# SAC'S HALF CENTURY

By John T. Correll

Three B-52s practice a minimum interval takeoff as part of a SAC operational readiness inspection. Strategic Air Command reduced bomber takeoff intervals to 12 seconds and tanker takeoff intervals to 15 seconds.

USAF photo by SSgt. Phil Schmitten

USAF photos

Gen. Curtis LeMay at Offutt AFB, Neb., in 1953 as SAC com-
mander. LeMay rebuilt the command from a disorganized
lackadaisical collection of airmen into a lean, tight, high-
performing, and war-capable machine.



Gen. Thomas Power, LeMay's deputy, replaced him as head
of SAC. Power didn't inspire the depth of admiration from
airmen that LeMay did, but he got the job done.

## There has been nothing like it, before or since.

There was a Strategic Air Command before Curtis LeMay, but it didn't amount to much. It was organized at Bolling Field, Md., in March 1946, then moved to Andrews AFB, Md., in October of that year, with an assigned mission "to conduct long-range offensive operations in any part of the world."

The first commander was Gen. George C. Kenney, who led Allied air forces in the Southwest Pacific in World War II, but he was often absent pursuing other interests. He was the US military representative to the United Nations and a likely choice to head the UN air force that was anticipated at the time. Kenney left the running of SAC to his deputies, one of whom declared that, "No major strategic threat or requirement now exists in the opinion of our country's best strategists nor will such a requirement exist for the next three to five years."

SAC was relaxed, attuned to the postwar demobilization and drawdown. There was no sense of urgency about the mission. Most of the command's aircraft were parked, unable to fly, and few of the crews were trained. At the end of 1947, only two of the 11 groups were ready to conduct operations. To reduce military field activities around Washington, D.C., SAC was relocated in 1948 to Offutt AFB, Neb., just south of Omaha. The new headquarters was in the former Martin-Nebraska plant where B-26 and B-29 bombers were once built.

When Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg became Air Force Chief of Staff in April 1948, he decided SAC needed stronger leadership. He shuffled Kenney off to Air University and sent for Lt. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the best operational commander in the force.

LeMay arrived at SAC in October and immediately began bringing in people who had served with him before and who shared his outlook and methods. His first change was to make Maj. Gen. Thomas S. Power the deputy commander. "He was sort of an autocratic bastard, but he was the best wing commander I had on Guam," LeMay said. "He got things done."

LeMay soon discovered the SAC war plan existed in name only. It had no specifics and did not designate targets or identify units tasked to perform specific actions. The bombing practice scores looked good, but that was because the crews were dropping their bombs from 12,000 to 15,000 feet instead of from combat altitudes. The targets were easy to find, often marked with reflectors. Some group commanders were not checked out on their airplanes.

"It was perfectly apparent to me that while we didn't have very much capability, everybody thought they were doing fine," LeMay said. "The first thing to do was convince them otherwise. So I ran a maximum effort mission against Dayton, Ohio—a realistic combat mission, at combat altitudes, for every airplane in SAC that we could get in the air. We had them all up, and not one airplane, not one crew, completed the mission as briefed: aborts all over the place, equipment that wouldn't work, the crews that wouldn't work, nothing worked."

Starting from there, LeMay rebuilt SAC into the most powerful military force in history. It lasted for almost half a century before deactivation in 1992 at the end of the Cold War. There has been nothing like it since.

## The Way of LeMay

LeMay used two main tools to recreate SAC his way: standardization and evaluation. This involved demanding standards, establishment of best practices, and constant measurement.

At any moment, an operational readiness inspection (ORI) team might land without notice at a SAC base and require the wing commander to execute his war plan. If the wing failed, the commander could lose his job.
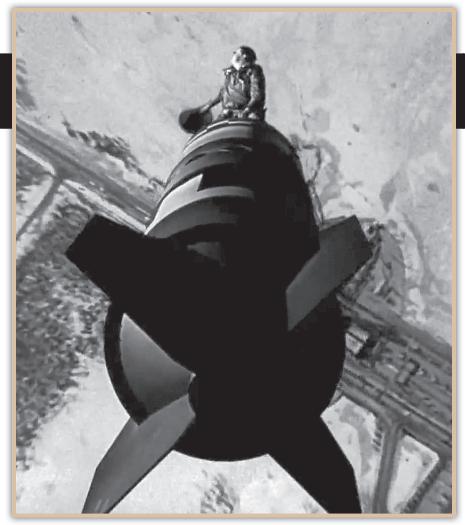
When LeMay took over, SAC's accident rate was terrible—65 major accidents per 100,000 flying hours. He believed that many of these accidents were caused by failure to use the checklist, especially by pilots who thought they did not need a checklist. Fearing LeMay's wrath in the event of a mishap in which procedures had not been followed, aircrews went back to their checklists. Within two years, SAC had the lowest accident rate in the Air Force.

