The Rise and Fall of the STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND

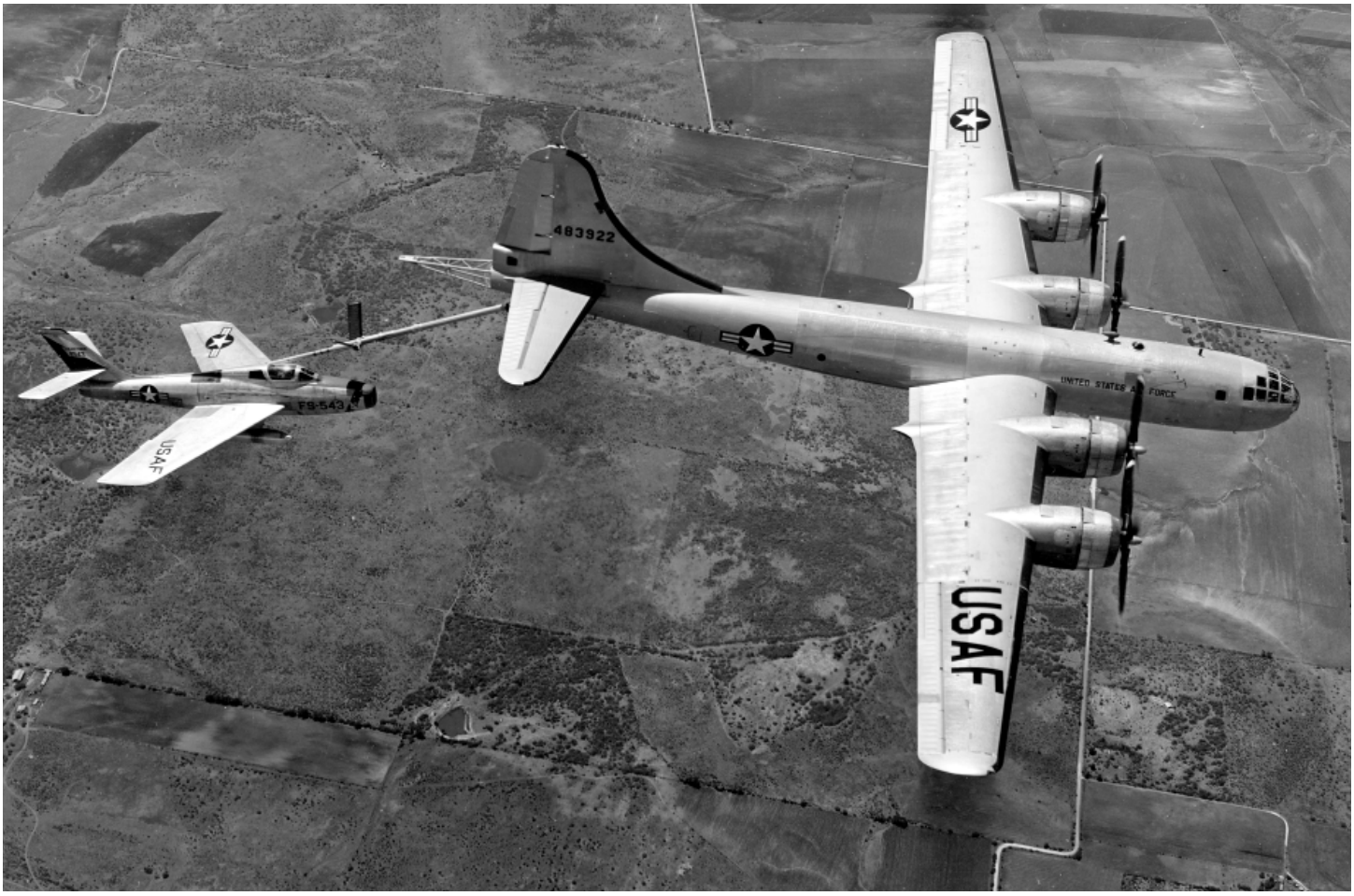
by Theodore R. Jamison, Ph.D.

Boeing B-29A Superfortress, 44-93869. The B-29 was the first "strategic" bomber in the Strategic Air Command's inventory. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives, AAHS-25216)

I was privileged to serve as a Historian for the Strategic Air Command (SAC) during its last years. The History Office (SAC/HO) had maintained annual histories of the command every year after its creation in 1946, and I joined a small staff of experts in 1985. Professional historians were active in all major USAF commands, and every base had a history office designed to research and write annual histories at that level. In any case, I worked in Building 500, Headquarters SAC, at Offutt AFB, Neb., and my areas of expertise ranged from logistics to human resources. During that period, I worked on a number of special studies for the Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC) that dealt with most disciplines in the headquarters. In my primary role, however, I was more involved in SAC's logistical world, and frequently traveled with the Deputy Chief of Staff (DCS) Logistics, a two-star, on his travels to the command's bases across the country.

When I arrived at SAC Headquarters in 1985, Maj. Gen. John Doran was ending his tenure as DCS Logistics and was soon followed by Maj. Gen. Charles J. Searock, who left the headquarters after Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 with three stars. Unfortunately, General Doran died shortly after his retirement from the Air Force. But thanks to General Searock's keen expertise in logistics and outstanding leadership, the face of SAC's supply and maintenance systems dramatically improved in quick fashion. The command's combat readiness was greatly improved by his innovating reforms. Under General Searock's respected leadership and logistics, readiness became more efficient for a command that had a mixture of weapons systems and missions. In a personal note, he was the best general officer whom I ever knew, and we became good friends. I greatly benefited by our close relationship, and gained considerable insight into his reforms of the command's logistical posture. He had flown many B-52 combat missions during the Southeast Asia conflict over a decade before his assignment to SAC headquarters, and he later was commander at Plattsburgh AFB, N.Y., an FB-111/KC-135 installation.

