché intelligence into planning. However, his assignment was not because of his ACTS paper but because General Arnold grew enraged at the G-2 staff when they withheld information from him. He directed his assistant executive

⁶³ Thomas D. White, "Japan as an Objective for Air Attack" (Air Corps Tactical School, 1938), 35.

⁶⁴ White, "Japan as an Objective for Air Attack," 36.

officer, Colonel Ira Eaker, to establish a mechanism for [he](#) and the Air Corps to collect their own intelligence. Eaker assigned White and Hansell to establish an intelligence section for the Air Service.⁶⁵ White's job was to "approve and arrange all foreigners' visits to Air Corps stations and factories where the Air Corps has contracts. All foreign flying of our airplanes, all reports to attachés...The intelligence part of it is...consolidating, recording, and disseminating the data from *all* our attachés and other sources."⁶⁶

This job brought General Henry "Hap" Arnold and White together, a proximity that was nearly a requirement for a young officer's advancement as World War II loomed. White impressed Arnold, who was developing an appreciation for intelligence and airmen who understood its purpose. In White's performance report, his immediate supervisor, Colonel Richards, rated White as an "Excellent Officer – One of the best I know." Arnold, in his endorsement, disagreed, "I do not concur – I consider this officer superior."⁶⁷

After a year on the Air Corps staff, Arnold assigned White to take the military attaché position in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Chief of Staff desired an Air Corps officer fill the position. White requested an operation assignment instead, but Arnold implied White would either fill the Brazil position or remain on staff.⁶⁸ Taking the hint, White accepted the Brazilian attaché position.

In preparation for his trip, White frequently flew the floatplane he planned to take to Brazil. White was [afforded](#) a plane to get around Brazil professionally but he chose a floatplane to accommodate his fishing trips. On February 25, 1940, he and three other airmen crashed

⁶⁵ "Personal Interview with Maj Gen Haywood S. Hansell," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., February 25, 1979, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁶⁶ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 191.

⁶⁷ "Officer Remarks for Gen Thomas White Performance Reports."

⁶⁸ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 193.

into the Anacostia River. According to the press reports, White's large floatplane struck a submerged object while he was attempting to land on the river. Fortunately, sailors from nearby NAS Anacostia rescued all crewmembers. Unfortunately, a photographer, Army Private Cherlin, took pictures of the plane with its tail in the air before sinking. This photo ended up on the front page of the papers.⁶⁹

For the second time, White crashed and made front-page headlines. To make matters worse, the crash delayed his trip to Brazil, as the floatplane was [his](#) transportation to Brazil.⁷⁰ After wrecking the floatplane, the Air Corps reissued him a BC-2, a small single-engine training aircraft.⁷¹ White and his mechanic flew the BC-2 almost 9300 miles from Washington D.C. to Rio de Janeiro by way of Texas, Mexico, and Central America. The flight earned him one of his two air medals.⁷²

White spent the next two years, from 1940 to 1942, in Brazil as the Chief of the Aviation Section of the military. His main task was rebuilding the Brazilian Air Force, which lacked modern aircraft. The United States fulfilled Brazil's request for T-6 Texan training aircraft shortly after White's arrival and White organized the pilots' training for the new fleet's ferry missions. White also saw the problem as more than airplanes, he thought it was a system-wide problem. As ranking member of the four-man team, White began with addressing the supply and training problems. As Brazil was slated to receive the P-40, he urged the Air Force to take a more aggressive approach in its preparation by stocking the right fuel. Leadership problems stemmed from a group of leaders who had no interest in flying. White also personally trained the

⁶⁹ "Four Fliers Escape Injury As Plane Dives Into Anacostia," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C., February 25, 1940).

⁷⁰ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 193.

⁷¹ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Maj Gen Haywood S. Hansell."

⁷² The BC-2 was a two-seat, tandem, single-seat aircraft used for training. It was one of three aircraft built before North American built the AT-6 trainer.

Brazilian Chief of Staff in the AT-6 and led him to solo. According to White, this was a major accomplishment, as the general had not flown alone in over six years.⁷³

Although White was highly regarded by the Brazilian leadership, his tour also produced personal gratification. While in Brazil, White took full advantage of the rivers and tropical fish to further his ichthyologic interests. For instance, when LeMay met White, he was excited about a species of fish he found that could swim backwards. Most fishing trips involved White fishing while his wife, Constance, painted watercolor panoramas. Their fishing trips evolved from sport to scientific exploration. White was responsible for the discovery of two new species, *Cynolebias Constanciae* and *Cynolebias Whitei*.⁷⁴

White's work in Brazil ended with the beginning of World War II. In March 1942, he moved to MacDill AFB and pinned on the rank of colonel. His first job was Assistant Chief of Staff for operations of the Third Air Force. Six months later, White was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, and took the position of Chief of Staff for Third Air Force.⁷⁵ Finally, as a general officer, White was in a position to formally lead airmen.⁷⁶

The Third Air Force was responsible for equipping and training airmen for the war. In doing so, White spent from dawn until dusk working on plans to equip operational training units. White remembered he did not "see daylight for three or four months" as the staff worked to equip the 92 bases under Third Air Force. White recalled, "We were turning out B-25, B-26, B-17, and B-24 groups just as fast as we could drag them out. It was a whale of a job. When they were ready to go, they had to be checked out: the pilots, the aircraft, the equipment, everything

⁷³ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White."

⁷⁴ Kenneth Schaffel, "A Warrior-Scholar," *Airman* 31 (February 1987): 25-28.

⁷⁵ "Statement of Service."

⁷⁶ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 193.

at these aerial ports of embarkation...Thousands of items of equipment, and there was always something short; it was just a grand, 100%, day-in day-out job.”⁷⁷ Despite the enormous demands of the job, White surpassed expectations. Major General St. Clair Street rated White highly: “I consider General White the finest brigadier general of my acquaintance. He is superlatively effective and loyal. He is fast and tireless. He thinks clearly and objectively. He is respected and admired by all with whom he comes in contact.”⁷⁸

Having performed remarkably, White expected a command assignment in the Pacific Theater after his tour at Third Air Force ended. In December 1943, General Barney Giles, deputy commander of the Army Air Forces, told White he would take the inaugural command of the Twentieth Air Force in the following year. Excitedly, White traveled to Washington D.C. for briefs on the B-29. White arrived to find a different future waiting for him. Once there, White remembered he was “rushed down to Gen Arnold’s office, and when I walked in General Bissell, who had been A-2 with the Army was sitting there in his office.” Arnold said, “Tommy, I don’t give a damn what you think or whether you like it. You’re A-2. General Bissell has just been moved from A-2 to the G-2...and you’re going to take his job.’ Well, I never had a worse blow in my life, because command of the Twentieth Air Force was the hot, strategic unit, you see.”⁷⁹ White could not escape his history as an attaché and past intelligence job on the Air Staff working with Arnold. Quickly thereafter, White reported as the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (A-2) in January 1944.

Despite his disappointment, White tackled the job as A-2 with tenacity. When [he](#) took the job, A-2 fell under the responsibility of Army Intelligence (G-2). Within this organizational[al](#) structure, the A-2 had

⁷⁷ Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White.”

⁷⁸ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 194.

