

THE NO-NONSENSE GENERAL MADE AIRPOWER

“**T**HIS IS MOMYER.”

Those three words put the listener on notice that it was Gen. William Wallace Momyer calling, and he meant business. He made his own calls, wanting the right answers right away. It was his style and he applied it across the board.

Momyer was one of the brightest and hardest-working four-star generals in Air Force history—acknowledged by all to be a true expert in tactical air warfare. He demanded much from his people and more of himself. It was never easy to work for him or to be his boss.

Described by Gen. Gabriel P. Disoway as hard to deal with because he was “so

much smarter than most people,” the ascetic Momyer eschewed the stereotype of the hard-drinking, smoking, and profane fighter pilot.

Quick-thinking and decisive, he brushed off subordinates’ opinions even though he often questioned his superiors’ views when they differed from his own. However, when a decision was made, he carried out orders to the letter.

“Spike” Momyer laid out his distinctive views on airpower doctrine, strategy, and tactics in his book, *Airpower in Three Wars*. He had an unusual career; in retirement, he guessed some of his superiors might have been

grooming him for promotion without his knowledge.

During World War II, the green Second Lieutenant Momyer rose in just four years to combat-seasoned colonel, becoming an ace with eight victories along the way. He wore eagles nearly 13 more years before gaining his first star. He became a full general in 1967.

The outspoken firebrand received his last combat command in the Vietnam War, where for the most part, White House politics overruled his military expertise.

He was tasked to execute Rolling Thunder, the long, largely ineffective

MOMYER

By Walter J. Boyne



WORK IN SOME OF THE TOUGHEST ENVIRONMENTS.

bombing campaign that contravened his instinct and methods. Though bitterly disappointed, he was a trooper, fighting the war as best he could. This was despite micromanagement from the Oval Office, which issued directives on everything from arbitrary rules of engagement to basic decisions on targets and ordnance.

In Vietnam, Momyer sometimes relaxed by talking with the pilots who flew for him. He often astounded them with his knowledge of their missions: when and where they flew, their call signs, ordnance, results, everything. Occasionally he would indulge himself by relating lessons he'd learned the hard way from his own combat experience.

Anecdotes about him from Vietnam fighter pilots offer divided opinions.

In one instance Momyer approved Robin Olds' idea to conduct the famous Operation Bolo, despite the fact that Olds' image and demeanor went entirely against Momyer's grain.

In another, Momyer backed Jack Broughton's concepts on local planning of attacks but later blocked Broughton's decorations. Momyer reputedly didn't want to cross Gen. John D. Ryan, who disliked Broughton.

Born in 1916, Momyer hailed from Muskogee, Okla. Hatbox Field, within the Muskogee city limits, caught his interest. The primitive US Army Air Corps field was important at the time—a stop for both the 1924 Around the World Flight and the air mail. Momyer remembered seeing Charles Lindbergh land there in 1929. But he often said it was the smell and feel of the old de Havilland DH-4 biplanes that really snared him.

A fierce competitor, and always getting into fights despite his small size, Momyer was determined to excel in sports and played on many school teams. Later he said the qualities of aggression and determination were part of a great fighter pilot's makeup.

His father died when Momyer was 14, and he needed to earn money, so he dropped athletics. He finished high school after the family moved to Seattle, and then graduated with a liberal arts degree from the University of Washington in 1937.

The next year he entered the Army. He attended primary and basic training at Randolph Field, Tex., flying the Consolidated PT-3 and the North American BT-8. He then went to nearby Kelly Field, where he reveled in the Boeing P-12 and fulfilled his ambition to become a pursuit pilot.

Receiving his wings and commission in February 1939, he reported to the 35th Pursuit Squadron at Langley Field, Va., commanded by then-Maj. Glenn O. Barcus.

“[So] much smarter than most people,” the ascetic Momyer eschewed the stereotype of the hard-drinking, smoking and profane fighter pilot.

The timing was exactly right as the 35th was converting from the two-seat Consolidated PB-2 to the Curtiss P-36. In June 1940 it became one of the first units to receive brand-new Curtiss P-40s fresh off the Buffalo, N.Y., production line. For the next year Momyer combined flying as a flight leader at Langley with running P-40 service tests at Wright Field, Ohio.

To Be Shot At

This experience led to his being sent to Cairo, Egypt, in March 1941. He was a technical advisor to the Royal Air Force on their new Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks, passing back all that he learned to Washington.

Momyer relished the job; it allowed him to fly combat missions with the Western Desert Air Force. Among the first units to get the Tomahawk was RAF No. 112 Squadron, the first Allied unit to use the “shark mouth” paint scheme

later immortalized by the American Volunteer Group.