Today, the Strategic Air Command does not exist, now gone for almost two decades. There is no singular exclusive nuclear-dedicated command in the U.S. Air Force. SAC, created in 1946, was purely a Cold War decision that focused on the Soviet nuclear threat that lasted over 40 years. With the command's activation, the Air Force chose to centralize its nuclear assets, both aircraft and missiles, under a four-star command at Offutt. AFB, Nebraska. Eventually, SAC constructed an underground



Initially, SAC was equipped with fighters to serve as escorts for the bombers. Here a F-84F, 51-1543, is refueled by a KB-29P, 44-83922. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

command post some 600 feet below the main floor of Building 500; a three-story facility that was nuclear-hardened if not hit directly.

SAC was the home of the Airborne Command Post ("Looking Glass") stationed at Offutt, tanker refueling assets (KB-29s, KB-50s and KC-97s), and primary reconnaissance missions. And, in the early days following its activation, the command possessed its own non-nuclear fighter force, with the F-51 as the first aircraft, followed by the F-80, F-84, F-86s and F-101s. SAC also owned an average of 50 C-124 Globemasters during the 1950s and a small number of RB-57s.

As time passed, and after the Korean War, SAC's war fighting inventories became only nuclear-designated bombers supported by an impressive tanker and reconnaissance force. Additionally, the command controlled all of the Air Force's Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). Finally, once jet bombers and tankers were deployed to SAC bases, the face of the command changed dramatically and became the Air Force's global nuclear deterrent.

Other USAF commands were born during the period after WWII when the Air Force became a separate service. Some were renamed, and others disappeared to adjust to Cold War needs. The most notable of those that vanished was the Air Defense Command as a realignment that adjusted to Cold War mission requirements. Meanwhile, SAC became the largest, most disciplined, and hard-working command in the Air Force, and many personnel dreaded assignments to Strategic Air Command bases, whether at Offutt or one of the many bomber and ICBM bases. Many of those bases were located in northern tier states, thereby providing a shorter range for missiles and bombers against the Soviet Union. By the late 1950s, the command's personnel strength was close to 300,000 officers and men.

Convair B-36s fly in formation over the National Capitol. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

The largest conventional bomb ever dropped by an aircraft, the variously described 42,000, 43,000 or 44,000 lb bomb is seen here loaded on a specially modified B-29A, 44-6223. This aircraft would make six inert test drops over Muroc (Edwards) AFB in March 1948. Designed for the B-36, only two would ever be dropped from one - both from the same plane on the same flight. The B-36 flew a 2,900 mile round trip flight to Muroc from Carswell AFB, Ft. Worth, Tex., dropping the two inert bombs on a Muroc bomb range. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

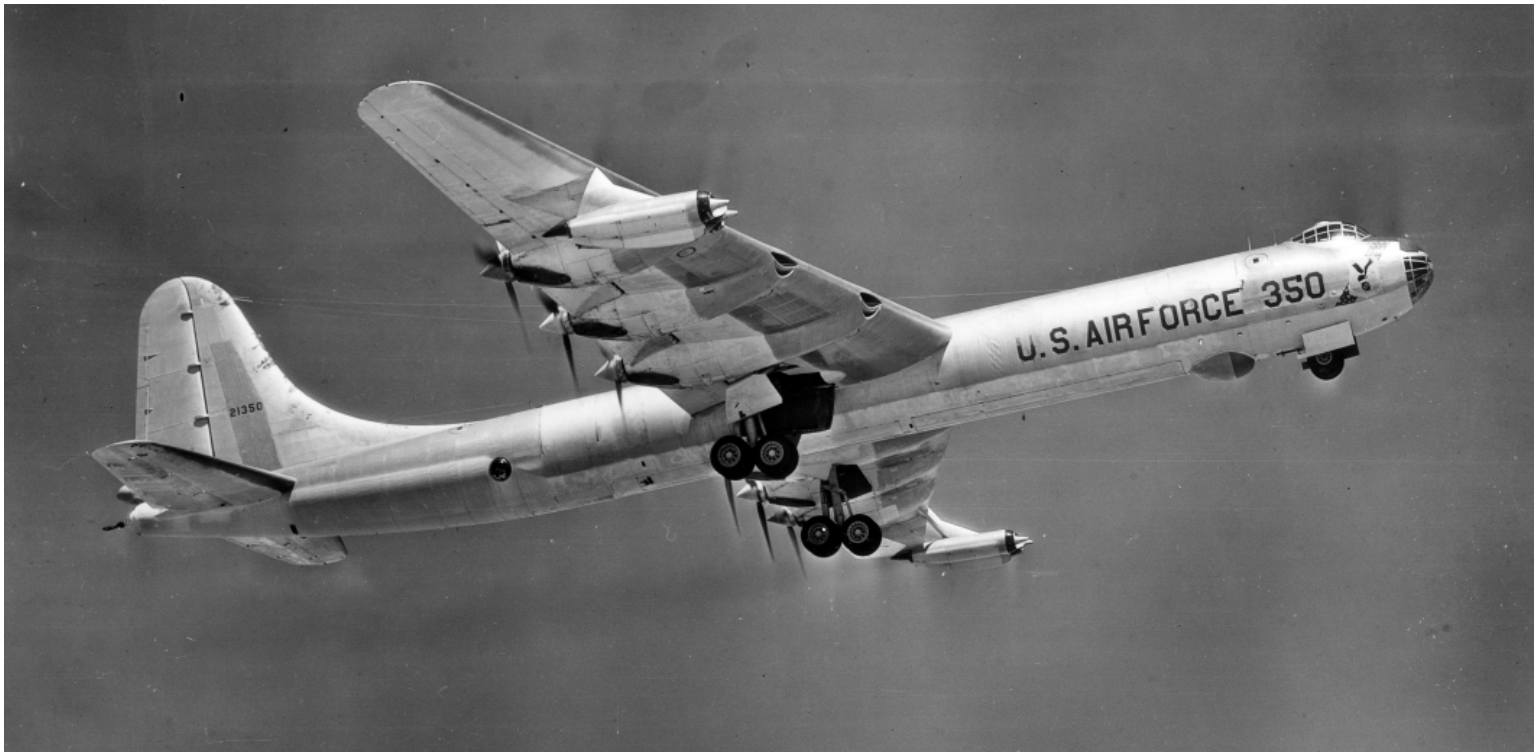
In the beginning, B-29s, the bombers that had ultimately finished off the Pacific war led by Gen. Curtis LeMay, were the first nuclear-configured aircraft in SAC's inventory. The Superfortress, of course, had delivered the two atomic bombs in August 1945. It was General LeMay who envisioned that the defeat of the home Japanese islands could only occur with strategic bombing, and he was proved right, the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki notwithstanding.

