



Alfred D. Starbird

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1912–1983

By John S. Foster

Alfred Dodd Starbird, retired army lieutenant general and authority on nuclear weaponry and military communications systems, died of cancer on July 28, 1983. Throughout his career of public service, which spanned nearly fifty years, Dodd Starbird exemplified the ideal of a leader with his highly developed management and leadership skills and his devotion to duty.

Dodd Starbird's achievements as an athlete, soldier, engineer, and government adviser are well documented. Yet, it is his expertise as a manager, a skill often overlooked in standard biographies, that distinguished him from many other military and civilian leaders. He was in many respects the ultimate manager—one who possessed the ability to organize and control the most complex projects and, equally important, to elicit the best from those who worked with him.

His leadership skills were forged at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Upon graduation from West Point in 1933, Dodd Starbird was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 1937 he received an M.S. in civil engineering from Princeton University. This engineering background enabled him to analyze difficult situations and to formulate carefully considered solutions. Similarly, his prowess as an athlete—he was a member of the U.S. pentathlon team that won a gold medal in the

1936 Olympic games—afforded him the stamina he would need during long, grueling hours spent on critical national security projects.

During World War II, Dodd Starbird proved to be an able combat officer. He served on temporary duty with the First Division Staff of the U.S. Army during its landings in North Africa and with the Fifth Corps during its landings and early operations in Normandy. He commanded a Third Army engineer combat group from January through June 1945, and then returned to the War Department General Staff.

It was during the postwar years, however, that Dodd Starbird's managerial skills were expanded. In 1949, for example, he played a key role in Sandstone, the first technically significant nuclear test at Eniwetok Atoll. After various assignments in the Pacific and Europe and two years in the Office of the Chief of Engineers, General Starbird was named director of military applications of the Atomic Energy Commission, a position he held from 1955 to 1961. His leadership helped accelerate atomic weapons development, which then introduced a new American nuclear deterrent capability.

Those who worked with Dodd Starbird in his various roles during the 1950s characterized him as a careful, precise person who worked extremely hard to understand all aspects of a problem. Said one former colleague: "He was a great manager because he not only understood what the scientific and technical people were trying to do, but he also thought up practical ways to help."

Under Dodd Starbird's supervision, outstanding progress was made in transferring nuclear fission and fusion development from research to military applications. Yet of equal importance was his work in developing Atomic Energy Commission positions on U.S. disarmament proposals to control nuclear weaponry.

Dodd Starbird's effectiveness was reflected in the way he went about his job. He examined each problem in painstaking

detail, with the result that he understood all of the key issues thoroughly before making a decision. This made it possible for program managers to do their jobs with the utmost effectiveness. A strong "people" manager, the general took a personal interest in those who worked for him and strove to gain their understanding and support for the task at hand. He was neither overly critical nor did he engage in second-guessing. Instead, he secured sufficient information to provide constructive solutions for even the most highly sensitive projects.

Above all, Dodd Starbird was a tireless worker. With a spirit of equanimity and good humor, he developed massive advisory reports on many complex technical and political issues, most of which were requested on extremely short notice. Moreover, despite his total dedication to national security, he still found time to go skiing with his wife, Evelyn Wallington Starbird, and their three children, as well as to pursue one of his favorite pastimes, long-distance running.

In 1961 the general was placed in command of the U.S. Army North Pacific Division supervising a large construction project in Portland, Oregon. In the fall of that year, the Soviets resumed nuclear atmospheric testing, and the Department of Defense called on General Starbird to leave his position at the North Pacific Division to plan, mobilize, and command the Joint Task Force Eight for Operation Dominic, the final nuclear tests in the Pacific.

He accepted without hesitation and accomplished the necessary preparations in an unprecedentedly short time to ensure that the 1962 atmospheric testing program was successful. The task force's work had barely ended in 1962 when Dodd Starbird was appointed director of the Defense Communications Agency, which oversaw all of the command-and-control operations for the Department of Defense.

During the Vietnam War, General Starbird served as director of the Defense Communications Planning Group, a cover name for the organization that pioneered the development

and deployment of the "McNamara Barrier" program. This program used aerial and unattended ground sensors to detect Viet Cong troop movements and systems to contend with the targets identified.

In 1967 General Starbird became manager of the Sentinel (later Safeguard) antiballistic missile (ABM) system, a position he held until his retirement in 1971. Under his leadership, this system was successfully tested at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California by the firing of intercontinental ballistic missiles that were located at radar/missile installations on Kwajalein Island in the Pacific. The system was being deployed in the United States to protect U.S. Minuteman missile fields near Grand Forks, North Dakota. Following the ABM treaty in 1972, however, the United States terminated all deployment of its ballistic missile defense system.

Although Dodd Starbird's thirty-eight years of commissioned military service ended in 1971, his service to the United States continued. He was named director of the newly created Department of Defense Office of Test and Evaluation, and in 1975 President Ford appointed him assistant administrator for national security in the Energy Research and Development Administration. When this organization was integrated into the new Department of Energy in 1977, President Carter named him acting assistant secretary for defense programs.

In 1980 Dodd Starbird finally retired from government service, forty-seven years after pinning on his second lieutenant's bars. Any one of the many positions he held during his last two decades in public life would have been a fitting capstone to a brilliant career. Yet to a man so dedicated to public service, each assignment represented another opportunity to serve his country.

As one of the U.S. Army's most outstanding engineers, General Starbird received many honors, including four Distinguished Service Medals, two Legion of Merit Awards, two Bronze Stars, commendations from the Atomic Energy Commission, and election to the National Academy of Engineering

in 1973. But perhaps his greatest achievement was earning the respect of his military and civilian colleagues and subordinates.

Alfred Dodd Starbird—general, engineer, manager, and leader—was one of the finest citizens America has produced. As the West Point Society said when presenting him with the prestigious Ben Castle Award for outstanding service to his country, "He was a man for all seasons, and for all tasks."