Doolittle and Eaker said he was the greatest air commander of all time.

LeMay

By Walter J. Boyne

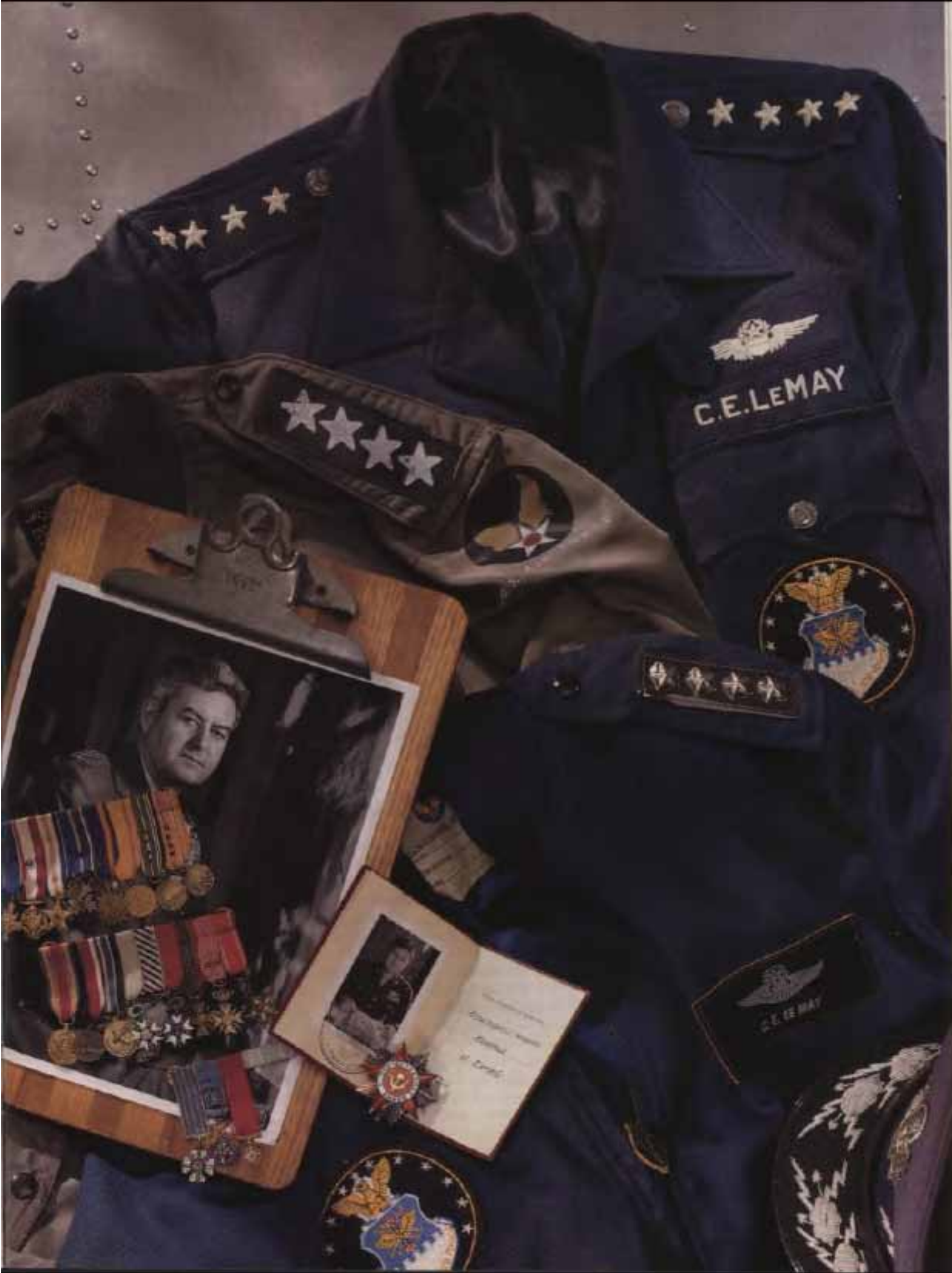
THERE has never been anyone like Gen. Curtis E. LeMay. Within the Air Force, he was extraordinarily successful at every level of command, from squadron to the entire service. He was a brilliant pilot, preeminent navigator, and excellent bombardier, as well as a daring combat leader who always flew the toughest missions.