In 1948, SAC received its first B-36A Peacemaker, a slow-moving, extraordinarily heavy bomber that had a combination of reciprocating and jet engines. The plane proved to be impractical and disappeared from SAC's runways by 1958. In the same year, General LeMay was named CINCSAC, and would remain the command's leader until 1957.

Along with the SAC's B-29 bomber force, the KC-97, KB-29s and KB-50s refueling tankers followed, and became an integral part SAC's global mission. Then, with the Boeing KC-135 Stratotanker, first delivered in June 1957, SAC possessed a refueling aircraft that far surpassed its predecessors. With the new tanker, command aircraft were no longer required to descend to lower altitudes and slow their speed in order to refuel from KC-97s.

Prior to the Stratotanker's fielding in November 1956, General LeMay had initiated Operation *Quick Kick*, a long-range

The SAC's B-29s would be supplanted by the B-50s represented by this B-50D-95-BO Superfortress, 48-096. 48-096 would be converted to an EB-50D as mother ship for X-2 program. On May 12, 1953, X-2, 46-675, exploded in belly of the mothership, X-2 was dropped into Lake Ontario, and mothership limped back to Niagra Falls Airport, N.Y., but never flew again. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives, AAHS-P000153)



The B-36 would be the primary strategic bomber in SAC until being replaced by the Boeing B-47. Here, Convair B-36H-50-CF Peacemaker, 52-1350, departs Eglin AFB. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

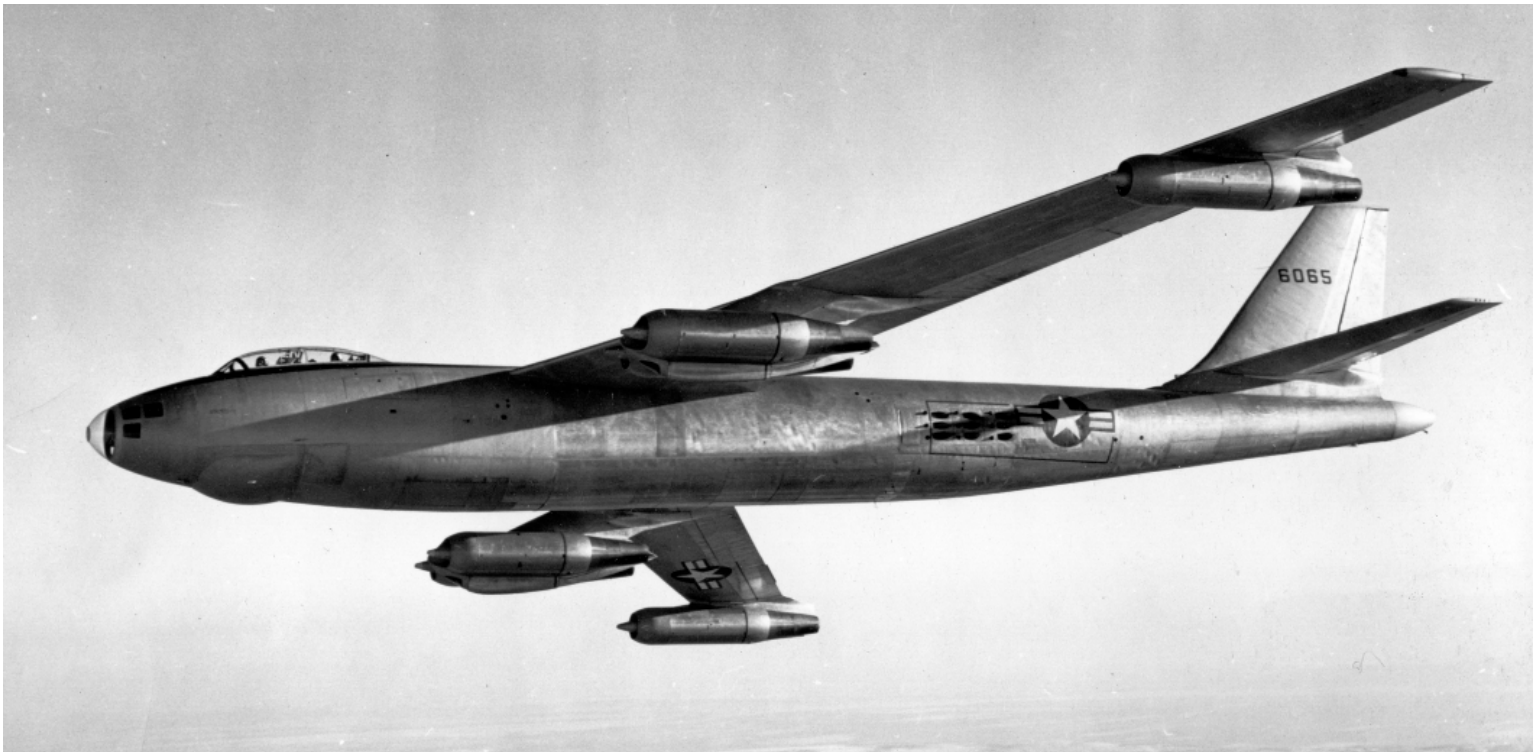
B-52 exercise using pre-positioned KC-97s that consisted of 13,500 nautical miles of flying in 31 hours, convincing him that a jet tanker was necessary for jet bombers. A month later, LeMay increased the mission in Operations *Power House* and *Road Block* using 1,000 B-47s and KC-97s in long range flights over North America and the Arctic. In those exercises, the command became convinced that a significant number of flying hours could be reduced by having a jet tanker. The KC-135 could fly at the same normal speed and altitude as the jet bombers, and the old reliable KC-97 became destined for the boneyard. Operation *Power Flite*, which occurred after deliveries of B-52s, revealed that flying hours could be cut by five to six hours in the round-the-world exercise using the KC-135. By 1958, five years after the Korean War's end, the command had 182 KC-135s in its inventory, and after a decade of fielding the jet tanker, SAC had over 650 of the aircraft.

