



**Making history**  
Her mother says Woodward  
“has always known  
exactly what she wanted”

NATION

# Air Boss

From her base in Germany, Major General Maggie Woodward ruled the skies over Libya. It was another first for women in combat

BY MARK THOMPSON

**D**ARTING AROUND A WINDOWLESS command center in southwestern Germany, Maggie Woodward flashed orders to pilots and skippers from the Great Plains to the Dolomites. She scrambled U.S. warplanes from Italy's Aviano air base and ordered them to attack targets deep inside Libya. She dispatched secret orders to Marine amphibious ships in the Mediterranean, instructing their chopper crews when and where to stage for pilot search and rescue. She ordered electronic-countermeasures aircraft to broadcast radio messages encouraging Muammar Gaddafi's troops to mutiny. She sent B-2 bombers from their base in Missouri to destroy Libyan aircraft on the ground near Misratah. A week later she dialed up a pair of B-1 bombers from South Dakota—which overcame a thick blanket of new snow, glare ice and freezing fog—to attack nearly 100 targets scattered across the North African desert. It was the first time the Reagan-era B-1s had ever struck overseas targets from their U.S. base.

Operation Odyssey Dawn also marked the first time in U.S. history that a woman commanded a military air campaign.

Fueled by Cokes and chocolate and backed by a staff of 400, Woodward raced Gaddafi's tanks to the rebel stronghold of Benghazi and, over the course of a frenzied 12 hours, halted their advance. “I remember being worried as we watched the Libyan regime forces bear down on Benghazi,” she recalled in an April 4 conversation. “I remember all of us being terrified that we wouldn't be able to turn them back in time and that they would overrun the city, and we just couldn't even imagine the massacre that would ensue.” Jubilation erupted, she added, as “we watched our F-15Es take out those tanks.”

Woodward's account is a reminder that the recent U.S. operation in Libya was a much more complicated affair than just a no-fly zone. It was more like a don't-move zone. Woodward ordered more than 2,100 sorties and 200 cruise-missile strikes, pinpointing any Libyan radar, missiles or

command posts that could threaten allied planes, as well as military units threatening civilians. Very few of those attacks helped clear the skies; they cleared the streets of Gaddafi's goons. Within two weeks, 25% of Gaddafi's military had been reduced to rubble. “Our mandate included protecting the civilian population in Libya,” she said, “so we did much more than just the no-fly zone.”

But now that the U.S. has stepped back from day-to-day control and NATO has taken responsibility for patrolling Libyan airspace, a kind of stalemate has set in. Gaddafi's forces changed tactics and no longer travel in tank columns; they move around in civilian pickups. Even if allied air power wanted to take them out, distinguishing one side from the other has become much more difficult. Rebel officials said NATO air strikes killed 13 of their comrades over the April 2 weekend.

Meanwhile, Gaddafi still has roughly 20,000 trained troops, but the rebels can only muster perhaps 1,000 on a good day.

With Gaddafi and his supporters holed up in Tripoli and the rebels based in Benghazi, there's a good chance each side could end up controlling half the country indefinitely.

### A Fast Burner

"WE'RE NOT GOING TO GET INTO THE first-woman thing, are we?" Woodward says, with more than a hint of exasperation. When asked if she feels like a role model for girls, the 51-year-old aerospace engineer and mountain-bike enthusiast replies, "I hope I'm an inspiring figure to lots of little boys and girls."

And big ones as well. Woodward spent the first 10 years of her life in Pakistan and India, where her late father worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development. (Her mother's father flew Jenny biplanes in World War I.) "Since I was about 4 or 5 years old, all I wanted to do was to fly," Woodward says. She recalls being taken aback when a guidance counselor told her the Air Force didn't let women fly. "Well, they're just going to have to change that," she recalls responding, "because I know that's what I'm going to do."

Her mother Mary Ann partly blames herself for pushing Maggie into the cockpit. When the family was living in Mumbai in 1970, Mary Ann left a note at the hotel of the three Air Force crew members flying Neil Armstrong and his Apollo 11 colleagues on their postmoonwalk world tour. It was an invitation to the Woodward home "for a cocktail"—liquor was banned commercially—"and they ended up staying for dinner," she says. Her daughter, 10 at the time, "soaked it all up." The crew invited Maggie's older brother to visit their plane the next morning, and Mary Ann—"not wanting to be a pushy mom"—didn't ask if her daughter could tag along. "She has never forgiven me for that," the combat commander's mother now says.

