

**Gen. Thomas Dresser White**

July 1, 1957–June 30, 1961



*Portrait by Paul F. Trebilcock*



**T**HOMAS DRESSER WHITE was born on August 6, 1901, in Walker, Minnesota, the son of an Episcopal bishop. One of his great-grandfathers, also a minister in the church, had officiated at the marriage ceremony of Abraham Lincoln. Another great-grandfather was the eloquent U.S. senator from South Carolina, John C. Calhoun. At an early age White exhibited remarkable intellectual gifts, along with a desire for travel and adventure. He attended St. John's Military Academy in Delafield, Wisconsin, from 1914 to 1918, when he was appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

"Tom," "Tommy," or "T.D.," as he was called by his classmates, edited the school magazine and later the yearbook, which predicted his future with amazing accuracy: "The echo of a steamboat whistle never fails to awaken in him the wanderlust, and he is always [thinking] foreign service. The best we can wish for him is that on graduation he will have his chance as attaché in some far capital." He was to get this wish, and much more. Seven months before turning nineteen, he graduated in the class of 1920, making him one of the youngest graduates in the history of the academy.

Assigned to the infantry, Lieutenant White soon grew bored with the rather dull peacetime duties of a ground officer and became interested in airplanes. After serving three years in the Panama Canal Zone, he transferred to the Air Service and won his wings in 1925, after learning to fly at Brooks and Kelly Fields in San Antonio, Texas. The following year he was assigned to the 99th Observation Squadron in Washington, D.C., where he also enrolled at Georgetown University to study the Chinese language. In May 1927 he married Rebecca Blaine Lipscomb, the daughter of a New York publisher. Their daughter later married "Billy" Mitchell, Jr., son of the famous general. Shortly after his marriage, White was sent to Peking, China, to continue his study of Chinese, and while there he compiled the *English-Chinese Vocabulary of Aeronautical Terms*.

While in Peking, White convinced his superiors to allow him to observe the fighting between Chiang Kai-shek and the Communists. He sent back so thorough a report that his superiors subsequently allowed him to extend his stay on the Chinese border as long as he continued to submit such comprehensive reports. During his stay in China, he also began to study the Russian language, a discipline that would serve him well after the United States granted

diplomatic recognition to the USSR in 1933. In February 1934 William C. Bullitt, the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, selected the thirty-three-year-old Air Corps first lieutenant and Russian linguist to serve as air attaché and pilot of the embassy airplane.

On one flight as White piloted Bullitt, the aircraft developed engine troubles. With no airfield in sight, White eased the plane down into a bog—nose over. Muddy but uninjured, Bullitt wired Roosevelt: “We landed upside down, but came out right side up.” When not piloting the embassy plane, White wrote excellent reports about the USSR, and his superiors in Washington commended him for his observations on the growth of Soviet air power.

A series of attaché assignments in Italy, Greece, and Brazil further developed White’s talents, not only as a first-rate intelligence officer, but also as an accomplished linguist. During those tours, he became fluent in Chinese, Russian, Italian, Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish. In March 1938 he married for the second time, to Constance Millicent Rowe, daughter of a British Indian civil service officer. Promoted to captain in August 1935, he returned to the United States in May 1938 to attend the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, Alabama, and the Army Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The schools provided him the broad theoretical background necessary for higher command and kept him abreast of U.S. air power and military doctrine.

Upon completing the Leavenworth course, he was assigned again to staff duties in the office of the Chief of the Air Corps. Shortly thereafter, he was promoted to major and sent to Brazil as military attaché. There he continued his study of languages, and with his wife Constance discovered the wonders of rare tropical fish, becoming an ichthyologist. White’s catches and Constance’s watercolors of the fish helped scientists distinguish species and establish a basic description for the designation of new species. In their honor, two previously unknown species of tropical fish were named “*Cynolebias Constanciae*” and “*Cynolebias Whitei*.”

After World War II began, White was recalled to the United States in 1942 to serve as assistant chief of staff for operations and then chief of staff of the Third Air Force at Tampa, Florida, whereupon he was promoted to brigadier general. In January 1944 he was reassigned to Army Air Forces Headquarters in Washington, D.C., where he became assistant chief of staff for intelligence. In that post he helped formulate plans for the D-Day invasion.

