

At Tactical Air Command, Gen. Robert Dixon helped the Air Force kick the post-Vietnam blues.

Dixon

By Rebecca Grant

IN WORLD War II, the German synthetic oil refinery at Merseburg churned out high-quality aviation gasoline used by the Luftwaffe. That made it a prime target of the anti-oil air campaign then being waged by Eighth Air Force. Bomber crews attacked the site in mid-May 1944, returning more than a dozen times that year. Germany protected Merseburg with rings of anti-aircraft batteries, making it a dangerous target indeed.

Every raid generated demands for bomb damage assessment pictures, which were the responsibility of the 7th Photographic Group. One squadron—the 14th—used low-flying Mark XI Spitfires, P-38s, and P-51s for this dangerous work. Its commander was a risk-taking, Ivy League-educated New Yorker trained to fly Spitfires by the Royal Canadian Air Force even before the US entered the war.

His name was Robert J. Dixon.

This same Dixon was to become, three decades later, a towering figure in the United States Air Force. He was the hard driving commander of Tactical Air Command in the critical years 1973-78, a formidable figure given to bold ideas and “wire-brushings” of foes and incompetents. One year ago this month, on March 21, 2003, as the US Air Force embarked on war in the Persian Gulf, retired Gen. Robert J. Dixon died in Fair Oaks Ranch, Tex. His imprint on the Air Force, however, is a lasting one.

Dixon was born in New York City in 1920 and graduated from Dartmouth College in June 1941 with a degree in literature. Soon, he entered pilot training in the Royal Canadian



Air Force and was commissioned. In September 1943, Dixon transferred to the US Army Air Forces.

Dixon had a long career as an airman, but it almost ended over Merseburg. The intense German flak that engulfed the bombers at 27,000 feet was even more lethal for Dixon’s fighters flying photoreconnaissance at low altitude. Dixon had survived the flak on more than 65 combat missions, but, during one flight over Merseburg, he was shot down.

Just the Start

He survived the ordeal, however, and was picked up by the Nazis. Dixon became a prisoner of war and was held captive until May 1945, when Nazi Germany surrendered and Allied prisoners were released. What might have been the end of the line for another airman was just the beginning for Dixon.

For one thing, Dixon was not done with combat. He spent 11 months in theater in the Korean War, where he flew another 28 combat missions and commanded the 335th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron. Much later, in the period 1969-70, Dixon served as vice commander of 7th Air Force and logged 36 combat missions over Vietnam.

It was after his tour in Southeast Asia, though, that Dixon found his opportunity to help reshape the Air Force, and he took it.

One who vividly recalls Dixon in the post-Vietnam period is retired Gen. Michael E. Ryan, Chief of Staff in 1997-2001. "He was my dad's DP [director of personnel]," said Ryan, referring to Dixon's three-star assignment under Gen. John D. Ryan, who served as Chief of Staff in the early 1970s.

The DP post was but one in a long series of personnel jobs held by Dixon. After World War II, Dixon worked as a group and wing personnel officer for the 82nd Fighter Wing. He followed this up with five years in personnel at Strategic Air Command headquarters. Dixon also spent the period 1967-69 at Randolph AFB, Tex., as commander of the Military Personnel Center.

This gave Dixon a deep interest in and knowledge of airmen. His experience was broadened in other ways. During tours with the Air Staff, Dixon immersed himself in national security issues. He did the same thing while assigned in the early 1960s to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe, which was then in Paris.

Dixon's years under the elder Ryan earned him a fourth star and led to the crowning assignment of his career. On Oct. 1, 1973, he took command of TAC, headquartered in Virginia's Tidewater area.

The Dixon years are well-remembered by retired Gen. Larry D. Welch, a former Chief of Staff who served under Dixon at TAC. Dixon, said Welch, "took command of Tactical Air Command during one of the most challenging times in its history." Welch said that the year 1973 was a low point in public support for the post-Vietnam military, and the Air Force badly needed to rebuild its morale and force structure.

Training was at the top of the list for a combat veteran like Dixon. Michael Ryan recalled how USAF

squadrons deploying to Vietnam had never been given a chance to conduct dissimilar air combat training—that is, flying against different kinds of aircraft and tactics—all because of the fear of an accident.

Dixon was "well aware of these stupidities," said Ryan. Dixon implemented more realistic training and made sure airmen got the most out of every precious hour of flying time.

Red Flag

One day, Dixon took a briefing from Col. Richard M. Suter, an original thinker with a new concept of realistic air crew training. It was called Red Flag. "Moody" Suter based his plan on lessons from Vietnam. He realized that young pilots who were shot down or had accidents usually suffered these reverses during the first 10 combat missions. His plan was to get those young pilots into a combat-like environment, where those first 10 missions could be performed in a controlled, nonlethal arena.

Dixon leaped at the concept, seeing in it a chance to further improve TAC's warfighting skills. He ordered TAC's deputy for operations—Maj. Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, who also would later become a Chief of Staff—to have Suter's brainchild up and running in four months.

Ryan noted of Dixon, "He took huge risks by pushing things like Red Flag and the aggressors. He was a man who said, 'Yes.'"