A master of tactics and strategy, LeMay not only played key World War II roles in both Europe and the Pacific but also pushed Strategic Air Command to the pinnacle of greatness and served as the architect of victory in the Cold War. He was the greatest air commander of all time, determined to win as quickly as possible with the minimum number of casualties.

At the beginning of World War II, by dint of hard work and training, he was able to mold troops and equipment into successful fighting units when there were inadequate resources with which to work. Under his leadership—and with support produced by his masterful relations with Congress—he gained such enormous resources for Strategic Air Command that American opponents were deterred.

"Tough" is always the word that springs to mind in any consideration of LeMay. Yet he went far beyond being tough to get the results he knew were needed. He achieved his great triumphs by combining his powers of analytical thinking with

During World War II, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay displayed masterful tactics and strategy that helped the US prevail first in Europe and then in the Pacific. Even Soviet officers and officials acknowledged LeMay's brilliant leadership and awarded him a military decoration (among items at right).


C.E.LEMAY

A determined LeMay earned a commission in the Regular Army through a complicated route, doing whatever it took to secure one of the service's rare flying positions. The young LeMay in this photo had just completed pilot training.

a rigorous operational philosophy. He was tough, as a combat commander should be tough—insisting on extremely high standards of training and strict evaluation. He knew from experience that this led to a proficiency that produced both good results and lower casualties. LeMay was ready for combat every day of his military career because he believed that there might be combat on any day.

Retired USAF Gen. Russell E. Dougherty, the eighth officer to command SAC and one of the most thoughtful, well-spoken military men in the United States, describes himself as "the first non-hero to command the Strategic Air Command." He has an almost endless fund of stories that shed light on LeMay.

Dougherty recalls a time that he was visited by retired Gens. Jimmy Doolittle and Ira Eaker at his Quarters 16 when he was CINCSAC at Offutt AFB, Neb. The three were sitting in a recreation room designed and furnished by LeMay when, in the course of conversation, Eaker stated that "LeMay was my best combat commander." Doolittle agreed and went on to say that he had watched LeMay both in Europe and the Pacific and believed him to be the best air combat commander the US or any other nation ever produced.

Eaker followed by remarking, "LeMay excelled as a 'today' general. He had great competence in every quarter, but he could look at what was in front of him today, and then take whatever forces were available today, and apply them to the enemy in front of him today."

Still, LeMay also was a "tomorrow" general. At the outset of the Cold War, he correctly identified the potential threat posed by the Soviet Union. He spent every day preparing first Strategic Air Command and then the entire USAF to make certain that tomorrow's battle would be deterred if possible and won if it could not be deterred. The organizations he created not only deterred tomorrow's battle indefinitely but also won the Cold War and consigned the aggressive, expansionist Soviet Union to the ash heap of history.

The man who did so much to win wars and keep the nuclear peace was born at home in Columbus, Ohio, on Nov. 15, 1906, the first of seven children, six of whom survived. The LeMay family was typical of the time, the father moving from job to job as necessity dictated and the mother struggling to make ends meet at home. In LeMay's 1965 autobiography, *Mission With LeMay,* the story is told of a 5-year-old Curtis Emerson LeMay becoming imbued with enthusiasm for flying when he first saw an aircraft passing overhead. He wanted to possess the airplane and he ran after it in a way that he never forgot. LeMay later realized that the event was a defining moment for him: He had to be involved in aviation.