⁷⁹ Leish, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White.”

previously focused their gathering on Europe in support of the Army. White saw the priority shifting and pressed for [an orientation](#) toward support of the war against Japan and postwar operations.

The Navy had the Office of Naval Intelligence and the Army had the G-2 staff. Meanwhile the Army Air Force's intelligence staff was subordinate to the G-2. White felt air intelligence would be more productive if it was independent and equal to the G-2 staff. He wrote to Arnold that as leader of the Army Air Force, he "needed a completely integrated and uninhibited intelligence staff, and until he got such, he could not be a full partner on the JCS."⁸⁰ Although his call for an independent intelligence branch was premature, White succeeded in turning the attention toward the Pacific. Along with Arnold, White believed airpower was the key to victory against Japan and [in](#) an independent air force. For White, as the A-2, timely and accurate strategic targeting information was important to [the success of both](#).⁸¹

Rewarding White for his dedication and hard work, Arnold arranged for him a wartime assignment in the Pacific.⁸² Arnold worked with General Kenney and Major General Street in assigning White as Deputy Commander of the Thirteenth Air Force. In his messages to Kenney, Arnold insisted on this job so White could gain operational experience.⁸³ After a little more than year on the Air Staff, White arrived in the Philippines in September 1944.

His wartime assignments led him across the Pacific Theater in a

⁸⁰ Robert C. Ehrhart, Jr Alexander S. Cochran, Robert F. Futrell, Thomas A. Fabyanic, John F. Kreis, AIR FORCE HISTORICAL STUDIES OFFICE WASHINGTON DC, Williamson Murray, *Piercing the Fog: Intelligence and Army Air Forces Operations in World War II* (DIANE Publishing, n.d.), 360.

⁸¹ AFHSO, *Piercing the Fog*, 360.

⁸² Arnold rated White as "An outstanding Air Staff officer whose clear thinking, logic, energy, and extraordinary personal qualities have lifted Intelligence in the Air Staff to the highest level ever enjoyed." Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 195.

⁸³ Henry Arnold to George Kenney, "Cable to Kenney from Arnold," July 12, 1944, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

myriad of deputy, chief of staff, and commander roles. He served in the deputy commander position until June 1945 when he was transferred to become the commanding general of the Seventh Air Force as part of the US Far East Air Forces (FEAF). White's command at the Seventh Air Force showed how highly he was regarded as the war plans used the Seventh to support the invasion of Japan.

He remained with the Seventh Air Force for over a year as the headquarters moved back to Hawaii and the mission changed to defense of Hawaii. After leaving Seventh Air Force in October 1946, White assumed the position of Chief of Staff for the Pacific Air Command in Japan and then Chief of Staff for US FEAF in Hawaii from January 1947 until January 1948. His final job in the Pacific Theater took him back to Japan as Commander of Fifth Air Force, where he oversaw the Air Force's role in occupation duties.⁸⁴

Although White arrived in the Pacific before the Japanese surrendered, he saw very little combat time. [He](#) missed the majority of the campaigns of the Thirteenth Air Force through the island campaigns and supporting MacArthur into the Philippines. Instead, White's time was spent in the headquarters. [He](#) remembered his time in the Pacific, "I was not personally in any combat missions...having been the A-2, the head of Intelligence, I was in on all the secret intelligence-gathering means, and I was not permitted to fly on any missions until the very last part of the war, when I went on some very minor ones. So that my part in it was entirely as a Chief of Staff, Deputy Commander of the Thirteenth Air Force, and later as Commander of the Seventh Air Force."⁸⁵

Never one to pass up a good opportunity to fish in a new exotic location, White took his tackle with him to the Pacific. Major General Street encouraged White's habit when he wrote him conveying the news

⁸⁴ "Statement of Service."

⁸⁵ Leish, "The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White."

of his assignment to the 13th Air Force. He told White, "Bring some fishing tackle when you come -- spinners and plugs -- we can get the rest. Fishing is reported good and we relish fresh fish as a change in diet."⁸⁶ White followed Street's lead and fished whenever his free time allowed it. On one such occasion, White took the security of headquarters for granted. In search of a place to fish on one of the islands, a soldier turned away the wandering White because he ventured into an area where the Japanese were still hiding.⁸⁷

As a commanding general, White impressed his superiors. General Kenney remarked on his performance report, "General White is a brilliant officer. He has a magnetic personality. He is superior either on command or staff duty. Of all the brigadier generals known to me, I place him No. 3 on my list of 81."⁸⁸ At the war's end Commander of the Fifth Air Force, Lieutenant General Ennis Whitehead wrote of White, "He is a superior officer in every way with a fine forceful personality and extraordinary leadership ability...He improved the overall combat effectiveness of the Fifth Air Force and thereby made a great contribution to the security of American forces and interests in the Far East. He has no superior as an Air Force officer of his grade. While he is fully competent for any assignment in the USAF, he is also superbly fitted for high command...Due to his unusual ability as a commander, I recommend that as far as is possible he be used for command duty."⁸⁹ Prophetically, Whitehead knew White was destined for greatness. White moved for the last time back to Washington D.C. in October 1948 where he took up duties as the Air Force's Legislative Liaison.

⁸⁶ St. Clair Streett to Thomas D. White, July 13, 1944, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁸⁷ Lawrence J. Spinetta, "White vs. LeMay: The Battle over Ballistic Missiles," *Air Force Magazine* 96, no. 1 (January 2013): 59.

⁸⁸ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 195.

⁸⁹ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 195-196.

Chapter 3

Air Force Senior Leader

After four years in the Pacific theater, the Air Force assigned Major General White to Washington D.C. as Director of Legislation and Liaison in October, 1948. This was White's fifth assignment to Washington, after 28 years in the military. His exceptional performance in the Far East coupled with his experience as an attaché led him back to Washington upon the behest of Air Force leaders.

Many people lobbied on White's behalf to bring him back to Washington after his tour at the Fifth Air Force. Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force General William F. McKee asked Assistant Secretary of the Air Force Eugene Zuckert for recommendations to replace the retiring Director of Legislation and Liaison. Zuckert remembered playing badminton with White while he was the deputy commander in Tampa. After the game, White impressed Zuckert as the two men talked. With that memory, Zuckert recommended White to McKee for the job. McKee replied that this was the second time someone recommended White that day. The new job held high-level visibility, and without that posting, Zuckert believed, White never "would have been Chief of Staff because he was an attaché type, he hadn't had any visibility and when he got that job, it became obvious that this man was a man of superior qualifications in an area where the Air Force was very, very poor."¹

Although this move was his last, and ended with White as Chief of Staff, he loathed the idea of returning to Washington and working amongst politicians. White described the notification of his assignment as the "blackest day in his life," despite Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington advising him he would learn more in the job than any other.²

¹ "Personal Interview with Eugene M. Zuckert," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., September 28, 1977, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

² Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Eugene M. Zuckert."

Despite the promise of success that lay in Washington, White debated continuing his career in the Air Force after arriving back stateside and laid out his decision in a comprehensive life assessment. He was torn between progressing in rank or retiring and pursuing a different career. Before leaving the Far East, White dreaded the idea of a return to Washington. He wrote, "Neither my wife nor I like Washington," and "There is no assignment of whatever rank involving duty in Washington which would be much to my liking. There are [only] four assignments in the entire Air Force which I would reasonably enjoy liking."³ It was a complicated decision, as White did not enjoy flying anymore yet, even at the pay grade of a major general, he felt he needed the flight pay to afford the higher cost of living in Washington.