General LeMay, CINCSAC since 1948, became well known for his tough, demanding methods designed to keep the command at its highest level of readiness. The B-29 continued to be his primary bomber asset along with the reciprocating engined tankers. LeMay left no doubt that his forces were nuclear-designated and global in nature, and resented any idea that they could be used in a conventional conflict. Although not the first CINCSAC, LeMay became the iconic, tough image of the command later, and his policies shaped SAC's future until its disappearance. Even to the time of his death just prior to Operation *Desert Shield* in 1990, LeMay continued to get annual CINCSAC briefings at Building 500, his signature cigar smoking in a non-smoking building never challenged. No other former CINCSAC was accorded that courtesy. LeMay's friend, actor James Stewart, who had become a SAC reserve flag officer, was a frequent visitor. As a footnote, the Strategic Air Command was the only USAF command to be featured in two films, one with Stewart in the leading role called *The Strategic Air Command*, a story that focused on the command's transition from the B-47 to the B-52. The other movie, *Bombers B-52*, featured Efram Zimbalist Jr. and Karl Malden, dealt with the fielding of the Model B-52Bs in the late 1950s. In short, most people in America were quite aware of the role of the Strategic Air Command, thanks to Hollywood. Its banner symbol, an armored fist holding lightning bolts was in its own way iconic and recognized.

In early July 1950, shortly after North Korea invaded South Korea, the Joint Chiefs ordered LeMay to deploy some of his B-29s to the Far East theater. The dismayed CINCSAC roared his disapproval, asserting that the command's mission was purely nuclear and its aircraft should not be used in a conventional war. Nonetheless, by order of the Joint Chiefs, B-29s were sent into the war, and after four months of steady conventional bombing, all North Korean strategic targets were destroyed. By October 1950, the overconfident 5th Air Force commander announced that "the war is nearly over."

Because of LeMay's strong objections concerning the Joint Chiefs' decision to place his B-29s under Far East Air Forces (FEAF), commanded by Gen. George Stratemeyer, and out of LeMay's command and control, the Air Force agreed to create a separate command in the Far East thereby keeping the CINCSAC directly involved in decision making. The new command, FEAF Bomber Command (Provisional), headquartered at Yakota AB in Japan, was activated, and its hand-picked commander was Lt. Gen. Emmett O'Donnell, SAC's 15th Air Force Commander, who was a LeMay loyalist. Then, the CINCSAC established a liaison officer who consulted with FEAF Headquarters and reported directly back to Offutt AFB.

Once the Far East reorganization was completed, LeMay



SAC's first pure-jet bomber would be the Boeing B-47, of which 2,032 of all types were ordered. The bomber was so aerodynamically clean that it was faster than many of the early fighters such as the P-80. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

sent 50 bombers from the 22nd and 92nd Bomb Groups to link up with FEAF's RB-29s (19th Bomb Group) already in theater. The deployment was swift, and the first strategic mission was launched against marshalling yards at Wonson on July 13, 1950. Once SAC's B-29s were situated in the Far East, in addition to their primary strategic bombing mission, two aircraft were set aside for paraflare and leaflet dropping in support of two 5th Air Force B-26 Invader wings located on South Korean bases, K-8 and K-9; bombers that were designated as tactical weapon systems, flying most missions at night against troop concentrations, supply convoys, and trains.

