

Gen. Nathan Farragut Twining

June 30, 1953–June 30, 1957



Portrait by Charles Baskerville



NATHAN FARRAGUT TWINING was born on October 11, 1897, in Monroe, Wisconsin, one of eight children. In 1911 the family moved to Portland, Oregon, where he and his brothers indulged their passionate interest in hunting and fishing. In the spring of 1915, Twining joined the Oregon National Guard, presumably because “they had a good rifle range and he liked to shoot.” He attained the rank of corporal as an infantryman with that Guard unit on the Mexican border in 1916. In June 1917 he entered the accelerated wartime West Point class and graduated in November 1918 as a second lieutenant, just days too late for service in World War I.

In July 1919 he joined the U.S. forces in Germany as a military ground observer and toured Belgian, French, and Italian battlefields. That September he entered the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. After graduating in June 1920, he received an assignment to the 29th Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning. In February 1922 he became aide to Brig. Gen. B. A. Poore, serving with him at Camp Travis, Texas; Fort Logan, Colorado; and Fort Sam Houston, Texas. But Twining was not convinced that the infantry was for him, and after a ride in a Jenny trainer piloted by an Air Service officer, he knew that he wanted to fly. After Twining’s repeated efforts to transfer to the Air Service, Poore finally signed off and let his aide begin air training. Twining entered Primary Flying School at Brooks Field, Texas, in August 1923. A year later he graduated from Advanced Flying School at Kelly Field, Texas, and then returned to Brooks Field as an instructor. On November 16, 1926, he officially transferred to the Air Service, and the following September he was reassigned to March Field, California, where he served as a flying instructor. Twining later recalled those early years of virtually unrestricted flying in Texas with exuberance: “There were no airfields then, and shooting [landings in] those little cow pastures was something. When you needed gas you staked the airplane down and went to town and got it.”

In February 1929 he joined the 18th Pursuit Group at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, where he served successively as adjutant, personnel officer, headquarters detachment commander, and commanding officer of the 26th Attack Squadron. Lieutenant Twining was ordered to Fort Crockett, Texas, in March 1932, and was assigned to the 3d Attack Group as a squadron commander. In August of that year he joined the 90th Attack Squadron and, a month later, the 60th

Service Squadron at the same base. An auto accident and, later, his marriage to Maude McKeever and the responsibility of raising three children led him temporarily to abandon flying for work in aircraft maintenance and engineering. Beginning in 1932, both his assignments and the development of his military career became more specialized as he focused on such areas as improving aircraft maintenance. He became engineering officer for the Central Zone of the U.S. Army Air Mail Service in Chicago, Illinois, in February 1934, and in June returned to Fort Crockett, where he became adjutant to the 3d Attack Group. In May of that year Twining was handpicked by then Lt. Col. Henry “Hap” Arnold as a pilot on the 1934 Alaskan Flight, but Arnold soon removed Twining because of a divergence of views over the ratio of pilots to mechanics. Apparently that difference did not bias Arnold against Twining, however, because some six years later Arnold, who was then the chief of staff of the Air Corps, assigned the newly promoted Colonel Twining to be his assistant executive in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps.

In March 1935 Twining became assistant operations officer of the Third Wing at Barksdale Field, Louisiana, where he was finally promoted to captain after seventeen years as a lieutenant. That August he entered the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and completed the course a year later. In August 1936 he entered the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and graduated the following June. At his next assignment as Air Corps technical supervisor at San Antonio Air Depot, Duncan Field, Texas, in July 1937, Twining gained a solid understanding of logistics. Three years later he was reassigned to the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps in Washington, D.C.; within three months he was chief of the technical inspection section in that same office. He then joined the operations division in December 1941. In February 1942 General Arnold brought Twining in as his assistant executive and three months later appointed him director of War Organization and Movements in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps, a position that directed the assembly of task forces, prepared troop movement orders, and allocated aircraft and personnel. Twining’s persistent pleas to Arnold to send him to war and out of the paper-shuffling business were finally acknowledged in July 1942, when he was sent to the South Pacific as chief of staff to Maj. Gen. Millard F. Harmon, the commanding general of the U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific Area.

