

Gen. George Scratchley Brown

August 1, 1973–June 30, 1974



Portrait by Maxine McCaffrey



GEORGE SCRATCHLEY BROWN was born in Montclair, New Jersey, on August 17, 1918. He was the son of a West Point graduate and career cavalry officer. He graduated from high school in Leavenworth, Kansas, and, after attending the University of Missouri for a year, he received a congressional appointment to the U.S. Military Academy in 1937. He graduated from West Point in 1941 and entered flight training at Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He received his pilot's wings at Kelly Field, Texas, in 1942.

Following flight training, he went to Barksdale Field, Louisiana, where he became a member of the initial cadre of the 93d Bombardment Group, flying B-24 Liberators. After a brief stint flying antisubmarine patrol at Ft. Myers, Florida, he transferred in August 1942 with the 93d Bombardment Group, the first B-24 group to join the Eighth Air Force in England. Until April 1944 he served in various capacities with the 93d, including commander of the 329th Bombardment Squadron, group operations officer, and group executive officer. As group executive officer, he took part in famous low-level bombing raids against oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, on August 1, 1943. The 93d was the second of five B-24 groups that raided Ploesti from a temporary base at Benghazi, Libya. Led by its commander, Lt. Col. Addison E. Baker, the 93d flew directly into heavy defenses to hit three of the six targeted refineries. The lead plane and ten others were shot down or crashed on the target. Brown, then a major, took over lead of the battered 93d and led it back to Benghazi. For his actions on that mission, he received the nation's second highest military award, the Distinguished Service Cross.

His next appointment was as assistant operations officer, 2d Air Division, in May 1944. The following May he assumed similar duties with Headquarters Air Training Command at Fort Worth, Texas. In 1946 he joined Headquarters Air Defense Command at Mitchel Field, New York, as assistant to air chief of staff, operations and later became assistant deputy of operations.

In July 1950, during the Korean War, Brown assumed command of the 62d Troop Carrier Group at McChord Air Force Base, Washington. This group operated between the West Coast and Japan. In 1951 and the early months of 1952 he commanded the 56th Fighter Wing at Selfridge Air Force Base, Michigan, and in May 1952 joined Fifth Air Force headquarters at Seoul, Korea, as director for operations.

In July 1953 Colonel Brown assumed command of Williams Air Force Base, Arizona. He entered the National War College in 1956 and, after completing the course in 1957, he served as executive to the chief of staff, Headquarters U.S. Air Force until 1959. During the next four years, he held two other positions at the Pentagon: military assistant to the deputy secretary of defense and military assistant to the secretary of defense.

Promoted to brigadier general in August 1959, Brown became commander of the Eastern Transport Air Force, McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, in August 1963. In September of the next year he was selected to organize Joint Task Force II, a Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) unit formed at Sandia Base, New Mexico, to test the weapon systems of all the military services.

He served as assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, D.C., from August 1, 1966, to August 1, 1968, when he assumed command of the Seventh Air Force and became deputy commander of air operations, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. In September 1970 General Brown became commander of the Air Force Systems Command at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. It was the mission of this command to provide the weapon systems and meet the technological needs of the total Air Force mission.

On August 1, 1973, President Richard M. Nixon appointed Brown to be chief of staff of the Air Force. As chief, General Brown worked to enhance the Air Force strategic bomber program and to replace the aging B-52s with B-1s, which could carry larger payloads and penetrate deeper into the USSR.

On July 1, 1974, President Nixon appointed General Brown chairman of the JCS, the first Air Force officer since Gen. Nathan Twining to hold the position. As chairman, Brown served three presidents during an era of limited budgets and constrained force structure. In 1974 he provoked an international controversy by asserting that Jews “own the banks and the newspapers in this country.” After making these remarks at a gathering at Duke University Law School, he was called to the White House by President Gerald R. Ford and rebuked. General Brown issued an apology. Acknowledging that Brown had made a mistake, Ford opted to keep Brown on as JCS chairman because of his excellent record as an officer.

Two years later General Brown got into trouble again by saying that Israel had become a military burden to the United States and by making deprecatory remarks about Britain and Iran. Of Britain he said, “It’s pathetic now; it just wants to make you cry. They’re no longer a world power. All they have got are generals, admirals, and bands. They do things in great style . . . on the protocol side. But it makes you sick to see their forces.” On Iran: “Gosh, the (military) program the shah has coming. . . . It just makes you wonder whether he doesn’t some day have visions of the Persian Empire.” Later General Brown said his remark about Israel referred to a partial depletion of U.S. military equipment stocks to resupply Israel after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. He also praised the British for their gallantry and professionalism and said he had no reason to believe that the shah of Iran planned to do anything other than lead his country properly.

As chairman, much of his time was consumed with Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty talks that focused on finding a formula by which the U.S. lead in missile reentry vehicles would offset Soviet superiority in missile throw-weight. Brown led the Joint Chiefs in urging U.S. air and naval deployments to South Vietnam following the U.S. pullout. But public and congressional opposition to any further involvement in Vietnam precluded approval of any military action. General Brown also participated in decision making over the U.S. response to two confrontations in the Far East that were widely perceived as tests of U.S. will in the aftermath of the communist takeover of South Vietnam. These were the *Mayaguez* incident in May 1975 and the shooting of two U.S. officers and wounding of another by North Korean guards in August 1976 in the demilitarized zone that divided the two Koreas. He also played a significant role in the success of the 1977 negotiations transferring the Panama Canal to Panama.

General Brown survived the furor that followed his sometimes controversial remarks and continued as chairman until his retirement in June 1978. He had contracted prostate cancer and was hospitalized intermittently until his death in December 1978. His military career spanned a technological revolution in weaponry. He started his combat career by flying heavy bombers in the European theater in World War II and retired as a four-star general when the cruise missile rivaled the manned bomber.

At the time of General Brown's death, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown maintained that "this nation has lost a great patriot and an innovative chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was a pioneer as an Air Force officer. He was a sincere, straightforward, and dedicated man. He was a friend."