Circuitous Route

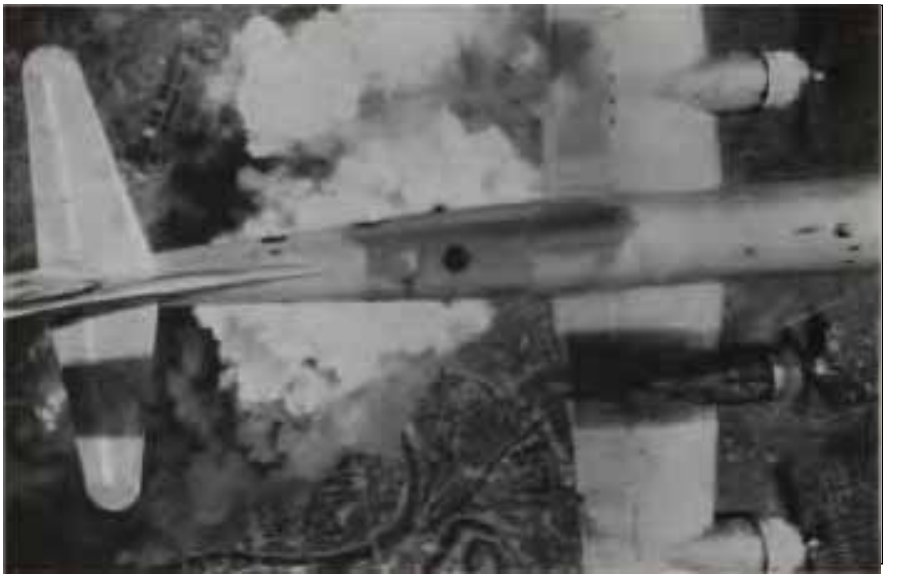
LeMay worked his way through Ohio State University, obtaining a commission in the US Army by a somewhat complicated route. He first gained a reserve commission as an ROTC student. Then, to expedite his entry into the flying cadet program, he resigned his commission to accept a commission in the Ohio National Guard. When he graduated from flying school at Kelly Field, Texas, in October 1929, he had to resign his National Guard commission before being awarded another reserve commission. Three months later, he received a commission in the Regular Army—an unusual accolade that spoke volumes, for most graduates of flying school in those days were given their reserve commissions and then released to civilian status. There were just too few available flying positions.

From the start, LeMay displayed the utter dedication and ferocious attention to detail that would characterize his career. Assigned to the elite 27th Pursuit Squadron of the 1st Pursuit Group, located at Selfridge Field, Mich., young LeMay accepted additional duties with pleasure, no matter what they were. He also sought out additional training, including subjects as esoteric for the time as celestial navigation. When he had an opportunity to learn instrument flying, he did so with his usual dedication, logging more time than any of his colleagues in the hood-equipped Douglas O-2s. He kept his skills. Famed test pilot Russ Schleeh, later LeMay's aide, recalls LeMay personally giving him tough partial-panel instrument checks in the B-17 when the soon-to-be famous 305th Bombardment Group was formed in 1942.

As much as he enjoyed flying Boeing P-12 pursuit aircraft, LeMay decided that fighters were essentially

defensive weapons and that any future wars would have to be won by offensive weapons. His assumption was fostered by the potential implicit in the new Martin B-10 bomber, which was just coming into service. At about the same time he made another important decision; in 1934 he married the vivacious, intelligent Helen Maitland.

In that same year, President Franklin D. Roosevelt tasked the Army Air Corps to carry the mail. The Air Corps, ill-equipped and lacking both the instruments and the training for flying in bad weather, nonetheless did an excellent job, though the press, acting out of political motives having little to do with the efficiency of the Air Corps, seized upon the inevitable accidents and represented the effort as a fiasco.



A B-29 from XXI Bomber Command drops incendiary bombs over Japan in 1945. In a revolutionary tactic, LeMay stripped the Superfortresses for low-altitude firebombing of Japan's industrial areas.

LeMay discusses the results of a raid by 300 B-29s on Tokyo in March 1945 with Brig. Gen. Lauris Norstad (left) and Brig. Gen. Thomas S. Power.

Scrounging

Typically, buck pilot LeMay flew as much as possible, pulling extra shifts whenever he could. Years later, he recalled that the chief hazard was not crashing but finding a place to sleep and scrounging enough money to get something to eat, for there were no extra funds provided for the expenses of either flight or ground crews.

LeMay learned from the experience. He was particularly struck with the overriding importance of logistics and the vital requirement for training, lessons he never forgot. He was promoted to first lieutenant in March 1935, after serving six years in grade. Subsequent promotions came rather more rapidly.

In 1937, he was assigned to the GHQ Air Force at Langley Field, Va., just as the first Boeing Y1-B17s were acquired by the 2d Bombardment Group. At Langley, LeMay maintained his skills as a pilot and increased his proficiency as a navigator. Next, he taught himself to be a bombardier, using the new and highly classified Norden bombsight. He was thus the first example of his own "triple rated" concept that he would later sponsor in Strategic Air Command.

His pilot–navigator–bombardier capability placed him in a unique position. The Air Corps wanted to prove the efficiency of the B-17, and LeMay was lead navigator on two "mass" flights of B-17s to South America in 1938—the "mass" meaning six Y1B-17s on the February flight to Argentina and three on the August flight to Colombia. But the GHQ Air Force gained its greatest fame (or in the eyes of the US Navy, notoriety) on May 12, 1938, when LeMay's impeccable navigation enabled three of the Fortresses to intercept *Rex,* an Italian ocean liner, 776 miles out to sea.