During World War II, Twining commanded three Air Forces—two in the Pacific and one in the Mediterranean—and flew combat missions with all three. In January 1943 he took command of the Thirteenth Air Force, whose mission was to provide air cover for operations in the Solomon Islands. About two weeks after he assumed command of the Thirteenth Air Force, the heavy bomber on which he was flying a mission was forced down in the sea at night. The plane sank in less than a minute. General Twining and fourteen others were left with two rafts, each designed to carry six men. For provisions the group had one chocolate bar, a can of sardines, and a canteen only half full of water. During the six days they spent on the rafts, they

beat off a shark attack with their paddles and survived on the rainwater they collected and the two albatrosses they shot and ate raw. All fifteen men were suffering from starvation, fatigue, and sunburn when Navy airplanes rescued them. Subsequently, on July 25, 1943, Twining was appointed commander, Aircraft, Solomon Islands, and placed in tactical control of all Army, Navy, Marine, and Allied Air Forces in the South Pacific, one of the first joint air commands in U.S. history.

During the Bougainville campaign, Twining's aircraft permanently knocked the Japanese airfields out of operation while they cleared the skies of enemy aircraft. It was during that period that he became a staunch convert to the doctrine and tenets of strategic bombardment. Sent stateside for some needed rest in December 1943, he was "kidnapped" by General Arnold (according to Adm. William Frederick Halsey and General Harmon) and not sent back to the Pacific, but rather to Italy, where he assumed command of the Fifteenth Air Force, providing tactical support to then Lt. Gen. Mark Clark's Fifth Army; covering landings in southern France; and carrying out strategic bombing forays into Germany, Austria, and the Balkans, including the famed raid on the Ploesti oil fields in Romania. Two months later, in addition to his other duties, he took command of the Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Forces. After some serious and unfortunate errors, especially at Cassino—where bombs were dropped on friendly forces—he was able to develop his Fifteenth Air Force to become the near equal of the Eighth Air Force in England.

Twining returned to the States in June 1945, and once again Arnold sent him on another command assignment, this time replacing Gen. Curtis E. LeMay as head of the Twentieth Air Force in the South Pacific theater. His B-29 Superfortresses pounded the Japanese home islands and dropped the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In October 1945 he was assigned to Continental Air Force Headquarters at Bolling Field, Washington, D.C., and two months later became commanding general of Air Materiel Command, with headquarters at Wright Field, Ohio. On October 1, 1947, Twining was named commanding general of the Alaskan Department, and on October 21 he became commander in chief of the Alaskan command, with headquarters at Fort Richardson. After a brief stint as acting deputy chief of staff for personnel at Air Force Headquarters in Washington, D.C., in July 1950, he was appointed Air Force vice chief of staff on October 10, 1950, with promotion to general.

In June 1953 Twining replaced Vandenberg as chief of staff of the Air Force. In that position he helped expand the nation's worldwide network of air bases for strategic bombers and played a major role in forming United States policy in Indochina. He also was instrumental in developing nuclear air weapons and the supersonic missiles and jets designed to deliver them. He was an ardent advocate of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and believed that SAC was the best deterrent to Communist military power. He also gained a reputation for easing the acrimonious controversies that characterized interservice relations in the immediate postwar years. One of the most noteworthy events during his tenure as air chief was his visit to the

USSR. At the invitation of the Soviet Union, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent a delegation of technical experts headed by General Twining to inspect Soviet air facilities—the first such visit by U.S. officers since the end of World War II.

In 1957 President Eisenhower named Twining chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), the first Air Force officer ever to hold the post. During the Quemoy and Matsu Islands crisis off the coast of China in August 1958, Twining and the Joint Chiefs recommended the use of whatever force was necessary, including atomic weapons, to keep the Communist Chinese from gaining control of the islands. The Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958, which gave the JCS chairman the previously lacking authority to assign tasks to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was passed during Twining's tenure as chairman. He personally took a leading role in both explaining and supporting Eisenhower's proposals before Congress and working out the implementation once the legislation was enacted.

General Twining served the Joint Chiefs of Staff until September 1960, when failing health and a cancer operation cut short his stint as chairman. Following his retirement from military service, he became vice chairman of the Holt, Rinehart, and Winston Publishing Company. He died of cardiopulmonary arrest on March 29, 1982.