On July 27, 1903, 17-year-old Henry Harley Arnold entered the US Military Academy at West Point and became a cadet. That he did so was a small miracle. Virtually from the day he was born on June 25, 1886, everyone had expected him to become a minister. His father had won the West Point appointment for his eldest son, but when he refused to take the exam, Henry went instead.

Cadet Arnold always ranked between 62d and 66th in a class of 110. He never became a class officer. He was large for the time, packing about 185 pounds on a frame just short of 6 feet tall. Still, he was only a fair athlete. In his last year at West Point, he was confined to quarters for some time for a sensational senior prank with fireworks.

When he graduated in 1907, Arnold wanted to join the cavalry, which was the glamour arm of the Army in those days, and he complained vigorously when assigned to the infantry. His protests failed, however, and that was the break of his life. Had he gone to the cavalry, he probably would never have taken up flying. Then, H.H. “Hap” Arnold might well have wound up commanding an obscure tank division instead of achieving world fame and the five stars of the first and only General of the Air Force.

It was his destiny to become a dominant figure in American airpower. In the 1920s and 1930s, his was one of few but highly significant voices speaking up for development of military aviation. He was a powerhouse in World War II, breaking through the barriers of conservatism and vested interest to mold the various elements of airpower into a powerful striking force. “In General Arnold’s story,” the New York Times editorialized at the war’s end, “can be found the key to that fierce loyalty, that close identification of men and weapons, which has had so much

H.H. Arnold, one of the nation’s first military aviators, went on to become the founding father of the US Air Force.

By Walter J. Boyne
to do with bringing the air arm to its present stage of terrifying efficiency.”

Then, as World War II drew to a close, Arnold saw that a new, powerful, and independent Air Force would have to be forged in the face of public apathy and took the lead in organizing public support for the task.

Next Stop: Wright Brothers

In his first assignment after West Point, the young Arnold served an uneventful two-year tour in the Philippines with the 29th Infantry before sailing west to return to the US. On this long journey home, he passed through Paris, where he observed Louis Blériot’s famous aircraft. On his return to US soil, with the 29th at Governor’s Island, N.Y., he made a second attempt to get out of the infantry, asking the Signal Corps to put him in “aeronautical work.” This time he succeeded.

On April 21, 1911, Arnold and 2d Lt. Thomas Milling were ordered to report to Dayton, Ohio, to learn to fly under the supervision of the Wright brothers. Just six weeks later, on June 5, 1911, he and 2d Lt. Thomas Milling were certified as US Army aviators.

The Wrights’ machines were extremely difficult to fly, but Arnold’s instructor, Al Welsh, sent him solo with less than four hours of actual flying time. On June 5, 1911, after another six weeks of flying, Milling and Arnold were certified as US Army Aviators No. 1 and No. 2, respectively, and were told to report to College Park, Md., where they became instructor pilots.

Flying was extremely dangerous in those days, generating names for Army airfields (Selfridge, Kelly, Scott, Hazelhurst, and Rockwell) faster than the airfields could be built. Between 1909 and 1913, the Army produced only 24 officers it deemed qualified to fly. Eighteen were killed in air mishaps—11 in training accidents and seven in later crashes. In Milling’s words, “Everybody expected to be killed.”

Despite the dangers, Arnold flew with a flair that broke both records and precedents. On Aug. 18, 1911, he set a military altitude record of 4,167 feet. He pioneered the use of goggles, won the first Mackay Trophy for a long reconnaissance flight, and directed artillery fire from the air, first by dropping notes and then by using a primitive radio. The press eagerly reported on the exploits of the young pilot. Adding to his growing fame were his appearances in two 1911 movies, The Military Scout and The Elopement, in which he played the role of aircraft pilot.

In his next assignment, Arnold began flying in the more powerful Wright C aircraft. All six of the Army’s Wright Cs would eventually be lost in crashes, killing six men. This early aircraft had an inherent flaw: When gliding at low speeds, sudden application of power would cause the nose to pitch down—exactly the opposite of what a pilot would expect. In a pusher-type aircraft, moreover, the engine was perfectly placed to crush the pilot upon impact with the ground.

