



The genius of this singular officer lives on  
in the modern United States Air Force.

# Creech

By Walter J. Boyne

**G**EN. W.L. “Bill” Creech was among the most influential generals in Air Force history. Rising from the rank of private to that of four-star general in a brilliant 36-year career, Creech might well be said to be the personification of the Air Force’s core values.

Another integral Air Force attribute—valor—is implicit in his 280 combat missions, 39 decorations (22 awards for bravery in combat), and Silver Star.

Admired by many, disliked by some for his mannerisms and strict adherence to principles, Creech’s manifold contributions are denied by almost no one—not even by those who don’t cherish his memory. Creech died Aug. 26, 2003.

Creech came to power at a time when fundamental changes were occurring within the service. The Air Force was adapting to the hard lessons learned in Vietnam with an unprecedented shift in leadership style.

Most Air Force leaders had been schooled in the centralized methods of Strategic Air Command, an orientation that was reinforced by the policies of Robert S. McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense in the period 1961-68.

By contrast, Creech espoused a philosophy of decentralized authority. He came to the fore just as a new generation of Air Force “fighter generals” was rising and President Reagan was rejuvenating the military with huge spending boosts.

These changes were congenial with



*Gen. W.L. Creech rose from Army private to four-star commander of Tactical Air Command over a 36-year career. Many of his policies and leadership principles continue to guide the modern Air Force.*

Creech's personal leadership style, which, in brief, was to decentralize, marry up the operators, maintainers, and supply personnel into individual squadron-level teams, and provide personal incentives to create a sense of responsibility at every level.

### Focus on the Product

He organized units in peacetime as they would fight in war, and he saw to it that each of the smaller teams was focused on a high-quality "product," whether it was aircraft sorties, engine buildups, or meals in the dining hall.

Those long familiar with SAC's centralized command system complained that Creech was wasting resources. Critics particularly derided his awarding days off to teams that met their goals ahead of schedule.

Creech maintained that by fostering pride, he was creating performance, and he always insisted that those individuals at the operating level were the ones who could make the hands-on decisions to improve performance.

He combined leadership and managerial skills in a way that amplified those individual values. Further, he recognized that any improvements made in the Air Force were soon discarded unless they were "institutionalized."

Thus it was that his combination of leadership and management skills had immediate effect when he assumed control of Tactical Air Command on May 1, 1978. His success at TAC led to widespread adoption of his techniques and influenced the character of today's Air Force.

Creech is most renowned for the dramatic steps taken at TAC, which he headed for six-and-a-half years—an unusually long time for a commander of a major command.

Despite his remarkable accomplishments at TAC, those closest to Creech value two other achievements even more highly.

The first of these was his call for weapons and tactics to suppress enemy integrated air defenses and take away from the enemy the "sanctuary of the night."

The second achievement—his teaching—was less war-related but of even greater lasting significance.

Creech's program for leader development involved careful selection of officers for promotion, mentoring



*In the Korean War, Creech served as a ground-based forward air controller and F-80 pilot. He was among the first to engage in jet-to-jet combat, when his F-80, like those pictured here, tangled with communist MiG-15s.*

groups of them, and then grooming small numbers for specific assignments.

Retired USAF Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, Chief of Staff in the period 1994-97, commented that "Creech educated the next two generations of four-stars, people who came to lead the USAF in the late 1980s, 1990s, and in the opening decade of the 21st century."

Included in those generations were such names as Joseph W. Ashy, Michael J. Dugan, Jack I. Gregory, Hal M. Hornburg, Charles A. Horner, John P. Jumper, John Michael Loh, Merrill A. McPeak, Richard B. Myers, John L. Piotrowski, Joseph W. Ralston, Robert D. Russ, Michael E. Ryan, Henry Viccellio Jr., and Larry D. Welch. All acknowledge Creech as much more than a mentor.

These future commanders were taught and tested by Creech in a Darwinian process that let the most able reach the highest positions of command. These men embraced his teachings and his methods, refined them, and institutionalized them so that they are now part of the fabric of the Air Force.

