

Major General Osmond J. Ritland
Inducted 1989



Major General Osmond J. Ritland was born in Berthoud, Colorado, on 30 October 1909. He majored in mechanical engineering for three years at San Diego State College, California, before beginning his Air Force career as a flying cadet at Randolph Field, Texas, in 1932. He served as a fighter pilot and flew Army Air Mail from 1933-35. He then left the service to work as a pilot for United Airlines for four-and-one-half years. He reentered the Army Air Forces in 1939, accepting a regular commission, and served as an experimental test pilot at Wright Field Ohio for five years. He transferred to the China-Burma-India Theater in December 1944, serving as the commander of the Assam Air Depot, India, until February 1946. Returning to Wright Field, he worked in the development and acquisition of Air Force experimental aircraft and in aircraft research and development.

In February 1950, General Ritland organized the 4925th Test Group (Atomic), which he then commanded. This group was responsible for development testing of all equipment needed to attain the Air Force's nuclear weapons capability. From July 1954 to December 1954, he served as Chief, Atomic Energy Division, HQ USAF where he supervised and coordinated all atomic energy matters involving Air Force nuclear programs. From December 1954 until April 1956, he was Special Assistant to the Deputy Chief of Staff, Development, HQ USAF, and served as the Air Force's project manager for the U-2.

The Air Force assigned him to the Air Force Western Development Division (WDD, later the Ballistic Missile Division) as Vice Commander in April 1956 and promoted him to brigadier general in October of that year. Major General Bernard A. Schriever, commander of the WDD, who spent a great deal of his time in Washington, had General

Ritland handle the beginnings of the space effort. In 1956 he was responsible for the day-to-day management of the organization and its ambitious Weapon System 117L satellite program, the forerunner of the entire Air Force space program. The ballistic missile program, of which he was part, had succeeded. The Strategic Missile Evaluation Committee (SMEC) had believed that, under an accelerated program, an ICBM could reach operational status in six to eight years; that such a weapon could have circular error probability (CEP), or accuracy radius, of five miles; that it could deliver a significant nuclear payload over a distance of 5,500 miles. The Atlas program, the first of the ICBM programs, however, exceeded even these optimistic projections. It became operational in just five years. It had a modestly advertised CEP of two miles instead of five. It could carry a greater payload than the SMEC anticipated. Its demonstrated range was well in excess of 5,500 nautical miles.

In 1956, the President's Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) decided that it wanted to have an update on where the nation's satellite capability stood, whether the country needed it, and its technical feasibility. General Schriever charged General Ritland with the responsibility of organizing a group to brief the SAB on this subject. General Ritland assembled a group for this purpose that recommended that the U.S. pursue an electronic readout satellite, but nothing came of the suggestion. General Ritland took a similar briefing before the SAB in mid-1957 with similar results, except that the SAB was now convinced that a reconnaissance satellite was technically feasible. Following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, General Ritland helped the U.S. start a program to realize an operational photographic reconnaissance satellite employing a recoverable capsule in the spring of 1959. The program was partially funded by the Air Force but predominantly by the CIA. After a series of failures, the program achieved success, proving that this approach to satellite information gathering would work.

In April 1959, General Ritland became commander of the Ballistic Missile Division, overseeing the early successes of the MIDAS, Samos, Discoverer, and recoverable photoreconnaissance satellite programs. On 1 April 1961, General Ritland assumed command of the newly created Space Systems Division of the new Air Force Systems Command, a position he held until 15 May 1962. He became the Deputy Commander for Manned Space Flight, Air Force Systems Command on 15 May 1962, responsible for all U.S. Air Force actions involved in the national manned space effort. On 1 December 1965, he retired from the Air Force, NASA awarded him its Exceptional Service Medal for his contributions to the Mercury and Gemini Manned Space Flight Programs. At the same time, the Air Force awarded General Ritland its first Distinguished Service Medal.

Following his retirement from the Air Force, General Ritland served as Vice President for Launch for the McDonnell Douglas Corporation for five years. He retired to Rancho Santa Fe, California, where he passed away on 23 March 1991.