White realized his potential for advancement before he left the Pacific. As a major general and commander of the Fifth Air Force, White was ranked 22nd of all officers in the newly independent Air Force. With this ranking and completion of two numbered air force command tours, White placed his odds of promotion to lieutenant general at three to one and then to general at one in three. He wrote, while contemplating retirement, "it is worth noting that except during the war, I have not followed an orthodox career. My natural bent has not been that of a soldier."⁴ His tour in the Pacific had placed him back on the military's normal officer progression.

Despite his promising outlook, the allure of other avenues called to White. His view was that there were four options available after retirement: do nothing, pursue a private business, teach, and pursue a professional study. He could not imagine a life of pure retirement would be fulfilling. As he did not have any professional skills in business or the desire to teach, White's passion for the outdoors guided him. He wrote,

³ Thomas D. White, "Career Plan," September 1949, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴ White, "Career Plan."

[“I have always been interested in the outdoors and natural history; particularly fishing as a sport though during past ten years, in addition, as an aquarist and an amateur collecting fish,” some of which he donated to Stanford University and the Smithsonian.⁵ If he retired, White’s plan was to gain a Doctorate in Zoology by 1955. While still commander of the Fifth Air Force, White pursued his plan to study ichthyology. His admission request to Stanford accompanied his wife’s application to study art there as well.⁶ In the end, White conceded to Symington’s advice and proved himself more than capable in his new position.](#) Working in the legislative liaison office gave White the opportunity to practice his political skills and introduced him to the issues that would span his time as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and then Vice Chief and Chief of Staff.

As a general officer, White’s views on Air Force policy and the advancement of technology were different from others. White viewed Air Force policy as subject to national objectives, which was unlike the prevailing doctrine of the period, which tended to place air combat upon an independent pedestal. He also supported technological advancements in missiles as [complementary](#) to the sacrosanct bomber. When the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, White lobbied for the Air Force to gain the space mission. All the while, attainment of rank did not stop White from practicing his [pastimes](#) of writing and fishing. Both paid dividends in the Air Force’s favor as White used his writing skills to relay service messages to Airmen, and his wildlife interest translated into the creation of the Air Force’s conservation program. His style of leadership during the Cold War was a breath of fresh air and his attempts to change the Air Force were noble.

⁵ [White, "Career Plan."](#)

⁶ [Margaret Storey to Thomas D. White, October 10, 1949, Air Force Historical Research Agency.](#)

His diplomatic personality and intellectual decision-making style guided him through his time working with Congress and furthered his success as Chief of Staff. While in the legislature liaison office, White worked directly for Symington. One of his more successful projects was lobbying for the Air Force Academy. After two years as an independent service, the Air Force sought to establish its own service academy. In 1949, Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg created a special office for Air Force Academy matters headed by Lieutenant General Hubert Harmon. While Vandenberg pushed the Academy agenda on his service's behalf, Congressman Carl Vinson led legislative efforts. As liaison, White developed a relationship with Vinson and encouraged his support.

In one meeting, Vinson told White the topic of a separate Air Force academy was dead. However, White persuaded Vinson to support the bill and then recommended the Air Force staff not press the issue. After gaining Vinson's support for a bill, he recommended Secretary Symington revisit the issue with Vinson in a couple months after the Congressional recess to ensure Vinson could garner additional support.⁷ With Vinson's backing, the bill to establish the Air Force Academy finally passed in 1954.

White also lobbied heavily in support of the new B-36 Peacemaker bomber while working in the legislative liaison office. Developed in the 1940s, concerns ranging from problems with the external fuel system to faulty defensive countermeasures plagued the bomber's performance. As the Air Force received roughly half of the defense budget, the Navy fought for an increased role and budget for their carriers. To exacerbate matters, a Navy civilian employee, Cedric Worth, and Commander Thomas Davies inflamed matters when they released an "Anonymous

⁷ Thomas D. White, "Memorandum for Major General William E. Hall, USAF, Director of Legislation and Liaison, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force," September 21, 1950, Thomas D. White Papers Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

Document” to the press that wrongfully accused the Air Force of choosing the Convair-manufactured bomber because the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of the Air Force personally benefitted from Convair’s financial success.⁸ White supported General Vandenberg and Secretary Symington while they defended the B-36 in the Congressional investigation that followed. In the process, “White built a tremendous reputation in Washington for his role in legislative liaison during the B-36 hearings.”⁹

Again, White impressed his superiors. Symington wrote highly of him to General Vandenberg, “General White is one of the most capable officers of any rank whom I have known. His character and personal traits are without question of the highest order. His affable personality, his quick comprehension of the broad phases of any high staff or joint staff problem, and his tireless energy, make him particularly well-suited for the highest level of assignments.”¹⁰ Zuckert remembered the qualities that made White successful with Congress as “quality. I mean intellect, integrity, everything...you could always depend on what he said.”¹¹ His success working with Congress and Symington paved the way for White’s continued promotions.

White amended his career plan in March 1950, during his last month in the legislation and liaison office. The political rat race wore on him. After a six-week vacation to Mexico with his wife, White remained committed to retiring, admitting, “I recognize the possibility that my present assignment with my extreme distaste for it may be a factor and may enter my thinking.”¹² His wife, on the other hand, rejected White’s

⁸ Jeffrey G. Barlow, *Revolt of the Admirals: The Fight for Naval Aviation, 1945-1950* (Washington, DC: Ross & Perry, Inc, 2001), 206-245.

⁹ Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 66.

¹⁰ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*.

¹¹ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Eugene M. Zuckert.”

¹² Thomas D. White, “Career Plan,” March 11, 1950, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

idea of retirement because she realized his potential. She saw [that](#) his job working with Congress provided political benefits for his possible promotion. White understood his promotion chances were good but with “some ‘political’ breaks they could be brilliant in the orthodox sense.”¹³ With this in mind, and with Mrs. White’s urging, White decided to remain in the military for at least another year unless he was promoted; [in](#) which case he would remain until March 1953.

After his time at the legislation and liaison office, White moved back to Air Force headquarters in April 1950. His new job title was Director of Plans in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations and later Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations when he was promoted to lieutenant general on July 28, 1951.¹⁴ In the new position, White was responsible for the preparation of the Air Force’s plans during the Cold War and Korean War.

White urged a change in the planning for nuclear war in addition to planning for the Korean War. The basic joint emergency war plan was named OFFTACKLE, and the target list for Russia was known as JCS 2056. The target list called for nuclear weapons to blunt, disrupt, and retard a Soviet offensive. Earlier air staffs had derived these targets under the same World War II thinking that placed oil industry and electric power grids high as priority targets among the Soviet atomic and fielded forces. The current Air Force disagreed with the targeting plan because of its lack of nuclear weapons while the Army found little interdiction support in the plan. White sought to remedy the problems between the two services. Arguing against the old way of thinking about strategic bombing, White gained support for reviving the target lists with fresh intelligence.¹⁵ The Joint Chiefs approved White’s request for

¹³ White, "1950 Career Plan."