The SAC rating system had points for everything. "You'd set a value on every item [that] was included in the whole scheme and the total of points gave you your score," LeMay said. "The system was elastic; the bracket of points could go up or down.

"Let's say that we are particularly bad in supply at the present moment. So we're going to weight supply a little heavier in the sum total. We assign higher numbers to supply, and automatically people work on that. Then we examine the master scoring system, where all the outfits are scored, and one outfit can be compared with another.

"Inside the organization, the commander examines his own score and he can observe that in supply—or personnel or operations—he made a lousy showing. So he swoops down into that area and fixes it. If not—new commander."

Evaluation was paired with competition, another of LeMay's favorite tools. He put great store in the annual bombing competition and rewarded those who



In "Dr. Strangelove," aircraft commander Maj. T. J. "King" Kong (Slim Pickens) rides a nuclear bomb to its detonation point over the Soviet Union.

did well. By 1950, bombing scores had improved by 500 percent.

To the delight of SAC and the outrage of the rest of the Air Force, LeMay obtained approval in 1949 to give his aircrews spot promotions. These came out of the overall Air Force grade authorization, which was capped by Congress, so each spot promotion meant one less somewhere else.

"Each quarter, wing commanders would determine the rank ordering of their crews. Based on bomb scores, testing, and in-flight evaluations—among other factors—commanders could list their crews from top to bottom," said Col. Melvin G. Deaile, a former B-52 commander who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the SAC organizational culture. "The top 15 percent of the crews for any given wing were eligible for spot promotions. ... If a navigator broke his leg, the crew went nonmission ready and everyone on the crew lost their spot promotion." Spot promotions peaked at more than 900 in 1959. The program was abolished in 1965.

LeMay worked hard to get better housing for families at his bases and to

put junior airmen in two-man dormitory rooms instead of open bay barracks. "Lousy food" was on the agenda, too. He got training for the cooks and warned them that the food had better improve, or else. "Or else might mean a sudden and unhappy change of station," LeMay explained.

A promotion in 1951 made LeMay the youngest four-star general in American service since Ulysses S. Grant. His tour at SAC was the longest tour ever for any general at a US major command, ending in July 1957 with his assignment as Air Force vice chief of staff.

SAC's slogan, "Peace Is Our Profession," is one of the most famous in military history. However, there was another one which became part of the continuing lore of the command: "To err is human; to forgive is not SAC policy."

## SACumcized

Under LeMay's leadership, SAC became an all-jet global strike force. The B-52 bomber entered service in 1955, and the KC-135 tanker in 1957. With aerial refueling, SAC bombers could reach targets anywhere in the world.

SAC had its own fighters for a while but finally decided there was no true role for them in the command and transferred the last of them to Tactical Air Command in 1957. However, long-range reconnaissance aircraft remained in SAC and continued flying for many years.

LeMay's focus was on the strategic nuclear mission. He had little time for anything else. He reluctantly provided bombers for the Korean War, but they were not his best. "When we got orders to send them over there, we picked the low priority outfits, the lowest ones on the totem pole," he said. "I did not want to destroy the capability that we had built up for a strategic war if we had to go to war. We sent the outfits that were not fully manned and not combat ready for the overall strategic war plan."

The National Security Council memorandum 162/2 in 1953 said that "Airpower and nuclear weapons should provide the nation's primary means of defense." Almost half of the defense budget went to the Air Force, with the nuclear forces—SAC and Air Defense Command—designated "Major Force Program 1."

The Air Force's first doctrine manual, published in 1953, emphasized strategic nuclear operations to the exclusion of almost everything else. So strong was the focus on SAC that the Korean War was ignored in the writing of doctrine. The 1959 revision of doctrine said that "the best preparation for limited war is proper preparation for general war."