In recognition of the great work done on Red Flag, Dixon and TAC were jointly awarded the 1977 Collier Trophy.

Dixon would prove to be a strong patron of Red Flag throughout his final years at TAC. Dixon's successor, Gen. W.L. Creech, expanded the training program. Dixon and Creech certainly were not close, but the need for Red Flag was a point of agreement.

Dixon did not stop at the tactical level. He pioneered a form of "system of systems" thinking about airpower and how to integrate the new technologies then becoming available. Welch said Dixon got TAC airmen to think about integrated concepts of operations.

These, according to Welch, included such concepts as combining EF-111 and F-4G defense suppression capabilities with A-10 and F-16 attack capabilities to provide maximum combat power in high-threat areas, and linking together E-3 AWACS and the F-15 fighter aircraft with ground-based radars and command and control systems to win early air superiority.

All of these concepts, said Welch, were "honed during long Saturday morning sessions."

Ryan came to TAC as a major in July 1976, and he has not forgotten what Dixon's honing felt like to staff officers such as himself.

"I was under his scrutiny," said the retired Chief of Staff. Their encoun-



Dixon began his career with World War II photoreconnaissance missions. He initially flew XI Spitfires, such as this one, on more than 65 combat missions before being shot down over Nazi Germany.



After assuming command of Tactical Air Command in October 1973, Dixon was an early proponent for Red Flag. This F-16 at Nellis AFB, Nev., sports the Red Flag aggressor paint scheme.

ters were frequent, as Ryan had the duty of briefing the man known as “the Tidewater Alligator.”

Cut to the Chase

Dixon was famously impatient. Those who briefed him had to move fast. “Ryan, cut the striptease and show me the naked lady,” he shouted one day. On another occasion, Dixon simply took over the briefing and began flipping through the slides himself. When he finished, he rose from the conference table.

“That’s not a *bad* concept,” Dixon said to Ryan. He walked out the door, slammed it, and yelled back, “That’s a *terrible* concept.”

Ryan later realized the bark was worse than the bite. Welch agreed.

“Dixon was often a hard taskmaster,” said Welch, who added that the general frequently fired for effect. “When he was impatient,” Welch went on, “it was because he thought more of a subordinate’s potential than did the subordinate.”

Dixon put his heart into his work. At TAC, he called for improving maintenance as a means for strengthening combat readiness.

“He shed tears over the frustration of an F-111 mechanic coping with multiple fuel tank leaks,” said Welch, “and responded by demanding that everyone from TAC generals to defense contractors leave no stone unturned to support that F-111 mechanic. And they did.”

The sagging state of TAC’s top fighter

aircraft—the old F-105s, F-4s, and so on—spurred Dixon to make sure the Air Force revamped its force structure.

“In the 1970s, after Vietnam, we were in free fall when it came to force structure,” Ryan said, adding that Dixon fought the battle to recapitalize the Air Force with major new programs such as the F-15 and F-16, creating a new and modern core to the fighter force

As US attention shifted from Southeast Asia to Europe in post-Vietnam years, Dixon reached out to other services to help develop a common doctrine of warfighting. According to Welch, Dixon would not tolerate parochialism. Yet Dixon’s view of how the services operated was hard and realistic.

His combat experiences and command of units ranging from squadron to numbered Air Force gave Dixon a clear view on the key airpower issues of the day. In conversations with historians of the Vietnam conflict, Dixon talked of the battles over air apportionment, noting that there were times when Marines, Army units, and even diplomats demanded dedicated airpower.

“That’s what you’ve got generals like 7th Air Force commanders for,”

Dixon argued, “to say that nobody owns it, it belongs to us, and we’ll put it where it belongs.”

Dixon placed a high priority on improving cooperation between the Air Force and Army. In this, he helped to lay the foundation for dialogue between TAC and the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command on issues such as close air support.

“If you look at their public statements and listen to what they said, you kind of wonder why we ever had any argument with the Army about close air support [in the 1970s],” Dixon said, “but, if you get in the competitive arena for money, ... you’re liable to hear a different story.”

Dixon believed frequent demands for close air support attested to the Army’s desire for and reliance on it. He hoped for “a better understanding of the interrelationship between airpower and ground power.”

“He cared about everything,” said Welch.

That dedication continued long after his time at TAC. Dixon served as president of Fairchild Republic Co., but he never lost contact with the Air Force. Twenty years after Dixon’s retirement, Ryan, as Chief of Staff, gave him a major advisory role in the Developing Aerospace Leaders project, an initiative to reevaluate the Air Force’s management of officers on their way to the top.

Dixon’s style had not changed.

“Everything that man said was for a purpose; every dagger was to get you to react and think,” said Brig. Gen. Richard S. Hassan, who has for several years run the Air Force office in charge of general officer assignments and who worked closely with Dixon on the Developing Aerospace Leaders project.

In Hassan’s view, it was the combination of Dixon’s unique experiences—combat in three wars, time at SHAPE, work for Gen. John D. Ryan, time at TAC—that made him great. “There’s this other level of general, a sort of military statesman,” Hassan explained. Dixon was one.

“The Air Force was his life,” said Hassan. ■

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