He later complained that he never got into position to shoot an enemy aircraft down because the RAF put “the Yank” in the rear of their formations and protected him. However, the assignment provided him vital experience at “what it is like to be shot at and to shoot.”

Upon returning to the States, he became deputy commander of the 60th Pursuit Squadron at Bolling Field in Washington, D.C. There he permitted his pilots to use their free time in the operations area to do one of two things: read their technical orders or play checkers.

After a short stint with the 60th, he assumed command of the 58th Pursuit Squadron in March 1942, at age 25. Within weeks, the newly promoted Major Momyer replaced then-Col. Elwood R. Quesada as commander of the 33rd Fighter Group. Quesada was impressed by Momyer's toughness and many years later was

instrumental in Momyer becoming commander of 7th Air Force in Vietnam.

The 33rd Fighter Group went to war on Oct. 22, 1942, to participate in Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa. The aircraft were carried aboard a converted tanker ship, and they would reach land by taking off from the erstwhile carrier USS *Chenango*. The mission was a one-way trip to the Port Lyautey airfield in French Morocco, which was still being fiercely defended by the French.

The 33rd received orders to launch on Nov. 10. The first P-40 was already positioned on the catapult. Its pilot, Lieutenant Daniel B. Rathbun noted how his rate-of-climb indicator needle went up and down with the *Chenango's* bow.

Rathbun launched successfully and arrived over the airfield to find it in American hands but still under fire. Its 2,000-foot-long concrete runway was marred with craters. Rathbun, trying to avoid the craters, stalled and hit one, wiping out his landing

Lt. Gen. William Momyer speaks at a press conference in 1967. He led that year's Rolling Thunder airpower campaign against North Vietnam, but was hampered by convoluted and bizarre stages of approval.



USAF photo



Gen. William Westmoreland (l) and Gen. Creighton Abrams (r) pin on Momyer's fourth star in Saigon in 1967. Although denied centralized control of air assets in Vietnam, Momyer made sure airpower was used to the maximum allowable effectiveness.

now reporting to Air Marshal Arthur Coningham. A man after Momyer's own heart, Coningham believed attacking enemy air bases was an essential element in gaining air superiority.

The tide soon turned against the Germans, and Momyer secured his third and fourth victories.

On March 31 he began his greatest air battle, leading his entire group of aircraft against German positions in El Guettar Valley. In a 1977 interview, Momyer recalled seeing a large formation that he took first for Martin B-26s, but then identified as Junkers Ju 87 Stukas. He

gear. He crawled out of the cockpit and ran to the destroyer USS *Dallas*, already tied up at the pier, requesting that a message be sent to *Chenango* to cancel any further launches.

About 45 minutes later, while making an effort to fill up the runway craters, Rathbun was dismayed to see the first element of the 33rd P-40s arrive.

Momyer, in the lead ship, attempted to land at the very edge of the runway, obviously hoping to stop in the first few hundred yards before a crater. He came in a hair too low, striking the slightly elevated lip of the runway and tearing off his landing gear. When his aircraft stopped sliding, Momyer jumped out and strode over to Rathbun, yelling, "If you had used your head, you could have prevented all of this."

Then, without regard to shell or sniper fire, Momyer began directing repair of the runway. A few minutes later, another P-40 crashed and flipped over on its back. Momyer ran to the aircraft, ignoring the possibility of it exploding. The pilot was trapped inside and Momyer had to tear away strips of jagged aluminum before he could remove him from the cockpit. Momyer was awarded the Silver Star for his heroism.

Despite the inauspicious start, Momyer would lead the 33rd in an intense year of tactical air combat. Luftwaffe elements with excellent pilots moved from Sicily into Tunisia, equipped with the

Messerschmitt Bf 109 F and G models. They were equally expert at dogfights and attacking airfields.

In later years, Momyer often remarked that enemy air attacks on American airfields in the Korean and the Vietnam conflicts would have been a good thing. In these and later wars, he explained, American air superiority was so great that the Army took it as a given. Consequently, airpower came to be viewed by some as a support function, ignoring its overriding importance in combat.

During December 1942, the 33rd moved from Telergma airfield in Algeria to Thelepte, in western Tunisia, on the site of a Roman ruin that highlighted the wretched living conditions there. Momyer was charged with attaining air superiority and supporting Allied ground units offensively and defensively.

On Jan. 4 Momyer scored his first victory, shooting down a raiding Junkers Ju 88 bomber. He followed this up four days later with a victory over a Messerschmitt Bf 109.

The 33rd was able to maintain a one-for-one parity in aerial victories, but the Luftwaffe's combination of air and ground attacks gradually gained it air superiority. By the beginning of February, the 33rd was worn down to the point that it had to be withdrawn to be brought up to strength.