In November 1912, Arnold was flying a Wright C at Ft. Riley, Kan., conducting radio experiments. Then, at about 400 feet altitude, the aircraft suddenly spun in a 360-degree turn and plunged toward the earth. Arnold was sure he was going to die, but by some miracle, his frantic, random manipulation of the controls managed to pull him out of the dive just a few feet above the ground so that he could land.

The experience left Arnold badly shaken, and he finally acknowledged that flying in Army aircraft virtually qualified as an act of suicide. He waited 20 days to regain his composure, swallowed his pride, and formally requested release from flying duty. The Army granted his wish.

“No Preliminaries”

Arnold was reassigned to a desk job with the Signal Corps in Washington. There, he experienced two thrilling events. The first came in 1913 when, after serving six years of active duty, he finally was promoted to first lieutenant. Second, he married an aristocratic hometown girl, Eleanor Pool, proposing before he ever had kissed her or told her he loved her. As Mrs. Arnold laughingly recalled in a 1969 interview: “That was Hap. No preliminaries.”

On a second tour in the Philippines, Arnold met and began developing an admiration for another Army officer, George C. Marshall, a man who would shape his career and the fate of the US Air Force to an inordinate degree. Upon returning to the US, he also encountered, for the second time, a newly emerging force in military aviation, then—Maj. Billy Mitchell. Mitchell invited the young lieutenant to “volunteer” to return to flying duties and dangled before him the rank of captain as a part of the bargain. Arnold accepted and resumed flying.
Not long after the US entered World War I in April 1917, Arnold was promoted to major and then was jumped to a colonel’s rank. Despite efforts to get overseas and take part in combat, he did his best work in the new Office of Military Aeronautics, meeting many top figures in the fledgling industry and gaining knowledge that, 25 years later in another war, would prove invaluable. He also got the bug for aviation research and development, which was to become a hallmark of his leadership.

When World War I ended, Arnold was dropped back to captain for one day and then promoted to major, whereupon he promptly embarked on a decade of activity that, at the time, seemed to inflict irreparable damage on his career.

Arnold’s major sin, in the view of Army leaders, was to openly back Mitchell’s cause during the latter’s infamous 1925 court-martial. Then, already under the gun as a result of the Mitchell affair, Arnold in 1926 was discovered to be a ringleader in highly unauthorized political activity; he and others had covertly been using Army paper, equipment, and information to spread and popularize pro-airpower views.

The second offense was the last straw. Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick, Chief of the Air Service, was furious. He offered Arnold a choice: resignation or court-martial. Arnold called Patrick’s bluff, asking for the court-martial with all of its attendant publicity. Patrick folded, but he “exiled” Arnold to Ft. Riley with a disastrous efficiency report intended to be the ultimate career killer.

However, what was supposed to be the end of the line for Arnold’s career proved instead to be the launching pad from which he rocketed to the top, for it was at Ft. Riley that he began formulating ways to make more effective use of airpower. Even before his exile to Kansas, Arnold had become alarmed about the German airline operations in the South American nation of Colombia. With Carl Spaatz, he laid the framework for an American airline to counter German influence. Plans devised by these two airmen eventually became a blueprint for creation of Pan American Airways. While at Ft. Riley, he was offered a top job at Pan Am, with a salary twice that of his Army pay, but he refused, despite knowing that the looming college expenses of his three sons and a daughter would more than strain a junior Army officer’s salary.

Hap Delivers

During the early 1930s, Arnold continued to attract considerable notice in Army circles. He handled tough logistic jobs in several huge (for the time) Air Corps maneuvers, built Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and competently managed the Western Zone when, in 1934, the Army carried the nation’s air mail. He cemented public relations with various interest groups by using military assets intelligently in fighting forest fires, dropping food to snowbound Indian reservations, and—quite illegally but sensibly—delivering military supplies to victims of earthquakes.

