



*Always at War: Organizational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946–62* by Melvin G. Deaile.

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Melvin G. Deaile's *Always at War* is a welcome addition to a growing literature<sup>1</sup> about the early years of the United States Air Force (USAF) Strategic Air Command (SAC). Deaile (PhD, Univ. of North Carolina) is a retired USAF bomber pilot. Using archival resources at the Air Force Historical Research Agency and the National Archives, as well as oral histories and recollections by SAC veterans, he has written a compelling study of the challenges of creating and sustaining a premier fighting force dedicated to deterring war by maintaining high levels of readiness throughout the forty long years of the Cold War.

Deaile begins by explaining the origins of the SAC, covering the familiar ground of the growth of the US Army Air Corps (later, Army Air Forces) after World War I; the strategic concepts of Billy Mitchell and Giulio Douhet; and the Army Air Corps' struggle to go beyond tactically supporting the Army, using strategic bombing doctrine as a means to that end. The concepts underlying strategic bombing—as devoutly preached by officers like Gen. Curtis LeMay—inspired the creation of SAC and its operations.

Deaile briefly discusses US strategic bombing in World War II, focusing on operations conducted by units under LeMay's command in Europe and the Pacific. He and many of his subordinates drew on that experience to turn SAC into America's first deterrent force. But, as Deaile observes, the initial impetus behind SAC came from Air Force Gen. George Kenney, whose formative command experiences were in the Southwest Pacific supporting Gen. Douglas MacArthur's campaigns in New Guinea and the Philippines. While Kenney handled public relations on behalf of an Air Force struggling to justify its existence, he left day-to-day operations to his deputy, Gen. Clements McMullen, who ended up degrading combat readiness by his inefficient management of SAC. Two years later, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the USAF Chief of Staff, was faced with declining numbers of operational aircraft, substandard bombing scores, a Secretary of Defense impatient with SAC inefficiency, and a damning report by Charles Lindbergh. So he fired Kenney and McMullen and ordered LeMay to take command of SAC.

Vandenberg needed LeMay to build an organization capable of providing a credible deterrent ... [and] to make sure that if a war started, SAC could win it almost immediately. Although LeMay knew how to employ bombers, his personal goal was to build an organization ... "so strong and so efficient that no one would dare attack us." (91)

At the heart of the book is its account of LeMay's leadership in making SAC into the first truly effective nuclear deterrence force. He began by scrapping previous war plans under which SAC would hit targets in the Soviet Union piecemeal, as America's few nuclear weapons—fused by ci-

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1. See, e.g., Edward Kaplan, *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2015), and Trevor Albertson, *Winning Armageddon: Curtis LeMay and Strategic Air Command, 1948–1957* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2019).

vilian nuclear specialists—became available. He argued successfully that SAC must have rapid access to the nuclear arsenal in order to launch a crippling strike on the Soviet Union. As he put it, “We are at war now!”

The atomic age did not afford the United States the luxury of learning by failure. LeMay’s leadership philosophy reflected this new paradigm: “We had to operate every day as if we were at war, so if the whistle actually blew we would be doing the same things that we were doing yesterday with the same people and the same methods.” (102)

As he had in the Second World War, LeMay standardized operations across all aircraft and ensured accurate

evaluation through technical manuals and checklists that outlined detailed procedures for each person and each task.... SAC procedures were atypical and exceeded Air Force requirements. This was the SAC standard—better than the rest—and for nuclear weapons operations, perfection was the only acceptable standard. (103-4)

Standardized procedures enhanced combat efficiency across SAC and dramatically reduced its accident rate to the lowest in the Air Force. LeMay extended this emphasis on standardization to Boeing’s plans for the B-52 bomber, insisting that pilots sit side-by-side, not in tandem as in the B-47, so they could monitor each other’s procedural compliance. Crews that worked well together, stayed together, sometimes for years. LeMay also instituted a competitive evaluation system to assess his command’s combat readiness, including no-notice Operational Readiness Inspections, which forced each bomber wing to go through its entire war plan except for penetrating Soviet airspace and actually dropping nuclear weapons.