¹⁴ "Statement of Service."

¹⁵ Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Air Force History and Museums Program, 1995), accessed March 15, 2015,

reexamination, but little changed with nuclear targeting while White was Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations.

In June 1953, General Twining succeeded General Vandenberg as the fourth Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Vandenberg left his second term in office a year early due to the early stages of the prostate cancer that would claim his life roughly two years later. The abruptness of Vandenberg's illness and retirement proved somewhat serendipitous for Twining and White. With Twining's promotion, White replaced him as the next Vice Chief of Staff and gained the rank of General. However, it was not Twining's idea alone to promote White. Rather, many advocates, such as Vandenberg, Kenney, Lieutenant General Wolfe, and Whitehead, encouraged Twining.¹⁶ The group sought to replace Vandenberg's political skill on Capitol Hill, as Twining was simple and trended toward an absolutist worldview.¹⁷ In particular, White impressed the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Roger Kyes, who "exerted his influence by saying there was only one candidate that he was interested in becoming Vice Chief...and Kyes was very credible on any matter with Secretary of Defense Charlie Wilson."¹⁸ White's political reputation and experience gained from his two years in the legislative liaison office filled Vandenberg's diplomatic void and laid the foundation for his rise to Chief of Staff.

Later, when he himself was appointed Chief of Staff, White chose General Curtis E. LeMay to replace him as Vice Chief of Staff in 1957, using the same philosophy of complementary commanders that had guided his relationship with Twining. LeMay, who many thought should have been the next chief, remained loyal to White on issues that normally would have caused LeMay to argue as a prior SAC commander. White

<http://www.afhso.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-100924-009.pdf>, 362.

¹⁶ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White."

¹⁷ Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 64-65.

¹⁸ Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Eugene M. Zuckert."

chose LeMay to run the day-to-day operations because of his strong organizational leadership abilities. It was a true juxtaposition of personalities, with White as the professional diplomat and LeMay seen as the archetypal Chief. While White may have been put off by LeMay's penchant for smoking at the dinner table, there is no substantial evidence to suggest the two generals did not get along professionally. LeMay, the loyal subordinate, worked well with White who when "in Joint Chiefs planning and budget sessions, it is Curt LeMay is often operating head of the Air Force—and, good soldier that he is, he operates in White's way."¹⁹

Although General White is not the most recallable Chief of Staff in Air Force history, his legacy quietly resides in several areas. One of those areas is Air Force doctrine. Pure air power doctrine was pervasive in the Air Force after World War II. It followed Douhet and Mitchell's teachings that air forces could single-handedly win a war. Air University, the service's doctrine keeper, was reluctant to prescribe specific doctrine to the Air Force because some thought air power developed too quickly to reside in a doctrinal box. But rank-and-file Airmen believed air power doctrine resided in a sphere largely independent of national policy, strategic bombardment was the Air Force's job, whether it was consonant with national policy or strategy or not. Rather, Air University placed a vague statement saying that the Air Force supported national objectives but then it would not name which national objectives.²⁰

In a speech in December 1957, White sought to change the Air Force's view of doctrine. He later expanded it into an *Air Force Magazine* article in January 1958. It followed Clausewitz's axiom "that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of

¹⁹ "The Power For Now," *Time*, November 25, 1957.

²⁰ Robert Frank Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine. Vol. 1: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1960* (Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press, 2004), 4-7.

political intercourse, carried on with other means.”²¹ White seemed to reprimand the Air Force while he set a new foundation for Air Force doctrine: “Let me make one thing crystal clear. Air Force doctrine is not a thing apart nor a code sufficient unto itself. The Air Force is a national instrument and evolves no doctrine, makes no plans, and makes no preparations other than those clearly and unmistakably called for or anticipated by the national policy.”²² The article argued that a capability does not equal a doctrine, e.g. the ability to destroy the Soviet Union with nuclear bombers did not mean it was Air Force doctrine. To support the national policy, White attempted to build adequate forces to succeed in deterrence and local conflict, included championing a flexible composite 19th Air Force.

The impetus for White’s demand for better weapons systems was the Cold War Arms race. Reaching back to his short time in Russia, White understood the adversary better than most of his colleagues. Looking back at Russian technology, “The quality was very decidedly inferior to our equipment, even in those days. Without question there was a great feel for the future of air and its uses.”²³ He appreciated Soviet ability to mass-produce deadly weapons that were quickly approaching parity with the United States. In a 1956 Cincinnati speech, White warned [that](#) the Soviets were “making scientific and technological advances at a faster rate” and “beating us at our own game—production.”²⁴ He urged a stronger public interest in military production to match the Soviet buildup of bombers and fighters.

His most popular contribution to Air Force technology and

²¹ Carl von Clausewitz et al., *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87.

²² Thomas D. White, “USAF Doctrine and National Policy,” *AIR FORCE Magazine*, January 1958, 47.

²³ White, “The Reminiscences of General Thomas D. White,” 15-16.

²⁴ “White Warns of Red R&D, Production,” *Aviation Week* (February 20, 1956): 31-32.

production resided in his support of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) development. White understood and valued the connection between technology and the Air Force's dependence on its continual advancement. [He](#) was a proponent of ICBM development during a period when most generals clung to the service's strategic bombing. One such general was the commander of Strategic Air Command for ten years. Neil Sheehan described General LeMay as like "most of the rest of the bomber generals who were now succeeding to the direction of the air forces, electronics, guided missiles, and other advanced concepts held scant interest for LeMay."²⁵ LeMay, along with his vice commander, Tommy Power, believed strongly in the efficacy of the manned bomber and initially discredited the value of an unmanned missile in nuclear deterrence. They saw the ICBM's potential, but refused to trade the bomber for the missile during periods of dwindling budgets. Missiles, in their opinion, were only political and psychological weapons used to enable the bomber's successful attack.²⁶

White saw the institutional bias, "To say there is not a deeply ingrained prejudice in favor of aircraft among flyers, would be a stupid statement for me to make. Of course there is."²⁷ The manned bomber would always maintain the tactical advantage with flexibility. However, the missile held other advantages. "Its reaction time and speed of flight are very valuable characteristics in a situation requiring immediate response to an attack. The ballistic missile will also permit greater versatility for our forces by relieving the manned bomber of those heavily defended targets where the cost of attacking with bombers would be too

²⁵ Neil Sheehan, *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War: Bernard Schriever and the Ultimate Weapon*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 124.

²⁶ Spinetta, "White vs. LeMay: The Battle over Ballistic Missiles," 56-60.

²⁷ Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine. Vol. 1*, 504.

high and where precise accuracy is not mandatory.”²⁸ Instead of promoting the bomber mindset, on May 14, 1954, White gave Major General Bernard Schriever the reigns for ICBM development and placed the Atlas missile as the highest priority research and development project in ARDC, choices few traditional Air Force bomber generals would have made at this time. White pressed development “to the maximum extent that technology would allow” and “lectured the Air Staff on ballistic missiles—they were here to stay, he told them, and the Air Staff had better realize this fact and get on with it.”²⁹ The Atlas missile deployments from 1959 to 1962 brought the fulfillment of White’s vision to create an operational ICBM force.

