

THE ORIGIN OF THE STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND (SAC)

USAF COMMAND OF THE BIG BOMBERS

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USAF General Curtis LeMay

In 1948, U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay was summoned back from Germany, *where he was in charge of the Berlin Airlift*, which provided critical provisions to Germans during the Soviet blockade, to take charge of the Strategic Air Command, which would become known simply by its acronym, SAC.

ORIGIN OF THE STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND (SAC)

SAC had been started two years earlier, and was supposed to be America's nuclear punch, which would so terrify the Russians or anyone else, that they would never even think of attacking the U.S. It was a vital program, yet it was badly broken. With his track record of making unfixable work, LeMay was the logical choice to take the helm. But as bad as he found things, *General LeMay made the situation ten times worse right at the start when he said something he never should have said.*

When LeMay arrived, SAC's headquarters was in the process of moving from Washington to Offutt Field in Omaha, Nebraska. In 1948, placing the headquarters of the U.S. nuclear force in the middle of the country still provided more time to respond in case of an attack from the Soviet Union. Within ten years, that would no longer be true.

In the beginning, the Strategic Air Command was a disaster. Most of its planes could not fly. Most of the crews lacked the most basic training for their new mission.

A general malaise hung over the entire organization—and those were just a few of its problems.

It had been organized in 1946, but perhaps because the U.S. still had a monopoly on atomic weapons, there was no sense of urgency in those early years. The wartime pressure that had pushed everyone just months earlier had evaporated.

But by the time LeMay arrived in 1948, the Pentagon understood that making Strategic Air Command strong was essential for countering the Soviet threat.

The logic of SAC was rudimentary—if you destroy us, we will destroy you ten times over—and in some ways, it fits perfectly with LeMay's view of the world. Do not bother anyone, but if bothered, do not be bullied. In post-war nuclear terms, it would become known as the balance of terror or mutually assured destruction.

In theory, the Strategic Air Command was the logical vehicle to promote U.S. power around the postwar world and instill fear in the hearts of its enemies. But SAC in its infant stages was one shockingly ill-organized, ill-equipped, nonfunctioning military operation, and everyone in the upper echelons of the Air Force knew it. It is no coincidence that SAC had an appalling accident rate. Worse, nobody seemed to care. In 1947, SAC ran a simulated test. Out of the 180 planes in its command, 101 could not even get off the ground.

The perfect example of its organizational dysfunction was obvious in the Strategic Air Command's plan of operation. In the event of a war with the Soviets, all of SAC's B-29s would first fly from their various bases to Ft. Hood, Texas, where the nation's nuclear weapons were stored under the command of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Once there, pilots would fill out the necessary paperwork, and the bombs would be brought out of their deep lockers and loaded onto the planes. From Texas, they would fly to England or Newfoundland where they would refuel. Only then would they fly off to their targets. The potential for problems was truly nightmarish if a crisis were to strike. It was obvious to LeMay, who believed in Murphy's law, that no one had thought things through.

There was a flying club atmosphere in SAC, similar to the one LeMay encountered in the 1930s Army Air Corps. In an odd calculation, pilots were encouraged to take an aircraft for any cross-country weekend jaunt—to visit a girlfriend or relative—for the sole purpose of burning up gas. In the military's accounting system, all future allotments of fuel were based on what was used in the previous year. This made for some happy pilots but hardly instilled the correct sense of mission.



SAC'S 1ST BOMBER - B-29 SUPERFORTRESS

The Strategic Air Command was the same Twentieth Air Force from Guam that LeMay had commanded during the war. It was a natural transition, since it was the only military organization on earth with previous nuclear experience, having dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. SAC's bomber was still the B-29, but it did not have the capability of flying to the Soviet Union and back.

If the country had been attacked and the planes were directed to drop bombs in Russia, the crews would be flying one-way missions.