Coincidentally, the Allied command structure was reorganized, with Momyer





USAF photo by TSGT. Samuel Mickelberg

Momyer (r) presents the Air Force Association's 1969 Outstanding Airman of the Year award to TSGT. Louis Benavides Jr. Although widely admired, it wasn't easy to work for Momyer, who was a perfectionist.

Momyer's illustrious combat record was tarnished by an incident of racial intolerance in 1943, at a time when such attitudes were still pervasive and with the armed services not yet integrated.

Momyer asserted that one of the units under his command—the 99th Fighter Squadron, known unofficially as the Tuskegee Airmen—was not effective in combat. His opinion was officially transmitted to Maj. Gen. John K. Cannon, deputy commander of the Northwest African Tactical Air Force. The comment was also picked up by the press, causing a furor in Congress. Eventually, an unbiased analysis of the 99th record against similar units showed that Momyer's assessment was wrong.

In the course of his time in combat, the young colonel had learned a lot, and he put that knowledge to use in a new job as a member of the US Army Air Forces Board, in Orlando, Fla. The board was intended to make recommendations to the commanding general on all matters of strategy, technique, organization, equipment, training, and so forth.

Making Airpower One

In March 1944, Momyer became chief of the board's Combined Operations Branch with responsibility for projects where air, land, and sea components were used. One of its chief conclusions was that after the main goal of gaining air superiority, second priority was to cut off the enemy's forward forces by destroying his forces in the rear. The concept was later validated in Korea, Vietnam, and the wars in the Middle East.

Momyer became assistant chief of staff to Lt. Gen. Quesada when Tactical Air Command was established in March 1946. Quesada later remarked on Momyer's excellent leadership in the planning of joint maneuvers with the Army.

In 1949, Momyer entered the Air War College at Maxwell AFB, Ala. While there he became an early advocate for treating "Air Power" as a single entity, rather than dividing it into tactical and strategic elements. He was also instrumental in creating a series of doctrine manuals, including the seminal AFM 1-2. On graduation in 1950, he was selected to become a member of the faculty.

Momyer distinguished himself at the National War College from 1953 to 1954. His experience there convinced him that setting aside some officers to be front-

line pilots for their entire career was a mistake. Momyer felt the Air Force was better off with personnel having a broad background, that this made airmen better able to handle new situations.

After the National War College, he embarked on a fast-paced series of important jobs.

First of these was in Korea, where he commanded the 8th Fighter-Bomber Wing for six months. In March 1955, when the 314th Air Division was reactivated, Momyer assumed command of all US Air Force units in Korea.

Since July 1954 a "permanent" colonel, he returned from Korea in October 1955 to assume command of the 312th Fighter-Bomber Wing, Clovis AFB, N.M. Two months later he was promoted to brigadier general.

In May 1957 Momyer took command of the 832nd Air Division at Cannon AFB, N.M. It had two wings of North American F-100D Super Sabres. The aircraft fitted with Momyer's long-held view that fighter aircraft had to be versatile, able to take on more than one role in combat.

There followed a series of assignments where Momyer continued to distinguish himself. He returned to TAC in July 1958 as director of plans. In 1961 he moved to the Air Staff at USAF Headquarters as director of requirements. Such was the force of his personality that he was informally recognized as the man "running the Air Staff."

Characteristically, he continued to do as much work as possible himself, earning fame for his reading speed and total recall. This performance masked an important shortfall, though: By failing to use his deputies effectively, he also failed to train a next generation to replace him.

Momyer gained his third star in August 1964, becoming commander of the Air Training Command, a job generally regarded as a "preretirement" posting. There he demonstrated his customary brilliance while still coveting what seemed an impossible dream—another combat assignment.

He was thus delighted in July 1966 to be named deputy commander of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) for air operations and also head of 7th Air Force. The new assignment would call on all of his military skills, not least of them flying. He saw to it that

called to his wingman that they would attack from the rear.

Boiling with enthusiasm, he told the interviewer, "I shot four Stukas down real quick. Bang! Bang! In the meantime the wingman got shot, ... so I pulled him off and took another shot then started on back home. I really shot down that day, they think, six or seven or even as high as eight [four were confirmed] because the whole place was littered with them."

With Allied airpower now ascendant, Momyer led his group in combat over Pantelleria, Sicily—which surrendered just to airpower—and Italy.



New York Air National Guard Col. Curtis Irwin (l) briefs Momyer (c) in 1971 on a tactical system training program, Guard Thunder. New Jersey ANG Brig. Gen. Joseph Zink looks on. Momyer was a widely acknowledged tactical air warfare expert.

he flew in every kind of USAF aircraft in the theater—and on every type of mission.

Operation Rolling Thunder began on March 2, 1965, and continued until Oct. 31, 1968. It summarized all that airmen complained about during Vietnam: a futile theory of “gradualism,” complex and unfair rules of engagement, and decisions about targets and bomb loads handed down from a weekly White House conference.

