

# Maj. Gen. Rupert H. Burris

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The distinction of becoming the first non-rated officer ever to head an Air Force major command capped a long list of accomplishments which Maj. Gen. Rupert H. Burris achieved during his remarkable 34-year “blue suit” career.

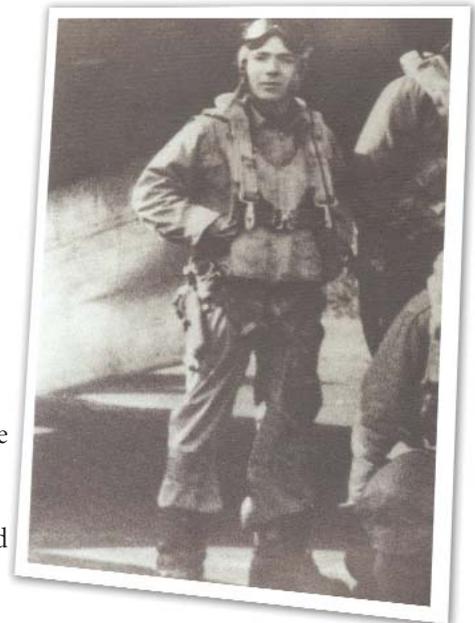
While his exceptional career encompassed a wide variety of notable roles—airial combat over Nazi Germany, communications support in the field in Vietnam, and a host of key leadership positions culminating in commanding the Air Force Communications Service—he has continued his life of service during his retirement.

General Burris faced demanding challenges at a young age before and after putting on a uniform. He recalled years later: “I come from less than humble beginnings in having spent my early years the son of an Arkansas share-cropper. . . . My mother died [when he was 16]. I was virtually on my own from then until 1943 when I entered the [Air Corps at age 18]. I thought the military was great—I’d never had it so good!” As an enlisted gunner aboard B-17 bombers during World War II, he vividly recalls a harrowing episode when a near-collision with another B-17 in bad weather led to “going inverted in a bomb and gas loaded B-17 at 21,000 feet over France and spinning down to 7,000 feet before

a miracle recovery.” After the war, and a brief stint as an administrative clerk, he completed Officer Candidate School in 1948 and received his commission as a second lieutenant.

During his distinguished career, General Burris served in a variety of capacities while ascending in rank and responsibility. During his tour in South Vietnam (1967-68), he survived two attacks on Tan Son Nhut AB, fixed the Air Traffic Control radar at Phan Rang AB, and was picked up at Bien Hoa AB by his son, John, who flew Army helicopters. The general continued to accrue marks of distinction as his career came to a close. Shortly before his retirement in 1977, he “was astonished” to be selected as the third speaker for the newly established Air Force Academy Commandant’s Leadership Series (the first was General Curtis E. LeMay, legendary commander of the Strategic Air Command). The next year, he received the prestigious Order of the Sword from AFCS NCOs in recognition of his contributions to the enlisted corps. In reflecting upon this and the earlier distinction of becoming the first non-rated officer to command a major command, General Burris stated: “I understand and appreciate my great good fortune. . . .”

In retirement, General Burris focused on serving the local community around his home of Mt. Holly, Ark., (he now lives in nearby El Dorado, Ark.). He became involved in the



**General Burris flew 30 missions as an enlisted gunner in B-17s during World War II.**

community club, volunteer fire department, deer camp, and the El Dorado Country Club. In the latter capacity, he became club president and won several golf tournaments. Although his son was killed in action in Vietnam, and cancer claimed his wife, Jo, in 1993, his two daughters, four grandchildren, and two great grandchildren take their share of his attention and activities these days. He also remains a sought-after speaker who frequently shares his experiences and insights with various audiences.

He said: “The Air Force offered me opportunities, and the same remains true today. I’d urge becoming skilled at your job. Treat your fellow airmen, regardless of rank, with consideration and respect. Given the opportunity to help someone, give it your best shot.”



**General Burris circa 1992.**

“Treat your fellow airmen, regardless of rank, with consideration and respect.”