The term "SACumcized" came into popular usage, with different meanings for different people. Even today, a cursory scan of the Internet turns up numerous SAC veterans proud of having been SACumcized—or thoroughly indoctrinated into an elite professional fraternity. To others, it meant SAC's domination of the budget, the spotlight, and much else. In the early 1960s, according to a study by Col. (later Maj. Gen.) R. Mike Worden, bomber generals held more than half of all the four-star positions in the Air Force.

When LeMay became Chief of Staff in 1961, he appointed SAC bomber Gen. Walter C. Sweeney Jr. to be commander of Tactical Air Command. His task, according to an article in *US News and World Report,* was "to do for TAC what LeMay did for SAC." Sweeney introduced a management system in which wings got monthly ratings with scores for operational and administrative activities. It was not well-received by the fighter community, which prized decentralization, innovation, and individual initiative more than standardization and top-down quality control.

LeMay and Power were initially distrustful of missiles, regarding them as distantly second in importance to bombers. The ICBM was an uneasy fit with the bomber culture of SAC. "Missiles—pilotless strategic bombers—represented a subculture with a different operating mentality than the pilots who ran SAC," said B-52 pilot Deaile. "Bomber pilots dominated SAC culture and would share

## "Fail-Safe," "Dr. Strangelove," and SAC

Two 1964 movies rose to cult status by speculation about accidental nuclear war. Both "Fail-Safe" and "Dr. Strangelove" depicted the system as breaking down and SAC bombers proceeding beyond their fail-safe points to deliver hydrogen bombs on the Soviet Union. If the plots seemed similar, it was because both were based on a British novel, *Red Alert,* published in 1958.

"Fail-Safe" was adapted from a 1962 American best-seller that tracked with *Red Alert* in most respects but which pretended to describe the Air Force's actual fail-safe system. SAC "Vindicator" bombers launch on warning of a Soviet attack, which turns out to be mistaken. A recall order is issued, but due to technical malfunction (a bad condenser) the attack code is received instead. As a sacrifice offered to avert Soviet retaliation when the bomb falls, the US President orders an American bomber to destroy New York. The movie followed the story in the book. Anti-military reviewers of the day saw great merit in it.

"Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" —filmed as a dark comedy with Peter Sellers playing both President Muffley and the crazed nuclear advisor, Dr. Strangelove—eclipsed "Fail-Safe" in popularity and impact. A B-52 commander in the field, USAF Brig. Gen. Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), sends his bombers to attack the Soviet Union. At the Pentagon, Air Force Chief Gen. Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) backs Ripper. President Muffley orders the SAC base stormed to obtain the recall code, but it is too late. The bombing mechanism on the B-52 is damaged by anti-aircraft fire but the aircraft commander (Slim Pickens), wearing his cowboy hat, straddles the bomb and rides it down to the target, rodeo style.

The movies had it exactly backward. The effect of a technical malfunction would have been to cancel the mission, not order it to completion by mistake. In his book, *Design for Survival,* Gen. Thomas S. Power explained how the system really worked.

"If a warning of an attack is received from NORAD [North American Air Defense Command], the SAC commander in chief is authorized to launch the alert force," Power wrote. "He does not have the authority to send the force to war—this authority rests entirely with the President of the United States—but he can and would launch the alert force for one purpose only, and that is to prevent its threatened destruction on the ground.

"Once in the air, the bombers fly toward a designated point on their routes which is well outside enemy radars. After reaching that point, the bombers return to their bases unless they receive coded voice instructions to proceed to their targets. The 'go code' can be given only upon direct orders of the President, and it must be authenticated by officers at each of several levels of command and by more than one member of the bomber crew. Coordinated action by several crew members is also required to arm nuclear weapons after the 'go code' has been received and authenticated.

"The 'go code' is transmitted to the airborne force by a variety of means and from widely separated transmitters in order to ensure its receipt. But if, for some unlikely reason, a bomber should not receive the attack order or if there is any doubt whatever regarding proper authentication, that bomber would turn back after reaching the 'Positive Control' point and 'Fail Safe.' Thus, the worst thing that could happen would be to leave, in case of an actual enemy attack, one or more targets in the aggressor's territory uncovered, a risk that must be accepted in order to guarantee against inadvertent action."

