

20 Years of Dynamic Deterrence

SAC in the Early Fifties

(Part 9 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

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20 YEARS OF DYNAMIC DETERRENCE

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Seldom in the history of the United States have military men worked harder, endured more hardship and pressure, and performed so consistently well as the men of SAC under General LeMay in the years from 1950 to 1955.

As was mentioned, part of the command fought a grueling duel with Soviet MiG-15s in Korea s part of the Far East Air Forces. Most SAC units, however, continued the struggled to build a nuclear strike capability strong enough and ready enough to deter a nuclear catastrophe. Both jobs placed tremendous pressure on SAC's nucleus of trained professionals.

The sudden go-ahead given to expand the U.S. Air Force, including SAC, in 1950 resulted in an almost overwhelming flow of raw manpower, material, bases and aircraft into the command. Unfortunately, of all these elements, the most critical, manpower, always lagged behind the others. And, even the most experienced men struggled to master new and barely operational aircraft and weapons. As a result, training was intensive and units were chronically undermanned. It appeared that a tradition was being carried on in SAC that each man would always have to work of two or more.

SAC men, like those of all the military services of that time, frequently carried their workload under difficulty, if not impossible, conditions. As new units were activated and assigned to undersized bases, housing was impossible to find, and barracks and other base facilities were often run down and inadequate. In the Arctic, at remote ZI [Zone of the Interior], in the African desert and on Pacific Islands, men worked under every kind of geographical or climatic handicap.

SAC's basic concept of training and operations caused combat ready wings to rotate to overseas bases every 90 days. This placed a tremendous strain on families of crew and direct support personnel. And, even hard-pressed wives were frequently required without notice to throw a bag and the children in the family car and clear out of their base housing during surprise base evacuation exercises.

Military discipline was also tight in SAC. Under the pressure of fighting a war and building an elite military force, SAC personnel worked around the clock and stayed in uniform, even in base movies and clubs.

It was a hard life, but the Strategic Air Command was building a tradition of professionalism, dedication and efficiency that would set a standard for the entire U.S. Air Force.

However, SAC leaders knew that they could not expect men to make the sacrifices required to be in SAC indefinitely without some compensation.

The strenuous training and long work hours were products of SAC's mission and the [Korean] war. They could not be changed. But broken-down barracks, poor housing, and the discomfort of inadequate bases could be helped. And, programs, like the SAC Dependent's Assistance Program and others, could be developed to help families whose husbands and fathers were on TDY [Temporary Duty] overseas.

The living conditions of SAC's manpower became one of the primary personal concerns of General Curtis LeMay, while SAC's Commander-in-Chief. He testified bluntly to the Congress and tirelessly requested that the Air Force and Department of Defense improve home facilities, design and build modern, comfortable barracks, build housing, and expand and improve recreation and educational facilities.

General LeMay also obtained approval, beginning in 1951, to give special "spot" promotions to the next higher grade to men on outstanding "lead" crews. Programs also were begun in the command to improve the quality of SAC's noncommissioned officers by founding NCO academies. And, then to give SAC's NCOs increased prestige and recognition.

Within the limits of money, resources and the demands of a tough mission, SAC rewarded the dedication of its professionals in every way possible. And they responded by staying. SAC consistently led the Air Force in retaining critical manpower. General LeMay, like every other SAC Commander, before or since, knew that the strength of SAC was in its skilled, dedicated manpower [assigned personnel]. It was the most critical resource he had, and he valued it.

(NEXT STORY: Part 10, SAC's Growth: A Controlled Explosion)