Woodward entered the service after

**Defense Secretary Robert Gates pronounced Woodward's effort a success 'because so much of [Gaddafi's] military has been destroyed'**



graduating from Arizona State University in 1982 and was soon piloting KC-135 tankers as they refueled fighters and bombers in midair during U.S. military action in Panama and the Balkans. She later ran tanker operations over Afghanistan and Iraq. Woodward racked up nearly 4,000 hours of flight time along the way and garnered a funky call sign: Swamp Witch. Today she is one of only 612 women—less than 5%—among the Air Force's 13,000 pilots. (Woodward is married to an Air Force one-star general, now retired; the couple has no children.)

In 2007 she became the first woman to run the 89th Airlift Wing—home to Air Force One and other VIP craft—at Andrews Air Base just outside the capital, where, other brass recall, she was popular and effective. "Successful general officers know how to take care of the troops and let the troops take care of the mission," says William Welser III, a retired lieutenant general who was once Woodward's commander. "Maggie certainly falls into that category."

Last summer, Woodward was promoted to run the 17th Air Force, part of the two-year-old U.S. Africa Command (Africom), which oversees U.S. military operations on the continent but for historical and logistical reasons is headquartered in Germany. Once President Obama ordered the no-fly zone, it fell to Woodward to make it happen. When the balloon went up, Woodward spent hours in the air-ops center at Ramstein air base, where more than 100 headset-wearing personnel, arrayed at a half-dozen rows of computer screens, monitored secret radio, video and instant messages. Woodward rarely sat at her command post on the war room's left side, instead roaming from desk to desk—from intelligence to operations to coalition partners—picking up new details and issuing instructions.

Not everything went perfectly. An 18-month-old baby was killed, apparently by an air strike on an ammo dump south of Tripoli that sent a tank round into his bedroom. Weather grounded most of Woodward's AC-130s and A-10 tank-killing

planes in the final days of the U.S. operation. She and her team held their breath when two F-15 flyers were forced to parachute into Libya after their plane malfunctioned. (The pilot was rescued quickly; his weapons officer was put up in a hotel by anti-Gaddafi forces until he could be picked up several hours later.) "That was a very emotional night and morning for all of us," she says. "The cheers that rose up from the floor in that air-operations center when we got the word that both crew members were safe were deafening."

Woodward dismisses grumbles from some Air Force veterans that a shooting air war should have been commanded by a fighter or bomber pilot. "That's one reason they call us general officers," she notes. "We're no longer the technical experts. We have to be able to listen to the experts and make good decisions."

### Nothing Left to Shoot?

OF COURSE, IT'S MUCH EASIER TO SCRAMBLE the jets than it is to craft a policy that will make Gaddafi go away. The Administration points out that the allies agreed only to protect Libyan civilians. "We've tried regime change before," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, "and sometimes it's worked, and sometimes it's taken 10 years." The White House is weighing sending more aid—initially nonlethal supplies like medicine and body armor—to help the rebels, who are complaining about a lack of allied air strikes since Woodward relinquished command. But there is concern in the Pentagon and elsewhere that any weapons pipeline to Benghazi would put the U.S. on the side of fighters it knows very little about. The most fervent U.S. hope, as Gates put it, "is that a member of his own family kills him or one of his inner circle kills him."

But there's not much sign of that possibility yet. Though some members of the Tripoli government have defected, there are widening rifts among rebel factions as well. Meanwhile, NATO warplanes circle overhead, but because Woodward's destruction of the Libyan air force was so complete, there is little left to do.

Woodward has returned to her normal job as Africom's air boss, managing relations with 53 countries and their militaries. She hopes to squeeze in some horseback-riding time before long but says she is not frustrated by the situation on the ground. "I was given a very clear objective," she says, "and I feel very good that we were able to accomplish those objectives."

For now, not everyone in the Libyan theater can make the same claim. ■