In case of war, Walter Boyne, a SAC colonel and later Air Force historian, was to fly to his target, the Soviet city of Tula, near Moscow.

"Then [we were to] turn southwest in the hope that a successful bailout could be made somewhere in the Ukraine where we were told, we might encounter 'friendly natives.' We were not optimistic about the outcome."

When LeMay took over SAC, he assessed the readiness of the Air Force and was blunt in his appraisal. "I should go on record and say this flatly: we didn't have one crew, not one crew in the entire command who could do a professional job." SAC itself was as bad as anything he had yet encountered in his career.

LeMay realized at the very start that it was no use to remodel what he had inherited. It was completely broken. He had to tear it down to its foundation and completely rebuild it. So he started the process with a vivid demonstration to show everyone just how bad things were. It would become known as the Dayton Exercise, and to this day, even though many of the people involved in it have long since died, it is still a legend within SAC. For obvious reasons, the public did not learn about it at the time. Even as late as 1964, when LeMay requested the official records of the Dayton Exercise while writing his memoirs, they were still classified.

The exercise sounded fairly simple in its concept. LeMay walked into his office early one morning and issued the following order to his operations chief: "Have 'em attack Wright. The whole damn command. By radar." That was all he said.

In translation, LeMay wanted the entire fleet of Strategic Air Command planes to stage a practice bombing exercise on Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio. They would fly directly from every SAC base across the country, converge over Wright Field, and electronically "bomb" it. The radar controller at Wright would be able to track the descent of every "bomb" to determine the accuracy of each crew. And because, as LeMay put it, "nobody seemed to know what life was like upstairs," he wanted all the planes to go in at a high altitude, where they would have to wear oxygen masks. Up until then, SAC pilots flew at low levels because they found the masks uncomfortable.

This challenge would be much easier than the real thing. SAC pilots would not have to fly into the Soviet Union, or even overseas. They were all familiar with Wright Field, but familiarity, short range, and peaceful conditions did not seem to help at all.

Because of mechanical failures, many of the planes never got off the ground. Still more had to turn back to their bases before they got anywhere near Dayton. Of the planes that made it to Ohio, not one bomber was able to hit the target. Not one.

Now everyone at Strategic Air Command and the Air Force could no longer avoid the truth. LeMay responded in his typical form. Instead of yelling or pitching a fit, he led. "I've been telling you that you were in bad shape. We are in bad shape. Now let's get busy and get this fixed." That was all he had to say, and as he had in the past, he included himself in the process.

Once again LeMay broke down the problem into its parts. First, he began cleaning the house and sent out a call for the best people he had worked with in the past.

LeMay was cold-blooded in the way he went about his work. A lot of people were fired in that opening phase. "We don't have time to distinguish between the unfortunate and the incompetent," LeMay explained with his stinging bluntness.

LeMay was one of the few Americans who understood how the nature of war had changed in just two years. He also understood that World War II could no longer serve as the model for any future

conflicts—especially concerning the Air Force. Nuclear weapons, along with jet planes and rockets, had changed the paradigm. The old world, in which the United States was protected by its two great oceans, was over. Unlike some, LeMay did not lament this. He always viewed technology as an ally that could advance his goals.

But what made him immeasurably more effective was this ability to inject his experience—when relevant—into this new realm.



SAC'S 2ND BOMBER – B-36 PEACEMAKER

LeMay's most crucial observation was that SAC's first mission could very well be its last. This new form of warfare would allow for no second chances. So LeMay had to create the state of readiness that was necessary to capitalize on that first and only chance to strike, should it ever be needed. To do it, he had to change the way people in SAC thought. "I determined to put everyone in SAC in this frame of mind: *we are at war now*. So that if actually, we did go to war the very next morning or even that night, we would stumble through no period in which preliminary motions would be wasted. We had to be ready to go *then*." If it came to a nuclear exchange, LeMay knew there would not be the luxury of a period of adjustment as there had been in England or the Marianas.