In August 1950, a month after the initial Wonson raid, SAC deployed two additional B-29 units to the Far East Bomber Command (Provisional); the 98th and 307th Bomb Groups. Once in theater, the 92nd and 98th Groups were stationed at Yakota AB, and the 19th, 22nd and 307th were deployed to Kadena AB, Okinawa. Finally, SAC sent Barksdale AFB's 91st Strategic Bomb Squadron's RB-29s in support of General O'Donnell. Once all of the B-29s and RB-29s were in the Far East, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the new Commander in Chief United Nations Command (CINCUNC) organized a consolidated target committee made up of 5th Air Force and FEAF Bomber Command (Provisional) senior officers. The committee remained the singular theater-level target agency for the duration of the Korean War. General MacArthur was relieved of his command on April 11, 1951, but there was no noticeable change in command and control in the war. He was replaced by Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, the new CINCUNC, who was later followed by Gen. Mark Clark. Obviously, the CINCUNCs were all Army generals.

Meanwhile, the deployments of SAC aircraft did not end in August 1950. Following the Chinese invasion of South Korea in October, the Joint Chiefs ordered LeMay to deploy the 27th Fighter Escort Wing at Barksdale AFB, an F-84E Thunderjet unit, to FEAF. Once in theater, the wing, which consisted of 75 aircraft, was transferred to Headquarters 5th Air Force Forward and other FEAF units at K-2, a fighter base at Taegu, South Korea, that also had F-86s and F-94Bs. Taegu was also a staging area for troop movements to and from Tachikawa AB, Japan, using C-124s. At K-2, SAC air and ground crews trained 5th Air Force personnel on close air support and reconnaissance missions. When that training was completed, the wing crews returned stateside to Bergstrom AFB, Austin, Tex., and began receiving new F-84Gs. By 1960 all of SAC's fighter assets had been transferred to the Tactical Air Command. The F-86s were the last to go.

In what became an important long-range mission significance for SAC, the first air refueling was accomplished over Korea under combat conditions by KB-29s in July 1951. That event was a true milestone in the command's global nuclear mission for years to come. Meanwhile, LeMay continued to be concerned over the deployment of B-29s to the Far East. He felt that SAC's primary nuclear mission was weakened by a reduction of the command's capability to prosecute a nuclear war against the Soviet Union with B-29s. Furthermore, he was concerned about his forces being under operational control of a theater commander, however temporary, and particularly mistrusted Generals MacArthur and Stratemeyer whom he knew coveted those forces. Finally, the CINCSAC never believed that he had true command and control over those forces, irrespective of his relationship with General O'Donnell, and remained quite uneasy over the relationship with FEAF. As the war progressed, furthermore, B-29s were increasingly used in tactical roles using aircrews that had been highly trained in long-range strategic bombing with nuclear weapons. LeMay's concerns were justified, and when his aircrews returned to SAC bases after the war in 1953, considerable retraining was necessary to restore

Boeing RB-52B-15-BO Stratofortress, 52-8715, was among the first batch of B-52s delivered to SAC. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

their strategic bombing skills. Then, as the war continued for three years, LeMay asked the Joint Chiefs to consider using nuclear bombs to create a permanent demilitarized zone along the 38th parallel. His recommendation was turned down, and the Korean War continued as a conventional conflict.

Accordingly, SAC's bombers remained in the Far East until the end of the war in July 1953, by then worn-out from endless strategic and tactical sorties over Korea. For example, there were many missions in which the B-29s flew over targets at high altitudes while low-level B-26 Invaders attacked tactical targets directly beneath them. Despite General LeMay's concerns over FEAF's obvious desire to permanently obtain his B-29s, thanks to the Joint Chiefs, he ended up gaining FEAF's 19th Bombardment Group, a genuine unexpected bonus.

In the end, FEAF Bomber Command (Provisional) had been an aberrational echelon in the Far East command. Apparently the Air Force viewed the B-29 mission in the conflict as "Provisional." During the Korean War, SAC bombers dropped 185,000 tons of ordnance on North Korean and Chinese targets. They flew over 181,000 combat hours (more than 18,000 sorties), and B-29 gunners were credited with shooting down 27 enemy aircraft. Altogether, 17 Superfortresses were shot down during the war along with a small number of aircraft that crashed in the Sea of Japan from mechanical failures.

In the meantime, LeMay got his wish for a new bomber, Boeing's B-47, the first jet long-range aircraft, and he eventually mothballed his B-29s and B-50s at Davis-Monthan AFB in Arizona. The B-47, generally agreed, was SAC's most beautiful bomber among many others fielded in nearly a half century, and was symbolic of the command's close relationship with Boeing. But the plane proved smaller and more globally limited than LeMay really wanted, and he was able to persuade the Air Force that another larger bomber, better designed for global thermonuclear warfare, was needed.

Doubtless, the B-52 Stratofortress became the lasting symbol of Strategic Air Command power over the following decades. The embryo of the B-52 had come in 1948 when Boeing's proposal to the Air Force, the Model 462, using six turboprop engines, was

SAC operated a large fleet of tanker aircraft that over the years included KB-29s, KB-50s, KC-97s, KC-135s and KC-10s. Shown here is a B-52B receiving fuel from a KC-97G. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

The General Dynamics' FB-111A saw limited service with SAC with only two Wings being equipped with the aircraft. Arrival of the B-1 saw the FB-111As being phased out of SAC inventory. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

accepted. Although it met range requirements, the aircraft was too slow, and Boeing abandoned the turboprop configuration for six Pratt & Whitney J-57 water-injected jet engines leading to two swept wings bomber prototypes, the XB-52 and the YB-52 (Model 464-67). By February 1950, the plane's gross weight was increased to 390,000 pounds, thereby extending its range. Altogether, there were eventually eight different B-52 production models produced by Boeing, each one unique in avionics, engines, and structure. Boeing invested over three million engineering hours to create the right bomber for SAC.