He also had established good relations with the small American aviation industry, learning upon whom he could depend, and willingly helped Hollywood producers to make positive films about military aviation.
Similarly, he assisted the experiments of Dr. Robert Millikan, head of the California Institute of Technology, and thus gained entry to a community that would help win World War II and then set the essential frame of research and development reference for an independent Air Force.

Arnold’s outwardly sunny countenance now earned him the nickname that he would carry for life: “Hap.” However, the name belied serious health concerns, which he kept to himself. Arnold had been troubled by ulcers during the 1920s and, during the trauma of the air mail experience, suffered what was probably a mild heart attack. During this time, Arnold pulled off a number of flying achievements, the greatest of which came in 1934, when, at 48 and white-haired, he won his second Mackay Trophy and a Distinguished Flying Cross by leading 10 Martin B-10s on an 18,000-mile trip from Washington, D.C., to Alaska and back.

From this point on, Arnold’s career was marked by unusual events. A long series of apparently random incidents—incidents which nevertheless fitted together like tiles carefully placed in a mosaic—would allow Arnold’s innate abilities to raise him to five-star rank.

On March 1, 1935, the General Headquarters Air Force was formed. The new GHQ Air Force had an autonomy which pleased those who saw it as a step toward an independent Air Force. Still, GHQ Air Force reported directly to the Army General Staff, a reality perceived by traditionalists as a means of exercising greater control over the airmen. Frank Andrews, Arnold’s friend and longtime rival, was promoted to major general and given command of the GHQ Air Force. Arnold was promoted to brigadier general and given command of the GHQ Air Force. Arnold was influential in Arnold’s promotion to assistant chief of the Air Corps under Maj. Gen. Oscar Westover. However, because GHQ Air Force did not report to the Chief of the Army Air Corps, Arnold viewed the new assignment as a step backward. He tried to refuse but was overruled. This caused some to think Arnold had strayed from the pro-independent Air Force camp, and it deepened the rivalry with Andrews and his supporters.

Craig, as Chief of Staff, was able to alter the balance in Arnold’s favor in 1938 by instituting measures that reduced GHQ Air Force’s influence and again in 1939 by requiring the GHQ Air Force to report to the Chief of the Air Corps. The confusion in the command structure had been eliminated, but the hard feelings were not.

On Sept. 21, 1938, Westover, generally conceded not to be the most proficient pilot, crashed in flames in a Northrop A-17 attack plane on an approach to Burbank Airport in California. Arnold became acting Chief of the Air Corps. This was a breakout event. Arnold would be serving at the very top, under the knowing and demanding eyes of the country’s leaders.

These included his old friend Marshall, soon to be Chief of Staff; the reserved but acute Secretary of War, Henry Stimson; the brilliant assistant secretary for air, Robert A. Lovett; the extremely influential “minister without portfolio,” Harry Hopkins; and, not least, President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself. Roosevelt was at first dubious of Arnold, having heard erroneous rumors that he had a drinking problem. Over time, he came to enjoy Arnold’s personality, so different from that of the starchy Marshall or the grumpy, cantankerous Adm. Ernest King.

Arnold had not yet been confirmed as Chief of Staff when, on Sept. 28, 1938, he was called to a critical meeting that he ever afterward termed the “Magna Carta” event of the Air Force. The President had assembled his principal advisers, including Craig, Marshall, Arnold, and the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Harold R. Stark. The world situation was turning dark; Hitler was on the loose in Europe, issuing territorial demands on parts of Czechoslovakia, and cowing Allied governments. Roosevelt’s message to his advisers was this: The only thing that would influence the German dictator was airpower. The President wanted the 1940 aviation budget expanded, and not just a little. He wanted the US in the next year to procure not 178 aircraft, as planned, but 10,000 aircraft! He wanted factories enlarged to produce 20,000 aircraft per year. It marked the beginning of an unprecedented expansion.

Not everyone liked Roosevelt’s message, but they all understood it, Arnold most of all. For besides building 10,000 aircraft in a year,
there loomed the extraordinary tasks of building the bases, training the pilots and mechanics, setting up all the support services, and in general creating not an inventory of airplanes but an Air Force. Within days, he was promoted to major general as his formal appointment as Chief of the Air Corps was confirmed.

