

BOOK REVIEW

# A Review of “Master of the Air: William Tunner and the Success of Military Airlift”



Robert A Slayton, Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press (2010)

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“If Tunner was running the Barnum and Bailey circus, the lion would put his head in the general’s mouth.” – As told by Raymond Towne, one of “Tunner’s Men” (p. 141)

Robert Slayton provides a leadership and military professional primer through his investigation of an early Air Force pioneer, Lt Gen William Tunner. For Slayton, Tunner’s leadership and expertise—and all the other elements of his “quirky” personality—were essential to the development of the modern United States’ global military airlift capability. Thus, to Slayton, Tunner is most definitely the “father of military airlift” (p. 2, 250-251).

Slayton gives us a good understanding of Tunner’s role in military airlift in a concise biography. He does a nimble job hustling through Tunner’s early life and career to reveal his discipline, focus, and strong work ethic. This contributed to his hiring by Colonel Robert Olds as the second staff officer to help organize the Air Corps Ferrying Command in 1941, where later Tunner headed the newly developed Ferrying Division of Air Transport Command, ensuring all aircraft moved from factories to the warfighter during World War II. Tunner then moved on to the China-Burma-India Theater in 1943, where he embraced innovation to ensure efficiency and effectiveness for those flying “The Hump.” Most of Slayton’s work then focuses on the strategic victory in the first Cold War engagement—he devotes eight of the fourteen chapters to it—as Tunner’s reputation from the CBI Theater resulted to his correcting and directing the effort during the Berlin Airlift. Finally, Slayton shows Tunner’s continued airlift excellence during the Korean War, mentions his leadership while commanding U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), and discusses his command of the Military Air Transport Service (MATS)—the precursor to Military Airlift Command (MAC) and later Air Mobility Command (AMC). Slayton’s engaging work makes one’s head nod throughout, recognizing Tunner’s essential role to modern airlift.

More significantly, Slayton’s work also offers a contribution to the challenge facing hierarchical, traditional, conservative institutions such as the U.S. Air Force. These organizations must somehow embrace the “quirky individuals,” the “transformation agents,” the “leaders with genius and determination [who are] pitted against



political officers and embedded bureaucrats” (p. 2). Slayton posits the conundrum that Tunner inspires: “How does the military—the most disciplined and ranked of American institutions—respond to this kind of intense talent and willful independence?” (p. 23) Central to Tunner’s success in this realm of airpower, according to Slayton, was his innovative and genius approach to this mission. Slayton’s presentation of Tunner is that of the ultimate innovator, specifically regarding his zeal for airlift, in which Slayton likens to another airpower archetype, Billy Mitchell. However, as Slayton admits, “But that drive, that vision, that entrepreneurial personality also made him single-minded and even thoughtless, and did not win him any friends in the highly structured air force” (p. 201). These events highlight that even though technology was changing the capability of airlift, it was Tunner who pushed that capability—it was Tunner who politicked for the all-jet airlift platform, which became the C-141 Starlifter—and then instituted the cultural change and the disciplined method of scheduling airlift within the Air Force. But, he stepped on toes while doing it (p. 220).

The two topics that best illustrate Tunner’s innovation and genius are the integration of women pilots into the force and the employment of private business beliefs to the military airlift world. Slayton includes a necessary chapter on “Tunner’s Women Pilots.” During his time as a leader in Ferrying Command, Tunner was always short of pilots. In a serendipitous moment, one of his top pilots introduced Tunner to his wife, a talented aviator herself, Nancy Love. Tunner was not interested in liberal reform, but in practical, logical results; he had to develop this resource to assist the war effort (p. 31). Tunner created the Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), a precursor to the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), often over objections of senior military officers.

Additionally, part of Tunner’s innovative streak was that he looked to the private business world for inspiration

in his airlift world. His relationships with C.R. Smith of American Airlines, Fred Atkinson of Macy’s, Robert Smith of Braniff Airlines, and Otis Bryan of TWA are examples of “Tunner’s Men” who created efficiencies and solid procedures within the military airlift world. According to Slayton, this contributed to the “Tunner Approach” that allowed the founder of airlift to be successful in all of the significant airlift events. This leadership approach consisted of being visionary, strong willed, persistent, independent, disciplined, and to gain recognition for his ideas (p. 22). His vision was to run “airlift as a business operation, and his whole approach was to impose the most methodical corporate procedures he could adapt to the institution” (p. 159)—hierarchy be damned.

Slayton’s work justifiably highlights Tunner’s innovative, demanding, and disciplined leadership style but often at the expense of other similarly capable officers. Unlike other accounts, Slayton suggests that Brigadier General Joseph Smith’s initial handling of the Berlin Airlift was “Cowboy Operations.” Other historians, such as Robert Owens in his *Air Mobility: A Brief History of the American Experience*, recognize the deftly-handled urgent situation that required some stumbling and experimenting of initial operations before the Air Force, and the nation, achieved a better grip on events—and thus it sent in the most capable airlift expert. Similarly, Slayton is extremely critical of Tunner’s nemesis, General John Cannon, as they battled during the Berlin Airlift and later butting heads when Tunner tried unsuccessfully to acquire Tactical Air Command’s troop-carrying aircraft for MATS.

Nevertheless, Slayton is correct to highlight this leader. In the words of another one of Tunner’s men, USAF Gen T. Ross Milton, who began his interactions with Tunner in 1948 and then worked in MATS from 1949-1957, Tunner was the “lone prophet” and “a zealot about air transport”—language usually reserved for those advocates of strategic bombing or an independent air force (p. 220). Slayton effectively captures this contribution in *Master of the Air*.