B-52As were never part of SAC's fleet. The maiden flight occurred on April 15, 1952, by the YB-52, and B and C Models were the first fielded bombers to the command's designated bases in June 1955. Altogether, Boeing delivered 742 B-52s to SAC bases over the years. Needless to say, as SAC received more B-52s, each model had its own newer features in avionics, structure and engines. For example, the engines varied with the Pratt & Whitney water injected J-57s on B, C, E, F and Gs, the MD-9FCS on D Models, and the TF-33 on the last model, the B-52H. Structural differences were quite noticeable, especially on the B through F Models, with taller vertical stabilizers. The B-52D, equipped with a High Density Bombing System (HDBS) that greatly increased its internal carriage (nicknamed "Big Belly") over all other models. The D Model was also equipped with external carriage on wing pylons and 3,000 gallon jettisonable wing tanks (C through F Models had them as well). G and H Models were characterized by shorter tails than their predecessors, and equipped with 700-gallon fixed tanks under the wings. Both models were also adapted to the Hound Dog air-to-ground missile, one that could be carried externally and launched 500 miles from target. The Hound Dog was the B-52's first nuclear standoff weapon. Finally, B through G Models were armed with fifty caliber tail guns, and the B-52H was equipped with a single 20 mm Vulcan gun for defense. All tail guns were operated by a forward compartment gunner. In conclusion, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, acquisition of the B-52 led to the fielding of SAC's greatest and longest living bomber. Then, there was a gradual drawdown of the B-47s, destined to be mothballed at Davis-Monthan AFB by 1964. SAC, of course, viewed those new, larger long-range B-52s as the chief deterrent in a global

Convair's B-58 Hustler lasted less than 10 years in service before being phased out. This early 1960s hot-rod was gone by February 1970. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives, AAHS-P008002)

Eight SAC B-52Fs equipped with Hound Dog nuclear missiles on their alert stands. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

thermonuclear conflict. But, as history would have it, they would be consistently used in conventional warfare.

With the Vietnam War, the command reluctantly deployed its B-52D, F and G models to Southeast Asia, the second and much longer conventional conflict after the Korean War. SAC leaders continued to believe in the singular nuclear mission, but Headquarters USAF and the Joint Chiefs disagreed. During the Southeast Asia conflict, B-52s were stationed as distant as Guam, along with KC-135s, and were used primarily for carpet bombing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. When peace talks ended in December 1972, the Air Force initiated Operation *Linebacker II*, an operation that lasted for 11 days in early 1973 and triggered a peace accord with North Vietnam. Despite the agreement, SAC B-52s continued sorties until August 1973.

When the Strategic Air Command's bombing missions over Vietnam ended in 1973, two years before war's end and after eight years of combat, all D Models were gradually sent to Davis-Monthan AFB with the last arriving in 1983, worn out and breaking down from the countless sorties. Spare parts shortages were also a problem, and air depots had been relegated to fabricating spares to keep the D Model flying. The command had lost 17 B-52s (not including 14 other operational losses) in the Southeast Asia conflict to Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) and MIGs but the losses were considered acceptable considering the number of sorties and length of time in theater.

By then, SAC's aircraft inventory included the new FB-111, a General Dynamics incipient headache, and the B-58 Hustler, a supersonic bomber SAC had purchased in the early 1960s and drawn down by 1970. In retrospect, the Hustler was viewed as a mistake in judgment, and aptly named according to some of SAC's aircrews. In any case, the heart of the bomber fleet continued to be the B-52s. As time would tell, B-52G models (largest model inventory at 193 aircraft) were relegated to conventional missions even though they were initially nuclear-configured. The FB-111 was more a tactical nuclear asset, and once its mechanical problems were ironed out, was nuclear-configured primarily for Short Range Attack Missiles (SRAMs), also a B-52 weapon that had been first delivered in 1972. SAC deployed a number of FB-111s to England as part of NATO's deterrent against the Soviets. The Tactical Air Command, meanwhile, had fielded conventional F-111s in its inventory and, in the early 1990s, obtained SAC's FB-111s, using them as trainers for a short period of time.

By 1976, SAC's B-52s numbered 419 planes, supported by 69 FB-111s. Although its remaining inventory of G and H Models was satisfactory after Vietnam, SAC wanted to purchase an interim bomber that would eventually replace the aging "BUFFs," the nickname given to the legendary Stratofortress by those who admired the aircraft. H Models, all built at Boeing's Wichita, Kansas, plant, in the meantime, had sat in alert pens fully loaded with nuclear weapons, and continued to have low flying hours after their deployment in the early 1960s.

The legendary longevity of the B-52 fleet was in no small way due to critical retrofits at Air Logistics Centers over the years following the Southeast Asia conflict, most of which were in the critical area of avionics. There were also important structural enhancements. In 1973, G and H Models underwent Phase VI's AN/ALQ V(I) Electronic Counter Measures (ECM) modifications for improved defensive systems. By 1981, SAC's inventory had dropped to 262 G and H Models with the retirement of the B-52D and F Models. The remaining G and H Models had been retrofitted with Global Positioning System (GPS), and AN/ALQ-172 V(II) ECM Sets, Strategic Radar System, Conventional Weapon Configuration, the Common Strategic Rotary Launcher (CSRL) system designed for nuclear and conventional AGM-86B Air Launched Cruise Missiles (ALCM) in H Models,

