

Gen. Merrill A. McPeak

October 30, 1990–October 25, 1994



Portrait by Pamela Firestone Bowman



MERRILL A. McPEAK was born on January 9, 1936, in Santa Rosa, California. After graduating from Grants Pass Union High School in Oregon, he earned a bachelor of arts degree in economics from San Diego State College in 1957. He was a distinguished graduate of the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps program in college and entered the Air Force in November 1957, completing pilot training at Hondo Air Base, Texas, and Vance Air Force Base, Oklahoma. He received his pilot's wings in November 1957 and then completed F-100 combat crew training at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, and Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada.

His first operational assignment was flying F-104 Starfighters with the 436th Tactical Fighter Squadron, George Air Force Base, California. He subsequently transferred to the 79th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 20th Tactical Fighter Wing, Royal Air Force Station, Woodbridge, England, where he flew F-100 Super Sabres. From May 1964 until August 1965 he was a member of the Third Air Force Tactical Evaluation Team, exercising and evaluating pilots and operations units in the United Kingdom.

In September 1965 McPeak returned to Luke Air Force Base as a gunnery instructor and later served as wing weapons officer for the F-104G program. That assignment involved training pilots in West Germany's Luftwaffe. From December 1966 to December 1968 McPeak flew the solo and lead solo positions with the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, the Thunderbirds. He performed in nearly two hundred official air shows in the United States and abroad.

In December 1968 Major McPeak went to the Republic of Vietnam, serving first as an F-100 tactical fighter pilot with the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing, Phu Cat Air Base, and then as operations officer and later commander of the "Misty" high-speed forward air controller unit. His unit subsequently was assigned to the 31st Tactical Fighter Wing at Tuy Hoa Air Base, where he served as chief of the wing standardization and evaluation branch. He flew 269 combat missions during his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Returning stateside in January 1970, McPeak attended the Armed Forces Staff College and graduated in July of that year. He then spent three years as an air operations staff officer in the directorate of plans and policy, Headquarters U.S. Air Force in Washington, D.C. He completed

the National War College program in June 1974 and concurrently earned a master's degree in international relations at George Washington University. He next was assigned as assistant deputy commander for operations of the First Tactical Fighter Wing, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida.

As a colonel he was a military fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City from July 1975 to June 1976. He then commanded the 513th Combat Support Group, Royal Air Force Station in Mildenhall, England, and in July 1977 he became vice commander of the 406th Tactical Fighter Training Wing, Zaragoza Air Base, Spain. From July 1978 to February 1980 Colonel McPeak was assistant chief of staff of current operations, Allied Air Forces Central Europe, at the Central Region Air Operations Center, Boerfink, West Germany. He then assumed command of the 20th Tactical Fighter Wing, Royal Air Force Station Upper Heyford, England. In July 1981, shortly after being assigned as chief of staff at Headquarters U.S. Air Forces in Europe at Ramstein Air Base, West Germany, McPeak was promoted to brigadier general.

In October 1982 he became deputy chief of staff of plans at Headquarters Tactical Air Command, Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. When he was promoted to lieutenant general in May 1985, he set out for Washington, D.C., as deputy chief of staff of programs and resources at Headquarters U.S. Air Force. In June 1987 he assumed command of the Twelfth Air Force and U.S. Southern Command Air Forces at Bergstrom Air Force Base, Texas. During the summer of 1988, he was promoted to general and assumed command of the Pacific Air Forces headquartered at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. Two years later he was back in Washington, having been selected to replace Gen. Michael J. Dugan as chief of staff of the United States Air Force on October 30, 1990.

General McPeak took over as chief during the Operation Desert Shield force buildup in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf that preceded the Operation Desert Storm offensive against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. As the Gulf War drew to a successful close, McPeak surmised that not only did the coalition have a technological advantage, but also the winning forces were better organized than were Saddam Hussein's forces: "We had better people and a better organization."

Because of the severe drawdown inspired by the end of the Cold War, McPeak oversaw the dismantling of several stalwart Air Force commands, including the Strategic Air Command and Systems Command. Those long-standing commands were consolidated into new commands, the Air Combat Command and Air Force Materiel Command. Aware of the support for downsizing both in Congress and in the administration of President Bill Clinton, McPeak set out to rebuild the Air Force from top to bottom and, in so doing, changed it in fundamental ways. He spoke often of how international events and domestic pressures would reshape the military services: "The Air Force must adapt or go the way of the dinosaurs."

It was his desire to make operations the centerpiece of the Air Force's organization, so he sought to strengthen its role. He introduced a different wing-level organizational concept, the

composite wing. Although not entirely new, the composite wing idea included two or more aircraft types essential to the wing's mission.

More than any chief before him, McPeak was determined to preserve the heritage of the Air Force. During organization downsizing, he introduced a systematic method for retaining historic units on the active list. In the area of training he made an effort to reduce the number of specialties so that people were more broadly trained and thus more flexibly usable. He believed that as the Air Force grew smaller, its training standards ought to be raised. Indeed, raising training standards became his creed in his purposeful pursuit of the quality Air Force. McPeak also stressed equipage. Rather than focusing on the types of equipment the Air Force ought to possess, he focused on a long-range plan for modernization. Finally, he stressed readiness, and he surmised that there the Air Force was in fairly good shape.

During his tenure, McPeak wore an unprecedented "two hats" for a short time: while chief, he acted as air secretary for three weeks. When he retired in October 1994 he felt fortunate to have worked on the "virtual Air Force—an imaginary Air Force." And he was quick to add that he could do this because he had great commanders, "great Air Force people." Following his Air Force career, McPeak became a business executive and consultant to various aerospace firms.