

Gen. Charles A. Gabriel
July 1, 1982–June 30, 1986



Portrait by Peter Egeli



CHARLES A. GABRIEL was born on January 21, 1928, in Lincolnton, North Carolina. After graduating from high school, he attended Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina, where he was an outstanding football quarterback for two years before entering the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. He graduated from the academy in 1950 with a bachelor of science degree and a commission in the U.S. Air Force. In 1963 he earned a master of science degree in engineering management from George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

After West Point, Lieutenant Gabriel entered pilot training at Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, and in December 1951 completed advanced training at Craig Air Force Base, Alabama. He was assigned to South Korea, where he flew one hundred combat missions in F-51s and F-86s and was credited with shooting down two MiG-15s. From December 1952 to November 1955 he was assigned to the 86th Fighter Interceptor Wing, Landstuhl Air Base, Germany, as a pilot and later as a squadron air operations officer. He then spent three years as an air officer commanding at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado.

In July 1959 Captain Gabriel transferred to Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, where he served as adjutant for the 3550th Pilot Training Group and commander of the Headquarters Squadron Section. Following graduation from the Naval War College in August 1962 and the completion of his master's degree in 1963, he was assigned as a staff officer in the Directorate of Plans, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C. In August 1966 he entered the Industrial College of the Armed Forces.

One year later, Lieutenant Colonel Gabriel took on the role of executive officer to the chief of staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, in Mons, Belgium. He returned to the United States for combat crew training in July 1970 and subsequently was assigned as commander of the 432d Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand, where he flew 152 combat missions in F-4s. He returned to the Air Staff in July 1972 as deputy for operational forces and deputy director of operations.

General Gabriel served as deputy chief of staff for operations at Headquarters Tactical Air Command, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia, from February 1975 to August 1977. He then

became deputy commander in chief, U.S. Forces Korea, and deputy commander in chief, United Nations Command, Seoul, South Korea.

In April 1979 Gabriel returned to Air Force Headquarters as deputy chief of staff for operations, plans, and readiness. He served as commander in chief, United States Air Forces in Europe, and commander of Allied Air Forces Central Europe at Ramstein Air Base, West Germany, from August 1980 to June 1982. General Gabriel became chief of staff of the United States Air Force in July 1982.

At the outset of his tenure as chief of staff, Gabriel believed that his top priority was to take care of Air Force personnel and ensure that the service remained an “outstanding way of life.” Four years later he could point to substantial pay raises and enhancements in benefits as tangible results of his tenure. But he acknowledged that a wide gap remained between military and private-sector wages, and he noted that future Air Force leadership would have to remain vigilant in its efforts to bridge that chasm.

On May 22, 1984, General Gabriel and his Army counterpart, Gen. John A. Wickham, Jr., signed a landmark agreement on thirty-one joint initiatives that the Army and Air Force had identified as essential to development and “fielding of the most affordable and effective air–land combat forces.” The initiatives addressed a variety of joint concerns, including theater air interdiction, battlefield air interdiction, manned tactical reconnaissance systems, intratheater airlift, air base ground defense, point air defense, surface-to-air missiles, and rear area close air support. The agreement evolved from two years of working on budgets “to ensure coordination and reduce overlap in the acquisition and development of systems.” Hailed as a “revolutionary approach” to cooperation between the forces, the agreement formalized the “participation of each service in the other’s budget process” and committed them to a “long-term, dynamic process” to exchange, review, and update initiatives.

At the time of his retirement two years later, General Gabriel could point to the substantial cost savings resulting from his emphasis on joint programs. He saw the Unified Space Command as a positive step toward jointness that would ensure that all military space assets were coordinated in support of national objectives. He pointed out that although generous budgets allowed the building of a much stronger defense and a more confident posture for deterrence, fiscal austerity would likely be the future reality. Gabriel did not predict the return of the “Hollow Force” of the 1970s, but he cautioned that the plentiful defense budgets of recent years would be difficult to sustain.

Following his retirement in 1986, Gabriel became a member of the board of directors of several firms, including GEC Marconi Electronic Systems Corporation, E-Systems Inc., Electronic Systems Corporation, Riggs National Bank of Virginia, United Services Life Insurance Corporation, and the Jessup Group Incorporated. He also served as chairman of the board of directors for FLT International and JGW Associates, on the corporate advisory board of the Martin Marietta Company, as vice chairman of the board of advisors for Citadel College, and on the board of advisors to the Defense Intelligence College.