Almost 50 years later, "Dr. Strangelove" is still attracting viewers, and "Fail-Safe" was remade for television in 2000, closely following the story line of the novel and the 1964 film.

few commonalities with those who would employ missiles."

Power assigned Lt. Gen. David Wade, "a long-time bomber man," to oversee integration of missiles and missile airmen into SAC and "show them the way things [were] done in the organization," Deaile said. The missileers took on the special sense of responsibility that comes with the strategic nuclear mission and eventually became as SACumcized as the rest of the clan.

## Life on Alert

When LeMay went to Washington in 1957, Power replaced him as commander of SAC. He did not inspire the kind of loyalty and admiration that LeMay did, but although lacking in charm and diplomacy, he was undeniably effective.

The emergence of ICBMs shortened the warning time for attack to 30 minutes. To avoid getting caught on the ground and in order to preserve a credible counterattack capability as a deterrent, SAC aircrews went on alert Oct. 1, 1957—and would not stand down again for more than 30 years.

Aircraft waited at the end of the runway with bombs loaded. Crews, stationed nearby in the "mole hole" alert facility, could have engines running in two minutes, begin to taxi in five minutes, and be airborne within 15 minutes. By 1960, a third of the bombers and tankers were on alert. For quicker launch, the alert aircraft were parked at an angle into the runway, ready for a minimum interval takeoff.

"The takeoff interval between tankers was 15 seconds, and just 12 seconds for bombers," said Thomas D. Jones, a B-52 aircraft commander before becoming a space shuttle astronaut. "The challenge for pilots was to negotiate the turbulence on the runway and avoid after takeoff the wake of the bomber ahead. Whatever we did, taking off 12 seconds behind another B-52 meant at least a minute

*Capt. Kenny Gibaldo (l), missile combat crew commander, and 2nd Lt. John Butler, deputy crew commander, perform a Minuteman III launch simulation at Minot AFB, N.D. Although both LeMay and Powers were initially skeptical of ICBMs, their value to the nuclear mission quickly became apparent.*

of very rough air during the takeoff roll and initial climbout."

From 1961 to 1968, B-52s flew continuous Chrome Dome airborne alerts with as many as 12 bombers in the air at any one time. The operation was directed from the fabled underground SAC command post at Offutt. When a controller in the command post picked up the red telephone at his side, he was in instant touch with every bomb wing, tanker wing, and missile launch control center in SAC. From 1961 to the end of the Cold War, a "Looking Glass" airborne command post flew continuously as a backup to the underground command post.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, SAC went to DEFCON 2, the defense condition one step short of all-out war, but its usual posture was DEFCON 4, one step of alert higher than the rest of the force, which typically maintained DEFCON 5.

About half the SAC officer force and a third of the enlisted force were certified to work with or around nuclear weapons. All of them, including the nuclear crews, were monitored by the personnel reliability program. Anyone who showed the slightest indication of a problem could be decertified, temporarily or permanently. Illness, domestic problems, or a death in the family could lead to temporary PRP suspension. Those with difficulties of a more lasting nature were decertified permanently.

Despite his earlier reservations, Power saw the value of missiles. At one point, he proposed that the Navy's new Polaris SLBM be assigned to SAC, accepting that the SAC staff would have to be "augmented by qualified Navy staff

personnel" and might "possibly involve the appointment of a Naval Deputy CinCSAC." The Navy declined.

SAC, with its bombers and ICBMs, continued to possess two-thirds of the so-called Strategic Triad, but internally, the balance was beginning to shift. In 1964, the number of ICBMs on alert in SAC pulled even with the number of bombers on alert, then moved ahead and stayed ahead.

## CAS From Valhalla

The Vietnam War ended the great separation between SAC and the rest of the force. Unlike in Korea, SAC sustained a major commitment to conventional operations in Southeast Asia with its bombers and tankers.

Between 1965 and 1973, the long-running B-52 combat operation code-named Arc Light encompassed more than 126,000 sorties over Southeast Asia. The principal base was Andersen AFB, Guam, but the bombers also flew from U Tapao in Thailand and Kadena on Okinawa.