There is a consensus today that the effectiveness of the Air Force can be attributed in large part to Creech's foresight in procurement and tactics and to his thoughtful selection of aggressive young commanders to follow in his footsteps.

### Life at the Bottom

Bill Creech was born in Argyle, Mo., on March 30, 1927. At 17, he

enlisted in the Army as a private. He often said later in life that his enlisted service made him a better officer by giving him a greater understanding of the service as a whole. Said Creech: "I've never forgotten what it's like on that bottom rung."

The future general entered the aviation cadet program in 1948, graduating with distinction and winning his wings and commission in September 1949. Creech was among the first in his class to solo in the North American T-6 trainer of the time.

His first operational assignment was with the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing at Naha, Okinawa, flying Lockheed F-80Cs.

In October 1950, the 51st went to Kimpo, South Korea, which was then at war with the North and about to be invaded by Chinese forces. Creech learned combat the hard way. He was on the ground, serving as a forward air controller with the Army's 25th Infantry Division, defending the Seoul-Pusan highway. Creech and his airman driver were cut off by marauding communist forces. They evaded capture, reaching friendly territory after three days. The 23-year-old lieutenant was badly frostbitten but soon returned to flying.

Creech became one of the first airmen to do battle with the formidable Soviet-made MiG-15 when the jet fighter made its debut in Korea. On Nov. 8, 1950, Boeing B-29s raided



**After proving his flying skill in Korea and as a flight commander in the US, Crech began flying F-84s with USAF's Air Demonstration Squadron, the Thunderbirds, in 1953. He later commanded USAF's Skyblazers team.**

Sinuiju airfield, and Crech's squadron strafed the flak installations. On his third pass, his F-80 took a 37 mm flak hit that jammed his throttle at an 83 percent setting.

He jettisoned his fuel tanks and flew down the Yalu River to the China Sea. Just as he reached the water's edge, he was jumped by another flight of MiGs, and these in turn were intercepted by F-80s from another squadron. Lt. Russell J. Brown led this attack and was credited with the first MiG-15 kill.

On his return to the United States, Crech was assigned as a flight commander at Luke AFB, Ariz., where for the next 28 months he taught advanced gunnery to students from 14 nations. It was at Luke that Crech developed some of the mannerisms that would later characterize him—and be used to caricature him.

Even in the sizzling heat of an Arizona summer, he was always immaculately groomed in a clean, freshly starched flying suit, with every hair combed carefully in place. This annoyed some who preferred more casual—i.e., sweaty—flying suits, but Crech backed up his sartorial elegance. His flying skill led him to the Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, the Thunderbirds, in November 1953.

Crech flew 125 aerial demonstrations, first in the F-84G, and then, beginning in 1955, in the F-84F. He later became known as “the father of the Thunderbirds” when he waged a

successful campaign to prevent Congress from abolishing the team after the 1982 multi-aircraft crash that killed four Thunderbird pilots.

### **Skyblazer**

In January 1956, Crech became the commander of the Skyblazers, the US Air Forces in Europe aerial demonstration team. The Skyblazers flew the supersonic (but less maneuverable) F-100C. In the next four years, Crech flew 399 aerial demonstrations with this team, appearing in Europe, North Africa, and the Mideast. Crech also served as a

spokesman for the Skyblazers, mingling easily with foreign leaders.

With his combat experience, gunnery skills, and aerobic expertise, Crech was a natural pick for the USAF Fighter Weapons School at Nellis AFB, Nev. He became its director of operations in June 1960. After that, in February 1962, he began a six-month assignment as special advisor to the commander of the Argentine Air Force. Soon, he was moving to a position that would open new vistas for him, serving as executive and aide to Gen. Walter C. Sweeney Jr., TAC commander.

Retired USAF Gen. David C. Jones, a former Chief of Staff and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, recalls being at a TAC meeting in which Sweeney pointed to then-Major Crech, across the room, and stated, “He is the most competent young officer I have ever known.” Jones took note.

