

20 Years of Dynamic Deterrence

SAC After Berlin

(Part 6 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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SAC After Berlin

The Berlin Blockade marked a turning point in U.S. National [defense] policy. And with it, a milestone for the Strategic Air Command – SAC was from that time recognized as the primary deterrent to Communist aggression, and had greatly increased importance in international affairs.

Most important for the command was a broad new concept of operations. SAC was no longer primarily engaged in peacetime training – “providing” a strategic bombing force. The first task was operational readiness – “being” a strategic bombing force. “Peacetime” was over as for as SAC was concerned.

General [George C.] Kenney [Commanding General of SAC] now concentrated on demonstrating and refining the capability of his nucleus of strategic air power.

For example, regular rotation of SAC units in Europe was begun with full 90-day deployments of entire bomb groups. The first was project LOOKER in which 30 B-29s of the 28th MBW [//Medium Bomber Wing] deployed to Scampton, England, then returned after three months of training. Far Eastern [Asia] rotation also continued.

While SAC [air] crews were rewriting the record books in the fall of 1948 and practicing their strategic deterrent mission, the command headquarters moved to Offutt AFB, Nebraska.

SAC also gained a new commander that 19 October [1948 with] General Curtis E. LeMay. His deputy [commander] was Major General Thomas S. Power.

Both these officers had been outstanding combat leaders in B-29 operations against [Imperial] Japan and were well qualified for their task. Both were known for their imagination and planning ability and their skill as managers.

These qualifications almost immediately would be taxed to the limit. Under the post-Berlin national policy, SAC’s long-held Air Force priorities began to produce quantities of men [personnel] and material [especially new bomber aircraft]. In 1949, personnel assigned to the command increased approximately one third. The B-36 and B-50 became fully operational that year and began to replace the older aircraft in significant numbers. The reconnaissance version of these aircraft also received engineering approval as the number of reconnaissance aircraft in SAC doubled in 1949.

Strategic support aircraft also doubled as C-97s and C-124 long-range, heavyweight cargo carriers entered the SAC inventory. And, there were six air refueling squadrons now in SAC – triple the 1948 figure.

This sudden expansion and rapid assimilation of new aircraft could have been chaotic, but it was not. With a clear mandate from U.S. national leadership for the foundation of the most powerful military force in history, General LeMay turned his attention towards refining the quality of his command and efficiently channeling his new resources.

He [General LeMay] quickly inaugurated a SAC Development Program to set up priorities for the expanding force. To coordinate the increasingly complex maintenance and supply tasks that came with his new weapons, the concept of maintenance control was begun.

To insure the highest quality of professional skill in combat crews, and lead crew school was established to act as a training ground for command-wide standardization of tactics and procedures.

Professional development and management were critical. The national economy was being strained by the commitments to post-war prosperity and world leadership. Military costs and personnel were cut sharply, even while the importance of strong defense forces was being proven.

Manning austerity and cost consciousness were still paramount problems and were apparently going to be around permanently.

The Achievement of the Early Years

The first years of SAC saw the command assume the character and spirit that would make it outstanding. Under General Kenney, the traditional stress on professional manpower was begun. He also established early in SAC's history the need for flexibility in operations and concepts. And, with Major General McMullen, he gave the command, from the beginning, a sense of immediacy and drive that has since been one of SAC's most impressive qualities.

These SAC operating principles were largely responsible for the command's successfully meeting the challenge of its first real defense task – deterring a possible Soviet military follow-up to Berlin.

With SAC's atomic capability greatly expanded by the end of 1949, Secretary of the Air Force W. Stuart Symington reconfirmed the basic mission of the command. "Existence of this strategic atomic force," he said, "is the greatest deterrent in the world today to the start of another global war."

(NEXT STORY: Part 7, 1950-1954 – Mission: Deter and Flight)