**Top Speed**

Circumstances conspired to help Arnold by allowing his whirlwind personality to operate at top speed. His performance in the job confirmed Marshall’s belief in him, for the new Army Chief of Staff said later: “I tried to give him all the power I could.” Arnold functioned almost autonomously, buttressed in time by the complementary skills of Lovett, a good administrator who had a deep knowledge of aviation as well as clear insight into Arnold’s personality. Arnold himself was a poor administrator, delegating tasks on an almost random basis, sometimes giving the same job to more than one person, but he brought a titanic energy to his office, one that inspired others to work hard for him and get the results he demanded.

All of Arnold’s past experiences were brought into play and put to good use. He cajoled aircraft manufacturers into expanding their efforts by dangling the prospects of contracts before them, creating the aviation industry that would win World War II on the basis of promises of future contracts. Most of the managers of the nation’s fixed-base operations had never made a dime at the business, but Arnold induced them to expand their facilities to accommodate the greatly increased training requirements that he knew were coming.

Marshall reorganized the War Department in June 1941. Arnold became his deputy chief of staff for air and Commanding General of the Army Air Forces. Marshall’s sponsorship and Hopkins’ approval had given Arnold entrée into Roosevelt’s inner circle. The independence given him by Marshall was enhanced by the protocol required at meetings with British military officers. The Royal Air Force was an independent service, headed by Air Chief Marshal (later Marshal of the Air Force) Sir Charles Portal. As Portal’s counterpart, Arnold received recognition, prestige, and rank, being promoted to lieutenant general in December 1941 and to general in March 1943. For a man who had remained a second lieutenant for six years, it must have been a bewildering ascent. It came about solely because he delivered before the most demanding taskmasters in the nation—Marshall, Lovett, Hopkins, and Roosevelt.

The swift rise and numerous responsibilities that came with it exacted a toll on Arnold’s health. Despite four known heart attacks—he may have concealed others—Arnold never relieved the pressure on himself or the pressure he put on others to do everything necessary to win the war as quickly and forcefully as possible. He traveled incessantly, seeing conditions for himself, driving himself harder than he drove his subordinates.

**Declaration of Independence**

In these circumstances, a lesser man might have seized the opportunity to press openly for an independent Air Force, but Hap Arnold did just the opposite. He deliberately suppressed all open agitation for the immediate creation of an independent Air Force. At
Hap Arnold was a giant, the right man for the time, and it is worth pondering the lasting implications of six of his many achievements:

- During World War II, he guided the swift creation of the most powerful military air arm in history, beginning with a paltry force and expanding it to more than 70,000 aircraft and 2.4 million personnel.
- He helped shape and oversaw military air operations that played a major role in defeating the Axis powers in Europe, drove Japan to surrender in the Pacific, and, with long-range aircraft and the nuclear weapon, defined a new form of airpower.
- He fathered the independent Air Force by inducing George Marshall (and hence the Army) to back the concept—the essential factor, for the Navy was unequivocally opposed to the idea. Only Marshall’s prestige made the separation possible.
- He played the critical role in selecting a new cadre of leaders, one suitable for the difficult times he knew lay ahead, and one which set a course of innovation for the future.
- His advocacy of research and development established a culture that the newly established USAF adopted, enabling it to prevail in the Cold War and, when it was permitted to exercise its full might, in the hot wars as well.
- By using both stick and carrot, he compelled the creation of the aerospace industry which helped to win World War II and was decisive in establishing the United States in the postwar era as the first superpower.

These are monumental achievements, to which could be added dozens more that stemmed from Arnold’s World War II leadership. Hap Arnold, West Point Class of 1907, father of the Air Force in 1947, continues to exert a major influence on the nature and course of the Air Force in 1997.

Walter J. Boyne, former director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, is a retired Air Force colonel and author. He has written more than 400 articles about aviation topics and 28 books, the most recent of which is Beyond the Wild Blue: A History of the United States Air Force, 1947–1997. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “The Chief’s Reading List,” appeared in the July 1997 issue.