As Sweeney's aide-de-camp, Crech often conducted business as if he wore his boss's four stars instead of his gold oak leaves. He was nonetheless effective in carrying out Sweeney's directives, which were handed down in the centralized SAC style.

In August 1965, Crech entered the National War College and on graduation was selected to work in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

November 1968 brought his assignment as deputy commander for operations of the 37th Tactical Fighter



**In 1968-69, Crech flew 177 combat missions in Vietnam, flying F-100s like this one. In Vietnam he decided missiles and electronics were needed to better suppress enemy air defenses.**



Wing, located at Phu Cat Air Base in South Vietnam. In the next six months, he flew 177 combat missions in F-100s. On one of them, Creech led an attack against a heavily defended position in Laos. Recognizing the danger, he waved off the rest of his formation and proceeded to make a perfect solo attack on the target.

In Vietnam, Creech came to the conclusion that flying low to avoid surface-to-air missiles—and in consequence accepting the hazard of anti-aircraft and small-arms fire—was absurd. He began to form views on using missiles and electronic weapons to suppress enemy air defenses. He was also determined to “take back the night” with new equipment.

Creech now came into his own, going to USAFE in November 1969 to command the 86th Tactical Fighter Wing at Zweibrücken, Germany. He did so well at the 86th that he was then assigned to the 401st Tactical Fighter Wing, located at Torrejon Air Base in Spain, a unit that had failed two consecutive operational readiness inspections (ORIs).

Using his rapidly growing array of leadership and managerial skills, he transformed the wing. In its very next ORI, the wing achieved USAFE’s highest score on record.

### Rising Star

Creech’s star was rising, but when Jones picked him—at the time, a brigadier general select—for a two-star assignment in Europe, it took a special dispensation from Gen. John D. Ryan, Chief of Staff, to seal the deal. It was then easy for Jones to assign him to further challenging and important positions.

Creech became vice commander of the Aeronautical Systems Division of Air Force Systems Command at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, in September 1974. A month later, he was assigned as commander of the Electronic Systems Division at Hanscom AFB, Mass. It was in this critical position that Creech learned much that would shape the development of electronic warfare.

Yet the pressures of the work triggered a heart attack that ordinarily meant the end of the career trail for officers. Jones intervened so Creech could recover and remain on active duty.

Creech then served in the Pentagon



**Creech took over TAC in 1978. He created measurable goals and rewards so all airman would take pride in their work. Creech began the practice of having names of enlisted crew chiefs painted on their aircraft, as the pilots had.**

until May 1, 1978, when he received his fourth star and was assigned to lead Tactical Air Command. His tour would leave an indelible imprint on TAC and move the entire Air Force toward his ideas.

He brought to TAC definite ideas about what he wanted to do and how to organize the command. TAC was a huge organization, comprising two numbered air forces, three centers, and seven air divisions. More than 111,300 military and civilian personnel were assigned to some 32 installations around the world. TAC had some 3,800 aircraft, many of them supersonic and nuclear capable.

Creech believed the command could improve its operations by moving past the era of bureaucratic centralism. He implemented his concept of decentralized, team-based systems, focused on a quality product, and transferred responsibility and authority to the lowest possible levels.

He sought out the views of subordinates and asked that his staff sections assign captains and lieutenants to brief him. He empowered his personnel with a sense of ownership and, in his words, “a stake in the outcome.”

Senior sergeants were brought back to the flight line, and senior officers were expected to fly a full schedule. Crew chiefs were given the privilege of having their names painted on the fuselage of “their” aircraft, just as the pilots were.

Much has been written about his institution of a “Proud Look” campaign that took large amounts of operations and maintenance money.

“Creech brown” became the term for buildings painted in the certain shade of earth-tone brown he favored, and it became virtually universal throughout TAC. Shop interiors went from greasy to glistening, and personnel took pride in their workplace and improved performance. Creech continually preached “quality in everything you do.”

The post-Vietnam drawdown in the Ford Administration and inadequate defense budgeting in the Carter Administration had put a serious crimp in TAC’s readiness. The most obvious result of Creech’s methods was a turnaround in readiness indicators. The TAC accident rate dropped from one every 13,000 hours to one every 50,000 hours.

