

Gen. John D. Ryan

August 1, 1969–July 31, 1973



Portrait by Lloyd Bowers Embrey



JOHAN D. RYAN was born on December 10, 1915, in Cherokee, Iowa. He was the youngest of five children, and his father was a railroad worker for Illinois Central. Ryan graduated from Wilson High School in 1932 and two years later from Cherokee Junior College, both in Cherokee. Following his junior college graduation, he entered the United States Military Academy and graduated there in 1938. While at the academy he was known by football experts as one of West Point's outstanding players. He was always ready in the clutch. He often recovered the fumble that turned the game around, caught the key pass that set up the touchdown, or kicked the extra point that broke the tie. He was noted for playing extremely well under pressure. He played hard and often went both ways—on offense and defense—and was respected as a true team player. For his prowess on the gridiron he was selected in December 1962 as a member of the *Sports Illustrated* Silver Anniversary All-American Team.

Ryan attended flying school at Randolph and Kelly Fields, Texas, and received his pilot's wings in 1939. He remained at Kelly Field as a flight instructor for two years. From January 1942 until August 1943 he directed training at Midland Army Air Field, Texas, and was instrumental in establishing an advanced bombardier training school. As a lieutenant colonel he next became operations officer for the Second Air Force at Colorado Springs, Colorado. As a colonel in February 1944 he transferred to Italy, where he commanded the 2d Bombardment Group and later became operations officer for the 5th Bombardment Wing, Fifteenth Air Force, which participated in the campaigns in southern France and the Northern Apennines, the Rhineland, and Central Europe. Colonel Ryan flew fifty-eight missions in B-17 bombers and was awarded the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, and Purple Heart.

After returning to the United States in April 1945, Ryan became deputy air base commander at Midland Army Air Field. In September 1945 he was assigned to the Air Training Command at Fort Worth and Randolph Field, Texas, where he remained until April 1946, when he assumed duties with the 58th Bombardment Wing. He then became Eighth Air Force director of operations. For the next three years he commanded the 509th Bombardment Wing at Walker Air Force Base, New Mexico. Ryan was promoted to temporary brigadier general in September 1952, and between July 1951 and June 1956 commanded the 97th Bombardment Wing

and the 810th Air Division, both at Biggs Air Force Base, Texas, and the 19th Air Division at Carswell Air Force Base, Texas.

General Ryan became director of materiel for SAC in June 1956 and four years later assumed command of SAC's Sixteenth Air Force in Spain. In July 1961 he was named commander of the Second Air Force at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana.

In August 1963 General Ryan was assigned to the Pentagon as inspector general for the United States Air Force. A year later he was named vice commander in chief of SAC, and in December 1964 he became its commander in chief. He was assigned as commander in chief, Pacific Air Forces, in February 1967. Ryan was appointed vice chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force in August 1968 and chief of staff in August 1969. When he took over as chief of staff, he was the first chief who had become a general officer during his postwar career.

Like his predecessor General McConnell, Ryan served as chief of staff of the Air Force during one of the country's most troubled eras. The war in Southeast Asia demanded a large and capable Air Force, and the constant strategic threat of the Soviet bloc required attention. Ryan's jobs included reconciling these threats with limited budgets and explaining Air Force policy to a divided Congress.

General Ryan wanted Air Force personnel to support two of his basic and long-held goals—to provide for the “security of this country and to help create a world environment in which other free countries can survive and prosper.” He noted that in the period since those goals had been established, significant political, economic, and social changes had taken place on the international scene. Initially, he recognized the shift in international power balance—the military strength of the United States and the Soviet Union had reached a level of parity. Furthermore, members of traditional alliances were pursuing more independent policies, and evidence of growing instability resulting from economic and social pressures was making weaker nations more vulnerable to militant insurgency. He recognized the pressure in the United States to reduce military programs and allocate resources to domestic programs. To counteract these trends he sought better methods of performing Air Force missions by introducing improved equipment such as the AMSA—the advanced manned strategic aircraft or the bombers for strategic forces, the all-jet strategic airlift mission performance in the overseas deployment and resupply of combat forces—and advanced satellite systems for tactical and strategic reconnaissance, and by developing a tactical satellite communications system to keep in touch more effectively with U.S. military forces around the world.

General Ryan made many difficult decisions during his tenure but perhaps none as difficult as those he made during the Lavelle affair. Ryan found it necessary for the commander of the Seventh Air Force, Gen. John D. Lavelle, to resign because the Inspector General reported that men under Lavelle's command had falsified reports in Vietnam. Ryan recommended that Lavelle be retired as a lieutenant general, but the Senate Armed Services Committee would not advance Lavelle beyond major general on the retired list.

Ryan also was involved in the continuing development of missile technology and the increasingly complex challenge of arms control and the simultaneous need for new generations of interceptors, attack planes, and bombers. During his tenure as chief, he endured the death of his eldest son, Capt. John D. Ryan, Jr., USAF, who was killed in 1970 when the F-4D fighter-bomber he was flying crashed on takeoff in California. His second son, Michael E. Ryan, would become Air Force chief of staff in November 1997.

General Ryan received honorary doctor of laws degrees from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and from the University of Akron, Ohio. In retirement Ryan remained involved with Air Force activities as a director of the Air Force Association. He died on October 27, 1983, at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.