LeMay completely redefined SAC along with its mission. "No other U.S. military force commander so imprinted his personality and ideals upon his organization as did LeMay," says Walter Boyne, who served under LeMay in the 1950s. "SAC became LeMay personified—but only after tremendous effort on his part." Years after he left Omaha, people would comment on seeing and feeling the "LeMay aura" when they visited SAC's headquarters, which was eventually named after him.

LeMay did not accomplish this for himself or because he wanted to coax the Soviet Union into an all-out war as some have suggested. LeMay had a rock-solid belief in the Constitution of the United States, which placed the military under civilian control.

LeMay never questioned this. He performed well so the president could deal with adversaries from a position of power, which was, LeMay believed, the only way of dealing with adversaries.



SAC'S 3RD BOMBER – B-47 STRATOJET

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As it had been in World War II, one of LeMay's primary concerns was looking out for the men and women under his command. From 1948 to his last day at SAC in 1957, LeMay managed to stop the hemorrhage of men and equipment that he inherited at the start. In 1948 there were 51,965 people at SAC—5,562 officers, 40,038 airmen, and 6,365 civilians. Morale was low and living conditions were appalling.



SAC'S 4TH BOMBER – B-52 STRATOFORTRESS

When LeMay took over Strategic Air Command in 1948, the accident rate was sixty-five major accidents per 100,000 hours—a dismal record. By 1956, LeMay's last full year at SAC, the accident rate fell to nine per 100,000 hours—an 85 percent drop. "Every time a commander suffered a major accident in his wing," LeMay recounted, "he came to see me about it. We went into the matter from every angle. They did not like the idea of coming up there and standing on the unpleasant piece of carpet, but that's what I made them do. We were going to find out how the accident happened and why."

General Jacob Smart, LeMay's aide in the 1950s, reiterated LeMay's firm belief in Murphy's law. Because of this, "he drove himself and others to prevent error or accident by Strategic Air Command personnel." To illustrate the point, Smart says, "LeMay required all aircrew members to make a detailed preflight inspection of a SAC bomber in accord with a prescribed checklist. Nobody was beyond doing this. He never put himself above the rules and followed the same procedure whenever he flew a SAC bomber."

Just as he disliked losing men during the war, he was equally angry about losing them to accidents. The worst thing a wing commander could say to LeMay was: "I don't understand it, he was a great pilot." It seemed every commander started his explanation that way. "They were never stupid pilots or bad

pilots, they were always great pilots,” LeMay observed. For that reason, he made the SAC safety checklist much more detailed—to make sure every pilot, especially the hotshots, followed the rules.

Better food, improved living conditions, and happier flight crews helped, but what ultimately turned SAC around was hard work, continuous innovation, and Curtis LeMay’s demand for perfection.

By 1953, the Strategic Air Command under Curtis LeMay had achieved a massive retaliatory strength. There were seventeen nuclear-armed wings, which translated to 329 B-47s, 185 B-36s, 500 tankers, and 200 fighters, as well as the old standby, the B-29, which flew until the early 1960s.

A global network of bases, some even built in isolated and barren locations like Greenland and North Africa, had been assembled, all within striking distance of the Soviet Union. In all, there were twenty-nine bases in the States and ten overseas.

Airmen would take their turns in “ready rooms” where they would be on alert for twenty-four hours. The planes, just outside the door, were “hot,” meaning they were maintained, fueled, and fully loaded with nuclear arms.

The bases were secure—LeMay ended careers if he witnessed any breach in that security. Within just a few years of taking over, Strategic Air Command was a well-oiled and deadly machine, coiled back and ready to spring at any time of day or night.



In 1992 SAC was decommissioned and, in its place, the United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) was created. USSTRATCOM assumed many of SAC’s previous responsibilities and absorbed U.S. military space operations.

Following the establishment of the USAF as a separate service in 1947, SAC bases in the United States consisted of:

Castle Air Force Base, California,- Patrick Air Force Base, Florida,- Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico,- Carswell Air Force Base, Texas, - Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona, -Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota.

