

20 Years of Dynamic Deterrence

1915-1946 – SAC’s Heritage

(Part 1 of a 22 part series)

In December 2014, Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) is recognizing the 70th anniversary of the Continental Air Forces, the predecessor of Strategic Air Command (SAC) and today’s AFGSC. To commemorate this, the Command History Office is re-publishing a series of stories detailing the first 20 years of SAC. The SAC Press Service originally published these stories in 1966 to commemorate the first 20 years of Strategic Air Command. They were re-published in 1971 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of SAC. Though the AFGSC History Office has edited the original text to correct syntax and to provide insight, the context of the original text remains and the reader must view these articles looking through the lens of history.

In December 1944, the Army Air Forces created the Continental Air Forces to coordinate the activities of the four Numbered Air Forces (First, Second, Third, and Fourth) stationed in the United States. However, strategic bombardment operations during World War II showed the need for a major command devoted exclusively to strategic, long-range air combat operations. So, in March 1946, the Army Air Forces re-designated the Continental Air Forces as the Strategic Air Command. The Strategic Air Command served as America’s greatest deterrent to the threat of nuclear attack on the continental United States from the early 1950’s until May 1992. To accomplish this mission, the command maintained a stable of long range strike bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles along with a fleet of air-to-air refueling tankers and reconnaissance assets. However, during 1992, as a result of the diminishing danger of massive nuclear warfare and the disappearance of a meaningful distinction between strategic and tactical missions, the United States Air Force disestablished the Strategic Air Command, dividing its assets and missions among the newly created Air Combat Command, Air Mobility Command, and Air Force Space Command. Seventeen years later, on 7 August 2009, the Air Force reactivated Strategic Air Command and then re-designated the organization as Air Force Global Strike Command. Air Force Global Strike Command with its six wings contains the nation’s entire inventory of Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 bomber aircraft with the Air Force’s newest Major Command perpetuating the proud heritage of the Continental Air Forces and Strategic Air Command.

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SAC PRESS SERVICE

UNCLASSIFIED

20 YEARS OF DYNAMIC DETERRENCE

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Re-written by AFGSC History

1915-1946 SAC's Heritage-Strategic Bombing

In the final months of World War II, when the Army Air Forces conceived Strategic Air Command, a handful of farsighted military planners predicted with some certainty the types of weapons the future would require. The basic science required for advanced nuclear weapons, high-performance jet aircraft, and ballistic missiles had been proven. For example, before the war ended, the technical know-how for the B-36 and B-47 had already been put into blueprints and the basic theory for intercontinental ballistic missiles had been demonstrated during the war.

On the other hand, the post-war political future appeared uncertain. Some allied leaders doubted that the spirit of wartime cooperation could continue after the fighting stopped, though most tried to remain optimistic. To them, in early 1945, it seemed impossible that the great nations who together defeated the powerful Axis could ever return to the outdated, aggressive nationalism of the pre-war world.

The optimists were almost right. At the war's end, most of the victorious nations prepared to work together for a better world. The Soviet Union was the tragic exception.

To counter the tragic Communist betrayal, these farsighted military planners carefully crafted SAC's deterrent mission, a mission that would eventually win the Cold War. To do this, they would rely heavily on the lessons of World War II and the success of strategic bombing.

The Concept of Strategic Bombing

In 1945, as the Continental Air Forces' planning staff began developing strategies for future wars, they had the best evidence possible that America still needed a strategic bombing force. Strategic bombing had contributed tremendously to defeating the Germans in Europe, and at the time, strategic bombing in the Pacific held great promise of making a land and sea invasion of Japan unnecessary. In their minds, the great military potential of strategic bombing had become a fundamental task for airpower.

With this said, the importance of strategic bombing had not always been widely accepted. In the years before World War II, only a few men, men like General Billy Mitchell, could visualize the potential of the unreliable, primitive aircraft of the time. In particular, General Mitchell saw that, while each individual aircraft might have limited firepower, many aircraft when massed together and concentrated on a single target system could strike a devastating blow.