Rockwell's B-1B Lancer replaced General Dynamics FB-111s. Originally designed for a high-altitude high-speed penetration role, the B Models were reconfigured for low-level penetration. (Photo by Adrian Pingstone from the AAHS archives)

the AGM-84 Harpoon and AGM-69A SRAM Missile Integration (External and Internal with CSRL), Tail Warning System (AN/ASQ-38), Terrain Following Radar (TFR), and Terrain Avoidance Radar (ACR), the AGM-28 Hound Dog configuration, an Electro-Optical Viewing System that improved damage assessment strike capability, with steerable low light television and Forward Looking Infrared Sensors (FLIR), 13 retrofitted improvements of G and H Model Defensive Avionics Systems (sensors, jammers, chaff, and flares), the USAF Satellite Communications System, and Cruise Missile Integration AN/ASQ-38 Offensive Avionics System (OAS). In short, the B-52 was purposely designed as a standoff platform as well as an over-the-target iron bomb weapon system. As one example of its new capability, the B-52 was able to launch Harpoon missiles 50 miles from an enemy ship with a guidance system that kept the weapon under the radar and precisely on target, thanks to missile TFR, until it hit the ship and exploded internally. That standoff capability, designed for Harpoons, ALCMs and SRAMs was designed to reduce SAM and aircraft attacks.

The B-1B, a North American Rockwell-built aircraft with a highly troubled Eaton defensive avionics system (DAS) and an excellent Boeing Offensive Avionics System, was fielded first at Dyess AFB in the mid-1980s, then to Grand Forks AFB, Ellsworth AFB and McConnell AFB, with an initial total of 100 bombers. Like the FB-111s, the B-1B had variable sweep wings with no external hard points. It also possessed two huge bomb bays, one designed for the new CSRL for nuclear and conventional ALCMs, and a second bay could be used for nuclear gravity bombs like the reliable M-61. The Lancer, as it was named, was a low-level subsonic aircraft with TFR and electronic counter measures that eliminated the need for defensive guns. The plane's General Electric (GE) engines were extremely powerful, but the B-1B suffered early mechanical problems, and one plane actually dropped an entire engine over southern Colorado. The Eaton defensive system was a major headache for the bomber, and five aircraft crashed, some including pilot error, soon after being fielded. SAC's successful history with Boeing over the years caused some in the command to lament Rockwell's stunning creation, and referred to it as merely an "interim bomber." The B-1B was dominating in appearance, and agile enough to perform some limited acrobatic feats with its wings tucked in. The aircraft's beauty was best captured in a well-known painting that showed the Lancer at low-level over a mountain lake just at the moment the afterburner was kicked in, causing a large spout of water shooting upward behind. My interviews with four-man aircrews revealed a highly positive bias for the aircraft, and it became a mainstay at its four bases. Today, it flies sorties over Afghanistan alongside B-52Hs.

The B-2 would eventually follow, but only a squadron was fielded at Whiteman AFB, Missouri. The Department of Defense (DOD) decided that the new stealth bomber was simply too expensive and unnecessary, and fielded no more. The command instead focused on continuing to modernize the B-52 with improved avionics, structural improvements, and weapons capability. It has now been projected that the H Models will last until the year 2040, likely long after the B-1B will be retired.

In the summer of 1990, SAC conducted a B-52G surge exercise, nicknamed Operation *Bull Rider,* at Clinton Sherman AFB, a bare base in western Oklahoma. The G Models were out of Barksdale AFB, and for a month were stretched to their limits with full internal loads of 750-lb general purpose (GP) bombs dropped over the Utah bombing range. Operation *Bull Rider* revealed the aging B-52Gs to be suffering, and spare parts were getting scarce. I attended *Bull Rider* with Maj. Gen. Charles Searock, and witnessed firsthand the logistical support in bare base austere conditions that included (Petroleum, Oil, Lubrication) POL, maintenance, and supply. *Bull Rider* proved to be an excellent

The Northrop B-2 Spirit was the last aircraft model to serve in SAC before it was dissolved in the early 1990s. (USAF photo from the AAHS archives)

exercise in preparation for Operation *Desert Storm* five months later, and General Searock led one of the missions to Utah.

H Models, in the meantime, had been removed from alert pens several years earlier, and SAC ceased its policy of nuclear-loaded B-52s in the air at all times started during the Cold War, mostly because of a couple of accidents, one in the Arctic and another off the coast of Spain. In both cases the nuclear weapons were safely retrieved. In the wake of those accidents, SAC and the DOD set up the Nuclear Accident Response Team (NART), governed by the *Nuclear Weapon Accident Response Procedures* (NARP) *Manual*. The NART was under SAC command and control with team members stationed at Offutt AFB for any future accident investigations. General Searock was in command of the team that would respond in the event of a USAF nuclear accident. The NART was viewed as uppermost in priority, and training for members was set up at Kirtland AFB, N.M., in 1990. NART was comprised of every conceivable specialty assigned to SAC, from engine mechanics to a historian, and I accompanied General Searock, who likewise took the training course. A historian not only recorded the nuclear accident, but was armed with records of previous events and methods of response. The first training exercise, using NART, was at Plattsburgh AFB, N.Y., in 1990. The U.S. Army, a short time later, had a similar team also under a two-star general, and shared its knowledge and expertise with SAC. That team focused on the Army's tactical nuclear weapons. At Seneca Army Depot in New York, for example, a nuclear accident exercise took place in 1991 in the Finger Lakes region, and I joined General Searock as an observer.