At one time during SAC’s existence, the Air Bases listed below were either SAC Bases or had SAC Detachments on them. I’m sure many veterans would remember these names. Many of these bases are now closed and some have had their names changed over the years.

Abilene AFB, Texas

Altus AFB, Oklahoma

Amarillo AFB Texas

Andrews AFB, Maryland

Barksdale AFB, Louisiana

Beale AFB, California

Bergstrom AFB, Texas

Biggs AFB, Texas

Blytheville AFB, Arkansas (aka Eaker AFB)
Bolling AFB, D.C. (When SAC Headquarters)
Buckley Field, Colorado
Bunker Hill AFB, Indiana (aka Grissom AFB)
Camp Carson, Colorado
Campbell AFB, Kentucky (SAC Special Activities Center)
[Cannon AFB, New Mexico \(AKA Clovis AFB\)](#) - Original SAC Base
[Carswell AFB, Texas](#) - Original SAC Base
[Castle AFB, California](#) - Original SAC Base
Chatham AFB, Georgia (aka Hunter AFB)
Clinton County AFB, Ohio
Clinton Sherman AFB, Oklahoma
Columbus AFB, Mississippi
Cook AFB, California
[Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona](#) - Original SAC Base
Dyess AFB, Texas
Eglin AFB, Florida
Eielson AFB, Alaska
[Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota](#) - Original SAC Base
Elmendorf AFB, Alaska
Ent AFB, Colorado
Fairchild AFB, Washington
Forbes AFB, Kansas
Francis E. Warren AFB, Wyoming
Geiger Field, Washington
General Mitchell ARS, Wisconsin
Glasgow AFB, Montana
Grand Forks AFB, North Dakota
Grand Island AFB, Nebraska
Great Falls AFB, Montana
Grenier AFB, New Hampshire
Griffiss AFB, New York
Hanscom AFB, Maryland
Hill AFB, Utah
Homestead AFB, Florida
Hunter AFB, Georgia
Key Field (ANG), Mississippi
K.I. Sawyer AFB, Michigan
Kearney AFB, Nebraska
Kincheloe AFB, Michigan
Ladd Field, Alaska
Lake Charles AFB, Louisiana
Larson AFB, Washington
Laughlin AFB, Texas
Lincoln AFB, Nebraska
Little Rock AFB, Arkansas
Lockbourne AFB, Ohio (aka Rickenbacker AFB)
Loring AFB, Maine
Lowry AFB, Colorado

MacDill AFB, Florida
Malstrom AFB, Montana
March AFB, California
Mather AFB, California
McConnell AFB, Kansas
McGuire AFB, New Jersey
Merced County Airport, California
Minot AFB, North Dakota
Moody AFB, Georgia
Mountain Home AFB, Idaho
Naval Air Station, Texas
Offutt AFB, Nebraska
O'hare International Airport, Illinois
[Patrick AFB, Florida](#) - Original SAC Base
Pease AFB, New Hampshire
Peterson AFB, Colorado
Phoenix Skyharbor IAP, Arizona
Pinecastle AFB, Florida (aka McCoy AFB)
Pittsburg ANG, Pennsylvania
Plattsburg AFB, New York
Presque Isle AFB, Maine
Randolph AFB, Texas
Robins AFB, Georgia
Roswell AFB, New Mexico
Salt Lake City IAP, Utah
Schilling AFB, Kansas
Seymour Johnson AFB, North Carolina
Sheppard AFB, Texas
Stead AFB, Nevada
Tinker AFB, Oklahoma
Travis AFB, California
Turner AFB, Georgia
Vandenberg AFB, California
Westover AFB, Maryland
Whiteman AFB, Missouri
Wright Patterson AFB, Ohio
Wurtsmith AFB, Michigan

With 50+ bases located in foreign countries around the world.



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