Sortie rate was perhaps the most important of Creech’s basic metrics. TAC’s average per-aircraft sorties rose from 11 to 21 per month. In effect, he had doubled the number of available aircraft.

The number of aircraft out of commission for maintenance declined by 75 percent.

### The Four Nos

He told his wing commanders that there were only four things that would result in an immediate dismissal. First was any lapse in personal integrity; second was ruling through fear; third



**Creech is renowned for his influence on both equipment and leadership. Shown here in 1998 with then-Lt. Col. Brian Bishop, at Nellis AFB, Nev., Creech has been called the Thunderbirds' savior.**

was losing one's temper in public; and fourth was abuse of office.

Somewhat plaintively, he would add that he preferred that they pass their ORIs, but failing was not an automatic cause for dismissal.

In the view of some officers who served under Creech, the general's performance at TAC and the subsequent spread of his methods was not as important as his effect upon weapons system procurement and tactics. It was his particular forte to bring developments from the laboratory to the battlefield.

Part of that process was the support he lent to the realistic training of Red Flag operations (which were initiated in 1975 during Gen. Robert J. Dixon's tour at TAC) and his expansion of the concept to include other disciplines such as electronic warfare (Green Flag), air defense (Copper Flag), and others.

Creech combined his experience in Vietnam and at the Electronic Systems Division to create requirements for a whole series of weapons that still are employed.

His requirements director was Loh, a fighter pilot with a master's degree in aeronautical engineering. Their combined efforts facilitated acquisition of the Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) targeting pod and other night-fighting equipment.

Having experienced the intense radar defenses of North Vietnam, and knowing that the Soviet integrated

defense system depended on its vast radar network, Creech sought to roll enemy defenses back with radar jamming, standoff missiles, and low observable "stealth" technology.

He believed the F-117A stealth fighter could penetrate the enemy's SAM ring radars and suppress defenses with laser guided bombs. His support for stealth continued through the early days of the Advanced Tactical Fighter program, which led ultimately to the F/A-22 Raptor.

Creech himself told the story of how he sold the concept of the F-15E Strike Eagle not only to the Air Force but also to McDonnell Douglas President George S. Graff. Creech outlined the need for a stretched fuselage, conformal fuel tanks, two-person crew, APG-70 radar, and LANTIRN targeting pods—all with no diminution of the F-15's stellar air combat performance.

Part of his argument was that the Air Force needed multirole aircraft and the service would not continue to buy single-role, air superiority F-15Cs.

### Force Subtractors

Defense against jamming was another of Creech's major interests.

His goal was to ensure effective communications, while denying the same to the enemy. Knowing that the Soviet Union had spent huge sums developing jamming equipment, Creech called for antidotes based on means such as frequency hopping. He also advocated development of airborne jamming systems, including the EF-111 and EC-130H Compass Call aircraft, which he regarded as enemy "force subtractors."

Creech was revered for his ability as a teacher. He personally attended most of the conferences he established at Langley AFB, Va. These were often designed specifically for a certain category of commander—wing, base, squadron, maintenance, and so on.

The general had a vision. He communicated it to the troops time and time again; his people believed it and perpetuated it. Creech often spent a day or more at his conferences, inculcating staff with his ideas about decentralization, empowerment, excellence at every level—the leadership aspects that would ultimately be contained in his Total Quality Management theory.

He spent much time with company- and field-grade officers, trying to imbue them personally with his ideas and goals. The result was a cadre of future leaders who helped institutionalize his ideas throughout the Air Force.

Creech retired in 1984 and went on to have a successful career in industry, even writing a best-selling book, *The Five Pillars of TQM*.

At the time of Creech's death, Jumper said, "No single officer has had greater influence on the Air Force in recent times than Gen. Bill Creech. He transformed the way the Air Force conducts warfare. ... He was a war hero of Korea and Vietnam who improved the tactics that have led to our successes in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Iraq. Through his efforts, we have made great strides in electronic warfare and, in battle, we have won back the night."

It was some tribute. And it was deserved. ■

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