After the typically slow promotion of peacetime, LeMay's career now began to skyrocket. He made captain in 1940—11 years after his commission date—and received command of a squadron in the 34th Bombardment Group.

Then as later, all of LeMay's work was based on a hard foundation of personal competence. Immediately before the outbreak of World War II, he pioneered air routes over the South Atlantic to Africa and over the North Atlantic to England. He was an excellent pilot: After a single landing in a Consolidated B-24 during training, he flew a brand new Liberator to England.

He was soon promoted to command—and to create and train—the

A B-36 crew preparing for a long-range training mission out of Ellsworth AFB, S.D. (above), and the aerial refueling of* Lucky Lady II *(lower aircraft below) symbolize the global strike force that LeMay envisioned and created.

305th Bombardment Group. He led the 305th in combat and found his true métier. A LeMay quote of the time comes close to being a perfect fit with his nature: In the midst of the air war against Germany, he said, "I don't mind being called tough, since I find in this racket it's the tough guys who lead the survivors."

Two Critical Tactics

Colonel LeMay drilled the 305th constantly, flying in every aircraft position except that of ball gunner. He ordered constant practice in formation and instrument flying to enable his men to cope with the miserable weather in which they would have to fight. In addition, he developed two crucial tactics that would be adopted throughout USAAF.

The first of these was to require a long, straight bomb run from the initial point, with no deviations from course or altitude to avoid flak. Using this tactic, the 305th consistently put more bombs on the target than did other groups. LeMay accepted the increased vulnerability of the long run-in, arguing that, overall, it was safer to fly a straight bomb run and knock the target out than to try to evade flak by jinking and have to return again and again.

Secondly, he devised what became known as the combat box, the arrangement in which the American bombers flew in staggered formations that optimized the firepower they could bring to bear on German targets.

These ideas were a product of LeMay's brooding silence and intense concentration, qualities that his colleagues learned to endure. At meals with his staff, it was not uncommon for him to eat without saying a single word. He was not being rude; he was just inordinately preoccupied with the demands placed upon him and aware of how little experience he actually had. Nonetheless, he was determined to do his job to the best of his ability and to save the lives of as many of his people as possible in the process.

LeMay continued to lead the toughest raids, even after he had been given command of the Third Air Division and promoted to brigadier general. He led the bloody Aug. 17, 1943, raid on the German city of Regensburg, when USAAF lost 24 out of 146—a chilling 16 percent—of the aircraft dispatched to the target.

Despite these losses, his overall success in Europe led to his being promoted to the rank of major general. He was selected by Gen. H.H. Arnold to be commanding general of XX Bomber Command in India. He was next transferred to the Mariana Islands to assume command of the XXI Bomber Command and there turned the faltering B-29 bomber campaign into a war-winning effort based upon new tactics.

LeMay elected to strip the B-29s of gunners, guns, and ammunition and send them in singly at low level to firebomb urban industrial areas in Japan. His success was so great that Japan, had its leaders been acting sensibly and honorably, should have surrendered by April 1945. Had they done so, they would have spared their country further devastation and they would have avoided the two atomic attacks in August 1945—at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—that forced their surrender.

One of LeMay's lesser known contributions came immediately after the end of the war, when Arnold tasked him to jump-start the leap into postwar technology as deputy chief of staff for research and development. He succeeded admirably and then served as a three star commanding

US Air Forces in Europe, where he initiated the Berlin Airlift.

Creating SAC

Though he already had achieved much, LeMay's greatest contributions were yet to come. The blockade of Berlin in 1948 and the relentless extension of Soviet power into Eastern Europe made Moscow's intentions only too obvious. On Oct. 19, 1948, LeMay assumed the leadership of Strategic Air Command.

In 1948, SAC had fewer than 52,000 personnel. It had 837 aircraft, including only 35 B-36 and 35 B-50 intercontinental-range bombers. It had only the beginning of a tanker force, with two air refueling squadrons just getting their converted KB-29s.

