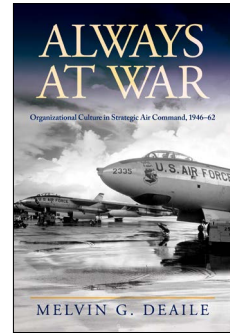


Book Review

Always at War - Organisational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946-62



Author: Melvin G Deaile

Publisher: Naval Institute Press; Illustrated edition (2018) (ISBN: 978-1682472484), 320 pages

Reviewed by Group Captain John Shields

Introduction

In 1946, the US created Strategic Air Command (SAC) to manage its nuclear bomber force in deterring the emerging Soviet threat. Although previous books have detailed SAC's history and its principal characters, Melvin Deaile's book *Always at War* brings a unique perspective by focusing on 'those elements that constituted SAC's organisational culture and the circumstances that brought them to fruition.' The book reviews the period from SAC's inception to its contribution during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, where: 'Throughout the crisis, SAC's airborne alert aircraft flew 2,088 missions logged 47,000 flying hours, travelled 20 million miles and conducted 4,076 air refuellings without a single accident.'

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a short but tense affair. However, Deaile argues that the crisis highlighted the benefits of SAC's evolving culture. Formed by leaders with extensive Second World War experience and a strong belief in strategic bombing, SAC generated a culture of personal responsibility, team cohesion, and competition. SAC leadership also exploited doctrine, strict adherence to detailed procedures, and technology to create an organisation that could meet the new global challenges. At the heart of the 'SAC Mentality' was the instilled sense of a clear and present danger from the growing Soviet threat.

The author, Melvin Deaile, is a decorated B-52 Stratofortress/B2 Spirit pilot and a United States Air Force (USAF) Weapons School graduate with combat experience in Operations Desert Storm and Enduring Freedom. On retirement from the USAF, Deaile transitioned to academia. He holds a PhD in American History and is an associate professor at the USAF's Air Command and Staff College. As an operator, academic and teacher, he brings significant credibility, relevance, and currency to the subject matter.

The narrative is part biography, part historical case study with a light smattering of political science thrown in for analytical purposes. It is an eclectic mix, but it works well. The book consists of 320 pages and dedicates the last 74 pages to endnotes, bibliography, and index. As a result, the main body is pared back to 222 pages and split across seven chapters as well as the obligatory introduction and epilogue.

The introduction lays the academic foundation by explaining the various cultural attributes. The author points out that the SAC culture did not develop quickly, nor did it remain constant throughout the organisation's existence, it adjusted to internal and external forces. Strategic shocks, such as the Korean War, new political administrations, inter-service rivalries, and embedding new force structures, all influenced the organisation's culture. Deaile lays out his academic framework by suggesting that culture provides its members with accepted ways of expressing and affirming their beliefs, values, and norms, and it shapes the way people operate, perform and act. One of SAC's mechanisms to establish these norms was the introduction of aircrew checklists to formalise good and safe practices across the force. Today, checklists are fundamental to sound airmanship, but this was a radical reform in the early days of SAC. Furthermore, culture exhibits itself in the symbols, rituals, routines, and even the myths a particular social group embraces. For example, many myths surrounded LeMay; most were security-related but unfounded. Nevertheless, the rumours bolstered, rather than hindered, LeMay's and his organisation's reputation. The net result was a greater vigilance and a sense of teamwork across the USAF's nuclear attack enterprise. After setting out his academic framework, the remaining chapters demonstrate how SAC, and its enigmatic leader, generated and maintained the SAC culture.

The chapters run in chronological order; the first two chapters are contextual and focus on the beginnings of airpower, strategic bombardment doctrine as well as US bomber experiences during the Second World War. Chapter Three reviews the birth of SAC, whereas Chapter Four focuses on the arrival of its second commander, LeMay – an individual who epitomised SAC and drove its organisational culture during his nine-year tenure in command. Chapter Five looks at SAC's contribution to the Korean War, while Chapter Six analyses SAC's culture. Chapter Seven examines the cultural challenges associated with integrating the missile community into a bomber-dominated world.

The book is an easy and enjoyable read, it avoids the common fault of over-reliance on potentially confusing military jargon. Moreover, the book contains extensive research, a point

reinforced by 40 pages of endnotes. Comprehensive primary source material is used, including the personal papers of SAC leaders from the Library of Congress and the Air Force Historical Research Agency. Moreover, the narrative has an equitable balance between academic research and anecdotes that enrich and personalise the story. Indeed, the efforts made by LeMay and his wife to cater to the needs of SAC dependents provided a rare insight into the softer side of LeMay's character.

Although not specified in the narrative, the book's contemporary relevance is significant. At the strategic level, the US transition from two decades of counter-insurgency operations to focus on a near-peer competitor has parallels with SAC/LeMay's travails of shifting from a Second World War to a Cold War focus. At today's operational level, military forces must continually adapt due to the introduction and integration of new capabilities. However, as they develop these new capabilities, do military leaders consider the culture that they currently have or the culture that they are trying to create? Additionally, and at the joint level, the modern military planners endeavouring to integrate cyber and space into the traditional environmental domains may wish to consider how SAC attempted to blend the missileer sub-culture with its dominant and well-established strategic bomber community. Consequently, much can be gleaned from the way that SAC was rolled out in 1946. Ultimately, the book has a broad utility for Cold War veterans or historians reflecting on halcyon days to the modern strategic leader seeking to introduce emerging warfighting capabilities and domains into contemporary constructs.

The book does have its quirks, but these do not distract from the book's overall utility. Each chapter has its own bespoke and comprehensive conclusion; this method does cater to the predatory reader – a known trait at US PME institutions! Perhaps bolstering the scope to include some or all of the last three decades of SAC's existence, including the Vietnam War, the latter stages of the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm, could have been an astute addition. However, the book's purpose is not to provide a biography of LeMay or a comprehensive history of SAC. *Always at War* complements other SAC-related books, but its unique selling point is its focus on the selection and development of the organisational culture. Modern air forces should take heed.

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