Operation *Desert Shield*, which began in the summer of 1990, was a preparatory period before the coalition fought Iraq in Operation *Desert Storm* in January-February 1991. B-52s were deployed to Jeddah Nu, Saudi Arabia, the tiny island Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean (a British possession), Moron AB, Spain, and RAF Fairford in England. At RAF Fairford there were a small number of H Models, and they used NATO munitions stored near the base. As Operation *Desert Storm* commenced, SAC exercised questionable judgment by flying fully loaded B-52Gs from Barksdale AFB to Baghdad on their first sortie of the war. Young, over-confident and excited pilots pushed their planes to the limit on the long trip to Iraq, refueling along the way, of course, and many of the J-57 Pratt & Whitney engines were burnt to a crisp after arrival at their bases. At Diego Garcia, many engines were replaced, and the fine sand on the island was so damaging, mechanics had to blow pulverized carbon through the J-57s to keep them clean and operational. One B-52G went into the sea after running out of fuel north of Diego Garcia, with three crewmen surviving and three killed. Meanwhile, the carpet bombing over Iraq by B-52s became legendary, and Iraqi soldiers surrendered by the tens of thousands because of what they either experienced or saw elsewhere.

SAC's other war fighting assets were deeply involved in Operation *Desert Storm*. KC-135s (including the improved, re-engined, re-skinned KC-135R Models) and KC-10s hovered over the region, ready to refuel both American and allied aircraft, with the KC-10s servicing coalition aircraft with JP-8, while other SAC tankers carried JP-4 in their tanks. SAC's famous SR-71, by the way, had been retired prior to Operation *Desert Shield* (first fielded in 1966). Command RC-135s, U-2s and

TR-1s provided critical intelligence to the coalition as well, along with AWACs aircraft. So that SAC's bombers would not run out of bombs during the *Desert Shield* period, much of Anderson AB's munitions dump on Guam was loaded on ships headed for the various B-52 bases. RAF Fairford's hefty supply of iron bombs stored in closed bunkers, meanwhile, was also quickly drained within two months by the handful of H Models. All bombs were WWII, Korea and Vietnam era munitions. Pre-positioned ships pulled into the Persian Gulf to deliver bombs to Jeddah Nu, and other ships took munitions to Spain and Diego Garcia. The RAF was our strongest ally in Operation *Desert Storm,* and their Tornados and other aircraft cratered many Iraqi runways. For all intents and purposes, there was no real classic air war over Iraq. F-15Es had been sent in early, along with the old reliable F-4s, and destroyed Iraq's early warning radar sites, clearing the way for bombers and fighters and minimizing the enemy's use of SAMs. Whatever fighter defenses that existed in Iraq's air force were knocked out of the skies by American, French and British planes early in the conflict.

In the midst of *Desert Storm,* in a rather puzzling event, CINCSAC Gen. John Chain decided to retire. After a ceremony at SAC headquarters, he flew a small antique plane from the base accompanied by his wife. Needless to say, I watched, puzzled and disillusioned. Chain was quickly replaced by Gen. Larry Butler, who, unbeknownst to many, was sent to dismantle SAC sometime after the war. In the meantime, General Chain had ordered a squadron of B-1Bs at Ellsworth to be retrofitted with a conventional package. He had wanted to test the bomber in real combat for the first time, despite many avionics and mechanical problems still unresolved by that time. General Butler quickly cancelled the order, sensing that B-1Bs would be scattered between the States and Iraq because of maintenance problems. Needless to say, B-1B aircrews at Ellsworth disagreed and were disappointed.

While the Barksdale B-52Gs dropped their internal loads of 750-lb bombs on Baghdad, other BUFFs launched conventional ALCMs against the Iraqis on that first night of the war. Also, British 1,000 pound bombs were externally loaded on Jeddah Nu-based G Model hard points for their first raid against Iraq. Although kept secret at the time, the new B-2 stealth bomber out of Whiteman AFB was used in a limited way as a test of its capability. With that decision, the B-1B was viewed as a non-player until its mechanical reliability and defensive system were improved.

As I sat in SAC's underground command post at Offutt AFB during January and February 1991, I watched the coalition's superior forces bring the war to a quick and decisive close. It was a privilege to sit next to my friend General Searock, who was awarded his third star during the conflict. Meanwhile, my experience in the underground command post subsequently produced three volumes published by the Air Force by 1992-93; two volumes covered the strategic air war over Iraq and Kuwait, and a third narrowly focused on F-16 actions in the conflict. General Searock, by then a three-star that had been responsible for the institutionalization of two major logistics programs dealing with supply and maintenance during his tenure at SAC and were put to the test in *Desert Storm,* was named Deputy Commander, Air Force Logistics Command soon after war's end and awarded the Distinguished Service Medal (DSM) for his exceptional leadership. (I wrote it up for the CINCSAC).

When the brief Gulf War ended, SAC's worn out B-52Gs were eventually retired to Davis-Monthan AFB, leaving a total of 95 H Models in the fleet (102 had originally been fielded). Those B-52s had far fewer flying hours on their TF-33 fan jet non-water injected engines, and had undergone many enhancing retrofits. Also, adequate spare parts continued to be available. Many of the B-52Hs were in almost pristine condition, and thereafter viewed as SAC's first line bombers along with now-operational B-1Bs and the squadron of B-2s. As SAC went out of business, many of the northern tier bases were eventually closed, and all other bases were turned over to a new consolidated command, Air Combat Command, at Langley AFB, Virginia. Building 500 at Offutt AFB, usually housing 5,000 personnel, was soon vacated, and was inhabited only by the new small Strategic Command staff that was comprised of all services, first led by an admiral. Over a 1,000 Minuteman and 50 multi-warhead Peacekeeper ICBMs were also transferred to the new consolidated command, along with tanker and reconnaissance assets. With the Cold War over, it was agreed that the Strategic Air Command was no longer a necessity.

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