He went to work, determined to build SAC to his exacting standards, unit by unit. Curiously, he was not dismayed, nor did he fire anyone, when an initial simulated combat mission was flown without a single aircraft getting over the target. As always, he was totally dedicated to his tasks and his responsibilities as a commander, yet he was always agonizingly aware of his responsibility to his men for their safety.

He started with the 509th Bombardment Group. He set high standards and insisted that they be met. He picked a staff that could evaluate performance and enforce his standards. It took time, but Strategic Air Command was transformed into a potent instrument of deterrence. As its proficiency increased, so did its morale; SAC became a recognized elite, a model for the Air Force to follow.

Under LeMay's leadership, SAC became a potent force for deterrence, an elite element of USAF. This B-47 crew, scrambling for a mission, was among SAC's tough, highly trained members who were ready on a moment's notice.

LeMay had a vision of SAC being so obviously powerful that it would be perceived by the enemies of the United States to be unbeatable and so deter them. To create a SAC of such stature, he had to enforce his will and his standards within the command and at the same time enforce his demands for resources in Washington—the Air Force, the Department of Defense, the Bureau of Budget, and the Congress. He was equally successful on both fronts.

The command was fashioned in his image and reflected his values. He got impressive results that helped him establish such good relations with Congress that he got sufficient resources on a regular basis. These were never enough to meet all his demands but more than enough to generate envy within DoD and even within the Air Force. Congress liked dealing with LeMay because he was straightforward. He placed no spin on his statements. He meant what he said and the lawmakers loved it.

LeMay embraced technology. He saw the jet bomber as the weapon of the present and the missile as the weapon of the future. If he was somewhat more attached to the manned bomber than the ICBM, he must be forgiven, for he knew what the bombers could do, and the missiles, though ultimately less expensive, were still to be tested.

After the famous Boeing chief test pilot A.M. "Tex" Johnston (right seat) checked him out in the cockpit, LeMay test-flew a KC-135 aerial refueler. Even as SAC commander, LeMay continued flying and setting records.

Not Since Grant

On Oct. 29, 1951, he became the youngest US four-star general since Ulysses S. Grant. He led SAC until

USAF Chief of Staff LeMay conferred with President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis. With him are (l–r) Col. Ralph Steakley, a JCS photo evaluator, and Lt. Col. Joe O'Brady and Maj. Richard Heyser, reconnaissance pilots.

June 30, 1957, the longest tenure of any US military commander since the days of Army Gen. Winfield Scott. When he left SAC it had grown to a force of 224,000 active duty personnel, equipped with some 2,700 aircraft—127 B-36s, 243 B-52s, 1,501 B-47s and RB-47s, 742 KC-97s, and 24 KC-135s. It was the mightiest force the world had ever known, and it established a Pax Americana, for it was so obviously powerful that no nation could risk war with it. LeMay saw to it that SAC was always ready to fight immediately—not the next month, not the next day, but that day.

LeMay did appear to be gruff, and this was interpreted that he was mean. He was not mean, as those who worked with him will tell you and as his many efforts on behalf of his enlisted forces demonstrated. He did not smile readily, in part because of his personality. LeMay was often uncommunicative, not because he meant to be rude but because he was, for his entire career as a commander, preoccupied with important problems, the weight of which might have overwhelmed a lesser man. When he did speak, he did so in a trenchant manner that economized on words but went to the heart of the matter.

Dougherty recalls that LeMay was an iconoclast who spoke in short-burst communications, each one pithy and accurate. He tells of a briefing that had been prepared for LeMay on the proposed stretch modification of the General Dynamics F-111 fighter into the FB-111 bomber version. Lt. Gen. David Burchinal, whom Dougherty characterizes as the "brightest man in the Air Force at the time," gave a detailed two-hour briefing on the proposed FB-111, during which LeMay did not say a word. When the briefing ended, LeMay turned to Burchinal and said only, "It isn't big enough." Dougherty notes that those four words captured the essence of the FB-111, for it lacked the necessary size to carry the combination of fuel, bombs, and sensors that it should have had for its mission.

LeMay transformed SAC, and ultimately transformed the Air Force, in ways that went beyond his absolute demand for wartime proficiency. He personally saw to it that housing was improved dramatically and was the driving force that resulted in first the Wherry and then the Capehart housing programs. From personal experience, LeMay knew the importance of good, rather than adequate, messing facilities, and he called for and got the same sort of improvements he'd achieved in the bomb wings. He brought his wife into his campaign for improved family services, and he again set standards that were adopted across the Air Force.