The events of World War I and his relationship with several early airpower zealots influenced Mitchell's theories, philosophy that became the basis for American strategic bombardment programs, and later, a separate service. After World War I, the airmen who had seen the airplane develop from a balky novelty into a significant military force, began cultivating military aviation making it an important facet of future combat. Men like General Mitchell, General Sir Hugh M. Trenchard of Great Britain's Royal Air Force, and an Italian air officer, Giulio Douhet, wrote and worked exhaustively to develop and explain the concept and theory of strategic bombardment.

The men of the U.S. Army Air Corps, particularly at the Air Corps Tactical School, studied and discussed the theories of these men often. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, almost every officer who later became an Army Air Forces leader during World War II attended the "TAC" School at Maxwell Air Base, Alabama. Of note, Captain George C. Kenney, one of the most popular instructors at the school during this time, eventually became the first commander of Strategic Air Command.

By 1930, the belief that bombardment had become the basic arm of an air force had become gospel in the school. The instructors emphasized the offensive principle in war, particularly in air war. Those early Mitchell, Trenchard, and Douhet disciples taught that strategic airpower could paralyze an enemy force in the field if bombers destroyed the arms and supplies before they reached the battlefield, before they were manufactured, if possible. They also believed that such bombing of enemy industry, communications, and basic utilities would demoralize the entire population and affect the enemy nation's will to continue fighting. To them, it was simple doctrine.

These principles dominated planning during the Interwar Years and eventually determined the development of new weapons and tactics. So, when the principle of strategic bombing was applied seriously in World War II, the Army Air Force was well prepared, at least in doctrine and aircraft design, to prove its point.

But in those Interwar Years, though the Army Air Forces had a new doctrine, they also needed to field an adequate bomber. General Mitchell discovered in the famous bombing tests against obsolete battleships that only the heaviest bombs could destroy hard targets. Through this, it became apparent that bombers needed to be large enough to carry such bombs and also have

great range, adequate speed, and firepower to penetrate enemy defenses and return home. The Army Air Forces needed a flying fortress.

So, in response to this need, the American aviation industry, at great financial risk, pioneered the development of long-range strategic bombing aircraft. Despite controversy with the Navy over the limits of Air Corps coastal defense responsibility, the bombing aircraft grew larger, faster, and had longer range. Finally, by 1930 the high speed B-10 bomber outpaced the fastest pursuit aircraft. Then in 1935, when Boeing delivered the first four-engine XB-17, the Air Corps finally had a true strategic bomber.

In World War II, this aircraft, in the company of RAF bombers, established the TAC School theory as fact. The success of the B-17, and other World War II bombers used in Europe, confirmed the need to develop high performance bombers, like the B-29, an airplane that would go on to defeat the Japanese Empire. Without such success, long-range bombers could have been relegated to an aircraft manufacturer's blueprints or an engineer's dreams and the atomic bomb could have possibly remained a scientific marvel, thousands of miles from many enemy targets.

However, the bomber did fly off the drawing boards and into the history books and the theories of the early airpower supporters were proven correct. However, this success needed to be measured and then codified. So, in November 1944, President Roosevelt directed that an impartial board measure the effect of strategic bombing in the European War and then produce a survey of their work. Also, in 1945, President Truman ordered a similar survey to evaluate the effect of strategic bombing in the Pacific War.

Both surveys agreed, strategic bombing had contributed decisively toward winning the war. While no claim was made that bombing alone had won the war, the Pacific War survey concluded that, "control of the air was essential to the success of every major military operation."

The surveys found that, "no nation can long survive the free exploitation of air weapons over its homeland." The Pacific survey further stated that, it is important to fully grasp the fact "that enemy planes enjoying control of the sky over one's head can be as disastrous to one's country as an occupation by physical invasion."

However, the greatest lesson of the strategic bombing surveys lay not in the writing, but rather in the battered cities of England and the ruined towns of Germany. The best way to win a war is to prevent it from ever occurring. "Prevention of war will not be furthered by neglect of strength or lack of foresight or alertness on our part," the Pacific survey concluded. "Those who contemplate evil and aggression find encouragement in such neglect...the United States must have the will and strength to be a force for peace."

The United States heeded this advice and with a great desire for peace, fashioned an organization that would deter its enemy and assure its allies. This force became Strategic Air Command and is still represented in Air Force Global Strike Command today.

(NEXT STORY: Part 2, The Post-War World)