As LeMay intended, SAC operated as if it was at war. Planes flew twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in all weather and environments. During the President John F. Kennedy administration, half of SAC was expected to be able to take off within fifteen minutes; some aircraft even maintained airborne alerts and command posts. The support organizations for the planes, such as radar stations and maintenance facilities, operated at the same pace. Security forces were trained to react as though every incursion were a genuine attack by Soviet saboteurs.

Astonishingly, a number of SAC personnel volunteered to periodically test SAC security, risking their own lives to keep security personnel on their toes. Rumor had it that LeMay himself was shot at! Even when they left the base, SAC personnel had to report their whereabouts and stay within six rings of a telephone. To sustain this grueling command climate, “entire crews could gain spot promotions for significant achievements such as winning the annual SAC bombing competition. On the other hand, entire crews could lose their temporary promotions if the crew, or even an individual member, failed to maintain high standards of performance” (116).

LeMay also sought the best housing and recreational clubs for SAC personnel, introducing dormitory-style barracks, auto hobby shops, flying clubs, and rod-and-gun clubs. The recreational clubs mirrored LeMay’s personal hobbies—he may have been one of the few Air Force general officers who did not enjoy golf! Seventy- to ninety-hour workweeks took their toll and “few SAC members remembered this period in their lives as anything but stressful. A majority of those interviewed who served during the 1950s believed SAC was at war with the Soviet Union” (149).

Strategic Air Command succeeded as a deterrent force, priding itself on high standards and an elitist mentality. Thanks to LeMay’s unusually long, eight-year leadership of SAC, his command philosophy persisted in his organization well after his departure.

LeMay’s successor, Gen. Thomas Power, oversaw the advent of intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (ICBMs and SLBMs). Like the nascent Army Air Corps within the

interwar Army, the ICBM force could easily have become a disruptive “subculture” within the plane-flying Air Force:

the operating characteristics of those who flew bombers and those who “launched” missiles were totally different.... Bomber pilots flew long-duration missions in cramped cockpits over enemy territory ..., [and] refueled in flight ... to drop bombs on targets. Furthermore, pilots attended survival school, in case they were shot down behind enemy lines.... Missileers did none of these things. They readied their missiles for launch within a matter of minutes and with the push of a button sent the weapon on its way.... More importantly, pilots from Power’s and LeMay’s generation went through pilot training at a time when they had to prove the inherent skills required to fly. What were the inherent skills needed to “pilot” a missile? One graduate of missile training explained what it took to become a missileer. Missiles ... required more knowledge and technical expertise, which is why everyone in the missile force—that he knew—had a college degree. Pilots used their hands and eyes; missileers were thinkers. (207)

Deaile’s comparison of missileers to pilots captures a significant ambivalence within the Air Force towards the ICBM force from the 1960s to the present. General Power and SAC successfully assimilated—“SACumsized,” as Deaile puts it—the subculture of missileers who underwent twenty-four-hour per day instruction, significant training, and periodic no-notice inspections. This regimen supports Deaile’s stress on organizational culture and contrasts with the interwar Army’s dealings with the Air Corps. But there is little discussion of how or whether the missileers established a viable career path within the Air Force, or how effectively it ensured that the missile force could evolve and grow. Deaile’s brief section on ICBMs suggests a counterfactual question: what if the ICBM community had pursued independence from the Air Force, as the Air Force had from the interwar Army? Might there have been a Space Force in the 1960s?

One wishes, too, that Deaile had widened his focus a little to compare SAC with similar Cold War high-reliability military organizations, such as the US Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program, which also relied—and continues to rely—on procedural compliance, continuous training, and frequent evaluation. And how, if at all, did SAC’s “always at war” culture for nuclear-armed bombers adapt to the more reliable and faster retaliatory capabilities of ICBMs and SLBMs?

A few quibbles: the introductory discussion of organizational culture and military sociology is unneeded. And the claim that “LeMay would become the longest-serving general in charge of a major command in U.S. military history” (143) overlooks Generals Winfield Scott and William Tecumseh Sherman, and Adm. Hyman G. Rickover. The rarity of spelling and grammatical slips (I counted only two) attests to the publisher’s improved editorial process.

Minor blemishes aside, *Always at War* is a superb historical study of the first US nuclear deterrent force, as well as a discerning meditation on the leadership and culture of high-reliability and high-performing military units.