His support of the ICBM did not consign the bomber to inadequate funding. The missile, for White, was a national instrument used in conjunction with bombers for strategic deterrence. Missile defenses without bombers were not sufficient; “This is on a very large scale comparable in my opinion to a Maginot line.”³⁰ White believed a lopsided defense structure would create a psychological dependence on the missile. Other than being a non-optimum posture, it would eventually cause a loss of bomber and fighter aircraft because of budget reductions.

In 1960, White fought to protect the bomber fleets during a period of budget tightening. In defense of the bomber’s role, White told Congress, “there will be a tremendous premium on systems which can look, and find, and report, and attack, and return, and attack again.”³¹ White believed the bomber force still held a vital role in deterrence and

²⁸ Thomas D. White, “The Ballistic Missile: An Instrument of National Policy,” *Air University Quarterly Review* IX, no. 3 (Summer 1957): 4.

²⁹ Jacob Neufeld, *The Development of Ballistic Missiles in the United States Air Force, 1945-1960* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 106.

³⁰ “Gen. White Warns Against ‘Maginot’ Danger; Tells Manned Weapon Need,” *Army Navy Air Force Journal* 97 (February 20, 1960): 676.

³¹ Zachary M. Matusheski, “Bomber Wars: Curtis LeMay, Robert McNamara and the B-70.,” *Air Power History* 58, no. 4 (2011): 19.

he supported the B-70 Valkyrie [enthusiastically](#). The controversial B-70 was the next step in bomber technology with its supersonic, high-altitude capability. After ICBMs reached operational units, White moved the B-70 to the highest priority for funding. He sacrificed the F-108 fighter before it reached production and declared others [might have to be](#) cancelled.³² In a letter to Senator Styles Bridges, White called the B-70 the most important single weapons system in the 1961 budget year.³³ Congress funded the B-70 for the next year but the budget continued to shrink. Unfortunately, the [Kennedy administration](#) cancelled the B-70 in 1962 due to lack of funding.

For White, missile development not only spurred technological and doctrinal changes in air defense and deterrence weapons but also generated the ability for man and the Air Force to reach space. White and the Air Force viewed space as its next domain to conquer and control. He expressed the Air Force's belief by writing in 1958, "The missiles that are getting the headlines today are but one step in the evolution from aircraft to piloted spacecraft."³⁴

Space was now in reach, and White lobbied for the Air Force to gain the space mission. In the early 1950s, the military, especially the Army, thought the idea of space exploration was amusing. Reflecting the Army's mindset, Secretary of Defense Wilson looked poorly on the idea of space control. When asked about the possibility of the Russians orbiting a satellite, he remarked, "I wouldn't care if they did."³⁵ However, in October 1957, the Russian satellite, Sputnik, launched the space race that [reflected changed minds and new opportunities](#).

³² Richard Fryklund, "AF Wins Full Go-Ahead On B-70 Superbomber," *The Washington Star*, September 23, 1960.

³³ Thomas D. White to Styles Bridges, June 28, 1960, Thomas D. White Papers, 1952-1961, US Library of Congress.

³⁴ Thomas D. White, "Leadership - in the Conquest of Space," *Air Power Historian*, April 1958, 76.

³⁵ Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine*. Vol. 1, 545.

White argued the air domain was inseparable from space. He wrote, "Air and space are not two separate media to be divided by a line and to be readily separated in two distinct categories; they are in truth a single and indivisible field of operations. Space is the natural and logical extension of air; space power is merely the cumulative result of the evolutionary growth of air power."³⁶ In a speech at the Jet Age Conference in February 1958, White expressed the natural extension of the Air Force into space. [He held](#) Air Force "interest and ventures into space as being logical and natural as when men of old in sailing ships first ventured forth from the inland seas in to the great oceans" and, similar to those early seafarers who were familiar with the seas, "ventures into outer space require men who know the air."³⁷

Part of White's vision for space was to have manned platforms in space. Airmen should venture into space because they were already familiar with flight and had the necessary training to make the next step. White also pointed to the speed records of [Charles](#) Yeager and the development of the X-15 rocket plane to prove that Airmen were capable of handling the speeds associated with space flight. Physiologically, White argued his service was more prepared for the challenges of working in space because of the Air Force's research contracts with universities, and [the](#) Air Force's Space Medicine School [was](#) already ten years old. These advantages placed Airmen "only a step away from manned orbital flight."³⁸

To put man in space, the Air Force collaborated with NASA to develop the Dyna-Soar, a manned spacecraft launched via a Titan rocket and returned as a glider. For White, "The Dyna-Soar...is the first vehicle which will combine the advantages of manned aircraft and missiles into a

³⁶ Thomas D. White, "The Inevitable Climb to Space," *Air University Quarterly Review* X, no. 4 (Winter -1959 1958): 3-4.

³⁷ Thomas D. White, "The Space Mission" (presented at the Jet Age Conference, Washington, D.C., February 28, 1958).

³⁸ White, "The Space Mission."

single system.” Its development “will lead to more sophisticated manned aerospace systems we need for the future. Included in these will undoubtedly be self-powered vehicles with unprecedented performance, which the pilot can conduct all phases of flight.”³⁹

There is a fine line between the United States controlling space and having the capability to control space. White preferred the nation have the latter, with manned and unmanned systems. In 1958, the systems in space were the eyes above to “keep us informed of all military movements of the Earth’s surface. Mapping accuracy will be increased greatly. Military targets throughout the world will be plotted with greater precision.”⁴⁰ Two years later, while laying out the top priorities of the Air Force, White reported “The recovery of an intact capsule released by an orbiting Discoverer satellite on August 11, 1960—a most significant first in international space achievements—is an excellent indication of progress the Air Force has made in such research.”⁴¹ The great achievement he spoke of was Corona, the reconnaissance satellite program where film was ejected via canisters and retrieved on earth.

Another way White lobbied for the Air Force’s role in space was by adding the term *aerospace* to the English language. Although White did not create the term *aerospace*, he popularized it and added it to the Air Force’s doctrinal lexicon. Two different sources adopted the term before White used it in his writings and speeches. The first was an editorial prepared by the Air Force Office of Information Internal Information Division on November 29, 1957. The editorial did not specifically mention aerospace, rather it combined the two words air and space as

³⁹ White, “The Space Mission.”

⁴⁰ Thomas D. White, “Space Control and National Security,” *AIR FORCE Magazine*, April 1958, 82.