The operation was not part of the air campaign run by 7th Air Force in Saigon. Arc Light aircrews and ground crews were drawn from the SAC nuclear alert force and remained under SAC control on temporary duty rotations of up to 179 days. Some pulled a half dozen or more Arc Light tours, but they did not get credit for a Southeast Asia combat tour.



DOD photo

In South Vietnam, B-52s performed the equivalent of close air support from altitudes of 30,000 feet. Strips of ground 1.2 miles long and 0.6 miles wide were saturation bombed by three-ship "cells" of B-52s. The first indication the Viet Cong had that the bombers were there was when the jungle erupted around them.

Operation Linebacker II in December 1972 marked the biggest assembly of US bombers since World War II. Over 11 days, the B-52s launched 729 sorties from Guam and U Tapao against the heartland of North Vietnam, mainly Hanoi and Haiphong. It brought the North Vietnamese back to peace talks and led to the signing of a cease-fire in January 1973.

SAC was the Air Force's single manager of the KC-135 tankers, whose primary duty was support of nuclear war operations. There was no increase in the tanker fleet, but SAC allocated an average of 88 tankers a year out of existing resources to operations in Vietnam. Under the code name Young Tiger, SAC tankers flew almost 20,000 sorties to refuel tactical fighters in addition to supporting its own B-52s in Southeast Asia.

LeMay retired in February 1965 and later that year published his memoirs, *Mission With LeMay,* written with the help of MacKinlay Kantor. One line about Vietnam from the book would dog LeMay for the rest of his life: "My solution to the problem would be to tell them frankly that they've got to draw back their horns and stop their aggression or we're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age."

What he actually said, he claimed subsequently, was that the United States had the *capability* to bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age, that the words in the book had been written by co-author Kantor, and that LeMay failed to catch them in his review of the draft manuscript.

### End of the Line

SAC reached its peak strength with 3,207 aircraft in 1959 and 282,723 people in 1962. Subsequent years saw a steady decline in numbers and a loss of primacy for SAC, with a corresponding rise in emphasis on conventional forces and operations.



*A bomber crew races to a B-52 armed with Hound Dog missiles. SAC bomber crews went on alert in October 1957 and wouldn't stand down until 1991.*

Even before the Vietnam War rejuvenated tactical forces, the United States had begun moving away from the Massive Retaliation strategy and reliance on nuclear weapons. By the 1970s, US policy was in pursuit of detente with the Soviet Union, arms control, and parity rather than superiority in nuclear power.

By the 1980s, a large part of SAC's B-52 force was tasked for conventional operations in support of the European, Atlantic, Pacific, Southern, and Southwest Asia theaters and, by 1990, SAC was down to 960 aircraft and 119,000 personnel. Fighter generals had displaced bomber generals in Air Force leadership.

Nevertheless, SAC had one last war to go. On the first day of the Gulf War in 1991, seven B-52Gs took off from Barksdale AFB, La., on the longest combat mission in history at that time, refueling in air four times and striking targets in Iraq before landing back at Barksdale 35 hours later. In the Gulf War, the B-52 was the weapon the Iraqis feared most, with deserters fleeing in droves for fear of a B-52 attack.

SAC held the Soviet Union at bay through the long nuclear standoff but when the Cold War ended, its primary reason for existence was vastly reduced. On Sept. 27, 1991, bomber crews stood down from round-the-clock alert for

the first time since 1957. After a run of 46 years, SAC was inactivated June 1, 1992.

The bombers and ICBMs were transferred to the newly created Air Combat Command, and most of the tankers went to Air Mobility Command. In a quick shift, the ICBMs were reassigned to Air Force Space Command in 1993. Air Force nuclear assets became components of a new joint command, US Strategic Command, with headquarters in Omaha. Gen. George Lee Butler, last commander of SAC, was the first commander of STRATCOM, which adopted the old SAC motto, "Peace Is Our Profession," as its own.

In 2009, the newly redesignated and activated Air Force Global Strike Command at Barksdale, took over control of the Air Force's three ballistic missile wings, two B-52 wings, and the only B-2 wing. The new command was created in response to a number of miscues in recent years in the handling of nuclear weapons, and the state of the nuclear mission.

For obvious reasons, Global Strike Command has been compared to SAC, and one of its early endeavors was to re-establish the demanding standards and operational culture that prevailed in SAC's half century. ∎

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