Despite his own inclination to avoid it, LeMay became a celebrity as SAC's commander, in small part because he continued flying and setting records. More than anything else, it is important to emphasize that LeMay had been a simple good soldier at SAC. Recent sensationalist television presentations and revisionist articles have claimed that he authorized, on his own, provocative overflights of the Soviet Union. They have alleged that his intentions were to acquire justification for launching a preemptive nuclear strike. These claims are totally false, fabrications made up from partial truths, comments taken out of context, and—on occasion—deliberately literal interpretations of obviously sarcastic remarks.

Air Force Secretary Eugene Zuckert swore in LeMay as Chief of Staff in June 1961. Among the dignitaries present were President Kennedy (center) and Vice President Lyndon Johnson (behind LeMay).

Famous Phrase

Those who knew him best know that it would have been anathema to him to work at odds with the established principle of civilian control of the military. In a similar way, LeMay always denied making the statement (about North Vietnam) that he favored "bombing them back to the Stone Age," yet this one phrase, a product of literary license, is inevitably chosen by journalists to characterize him.

In contrast, no one notes a particularly admirable LeMay characteristic that personified his role as vice chief of staff to Gen. Thomas D. White. Given his public prominence, it would have been understandable if LeMay had occasionally upstaged his less-well-known boss. It never happened, and White acknowledged the fact.

LeMay used his prodigious analytical powers and rigorous operational philosophy to transform the Air Force into a powerful striking force, the backbone of superpower deterrence.

LeMay found himself caught in an impossible situation when he became Chief on June 30, 1961, for he did not understand his leaders and they did not appreciate his experience as a warrior. The new civilian authority, led by President John F. Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, adopted a policy of "flexible response" advocated by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor.

To a significant degree, flexible response led the US into a ground war in Southeast Asia; it made no sense to LeMay. His advice on not entering combat in Southeast Asia was ignored, and most galling of all, once combat began, his advice on how to win the war was ignored as well. Later, he noted that the US dropped 502,000 tons of bombs on Japan and won the war. In Southeast Asia, the US dropped 6,162,000 tons of bombs (mostly on our ally, South Vietnam) and lost the war.

The difference was that in Japan, LeMay chose the targets, and in Vietnam, McNamara and President Lyndon B. Johnson did.

His inability to deal with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations filled his years as Chief with frustration. LeMay believed in civilian control but also believed that civilian control of the military implicitly required careful consideration of the military's advice on military matters. He particularly resented McNamara's continual use of "military" rationale to explain decisions that he made based only on quantitative analysis.

It was McNamara's penchant for quantification that led to the cancellation of the B-70 bomber and Skybolt missile. LeMay had to suffer in silence as McNamara first forced the TFX multiservice fighter concept down Air Force and Navy throats and then selected the General Dynamics F-111 over the Boeing entry.

The Wallace Error

In spite of their mutual antipathy, Kennedy let LeMay remain Air Force Chief of Staff; he was too well liked by Congress for his enemies to try to remove him. LeMay retired on Jan. 31, 1965, but he would have one more conscious decision to make, one which he believed was as much in the service of his country as serving as CINCSAC. Sadly, it was to be a fatal error to his popular reputation. He accepted the offer of George Wallace, the segregationist Alabama governor, to run as his vice presidential candidate in the 1968 election.

At the time, LeMay's friends were nonplussed by the move. They knew that he was not a racist—he had fostered integration in SAC and the Air Force generally—but to them LeMay was still General LeMay, and few, if any, questioned him at the time.

Gen. David Jones, former USAF Chief of Staff and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was once LeMay's aide and pilot. He has related how, many years later, in Orlando, Fla., in a gathering of retired generals, LeMay was asked why he had run with Wallace. LeMay was silent, then replied that he despised Wallace's policies and would never have run with him if he thought he had a chance at winning. He did, however, believe that the Democratic nominee for President, Hubert Humphrey, would be disastrous for the country's defenses if elected. Thus, according to LeMay, he ran with Wallace, against all his desires, simply to help take votes away from Humphrey.

The decision was disastrous for his reputation. As a result, LeMay forfeited the lasting recognition that he had earned with such labor.

LeMay spent his post–Air Force years productively, working for the establishment of Air Force Village West in California. He was content with his contributions to history. The nation was fortunate to have had LeMay when it needed him. ▪

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