⁴¹ Thomas D. White, “USAF’s Ten Top Priorities,” *AIR FORCE Magazine*, September 1960, 58.

separate domains in reference to “air/space vehicles of the future.”⁴² That same month, Lt. Gen. Clarence Irvine (Deputy Chief of Staff for Material), started using the term air/space in his public addresses. Air University published an adaptation of air/space as *aerospace* in the February 1958 *Interim Aero-Space Glossary*.⁴³

Aerospace spread across the Air Force within the next year as White cemented the Air Force’s hold on the space mission. By the end of 1959, the Air Force slogan changed to “U.S. Air Force—Aerospace Power of Peace” and later the term became part of the *United States Air Force Basic Doctrine*.⁴⁴ White also attempted to change Strategic Air Command’s name to Strategic Aerospace Command to establish it “as the air/space agency for the accomplishment of the strategic war mission” and the change would “materially contribute to the Air Force objective of establishing aerospace as a widely used and enduring term.”⁴⁵ However, in less than a year Secretary Zuckert told White that he was “overdoing the *aerospace* plug” and SAC remained as it was.⁴⁶

To educate airmen about the Air Force’s top priorities, White addressed them and [the](#) public in speeches and periodical articles, something his predecessors did much less frequently. As Chief of Staff, White wrote multiple articles in *Airman*, *Air Force*, *Air Power Historian*, and *Air University Quarterly Review*. While some were transposed speeches, the subjects were generally divided between the top priorities of the Air Force, the importance of space, and deterrence. These articles were a pleasure for White to write. Major General Richard Yudkin, a

⁴² Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine*. Vol. 1, 10-11.

⁴³ James L. Jackson, “Aerospace,” *American Speech* 41, no. 2 (May 1, 1966): 158–159.

⁴⁴ Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Mastering the Ultimate High Ground* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003), 42.

⁴⁵ Thomas D. White to Thomas S. Power, December 5, 1960, Thomas D. White Papers, 1952-1961, US Library of Congress.

⁴⁶ Thomas D. White to Curtis E. LeMay, May 11, 1961, Thomas D. White Papers, 1952-1961, US Library of Congress.

deputy chief of staff at the time, remembered White enjoyed writing and “fancied himself a writer...a man who could write rather reasonably well.”⁴⁷

As Chief of Staff, White sought to transform the thinking ability of his airmen by encouraging them to think critically. Monthly journals and magazines were his venue to relay strategic messages to the tactical level. In the first issue of the *Airman* magazine White declared the magazine was his way to keep in touch with the troops and keeping [them](#) informed on important topics. He wrote “The task of keeping informed is more important today but more difficult. The *Airman* is established as a means to provide you with information. Not only will the *Airman* help keep you informed, but will also provide you with a means of informing us.”⁴⁸ Reaching Airmen through his articles was one [way in which](#) White sought to develop a smarter corps.

Because of ever-increasing technical complexity [in](#) weapon systems, White also wanted to change the type of person who should enter the Air Force. Early airpower advocates, such as Billy Mitchell, thought pilots should be expert equestrians and athletes. In order to build a nation’s strong air force, “Suitable pilots can be drawn only from certain classes, such as the young men who go to our colleges and not only are proficient in their studies, but in athletics such as football, baseball, tennis, polo, and other equestrian exercises which make the body and mind act together quickly.”⁴⁹ Enlisted troops also needed a different skillset than before. Power wrote [to](#) White that SAC needed a more technical thinking airman to work on the complex weapons, like

⁴⁷ “Personal Interview with Maj Gen Richard A. Yudkin,” interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., November 15, 1977, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁴⁸ Thomas D. White, “Introduction,” *The Airman*, August 1957.

⁴⁹ William Mitchell, *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power--Economic and Military* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 24.

the ICBM and B-52.⁵⁰

White thought differently. The ability to think was the most important asset in recruits and officers. He differed from Power and LeMay, who refused their SAC officers the opportunity for education. “LeMay exhorted that if they wanted to learn about airpower, the best place to be was in SAC.”⁵¹ White disagreed. Times were different and “The ‘brainy’ man is the only type that is endowed with the peculiar problem solving capacity which is so urgently required. He is the only type that can hope to deal effectively with new problems not adequately provided for by stereotyped reactions.”⁵²

Another way White attempted to change the character of the Air Force leadership was through promotions. During the late 1950s, SAC dominated the Air Force leadership. On one promotion board, over half of the colonels selected for brigadier general were from SAC. White went to Zuckert over the matter and confessed he was very upset about it. Together they threw out the promotion list and returned it to the Air Staff for a more equitable representation of the total force.⁵³ Unfortunately, the changes in senior leader representation did not last for long. When LeMay took over as Chief of Staff in 1961, he promoted SAC generals into leadership positions. By October, “all major operational commanders, and the vast majority of the Air Staff leadership, had become ardent bomber generals—most of them SAC absolutists. SAC’s methods became Air Force methods.”⁵⁴

Fortunately, there was time for White to enjoy his favorite hobby, fishing. On most business trips, White found time to fish at the conference location or somewhere nearby. One of his favorite areas was

⁵⁰ Thomas S. Power to Thomas D. White, February 14, 1959, Thomas D. White Papers, 1952-1961, US Library of Congress.

⁵¹ Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 80.

⁵² White, “Leadership - in the Conquest of Space,” 79.

⁵³ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Eugene M. Zuckert.”

⁵⁴ Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals*, 89.

in Goose Bay, Newfoundland near the SAC base of the same name. One such trip brought more trouble than enjoyment when White's helicopter crashed enroute. Unbeknownst to White, some members of his staff attempted to remove White's name from the incident. When questioned about the crash and cover-up, White answered truthfully but offered little more explanation.⁵⁵

His passion for ichthyology also took over the free space in the Vice Vice Chief's house at Fort Myer in Washington. Inside the house, the Whites kept 15 aquariums stocked with tropical fish. Fascination with tropical fish started during [their](#) time in Brazil, as they noticed the small schools of fish swimming in the rivers. Next to the aquariums were also many rare fish from across the world, preserved in jars of formaldehyde. In the spare room, White tied flies while his wife worked on her watercolor paintings.⁵⁶ His hobby did not remain an activity for his free time only. White's passion for the outdoors led him to help create the Air Force's conservation program.

The success of the Air Force's conservation program was rooted in White's hiring of professional conservationists and modernizing service regulations for wildlife and [land](#)-management practices. While serving in the LL office, White had worked on the first Sikes Act in 1949. The Sikes Act regulated wildlife conservation programs on military installations. The author of the bill, Rep. Robert Sikes, gained White's support of the measure and influenced his views on Air Force conservation management practices. Then, as Vice Chief of Staff, White formed a board [in November 1955](#) to examine the effect weapon ranges had on the

⁵⁵ Drew Pearson, "AF Craft Crashes on Fishing Trip," *The Washington Merry-Go-Round*, n.d.

⁵⁶ Winzola McLendon, "New Air Chief Has Attic Full of Hobbies," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C., July 7, 1957), sec. F.

surrounding environment.⁵⁷

In 1956, the [flying service](#) created the Air Force Fish and Wildlife Service and hired the conservation expert, Elwood Seaman, in October 1957. White took great interest in any problems the fledgling program experienced. Seaman praised White's support, "Without exception, every time I brought a conservation matter to General White's attention, be it a request to stop bad practices such as pilots shooting animals as targets-of-opportunity or initiation a special fish and wildlife and forestry project at a base somewhere, he always approved and made excellent suggestions."⁵⁸

In 1958, the Air Force created the General Thomas D. White Conservation Award to encourage conservation efforts and award the base with the best fish-and-wildlife activities. The award stemmed from White's view that "Defense is more than planes and missiles to protect the country against an enemy attack. Part of the defense job is the safeguarding of the land and timber and water, the fish and wildlife, the priceless natural resources which make this country of ours worth defending."⁵⁹ During the first year of the conservation program, the Air Force planted more than two million trees and restocked base lakes and streams with more than a million fish. Bases reclaimed more than 1,500 acres of fishing waters through chemical filtration and planted more than 35,000 acres of seed plots for wildlife grazing.⁶⁰ In 1962, the Department of Defense patterned its new conservation program off White's Air Force award criteria.⁶¹ Although not as operationally or doctrinally important,

⁵⁷ Jean A. Mansavage, *Natural Defense: U.S. Air Force Origins of the Department of Defense Natural Resources Conservation Program* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2014), 91.

