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Review of "Always at War: Organizational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946-62" by Melvin G. Deaile

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Melvin G. Deaile. *Always at War: Organizational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946-62*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018. Pp. 296.

In the classic Hollywood movie about the Strategic Air Command (SAC), Jimmy Stewart plays Robert "Dutch" Holland, a former Second World War bomber commander. Due to a lack of experienced leaders in the United States Air Force (USAF), Lieutenant-Colonel Holland is recalled to active service, but he protests having to leave his wife and career during peacetime, asking his superior: "Where is the fire? I just don't see the necessity." The General replies, "You would if you were in my shoes. Do you realize we are the only thing that is keeping the peace? By staying combat ready, we can prevent a war."¹ The film's message was clear, as it is in Melvin Deaile's book *Always at War*—SAC's motto was "Peace Is Our Profession," but the price of that peace was a highly-trained and technologically-advanced bomber force held on a constant war footing. Though much has been written on war planning and strategy in this period, Deaile, an associate professor at the US Air Command and Staff College,² adds a fresh perspective on SAC from its 1946 founding to its 1962 peak. As Deaile notes, "[m]ore than a simple history, [the book] describes how an organization dominated by airmen developed its own unique culture," one that considered itself to already be at war (p. 3).

The book is divided into seven chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. The first three chapters set the stage with an overview of the historical and ideological underpinnings of SAC. Deaile describes how the air force formed both a subculture—derived from its profession of the officer pilot and its technology of the airplane—and a counterculture—stemming from its search for a coherent doctrine that could exploit the potential of the airplane while emancipating

¹ Stewart, a veteran of bombing missions over Germany and a postwar reserve USAF officer who rose to the rank of Brigadier-General, flew operationally the SAC bombers featured in the film. See *Strategic Air Command*, DVD, directed by Anthony Mann (Los Angeles, Paramount Pictures Corp., 1954). For more on SAC's use of popular culture to advance service interests, see Steve Call, *Selling Air Power: Military Aviation and American Popular Culture after World War II* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).

² Colonel Deaile is also a former SAC bomber pilot and veteran of the First Gulf War. The book is based on his 2007 doctoral dissertation.

it from merely supporting ground forces—within the Army, of which it was a part. Airpower theorists like Billy Mitchell provided the doctrine of strategic bombing which held out the promise of victory in future wars without the need for costly invasions. The Second World War put theory into practice and saw the development of training and tactics that increased the effectiveness of strategic bombing. The postwar Strategic Bombing Survey of Germany and Japan (in the latter case, where bombing was deemed particularly effective) may not have proven that airpower could win wars, but it certainly made a decisive contribution to victory, bolstering arguments for a centralised air force command. The advent of the atomic bomb and the intercontinental bomber presented the opportunity for airpower to deter the new enemy, the Soviet Union. The Truman administration, seeking a cost-effective counter to the Soviet Union's massive ground forces, shifted the postwar defence budget in favour of airpower and atomic strikes. Consequently, SAC was formed in 1946 as an independent offensive command, and USAF founded in 1947 as a service equal to the Army and Navy. The air force had finally achieved its goal of controlling its own assets, assets which could now devastate an entire city with a single bomb.³

But things did not go well for SAC at first, and Deaile argues this was a function of a critical aspect of organisational culture: leadership. The first commander of SAC, General George Kenny, was a wartime Pacific theatre tactical—not strategic—air commander who mismanaged issues of personnel, force structure, training, and tactics. Kenny was fired in 1948 in favour of the man forever linked with SAC, Lieutenant-General Curtis LeMay. The tough, blunt, cigar-chomping—and innovative and results-oriented—LeMay had a proven record as a bomber commander in both the European and Pacific theatres, and he recruited like-minded commanders with similar combat experience. This command group then set about shaping SAC's organisational culture around the premise, as succinctly stated by LeMay, that “We are at war now!” (p. 102) According to Deaile, “LeMay and his team of ‘bomber generals’ put