Momyer’s job was complicated by the tortuous structure of military command and rivalries he inherited. He reported to Army Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who commanded MACV for air operations in South Vietnam, Laos, and the very southernmost parts of North Vietnam.

For the other parts of North Vietnam, Momyer reported to Gen. Hunter Harris, commander of Pacific Air Forces, who in turn reported to Adm. U. S. Grant Sharp Jr., the commander in chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC).

Further muddying the chain of command, Momyer controlled USAF aircraft operating from South Vietnam and Thailand only when they were airborne.

Meanwhile, all Boeing B-52 attacks were controlled by Strategic Air Command.

This byzantine system was maddening to Momyer, but he soldiered on. Denied centralized control of air assets, he nevertheless struggled to coordinate attacks to best advantage.

In Rolling Thunder, Momyer had operational control of the missions but virtually no control over the strategy they carried out. Any request for a particular operation had to go through seven stages of approval that included PACAF, CINCPAC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, and finally, the President.

Despite the built-in bureaucratic headaches, Momyer realized that air operations were integral to ground operations in South Vietnam and ensured that airpower was applied with maximum possible effectiveness.

He also accomplished a much more difficult task: adhering to the official line and then, shortly afterward, requesting changes to it.

First, in a briefing to Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in July 1967, Momyer convinced the defense chief that airpower was having a “profound effect” on the enemy’s ability to fight—in effect, arguing that a system he knew to have terrible flaws was working well.

Momyer knew better than to suggest McNamara change the system and adopt his views on airpower to make it work

better. Instead, he fought against further restrictions and a reduction in capability. McNamara went away impressed with Momyer and said so to President Lyndon B. Johnson.

A second triumph followed a few days later. Appearing before a Senate Armed Services subcommittee, Momyer was asked how it might be possible to bring the war to an end. He answered by requesting a larger approved target list, flexibility to attack



USAF photo by TSgt. Wehr

Momyer (l), then-commander of Tactical Air Command, was a guest of honor along with Sen. Barry Goldwater (r) at a 1971 AFA event at Langley AFB, Va. Momyer retired in 1973.

targets of opportunity, and greater capability to attack the lines of communication.

The two briefings illustrate Momyer’s thinking and speaking skills. At once he reassured McNamara on the effect of airpower, using the systems management language McNamara understood. He then communicated his real needs to the Senate, without overtly contradicting what he’d told McNamara.

Based on his combat performance in Vietnam and the halls of Washington, Momyer had opportunity to prove his approach at an opportune time, when he was able to convince Westmoreland that centralized air control was vital if the fateful battle for Khe Sanh was to be won.

The battle of Khe Sanh was fought from Jan. 21 to April 1968. The site of the battle had little strategic value, but the North Vietnamese hoped it would

reprise their triumph over the French at Dien Bien Phu. They had mustered about 20,000 troops and heavy artillery around 6,000 US marines.

Momyer insisted to Westmoreland that without centralized air control, Khe Sanh would be lost. Westmoreland responded, “Spike, Khe Sanh has become a symbol. It is of no importance to me, but it has become of great psychological importance to the United States. ... If I lose Khe Sanh I am going to hold the United States Air Force responsible.”

Despite Marine Corps opposition, Momyer was formally given command of the air assets on March 8. He readily accepted the responsibility, knowing that if Khe Sanh fell, North Vietnamese troops could run wild in South Vietnam. The marines who had opposed centralization now accepted Momyer’s centralized control of the air assets.

Momyer proceeded to apply airpower to rain destruction upon the North Vietnamese forces. Coordinated Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft attacks dropped more than 100,000 tons of ordnance on the enemy in 24,674 sorties. Two regular North Vietnamese divisions were decimated, with an estimated 10,000 killed. More than 12,000 tons of supplies were delivered in 1,124 sorties. Some 845 badly wounded men were evacuated by air.

The North Vietnamese lifted the siege and Westmoreland stated that “the key to our success at Khe Sanh was firepower, principally aerial firepower.”

Momyer was vindicated; he had imposed his will at long last on the conduct of the air war—and had succeeded.

The general concluded his Air Force service as the commander of TAC from 1968 to 1973. From his perch at Langley, he remained intimately involved with the Vietnam War and was correctly regarded in all circles—political, military, and popular—as being the most knowledgeable man on the history, strategy, and tactics of fighters.

After retirement, Momyer researched *Air Power in Three Wars* for five years and continued to be an asset and inspiration to the Air Force for many years. He died in Florida on Aug. 10, 2012, at the age of 95. ■

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 600 articles about aviation topics and 40 books, the most recent of which is How the Helicopter Changed Modern Warfare. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “C-124 and the Tragedy at Tachikawa,” appeared in the July issue.