20 Years of Dynamic Deterrence

SAC Before the Berlin Blockade

(Part 4 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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SAC's first commander, General George C. Kenney, was an officer with a reputation as a strategist and an innovator. He has been an early student of the doctrine of strategic bombing and a successful wartime commander of bomber forces. Then, in 1946, he was moved from his post as senior American officer on the Military Staff Committee of the United Nations to command the newly created Strategic Air Command. His deputy was Major General St Clair Streett.

Although activated at Bolling AFB on 21 March 1946, SAC headquarters moved to Andrews AFB that October. During those first months, SAC was a command trying to build some sort of order out of the post-war confusion. There were 36,000 men assigned and about 600 aircraft, only about 250 of them bombers. The others were assorted aircraft including just three jet fighters, P-80 Shooting Stars. Six very heavy bombardment groups and two fighter groups were partially manned at 18 different active installations.

With an unprecedented mission and a sense of immediacy, the SAC staff went to work. One of the first tasks was to organize is untrained, partially equipped random elements into some kind of order. It was a tough job and required major reorganization to get the command structure blocked out.

Essentially, SAC built up two numbered air forces, the 8th and 15th, plus the 311th Air Division, an organization specializing in strategic reconnaissance. On 25 January 1949, the Air Force re-designated the 311th as 2d Air Force.

First operational consideration was creating an atomic strike force. This was started when the 509th Composite Bomb Group of 15th Air Force was given the tactical atomic mission on 1 May 1946. Located at Roswell AFB, New Mexico, the 509th was SAC's only combat ready atomic delivery unit. In July 1946, this organization furnished most of the air support for the Operation CROSSROADS atomic tests. In these tests, on 1 July 1946, a SAC B-19, "Dave's Dream" of the 509th dropped an atomic bomb from 30,000 feet on 73 ships of Bikini Atoll, five were sunk and nine badly damaged.

As 1946 ended, the job of SAC became much clearer. The SAC staff would take the collection of men, aircraft, and bases that SAC had inherited plus the steady flow of new units and aircraft, and mold them into a manageable military force. Next, they would build a

professional core of highly trained manpower to carry out the peacetime mission of SAC. Lastly, they would develop and test new tactics, doctrine, and operational concepts to insure tactical fluidity. The main difficulty in achieving these objectives came from the lack of money and the chronic shortage of personnel plaguing all military services at the time.

As new units and additional bombers were added to SAC, there were few people added to man and operate them. For example, when the Air Force had to cut its planned group strength from 70 to 55 groups in 1947, a manning ceiling was placed on SAC. When more units were authorized, SAC had to accept the added load with the people on hand. Cross-training, then, became a major effort. Intensive training of all manpower, particularly aircrew, occupied the bulk of unit energy and time. It was planned, optimistically, that all pilots would be triple-rated. Units would also use combat crew officers during their non-flying time to carry out the routine supply, maintenance and administrative tasks. Under such a program, men worked seven days a week and worked each day until the job was complete.

Adequate supply and maintenance were almost impossible. Besides not having the necessary men trained to keep the work force flying, the inadequate leftovers of the World War II spare parts stock and lack of an adequate supply pipeline kept hundreds of aircraft on the ground.

For example, when SAC made its famous "mock raid" on the city of New York on 16 May 1947, with 101 bombers, this was all that the command could get in the air. Almost 80 bombers were left on the ground unable to fly the mission.

The relative handful of men would not be stopped, however. Under the imaginative leadership of General Kenney and the hard driving of Major General Clements McCullen, who had become deputy commander in January 1947, SAC personnel established milestones of achievement and conceived tactics and concepts. SAC operations also expanded and increased considerably.

For example, because Air Force doctrine saw the polar region as the air battleground of future wars, SAC's first major training effort was directed at perfecting arctic operations. In two projects, HARDRUM and POLARIS, SAC units surveyed and mapped the Polar Regions. These were hazardous and difficult missions and a great many hard lessons were learned that later resulted in improved facilities and navigational aids in that area.

SAC pioneered the techniques of cruise control during that time to stretch every possible mile of range from its aircraft.

In 1947, SAC units also began rotating bomb squadrons to the Far East and Europe and flew training and good will mission to England, Western Germany, Italy, France, Holland, Belgium, Saudi Arabia, and South America.

Within the United States, besides the New York practice attack, SAC units also simulated missions against Chicago and Kansas City.

By 1949, SAC's base structure had begun to stabilize and aircraft strength shifted strongly from medium to heavy (B-29) bombers. SAC also picked up about 180 jet P-80 fighters during this same period. The pressure on people can be illustrated well by noting that SAC had 49,500 people in 1947 manning 15 bases and flying approximately 1,000 aircraft. A year later, with just 3,400 more people, SAC was flying, in addition to the B-29s, two new types of aircraft, the B-36 and B-50. The command was operating from 22 bases, including four in England and others in the Far East and the arctic. Total aircraft strength was still about the same.

Knowing the importance of rapid mobility, General Kenney activated the first strategic support squadron in early 1948. Flying C-45s, C-47s, and C-54s, this unit was SAC's own airlift capability and contributed greatly towards helping SAC's widely extended units stay operationally ready.

Two new weapons systems added in 1948 gave SAC a promise of a long-needed boost in range and firepower. The B-36 had been designed during the war to give the Air Force the ability to operate over the long ranges of the Pacific. With the shape of the post-war Communist threat becoming clearer, these two aircraft were a fortunate fall-out from wartime planning. With an even longer look to the future, the all-jet B-47 and B-52 bombers were also on the drawing board when the B-36 and B-50 were first added to the SAC force.

But, new aircraft brought new problems for SAC maintenance and supply. Parts for the big bombers were scarcely in production and aircraft were delivered to tactical units without the usual service testing. Although delivered early in 1948, it would be many months before the B-50 and B-36 would make a major contribution to the strategic force.

SAC's fighter forcer began to shape up during this time. Originally conceived as escorts for SAC bombers, the early fighters lacked range, and many types were tried, including the F-51 and F-82, before the longer-range F-84 proved best for the job.

Even with limited range, however, SAC F-80s made the first west to east transatlantic jet fighter deployment on 16 July 1948. On this pioneer flight, 16 SAC F-80s flew from Selfridge AFB, Michigan to Prestwick, Scotland in nine hours 10 minutes.

During these high-pressure months, SAC pioneered a revolutionary concept in bomber operations, in-flight refueling. Although only occasionally demonstrated successfully before the war, SAC planners saw the combat potential in refueling bombers in flight. Therefore, in 1948, SAC began modifying its B-29 and B-50 fleets and by 30 June, the atomically armed 509th and the 43d Groups were equipped with refueling squadrons.

The high state of training and readiness of these two units, the most powerful military force in the world at the time, is illustrated by the 43d and 509th taking first and second place in the first SAC bombing competition held that June at Castle AFB, California.

(NEXT STORY: Part 5, SAC and the Berlin Blockade)