³ On war planning and strategy in this period, see Edward Kaplan, *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

SAC on alert; war was not months or weeks away, but hours away. SAC's daily routines reflected an organization at war" (p. 119).⁴

The next four chapters are the best in the book, and they examine how SAC became the premier command not just within USAF but within the US Armed Forces, a force LeMay envisioned as being "so strong and so efficient that no one would dare attack us" (p. 91). When LeMay took over SAC, he conducted a command-wide bombing exercise, and not one crew finished the mission as briefed. He then set about transforming SAC into an elite force that could deliver on a war plan which required it to destroy the Soviet Union in one mission. He established realistic and routine training procedures and missions so that crews achieved and maintained a high level of readiness and effectiveness; SAC crews joked that every city in the US had been obliterated many times over through simulated bombing runs. Checklists encouraged standardised operating procedures for everything to ensure safety and efficiency. Personnel, who previously cross-trained on roles and rotated between crews which undermined proficiency, now specialised in roles and were kept together to create high performing crews. Crews also competed against each other in terms of proficiency and bombing accuracy; high performing crews became lead crews and could be spot promoted while poorer performing crews were demoted and retrained. And senior officers did not fly a desk; they flew missions so they had the same experience as their crews. Constant competition and evaluation—between and of crews, officers, and units—were key to LeMay's philosophy of continual improvement, and his annual surprise inspections were legendary and cost many officers their commands. Security was considered equally important, and infiltration teams would try to penetrate the perimeters of SAC bases to test preparedness, a risky business considering guards were instructed to shoot to kill.⁵

⁴ Bomber generals would dominate USAF postwar leadership, and it was 1982 before a fighter general became USAF Chief of Staff. On their rivalry, see Mike Worden, *Rise of the Fighter Generals: the Problem of Air Force Leadership, 1945-1982* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1998).

⁵ On the formative years of SAC, see Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996); and a more recent study by Phillip S. Meilinger, *Bomber: The Formation and Early Years of Strategic Air Command* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 2012).

Deaile points out that the “SAC mentality” took a toll on its personnel. One of the more interesting chapters of the book is Deaile’s discussion of the effect of SAC’s organisational culture on the daily lives of SAC personnel and their wives and families. Despite LeMay’s (and his wife’s) laudable dedication to providing better pay, food, health, and accommodation on and off base, and even outlets such as social and recreational clubs and support groups for SAC personnel and their families, the reality was that SAC’s drive for excellence combined with rigid discipline, around the clock operations, and Arctic and overseas deployments came with a heavy cost in terms of stress, and SAC had the highest divorce rate in USAF.

Deaile ends his book with the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when SAC came close to going to war. He describes SAC’s relentless pace of operations during the crisis, noting that all missions were performed as trained for without accident or incident. At the height of the crisis, SAC had 1,436 bombers and 183 missiles on fifteen-minute attack notice: “SAC personnel had demonstrated what close to fifteen years of a ‘we are at war’ mentality and culture had produced” (p. 218). Deterrence, based on the credibility of the response, was on full display. The crisis would mark SAC’s apex, for 1962 was also the first year since 1946 that it did not have a bomber in production,⁶ and with a shift in strategy from Massive Retaliation to Flexible Response and from bombers to missiles,⁷ by 1968 SAC was reduced in personnel by almost half. This steady decline continued until 1991 when SAC’s remaining bombers were taken off alert with the end of the Cold War, and the command officially ceased to exist a year later. But SAC lives on in the esprit de corps of its veterans; at annual reunions its members proudly consider themselves to be victors in a war where none of them ever dropped a bomb on their intended enemy. Deaile has written a fitting tribute to their service.

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⁶ An examination of SAC bomber procurement can be found in Michael E. Brown, *Flying Blind: the Politics of the US Strategic Bomber Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁷ Deaile describes missileers—who were not pilots—as a subculture which SAC worked hard to incorporate into the organisation (so as not to risk them becoming a counterculture), but his section dealing with the integration of missiles into SAC is brief and warrants further examination.