⁵⁸ Mansavage, *Natural Defense*, 91.

⁵⁹ Mansavage, *Natural Defense*, 85.

⁶⁰ "Eglin Wins Gen. White Game Award," *Air Force Times* XXI, no. 38 (April 22, 1961).

⁶¹ Mansavage, *Natural Defense*, 97.

White's conservation efforts underscored just how different he was from other early service chiefs.

Those who worked for White while he was Chief of Staff describe his leadership as different than most of his fellow generals. His diplomatic demeanor differed from the aggressive personalities of archetypal Air Force leaders like Arnold and LeMay. This does not mean White was a pushover, for he was stern with subordinates whose work did not meet muster. Overall, White carried himself as a gentleman and treated everyone with respect. General Bruce Holloway described White as a "very diplomatic guy" who "had patience on the surface... underneath he was just as sharp and he had the incisiveness. He was a very articulate man." In dealings with Congress, White was extremely popular on the hill. "He would go to Congress quite often and we'd go with him...He could answer most of the questions and he always did it in a man to man fashion that did not antagonize the committeemen, very effective man. He was a very fine contact man of almost any group, a rather beloved guy."⁶²

Rather than prescribe the solution to problems presented, White relied on the expertise of those he hired to provide him with unfiltered information. Like Arnold, White developed a "think group" called the Long-Range Objective Group to provide strategic recommendations to him. One member, Lt General Abbott Greenleaf remembered, "General White was a very, very reflective person, and he wanted the original results of our study unmodified by the staff."⁶³ His desire for unfiltered information speaks to his ability to quickly comprehend complex problems and make decisions. One of his aides, General George Brown attributed his ability to "a mind and a quick perception and appreciation

⁶² "Personal Interview with Gen Bruce K. Holloway," interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., July 7, 1978, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁶³ Puryear, Jr., *Stars in Flight*, 203.

for things that others just...didn't seem to grasp.”⁶⁴

Rarely taking work home, White worked hard while at the office and then focused on being at home when he left work. As Vice Chief, White worked 12 to 13 hour days but when he moved to [the](#) Chief's office, he worked from eight am to six pm.⁶⁵ White had the ability to focus intensely on the task at hand and then move on. Hansell suggested that his friend “had a fine intellect, top-flight, maybe the best of the lot. He had a magnificent capability for direction of his mind control of it. He could take a problem and devote his entire attention to it, reach a conclusion, discard it, pick up another one, without any overlap, without any taking it home and worrying about it. He devoted his entire attention to what he was doing right now and work and pass on the next one and the next one.”⁶⁶

At home, he refrained from discussing work with Mrs. White. When asked if White brought work home, Mrs. White replied, “Practically never. What he used to do is when he had too much to do, he used to go back Saturday morning and lock the door and sit and clean up the stuff.”⁶⁷ On some Saturdays, White would walk the offices and casually sit down with his staff and catch up on what they were working on. Saturday visits allowed White to get to know his staff more personally than the formal Monday thru Friday schedule allowed.

His ability to let go of work carried through to his relationship with colleagues. White was cordial, respected, and exchanged warm letters with his peers. However, on conference trips, White needed to escape from their presence for a release, usually to fish. Remembering a certain

⁶⁴ “Personal Interview with Gen George S. Brown,” interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., September 14, 1977, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁶⁵ “Personal Interview with Maj Gen Robert N. Ginsburgh,” interview by Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., August 4, 1977, Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁶⁶ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Maj Gen Haywood S. Hansell.”

⁶⁷ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Mrs. Thomas D. White.”

trip to the Caribbean, Brown said White “didn't pal around with them at all. He was apt to be off by himself fishing or - I can remember seeing him climb over those rocks down at the bottom of the cliff in fishing in the surf there...he never had a very closeness or warm pal relationship with any of the four stars.”⁶⁸ Fishing was the release from the pressures of the job with infighting and emotions running high over minor problems.⁶⁹

In 1961, White was ending his thirteenth year in Washington and fourth year as Chief of Staff. It was time for him to retire. However, President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense McNamara wanted White to stay an additional year, to prevent LeMay from replacing him as Chief. The time in Washington aged White and he appeared tired.⁷⁰ Rumors named potential replacements as General Frederick Smith, Lieutenant General Joe Kelly, and Lieutenant General Bernard Schriever.⁷¹ The decision weighed on White, he wanted to retire, but his strong sense of duty made it difficult to leave. White believed LeMay would be a good replacement and did not decide to retire until he was assured LeMay would replace him.⁷² General White retired after four years as Chief of Staff on July 1, 1961.

White spent his short time in retirement pursuing his early passions, fishing and writing. He and his wife retired in the Washington area but travelled often across the globe looking for new places to fish. When at home, White held a regular column in *Newsweek* and wrote articles in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *US News and World Report* on military strategy and deterrence. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson appointed him to the General Advisory Committee of the Arms Control

⁶⁸ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Gen George S. Brown.”

⁶⁹ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Gen George S. Brown.”

⁷⁰ Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Eugene M. Zuckert.”

⁷¹ “AF Staff Chief White Asks to Retire July 1,” *The Washington Star*, May 12, 1961.

⁷² Puryear, Jr., “Personal Interview with Maj Gen Robert N. Ginsburgh.”

and Disarmament Agency. White also served on the board for Eastern Airlines and Electronic Teaching Laboratories. Secretary Zuckert also asked him to investigate the cadet honor system and athletic program at the fledgling Air Force academy in 1965. This was the same year White found out he had leukemia.⁷³

Sadly, White passed away on December 22, 1965, at the age of 64. Including his time at West Point, White gave over 42 of his 64 years selflessly to his country. Eulogies from President Eisenhower, LeMay and Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates praised his intellect and dedication. However, Admiral Arleigh Burke said it best, “the Air Force became a magnificent service because of his magnificent leadership.”⁷⁴



⁷³ George M. Watson, *Secretaries and Chiefs*, 128.

⁷⁴ Lemnitzer, “Thomas Dresser White.”

CONCLUSION

General Thomas White was a different [kind of](#) leader during the early Cold War. His background and style of leadership sat in contrast to most of the bomber generals who subscribed to an aggressively pure airpower [approach to national security](#). The various experiences gained during his junior and mid-grade officer assignments, [explain](#) how White rose to Chief of Staff of the Air Force. While White was not the orthodox officer, he represented a diplomatic calm that, as one journalist put it, was “Just what the Air Force needed.”¹

Beginning with his formative years, White’s family prepared him for success. The White family pedigree connected to Abraham Lincoln on his mother’s [side](#), the Dressers. His father, a bishop in Illinois, descended from John C. Calhoun, Francis Marion, and the Marquis de Lafayette. Despite White’s dislike for politicians, [his](#) family connections helped him when contacting his Illinois representative for help in his career. His father’s position also provided White with his education at St. John’s Military Academy, which prepared him for success at the US Military Academy.

