

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of “Airpower Pioneers: From Billy Mitchell to Dave Deptula”

John Andreas Olsen, ed., Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press (2023)

Review By: Douglas Kennedy

“Those who serve know how important a single, galvanizing officer of vision and integrity can be in motivating a person’s career. But how confident are we that such an officer will survive, when the slightest divergence can derail a career?” – Lt Col Timothy Kline (1982, p. 31)

John Andreas Olsen, a Royal Norwegian Air Force colonel, once again gathers a strong cast of airpower historians and other airpower intellectuals for his third contribution to Naval Institute Press’s “The History of Military Aviation” series with *Airpower Pioneers: From Billy Mitchell to Dave Deptula*. This latest edited volume completes his trilogy to P.J. Springer’s series and effectively complements Olsen’s other two works in the series: *Airpower Reborn: The Strategic Concepts of John Warden and John Boyd* (2015) and *Airpower Applied: U.S., NATO, and Israeli Combat Experience* (2023). *Airpower Pioneers* investigates 12 American airpower leaders who cover the more than a century of American airpower history and the 75 years of US Air Force history. Olsen and his fellow authors chronologically guide the reader through airpower history by reflecting on these various personalities who bridge this span of time while illustrating their visionary ideas and steadfastness of purpose to see these ideas through. As Olsen states in his concluding chapter, “Reflections: The Importance of Vision,” these 12 pioneers “demanded new systems, new organizations, and new doctrines” and understood the “distinctive characteristics of airpower—speed, range, flexibility, precision, and lethality” (pp. 402–403). More importantly, Olsen reminds us, “The future of aerospace power requires airmen not only to push the limits in combat but also to emphasize, publicly and frequently, what is special and vital about airpower” (p. 402). This study profiles 12 airmen who gave—and in some cases continue to give—all for the benefit of a more secure national defense via air and space power.

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Olsen's assemblage of authors includes some high-profile contributors to airpower history who share their insights about some well-known and often-discussed airpower advocates, as well as some biographies on lesser-known, but no less significant, airpower promoters. Former Air Force historian Richard Hallion presents the "visionary firebrand," Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell; Dik Daso reconnects with the "airpower architect," General of the Air Force Henry "Hap" Arnold; Richard Muller revitalizes the "planner, commander, and historian," Major General Haywood "Possum" Hansell, Jr.; Phillip Meilinger reengages with General Hoyt S. Vandenberg—"building the Air Force"; Paul J. Springer reminds us about the "operator, organizer, and commander," General Curtis E. LeMay; Karl Mueller discusses "guiding the Air Force to new frontiers" through examining General Bernard A. Schriever; David Ochmanek introduces the "analyst who put rubber on the ramp," Lieutenant General Glenn A. Kent; Brian Laslie discovers the "modernizer and reformer," General David C. Jones; Benjamin Lambeth considers "transforming the combat air forces" through General Wilbur L. Creech; Olsen reconnects with the "strategist, innovator, and educator," Colonel John A. Warden; Heather Venable champions General Merrill A. McPeak's "reorganizing the Air Force"; while finally, Christopher Bowie hails the "airpower advocate and visionary," Lieutenant General David A. Deptula. All chapters are consistently well-written and researched.

Besides a solid look into an understanding and development of airpower as an impressive tool of national

power, the book provides insightful lessons on leadership and character. This ensures that the book is a must read for young military professionals, especially officer candidates. The reader learns not only about many of the brave, individual combat exploits and certainly the courageous commitment to advancing programs and ideas but also gets a real sense of General Creech's adage that "the single most important imperative for a leader is to produce more leaders," and to apply "a simple rule: A mistake is not a crime, and a crime is not a mistake"—to boost innovation, initiative, and ingenuity in a force where "integrity first" matters (p. 292). Creech's outlook was a result of the mentorship that he received from General Jones, who learned this lesson while an aide to General LeMay. Whether done intentionally, a thread weaves through these 12 warriors connecting them to one another and binding them to an insightful legacy of US airpower history.

The challenge and fear revealed in this work is whether US air, space, and cyberspace power will continue to produce the leaders necessary to advance the technological, doctrinal, organizational requirements to dominate the future. This has been the lament since then-Lt Col Tim Kline queried, "Where have all the Mitchell's gone?"—an article that shows up in print every so often. Olsen's compilation offers a retort to this question, by demonstrating that we have continued to produce those leaders ... and that we can have confidence that the force is developing future air and space power advocates.

Kline, T. (1982) Where Have All the Mitchell's Gone. *Air University Review*, 33(4), 31.