His request for combat duty was honored in September 1944, when he went to the Pacific as deputy commander of the Thirteenth Air Force and took part in the New Guinea, Southern Philippines, and Borneo campaigns. Always widening his linguistic abilities, he devoted his little spare time to the study of the Micronesian and Filipino dialects, as well as the Japanese language. In June 1945 Brigadier General White became commanding general of the Seventh Air Force in the Marianas and led it in island-hopping to Okinawa, where it played an important role in bringing about the Japanese surrender. At the end of the war, he took the Seventh to Hawaii. Promoted to major general in 1946, when many other general officers were being

reduced in rank because of congressional ceilings, he was called to Tokyo as chief of staff of the Pacific Air Command. One year later, he assumed command of the Fifth Air Force in Japan.

White returned to the United States in 1948 to serve as director of United States Air Force Legislation and Liaison. He was promoted to lieutenant general in 1951, and for more than a decade he held a succession of top-level posts in Headquarters USAF: Air Force member of the Joint Strategic Survey Committee in 1950; director of plans in 1951; and deputy chief of staff for operations in 1951. In 1953 Gen. Nathan F. Twining selected him as his vice chief of staff.

As Twining's vice chief, General White, now at four-star rank, was largely responsible for domestic issues such as the air defense buildup. Beginning in 1954, the Air Force constructed the most technically advanced air defense network the world had ever seen, centered on the semiautomatic ground environment (SAGE) system, a computer-oriented command, control and communications network. This system could identify hostile aircraft approaching the United States and direct friendly fighters to intercept them. In addition, during his stint as vice chief of the Air Force, he initiated serious efforts to deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). While advocating ICBM programs, White argued that missile systems would not eliminate the requirement for manned aircraft.

In 1957 White replaced Twining as chief of staff of the Air Force. In that position his major challenge was to weave a complex array of missiles and space and atomic weapons into the nation's deterrent screen. To accomplish that task, he called for a "mixed force" of strategic bombers; intercontinental and medium-range ballistic missiles; tactical aircraft; installations and reliable and secure communications; an advanced reconnaissance system; a modernized cargo fleet; and advanced space systems. He believed that the Air Force could not devote its resources overwhelmingly to one weapon system. Although he had been in the forefront in encouraging research and development of the ICBM, he did not consider it a weapon that would enable the Air Force to fulfill all of its defense requirements. On this point, subsequent events proved him to be profoundly correct, and it may be in his "mixed force" concept that White left his most important legacy as chief of staff.

In developing his ideas of future force requirements and military strategy, the general said, "There is no dividing line between air and space; they are one vast operating arena, and they must be considered as one medium: aerospace. . . . We must move steadily toward operations in space—not merely because it is there, challenging us, but because it is vital to our nation's security to do so." Under White's tenure, the Air Force made its first deep move into space, launching satellites for reconnaissance, weather forecasting, and communications, and as space probes.

When he retired in 1961, the National Geographic Society honored him by designating a space award to be given annually in his name. The award would go "to that military member or civil service employee of the United States Air Force who has made the most outstanding

contribution to the nation's progress in aerospace." Among the award's first recipients were Air Force astronauts Virgil "Gus" Grissom, Gordon Cooper, and Edward White. The Air Force Academy established the National Defense Award named after General White in 1962 to honor the living U.S. citizen who contributed most significantly to the national defense and security of the United States during the preceding year. In addition, the Natural Resources Award, which is presented annually to the Air Force base displaying the greatest effort in conserving natural resources, was named after General White. Upon the general's retirement, President John F. Kennedy cited him for discharging "with great distinction the tremendous responsibility of assuring strong, effective deterrent forces in being while simultaneously integrating into the Air Force the new military systems which are the products of modern technology."

White kept busy in retirement. President Kennedy appointed him to the General Advisory Committee of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and President Lyndon B. Johnson extended the appointment. White was a director of several companies, including Eastern Airlines, and in mid-1964 was elected board chairman of Electronic Teaching Laboratories in Washington, D.C. He also frequently contributed articles to *Newsweek* magazine. Although suffering from the initial stages of leukemia in 1965, he was called upon to chair a special advisory committee appointed by Secretary of the Air Force Eugene M. Zuckert to investigate the cadet honor system and the athletic program at the Air Force Academy. It was his final mission for the Air Force and his country; he died on December 22, 1965. Eulogizing the general, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower described him as "a man of intense dedication . . . intelligent, thorough and flexible in his thinking." Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, White's successor as chief of staff, praised him as "a man of action, an erudite scholar and thinker and an enlightened human being."