

BOOK REVIEW:

Always at war: organizational culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946 - 62

by Melville G. Deaile

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Always at War is more than an historical account of the United States Air Force Strategic Air Command. It addresses the development of the organisation, its culture and behaviours, and the standards and ethics that were imprinted on the Command by a strong, personal and uncompromising leadership.

These themes are melded carefully throughout a review of the development and operations of Strategic Air Command and serve to provide the reader with an understanding of the dynamics that made the Command so effective. Discussion of the Command's behavioural attitudes is presented simply and cogently so that the reader is taken on a journey to understand the driving forces that developed one of the most powerful flying forces in history.

Strategic Air Command was formed in 1946 within the United States Army Air Forces – the United States Air Force not being formed as an independent air force until September 1947. It was the result of the Air Force's internal beliefs in the effective projection of air power as a deterrent with an ability to respond to external demands in a strategic bombing campaign. It would be led by an independent air commander, not a theatre commander operating within a limited geographical environment.

Strategic Air Command rapidly became the centrepiece of United States deterrence against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The alternative of raising a standing army was considered excessively expensive and would have been unpopular amongst the American populace so soon after the end of World War II.

When General Curtis LeMay took over the Command, it was complacent and demonstrated limited effectiveness. LeMay had led the bombing campaign against Japan in World War II and the lessons learned from that campaign became the basis for the culture, doctrine and ethics of a rejuvenated Strategic Air Command. He subsequently became its longest serving commander.

He demanded excellence from his crews and required that his commanders were pilots and that they flew and led missions. If they did not, they were fired. In LeMay's words: "you can't tell an aircraft commander what to do unless you can do it yourself". His ruthless quest for excellence was driven by the need for the development of a credible deterrent force to face the Soviet Union in the unfolding Cold War.

LeMay recognised the limited warning that would precede an attack on the United States and developed cultural norms insisting: "We are now at war". He drove the men in the Command, aircrew and technical crews, hard. He demanded high and uncompromising standards of performance and introduced constant reviews of results to

ensure that the changing environmental and strategic circumstances were fully covered. It was a hard Command.

At its peak, Strategic Air Command was capable of launching a force of over 700 bombers with near simultaneous penetration of Soviet airspace and, in conjunction with its missile force, the co-ordinated delivery of almost 2000 nuclear weapons. It was a truly formidable force that, in one decisive strike, planned to destroy Soviet aircraft and petroleum production in 35 cities where 24 million people lived. This was not merely a large and powerful force; it was a force that shared the one culture built on an uncompromising drive for excellence.

The book provides a fascinating insight into the development of what was most likely the most destructive force in the Cold War. LeMay's initiatives were many: the right organisational fit; central control of the force; development and acquisition of bomber aircraft, air-to-air refuelling aircraft and reconnaissance aircraft; and forward deployment of bombers until the tanker force became operational. He introduced standardisation and evaluation; operational readiness inspections; and common checklists and procedures throughout the force; all of which are now common practice for modern air forces. He also introduced higher standards of accommodation and welfare initiatives for the men and families within the Command.

None of these achievements would have been as readily introduced or as effective without the strong organisational culture that existed within Strategic Air Command. Interestingly, the discussion of organisational culture, its artefacts, and the styles and roles of leadership and their relevance to operations, are simply put. Often this is not the case.

The author, Melvin G. Deaile, is an associate professor at the United States Air Command and Staff College with a PhD in American history. He has flown the B-52 Stratofortress and B-2 Spirit aircraft. He flew combat operations as part of Operations Desert Storm and Enduring Freedom and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He is a distinguished graduate of the United States Air Force Weapons School.

At the outset, *Always at War* sets the military aviator apart within the warrior class and this provides the basis for the discussions that follow regarding the beliefs of airmen that airpower could provide an effective deterrent force against an aggressive enemy. It provides a fascinating insight into a culture and a leadership style that was uncompromising and that was readily embraced by the members of Strategic Air Command.

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