After graduating from West Point, White’s first assignment and his Illinois pedigree connected him with his first and most important mentor, Brigadier General John M. Palmer. Palmer did not punish White for his multiple applications to leave the Infantry; instead, he recognized White’s potential. A writer himself, Palmer encouraged White’s scholastic and writing endeavors. As a junior officer, White secured an agent and wrote continuously. Despite some reservation, Palmer recommended White’s transfer to the Air Corps and later endorsed White’s application for language study in China.

After joining the Air Corps, White’s career might have followed the

¹ Claude Witze, “Just What the Air Force Needed,” *AIR FORCE Magazine*, July 1961.

typical pilot's path of gaining experience and commanding squadrons. Instead, White's wanderlust predominated. As a Chinese language student, [he](#) gained recognition for his tactical intelligence collections and his efforts to produce a helpful Chinese aviation dictionary.

Probably the most important assignment of White's early career was the shortest, the hardest, and the one that found him. White's trip to Russia as the first air attaché was under the direction of General MacArthur. His personal study of Russian and his prior experience in China qualified White for this venture. His Russian assignment lasted less than a year but was fraught with peril. The crash with Ambassador Bullitt received international press attention and warranted an explanation to President Roosevelt. The fishing excursion opened White's eyes to the brutality of communist rule. Everything in Russia was difficult for White, yet he learned at an early point in his career how to overcome [continual](#) challenges.

His return for education at the Air Corps Tactical School and Command and General Staff College reconnected White to his Service and served as indoctrination to the strategic bombing [preference](#) of the Army Air Corps. White's paper, "Japan as an Objective for Air Attack," at ACTS, while reflective of prevailing ideas of air war, displayed his unique experience in the attaché and intelligence community with his recommendation of attaché integration into planning cells.

The next assignment, working for General Arnold at the Air Staff, increased White's future potential as a senior leader. As "Father of the Modern Air Force," Arnold made men's careers. White's command in the Pacific during World War II, a prerequisite for future promotions, would not have been possible without Arnold's guidance. But Arnold's support only opened the door for White. He had to step through it. White met the task in the Pacific and impressed his superiors, as he did throughout his career. After World War II, White returned to Washington where he ultimately served as Chief of Staff.

White was different in substance and method. While the rest of the Air Force focused on pure airpower, White guided Air Force doctrine to its place under national policy. As a champion for ICBMs, he provided Schriever the space to lead the Air Force's missile project without interference from bomber generals. White diverged from fellow generals who held strategic bombing as the only path to victory. In method, the collection of his attaché experiences taught White a different way of solving problems; a diplomatic approach would often prevail over an absolute approach. He would often relay this lesson to his staffers with the Otto von Bismarck quote, "Politics is the art of the possible."² His experience also taught him to welcome other perspectives, as was evidenced by his rejection of a SAC-heavy promotion list. White appreciated the different opinion.

He was often described as aloof or having wanderlust. Early in his career, White did possess a sense of adventure manifested in his desire to travel. This did not preclude him from doing his job well, and he excelled wherever he worked. In all jobs, White accomplished his work with a sense of intensity. This same intensity carried over into his hobbies and personal pursuits. Fishing was not just a hobby; it was his much-needed stress relief. His intellectual curiosity turned fishing into a scientific study where he contributed to the field of Ichthyology without holding any formal academic training. His other interest, writing, was much more than a haphazard hobby. White labored with writing and struggled to publish his articles as a young officer. The work paid off when he was Chief of Staff and later in retirement, as he was able to convey his thoughts on national security policy, the state of the Air Force, and nuclear deterrence.

The awards given in his honor represent White's legacy in the missile, space, and conservation areas today. His support enabled the

² Puryear, Jr., "Personal Interview with Maj Gen Robert N. Ginsburgh."

success of such programs that drastically influenced national security. The Air Force [Academy](#) honors White's contributions to national defense by awarding the Thomas D. White National Defense Award to the U.S. citizen "based on outstanding contributions to national security in any fields of endeavor including science, technology, leadership, management, national affairs, international affairs, or a combination thereof."³ In 1961, the National Geographic Society honored White by establishing the Gen. Thomas D. White United States Air Force Space Trophy. Each year the Air Force awards the military or civilian [member](#) who contributed most to "aerospace progress."⁴ White's impact on military conservation also remains, as the Air Force awards the General Thomas D. White Environmental Quality Award to the base with the best environmental protection program.

General White is an example of how future leaders do not have to follow the same path in order to be successful. His career path is a series of unorthodox jobs broken by periods where he could realign with the traditional [Air Force](#) path before stepping off again to another attaché or staff job. The diverse resume married with his keen intellect provided White a special set of skills and diplomatic personality to lead effectively during the complex political environment of the Cold War.

[His intellectual intensity and flexibility](#) across the spectrum of military issues [set him apart from his fellow general officers.](#) He [was a scholar-warrior versus the stereotypical operational specialist.](#) While SAC generals, like LeMay and Powers, focused on propelling airpower's rise with nuclear bombers, White was able to expand airpower thinking beyond strategic bombing and [subjugate](#) Air Force [doctrine](#) to the

³ U.S. Air Force Academy, "The Thomas D. White National Defense Award," October 31, 2013, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.usafa.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=9428>.

⁴ National Museum of the US Air Force, "Gen. T.D. White: Pioneer Airman and Scholar," June 4, 2009, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=14654>.

national strategy. Not only did he embrace the new technology offered with the ICBM, but he also saw the benefit in protecting the environment from damage done by military installations. The two extremes between nuclear destruction and wildlife conservation represented his breadth of intellect. White was just as comfortable learning new languages, talking about nuclear deterrence, writing about current Air Force issues, testifying before Congress, and championing conservation as he was when fishing in a newfound stream.

Albeit successful, White's time as the Chief of Staff is likely little remembered because his imprint on the organizational culture was quickly overwritten by his successor. The bomber absolutists who followed White downplayed his notion that all Air Force policy and doctrine must conform to political policy. The Air Force did not return to the Clausewitzian notion of military submission until the Gulf War. LeMay also erased White's influence on the diversity of general officers. The bomber generals held the Chief of Staff position until General Lew Allen took the position in 1978. Although a bomber pilot and warrior-scholar like White, Allen was different because he held a PhD and never flew in combat. General Thomas White was a man ahead of his time and his service is an admirable model of a leader in the USAF.

White is the type of scholarly leader the Air Force needs today. The service faces some of the same complex problems as it did during his tenure. Shrinking budgets force generals to choose between maintaining the technological edge over foreign competitors and other peripheral priorities. Congressional committees pressure the services to present an acceptable budget while maintaining the same level of readiness. Drawdowns are a reality. The Air Force, much as during White's service, should heed the warning of British physicist, Ernest Rutherford, "We

[haven't got the money, so we've got to think!"](#)⁵ Intellectual versatility would serve the Air Force well during this complex period and leaders will do well to look at the example given by General Thomas D. White.



⁵ R.V. Jones, "Science, Technology, and Civilization," *Bulletin of the Institute of Physics* 13, no. 4 (1962): 102.

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